Constructions of Cinematic Space: Spatial Practice at the Intersection of Film and Theory

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to bring fresh insights to current understandings of cinematic
space and the relationship between film, architecture, and the city. That attempt is
situated in relation to recent work by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Saskia Sassen,
and others on the importance of the city in the current global framework, along with the
growing body of literature on film, architecture, and urban space. Michel De Certeau’s
threefold critique of the city, set forth in The Practices of Everyday Life, structures a
comparative analysis of six primary films, paired as follows, with one pair for each of
three chapters—Jacques Tati’s Play Time and Edward Yang’s Yi Yi, Vittorio De Sica’s
Bicycle Thieves and Wang Xiaoshuai’s Beijing Bicycle, and François Truffaut’s The 400
Blows and Mira Nair’s Salaam Bombay!. Along with De Certeau’s notions of spatial
practice, walking rhetorics, and the pedestrian speech act, the philosophy of Gilles
Deleuze—including work from the Cinema texts and A Thousand Plateaus—is
developed in relation to existent film theory on movement, time, and space. The analysis
operates as a kind of mediation between an active set of spatial theories—a mediation
which uses traditional techniques of film analysis and critical theory to instigate a
negotiation around the topic of (cinematic) space. That negotiation implies a common
ground on which the film texts and theories are read against and in addition to one
another, allowing each to contribute in its own right to the setting up of a series of
terms—what I refer to as a “spatial grammar”—proper to both film and theory. The
spatial grammar thus comprises a more abstract theoretical plane—a palimpsest on which
resides a classic body of work on cinematic space (including André Bazin, Stephen
Heath, and Kristin Thompson), and on which I layer the work of De Certeau, Deleuze,
Fredric Jameson, and others.

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Biographical Note

Brian Jacobson holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Science from Appalachian State University (1998-2002). Beginning in fall 2005, Brian will be pursuing a PhD in Critical Studies at the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television.

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Introduction

Imagine a cinematic architecture – a literal hodge-podge of settings; a figurative montage of narratives; a theoretical abstraction of spaces. The relative fragments which might be called upon to construct such an edifice are endless. You might recall the home of Dorothy Arzner’s Craig’s Wife, the office towers of Jacques Tati’s Play Time, F.W. Murnau’s Haunted Castle, Shawshank Prison, Harry Potter’s Hogwarts School, or any number of other architectural set(ting)s. You might also think of the edited narrative architectures of films such as D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane, Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon, Alan Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad, David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive, Christopher Nolan’s Memento, … the list goes on and on.

Inasmuch as architecture is about space, movement, and even time, its juxtaposition with cinema seems inevitable. And yet, prior to the recent trend toward that very comparison, the explicit consideration of architecture’s relevance to film studies (and the reverse) has been somewhat sparse.¹ I say explicit not only because of the obvious exceptions to that scarcity, but also because we might say that architecture is always already figured into our understandings of film. That, of course, depends on how we define architecture. In relation to film, the term “architecture” becomes increasingly complex as its potential meanings multiply—constructed studio sets; local built environments; edited montages; cinematographic traversals; and more. In a sense, then, it is perhaps not too much to say that film is unthinkable without architecture. Once again, though, this is not a new idea.

At least as early as Sergei Eisenstein and René Clair one can find proclamations about film’s intimate relation to architecture. But how, exactly, are we to figure that relationship? Eisenstein himself provides us with a fascinating example of the cinematic nature of architecture in his essay “Montage and Architecture,” and one might easily identify traces of a similar thinking throughout the history of film theory. At the same time, though, the recent proliferation of work on the topic makes it clear that many questions remain. In the pages to follow, we will move, in a sense, one level of abstraction away from such specific questions to a more general consideration of cinematic space—if we are to understand cinema and architecture, it seems more than relevant to first refine our conception of cinematic constructions of space. To construct a cinematic architecture, we best know our tools.

You might approach such an edifice as one traverses a memory palace, tracing a vector in the manner of the narrator (or spectator) walking through the Hermitage Museum of Aleksandr Sokurov’s Russian Ark. Or you might imagine yourself, like Alan Hakman in Omar Naim’s The Final Cut, seated at the “guillotine,” composing this cinematic structure from the collective camera eye’s cumulative reel. But any way you slice it, the potential trajectories are limitless.

In the introduction to their recent edited collection of essays on film’s relationship to the city, Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice note that:

Recent years have witnessed the increasing interpollination of film studies with such diverse fields as architecture, urban studies, geography, sociology, and social theory, all of which have been newly invigorated by a distinctive “spatial turn.” At the same time there has been an intensified recognition within film studies of the city (and the city-film) as the archetypal ground for examination of visual and sensory experience, form and style, perception, cognition, and the meaning of the filmic image and filmic text.²

Indeed, and perhaps not surprisingly, the city has a privileged place in the history of film—as distribution site, staging ground, and diegetic setting. In the chapters to follow,

² Shiel and Fitzmaurice, Screening the City, 1.
we will focus almost solely on the latter—the city in the film—as a means for considering how the “spatial turn” might play out through comparative analysis of a particular group of city-set films. That analysis (described more fully below) will consist of three chapters, each comparing two films from different historical and geographic contexts (totaling six unique urban settings). But we will not merely concern ourselves with the city as backdrop to the diegetic content; nor will we be satisfied to say that a particular film could only have taken place in a particular city; nor finally, will it be enough to suggest that the city is a character in the film. We are likely to consider each of these possibilities along the way, but our starting point will initially be more general. Thus, we will be asking first-order questions such as how cinematic space is constructed in order to reach the second-order of why that space is constructed and what might it mean. At the same time, we will be considering some of the theoretical foundations which prior work in the field of film studies offers us to answer these questions, and testing additional models which, layered onto the existent structure, might create a theoretical edifice more apt for the task. As a prelude to that analysis, let us take a moment to describe the theoretical foundation which will frame the discussion to come.

**why the city, or rather, the global city?**

*Imagine a cinematic city. You might think of New York, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Paris, Bombay/Mumbai, Beijing, Taipei … each part of a complex cinematic imaginary. Or perhaps you think of solely fictional (cinematic) cities – Metropolis (Fritz Lang’s or Superman’s), Alphaville, Gotham City, Oz … Or you might think of cinematic constructions of existent cities – Woody Allen’s or Martin Scorsese’s Manhattan, Godard’s Paris, Wong Kar-Wai’s Hong Kong … Whatever you might imagine, the city no doubt looms somewhere on the cinematic horizon.*

But what, outside of the sheer frequency of its portrayal in film, makes the city especially relevant for film studies and for our consideration? And if the answer lies outside of its specifically cinematic representation, what can that representation reveal about the extracinematic materiality which makes the city so relevant for discussion? In other words, is
there something about the city—something not specifically related to cinema—which makes it a place of interest for those studying film? And if so, what might application of film studies readings and methodologies to the city reveal that other disciplinary approaches ignore or leave out? In his analysis of cinema and urban space, Stephen Barber posits that:

In its interaction with the city, film carries a multiplicity of means through which to reveal elements of corporeal, cultural, architectural, historical and social forms, as well as to project the preoccupations with memory, death and the origins of the image that crucially interlock cinema with urban space.\(^3\)

We will be especially concerned with identifying and examining the “multiplicity of means” of which Barber writes, but that will also continue to be in the service of better understanding the “elements” which those means are said to reveal. To begin, then, we might best describe our preliminary understandings of those elements by outlining a set of theoretical models which frame those initial conceptions. Our point of entry is very specific, but we will see that it opens the door to a larger discourse and a more general set of questions which will help to frame the remainder of our discussion.

The recent work by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (and extended by Saskia Sassen) points to the city as a crucial site in which to explore the dynamic relationship between identity and space. This and other work suggests that questions of modern subjectivity and socio-political practice have specific valence in the context of urban space that has yet to be sufficiently addressed. It is that specificity which will be of particular interest here as we read film as both a reflection of the ways in which space, subjectivity, and practice operate in the cinematic imaginary, and as a kind of theoretical testing ground (after the fact) for theorists to imagine these practices at work.

It is worth briefly summarizing the essentials of Hardt and Negri and Sassen’s positions. In their discussion of the “smoothing” of social space in globalization, or “Empire,” Hardt and Negri note that despite the decline in national boundaries, segmentation and

\(^3\) Barber, 7.
inequality remains, and have perhaps become more severe. They point to the increasing proximity of economically diverse populations in urban spaces as both a symptom of this segmentation and a pretext for the operations of the “society of control.” This segmentation, they say, is written on the urban landscape of large cities, so that

[w]here the extremes of wealth and poverty have increased and the physical distance between rich and poor has decreased in global cities such as Los Angeles, São Paulo, and Singapore, elaborate measures have to be taken to maintain separation.⁵

At the same time, however, the maintenance of that separation is resisted, or circumvented, by the actions of what Hardt and Negri term the “multitude.” Simply put, the multitude is as a kind of productive force operating against and within the global system of Empire. Although Hardt and Negri seem (rightly) to resist a pithy definition of the multitude, we might—especially given its spatial valence—start with their explanation of the relationship between production, domination, and the lack of place on which abstract labor is founded—

The dialectic between productive forces and the system of domination no longer has a determinate place. The very qualities of labor power (difference, measure, and determination) can no longer be grasped, and similarly, exploitation can no longer be localized and quantified. In effect, the object of exploitation and domination tend not to be specific productive activities but the universal capacity to produce, that is, abstract social activity and its comprehensive power. This abstract labor is an activity without place, and yet it is very powerful. It is the cooperating set of brains and hands, minds and bodies; it is both the non-belonging and the creative social diffusion of living labor; it is the desire and the striving of the multitude of mobile and flexible workers; and at the same time it is intellectual energy and linguistic and communicative construction of the multitude of intellectual and affective laborers.⁶

In this way we can begin to see the ways in which Hardt and Negri conceive of the multitude and imagine it to operate, but it is worth spending a few more lines to more

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⁶ Hardt and Negri, Empire, 209.
precisely describe their derivation of the term. The concept of the multitude is really the combination of two multitudes, one based on existence (the always already), the other on potentiality (the never has been). Of the first multitude (derived from Spinoza), Hardt and Negri write:

throughout history humans have refused authority and command, expressed the irreducible difference of singularity, and sought freedom in innumerable revolts and revolutions. This freedom is not given by nature, of course; it comes about only by constantly overcoming obstacles and limits.\(^7\)

This multitude, they write, “is ontological and we could not conceive our social being without it.”\(^8\) The second order, or what they call the “not-yet multitude,” is the political potentiality brought about by “the emergence of the cultural, legal, economic, and political conditions” which constitute Empire.\(^9\) These conditions might be described as the set of relations determined by the increasingly free and global circulation of capital, information, goods, and people. They are also determined by the international regulatory framework governed by global organizations such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations, along with the requisite decline of the power of the nation-state. Hardt and Negri’s configuration must, of course, come into question in light of the current conditions of the “war on terror,” the tightening of borders, and the so-called reassertion of the nation-state. On the other hand, Hardt and Negri argue that the current state of affairs is not necessarily inconsistent with their conception of Empire. “Rather,” they write,

severe divisions and hierarchies, along regional, national, and local lines, define our current global order. Our claim is not simply that unilaterism and multilateralism as they have been presented are not desirable but rather that they are not possible given our present conditions and that attempts to pursue them will not succeed in maintaining the current global order. When we say

\(^8\) Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 221.
\(^9\) Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 221.
that Empire is a tendency we mean that it is the only form of power that will succeed in maintaining the current global order in a lasting way.\textsuperscript{10}

At any rate, the point here is not necessarily to interrogate the concepts of Empire or the multitude. Rather, our goal will simply be to enter the discourse provided by Hardt and Negri and attempt to follow their lead by considering (from a different perspective) some of the questions which define whatever we choose to term our current socio-political framework. Thus, as alluded to above, we will focus on their description of the city as point of intersection of the economic, cultural, political, and other constituent forces of Empire. We should note that the cities in the cinematic examples which we will examine may in some cases historically precede the onset of Empire proper. However, as we will see in the description of the films below, these older cinematic references, especially in their comparison with more recent films, offer striking instances of the ways in which cinema’s representation of the city has changed (or not) in the present context which Empire seeks to define. The same can be said for Saskia Sassen’s description of the “global city”—although some of our examples may not fit the proper definition of the global city, the point of setting up these recent theoretical takes on the city is not to find cinematic examples which exactly fit their models, but rather to emphasize the degree to which the city is an important site of study which film might have something to offer. With that focus in mind, we will now turn briefly to the work of Saskia Sassen for a more detailed conception of the ways in which the city localizes the operations of Empire.

Sassen conceives of the “global city” as a site representing “a strategic space where global processes materialize in national territories and global dynamics run through national institutional arrangements.”\textsuperscript{11} She notes that an urban spatiality determined by massive concentrations of resources and existing within cross-border flows is not altogether new, but

\textsuperscript{10} Hardt and Negri, \textit{Multitude}, xiii.

What is different today is the intensity, complexity and global span of these networks, the extent to which significant portions of economies are now dematerialized and digitalized and hence the extent to which they can travel at great speeds through some of these networks, and … the numbers of cities that are part of cross-border networks operating at vast geographic scales.¹²

The space of cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo (her initial three examples) brings together the major players of global corporate capital and immigrants, minorities, and various discriminated groups that fill all levels of service functions. In this way, groups of individuals from all over the world—who would not normally come into contact—mix and relate in new ways. Each of these actors finds space in the global city to engage in political operations, and in these engagements, new political subjectivities are formed. The formation of these new subjectivities is aided by the degree to which the space of the global city offers the potential for informal practices by subjects not normally defined as political. These subjects, despite lacking power, may, in the strategic space of the global city, “acquire presence in a broader political process that escapes the boundaries of the formal polity,” and “develop a politics that, while transnational, is actually centered in concrete localities.”¹³

In the chapters to follow, we will at times return to these theorizations of the city and its subjects, allowing the films to dictate their relevance. Again, the project here is not necessarily to interrogate or rethink the work outlined above (which is not to say that it will not happen). Rather, these theories are meant to contribute to the larger context of the filmic analysis which follows. At the same time, we will see that these films do help to both make more apparent and refine these theorizations. Thus, let us now move on to another theoretical model which will further define that framework while contributing to the refinement of the theories already mentioned.

Michel de Certeau – a tour guide?

¹² Sassen, The Global City, xxii.
Imagine a cinematic tour. Your “intro to film” class? A trip to the local video store? An archival retrospective? Or perhaps in the diegetic sense – is The Wizard of Oz a tour of Oz? Is Roberto Rossellini’s Voyage in Italy a tour of Naples? Is Mani Ratnam’s Dil Se a tour of India? Is Chantal Akerman’s Toute Une Nuit a tour of Brussels? More generally, could we say that any film is a tour of its spaces? If so, what do we learn? Walter Benjamin describes film as a form of travel; Michel de Certeau posits that every story is a travel story (a spatial practice). But what does such an understanding of film imply? If De Certeau is right that travel is a spatial practice, how do we imagine those practices? And how do they operate in the spaces of cinema?

In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau investigates the ways in which individuals, as consumers or users, uncover new “ways of operating” within formal rules and “disciplinary” structures. According to De Certeau, these ways of operating, as practices of re-appropriating space, function as “clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline.’” He seeks to bring to light the “antidiscipline” which these operations compose from within. As we will see in Chapter One, De Certeau derives his model from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theories of language, Michel Foucault’s explorations of discipline and power, and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus (particularly as derived from his “ethnological studies”). Put simply, De Certeau seeks to understand the ways in which entrenched systems always leave a kind of remainder, a potentiality for practices which operate counter to the systems’ sanctioned actions. From Wittgenstein, then, De Certeau develops the notion of a system (for Wittgenstein it is language) from which there is no outside, no “position of mastery” to be attained, thus necessitating practices from within. In Foucault, De Certeau finds a more explicit link to social systems of power and disciplinary control, along with the beginnings of a discourse which would describe operations contrary to that “disciplinarity.” From Bourdieu, finally, De Certeau derives what he terms “an economy of the proper place (une economie du lieu propre).” For De Certeau, this “economy” gives a crucially spatial quality to the notion of the “strategy,”

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15 De Certeau, 55.
another ordering system of practices. We will further examine the ways in which De Certeau constructs his theory of practices in the context of our analysis of urban-situated films. For the moment, though, it is worth preliminarily mentioning De Certeau’s notion of spatial practices, specifically as they relate to our focus on the city and the theorists mentioned above.

Beginning his discussion of specifically spatial practices, De Certeau describes the view of Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Center. He asserts that, from this vantage point, vision momentarily arrests the agitation of the city, transforming it, he writes,

into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday’s buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today’s urban irruptions that block out its space.\textsuperscript{16}

It seems safe to suggest that this description is consistent with Sassen’s global city and the spatial localization of Hardt and Negri’s Empire; it is also the site in which De Certeau expounds a theory of spatial practices enacted in the everyday trajectories traced by urban pedestrians. The development of this theory is itself a movement—through the critique of an operational concept of the city, De Certeau proceeds to distinguish a set of urban practices thriving “beneath the discourses that ideologize the city.”\textsuperscript{17}

In the chapters that follow, we will follow De Certeau’s movement, organizing a series of cinematic analyses around the critique of the operational concept of the city. That movement will not only apply De Certeau’s critique to cinematic representations of urban spaces; it will also trace the development of the theory of spatial practices and attempt to construct in its mold (or following its trajectory) an understanding of cinematic practices, of cinematic language.

Although De Certeau never refers directly to cinema, we will see that the concepts which emerge from his discussions of “ways of operating,” practices of appropriating space, and

\textsuperscript{16} De Certeau, 91.
\textsuperscript{17} De Certeau, 95.
the “problematics of enunciation” provide salient insight for film analysis on multiple levels. As mentioned, De Certeau sets up his argument in a linguistic framework (via Wittgenstein), but he justifies the application of the linguistic model to non-linguistic operations by presupposing that all such analyses must be concerned with uses determined as consumption. Film analysis, already a kind of linguistic practice in its semiotic form, can also be said to fit the requirement of being a consumptive practice—including from the standpoint of the spectator, as well as for the auteur who “consumes” a certain set of formal parameters (not to mention, for the moment at least, censorship standards) and develops a cinematic practice within that formal framework. We will be primarily concerned with the latter, although the consumptive practices of the cinematic audience would also be interesting to consider in relation to De Certeau’s analysis.

Thus, we will examine De Certeau’s relevancy for film analysis on three primary levels:

1. Using his critique of the threefold operational concept of the city, we will compare a series of cinematic representations of urban space. We will suggest that these examples provide a useful testing ground for the theorist to consider De Certeau’s critique as it can be both applied and extended in relation to the cinematic practices which seem to give it life.

2. De Certeau offers a conception of the city that privileges the ways in which subjects moving through formally structured “places” create “spaces” of individual and collective practice. The emphasis on movements, or trajectories, that (re)determine urban space provides a link between city and cinema, specifically as it suggests film as the representational mode most appropriate for capturing and reflecting on the nature of the urban.

3. By asserting that the act of walking is also an act of creating language (a “rhetoric of walking”), De Certeau puts forth the notion of space as a grammar. We will trace the ways in which cinema, as a spatial practice, necessitates a specifically
spatial component to the grammar of its analysis. Further, we will test the terms of De Certeau’s model as potential expressions of such a grammar.

The threefold operational concept of the city will serve as a kind of foundation from which we will construct a three part filmic analysis that, like a three-phase architectural project in which each phase is dependent upon the former and advances the creation of a whole (walls→floors→roof→home?), will ultimately lead to a greater understanding of cinematic representations of (global) cities, the practices of (cinematic) subjects in urban spaces, and the (spatial) grammar of cinema itself. Each section will advance one aspect of De Certeau’s critique of the operational concept, as well as advancing the notion of spatial practices and cinematic grammars. But, as the concepts interweave, the linear and matrix-like structure will necessarily break down, folding back on itself as concepts call upon previous examples, as new examples refine previous ideas, and as previously developed models attain more (or less) importance—as the structure becomes more defined, the possibilities for new practices within the space increase. Additionally, as in any structure, there will necessarily be holes (window and doors?) through which ideas will come and go, announcing their presence and just as quickly vanishing, leaving lingering traces that mark the structure—the figure of the multitude, the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, and the concepts of the (trans)national and the (post)modern will find their way in and out of the discussion, marking the construction of our theoretical edifice. Thus, let us turn now to the films themselves to give initial grounding to De Certeau’s operational concept of the city, and to set up the structure of the analysis to come.

**cinematic transpositions – a set of films**

*Imagine a cinematic fabric – a quilt crafted from figurative folds of celluloid; a layered tapestry fashioned from the cuts of film past, present, and future; a textured piecing together of fragments from the cinematic imaginary. Such an image might stand as an apt metaphor for the acts of citation, homage, and appropriation which seem to proliferate throughout a kind of cinematic embroidery. If you again think of a cinematic architecture and the cinematic city, you might imagine the ways in which each would contribute to a*
specifically urban fabric—a complex palimpsest residing at the intersection of a multiplicity of cinematic renderings of urban space.

The analysis of six primary films will ground our discussion of the city and its cinematic representations. These six films hail from six different filmmaking contexts, spanning approximately four different decades. This diverse corpus will find a certain unity in stylistic continuities, the common presence of the urban, and the organizing discourses of De Certeau. Additionally, the discontinuities and diversity of these films will allow, especially in the structure of their analysis (see below), for a comparing/contrasting discursive strategy in which stylistic influences, the persistence of the importance of urban space, and the appropriation and extension of critical cinematic discourses will come to the fore. It is worth noting from the outset that, although that appropriation and extension will be part of what we aim to address in our discussion, it will be of secondary concern to our primary consideration of the techniques by which cinematic space is constructed. Thus, the comparison of texts will operate first as a discursive strategy, and second as a comparative analysis in its own right.

The six films to be analyzed are Ladri di biciclette (Bicycle Thieves, De Sica, 1948, Italy), Les Quatre cents coups (The 400 Blows, Truffaut, 1959, France), Play Time (Tati, 1967, France/Italy), Salaam Bombay! (Nair, 1988, India/UK/France), Yi Yi (Yang, 2000, Taiwan/Japan), and Shiqi sui de dan che (Beijing Bicycle, Xiaoshuai, 2001, Taiwan/China). They will be paired and discussed as such:

I. Play Time – Yi Yi
II. Bicycle Thieves – Beijing Bicycle
III. The 400 Blows – Salaam Bombay!

These pairings immediately call forth a series of binaries—especially temporal (old vs. new) and geographic (West vs. East)—which, as mentioned above, will serve to initiate a series of comparisons that will fashion a more rich discussion of De Certeau, cinematic representations of the urban, and the spatial language of cinema. While those binaries
prove useful as a model from which to build our analysis, they also become problematic as they imply a negation of other models and other directions of influence. For the moment, we will merely acknowledge the limitations of the present model; at the conclusion of our analysis, we will return to this question to more fully consider other models and influences which might enhance the one proposed here. In the subsections on each chapter to follow, we will briefly preview both the logic of these pairings and what they might reveal about the nature of cinematic appropriation, the changing cinematic conception of urban spaces, and the consistency of critiques lodged within and against the city. Before that preview, however, let us take a moment to describe the mode of analysis which will guide our readings of the theories and films outlined above.

**cinematic and theoretical spaces – a mode of analysis**

Our investigation will operate in a space between two traditional techniques of film analysis—namely, that of using a film text to illustrate a theory, and the reverse, using a particular theory to read a text. Although each strategy will be put to work at times, neither will stand on its own; nor will the two techniques be mutually exclusive. A better way to describe our discursive strategy might be as a kind of negotiation—between the two techniques just mentioned, between film texts and theories, or, less dualistically, among a set of theories, theorists, films, and filmmakers (not to mention audiences!). As the previous sections imply, the basis for such a negotiation will be, as Shiel and Fitzmaurice describe, a certain “spatial turn.” Indeed, if the aim of this project is to further our understandings of cinematic space, that aspiration is allowed for—and even, perhaps, demanded by—the ways in which space operates as a crucial hinge on which the films and theories to be discussed turn. In other words, the space in which we will lodge our analysis is opened by a common concern among the films, filmmakers, and theorists listed above (along with others) with space itself. In this way, then, we might say that part of our goal is to understand the ways in which the above listed films stand as testing grounds for, reflections on, and even negations of the spatial theories of De Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, and other theorists who will be invoked in our discussion. At the same

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18 Shiel and Fitzmaurice, *Screening the City*, 1.
time, we will be interested in the ways in which the work of those theorists performs a similar set of functions in relation to the theories of those films.

Thus, as the previous sections imply, our investigation will, in some places, be highly theoretical. At the same time, however, the theories will always be ultimately grounded in more concrete formal considerations of the film texts. In a sense, then, we might describe our analysis as a kind of mediation between an active set of spatial theories—a mediation which will use traditional techniques of film analysis and critical theory to instigate a negotiation around the topic of (cinematic) space. That mediation will further involve the appropriation and setting up of a series of terms proper to the films and theories—what we will call our “spatial grammar.” That spatial grammar will comprise a more abstract theoretical plane—a palimpsest on which resides an existent body of theoretical work on cinematic space, and which we will layer with a new set of relevant theories. And that, perhaps, is the best characterization of this project—as an attempt to bring fresh insights to a body of films and theories by introducing additional films and theories which, when layered onto the existing set, allow something new to emerge. Finally, then, let us turn to the brief chapter descriptions which will preview the work of analysis just described.

**Chapter One**

In **Chapter One** we will compare Jacques Tati’s 1967 film *Play Time* and Edward Yang’s 2000 film *Yi Yi* in a discussion of the first aspect of the threefold operational conception of the city—founded upon “the production of its own space (*un espace propre*): rational organization must thus repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it.”19

In *Play Time*, Jacques Tati performs a critique of the International Style of architecture and its rationalizing and alienating functions. Set in the modernized Paris of the 1960s (but also implying through its architecture that it could be virtually any modern city of the time), *Play Time* explicitly “plays with” the modern city’s rational organization and

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19 De Certeau, 94.
the subsequent repression and alienation of the individual subject in its constructed space. Tati, in his comic persona Hulot, enacts the ways in which the body becomes a kind of pollutant to the clean rationality of the modern city, and launches a comical political critique of the social relations created in such a context. Tati’s use of the body and space also enacts some of the spatial practices described by De Certeau—in short, Tati performs what De Certeau describes in his assertion that “space is a practiced place.”

Edward Yang’s Yi Yi, set in Taiwan and Japan, pays (in)direct homage to Tati in its use of modern architecture as a means for critique of the social relations of modernized Taiwan. Through the use of glass architecture and reflection, Yang creates a cinematic space of an always present city that maps the emotions of its inhabitants. Again, as in Playtime, the city, in “the production of its own space,” serves to suppress (and repress) the characters who “pollute” the urban cinematic space. But Yi Yi also furthers the implied international and globalized context of Playtime. In Yi Yi, the modes and discourses of global capital add another layer to the rationality of the modern city. This layer is added in the film’s narrative and dialogue, but also, and significantly, in its architecture—both in the constructed montage of the film itself and its constructed urban spaces. Thus, in a sense, Yang lodges Tati into a postmodern, global context, and in that contextualization extends and expands the critique of modern social relations. But he also provides a sense of hope in the characters of NJ and Yang-yang and implicitly announces the possibility of film itself as mode of critique and producer of social knowledge.

Chapter Two

In Chapter Two, Vittorio De Sica’s Bicycle Thieves (1948) and Wang Xiaoshuai’s Beijing Bicycle (2001) will be compared in a discussion of the second operational concept of the city:

the substitution of a nowhen, or of a synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions; univocal scientific strategies, made possible by the flattening out of all the data in a plane projection, must replace the tactics of users who take advantage of

20 De Certeau, p. 117.
opportunities” and who, through these trap-events, these lapses in visibility, reproduce the opacities of history everywhere.  

*Bicycle Thieves*, as exemplar of the post-WWII Italian neorealist movement in film, is particularly important in a discussion of cinematic representations of the city. At a historical moment when directors left the confines of the studio and turned their cameras on destroyed cities and the lives of their inhabitants, cinema (re)announced its own possibility for social critique. In this sense, De Sica’s film invokes a series of films including *Rome, Open City*, *Germany Year Zero*, and *Umberto D*, that directly address the everyday lives of characters who, faced with the erosion of tradition and emptying out of history in the decimated landscape of the post-war city, are forced to turn to a limited set of opportunities. Theirs is a (implicit) critique of the “nowhen,” the empty moments of the everyday in the city rendered hopeless and void of tradition by the devastation of war. This is Deleuze’s *espace quelconque (any-space-whatever)*, a space in which characters are forced to wander but are also given the possibility of a chance encounter and an (unlikely) temporary alliance in their movement through urban space. This wandering character also enacts De Certeau’s construction of space out of the places of the devastated city, and the directors of neorealism double that construction of space through the camera-subject. In each of the aforementioned films we find a series of “walks” through the city—the camera constructs a space, a grammar, and a rhetoric of the urban as it puts the city (and history) on visual trial. 

As in the case of *Yi Yi* and *Playtime*, Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) is direct homage to (and in this case a loose remake of) *Bicycle Thieves*. *Beijing Bicycle* is constructed as two parallel (and intersecting) stories of Chinese youth. Guei, newly arrived in the city, finds a job as a bicycle messenger, but when his bicycle is stolen he is faced with the prospect of unemployment and return to struggle for survival. Jian, a student from a middle-class family buys Guei’s stolen bicycle on the black-market. For Jian, the bicycle is a means of access to a group of Chinese youth which he earnestly desires to be a part of. As in *Bicycle Thieves*, the bicycle thus serves as the vehicle of the possibility of

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21 De Certeau, p. 94.
change for the characters, each of whom is faced with struggle for survival—in Jian’s case a kind of social survival, and in Guei’s case for economic survival. *Beijing Bicycle* also lodges itself in a moment of transition for the title city and directs its lens at the transition brought on by the capitalist modernization of China. This is again a moment of the erosion of tradition (as seen in the figures of Jian’s parents) and evacuation of history, and the film directs its critique directly at those symptoms. But the film, as is the case with *Yi yi*, does something more than its predecessor. The bicycle, as it is shared by Jian and Guei, becomes more than the absent object of opportunity in the nowhen of the modern city—it becomes the source of an unlikely alliance and the possibility for what De Certeau alludes to in his assertion that

> Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer.22

This is again the temporary alliance of Deleuze’s *espace quelconque*. Although the film’s ending potentially complicates our reading of the possible outcomes of such alliances with Guei and Jian being beaten and the bicycle destroyed, the film does intimate the possibilities for resistance in the opportunities found beneath the surface of the “flattened” nowhen of the modern city.

**Chapter Three**

Finally, in **Chapter Three**, François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) and Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* will be discussed in relation to the last of the three operational concepts of the city:

> the creation of a *universal* and anonymous *subject* which is the city itself: it gradually becomes possible to attribute to it, as to its political model, Hobbes’ State, all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects—groups, associations,

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22 De Certeau, p. 95.
or individuals. “The city,” like a proper name, thus provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties.\(^{23}\)

Here the appropriation is perhaps less evident, but the comparison is rich. The films share a common concern with the lives of children operating within disciplinary logics, and each film comes to a similar conclusion, both in terms of narrative (with their respective protagonists escaping from juvenile imprisonment) and visual finale (the similar final shots of the boys gazing into the camera). We will read each film in terms of its critique of the disciplinary logic of the city by identifying and analyzing the places and spaces traversed by its children. Ultimately, we will find that the crucial difference between the films’ respective critiques can be cast in terms of confinement and expansion—*The 400 Blows* embodying the former and *Salaam Bombay!* extending the critique to the latter. Once again, De Certeau’s models of space and place, strategy and tactic, and walking rhetorics will inform our reading of the two films.

Additionally, we will examine the ways in which each film concerns itself with the nature of cinematic perception as read through a series of scenes in which the characters confront perceptual places of play. In each case we will argue that this concern with perception might best be read in relation to the filmmakers’ stated desires to create cinematic alternatives to the films of their respective geo-historical contexts.

**moving on – what’s left out?**

Although we will be focusing our subsequent discussion on the six films mentioned above, those will certainly not be the only films invoked. Nonetheless, our set of examples is relatively small, which is, of course, in no way meant to negate the potential relevancy of numerous other excellent examples of films which might have further complicated our working model. Indeed, as the brief introductions to the prior sections should reflect, the potential films and filmmakers relevant to considerations of cinematic space are expansive. Similarly, there is likely another large set of examples which might

\(^{23}\) De Certeau, p. 94.
have been saliently explored specifically in relation to De Certeau’s operational concept of the city (although the pairings would perhaps have been more difficult). Going chapter by chapter, we might even imagine replacement films for those privileged by our analysis—instead of *Play Time* and *Yi Yi* we might have chosen one of Tati’s other films, Godard’s *Alphaville*, Scorcese’s *Taxi Driver*, Elia Suleiman’s *Divine Intervention*, …; rather than *Bicycle Thieves* and *Beijing Bicycle*, we might have considered De Sica’s *Umberto D.*, Rossellini’s *Open City* or *Germany Year Zero*, Lang’s *Metropolis*, Anh Hung Tran’s *Cyclo*, Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Dust in the Wind*, …; and in place of *The 400 Blows* and *Salaam Bombay!* one might have imagined Agnès Varda’s *Cleo from 5 to 7*, Zhang Yimou’s *Not One Less*, Tsai Ming-Liang’s *What Time is it There?*, Abbas Kiarostami’s *A Taste of Cherry*, Mani Ratnam’s *Bombay*, …. Thus, we should at least keep these films in mind as we proceed, imagining how each might support, complicate, or extend our analysis. At the conclusion of our analysis, we will have the opportunity to further reflect on the adequacy of our model and the films with which it will be constructed and deployed in the chapters to follow.
Chapter One

In a poignant sequence from Jacques Tati’s *Play Time*\(^{24}\) (1967), Tati, in his famed role as Monsieur Hulot, is thwarted in his attempt to keep an appointment with Monsieur Giffard due to a series of amusing confusions spawned by the architectural particularities of the International Style office building in which Giffard works. False reflections on the building’s glass walls, an elevator “disguised” as an alcove, an endless grid of identical cubicles, and indistinguishable hallways are aspects of an architectural logic that leaves Hulot uncertain of his whereabouts in a comical condition of frustration. While in *Play Time* Hulot’s frustration, activated by his alienation from the modern places of the International Style of architecture, functions to humorous ends (even reaching the absurd at times), in Edward Yang’s *Yi Yi* (2000) a similar architectural surface produces a markedly different, in this case melodramatic, affect. In one of the film’s most visually striking scenes, the wife/mother of the family around which the narrative revolves is filmed through a glass window of a modern office building. She stands alone in a dark room, her gaze out the window (but seemingly to somewhere else). Her image is doubled by her reflection on the glass, along with the streaks of red and white light which serve as a visual reminder of the ever-present thoroughfares and traffic of modern Taipei—her emotion and alienation project onto the clean surface, blending with, becoming part of the urban makeup of the city. If *Yi Yi* is indeed an homage to the critique advanced by Tati in *Play Time*, as I will suggest, the homage has little or nothing to do with the films’ narrative conventions, their respective moods, or even their cinematic styles. Rather, the homage to—perhaps more appropriately the *appropriation of*—the critique in Tati’s film serves to indict a particular kind of rationality, or “disciplinarity,” embodied by the architectural structures of the modern (global) city.

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In this chapter I will evaluate Yang’s cinematic appropriation and extension of the devices utilized in *Play Time* by focusing on the ways in which each film addresses and critiques the rationality of the modern city and the alienation of the subjects of their urban locales. Michel de Certeau’s analysis of the first aspect of the operational concept of the city (to be discussed momentarily) will serve as a theoretical foundation from which the respective films will be individually explored in terms of their representations (of the rationality of the modern city, of the alienated modern subject, and of the practices of such subjects in defiance of that rationality) and cinematic devices (how space is constructed through specific stylistic choices). Those representations and cinematic devices will be further teased out in terms of their implications for understanding the conceptions of the global city and the “multitude,” especially as those concepts relate to the “practices of everyday life” and specifically spatial practices identified by De Certeau and embodied in the two films. Finally, I will evaluate the ways in which *Yi Yi*, in its homage, appropriation, and extension, (re)situates Tati’s critique of modernity and modern architecture in the context of late capitalism, globalization, and the transnational milieu of Taipei.

According to De Certeau, “the ‘city’ founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse is defined by the possibility of a threefold operation.” The first feature of that operation is the production of a rational space (what he refers to as *un espace propre*) that seeks to repress the myriad activities and agents, be they political, social, economic, environmental, etc, that might complicate the processes of the city’s formal structure. In other words, the city is established in correspondence with a disciplinary framework (á la Foucault’s “disciplinary society” in which rationality reigns and the city-subject is regulated by a series of formal institutions (church, military, school, family, etc). For De Certeau, the position of the subject in relation to the *espace propre* determined by the disciplinary structures of the city parallels the relation he finds in Wittgenstein between the position of the philosopher and the *espace propre* established by language. According

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25 De Certeau, 94.
to De Certeau’s reading of Wittgenstein, “by being ‘caught’ within ordinary language, the
philosopher no longer has his own (propre) appropriable place. Any position of mastery
is denied him.”27 From this new vantage point Wittgenstein embarks on an exploration of
the practices of everyday language; De Certeau’s goal is similar: to identify the practices
of everyday life which operate within the rational spaces and limiting structures of
modern society. Of specific concern here will be the specifically spatial practices which
De Certeau identifies as operating within the conventions established by the modern city,
but it is worth noting that these practices are only a subset of the kinds of practices De
Certeau finds in a series of non-spatial contexts. In the sections to follow, I will explore
the construction of the espace propre and the enacting of spatial practices as represented
in Play Time. This exploration will also reveal the degree to which the medium of cinema
is particularly appropriate for such representations and revelations, as well as the ways in
which those representations lead to specific understandings of the language and function
of the grammar of film analysis.

Play Time

Play Time, Tati’s fourth feature film and his third instantiation of the character Hulot,
was itself something of an architectural achievement. The set, developed with the help of
Tati’s friend and architect Eugène Roman and known as “Tativille,” was constructed near
Vincennes beginning in 1964 and eventually constituted a 162,000 square-foot “city”
complete with office blocks constructed on wheels and tracks so that they could be
moved to allow Tati to film a variety of shots.28 According to François Penz, the office
buildings were inspired by the Esso29 (1963) building, “the first office building erected at
La Défense,” and “Tativille is in effect a mock-up of how La Défense might ultimately

27 De Certeau, 11.
and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia.
29 Penz also notes that the Esso was likely inspired by the Lever Brothers Building (1952) designed by
Gordon Bunshaft and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill—one of the first examples of the “light curtain wall”
(see Jencks, 26)
look.”30 This is all to emphasize the degree to which, as Tati himself suggested, the set, and thus the architectural space, became “the real star of the film.”31

_Play Time_ was the follow-up to _Mon Oncle_ (1958), Tati’s third feature and an earlier representation of the comical particularities of modern spaces (even referred to by one architect/writer as “perhaps the most savage cinematic satire on modern architecture”32). However, while in _Mon Oncle_ Monsieur Hulot takes center stage in his exploration of the private spaces of the Modernist home and Parisian suburbs, in _Play Time_ he is in many ways lost (in the diegetic sense, as well as by the camera) in the public spaces of the corporate office complex and Parisian streets. Thus, Tati’s foregrounding of the urban architectural aspects of the film, superceding characterization and narrative elements, sets _Play Time_ apart from many other “city films” (including the other films to be discussed here).33 As we will see, this centering of architecture and urban space has important consequences and provides salient avenues for understanding the particularly spatial aspects of cinema that, by means of De Certeau’s theories of spatial practice, will also suggest the ways in which cinematic practice might relate to more general forms of social and artistic practice.

_modern architecture, the espace propre, and the alienated subject_

If modern architecture really did die, as Charles Jenks34 suggests, on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. in St. Louis, Missouri with the demolition of Minoru Yamasaki’s _Pruitt-Igoe Housing_ structure, what, exactly, is it that “died” with it? Clearly, for Jenks, this has something (or perhaps everything) to do with the philosophical doctrine of Rationalism, as realized in the ideas and structures of modern architects (and, more generally, in the modern movement in the arts)—“Like rational schooling, rational health and rational

30 Penz, 65.
31 Quoted in Borden, 27.
33 This is in no way to ignore films such as Dziga Vertov’s _Man With the Movie Camera_ (1929), László Moholy-Nagy’s _Marseille Vieux Port_ (1929), or Walter Rutmann’s _Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt_ (1927).
design of women’s bloomers, [modern architecture] has the faults of an age trying to reinvent itself totally on rational grounds.”  

Now of course, as we know (and Jencks must realize), modern architecture lives on, whether in the lasting structures of that now-dead age or in the new constructions of the “so-called modern architects [who] still go around practising a trade as if it were alive.”  

And thus, if the so-called death of modern architecture was to be met with a certain degree of pleasure, and if that pleasure was to be directed at the decline of pure rationality in architectural form, then how are we to confront its remnants? More specifically, to the degree to which modern architecture has been critiqued for its production of spaces which alienate their inhabitants, how does that alienation continue in the “proper” spaces of modern architecture, and how do the alienated subjects of those spaces confront, overturn, or work within them?

Let me return to De Certeau. His concise description of the city’s construction of its *espace propre* rings a similar chord to that of Jenks’ description of modern architecture: “rational organization must thus repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it.”  

As mentioned earlier, De Certeau defines the *espace propre* in relation to the model of rules and limitations, along with the necessary place of the philosopher in that model, which Wittgenstein explores in the practices of language. It is perhaps not surprising then that Le Corbusier, in his 1923 manifesto *Towards a New Architecture*, so often returns to the significance of the need for architects to locate a “plan” which would regulate and order architectural creation. For instance:

The Plan is the generator.  
Without a plan, you have lack of order, and willfulness.  
The Plan holds in itself the essence of sensation.  
The great problems of to-morrow, dictated by collective necessities, put the question of “plan” in a new form.  
Modern life demands, and is waiting for, a new kind of plan, both for the house and for the city.  

35 Jencks, 10.  
36 Jencks, 9.  
37 De Certeau, 94.  
In fact, Le Corbusier’s vision of the city sounds at times strikingly similar to the “technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space”\textsuperscript{39} in which De Certeau locates the practices of everyday life: “The great problems of to-morrow, dictated by collective necessities, based upon statistics and realized by mathematical calculation, once more revive the problem of the plan.”\textsuperscript{40} For De Certeau, statistical investigations and other rationally constructed models fail to account for the “trajectories” of the subjects operating within the established frameworks which Le Corbusier seems to imagine. This implies the deficiencies of a modern architecture which fails to properly conceive of the practices of its (therefore alienated) inhabitants, as well as suggesting the possibility for those subjects to nonetheless develop methods for working within the confines of that rational system.\textsuperscript{41} As we will see in the next section, this concern with the rationality of modern architecture and the experience of the subject within its rational space is put on display in \textit{Play Time}.

\textit{alienation of the modern subject in Play Time}

In his short essay “Material Sounds: Jacques Tati and Modern Architecture,” Iain Borden challenges the “popular misconception” that Tati’s films, particularly \textit{Play Time}, are assaults on Modernism. He asserts, rather, that the films “are overtly positive attempts to reassert the poetic aspects of modern life that are latent within Modernist urbanism,” and that “Tati’s films help unlock the experiential and comic potential of modern architecture.”\textsuperscript{42} Ultimately, I agree that in \textit{Play Time} Tati does unlock a kind of potential within the conventions of modern architecture and modern disciplinary society, but to negate or smooth over the critique as Borden does here is, in a sense, to miss the joke by skipping straight to the punch-line. In this section I will examine that critique as a means for better understanding the potential which Borden locates in Tati, as well as to lay the

\textsuperscript{39} De Certeau, xviii.
\textsuperscript{40} Le Corbusier, 49.
\textsuperscript{41} Pruitt-Igoe as example here, having been “vandalized, mutilated and defaced” by its inhabitants. See Jencks, 9.
\textsuperscript{42} Borden, 28.
foundation for a later discussion of Edward Yang’s appropriation of that critique in the service of another sort of potentiality.

Near the beginning of *Play Time*, upon first arriving at the office building of Monsieur Giffard, Hulot is escorted into a waiting room, presumably to await their scheduled meeting. Hulot proceeds to slip on the smooth floor, “play” with several of the modern chairs that always return to form after being sat or otherwise impressed upon, and pace about the generally uncomfortable room. A second man enters the room and, in a series of machine-like gestures, sits comfortably in one of the chairs (they’re all the same), adjusts his clothes, and shuffles through some papers from his briefcase. The contrast is obvious—Hulot’s lanky figure sprawling from his chair, his body alienated by the modern accoutrements; the other man’s body a seemingly perfect fit. So what is the point? Do you have to be a kind of automaton to properly inhabit modern space? Perhaps a second scene will help. Monsieur Giffard, following the sequence (mentioned at the beginning of the chapter) in which Hulot literally chases Giffard through the office building, finally thinks he sees Hulot just outside. In his hurry to catch the false Hulot, Giffard runs straight into the glass door, so clean as to not be noticeable separating inside from out. These are only two in a series of gags determined by the rejection of the body by the film’s modern architectural spaces—a simple representation of alienation depicted through the individual body.

But maybe this is only too obvious; after all, action on the body is a common enough element of comedy that we might even disregard it here as a mere loving gesture toward our well-meaning modern designs—“just creating fun from within”—as Borden puts it. Perhaps, though, one last scene will help sharpen the critique. Early in the evening of the first day of *Play Time*’s diegesis, Monsieur Hulot happens upon an acquaintance outside the man’s four-unit, two-story modern apartment building and proceeds to go inside for a drink. For the next approximately ten minutes the camera oscillates outside the building, moving generally back and forth between the friend’s and his neighbors’ apartments. The joke, apparently, is that the two households (doubled by the two apartments below) are shown to be staring at the same spot on opposite sides of the wall (watching wall-
mounted or inset televisions). Upon closer observation, however, something more is revealed. First, not only are the four apartments revealed to be, with the exception of a few wall decorations, identical, but they also contain the same furniture that Hulot encountered earlier in the office waiting room. In fact, the waiting room scene is here doubled when the friend shows off the chair’s form-returning feature to Hulot, who subsequently slips and falls on the apartment’s similarly smooth floor. The home has become an office waiting room. But, if the home has become the workplace, it has also become a museum of sorts, part of the Paris tour—the huge glass windows in place of walls on the front of the building rendering the apartments relative museum dioramas to a passing tour bus (the passengers synchronously turn to look). This is about more than voyeurism, however, as suggested by another consideration of the waiting room. Despite its alienating relation to Hulot, there’s nothing especially unusual about this waiting room, with the exception of the series of portraits—of what must be imagined to be the chairmen of the board of the company housed in the building—hanging on the glass walls and seemingly staring at each of the chairs. The gaze becomes more than that of the voyeur, whatever those implications might be; it becomes the disciplinary gaze. What then of the glass-walled apartment building? Furnished as the office waiting room and under the gaze of tourists and other various passers-by, has it gone from home to workplace to museum scene to *cellblock* even?

If this is a viable contention, we have certainly moved away from Borden’s assertion that Tati’s practice is “overtly positive.” Tati himself, however, seems to call this into question in a statement crucial to Borden’s argument: “If I had been against modern architecture I would have shown the most ugly buildings.” Are we to suggest that Tati betrays his own words? Rather, I propose that Tati does not have to be necessarily *against* modern architecture to critique a modern disciplinary society of the sort that modern architecture embodies. In fact, would it not be appropriate to lodge such a critique at the best modern architecture has to offer? As Tati puts it, he made the set “so

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43 Quoted in Borden, 27.
that no architect could say anything against it. I took the finest I could. These buildings are beautiful."  

Let us return to the assertion itself. As Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, one of the essential tasks of discipline is to arrest or regulate movement and to establish calculated distributions of people. This arresting or regulation, however, does not necessarily imply a complete enclosure—although located in a series of institutions (family, school, military, prison, etc), discipline becomes more pervasive. The formation of the disciplinary society is also determined by a “movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines…to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of ‘panopticism.’” Foucault’s invocation of the architectural form of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon is well known as it reveals the workings of surveillance in the formation and regulation of the disciplinary society. How might this architectural model of surveillance function in relation to the modern architectural spaces of *Play Time*? I have already suggested a kind of surveillance implied in the glass architecture of the apartment complex. What is perhaps more revealing is the function in *Play Time* of the closest Parisian rendition of the architectural panopticon, the Eiffel Tower. It is never seen in a direct shot in the film, functioning as an always present but conspicuously absent marker of Paris, seen only through reflections in mirrors and glass doors. “The film’s big joke,” as Joan Ockman puts it, “is that the tourists never arrive in the historic and symbolic center of French and world culture. Rather, they pass their compressed holiday in its hypermodern simulacrum.” Very much like the panopticon—implying the ever-presence of surveillance even in its visual absence—the Eiffel tower functions here not only as a commentary on the erosion of the specificity of the city effected by the increasingly pervasive International Style, but also as a more complex critique of modern disciplinary society. This is crucially not, however, the Eiffel Tower of a film like René Clair’s *Paris qui dort*. Instead, as Ockman contends, it becomes “an empty center that means

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44 Also quoted in Borden, 27-28.
45 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 216. For a more full explanation of “Panopticism,” see pp. 195-228.
47 In this film, made in 1925, the Eiffel Tower retains a centrality in its role as the source of a scientist’s “crazy ray” which freezes the city and inhabitants of Paris.
nothing." Thus, what I am suggesting, moving finally closer to Borden’s assertion with which we began, is that Tati simultaneously calls forth a series of critiques of disciplinary society (as embodied by modern architecture) and offers a means, not for escape, but for, as he himself puts it, “rendering it human.” In the next section I will return to De Certeau as a means for unraveling this “rendering human” and the potentials, both for social practice and the cinematic medium, expressed by Tati in Play Time.

**Play Time’s spatial practices**

In an effort to advance his conception of the practices of everyday life beyond what he refers to as solely graphic representations, De Certeau introduces the idea of walking in the urban system as a parallel to the function of the speech act in the system of language. The pedestrian speech act, as he calls it,

has a triple “enunciative” function: it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic “contracts” in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an “allocution,” “posits another opposite” the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action).

The pedestrian speech act is suggestive here as it provides a way of interpreting the acts of appropriation and spatial “acting-out” which Tati enacts in his “rendering human” of the places of modern architecture. It also allows us to understand the creation of spatial relations—which I will argue is a crucial cinematic device that De Certeau allows us to elevate to the level of a filmic grammar—as a kind rhetorical enunciation.

It is therefore interesting that De Certeau, only a few paragraphs after his stated move away from graphic representations, turns to Charlie Chaplin as a privileged example of

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48 Ockman, 183.
49 The longer quote (in Ockman, 193) is: “But if at first inhabitants of the new city feel lost, little by little they habituate themselves to it. They gradually efface its ultramodern stage effects, ultimately rendering it human.”
50 De Certeau, 97-8. The inset quotes are attributed to E. Benveniste, Problèmes de linguistique générale.
the activation of spatial practices. Chaplin’s multiplication of the possibilities offered by simple objects such as his cane parallels the ways in which the pedestrian walker activates a subset of the possibilities available within a given spatial order. As De Certeau puts it, “walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks.’” I will momentarily delay an examination of the political import of this “rhetoric,” but it is likely evident from the outset that the pedestrian speech act, in its mode of transgressing the rules of spatial order, implies a kind political potentiality.

Tati’s Hulot has often been compared to, or rather, contrasted with Chaplin’s Tramp. As Ockman notes, “where the Tramp aspires to be a dandy, Hulot is ordinary, disheveled, a nondescript if idiosyncratic type. His talismans—pipe, hat, umbrella, suitcase—look seedy, hardly the modern objets-types celebrated by Le Corbusier.” Borden similarly suggests that “where Chaplin’s creation is clownish, actively disruptive of the regimented institutions and pompous individuals he encounters, Tati’s is far more passive yet pervasive.” This pervasiveness is especially suggestive as it is heightened in Play Time—Hulot becomes, in Ockman’s words, “no longer so much singular as a man of the crowd.” Tati does not limit to Hulot the multiplication of the possibilities inherent to common objects; rather, the spatial practices are dispersed, becoming more of a collective set of practices accessible to all. This is saliently expressed in Play Time’s lengthy restaurant scene. In a sequence that at times reaches the level of the absurd, the architectural a priori of the space is totally overturned by the practices of the restaurant patrons. The building’s architect and the restaurant staff ultimately lose all control of the space as the patrons, led by the American tourist, become a self-constituting authority, establishing new rules and (re)activating the restaurant itself. Is this not unlike the kind of endeavor that Hardt and Negri seem to suggest as the possibility of the “multitude?”

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51 See De Certeau, 98. “Thus Charlie Chaplin multiplies the possibilities of his cane: he does other things with the same object set on its utilization.”
52 De Certeau, 99.
53 One might also cite Jackie Chan’s characters as contemporary instances of enacting the kinds spatial practices being discussed here.
54 Ockman, 177.
55 Borden, 28.
56 Ockman, 177.
57 See my introduction for a description of the “multitude” within the framework of “Empire” set forth by Hardt and Negri.
The patrons do not, of course, enact a specifically *political* set of practices, but it must be asserted that the actions represented in *Play Time* do bring to the fore the possibilities for collective practice within the formal structures of modern disciplinary places. Along these lines, as Foucault notes in regards to the possibility for a liberatory architecture, “liberty is a *practice*.” In reference to Le Corbusier in particular, Foucault states:

> He was, I am sure, someone full of good intentions and what he did was in fact dedicated to liberating effects. Perhaps the means that he proposed were in the end less liberating than he thought, but, once again, I think that it can never be inherent in the structure of things to guarantee the exercise of freedom.

So, to return one last time to Borden’s assertion of Tati’s positive intentions, what Tati seems to imagine in *Play Time*—agreeing, perhaps, with Foucault—is both the possibility for an optimistic take on modern architecture, as well as, in the absence or ultimate falsity of such optimism, a liberating potentiality to be enacted by a collective subjectivity.

**practices of cinema: the spatial grammar of film analysis**

What has been left out of the discussion up to this point is an engagement with the formal cinematic devices with which Tati constructs the places and spaces of *Play Time*. Not only are these formal devices significant for understanding the “spatial practices of cinema,” but, in addition, if the political potentialities discussed in the previous section are to be taken seriously, they are certainly bolstered by considering the relationship with the spectator that Tati sought to create through these formal cinematic strategies.

The massive construction of Tativille for *Play Time* has already been described; the significant analog to this elaborate set is Tati’s decision to shoot in 70mm wide-screen format. As Penz notes, “wide-screen 70mm is a perfect format for embracing a large panoramic view of architectural spaces,” allowing Tati to exploit the full effects of the

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long shot and long take that figure so prominently in the style of the film. The use of 70mm and the long shot/long take combination functions more complexly, however, than to merely capture the film’s large architectural spaces; these stylistic choices also function to create a particular viewing experience for the spectator. Tati says it best: “I want to make people participate a little more, to let them change gear themselves; not to do their work for them.” As Thompson puts it, “Tati flaunts the illegibility of his mise-en-scene, while simultaneously inviting us to play this perceptual game,” a game complete with “black-and-white, life-sized photographic cutouts (of people and cars) in the backgrounds of scenes.” For Thompson, these structures act to “bare the device” of the film, serving as Tati’s acknowledgement of its perceptual difficulty. Thus, Tati invites the spectator to explore the spaces of modern architecture by attempting to actually place her in it—a strategy with not insignificant consequences. If Play Time suggests a critique of modernism and disciplinary society, it is left to the spectator, after taking a temporary journey into the spaces of Tativille, to make the final call. This is heightened by the film’s basic lacks of both narrative and a consistently assigned point of view—although the point of view is at times associated with Hulot or the American tourists, for the most part the camera retains a kind of objectivity that allows the spectator’s eye to wander. In fact, not even the spectatorial point of view can be fixed (at least in the intended 70mm projection viewing situation)—as Ockman notes, “the wide format actually causes the viewing experience to change depending on whether one is seated in the center or at the edges of the movie theater.” The instability of point of view, combined with the lack of strong narrative flow and the long take “provokes an aleatory, roaming mode of viewing (similar to that experienced in Michael Snow’s classic film Wavelength, also made in 1967).” Thus, I suggest that what Tati in fact achieves is a doubling of De Certeau’s spatial practices: the practices enacted by Play Time’s characters in the espace propre of modern architecture are doubled by the viewing practices of the spectators in the cinematically constructed space of Play Time itself. Of course, that is not to suggest that the spectator has the option of, for example, reediting the film, literally reconstructing its

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60 Penz, 65.
61 Quoted in Penz, 65.
62 Thompson, 257.
63 Ockman, 186.
64 Ockman, 186.
architecture as the characters do in the restaurant scene mentioned earlier. But the film
does, through the stylistic devices discussed here, allow the spectators to create their own
trajectories through the space, trajectories that might change on every viewing occasion.
This is also not to suggest that Play Time creates an entirely unique viewing practice—it
is not much to say that every viewing experience will be different for any film. However,
it is perhaps not too much to suggest that Play Time significantly heightens the possibility
of such a viewing practice for the reasons already mentioned. I have isolated a small set
of formal cinematic devices that Tati utilizes in the construction of a specific kind of
filmic space—a space that I suggest creates the potential for a vital kind of viewing
practice. A brief return to De Certeau’s explanation of spatial practices will allow us to
see how these formal devices can be read in a kind of “spatial grammar” of film analysis.

It is not by accident that I retained the entirety of Joan Ockman’s previous quote to
include the parenthetical reference to Michael Snow’s experimental film Wavelength.
Stephen Heath’s classic essay on narrative space in film begins by quoting Snow: “It is
precise that ‘events take place.’”65 Heath thus asks what this taking place is in film and
proceeds to derive an explanation of the constructions of narrative space and perspective
from the history of the Quattrocento perspective of Renaissance painting. “From the
Quattrocento on,” he writes, “the ‘pane’ delimits and holds a view, the painter’s canvas
as a screen situated between eye and object, point of interception of the light rays.”66 This
has important consequences for cinema as:

what enters cinema is a logic of movement and it is this logic that centers the frame. Frame space,
in other words, is constructed as narrative space. It is narrative significance that at any moment
sets the space of the frame to be followed and “read,” and that determines the development of the
filmic cues in their contributions to the definition of space in frame (focus pull, for example, or
backlighting). Narrative contains the mobility that could threaten the clarity of vision in a constant
renewal of perspective; space becomes place—narrative as the taking place of film—in a
movement which is no more than the fulfillment of the Renaissance impetus.67

65 Quoted in Stephen Heath, “Narrative Space,” in Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader,
66 Heath, 390.
67 Heath, 392.
Heath answers the question of what taking place means in film by asserting that narrative takes place—the creation of a narrative place out of the spatial possibility of the filmic “canvas.” “What is crucial,” Heath claims, “is the conversion of seen into scene, the holding of signifier on signified: the frame, composed, centered, narrated, is the point of that conversion.” Thus, in Heath’s formulation, narrative resides in a certain state of tension with space in film: while it holds the potential to disrupt “the clarity of vision,” it also creates the possibility of constructing a coherent place. That construction of place, as we will see shortly, is based largely on the specific formal devices of classical Hollywood cinema loosely classified as continuity editing techniques. But for the moment let us return to Heath’s explanation of space becoming place.

To begin his exploration of “spatial stories,” De Certeau delineates the distinction between his use of the terms space and place:

A place (lieu) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the “proper” rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.

A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.

At first glance it seems simple enough to suggest that De Certeau’s distinction is merely the reverse of Heath’s—instead of De Certeau’s statement “space is a practiced place” we might say that for Heath the place (of film) is a practiced space. In this simple reversal, Heath’s place functions similarly to De Certeau’s space as what exists when narrative mobility is taken into consideration, when the spaces of cinema are actualized

68 Heath, 392.
69 De Certeau, 117.
by a motion that creates a scene. Thus Heath’s space, functioning as De Certeau’s place, would be the a priori from which narrative possibility emerges. Upon closer consideration, however, this simple reversal breaks down, revealing a more poignant tension between the two (competing) conceptions of place and space. What we find, in fact, is that Heath’s creation of place out of space is closer to what De Certeau would describe as a return of a created space to the status of place. What is crucial here is the notion of “order” (the propre). For both De Certeau and Heath place is constituted by an ordering; the distinction is that for De Certeau that ordering exists a priori while for Heath it is constructed out of potential disorder. So for De Certeau the movement from place to space is a creation of possibilities, or rather, a dis- or re-ordering. For Heath, on the other hand, the movement from space to place is a limiting move—in order to construct a coherent narrative, the possibilities of space must be limited in the creation of a “scene, the holding of signifier on signified [the creation of a truth?].” The point of this distinction is not to imply the falsity of Heath’s conception of narrative space in film—the limitation of the spatial possibilities of the frame for the construction of coherent narrative seems perfectly reasonable. It must also be remembered that Heath leaves open the possibility for a different function of narrative in its “potential to threaten the clarity of vision in a constant renewal of perspective.” What I want to suggest here are the ways in which De Certeau’s conception of place and space offer an extension to Heath’s conception of space in cinema. In other words, how might we map De Certeau’s spatial practices onto the grammar of film analysis?

At this point it is likely fitting to return to a filmic example to help clarify the distinction I have been drawing between De Certeau and Heath. In the often-discussed opening sequence of Play Time (after the pre-credits), Tati immediately places the film, as Kristin Thompson notes, “resolutely outside the classical tradition.” By disavowing classical continuity editing techniques and spatial cues (in this case the establishing shot), Tati overturns the categories of perception that govern traditional film viewing. The first shot—of an ordinary modern architectural building—seems to function as an everyday establishing shot with which one might expect a film to begin. This assumption seems

70 Thompson, 251.
plausible as the next three shots portray the interiors of what might be assumed to be the same building. It is in the fifth shot that Tati reveals that the interiors are actually that of an airport (it is often suggested that, before this fifth shot reveals the airport ticket counter, the spectator is led to believe that the scene takes place in a hospital). And it is not until the film’s fifteenth shot that we get a more traditional establishing shot that reveals the airport’s façade. We can thus already see that *Play Time* functions, on some level at least, outside of the spatial norms of film that Heath’s model explains. A closer look at the fifteen shots that construct this opening sequence will make the differences more clear.

By the end of the opening sequence it is relatively clear that the film’s narrative will center on the actions of a group of American tourists. In the opening shots, however, this is merely one of at least four potential narrative lines, the other three of which will be left behind. As Thompson notes, “the causal action of the narrative proper does not start until we see the tour arrive at the customs gate; hence the lack of relevant events in the first six shots encourages us to concentrate on the specific ways in which the film uses sound and image to create humor.”71 The second shot, with the camera positioned outside of the building at a slightly oblique angle, frames two nuns walking together from left to right. A straight cut brings us to the next shot—a long shot now in the building’s interior—of the nuns walking directly away from the camera. The nuns will reappear in later shots in the airport, but in this third shot they walk out, leaving our focus on the man and woman seated in the lower left of the frame. This shot seems to set up the traditional narrative and spatial conventions that Heath describes—we are invited to follow the point of view of the two characters and focus on their conversation, thus establishing a kind of narrative order within an otherwise perceptually chaotic frame. This is immediately overturned, however, as a straight cut to the fourth shot (another long shot) reframes the space directly opposite and slightly off-center from the previous camera position. The couple is now positioned on the upper-right periphery of the frame. At this point a loud speaker announces the arrival of a flight, and, combined with another cut to a medium-long shot

71 Thompson, 253. See Thompson’s description of this opening sequence for a more detailed account of the visual and aural gags that set the tone for the remainder of the film (253-4).
of the airport ticket counter, we are made to realize that this building is in fact an airport.
The man and woman are left behind, and again we are left without a solid narrative. After
a longer high-angle shot of the airport interior, the seventh shot frames the customs
turnstiles where we find the arrival of a businessman, followed by (finally) the tourists.  
The next three shots seem to follow the businessman as he leaves the airport, after which
the subsequent three shots focus on the tourists. In the fourteenth shot we see the
businessman for the last time (until seeing his portrait in the aforementioned waiting
room), and finally we return to the tourists at the fifteenth shot (the “establishing” shot).
In these fifteen shots (spanning approximately seven minutes) we are offered at least four
potential narrative focuses, not to mention a series of perceptual distractions which
include the false arrivals of Monsieur Hulot (the “real” Hulot does not even appear in this
sequence).

*Play Time*’s opening sequence sets up a pattern of loose narrative and perceptual
distraction that, heightened by the formal devices outlined above (i.e. the long shot, long
take, etc), will continue throughout the remainder of the film to function outside of the
narrative “taking place” provided by Heath’s configuration of film space. Rather than
constructing an ordered narrative place, or scene (as well as a stable Quattrocento point
of view), out of perceptually uncertain non-narrative spaces, *Play Time* multiplies the
possibilities, adding complexity to the cinematic places that Tati constructs. Thus, one
might simply define *Play Time* in a negative relation to Heath’s narrative space. Instead, I
contend that De Certeau’s conception of the place/space relationship allows for a positive
definition of the specifically spatial film techniques exploited in this film. What *Play
Time* in fact embodies is the opening of various possibilities to be enacted in ordered
places in the creation of unordered, unpredictable, and unlikely spatial practices. I will
return to this assertion later in relation to examples from the other films to be discussed,
but it is worth noting for the moment that, as these further examples will show, De

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72 Thompson’s reading of the film in relation to David Bordwell’s notion of “parametric variation” also
provides a positive definition of the film’s technique in terms of the directing and misdirecting of
perception by Tati’s various and simultaneous gags, and is very much relevant to the definition I assert
using De Certeau. I argue that by using De Certeau we can better engage the specifically spatial aspect of
the parametric variation and perceptual “play” at work in this (and other) films.
Certeau’s relevancy for understanding the spatial grammar of film is not limited to *Play Time* or simply to films which privilege stylistic devices or space over narrative.

To conclude this section, let me briefly return to the political potentialities that I earlier suggested are represented in both *Play Time*’s content and relationship with the spectator. As Kristin Thompson notes, the film’s “concentration on perceptual difficulty has ideological implications” related to “the perceptual skills necessary for resolving the uncertainty of viewing.”\(^{73}\) According to Heath, in a reading of Marx that advances the notion of a kind of political struggle which is carried out in the relationship between form and content, “it becomes possible to say that the narrative space of film is today not simply a theoretical and practical actuality but is a crucial and political avant-garde problem in a way which offers perspectives on the existing terms of that actuality.”\(^{74}\) Although he only provides two examples, Wollen and Mulvey’s *Penthesilea* and Oshima Nagisa’s *Death by Hanging*, Heath does begin to suggest the possibility for a functioning of space in film that is not dependent on narrative (or limited to the avant-garde):

> At its most effectively critical, moreover, that work [of the operations of narrativization] may well bear little resemblance to what in the given situation is officially acknowledged and defined as “avant-garde”; in particular, and in the context of the whole account offered here of film and space, it may well involve an action at the limits of narrative within the narrative film, at the limits of its fictions of unity.\(^{75}\)

I suggest that De Certeau’s notions of space, place, and practice offer the possibility of engaging with the functions of cinematic space “at the limits of narrative” in ways which Heath’s conception of narrative space fails to fully exploit. These notions also give a positive definition and language for describing the techniques involved in the creation of the “perceptual shifts” which Thompson associates with the process of “defamiliarization”\(^{76}\) and its implications for a kind of resistance to ideology. As seen in the case of *Play Time* (and to be advanced in subsequent sections), De Certeau’s

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\(^{73}\) Thompson, 251.

\(^{74}\) Heath, 411.

\(^{75}\) Heath, 412.

\(^{76}\) See Chapter Two for a more full elaboration of “defamiliarization.”
conception of spatial practice allows us to read the spatial elements of film outside of (and in tandem with) narrative-driven unities of space. In other words, De Certeau allows us to see that not only do “events take place [in film],” but that those places can sometimes become spaces that do not even need an event.

**Play Time on the cusp of the postmodern?**

To conclude my specific focus on *Play Time* and transition to Yang’s *Yi Yi*, let me turn briefly and preliminarily to questions of the postmodern and transnational. For Joan Ockman, *Play Time* stands “on the brink between modernism and postmodernism” as “a kaleidoscopic reflection on the experiential conditions of late-twentieth-century architecture and the mass subject that inhabits it.” Indeed, if we maintain Jameson’s “twin symptoms of modernity,” anxiety and alienation, *Play Time*’s explicit critique of modern architecture and its more implicit commentary on surveillance and the disciplinary gaze situate the film squarely in the modern. But additionally, if drawing attention to and questioning “grand illusions” is a mark of the postmodern, Ockman’s reading of the film’s analogy-making between glass architecture and the film medium itself allows us to perhaps place *Play Time* somewhere in the realm of the postmodern. To speak more specifically of space, or what Fredric Jameson refers to as a “postmodern hyperspace,” if we think of the places cum spaces in *Play Time* we might further agree with Ockman’s situating of the film on the brink of the postmodern. As Jameson notes in his discussion of the Frank Gehry House in Santa Monica,

> in a more articulated way [Gehry’s space] confronts us with the paradoxical impossibilities … which are inherent in this latest evolutionary mutation of late capitalism toward “something else” which is no longer family or neighborhood, city or state, nor even nation, but as abstract and nonsituated as the placelessness of a room in an international chain of motels or the anonymous space of airport terminals that all run together in your mind.

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77 Ockman, 192.
78 See Ockman, 188-90.
Is not the airport terminal in *Play Time*’s opening—especially in Tati’s perceptual complication of it—such an anonymous space? More poignantly, is this not Tati’s take on the International Style of architecture in general? Part of the film’s joke, made explicit by the travel posters depicting a series of other (global) cities with modern buildings which could have been taken straight off the set of Tativille, is that, in its move to modern architecture, Paris appears as any other modern city might—in a sense, becoming *placeless*. If this is merely hinted at in *Play Time*, it is firmly planted in *Yi Yi*—whether it be in the “placeless” hotel rooms (to follow Jameson), the “NY Bagels” shop, or the McDonald’s, the film certainly finds its own “postmodern hyperspaces.” As we will see, Yang creates his own kind of transnational cinematic spaces as well, and it is in these spaces that we will begin to trace the extension that Yang makes of Tati’s critique of modernism, alienation, and the disciplinary society.

**Edward Yang and the new Taiwan cinema**

Along with Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Ang Lee, Edward Yang is considered one of the leaders of the so-called Taiwanese *new wave*, a cycle of Taiwanese films beginning in the early 1980s that arguably continues to the present. According to Douglas Kellner,

> the recent Taiwan cinema is “new” in that it carries out a rebellion against previous genre cinema (its own and Hollywood) and attempts to produce a socially critical and aesthetically innovative cycle of films appropriate to explore contemporary Taiwan society.\(^80\)

These films have sought to address Taiwan’s colonial history, its rapid modernization and urbanization, and the social concerns and struggles for national identity that have accompanied each of those processes but had been previously suppressed by government control and/or censorship of the film industry. As Kellner notes, a Taiwanese film industry did not exist before the end of World War II with Taiwan’s liberation from Japan (ending fifty years of colonization in which primary film exhibition consisted of imports from Japan, China, and the US). After the war Taiwan came under the control of

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China and Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government and was established as the Republic of China. In this context, a film industry was allowed to emerge, but the primary production was limited to propaganda film or diversionary entertainment including “innocuous comedies, melodramas, Kung Fu films and other genre artifacts.”

This remained the norm until Chiang Kai-shek’s death in 1975. Under the rule of Chiang’s son from 1975, until his death in 1988, and continuing thereafter, the loosening of control over cultural expression has led to a liberalization of the film industry in Taiwan that has spawned the birth of the New Taiwan cinema. That is not to say that Taiwanese filmmakers have achieved complete freedom; as Kellner notes, in the 1980s filmmakers still “needed to take in account possible government censorship or denial of funding,” thus operating “within limited parameters in regards to social criticism and opposition.” Additionally, as Yang himself has commented, the production and distribution channels operating in Taiwan up to the present have often left the work of the Taiwanese new wave unscreened in Taiwan itself. Thus, Yang and the other filmmakers of the New Taiwan cinema not only operate within a complex set of parameters determining their creative work—they also face questions of whether a Taiwanese film industry as such can even be said to exist within the global system of film production and distribution. Within these constraints and amidst these questions, the directors of the New Taiwan cinema have “exhibit[ed] a shared effort to develop a distinct cinematic language appropriate for a national cinema.” This cinematic language is marked by complex narrative lines, use of the long shot, long take, and relatively static camera, use of non-professional actors, and a focus on the everyday. As we will begin to see in the next section, these are also particular markers of Yang’s cinematic style, as displayed in Yi Yi.

**Yi Yi and Yang’s urban Taiwanese spaces**


81 Kellner, 102.
82 Kellner, 103.
84 Kellner, 105.
distinct from the other directors of the New Taiwan cinema—especially its other noted master Hou Hsiao-Hsein—whose films generally depict rural/urban conflict or focus solely on the rural, “with Yang we witness the dominance of city life, with tradition and rural life left only as cultural signs within modern commodity culture.”85 For Kellner, Yang’s work is the culmination of a “national allegory about modernization” that can be traced throughout the films of the new Taiwan cinema. This is achieved through the use of a modernist aesthetic created by unique visual, narrative, and atmospheric stylistic markers. In the next section I will describe how these stylistic markers function in Yi Yi, especially in their similarities to the style of Play Time outlined above. This comparison will lay the foundation for a further tracing of the ways in which Yang appropriates a kind of cinematic stylistic discourse for a similar critique of modernism and a new critique of the postmodern and transnational character of contemporary Taiwan.

**an homage to Play Time?**

During their first “date,” having just seen a film, Fatty and Ting-Ting return to the usual café where they briefly discuss the film. Fatty comments that “Movies are so lifelike, that’s why we love them,” to which Ting-Ting responds “Then who needs movies? Just stay home and live life!” The first time I viewed Yi Yi, I nearly leapt from my seat at that moment to proclaim the verification of my suspicion that Yang was paying a sort of homage to Jacques Tati. I have since failed to find the quote that my memory had attributed to Tati and which would provide the “truth” of this connection, but perhaps that verification is not even really necessary. Nor is it completely disheartening that no interview or writing from Edward Yang has “proven” this imagined link to Tati. Despite that lack of proof or verifiable truth, I am convinced that, at the least, Yi Yi, particularly in its visual cinematic style and use of glass architecture, continues a cinematic discourse around the critique of modernism and the alienation of modern architectural places that Play Time, if not the preeminent example of, is certainly included in. And even if Fatty and Ting-Ting’s dialogue cannot be verified as a direct quote of Tati, the film’s visual “quotes” are perhaps even more telling.

85 Kellner, 112.
formal devices, visual style, and Yang’s construction of cinematic space

Like Tati, Yang privileges the use of the long shot, the long take, smooth panning and tracking shots, and slow pacing. He also makes extensive use of the peripheries of the frame, as Kellner notes, “construct[ing] highly complex images where characters are often at opposite sides of the frame, separated by objects.”86 The use of these formal devices in Yi Yi serves to create a visual and stylistic unity that coheres the film’s numerous and interwoven narrative threads; they create a certain feeling, a particular relationship between the spectator and the characters that is indicative of the more general style of the new Taiwan cinema as a whole. Kellner suggests that Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s “long takes and long shots, often with deep focus cinematography, allow him to depict many aspects of the social environment” in the creation of what some have described as a “democratic cinematic language which allows the spectator to interpret the events, reflect on the characters and actions, and construct his/her own meanings.”87 I would argue that this is also true of Yang’s style and is another important link to what Jonathan Rosenbaum has termed “Tati’s democracy.”88 François Penz has noted that one of the important aspects of this “democracy” is Tati’s decision (in both Play Time and Mon Oncle) to “practically never [change] the lens throughout the film in order not to confuse the audience about the scale of the objects.”89 This partly explains the near complete absence of close-ups in Play Time, another feature partly shared by Yi Yi. Wu Nien-Jen, one of the major figures in the new Taiwan cinema (as a writer, director, and actor, including his role as NJ in Yi Yi), has expressed a sentiment about the use of the close-up that could be said to reflect the larger view of the new Taiwan cinema as a whole:

86 Kellner, 105-6.
87 Kellner, 108.
88 Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Tati’s Democracy,” Film Comment 9, no. 3 (May-June 1973).
89 Penz, 65.
I really dislike close-ups, especially zoom lenses. It’s so unnatural. When we watch films, we should be active and go in and explore what the image offers. The notion of images that pick out the most important elements in a scene and presenting them “in your face” is awful.\(^{90}\)

Thus, what we find in the films of the new Taiwan cinema is a concern, similar to that of Tati, with the possibility for engaging the active spectator in the creation of a particular kind of cinematic space. It is worth mentioning here that Tati is only one of numerous other filmmakers who might be said to influence this kind of construction of cinematic space. Kellner asserts Michelangelo Antonioni’s influence on Yang, especially in relation to the two directors’ uses of the tracking shot. This assertion seems quite reasonable, and I would note Yang’s use of an Antonioni-esque style of beginning and ending shots in *Yi Yi* with short moments that frame the spaces without the characters, allowing the viewer to explore the space without a necessarily narrative or character-driven point of view. As in the case of Tati, I would propose that this is part of a kind of spatial practice of filmmaking (in the construction of *space* out of *place*) and viewing (creating individual “trajectories” within the given *places* of the screen) that applying De Certeau to a spatial grammar of film analysis offers.

Kellner also devotes considerable space to a comparison between Yasujiro Ozu’s and Hsiao-Hsien’s similar cinematic styles and constructions of space; he contrasts the two primarily by asserting an ideological distinction between their underlying cinematic aims. Traces of Ozu’s style can also be found in Yang’s constructions of interior spaces. I will put off for the moment the ideological questions that Kellner raises, but as an even more extensive analysis would reveal, these distinctions can help us to understand *Yi Yi* in relation to the postmodern. For now, I will further examine the relationship between Yang and Tati by noting the ways in which the formal cinematic devices discussed in this section are put to use in relation to the particularly urban settings and glass architectures that set Yang apart from the other filmmakers of the new Taiwan cinema.

*a return to modern glass architecture and alienation*

At the opening of this chapter, I described a shot in which Min-Min, the wife/mother of Yi Yi’s central family, stands at the window of her modern glass office building staring blankly at the city below—the city, reflected on the glass separating her from the camera, keeping her at a distance (from us), becomes a part of her body as the two melt into the building’s glass surface, a flashing red traffic light standing in for her heart. We will return to this scene again shortly, but it is merely one in a series of shots in which Yang shoots his characters from the opposite side of the film’s ever-present glass—these include the numerous café scenes, shots of characters riding in automobiles, NJ’s and Sherry’s hotel rooms, and the units of the large condominium that is central to many of the film’s intersecting narratives. As I have discussed in the context of Play Time, the focus on modern glass architecture functions here, I suggest, to critique a kind of alienation that is in part a product of the architecture itself but is also related to a larger systemic configuration which is embodied by that excessively rational architectural form. Kellner writes of Yang’s previous feature films (Yi Yi was not released at the time of his article) that “Yang’s camera work and framing suggest human alienation and objectification in an urban environment, and he shows a determining social reality to exist off-screen, shaping the visually depicted actions.”

In the remainder of this chapter I will examine the alienated (and, I will suggest, fragmented) characters and complex cinematic spaces of Yi Yi as a means for understanding Yang’s film as both a continuation and extension of the critique of modernism and disciplinary society (the determining social realities to which Kellner refers?) enacted in Play Time.

**Yi Yi: traversing (post)modern Taiwan on the backs of the family**

In his article “Yi Yi: Reflections on Reflexive Modernity in Taiwan” David Leiwi Li describes Yi Yi as a “cradle to grave story” constructed in a narrative linearity that focuses on the complex workings and social environment of the multi-generational family. The film begins with the wedding of NJ’s (the main protagonist played by Wu Nien-Jen)

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91 Kellner, 106.
brother-in-law Ah-Di to his obviously pregnant fiancée. That evening, Ah-Di and Min-Min’s (NJ’s wife) mother Popo suffers a stroke that leaves her in a coma until her death at the film’s conclusion. NJ, a partner in a transitioning media technology corporation, and Min-Min, an editor, have a teenage daughter, Ting-Ting, and an eight year-old son, Yang-Yang. The film’s complex narrative threads follow the independent and interweaving lives of these four main characters, along with Ah-Di and the family’s neighbors, Li-Li and her mother. For David Li, “Popo [the comatose grandmother] is Edward Yang’s object-correlative of the old filial authority while the breakdown of generational interlocution is his overall figure of familial disintegration.” By tracing the narrative threads that comprise this “familial disintegration” I will examine the ways in which Yang constructs a series of simple slice-of-life tales that, in their cinematic unity, uncover a larger social critique of (post)modern Taiwan. I will argue that each of these narrative elements is constituted by a particular type of (cinematic) space, analyses of which will reveal the alienation and fragmentation specific to each character and from which Yang’s assessment of contemporary Taiwan will emerge. In the three short sections that conclude this chapter I will explore each of these related spaces and the ways in which they suggest: a critique of modernity (à la Tati), an extension to the postmodern and transnational context of Taiwan, and a set of practices (à la De Certeau), along with a kind of hope, for the (post)modern subject.

Min-Min: placelessness, or, existential messiness on the architectural surface

If every character in Yi Yi embodies and projects a kind of alienation from the places, temporalities, and social configurations of modernized Taiwan, none presents as saturated an image of it as Min-Min. Hers is the face of estrangement. Rendered material in her occasional tears, Min-Min’s disaffection more often silently melts onto the architectural glass surface and disappears into endless and anonymous Taipei. Just after the already twice-mentioned scene in which she stands alone staring blankly into the city below, Min-Min is accosted by a co-worker who asks “Still here?” Min-Min replies “Where can

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93 Li, 199.
If Min-Min’s is the alienation of modernity and modern architecture expressed in *Play Time*, it also becomes something more as even that sense of place recedes in the throws of what Jameson refers to as “postmodern hyperspace.” In his discussion of the problematic nature of positioning objects and bodies in the architectural spaces of late capitalism, Jameson asserts that

all these features—the strange new feeling of absence of inside and outside, the bewilderment and loss of spatial orientation in Portman’s hotels, the messiness of an environment in which things and people no longer find their “place”—offer useful symptomatic approaches to the nature of postmodern hyperspace.  

For David Li, the prominence of glass in *Yi Yi* “figures the growing indistinguishability of the inside and outside that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as characterising the generation of ‘imperial subjectivity.’” Indeed, for Hardt and Negri, one of the defining aspects of the disciplinary society characterized by enclosed institutional places is the relation between inside and outside. By contrast, in the “imperial society,” or *society of control,* announced by the so-called crisis of institutions, “the place of the production of subjectivity is no longer defined in this same way.” Rather, they proclaim,

today the enclosures that used to define the limited space of the institutions have broken down so that the logic that once functioned primarily within the institutional walls now spreads across the entire social terrain. Inside and outside are becoming indistinguishable.

Thus we might say that Min-Min’s “existential messiness” (as Jameson would articulate it) is the result of the pervasive production of subjectivity that accompanies the transition

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94 Li (201) translates this scene as, Nancy: “Haven’t you gone back yet?” Min-Min: “I have nowhere to go.”
96 Li, 200.
to “imperial society.”

100 Heightened by the collapse of filial authority, literally in the body of Popo, along with the recent non-traditional wedding of her brother (to his already pregnant fiancée), Min-Min’s inability to situate herself even in the old institutional places of subjective formation leaves her grasping for a stable source of identity. It is perhaps not surprising then that she retreats to the Buddhist temple to escape her everyday monotony, the “blank” that she describes as her life. For Li, Min-Min’s sojourn at the temple “indicates how the traditional folk or new age spirituality can reclaim authority alongside other burgeoning expert systems in late modernity.”

101 But as we see (and Li himself notes) in Min-Min’s return from the temple and her rejection of its possibility to provide her with anything different, Yang does not wish to put forth this return to the “old” institutions and traditions as a “way out.” Rather, as we will see momentarily in the character of Yang-Yang, Yang provides other possibilities for operating within the “imperial society” of control.

It is also worth noting at this point the complications that are brought to my earlier and continuing reading of De Certeau by this move from the disciplinary society to the new framework of the society of control. As I earlier discussed, De Certeau’s conception of the practices of consumers, or users, within the espace propre taken from his reading of Wittgenstein is also informed by Foucault’s explication of the disciplinary society. The formal structuring and physical enclosures that Foucault describes parallel the proper, rational places of language that are put forth by Wittgenstein and that serve as a model for De Certeau. I would argue that De Certeau’s conception also allows for the shift to the more pervasive, less formally structured configuration of the society of control. As he himself writes,

on the scale of contemporary history, it also seems that the generalization and expansion of

100 It must be acknowledged, of course, that this reading is particularly Western in its application of Foucault’s Enlightenment-determined model. The assumptions about the positioning of the Chinese subject thereby implied should thus be kept in mind and tempered by the reader’s own knowledge of non-Enlightenment models, models which are likely to shed further light on the issues considered in our present analysis.

101 Li, 201.
are more and more frequently going off their tracks. Cut loose from the traditional communities that circumscribed their functioning, they have begun to wander everywhere in a space which is becoming at once more homogeneous and more extensive. Consumers are transformed into immigrants. The system in which they move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere.  

What becomes immediately noticeable, and not surprising, is that De Certeau’s conception of this more pervasive functioning develops from the side of the consumer, functioning “between the links.” This notion is couched in a distinction between strategies—a set of actions based on the emanation of power to “an ensemble of physical places” from a proper center—and tactics—a set of procedures based on the temporality of the “favorable situation, [of] the rapidity of the movements that change the organization of a space.”

De Certeau’s “strategy” seems clearly based on the delineated and formal places of the disciplinary society, but already his description of the “tactic” as mode of resistance to these strategies begins to sound more like the modulating functions of the control societies. These tactics also sound remarkably similar to the practices that Hardt and Negri imply for the “multitude.” For the moment, however, we will have to be satisfied that his conception of spatial practices fits the framework of the society of control and leave De Certeau just as he begins to sound increasingly prophetic and similar to more contemporary assessments of late capitalism:

… but now that “proper” has become the whole. It could be that, little by little, it will exhaust its capacity to transform itself and constitute only the space…in which a cybernetic society will arise, the scene of the Brownian movements of invisible and innumerable tactics. One would thus have a proliferation of aleatory and indeterminable manipulations within an immense framework of socioeconomic constraints and securities: myriads of almost invisible movements, playing on the more and more refined texture of a place that is even, continuous, and constitutes a proper place for all people. Is this already the present or the future of the great city?

102 De Certeau, 40 (emphasis added).
103 De Certeau, 38.
104 De Certeau, 40-1 (emphasis added).
In the next section we will see the ways in which Yang places these concerns with subjectivity, alienation, and fragmentation in a transnational cinematic space that, although still largely related to modern architecture, begins to firmly move beyond the critique of modernity in *Play Time*.

**NJ: the fragmented transnational traveler**

To return more strictly to *Yi Yi*, let me turn now to NJ. An excellent example of the perceptual complication and confusion created by the use of glass architecture in *Yi Yi* (and very much in the style of *Play Time*), as well as a useful starting point for considering NJ’s character, is the scene in his office shortly before he goes to Japan to “close the deal” with Ota (and relive his youth with Sherry). The scene is shot with static camera at an approximately forty-five degree angle to a glass wall that seems to separate NJ’s office from the remainder of the floor. As NJ and his secretary (along with other characters in the background) traverse back and forth across the frame and to and fro through the glass wall’s door, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern which characters are seen through the glass and which are seen in its reflection. As the scene draws to a close, just before NJ walks out for good, for a moment NJ, his secretary, and another character pause, leaving a static image in which three bodies (or a body with three heads) appear to occupy the same space. It is nearly impossible to tell where the characters are situated in the office, or even which body is which—NJ, projected on the glass architectural surface, is fashioned as the multiple, fragmented self.

If NJ is plagued by the kinds of anxiety and uncertainty that Jameson suggests are part of the “great negative emotions of the modernist moment,” his struggle has more to do with the fragmented subjectivity that is characteristic of the postmodern than the modern alienation that I located in Min-Min’s character. That fragmentation is diegetically discernable in his occupation of the complex roles of business partner of a company in transition, patriarch of a “disintegrating” traditional family, and one-half of a still uncertain long-lost love affair. It also figures prominently in the film’s visual spaces as he becomes the most mobile of the characters in his complex traversals of space and time. In
this way, Yang addresses Taiwan’s complex colonial history and its transnational place in
the global marketplace through a creative cinematic rendering of NJ’s physical, mental,
and emotional travels.

As his aforementioned company struggles to position itself in the changing media
landscape, a Japanese computer games creator, Ota, arrives as a potential business
partner. NJ is quickly given the task of wooing Ota, or at least keeping him interested,
while the other partners attempt to secure a deal with Ota’s Taiwanese copycat, Ato. NJ
and Ota quickly forge the kind of personal connection that is conspicuously absent from
NJ’s other relationships—Min-Min is both mentally and, in her trip to the temple,
physically distant, NJ makes seemingly little effort to connect with Ting-Ting, his efforts
to connect with Yang-Yang are limited by time, and he has a tumultuous relationship
with Ah-Di, who is constantly plagued by his debt to NJ throughout the film. In fact, one
of the only other characters to whom he is able to speak (excepting Sherry, to whom we
will turn in a moment) is the comatose Popo, to whom he asks “If you were me, would
you like to wakeup?”

As alluded to in my brief account of the new Taiwan cinema, Taiwan is the product of a
series of colonial relationships with China and Japan that lingers in the minds and images
of contemporary Taiwanese filmmakers. This has been additionally complicated by the
influence of American culture and politics in Taiwan. As Wu Nien-Jen remarks on
contemporary relations between Taiwan and Japan,

This is very complex. I believe that the Taiwanese attachment to Japan is the same as our
attachment to the U.S. In both cases, it’s one-sided; it’s not mutual, not reciprocal. To some extent
you can say we Taiwanese worship Japanese, and American, culture.

The choice of another culture, it’s all the same, whether it’s Japan or the U.S. Plus, it’s an island.
People come and go, colonial rulers come and go. It’s a long historical process. I have a friend
who uses this metaphor: after the invaders gallop through the area, they usually damage the place,
but in our case, in Taiwan, their hoof prints remain, not just as damage but as a wide, mixed-up, hybrid place.\textsuperscript{105}

In \textit{Yi Yi}, Wu Nien-Jen, as the character NJ, both embodies this complex relationship and traverses its “hybrid place.” As business partner he is forced to look to Japan for financial success, and in his personal relationships he is drawn most strongly to his new Japanese friend and his former love who now lives in the US and is married to an American. In the latter half of the film this complexity is brought to the fore as NJ travels to Japan to meet with Ota and Sherry.

From what appears to be his subjective point-of-view, the last shot we see before NJ arrives in Japan is a nearly minute-long tracking shot of Taipei as seen driving through it at night. The endless blocks of modern glass architecture and the bright lights of the city are NJ’s (and our) last impression of Taiwan before his emotional journey takes him to another place, Japan, and another time, reliving the moment of his young love with Sherry. This view of Taipei’s endlessly structured urban geography will contrast markedly with the diverse topography of Japan—this is sure to be a complicated journey.

On their first day of exploring Japan, Sherry and NJ are immediately lost in the train station. This is rendered humorously in a straight cut from the previous scene in which Ota tells them: “You are young people. Young people always find their own way. That’s the best way.” In three short shots, Yang sets the stage for the confusion and complication that will mark the couple’s emotional voyage through Japan and their past. The first two shots, which almost do not even fit with the film’s more general aesthetic, frame NJ and Sherry from high angle in the bright train station with a slightly shaking camera that is seen almost nowhere else in the film. The third shot is a longer take that frames a series of intersecting train tracks extending into the distance and surrounded by a mish-mash of architectural structures that, in their diverse style, look nothing like the Taipei seen only a few shots before. Over this third shot we hear the couple retelling the story of their first date, a story that will continue and recur throughout their travels. Yang in effect uses the architecture to tell what is obviously a difficult and complex tale. At

\textsuperscript{105} Davis, 723.
this point, Yang adds another layer of complexity by inter-cutting scenes of Ting-Ting and Fatty’s temporally concurrent first date. By shifting back and forth between the images and overlapping the audio tracks, Yang produces a kind of transnational space that, combined with the continuing story of NJ and Sherry’s first date, creates an image that seems to cut across history, geography, and all of the other divides that separate NJ from both his daughter and his past. For David Li, this sequence reflects the ways in which “time and space of transnational proportions are radically compressed into living immediacy to exemplify the arrival for some of the condition of a global village.”\(^{106}\) But as Li notes, this image is not only that of the reduction of time and space in the new global context in which Taiwan is situated; it also “hark[s] back in late modern Japan to a modernising Taiwan three decades ago.”\(^{107}\) In this way, Yang uses NJ and Sherry’s journey to address both Taiwan’s contemporary status in the global market as well as its complex colonial past. This colonial past, as mentioned earlier, has been of particular importance to the filmmakers of the new Taiwan cinema. As Wu Nien-Jen has remarked, “an important thing about the Japanese occupation of Taiwan is that … Japan is the foundation of modernization in Taiwan.”\(^{108}\) But as Yang represents in NJ’s journey, this modernization has left Taiwan in a very different state from that of its colonizer. As Jameson describes in relation to Yang’s earlier film *Terrorizer*,

> Taiwan is somehow within the world system as its citizens are in their city boxes: prosperity and constriction all at once; the loss of nature…; the failure of the classically urban to constitute itself standing in some intimate relationship and counterpoint to the failure of the classical psychic subject to constitute itself.\(^{109}\)

Yang leaves us with the feeling, whether accurate or not, that Japan’s citizens have somehow escaped their boxes, that Japan’s urban spaces represent something more than the pure rationality of Taipei’s modern structures, that nature remains a site for escape and reflection (as NJ and Sherry enact), and that the Japanese subject (in the figure of

\(^{106}\) Li, 202.
\(^{107}\) Li, 202.
\(^{108}\) Davis, 724.
Ota) has been fully constituted in a way that NJ (standing in for the Taiwanese subject) cannot.

Yang does perhaps even more here than merely to point out the various layers of linkage and differentiation between Taiwan and Japan. Li asserts that Yang seeks to combat the ways in which “global capital’s perpetual manufacturing of difference and engineering of sensation threatens to compact our sense of time into ephemeral pleasures.” In the face of this, Li says, Yang “wants the recognition of this finitude [of human life] to effectively counter a normative conception of time in late modernity as instantaneously self-fulfilling.”\(^{110}\) But while Li sees Yang as asserting a positive outcome to be had in the return from the “exhilarating unknown” and the repression of “reticent” desires that NJ and Min-Min represent, I would suggest that there is more of a warning here than a celebration. For Li, the film’s warning, or “ethical imperative,” is a rejection of “crass materialism” and “those who seek short-term interests.”\(^{111}\) Although those themes could certainly be said to emerge, I contend that there is an equally apparent warning against seeking refuge in the traditional sites of subjective formation. Despite NJ and Min-Min’s return to the home and family, it is not at all clear that anything has necessarily changed. Moreover, the parallels that Yang draws between NJ/Sherry and Fatty/Ting-Ting seem to serve as a warning against the generational cycles that Li suggests Yang is celebrating. In this vein it is also not clear that NJ’s repression of his desires is to be entirely privileged over Fatty’s desperate act of murder—the film ends without suggesting that either has really solved anything. If anything, the film seems to me to suggest that the generational cycles which NJ, Min-Min, Ting-Ting, Fatty, and (although I haven’t the time to discuss her character fully here) Li-Li are trapped in must be somehow escaped. I will finally suggest that if any character is fully celebrated in this film it is Yang-Yang, the eight year-old son who might be said to stand in for Yang himself. Thus, in the final section of this chapter I will examine the ways in which Yang-Yang enacts and represents the creative potentialities of resistance that Yang seems to imagine for the (post)modern subject.

\(^{110}\) Li, 202.

\(^{111}\) Li, 203.
**Yang-Yang: artistic redemption in the hands of youth?**

I have already characterized Min-Min as lost in the “placelessness” of postmodern hyperspace, negotiating both the alienation of the modern and the “existential messiness” of the postmodern, and NJ as plagued by a fragmented subjectivity firmly “situated” on the transnational planes of the postmodern. Finally, I will turn now to Yang-Yang as the figure most capable, seemingly against all odds, of seamlessly traversing the disciplinary places of *Yi Yi*’s (post)modern, transnational milieu and coming out “clean” on the other side.

If Popo acts as a kind of absent center around which Yang’s story of familial disintegration circulates, Yang-Yang functions more as a displaced center, coming in and out of each of the other characters’ lives, but never firmly situated. In the film’s opening, he is the “center of attention”—literally, both in his position at the base of the “family tree” photograph (in center frame of the medium shot that “introduces” him) and as he is plagued by constant teasing at the hands of his young female relatives, and figuratively in the eyes of NJ as they leave the wedding for a quick bite at McDonalds. After being displaced from the film itself by Popo’s stroke, Yang-Yang returns to the center, this time as the subject of the disciplinary logic of the school. In this case, he is comically proven innocent of the charge of bringing a condom to school, but this early scene sets up the ways in which he will function as the object of a disciplinary gaze that Yang represents cinematically through the use of long high-angle shots and security camera monitors that track Yang-Yang through the school. But if Yang-Yang is the object of the disciplinary gaze, he enacts a kind of reversal, stepping to the other side of the lens, literally appropriating the gaze through the eye of the camera.

It is, of course, not by chance that Yang-Yang chooses the medium of photography as visual form of expression. His inability to talk to the comatose Popo despite Min-Min’s urging “speaks” to Yang-Yang’s larger silence in the face of a complex world, a disciplinary logic, and his preoccupied family. In one of the rare cases in which he
actually does speak (excluding the film’s finale, which I will cite momentarily) he waxes philosophical:

Yang-Yang: Daddy, I can’t see what you see and you can’t see what I see. How can I know what you see?
NJ: Good question. I never thought of that. That’s why we need a camera. Do you want to play with one?
Yang-Yang: Daddy, can we only know half of the truth?
NJ: What? I don’t get it.
Yang-Yang: I can only see what’s in front, not what’s behind. So I can only know half of the truth, right?

David Li reads this as Yang-Yang, “junior alter ego of Director Yang,” setting up a “cinematic dialectic of vision.” He asserts that Yang-Yang (and Yang) are interested in this dialectic of vision in two ways:

One is the urge to transcend partial and peripheral for holistic vision, an attempt at grasping social and spatial interdependency and integrity. The other is the desire to recognize a temporality of sight, to couple the forward-looking eye/I with the history of its own immanence and the origin of its imminent becoming. If Yangyang pictures the rear of people’s heads to enable their self-perception, the director of Yi Yi wants to locate the failure of constructing totality in the post-modern fracturing of time and space and at the same time recuperate its possibility.

Although I would agree that “grasping social and spatial interdependency” is one of the film’s crucial concerns, Li’s assertion that Yang desires to “recuperate the possibility” of totality in the midst of the postmodern seems to me to be a misreading effected by the larger theoretical grounding from which Li interprets the film. Li is in many ways reacting against Fredric Jameson’s—Jameson being one of the first western academics to address Yang’s earlier films—reading of Yang in what Li calls a “post-modern sentiment of the deceased subject and displaced morality.” Li proposes to “break the stranglehold of the modern and post-modern debate” by looking to the framework of “reflexive

112 Li, 201.
113 Li, 201.
114 Li, 198.
modernity” developed by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash. Ultimately, however, the only real distinction that Li draws between Jameson’s postmodern framework and that of reflexive modernity is the latter’s more optimistic outlook on late modernity as opening a possibility for “reflection” and self-organization.\footnote{Li, 198.} I do not intend to engage in a comparison of the two frameworks here; however, although I would agree that couching one’s reading in “post-modern resignation to the impossibility of truth claims” would render an unnecessarily pessimistic view of Yang’s work, Li’s reversal of that pessimism in a kind of celebration of Yang’s attempts to “recuperate the possibility” of a so-called holistic vision, or truth, is itself unrealistic. I would suggest that instead, as usual, the “truth” lies somewhere in-between. For if, as I have already argued, Yang is less than eager to privilege any of his characters’ responses to their social conditions, he is certainly not ready to celebrate any of them as engendering the possibility for an overarching truth that will resolve the various levels of angst pervading the film’s diegetic space. On the other hand, he is also not resigned to the impossibility of functioning within the repressive logics affecting those conditions of alienation, fragmentation, and angst. Thus, like De Certeau, he chooses a third avenue, a traversal of the space between that offers potentiality in practice, here represented in the figure of Yang-Yang. Although he is thwarted, misunderstood, and misrepresented (humorously as a “newfound maestro” of “avant-garde art”\footnote{Yang-Yang might be read here as standing in for the experience of Taiwanese filmmakers, especially Yang, whose work has been described as not “commercial enough” for Taiwanese audiences. See Sklar, "The Engineer of Modern Perplexity."}) along the way, he ultimately emerges at the film’s conclusion as the only character who seems confident about his direction and place in the world. The film closes with his speech to Popo:

I’m sorry, grandma. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk to you. I think all the stuff I could tell you, you must already know. Otherwise, you wouldn’t always tell me to “listen!” They all say you’ve gone away. But you didn’t tell me where you went. I guess it’s someplace you think I should know. But, grandma, I know so little. Do you know what I want to do when I grow up? I want to tell people things they don’t know. Show them stuff they haven’t seen. It’ll be so much fun. …
If this is indeed Director Yang speaking through his young character, his desire is clearly not to reach a holistic vision or recuperate the possibility for grand narratives of truth. But it is to show us *something*, something about the postmodern condition—specific to Taiwan and perhaps extendable across the urban global framework—and something about potentiality—in the practices of cinema, in the minds of youth, and in the spaces themselves.
Chapter Two

At the conclusion of the first of his two books on cinema, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze announces a cinematic crisis. On one hand, this is a theoretical, or rhetorical, crisis—the characterization of cinema that Deleuze has outlined in the previous eleven chapters must give way to a new kind of cinema, a new cinematic philosophy (and a new book). On the other hand, the crisis, like the rest of Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema, is situated in a particular historical account of the development of cinematic form. Deleuze firmly locates the crisis of cinema—conceived as the crisis of the “action-image”—in the aftermath of World War II. More specifically, Deleuze finds the first realization of the crisis, along with the subsequent reformulation of cinematic practice, in Italy of the late 1940s. As opposed to France, a country clinging to the appearance of a contribution to victory, and Germany, whose film industry had succumbed to fascism, Italy was marked by certain defeat and destruction, but also by “a resistance and popular life underlying oppression, although one without illusion.”

Combined with its film industry’s relative escape from fascism, “it is this very special situation of Italy which made possible the enterprise of neo-realism.” It is in Italian neo-realism that Deleuze locates the emergence of the five characteristics which mark the crisis and lead to the new image, the time-image, of cinema. I will return to these five characteristics in my discussion of Vittorio De Sica’s Bicycle Thieves, but, from the outset, I would note one aspect that will be of primary concern in its application to urban space. For Deleuze, the opposition between Italian neo-realism and realism is based on the former’s breaking of coherent spatial coordinates in favor of mixed-up spatial referents. This breaking of spatial coordinates constitutes the formation of the any-space-whatever, the site in which the

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118 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 212.
119 I prefer the plural British release title to the American singular *Bicycle Thief* as the former implies the multiplicity of stories, or more general critique, which I argue the film provides.
characters of the new cinematic image enact what becomes a specifically urban voyage. In Deleuze’s formulation, two main factors contribute to the proliferation of these spaces in film after World War II:

The first, independent of the cinema, was the post-war situation with its towns demolished or being reconstructed, its waste grounds, its shanty towns, and even in places where the war had not penetrated, its undifferentiated urban tissue, its vast unused places, docks, warehouses, heaps of girders and scrap iron. Another, more specific to the cinema … arose from a crisis of the action-image: the characters were found less and less in sensory-motor “motivating” situations, but rather in a state of strolling, of sauntering or of rambling which defined pure optical and sound situations.\(^\text{120}\)

As we will see in the pages to come, both De Sica’s Rome and Wang Xiaoshuai’s Beijing are marked by these any-space-whatevers. Our consideration of the sources of these spaces, as well as the actions effected by them, will bring to the fore the ways in which Beijing Bicycle translates and transforms the social critique of Bicycle Thieves in the context of “sixth generation” Chinese cinema. Additionally, the concept of the any-space-whatever will serve to shed new light on the constructions and analyses of cinematic space and grammar which I introduced in the previous chapter.

**De Certeau’s operational concept of the city, part II**

The second aspect of the operational concept of the city examined and critiqued by De Certeau is as follows:

the substitution of a nowhen, or of a synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions; univocal scientific strategies, made possible by the flattening out of all the data in a plane projection, must replace the tactics of users who take advantage of “opportunities” and who, through these trap-events, these lapses in visibility, reproduce the opacities of history everywhere.\(^\text{121}\)

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\(^{120}\) Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 120 (emphasis in the original).

\(^{121}\) De Certeau, 94.
The “opacities” to which De Certeau refers are conceptually developed earlier in his text during his discussion of strategies and tactics. As mentioned in the first chapter, De Certeau distinguishes between strategies and tactics based on their respective relations to space and time. The distinction is also determined by his explanations of opacity and transparency. As has already been discussed, for De Certeau, the users of a given system enact a series of practices that, although functioning within the rules of that system, “trace ‘indeterminate trajectories’ that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move.”\[^{122}\]

These trajectories escape the methods of classification and ordering provided by statistics and other means of administrative calculation. In this way, De Certeau says, “the ways of using…become invisible in the universe of codification and generalized transparency.”\[^{123}\] This “universe” is the strategic realm of the “proper” place (as in the first feature of the operational concept of the city) and that proper place’s triumph over time—the strategic is based on the mastery of space and the suppression of time (the “synchronic system”). Tactics, on the other hand, are actions based on the very lack of place that strategies demand. In the absence of control over or identification with a place, the user must enact tactics based on the clever utilization of time:

> It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. … This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment.\[^{124}\]

Earlier in the book, prior to providing us with the terminology with which to describe it, De Certeau sets up what he will refer to as the “tactic” as a way of using defined by skill or ruse:

\[^{122}\] De Certeau, 34.
\[^{123}\] De Certeau, 35.
Like the skill of a driver in the streets of Rome or Naples, there is a skill that has its connoisseurs and its esthetics exercised in any labyrinth of powers, a skill ceaselessly recreating opacities and ambiguities—spaces of darkness and trickery—in the universe of technocratic transparency, a skill that disappears and reappears again, taking no responsibility for the administration of a totality.\textsuperscript{125}

We can thus understand the reproduction of the “opacities of history”—which he suggests the city, in its operational conception, must repress—in terms of an opacity defined by its opposition to the statistical or administrative methods of “smoothing over,” or making transparent, the actions of users in a system. It is therefore interesting that De Certeau cites the “skill of a driver in the streets of Rome” as exemplary of the tactic. Although the characters of \textit{Bicycle Thieves} are certainly not drivers in the sense in which De Certeau is referring here, we might say that they, or perhaps De Sica, do enact the kind of traversal of Rome’s “labyrinth powers” which serves to “reproduce the opacities of history” that would otherwise be suppressed in Rome’s post-war administrative urban framework—in other words, part of what we will trace are the ways in which De Sica provides a kind of introduction to both the administrative logics of post-war Italy, as well as the logics operating within and beneath the administrative surface. As we will see, the characters of \textit{Beijing Bicycle} arguably enact a similar traversal in Xiaoshuai’s cinematic Beijing. Thus, the framework provided by Deleuze’s conception of the any-space-whatever, combined with De Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics, will serve as a starting point for understanding the cinematic practices and appropriations that mark these two films.

\textbf{Bicycle Thieves}

\textit{It would be no exaggeration to say that \textit{Ladri di Biciclette} is the story of a walk through Rome by a father and his son.}

André Bazin\textsuperscript{126}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[125]De Certeau, 18.
\end{footnotes}
As Giuliana Bruno notes, Bazin’s characterization of *Bicycle Thieves* as a “city walk” lodges the film—along with films such as Roberto Rossellini’s *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1947)—firmly in the tradition of neorealism: “a movement that developed street life filmically, exposing the living component of the production of space.” If this is indeed the case, to what ends do these films utilize their particular productions of space? For Bruno, in a reference to *Germany Year Zero* that might be applied more generally to neorealism at large,

This walk constructs the city as a landscape of emptiness, rubble, and debris: an urban cancer that speaks of history and reveals how the traces of its ruins are left upon the urban fabric to mold its present and map the future.

Although the rubble and debris are somewhat less evident in the urban landscape of *Bicycle Thieves* compared to *Germany Year Zero*, the emptiness—both of the architectural space and social framework—is unmistakable. Consider the film’s opening sequence: Ricci sits alone on the sidewalk, toiling with stones and debris, before he springs at the opportunity of finally getting a simple job; one of the men in the crowd, upset about being passed over for one of the only two jobs available, protests “Because it’s not for me I must continue to rot?” to which the labor head responds “There’s just no work for you people!”; and finally, Ricci again, at the prospect of losing the job for not having his bicycle, “I’m not going to wait around another year.” Combined with the desolate topography surrounding the housing structures that provide its background, the brief dialogue of this first scene already portrays the hopelessness which has, and will continue to characterize these characters’ lives.

In the opening scene and the scenes which immediately follow, we can begin to see the ways in which *Bicycle Thieves* establishes Rome in accord with the second aspect of De Certeau’s operational conception of the city. Specifically, administrative classification, the suppression of tradition, and the general “synchronic” nature of the city are clear from

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128 Bruno, 30.
the outset. In the first scene, for instance, the administrative logic is made explicit in the
crowd’s response to the prospect that Ricci will lose the job if he does not have a bicycle:

First Man: “I have a bicycle!”
Second Man: “You’re not the only one! I do too.”
Labor Head: “You’re a bricklayer. That’s a different category.”
Second Man: “Then change it!”
Labor Head: “I can’t.”

In the following scenes, in which Ricci and his wife Maria are forced to pawn their
wedding sheets in order to retrieve the bicycle, the suppression of tradition comes to the
fore. As Kristin Thompson observes, De Sica even “provides a bit of symbolic irony” in
this sequence in the form of a group of children in the background who are “playing at
bride-and-groom” just before Ricci and Maria pawn the trousseau sheets.129

It what ways, then, does the film function as a kind of opposition to this characterization
of the city? Or, to the extent to which the film—in these early instances, as well as
others—reveals something about Rome, does this revealing operate as something more
than to merely represent the negative face of a particular post-war context? Kristin
Thompson provides a starting point for addressing these questions in her consideration of
(neo)realism’s “defamiliarizing power.” Starting with realism proper, she suggests three
ways in which this “defamiliarization” makes realism relevant to the neoformalist
analysis she advances. First, as a representation and exploration of everyday reality,
realism already enacts a basic defamiliarizing function of art—elevating the familiar to
the status of the exceptional, or in other words, making us notice that to which we are
otherwise habituated. Second, because reality is an aspect “of the material of which the
work [of art] is constructed,” in some cases, “depending on the norms of the period,”
merely choosing to represent that very reality can be defamiliarizing.130 And finally,
purely as style and regardless of content, realism can be defamiliarizing in relation to
other prevalent (non-realist) styles. Thus, by situating Bicycle Thieves in the stylistic

129 Thompson, 207.
130 Thompson, 199-200.
category of realism—and therefore assigning to it a defamiliarizing function—we can already begin to see the ways in which the film implies a kind of active spectatorship. Additionally, De Certeau’s conception of (spatial) practices provides us with a useful analog, or layering onto the neoformalist defamiliarization.

**the rhetorical city walk (as narrative)**

In the previous chapter, I described the ways in which De Certeau’s idea of the “pedestrian speech act” provides a means for understanding the operations of characters in cinematic space, as well as the practices of viewing certain kinds of those spaces. In this section I will continue in that vein by considering De Certeau’s notion of “walking rhetorics” in relation to the narrative and spatial movements of *Bicycle Thieves*.

Kristin Thompson uses *Bicycle Thieves* as a vehicle through which to ground and advance her discussion of the functions of cinematic realism. She asserts that the film’s realism lies in its break from classical cinema in five primary areas: subject matter, narrative structure, mise-en-scene/cinematography, ideology, and citations of classical cinema (specific references to contemporary popular films and actors). Of specific interest here are the ways in which she describes *Bicycle Thieves* as breaking with classical narrative structure. This primarily operates according to the film’s use of the incidental, chance, and coincidence to propel the narrative forward. “Chance,” Thompson writes, “here involves two kinds of relationships among events: interpolated events incidental to the action and coincidences that further the action.” On the level of the incidental, we can think of the already mentioned children playing bride-and-groom, the children playing in the street outside the fortune teller’s building, the accordion-player and beggar who linger while Ricci hangs his first posters with his supervisor, or a series of other moments to which Thompson refers. For Thompson, these “events help give *Bicycle Thieves* its rich, detailed texture” and, in contrast to classical narratives in which

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131 For a more thorough explanation of “defamiliarization” in neoformalist analysis, see Thompson, especially pp. 10-11.
132 Thompson, 207.
133 See Thompson, 208.
every instance demands significance, “recreate the rhythm of real events, with trivial and important happenings alternating.” The second aspect of chance—coincidence—functions to link the major sections of the narrative. Here we are reminded of the scene in which Ricci first spots the thief at the market, or when the thief appears outside of the fortune-teller’s house, or when the owner of the bicycle happens to come out just as Ricci attempts to steal it. These chance events propel the narrative forward, breaking it from the temporal lags of the incidental moments. The element of chance functions in tandem with a carefully constructed “series of deadlines, appointments, and dialogue hooks” that are more in-line with the style of classical film. It is in this combination of chance and careful construction that Thompson locates the film’s radical break. This is also an important aspect of André Bazin’s characterization of neorealism’s very reality.

Citing Orson Welles’s use of deep focus, Bazin asserts that continuity—“a fundamental quality of reality”—is “restored to cinematographic illusion” in a break with classical editing derived from the films of D.W. Griffith. According to Thompson, the “continuity” to which Bazin refers here is “temporal continuity as such, not … the term ‘continuity’ as it refers to editing.” Thompson is, of course, correct, but it is important to note that Bazin is very much concerned here with editing, or rather, the lack thereof. The break which he associates with Welles is the removal of abstract elements (such as the close-up or subjective point-of-view) in favor of the deep focus and long take—

Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field. It is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an a priori significance, it is the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern, as in a sort of parallelepiped of reality with the screen as its cross-section, the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene.

134 Thompson, 207.
135 Thompson, 208.
137 Thompson, 203.
138 Bazin, 28. Here Bazin seems to stand in continuity with my argument from Chapter One regarding the kind of cinematic “viewing practices” made manifest in Tati’s Play Time.
In this way, according to Bazin, the “visible continuity” proper to reality is restored by eliminating edited intrusion. Temporal continuity is thus based on a more realistic rhythm of everyday sight—rendered visual in the “reality” of the deep focus shot. But what of 

_Bicycle Thieves_, which, as Thompson also notes, for the most part avoids use of the deep focus shot or the long take? I would suggest that although Bazin cites Welles’s use of deep focus as the break from which realistic continuity develops, that continuity is not dependent on deep focus as such. In other words, although _Bicycle Thieves_ does not make express use of deep focus, it does avoid the edited intrusion of abstract elements, thus retaining visible continuity. In _Bicycle Thieves_, then, this visible continuity heightens the temporal structure—undistracted by abstract editing within the scene, the spectator is left to focus on the scene-to-scene temporality that Thompson identifies as the film’s radical break.

Bazin’s characterization of _Bicycle Thieves_ as a “city walk” can perhaps thus be understood as a description both of the narrative diegesis as well as the edited narrative temporality. In other words, the film—understood purely in terms of the components of chance (the incidental and coincidental) and classical causal connections—can be read as a cinematic city walk whose content (the narrative proper of Ricci and Bruno’s search for the bicycle) is in one respect inconsequential. What I am suggesting is that the film operates on two (not mutually exclusive) levels to reveal the character of Rome—both as a simple narrative (of Ricci and the stolen bicycle) and as a kind of guided tour for the spectator, a walk we might take through the city in which there are certain “must see” locations but also those things which we would encounter entirely by chance and which would create a kind of temporal continuity in accord with that of the film. In either case, with the film’s narrative construction in mind, we can now turn to De Certeau to continue our consideration of the earlier question of how the film operates beyond a revealing of Rome, adding to the “defamiliarizing” function of realism cited by Thompson.

De Certeau asserts, quite simply, that “there is a rhetoric of walking.”[^139] How, then, and to what ends, might we understand the “city walk” of _Bicycle Thieves_—on both of the

[^139]: De Certeau, 100.
levels I have proposed—as a walking rhetoric? De Certeau outlines his walking rhetoric based on, or even defined by, the manipulation of spatial organizations—put in the terms of his larger argument, the practices enacted within the *espace propre*. Thus, walking, De Certeau writes,

creates shadows and ambiguities within [spatial organizations]. It inserts its multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors). Within them it is itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that constantly alter it and make it the other’s blazon: in other words, it is like a peddler, carrying something surprising, transverse or attractive compared with the usual choice.\textsuperscript{140}

We might then already say that the walk of *Bicycle Thieves* serves to (re)insert the negated or ignored particularities of the social, cultural, and personal into the city. In terms of the second aspect of the operational concept, we could say that walking “reproduce[s] the opacities of history” suppressed by administrative functioning. But we should go further, or at least be more precise. These practices can be more fully understood in a formal structure defined by the stylistic figures of *synecdoche* (in which a part stands in for the whole) and *asyndeton* (in which linking words are eliminated). De Certeau relates these figures in terms of their spatial dimensions. “Synecdoche,” he writes, “expands a spatial element in order to make it play the role of a ‘more’ (a totality) and take its place,” while asyndeton “creates a ‘less,’ opens gaps in the spatial continuum, and retains only selected parts of it that amount almost to relics.” Or, put more simply, “synecdoche replaces totalities by fragments (a *less* in place of a *more*); asyndeton disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something).”\textsuperscript{141} Is this not the very structure of the narrative outlined above? More plainly, might we say that *Bicycle Thieves* is constructed by taking a set of fragments—pieces of the everyday that stand in for larger social and political concerns—and stringing them together? It might be objected that where asyndeton, as De Certeau describes, “undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility,”\textsuperscript{142} the narrative of *Bicycle Thieves* is based on continuity—Bazin’s temporal continuity. One might also argue that

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\textsuperscript{140} De Certeau, 101.
\textsuperscript{141} De Certeau, 101.
\textsuperscript{142} De Certeau, 101.
this is generally characteristic of western narrative cinema. It is true, in a sense, that De Certeau’s statement is generally applicable, but the distinction, ever so slight as it may be, is the heightened social and political valence of the fragments which comprise Bicycle Thieves. Moreover, as Thompson shows, the film’s radical break with classical cinema is the way “its abrupt changes in tactics [through the incidental and coincidental] help to undermine the conventional hermeneutic line” that the film otherwise emphasizes. The radical aspect of the film could thus be assigned to the elements of chance that determine its very rhythm—to use De Certeau’s language, “through these rhetorical operations a spatial phrasing of an analogical (composed of juxtaposed citations) and elliptical (made of gaps, lapses, and allusions) type is created.” This occurs within and in a kind of opposition to the techniques of classical narrative structure. Thus, we might say finally that the “city walk” of Bicycle Thieves creates “an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes.” It is in this way that the film fashions a critique of the post-liberation “city in transition,” reasserting tradition, the plight of the individual, and the historical foundation of the present in the face of the synchronic substitution and administrative segmentation of the city (la ville propre).

**spatial rhetoric in the any-space-whatever**

Up to this point the narrative “architecture” and “walking rhetorics” of Bicycle Thieves have been primarily discussed in terms of their temporality—Bazin’s temporal continuity and Thompson’s description of the film’s “schedule.” In this section, we will turn to Deleuze, buttressed by De Certeau, to consider the particularly spatial aspects of the film and the ways in which the film’s spatial construction contributes to its rhetoric. Additionally, this turn to the spatial will allow us to again initiate a consideration of the grammar of film analysis and the ways in which Deleuze and De Certeau contribute to an extension of that grammar.

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143 Thompson, 210.
144 De Certeau, 102.
145 De Certeau, 102.
It is, perhaps, more than appropriate to turn to Deleuze at this point of our intersection of the temporal and spatial. As mentioned at the opening of this chapter, Deleuze situates the beginnings of cinema’s transition from the *movement-image* to the *time-image* in the films of Italian neorealism. Five characteristics define this transition: the substitution of a dispersive situation for a globalizing or synthetic one, the breaking of lines connecting space and time into deliberately weak links or connections, the replacement of sensory-motor situations in favor of the stroll or voyage, the dominance of the cliché, and the switch from a world of assignable actions and distinctive organizational milieus to the world of conspiracy and the diffusion of effects. Preliminarily, we can suggest the ways in which these characteristics are evident in *Bicycle Thieves*. Describing the first characteristic, Deleuze writes:

> The city and the crowd lose the collective and unanimist character … the city at the same time ceases to be the city above, the upright city, with skyscrapers and low-angle shots, in order to become the recumbent city, the city as horizontal or at human height, where each gets on with his own business, on his own account.\(^\text{146}\)

The crane-shot in the opening sequence is nearly the only instance of verticality in a film otherwise shot “horizontally,” on the level of the human eye—the other instance being the film’s final shot.\(^\text{147}\) As we will return to shortly, the social collective is shown to be in crisis as well. As for the second characteristic, if the previous section revealed nothing else, it certainly showed *Bicycle Thieves* as functioning in terms of the ways in which, as Deleuze writes, “the line or the fibre of the universe which prolonged events into one another, or brought about the connection of portions of space, has broken,” leaving chance as “the sole guiding thread.”\(^\text{148}\) The third characteristic is essentially that of the *any-space-whatever*, which we shall return to in relation to *Bicycle Thieves* momentarily.

The fourth characteristic—the reign of visual clichés as comprising a “world without totality or linkage”—might be aligned with Kristin Thompson’s reading of the film’s citations of classical cinema. For Thompson, these visual markers serve to connect with

\(^{146}\) Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 207. One question that arises here is the degree to which European cities tend to lack the skyscrapers to which Deleuze refers, thus already reducing the necessity for the low-angle shots that Deleuze seems to see as a distinguishing factor between classical and modern cinema.

\(^{147}\) We will consider the significance of this “book-ending” in the final section of this chapter.

\(^{148}\) Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 207.
the audience, reminding them of the film’s distinction from the classical cinema depicted in the recurring movie posters, movie fan magazines, and photographs.\(^{149}\) Although Deleuze’s conception is perhaps more philosophically complex, in Thompson’s formulation these images do, as Deleuze would say, “circulate in the external world … [and] penetrate each one of us and constitute his internal world.”\(^ {150}\) Finally, the fifth characteristic—the diffusion of power and effects without an identifiable center—is characteristic of the milieu of the Rome of Bicycle Thieves—the source of the characters’ suffering and misery remains without a definable source, spread across the social fabric.

Although each of these characteristics can help us to understand the nature of Bicycle Thieves as Deleuze might conceive it, the role of the any-space-whatever is particularly relevant for our specifically spatial concerns. For Deleuze, the any-space-whatever is marked by its potentiality—“it no longer has co-ordinates, it is a pure potential, it shows only pure Powers and Qualities, independently of the states of things or milieux which actualize them.”\(^ {151}\) But if it is a pure potential, what does Deleuze suggest is offered or might emerge from that potentiality? And just as importantly, how does this abstract sort of space—if it does indeed operate “independently of the things or milieux which actualize [it]”—relate to specific locales? These are the questions that must be answered in order to bring Deleuze to bear on our consideration of Bicycle Thieves, and we can begin to find those answers by returning to his initial definition of the any-space-whatever:

Any-space-whatever is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible. What in fact manifests the instability, the heterogeneity, the absence of link of such a space, is a richness in potentials or singularities which are, as it were, prior conditions of all actualisation, all determination.\(^ {152}\)

\(^{149}\) See Thompson, 214-15.
\(^{150}\) Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 208.
\(^{151}\) Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 120.
\(^{152}\) Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 109.
To begin to unravel this complex definition, we might attempt to apply it to the cinematically constructed space of *Bicycle Thieves*. This application would function on two levels, what we might differentiate as *macro* and *micro* spatial constructions. On the micro level, for instance, consider the scene in which Ricci and Bruno first search for the old man after seeing him with the supposed thief outside the market. The chase is constructed through a series of shots constituted by contrasting light and shadows and a play of depth. The long shot functions here to create a sense of depth, consuming large spaces and revealing long alleys and empty streets. But the editing renders the spatial linkages weak—it is an almost vertiginous space in which it remains unclear as to where the characters are located or where they are going. Indeed, Ricci and Bruno are lost, as are we as viewers. Furthermore, these are linkages which could have been put together in any number of configurations to create a similar dizzying affect. However, nothing appears to be actualized in this space—it is as if Ricci and Bruno take a detour into its emptiness, nothing happens, and they leave. If so, then what is the point of this scene? We could, of course, simply say that it is part of a narrative chase, a way to build up suspense, but it is certainly a strange way of doing so—Ricci and Bruno appear to be running aimlessly, the old man is nowhere in sight, Bruno tries to take a break to urinate in the street. For Kristin Thompson, this is part of “the film’s generally oppressive depiction of Italian society.”

Read from that point of view, we might say that the potentiality which emerges from this micro case of the any-space-whatever has to do with its very emptiness. As Deleuze defines it, the any-space-whatever has two states, “deconnection” and emptiness, which are “always implied in each other.” If this scene is indeed a commentary on Rome’s oppressive nature, then we might say that the potentiality of this disconnected and empty space has to do with its reversal—in other words, with a populating of this space, a “rendering human,” a breathing of life back into a “dead spot” of the city (and the film’s narrative). After all, as Deleuze asserts in his meditation on the possibility for a modern political cinema, “it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet…*the people are missing.*” Deleuze situates his

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153 Thompson, 208.
154 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 120.
discussion of political cinema, or a “minor cinema,” in the context of the “third world” and “minority film-makers,” but the notion of a cinematographic art engaged in the task of “contributing to the invention of a people” seems more widely applicable. Indeed, if we think of post-liberation Italy (and the micro any-space-whatever just described) in relation to Deleuze’s description of the possibility for a political art, the similarity is rather striking:

The moment the master, or the colonizer, proclaims ‘There have never been people here’, the missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessary political art must contribute.156

But this does not get us quite close enough to answering the question of how the any-space-whatever functions as potentiality on the level of the particular. Let us consider, then, what we might refer to as the macro instance of spatial construction of the any-space-whatever. In the case of Bicycle Thieves, this would constitute the film in its entirety—the construction of Rome through a linkage of scenes which might be said to exist as points on an incomplete map. This is where we can truly begin to see the work of the voyage, ballad, or journey which Deleuze suggests characterize neorealism. The “city walk” constructs a space—a kind of Rome, but one whose elements are arbitrarily joined and whose connections are not made clear. We may have a map with defined locations, but we have no recourse to a trajectory that would allow us to find our way between them. At this point, it may seem almost contradictory to layer complexity onto an already difficult concept, but I think it is useful here to briefly invoke a parcel of Deleuze’s larger philosophical considerations of space to help finally untangle ourselves from the throes of the any-space-whatever and see its import for understanding (this) film.157

156 Deleuze, Cinema 2, 217.
157 Although I do not have the time or space to do so here, I propose that any consideration of Deleuze’s film theory must be understood in relation to his larger body of philosophy. After all, Deleuze’s work on film is not, as he himself notes, the work of film theory as such, it is the work of philosophy or the creation of concepts which belong to cinema but are not about cinema itself.
In the fourteenth chapter, or “plateau,” of Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, space is considered in the unstable dichotomy of smooth and striated. Through a series of “models” (e.g. technological, musical, mathematical, etc.) they elaborate a distinction, which becomes more of a variation, between the two categories, perhaps summarized as the following:

In striated space, lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from one point to another. In the smooth, it is the opposite: the points are subordinated to the trajectory. … There are stops and trajectories in both the smooth and the striated. But in smooth space, the stop follows from the trajectory; once again, the interval takes all, the interval is substance … In smooth space, the line is therefore a vector, a direction and not a dimension or metrical determination. It is a space constructed by local operations involving changes in direction … Whereas in the striated forms organize a matter, in the smooth materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them.

In their use of the “trajectory” and “vector” to describe the smooth as a space of movement or motion in contrast to the privileged “points,” “dimensions,” and “metrical determinations” which characterize the striated, Deleuze and Guattari’s dichotomy begins to sound not unlike De Certeau’s space/place distinction (outlined in Chapter One). As in De Certeau’s place, the striated is characterized by an ordering that, in the movement to the smooth (or becoming *space*), is re- or dis-ordered in what Deleuze and Guattari might refer to as *deterritorialization*. Taken a step further, we can also begin to see a parallel with De Certeau’s conception of tactics vs. strategies:

Smooth space is filled by events … far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties. … Whereas in the striated forms organize a matter, in the

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158 “Unstable” in the sense in which, as in much of the remainder of their text, Deleuze and Guattari set up dichotomies only to break down their very binary structure in favor of a kind of oscillation that emphasizes the in-between or variable space from which the concept emerges. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 474-500.

159 Deleuze and Guattari, 478-9.

160 For one explanation of “deterritorialization” see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), 88. “The process of repressing desire by taming and confining its productive energies is termed ‘territorialization’ and the unchaining of both material production and desire from socially restricting forces is called ‘deterritorialization’ or ‘decoding’, where the decoding of repressive social codes allows desire to move outside of restrictive psychic and spatial boundaries.”
smooth materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them. It is an intensive rather than an extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties.\textsuperscript{161} 

The smooth, characterized by the temporality of the event, thus stands in for De Certeau’s time-based \textit{tactic}; distinct from the material (spatial) organization that operates \textit{strategically} within the striated. In other words, what we can begin to see are the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of space is related to the kind of tension between order and variation or movement and stasis that—especially read alongside De Certeau—suggests a potentiality of variation within the \textit{propre}.

Finally, through Deleuze and Guattari’s application of the smooth and striated to the city, we might return to our more specific concerns with the urban spaces of cinema and the any-space-whatever. “The city,” they write, “is the striated space par excellence,” but it also becomes the site “of a contest between the smooth and the striated.”\textsuperscript{162} This “contest” is the variation that breaks down the simple dichotomy, but that very breaking down exceeds in importance the dichotomy itself:

What interests us in operations of striation and smoothing are precisely the passages or combinations: how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces. Even the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces: to live in the city as a nomad, or as a cave dweller.\textsuperscript{163}

In this way, then, we can read the potentiality of Deleuze’s any-space-whatever in terms of an ongoing operation of variation, a work of smoothing and striating or of \textit{de-} and \textit{re-}territorialization. In other words, on the wasted urban landscapes of post-War Italy emerges that very contest between smooth and striated, between the work of individual or collective desire and the forces of administrative logic (ordering).

What, then, of \textit{Bicycle Thieves} and my proposition of the film as \textit{macro} any-space-whatever? In a perhaps barbarous application of Deleuze and Guattari, we might say that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{161} Deleuze and Guattari, 479.
\item \textsuperscript{162} Deleuze and Guattari, 481.
\item \textsuperscript{163} Deleuze and Guattari, 500.
\end{itemize}
the film itself embodies the work of smoothing and striation. Ricci and Bruno (and we as spectators) traverse a set of ordered points constituting Rome, but our trajectory is, in a sense, untraceable—indeed, this is the voyage, ballad, or rambling which marks the crisis of the action-image, the breakdown of the sensory-motor schema, and the birth of Deleuze’s modern cinema. This voyage without destination through the any-space-whatever is an act of smoothing, a movement of potentiality. On the order of the film’s (edited) architecture—in its tension between continuity and chance, between traditional narrative editing and the interruptions or digressions of the (co)incidental that mark its radical (realist) break—we find a second instance of a kind of variation between smooth and striated, with traditional continuity acting as a cinematic striation and the chance events functioning as smoothing operations. Put more plainly, classical continuity editing acts as a kind of striation in its very (to use De Certeau’s term) transparency or self-effacement—it serves to make invisible by ordering the matter of the film (as Stephen Heath might have it, constructing a filmic space). The introduction of chance, on the other hand, “smooths” by making itself visible, rendering itself as symptom of a potentiality—the introduction of the (co)incidental in Bicycle Thieves disorders the coherency of the classical editing continuity (as Thompson writes, “undermin[ing] the conventional hermeneutic line”164), opening a space (De Certeau’s, not Heath’s) for an affective force. Thus, on both levels, if the film’s conclusion is interpreted as bleak, it must be in part due to the end of the voyage, the return of striation. But to finally return to the initial question of what more emerges from the film than a mere negative characterization of Rome, we might suggest that in its very representation of the variation between smooth and striated, the film evokes an abstract potentiality, an artistic manifestation of the processes by which the modern city becomes a contested space. As we turn to Wang’s Beijing Bicycle, we will see the ways in which the terms of our present discussion—De Certeau’s tactics and strategies; Deleuze and Guattari’s smoothing and striation—along with the opsins of Deleuze’s cinema texts become useful in our developing spatial grammar.

164 Thompson, 210.
Beijing Bicycle

*Beijing Bicycle* was Wang Xiaoshuai’s fourth feature film (and winner of the Special Jury Prize at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival). Wang is often associated with the so-called “sixth generation” of Chinese filmmakers, a categorization that (as we will outline momentarily) has been challenged, along with the remainder of the generational grouping scheme often used by Western critics to order the history of Chinese cinema. The “generations” are a primarily temporal classification beginning with the “film pioneers who introduced motion pictures to China during the turn of the century and who subsequently ventured into film production in the 1910s and 1920s.”165 The second generation comprises filmmakers working in the 1930s and 1940s, generally characterized as left-wing, “who cultivated a realist tradition that blended classical Hollywood with the tradition of Chinese performing arts.”166 The third generation, occupying the 1950s and 1960s, consisted of filmmakers producing official (Communist ideological) narratives in the socialist realist style. Third generation filmmakers continued to produce films into the 1960s and 1970s, during which the filmmakers who would become the fourth generation were receiving the first formal film training under China’s socialist educational system. With the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the professionally trained fourth generation filmmakers were granted their first independent productions. The fifth generation refers to the first class of filmmakers to graduate, in 1982, from the reopened Beijing Film Academy (closed during the Cultural Revolution). The filmmakers of the fifth generation, including well-known directors Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, “were famous for their participation, in the early to mid-1980s, in making experimental art films that challenged the socialist realist tradition.”167 And finally, the sixth generation, as Yin Zhu writes, “refers to a group of self-promoting young filmmakers who came of age during the post-Mao era and lived in urban centers.”

165 Yin Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 5. In this section I draw from Zhu’s account of the generational classification. For a brief summary of the various methods of film historiography that have been deployed to account for the history of Chinese cinema see Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 7-12.
166 Zhu, 5.
167 Zhu, 7.
The generational scheme, especially the sixth generation, has been argued against in the 1990s, in part because, according to Zhu, “the division among propaganda, popular, and art cinemas has been blurred.”

Yingjin Zhang further notes that the problems with the generational naming system are evident at least as early as the fifth generation. In the case of the fifth generation, Zhang points out that the naming system implies “the incorrect assumption that Fifth Generation films share a homogenous style,” as well as that the system “gloss[es] over the marked differences in any director’s work over time.” Zhu notes that the sixth generation has similarly been “argued against…as a grouping tag because no consistent thematic or stylistic pattern exists among the young filmmakers.” In response to the inadequacy of the generational scheme, Zhang proposes to institute “the term ‘New Chinese Cinema’ for works of the Fifth Generation, their associates, and other prominent directors since 1980 [including those of the so-called sixth generation].”

In its relation to the often defined characteristics of the “sixth generation,” including the earlier films of Wang Xiaoshuai’s oeuvre, Beijing Bicycle itself reflects the usefulness of Zhang’s proposed “New Chinese Cinema.” If one of the markers of the sixth generation is, as Zhu suggests, their low budgets, Beijing Bicycle, with its budget of $400,000, already begins to complicate its generational association ($400,00 is, of course, a small budget, but consider that Wang’s first film, The Days (1993) was made for only £7,000). The film also eschews stylistic devices, such as heavy reliance on voice-over narration, that have been associated with the “sixth generation.” For what it is worth,

168 Zhu, 7.
170 Zhu, 7.
171 Zhang, 24.
174 Zhu, 166.
then, I will adopt Zhang’s “New Chinese Cinema” as point-of-reference for situating *Beijing Bicycle*. If the film does retain any relation to the sixth generation as such, it is the degree to which it is one in a series of what Zhu refers to as “contemporary urban dramas reflective of a postmodern estrangement/alienation.”\footnote{Zhu, 7.} This will also be the starting point from which we will consider *Beijing Bicycle*’s relation to *Bicycle Thieves*—as appropriation, reworking, and extension.

**Beijing Bicycle (Thieves)**

At the most we might say that *Beijing Bicycle* is a loose remake of *Bicycle Thieves*; at the least, we could certainly suggest that the former film draws a certain inspiration from the latter. In either case, we are left to ponder where the source of that inspiration lies, in what ways it “works” in its transcendence of the temporal and geographic divides between late 1940s Italy and 21st century China, and to what affect it is deployed in a new context. To begin to answer these questions, a certain contextualization is necessary—we certainly cannot expect to compare these two films without some understanding of the historical specificity of their respective “realities.”

As discussed at the opening of this chapter and in the section on *Bicycle Thieves*, Italian neorealism was the product of a specific historical moment—the post-World War II, post-liberation, urban locales of (primarily) Italy.\footnote{Roberto Rossellini’s *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1947), set in Berlin, is a notable exception.} As André Bazin writes:

> Some components of the new Italian school existed before the Liberation: personnel, techniques, aesthetic trends. But it was their historical, social, and economic combination that suddenly created a synthesis in which new elements also made themselves manifest.\footnote{Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism,” 19.}

If these “new elements” are some of the marks of neorealism, they are lodged in, or, as Bazin suggests, emerge from, a particular set of visual (the devastated urban landscape described earlier) and social (to be discussed in more detail momentarily) markers which
defined Italy’s moment of transition. In this moment, according to Mira Liehm, the “major Italian film directors of the post-World War II period” emerge:

Their individual aesthetic concepts are widely divergent, and each of the three [Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti] is an original creator in his own right. But [their] shared “hunger for reality” gave birth to a style that became, as much as a deep moral commitment, the unifying agent of the movement referred to as the neorealist school.  

If their “unifying agent” was a “hunger for reality,” the unification of the product lies in a certain representation, a critique perhaps, of the very moment in which their reality lies. The transition itself, and the social consequences of that moment, are the object of a critique formulated, as both Bazin and Liehm suggest, from a diverse set of preexisting (and emerging) aesthetic and stylistic modes—in other words, the cinematic practices of the neorealist filmmakers were, as much as something radically new, the product of a creative (re)mixing of existent cinematic forms and styles applied to a particular moment.

Might we suggest that the context of the New Chinese Cinema is similar? The China of *Beijing Bicycle* is not, of course, recovering from war and liberation, but it is in a moment of transition—that of modernization and the movement to a global capitalist/consumerist economy. As Yinjin Zhang contends, it is crucial to consider this context in analysis of “contemporary Chinese Urban cinema, a cinema that at once projects and problematizes new boundaries and desires in the era of globalization.” This is particularly important for understanding the work of the filmmakers of the latter part of the New Chinese Cinema. As has been noted, these directors focus particularly on urban spaces, spaces bearing the most obvious visual (architectural) and social marks of the effects of modernization and globalization. As Shiela Cornelius briefly outlines, this is the result of large-scale rural to urban migration in response to late-1980s changes in agricultural policies, along with generational conflicts related to economic disparities and the proliferation of Western culture and lifestyle. In this context, Shuqin Cui remarks:

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179 Zhang, 253.
180 See Cornelius, 90-94.
the city in the young directors’ films appears as a personal and subjective space rather than the embodiment of conventional themes, whether from Chinese tradition or national history. The voice and the perspective utter aloud, “I am the protagonist of this urban stage; the city is mine.” The setting and tales of urban experience are the signature marks of independent films. *Although each director offers a distinct vision, their psychological and cinematic engagements with the city bind them together.*

Ultimately, what I am suggesting, then, is that, in *Beijing Bicycle*, Wang Xiaoshuai appropriates the “model” of *Bicycle Thieves*, transposing the urban critique of its particular historical moment of transition for a new moment, a moment that is in many ways markedly different but yet bears some cinematic similarities, especially in its concern with the everyday consequences of its particular transition on the individual. In the final section of this chapter, we will trace those similarities and differences by examining the function of the bicycle and the characters’ responses to its theft in the two films. First, however, we will consider *Beijing Bicycle* in its own right, specifically as it advances the applications of De Certeau’s operational concept and the terms of spatial grammar developed in the first part of the chapter.

*two narratives, two spaces, two bodies*

*Beijing Bicycle* is a film about spaces, or better, the *clash* of spaces, the collisions effected by social processes—rural and urban, traditional and modern, local and global. It is also a film about temporality, about aging—the coming of age of youth, the aging of a nation-state. Above all, perhaps, this is a film about continuity, change, and nostalgia—made visual in the form of the changing architectural body of the city and in the bodies of its youth. We could say, then, that the film is really about two spaces, two bodies, and their ultimate (and inevitable) collision. What that collision reveals, in the very process of

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182 Other films of specific interest here include Ousmane Sembene’s short film *Borom Sarret* (1966, Senegal), Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Liantian Fengchen* (*Dust in the Wind*, 1986, Taiwan), and Anh Hung Tran’s *Xich Lo* (*Cyclo*, 1995, Vietnam).
its creation, is a kind of reassertion, or recuperation, of “the opacities of history” that De Certeau finds to be effaced in the administrative structure of the modern city. Beijing seems in many ways to be a perfect example of the tension underlying the second facet of the operational concept of the city—synchronic vs. diachronic, history vs. the “nowhen,” and so on. In *Beijing Bicycle*, these tensions reach the point of eruption. Let us then turn to the film in order to trace these tensions in its two spaces and two bodies.

Simply put, the film is the story of two Chinese teenagers told in two distinct but intersecting narrative lines that ultimately merge in a kind of narrative collision. The film begins with Guei, a rural migrant to Beijing looking for work and economic stability. He obtains a bicycle messenger job for an express delivery service; for his deliveries he is given a new bicycle which he can eventually own by collecting enough delivery commissions. By night, he lives with an older migrant at the man’s small grocery wedged between modern housing structures. But by day, Guei’s space is modernized Beijing—the large modern buildings and office structures of the rebuilt city. The bicycle—his job and livelihood—becomes his mode of access to urban China and, as his manager tells the new employees, his means “to fit in society.” That access, or fitting in, and Guei’s ultimate success in traversing his new space (and life) is to be based primarily on his spatial knowledge of Beijing—again, as the manager puts it: “Behind you is a map of Beijing. You’ll have to know every street, every avenue and alley like the back of your hand. Think of yourselves as the carrier pigeons of today!” With the map transcribed in his mind—as inscribed on his body—Guei will have to “become” Beijing in order to survive. That becoming is enacted in a series of perhaps darkly humorous scenes in which Guei learns his job and the “rules” of the city. In these scenes, we learn Beijing with Guei—long tracking shots of riding between the towering vertical structures, first excursions into modern office buildings with their carousel doors, mirrored walls and ceilings, and long homogeneous hallways, and a confusing tour of a modern health club are Guei’s introduction to the logic of the modern urban space and society. The passage of time—the film’s first thirty minutes, or diegetic month—is marked by Guei’s tracking of his commissions, finally reaching the day when the bicycle will be his. On this day, the day of his confusing and manipulated trip to the spa, Guei’s bicycle is stolen—he is fired.
from the delivery job for failing to make a delivery after the theft, but is promised reinstatement if he can find the bicycle (which he has inscribed as his own with a mark on the frame’s rear bar).

At this point the film turns to its second narrative, that of Jian, a high school student and the son of a lower middle-class family. Jian’s family lives in Beijing’s hutongs, traditional residential areas, many of which date to the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The sheer horizontality and materiality of the hutongs is the first visual marker of the difference between the film’s two spaces, a visual marker that signals the (at least initially) clear distinction between Jian and Guei. When we first meet Jian, we learn that he has just obtained a bicycle—an object he has been asking his father to buy him for an apparently long time. For Jian, the bicycle is a means of access to a kind of social status—with his friends and with the girl (Xiao) he desires—and to his own sense of self, expressed in long tracking shots of Jian riding the bicycle home from school, arms spread in pure joy. Although his father has been promising to buy him a bicycle for years, the family’s needs have always dictated that the money be spent otherwise. In response, we eventually find out, Jian has in fact stolen the family’s savings to buy the bicycle on the black market. This, of course, is the bicycle that has been stolen from Guei and which will serve as the source of the film’s narrative “collision” and the collision of the two spaces cum two bodies.

Although this collision, based on the simple distinction between Guei vs. Jian as modern vs. traditional space, holds to some extent, there is obviously much more complexity to each character and their respective relationships to space and Beijing’s transition. Indeed, each character himself embodies a kind of collision, contradiction, or general conflict that reflects the various complexities of Beijing. Guei’s character, for instance, quite obviously expresses the rural/urban clash experienced by the many rural to urban migrants of late twentieth-century China. Equally, Jian’s character is reflective of both the complexities of middle-class Chinese youth as well as the status of the non-traditional

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family (his conflict with his father can in many ways be traced to his implied relationship to his stepmother and stepsister). In fact, what the film ultimately suggests, as Wang himself says, is that “fundamentally, as adolescents, the two characters are the same.”

This identification between the characters is expressed visually near the film’s conclusion in the sequence of cross-dissolved short shots of the bicycle exchanges—the film’s temporal passage is reflected in the exchanges as the characters’ differences are in some ways elided, culminating in the final shot of that same sequence in which Guei and Jian finally become friends. At the film’s conclusion, in the next to last scene in which Guei and Jian are both beaten up by Jian’s nemesis and his friends, the identification becomes complete—the narratives fully collide, the boys’ plight is momentarily the same as they are unable to escape—they are, again as Wang puts it, “both victims of the tragic story of youth.”

But to more fully understand the complexities of this collision, it is helpful to step back and look more closely at the distinction we set up with which to begin. In the next section, we will examine the ways in which Wang constructs the distinct spaces and narratives of *Beijing Bicycle* by invoking the terms of spatial grammar introduced earlier in relation to *Bicycle Thieves*.

**the clash of urban modernization: enclosure and openness**

Let us, then, momentarily reestablish the distinction between the spaces of *Beijing Bicycle*—between the traditional and modern, closed and open, or perhaps, to return to the terms of our earlier discussion, the smooth and striated. We will again frame this distinction in the individual narratives of Guei and Jian, which will also allow us to again see the ways in which the distinction breaks down in the collision of the narratives and thus the collision of the spaces themselves. In this way, we might begin by offering Guei’s space—the modernized topography of Beijing—as a kind of open, striated space (which is actually better termed a *place*). Its opposite, then, would be the closed but smooth space of Jian’s *hutongs*, and their collision would seem to become the eruption of the underlying tension between the traditional and modern, or the constant back and forth

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184 Quoted in Tang.
185 Quoted in Tang.
between smoothing and striation. Let us be more precise by dissecting the visual construction of these spaces.

Guei’s space might be simply characterized in terms of its alternation between the tracking shot—consuming exteriors, exploring the verticality of the modern city—and the (mostly) static camera—exposing the stagnation of modern interiors. To return to the terms of our discussion of place and space in the first chapter, we might contrast the slow moving (such as to be comparatively static) interior (and exterior) shots as representative of a kind of ordered place (the striated) and the mobile (exclusively) exterior shots as enacting a spatial rendering of those places (a smoothing). In other words, the modernized places of Beijing are of an ordered logic, a logic which Guei must learn in order to survive (by learning the map of Beijing “like the back of [his] hand”). This learning of the “rules” of that order allows Guei to enact a spatial practice on its surface. In fact, we might say that the bicycle messenger, or the express delivery service itself is based on the spatial practice of the “tactic” described by De Certeau as a “mobility” that is dependent on the clever use of temporal opportunities. As De Certeau says of the tactic, “it does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection.” This very distance is part of the distinction here between the static shots and tracking shots capturing Guei’s movements. While a kind of objective distance is employed in the marking of the modern urban topography as open and striated, the only potential smoothing of that place is enacted in the close mobility of the tracking shot. Consider, for instance, Guei’s first delivery—to a non-distinct modern office building. The scene is composed of three interior shots: the first a long take of Guei confusedly entering the building through its carousel door (a Tati-like moment perhaps), the second shot beginning on the mirrored ceiling just above Guei’s head before slowly panning down to reveal the perceptual reality (again, like in Tati, perhaps marking Guei’s own confusion), and finally, a static long shot of a homogenous hallway of office doors, one of which Guei enters. As will be repeated in the longer scene

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186 It is worth clarifying that some of the exterior shots are static long shots, but even this use of the static might be said to constitute the same ordering which is here associated with the interiors in contrast to the tracking shots.

187 “Like the skill of a driver in the streets of Rome or Naples…” De Certeau, 18.

188 De Certeau, 37.
of Guei’s delivery at the spa, the point-of-view shot is absent, the camera movement is sparse and slow, and a kind of distance is retained—Guei is placed in the ordered logic of the modern buildings. Similarly, in the long exterior shots (and even in the medium-long tracking shots), Guei is placed in what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “the striated and optical space of long-distance vision.”

The potential smoothing of this place, then, as we have been hinting around, is perhaps only in the alternation between the close tracking shot of Guei and the point-of-view (low-angle) shots capturing the vertical urban skylines. Even with these few shots, however, Guei’s urban setting remains almost entirely visually constructed as a striated place.

Jian’s environment—specifically that of the hutongs—might be similarly characterized by a simple shot-type alternation, in this case between the specifically long and medium (both relatively static) shots. In contrast to the distanced places of modern Beijing, the hutongs are characterized by a kind of closeness rendered visually in the long/medium alternation. An early example of this is the shot in which we first meet Xiao. The shot begins as a long shot, from Jian’s point of view, down one of the hutong’s alleys, but becomes a medium shot of Xiao as she rises into the frame, creating an acute sense of closeness. This closeness is felt even in the long shots which construct Jian’s space as the narrow alleyway walls, always in frame, keep us aware of the enclosed nature of the hutongs. In a somewhat different, but also particularly relevant shot, we follow Jian from behind—the shot is one of the film’s few non-steady handheld shots, staying close to Jian as he walks through the hutong maze to the hiding place for his bicycle. This shot in particular functions to create what Deleuze and Guattari might call a “close vision-haptic space”—“it seems to us that the Smooth is both the object of a close vision par excellence and the element of a haptic space.”

The distinction they are drawing out is that between the close-range haptic vision of the smooth and the long-distance optical vision of the striated. This is also an appropriate description of Wang’s spatial cinematic construction of the hutongs, with a tendency toward the former perhaps giving this setting its more

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189 Deleuze and Guattari, 494.
190 Deleuze and Guattari, 493.
191 The “haptic” here implies a kind of tactility, but, as Deleuze and Guattari write, “‘Haptic’ is a better word than ‘tactile’ since it does not establish an opposition between two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfill this nonoptical function.” Deleuze and Guattari, 492.
“smooth” feel. The distinction is more pronounced in relation to the difference between the modern places initially occupied by Guei and the traditional *hutongs* of Jian—with the former obviously favoring the long-distance optical vision, and the latter preferring the close-range haptic. In a kind of establishing shot with which Jian’s narrative begins, this distinction is rendered visually and thematically in what we might term a “spatial linkage.” The shot begins framed on a tall modern building under construction, inside which the boys practice their “bicycle acrobatics,” before a slow pan reveals the rooftops of the *hutongs* residing immediately adjacent to the building. This slow pan serves to both comment on the erosion of traditional Chinese housing in the architectural modernization of Beijing, as well as to transition between the film’s two distinct narratives. Following from this spatial linkage, then, we will turn now to the ways in which these settings come together visually in the two narratives’ ultimate collision.

As mentioned, the film’s narrative collision is initiated by the theft of Guei’s bicycle and Jian’s subsequent purchase of it on the black market. The intertwining of the two narratives begins just after Guei’s friend spots Jian and Xiao with the bicycle outside of the friend’s grocery. In the next scene, Guei “steals” back the bicycle, leading to the first of a series of chases, in this case ending with the film’s first literal collision—Guei crashing into the back of a pickup truck carrying a load of flour. The crash is set up by a simple alternation between shots of Jian chasing Guei and of the truck backing out of an alley, but the collision itself occurs off-screen—we see only the aftermath of the crash with Guei lying in the truck bed, covered in flour, literally marked as other to the *hutongs*, and the bicycle, tire still spinning, lying behind the truck. The stylistic composition of the post-collision shot, almost photograph-like in its stillness and silence, will be repeated in two later shots—Guei’s crash with the servant from the modern apartment building adjacent to the grocery and the shot immediately after we hear (but do not see) Jian hit his nemesis (Xiao’s boyfriend Da Huan) with the brick (each to be discussed in more detail momentarily). As the literal occurrences of the film’s narrative

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192 “Acrobatics” is the term used by Wang in the Tang interview. This style of cycling, termed “trials” riding, might itself be discussed as a kind of spatial practice in its explicitly creative traversals of ordered (sometimes urban) places. The prevalence of trials riding in the film is an interesting analog to the spatial practices I described Guei as enacting in his more traditional use of the bicycle.
and symbolic clashes, the significance of these shots is worth considering. In each case, the collision is only announced through sound, delaying our visual recognition to the explicitly composed and still aftermath. Each collision also significantly occurs in or around the space of the hutongs. If, as I have suggested, the hutongs are the smooth space par excellence of the film, they might also be described in terms of the any-space-whatever. In the context of Bicycle Thieves, I discussed the relationship between the any-space-whatever and smooth space in terms of a potentiality emerging from the contestation of the urban landscape. Deleuze also allows us to extend the operations of the any-space-whatever by invoking two new terms, or signs, which develop in modern cinema—opsigns and sonsigns. These signs are born of what Deleuze refers to as the “purely optical or sound situation” which becomes possible in the any-space-whatever. If Beijing Bicycle is itself about change (and time), how might these post-collision shots relate to this direct time-image? If we listen more closely to Deleuze (writing specifically about Ozu) this seems to become quite clear:

The still life is time, for everything that changes is in time, but time does not itself change, it could itself change only in another time, indefinitely. At the point where the cinematographic image most directly confronts the photo, it also becomes most radically distinct from it. If, then, these shots can be said to function as direct images of time, as opsigns, again we are led to question the nature of their radical distinction. In other words, how do these shots function to reveal something about the changing urban and social fabric of contemporary Beijing? For Deleuze, “the very special distinction of the opsign” is to “make time and thought perceptible, to make them visible and of sound.” In this way, we might say that the significance of the post-collision shots is to introduce a moment of thought. The direct image of time (as change) functions to elevate the film’s literal and

193 Deleuze, Cinema 2, 5.
194 Deleuze, Cinema 2, 17.
195 Deleuze, Cinema 2, 17 (emphasis added).
196 Deleuze, Cinema 2, 18.
figurative collisions to its thematic level—a visual rendering of change in the event, in the slice of life, on the “smooth” plane of the any-space-whatever. Returning to the first post-collision shot, for instance, we might consider the visual “othering” of Guei, covered with flour, in relation to his status as “other” not only to Beijing, but specifically to the *hutongs* and Jian’s (and his friends’) status as educated urban youth. In the event of collision and the direct image of time, a change occurs—Guei can no longer simply integrate into the urban social framework and Jian can no longer continue to live the lie of his acquisition of the bicycle. Similarly in the case of the second collision in which Guei crashes into the servant (who we are still led to believe is a modern woman living across the street from the market)—in this case the rural/urban divide is literally broken down (becoming even more profound when we later realize that the girl was merely pretending by dressing in her boss’s clothes) and we are made to be reminded of Guei’s status as rural migrant longing for the modern accoutrements of the city. The final of these shots is perhaps the most interesting. Jian, frustrated by Xiao’s refusal of his advances and her new boyfriend’s patronizing, follows the couple through the alleyways of the *hutong*. As he rides along behind them, he picks up a dislodged brick and darts through another alley, after which we hear Jian scream “You Bastard!” followed by the loud strike of collision—the brick on the boyfriend’s head. The next shot, our post-collision “photo” of sorts, or direct time-image, is framed at low angle, just behind the boyfriend, Jian standing over him and his bicycle with the brick in hand. In many ways, this is simply the image of youth jealousy driven to violence, but it also signals something more poignant. In this collision, we see the traditional and modern coming face to face—Jian, dressed in white shirt and red tie, is the traditionally educated Chinese youth; Da Huan is fashionably “cool” and progressive with his dyed hair, sunglasses, bmx-style bike, and casual clothes. This clash between traditional and modern takes another turn, however, in the film’s final sequence.

The final sequence of *Beijing Bicycle*, beginning immediately following the aforementioned shot of Jian and Da Huan, brings the narrative collision to a conclusion as Jian and Guei’s stories momentarily meld into one. After hitting Da Huan with the brick, Jian meets Guei for what is to be the final exchange of the bicycle—Jian tells Guei
to keep the bicycle because he no longer needs it. At that moment, Da Huan and his friends appear, ready to take revenge on Jian (and, by association, Guei). Jian and Guei split up, each trying to escape through the alleys of the hutong, but their paths ultimately come together as they find themselves trapped at the end of an alley. It is worth mentioning that Guei is unable to escape because, as he tells Jian, he cannot find his way out of the hutong—he may know Beijing “like the back of [his] hand,” but his lack of knowledge of the spaces of the hutongs is his apparent demise. In what we might call the film’s final clash, Da Huan and his friends beat Jian and Guei nearly unconscious and one of the boys destroys Guei’s bicycle. If this is the final clash, the final literal collision (we actually see this one) is that of Guei striking the boy with another brick—the reassertion of the traditional through its architectural fragment, perhaps? In any case, the film ends with Guei, perhaps undaunted, certainly unwilling to give in, walking through his modern space, bicycle on his back. We will briefly consider the ambiguity of this ending alongside that of Bicycle Thieves in the final section, but first we will address the (dis)continuities between the two films in terms of the bicycle, specifically in relation to the characters’ responses to its theft.

**bicycle negotiations and the urban social framework**

Having focused on each film individually, we will turn finally to a more explicit comparison. As already mentioned, to the extent to which we can say that Beijing Bicycle is a remake, reworking of, or simply echo of Bicycle Thieves, one of the key continuities between the two films is their similar historical location in, and concern with, a moment of transition—the modernization of China and post-WWII liberation. Each film addresses the complexities of its specific moment through a relatively simple narrative centered around the theft of a bicycle. In this way, the bicycle becomes the real common denominator between the two films, and as such it is through a tracing of its function and the consequences of its theft that we might best flesh out the particulars of these films.

Simply put, in each film, and for each character, the bicycle serves as a means for both physical and socio-economic mobility. Crucially, then, how do each of these characters
respond to its subsequent theft? And more specifically, where do they respond, both spatially and socially? To begin, let us consider the architectural makeup of the frameworks to which the characters turn, each being, I would argue, beneath the surface of the city proper. In Bicycle Thieves, for instance, Ricci literally goes beneath the surface of Rome to the emptied-out underground passageways. In Beijing Bicycle, the negotiations between Jian and Guei occur similarly in the city’s emptied spaces, in this case in the parking garages and high-rise buildings under construction. It is no coincidence, of course, that these spaces are the sites in which the fundamental action of these films takes place. As we have been suggesting throughout this chapter (and in the first), the architectural locales of these urban critiques are the thematic visual order from which the films’ larger critiques—or suggestions of a “deeper” crime than the simple bicycle theft—emerge. For Bicycle Thieves, then, the sub-surface situating of Ricci’s search for authority is part of the film’s thematic architectural critique of post-liberation Rome—combined with the desolate and devastated architectures of the city above, these spaces speak to the character of Rome’s social fabric. Similarly in Beijing Bicycle, the empty interiors of modern buildings under construction become the literal space of negotiation over the ownership of the bicycle, with that negotiation pointing to a larger thematic negotiation over the nature of urban space in (modernizing) Beijing. On a more theoretical level, these fringe, or perhaps liminal, spaces carry a particular valence as sites for political potentiality. As De Certeau writes in relation to the possibility for political practices outside of the city’s regulatory framework,

the city is left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power. The city becomes the dominant theme in political legends, but it is no longer a field of programmed and regulated operations. Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer.  

In the two films at hand, that “beneath” is not only below the city’s ideological discourses, it is in fact “below” (or outside) its urban architectural structure. This is

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197 De Certeau, 95 (emphasis added).
particularly pronounced in *Beijing Bicycle*, as a film in many ways concerned with the modernization of Beijing, emphasized visually in the “spatial linkage” shot (mentioned earlier) in which the camera slowly pans from one of these new modern buildings to the rooftops of the *hutongs* (with completed modern structures lining the city skyline in the distance). This spatial linkage clearly evokes Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s discussion of urban architecture and the attempts by cities to retain control in spite of the “ruses and combinations of power” operating beneath the city surface—

> Where the extremes of wealth and poverty have increased and the physical distance between rich and poor has decreased in global cities such as Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, and Singapore, elaborate measures have to be taken to maintain their separation.¹⁹⁸

That maintenance of separation, they write, is based in many ways on “the decline of public space that had allowed for open and unprogrammed social interaction.”¹⁹⁹ In *Beijing Bicycle*, the characters find their own spaces—these fringe, liminal spaces at the border between traditional and modern architecture—in which to resolve their conflicts outside of disciplinary authority. This is the social *where* to which I referred—Guei is unable to seek authority in the form of the police (in fact, he is arrested while searching for the bicycle) and his appeal to the family in the figure of Jian’s father is ultimately unsuccessful; rather, the solution is only to be found outside of these “institutions” and in the hands of the boys themselves.²⁰⁰ As Director Wang puts it, “the system of law in China right now has a lot of holes, and a lot of people seem to be struggling to find their own way.”²⁰¹ This might also be said to be the case of the Rome of *Bicycle Thieves*—specifically in relation to law, Ricci again first seeks resolution in the disciplinary authority of the police (twice), but in each instance is turned away. *Bicycle Thieves* might even be discussed more generally as a sort of meditation on sources of authority (and their inadequacies) in post-war Italian society. Consider, for instance, the sources to

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¹⁹⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 337.
¹⁹⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 337.
²⁰⁰ Anh Hung Tran’s *Xich Lo* (*Cyclo*, 1995, Vietnam) is another interesting example here—and perhaps a counterpoint—as the protagonist whose bicycle is stolen descends into an underworld of organized crime where he is forced to commit acts of violence before nearly committing suicide and finally escaping with a new “cyclo.”
²⁰¹ See Tang interview.
which Ricci either turns for help or at least comes into contact with—the labor general, the police, a kind of socialist collective, the Catholic Church, and a fortune teller. The closest thing he finds (outside of his own capacity to search) is the simple help of his friends and Bruno. In any case, what we have in each film, then, is a complete disregard for administrative (or moral) authority in favor of the practices of disempowered individuals. These practices are, of course, only somewhat successful, but they do point to the ways in which individuals (and collectives) find spaces and modes of operation (what De Certeau terms “tactics”) beneath the administrative powers of the city. To conclude this chapter and our discussion of these films, we will lastly consider the ways in which each film implies the possibility for a larger set of similar stories (and practices) with equally ambiguous endings, thus implying a more general commentary outside of these particular narratives.

**many stories, ambiguous endings**

We might say that each of these films begins by visually transporting us from the universal to the particular. In *Bicycle Thieves*, it is the first crane shot, panning from the crowd of men waiting for the labor manager to Ricci, sitting alone on the ground. These men are the other potential beginnings of what might be the same stories. *Beijing Bicycle* opens with a series of faces—interviewees for the bicycle messenger job—speaking directly into the camera. They have come to Beijing from rural China, each with a particular history, and each with the possibility for a similar future as employees for Fei Da Express Delivery. Some of these may be the same men, lined up with their new bicycles, whom we see receiving their initiatory pep-talk from Fei Da’s manager. As has already been described, this is a not uncommon tale for late-twentieth century Beijing, as thousands of migrants, especially young men, left the countryside and (re)turned to the coastal cities. Guei becomes our stand-in for those other untold tales, the tales of other “stubborn”202 peasants traversing the urban complexities of Beijing. In another image

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202 Director Yang, in the Tang interview, remarks of these peasants: “So in order to deal with this increasingly complex society, which they might not understand, stubbornness is what oftentimes gets them through. It's certainly a common characteristic a lot of peasants have, and in the big city, it helps them to survive.”
which seems to remark on the possibility for numerous similar stories, Guei searches through rack after rack of bicycles, hopelessly looking for his marked bicycle. How many of these bicycles are, like his, stolen, and what are the stories of those bicycle’s owners? The scene echoes a similar scene in *Bicycle Thieves*. Ricci, waiting for the pawnshop attendant to retrieve the bicycle from the long rack, glances up as another attendant climbs the wall to deposit the sheets Ricci has just pawned atop what must be thousands of others—thousands of other families pawning their wedding sheets (or bicycles) to survive, and thousands of other stories untold. It seems safe to say that these small details serve to remark on the films’ attempts to do more than simply tell a story—in these moments the films reveal themselves as allegorical comments on, at the least, their own city spaces. But if these films are allegories, they come with few concrete answers to their critiques. I have suggested in the previous pages several ways in which each film might imply a kind of potentiality for operations “beneath” the surface of the urban social fabric, but ultimately each film leaves us, in a sense, mired in ambiguity. Let us conclude, then, with the films’ final shots. The return (without resolution) from the particular to the universal in *Bicycle Thieves* is the last crane shot—leaving Ricci and Bruno’s backs and returning to the backs of the crowd, and to the numerous stories untold and unresolved in post-war Rome. In *Beijing Bicycle* we may get at least a small sense of hope in the form of Guei’s pure determination, walking alone once again, this time with the broken bicycle on his back. But again, his story is left (as is Jian’s) unresolved, as the film cuts to a final high-angle shot of a busy intersection—one final direct image of time for a collision not yet staged.
Chapter Three

To begin, we might do best to start at the end—with the final shots of François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) and Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). The films’ respective final shots are similar—the former’s classic freeze-frame of Antoine Doinel, staring into the camera lens, and the latter’s slow zoom (so slow as to nearly efface itself, becoming still) to Krishna’s face, again, staring into the camera. What are we to make of these final shots in their seeming direct address to the spectator? To answer this question will obviously require us to take a step back, considering the films as a whole. But to begin, considering these shots in relative isolation, we might offer a hypothesis about the intention of these final gazes into the camera (and onto the viewer). It seems simple and reasonable enough to suggest that they function as a kind of invocation, a prompting to the viewer. But if so, for what purpose do these films seek to invoke their spectators? And in what ways do these shots (and the films as a whole) function to create such an effect (and affect)? This is one set of questions which will be addressed in this chapter, and we will return to them at our conclusion—after examining the complexities which might allow us to move beyond our simple hypothesis.

A second set of questions will revolve around the third facet of Michel de Certeau’s operational conception of the city. In this conception, the city becomes a kind of “universal and anonymous subject,” trumping the multiplicity of entities operating within its moniker. How, then, do these films, in their depictions of characters (primarily children) attempting to operate at the margins of the city-subject’s control, enact a critique of that very configuration? As a corollary, how do these films function as a kind of “making visible” of the conditions and relations at hand within the city-subject? Following De Certeau, we will suggest that these films portray and critique a disciplinary logic on which the city-subject is founded, with the latter film expanding the critique embodied in the former. Additionally, through these films we will begin to see the ways
in which creative practices serve to allow subjects to evade that disciplinary logic. In each case, we will see that both the logic itself and the evasion thereof can be saliently read by focusing on the specifically spatial aspects of the films and their depictions of their respective cities. Finally, that spatial reading will bring us back to the initial question of the final shots and their direct address, or invocation; leading to a consideration of a final cinematic space, what we might refer to as the phenomenological space of film viewing.

Thus, in this final chapter we will deploy and further develop some of the terms from the “spatial grammar” of film analysis put forth in the previous chapters as a means to understand the spatial logic of these films’ critiques. We will also again consider the ways in which the latter film performs a kind of appropriation of the terms of the former, while also adapting and extending its critique for a new context. And finally, we will attempt to read these films in terms of their concerns with perception and the ways in which the final shots imply a kind of perceptual negotiation on the level of thought.

**The 400 Blows and Salaam Bombay!**

As implied in the opening, the similarity between the final shots of these two films seems to invite a comparison, a comparison which becomes more appropriate, if more complex, when the films are considered in their entireties. On one level, the association is simple enough—each film focuses on the lives of children (in each case portrayed by non-professional actors), each film relies on location shooting in a busy urban locale, and each ultimately finds its protagonist confined in (and escaping from) a juvenile reform center. Perhaps residing on the same level, but at least requiring further examination, another series of associations emerges in terms of both thematic content and geo-historical context. I will be suggesting three such instances of association—the first related to their common thematic critiques (content), the second determined by each film’s place in relation to its existent national cinema (context), and the third, in a way residing at the intersection of the others, a more abstract concern with perception (content + context). The first association, that of the films’ respective critiques of disciplinary logic, will be
the focus of the sections immediately to follow, and the third, that of perception, will be addressed at the conclusion of the chapter. For now though, let us turn to the second, purely contextual, association as a means for situating the two films and beginning to set the stage for our larger consideration of their thematic and stylistic aspects.

François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* is well-known as the landmark feature in a cycle of films and group of directors labeled the French New Wave (*Nouvelle Vague*). The New Wave, most often associated with the group of *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics-turned-directors (including Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, and Truffaut), derives its name from “a series of articles written by Françoise Giroud for the weekly magazine *L’Express*” in 1957. The articles were based on an extensive survey of French people ages 18 to 30 on topics including “clothing habits, morals, values, lifestyles, and cultural behavior.” Michel Marie asserts that the survey’s focus on French youth was part of a larger theme—the “succession of generations”—prevalent across the changing social, political, and cultural landscape of late 1950s France. In some ways prompted by the *Cahiers* group (as both critics and filmmakers), the French cinema would figure as an important indicator of these changes. Indeed, as Susan Hayward proposes (focusing on the political but also reflective of the larger social and cultural climate):

in some respects, therefore, [the New Wave] cinema was being kept alive by the instability of France’s institutions at those times of great political upheaval – an instability which the New Wave (though not a political cinema) so clearly reflected through praxis.

If the New Wave can be said to reflect, as an artistic movement, a focus on the young and the “new” in a context of large-scale change, what becomes especially interesting for our purposes is the degree to which this movement attempted to create a new kind of cinema

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204 Marie, 6.

205 As Marie notes, “it was again *L’Express* that renewed the New Wave label by applying it to new films distributed early in 1959.” See Marie, 9.

206 Hayward, 209-10.
through a creative deployment of new (and old) stylistic devices. Again, Hayward sums this up well:

In terms of the visual, this New Wave cinema …, unceremoniously deconstructed the institutional iconography before the spectators’ eyes. The establishing shots (which safely orientated the spectator in terms of space and time) were excised. A fast editing style (achieved by jump cuts and unmatched shots) replaced the seamless editing style that had prevailed before. The camera abandoned the studios and went out into the streets and suburbs of Paris (Paris was the one icon that did not disappear, although she was ‘truly’ represented). This cinema, therefore, was as much about the process of film-making as it was about desanitising the sacred cows of the bourgeoisie.207

As we will see later in the chapter, this visual movement away from the style of the previous French cinema attacked by the Cahiers group should be read as not only a reactionary stylistic revolt of sorts, but also as a positive conception of a new cinema—I will argue that one facet of this conception is a concern with perception that we will read through Truffaut’s The 400 Blows.

Nair’s Salaam Bombay! could also be situated in terms of its distinction from the cinematic norms of its geo-historical context—in this case, Indian cinema. More precisely, we might suggest the film’s status as a departure from, and, in some ways, response to, the Hindi-language films produced in Bombay (Mumbai) and widely known as “Bollywood.” As Rachel Dwyer writes of popular Hindi-language film,

The main “attractions” of Hindi cinema include the sets and costumes, action sequences (“thrills”), presentation of the stars, grandiloquent dialogues, song and dance sequences, comedy interludes and special effects.208

Salaam Bombay! obviously differs from the popular cinema in each of these areas—the film is shot entirely on location as opposed to elaborately constructed sets; the costumes used were often the real attire of the non-professional actors; the portrayal is of the

207 Hayward, 209.
everyday rather than exaggerated “thrills;” there is a complete absence of star actors and actresses (although some became stars later); and the film has no song and dance sequences (at least not in the style of popular Hindi cinema) or special effects. Given Mira Nair’s background, the film’s stylistic difference is not surprising—Nair was trained in the cinéma vérité style while taking film courses at Harvard and had directed four documentaries prior to Salaam Bombay!, her first feature film. But more significantly, at least for our purposes, Nair chose to deploy that style as a direct response to popular Indian cinema. As Nair herself has commented, she “wanted to make a film alternative to Bollywood.” Elsewhere she is quoted:

I feel very strongly that India’s commercial cinema caters to the lowest common denominator in an audience. They insist that’s what an audience wants, and I just don’t accept that. I don’t underestimate Indians. The economy of SALAAM BOMBAY! is definitely the way I think cinema ought to be used. I see that as cinematic power …

Salaam Bombay! thus became the first Indian feature film shot on location in Bombay using synchronous sound; it was also the first film to use the vernacular language found on the streets of Bombay (a mish-mash, so to speak, of the many languages indigenous to India, with a bit of English). Ultimately, then, these “firsts,” combined with a visual aesthetic consequent of Nair’s cinéma vérité background (and the film’s miniscule budget), serve to create a cinematic style consistent with Nair’s desire to respond to and create an alternative to Indian commercial cinema.

Although the contexts are obviously different, it is perhaps not too much to point out that one of the crucial facets of each of these projects (and their directors) was a desire to explore and extend (or escape) the cinematic milieus in which they were borne. What I mean to emphasize is that as we consider these films in the remainder of the chapter, it is useful to keep in mind that the critiques mounted by each film exist on multiple conceptual levels and that the thematic and stylistic devices deployed should be read as both socio-political and purely cinematic interventions. This will become particularly

209 Taken from Mira Nair’s commentary track to the DVD. Fix this note later
relevant, I think, in the final section of the chapter—in which we will consider these films as meditations on (cinematic) perception, meditations which speak to the meta-cinematic concerns that I have been proposing these films embody. At this point, then, let us move on to a consideration of the two films in relation to Michel de Certeau’s operational conception of the city and the specifically spatial ways in which the films function to critique its disciplinary logics.

**De Certeau’s operational concept of the city, part III**

De Certeau describes the third and final aspect of the threefold operational concept of the city as the possibility of the following:

> finally, the creation of a *universal* and anonymous *subject* which is the city itself: it gradually becomes possible to attribute to it, as to its political model, Hobbes’ State, all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects—groups, associations, or individuals. “The city,” like a proper name, thus provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties.\(^{211}\)

Again, as we have seen throughout our discussion of De Certeau, the city-subject is here determined by an ordering, or entrenchment in the *propre*—in this case the strategic ordering of the city’s institutional foundations. This brings to mind, once again, Michel Foucault’s description of disciplinary societies and their institutional embodiments in the family, factory, school, church, hospital, military, penitentiary, etc. Indeed, earlier in the same text, De Certeau describes Foucault as “offer[ing] a variety of synonyms, words that dance about and successively approach an impossible proper name: ‘apparatuses’ (*‘dispositifs’*), ‘instrumentalities,’ ‘techniques,’ ‘mechanisms,’ ‘machineries,’ etc.”\(^{212}\) To this succession, De Certeau adds “city” as another synonym describing the configuration and “technological” basis of disciplinary relations. More abstractly, what De Certeau seems most interested in taking from Foucault (and extending) is Foucault’s explication

\(^{211}\) De Certeau, 94.
\(^{212}\) De Certeau, 45.
of “two heterogeneous systems”—the system of practices without discourse and a discourse able to describe those practices. Foucault, De Certeau writes,

outlines the advantages won by a political technology of the body over the elaboration of a body of doctrine. But his is not content merely to separate two forms of power. By following the establishment and victorious multiplication of this “minor instrumentality,” he tries to bring to light the springs of this opaque power that has no possessor, no privileged place, no superiors or inferiors, no repressive activity or dogmatism, that is almost autonomously effective through its technological ability to distribute, classify, analyze and spatially individualize the object dealt with. … In a series of clinical [sic] tableaux (also marvelously “panoptic”), he tries to name and classify in turn the “general rules,” “conditions of functioning,” “techniques” and “procedures,” distinct “operations,” “mechanisms,” “principles,” and “elements” that compose a “microphysics of power.” This gallery of diagrams has the twin functions of delimiting a social stratum of practices that have no discourse and of founding a discourse on these practices.  

Thus, according to De Certeau’s reading, Foucault provides a description of the systems of power consistent with Wittgenstein’s account of the system of language from which the philosopher is unable to achieve any position of mastery above or outside that system. As we saw in Chapter One, De Certeau applies Wittgenstein’s model of language to other systems, including the specifically spatial orderings that we have been tracing. Foucault’s model allows De Certeau to move his considerations to a more explicitly political or ideological plane, while also remaining firmly entrenched in the discourse of everyday practices. Interestingly for our discussion, these considerations also continue to be in many ways spatially determined. De Certeau thus writes of Foucault’s conception of the “move” that organizes the discursive space of practices—“it is the miniscule and ubiquitously reproduced move of ‘gridding’ (quadriller) a visible space in such a way as to make its occupants available for observation and ‘information.’”  

Of course, De Certeau is not content to merely accept the “ubiquity” of such a move without quickly turning to an inquiry into the practices of the occupants themselves. He is thus disposed to immediately ask how “we explain the privileged development of the particular series constituted by panoptic apparatuses” and in what ways might we see other series “as an

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213 De Certeau, 46.
214 De Certeau, 47. He further describes Foucault as allowing for the creation of a theory of “style, a way of walking through a terrain, a non-textual move or attitude…” (47)
immense reserve constituting either the beginnings or traces of different developments?²¹⁵ In this “reserve,” then, lies the possibility for “consumer” practices, practices which hold the potential for re-organizations of spaces and languages; again spatially conceived—

Beneath what one might call the “monotheistic” privilege that panoptic apparatuses have won for themselves, a “polytheism” of scattered practices survives, dominated but not erased by the triumphal success of one of their number.²¹⁶

This helps, then, returning more explicitly to the third facet of the operational concept of the city, to see the ways in which Foucault’s “disciplinary society” informs De Certeau’s formulation of the “city-subject.” As we will see in the discussion to come, this “polytheism” is the very mode of being for the child-characters of the two films; a mode of being that is, as much as anything else, spatially constituted. To further mine this concept in relation to the “scattered practices” of users, we might trace the path invited by De Certeau’s invocation of Thomas Hobbes, specifically as Hobbes’ model of the State conceives of the “people” and the “multitude.”

If De Certeau’s use of Foucault pushes his discourse in the direction of a more explicit concern with the political, his invocation of Hobbes might be said to complete the move. Although De Certeau merely invokes Hobbes without fully teasing out its implications, by sketching that untraced path through Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s reading of Hobbes, we can imagine what De Certeau might have been thinking. Simply put, Hardt and Negri situate Hobbes at the birth of the concept of modern sovereignty. Starting from the foundation of Hobbes’ conception of the State—the necessity of a sovereign ruler to impose order on an otherwise chaotic society—Hardt and Negri describe the consequent relation between ruler and ruled:

> The fundamental passage is accomplished by a contract—a completely implicit contract, prior to all social action or choice—that transfers every autonomous power of the multitude to a sovereign power that stands above and rules it.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ De Certeau, 47-48.
²¹⁶ De Certeau, 48.
For Hardt and Negri, what Hobbes accomplishes in this “contractual schema” is to resolve the apparent contradiction between *transcendence* and *representation* that lies at the heart of modernity—the ontology of chaos from which Hobbes begins necessitates “a contractual schema of representation that legitimates the sovereign power a priori.”

This, in a sense, is how De Certeau conceives of the city-subject—“all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects” are gathered under the transcendent aegis of the “Concept-city” (which, lest we forget, De Certeau refers to as the “machinery and the hero of modernity”), a move necessitated and legitimated by the implicit ontology of the *propre*. Taken a step further, De Certeau’s use of Hobbes becomes even less surprising when we consider Hobbes’ figuring of the “people” in his equation of the sovereign. As Hobbes writes:

> It is a great hindrance to civil government, especially monarchical, that men distinguish not enough between a people and a multitude. The people is somewhat that is one, having one will, and to whom one action may be attributed; none of these can be properly said of the multitude.

Although De Certeau would almost certainly be distressed by the valence of this statement and its consequences for the “people,” he might be more than happy to agree with the need to distinguish a requisite “multitude.” In fact, he wastes no time telling us something of the sort—in his dedication “to the ordinary man” before even the “Contents” of *The Practices of Everyday Life*, De Certeau writes:

> Slowly the representatives that formerly symbolized families, groups, and orders disappear from the stage they dominated during the epoch of *the name*. We witness the advent of *the number*. It comes along with democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics. It is a flexible and continuous mass, woven tight like a fabric with neither rips nor darned patches, a *multitude of quantified heroes* who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one.

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217 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 84.
218 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 84.
219 De Certeau, 95.
This definition of the “multitude,” read against Hardt and Negri’s (and, in a sense, Hobbes’), succinctly describes De Certeau’s overall conception of systems and users—that is, the definition implies both the status of users in the eyes of administrative logic (the multitude “who lose names and faces”) and their own standing outside of that logic (as “a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one”). This aligns with Hardt and Negri’s “people” as “tend[ing] toward identity and homogeneity internally” and “multitude” as “a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations,” with the people standing for “a constituted synthesis that is prepared for sovereignty” and the multitude as “an inconclusive constituent relation.”

Read in this way, De Certeau’s “users” and Hardt and Negri’s “multitude” can be understood as overlapping in their shared relation to the propre. In other words, it might be worth suggesting that Hardt and Negri’s definition of the “multitude,” or more specifically, their explanation of its potentiality as a self-organizing formation, is bolstered by considering it in relation to De Certeau. Indeed, if Hardt and Negri have been criticized for failing to fully explain how the multitude, in its “open set of relations,” would come to institute a kind of praxis, perhaps De Certeau’s description of the dis- and re-ordering capacities of users begins to provide answers. At any rate, what is not to be forgotten in these considerations is their spatial component—specifically, the spaces of the multitude and their relation to the propre. As described in the introduction, the “global city” gives a local face to Hardt and Negri’s global phenomenon. More abstractly, in part returning to Foucault, the very logics within which users (or the multitude) are said to operate are spatially conceived. It is therefore again useful to flesh out these concepts more precisely through a reading of their spatial dimensions. This is also the moment of entry to the films under consideration here. As suggested in the opening, both The 400 Blows and Salaam Bombay! seem to demand a reading consistent with the argument traced above. Thus, in the next section we will see that each film portrays the disciplinary logics, practices of users, and spatial derivatives of each, of which we have attempted to provide a theoretical outline as preface to the analysis itself.

222 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 103.
**disciplinary places and, or as, practiced spaces**

To begin, we should ask what it is about these films that suggests a specifically spatial reading. Are these films *more* spatially determined than other films? Does the spatial element surpass in importance other aspects of the films? In other words, is the focus on space, as I have suggested, “demanded” by the films themselves? We might argue for this on three levels. In the first instance, returning to our earlier contextualization of the films, considered in terms of their relation to (and departure from) their geo-historical cinematic contexts, each film utilizes its locales as one of the defining aspects of that departure. In each case, the films, in contrast to their predecessors, use location shooting. In the case of *The 400 Blows*, this is combined with innovative cinematographic techniques used to capture those locations. Similarly, in *Salaam Bombay!* Nair’s cinéma vérité style comes to the fore in its mode of conceiving spaces. Thus, in each case we are left to consider the ways in which the films, in contrast to the cinematic precedents to which they are responding, use space (and its cinematic construction) as a differentiating marker. In the second instance, and specifically in relation to our consideration of De Certeau’s anonymous city-subject, the role of the specific cities themselves becomes important. Consider the first shots of *The 400 Blows*—Paris is immediately established as the film’s setting as the camera, apparently shooting from a moving automobile, progresses ever-closer to the Eiffel Tower before finally reaching its base and moving away. Similarly, we are continually reminded of the latter film’s setting—already present in the title—through iconic images of Bombay such as (again embodied architecturally) the Gateway of India. Thus, although we might suggest a reading that allows for a larger generalization of the critiques of each film’s spaces, those spaces are explicitly attached to their specific cities. And finally, in the third instance, purely considering the narrative lines followed by each film, it becomes apparent that each film imparts its critique by tracing its characters’ traversals of a series of specific backdrops—as De Certeau writes of travel stories, “stories of journeys and actions are marked out by the ‘citation’ of the places that result from them or authorize them.”

Thus, our discussion of the places and spaces of the two films will be ordered by those very locations—school, home, prison,

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223 De Certeau, 120.
street, and cinema. In each case, we will see that those specific places are deployed (or left conspicuously absent) as points on an increasingly detailed “critical map.” We will also find that the terms of our earlier discussion—the elements of our “spatial grammar” of film analysis—function as salient descriptors for the spaces to be analyzed. Thus, let us now turn to those places and spaces to further our discussion of the disciplinary logics of the city-subject and the spatial practices enacted therein.

disciplinary places

In terms of De Certeau’s critique of the operational concept-city, the ordering made explicit in the spatial constructions of the films at hand is that of a subset of the disciplinary institutions outlined by Foucault—in this case, the school, home (or family), and prison. In the three sections to follow, we will analyze the function of these spaces (or their lack) in order to see the ways in which the films develop their respective critiques. Furthermore, these analyses will begin to reveal the ways in which Salaam Bombay! transposes and expands the critical framework of The 400 Blows.

school

The first disciplinary place of The 400 Blows (following the opening Paris drive) is the school. In this opening sequence, we find the famed Antoine Doinel, as will be the case throughout the film, singled out for punishment—always for some transgression, but often due solely to bad luck. The teacher is, in typical fashion, domineering and harsh, and the rationality of the educational logic is immediately established—the teacher counts down the final seconds of the exam period, Antoine’s friend René is made to hand in his paper without finishing the final lines (“no exceptions!”), and we learn, of course, that “recess isn’t mandatory, it’s a reward.” This logic is reasserted in various guises throughout the film—the laborious homework assignment that, because he cannot finish it, leads Antoine to skip school, the hierarchy of grades which Antoine’s mother uses as a reward system, arbitrary (numerical) punishments for fighting during recess, lining up and marching into the school and during physical education (which will be doubled in the
detention center), and the necessity of notes from parents to explain absences that, due to Antoine’s failure to forge his own, leads to his lie about his mother’s death. In fact, it is suggested that only in the utmost state of exception—in this case the death of a family member—can the rational logic be circumvented. Returning to the distinction between strategies and tactics described in the previous chapter, we can see the ways in which De Certeau’s description of the spatial aspect of the strategy is echoed in this film. De Certeau describes the strategy as:

> the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats … can be managed. As in management, every “strategic” rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its own place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an “environment.”

It seems simple enough to apply this logic to the “school” generally conceived, however, as the examples above indicate, in this case the film heightens the strategic logic of the school as place. But if the film goes to great lengths to establish the strategic place of the school, it is also very much concerned with the children’s circumvention of its logic. As Marilyn Fabe writes,

> the schoolroom scenes at the beginning of the film convey the tension between regimentation and freedom as the students create little moments of spontaneous pleasure even as they are fixed in the formal rows of the traditional classroom. They secretly pass around a figure of a seminude woman and erupt in suggestive amorous poses behind the teacher’s back while he writes a poem on the blackboard about the love life of a hare.

What Fabe seems to point to here, sounding quite similar to De Certeau, is the opposition between time and space which is requisite to her explicit setup of “regimentation vs. freedom.” As mentioned in Chapter Two, the basic distinction between strategies and tactics is the former’s mastery of space and the latter’s clever use of time. Thus, as Fabe

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224 De Certeau, 36.
225 Marilyn Fabe, Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 128-9 (emphasis added).
describes, the children’s “moments of spontaneous pleasure” act as tactical interventions within the strategic place of the school. The children, despite lacking any position of mastery, retain the possibility for creative practices of freedom, even if ever so brief. As we will see later in our discussion of the street as practiced space, the children’s tactical interventions are heightened to an almost absurd cinematic moment in the sequence in which they escape the gym teacher’s jog through Paris. For the moment though, let us consider the function of the school in *Salaam Bombay!* as the first instance of contrast between the two films.

The school is, of course, conspicuously absent from much of *Salaam Bombay!*; part of the crime being that the street children are unable to attend school and thus unable to attain the possibility of a life elsewhere. When the school does appear, it comes as part of Rekha’s emotionally devastating realization about her daughter’s (and her own) life. Faced with losing her daughter to the state—its pure rationality dictating that Rekha is not fit to take care of Manju—Rekha is made to realize that succumbing to that rationality is left as the only apparent means by which Manju might attain a different life. Even there, however, the school is not spoken of directly, remaining a kind of distant but always present reminder of the lot of the film’s children. Indeed, the only direct reference to the school associated with the film is paratextual—a portion of the proceeds of the film being used for the creation of a series of schools for India’s street children. Thus, we are left to perhaps draw up a contrast between the two films in terms of the former’s critique of the rationality and brutality of the school versus the latter’s implicit construction of the school as marker of (absent) hope and possibility. On the other hand, however, such a simple reading of the latter film negates aspects of its larger critique. If the school becomes the film’s implied source of potentiality, it is only in relation to the other suppressions of the social logics that remove it from the realm of possibility. In other words, whereas in *The 400 Blows* the school emerges from the “polytheism of scattered practices” as one in a number of potential logics to be addressed, in *Salaam Bombay!* the place of the school is not even allowed as a point for tactical intervention. Thus, as we will see in the sections to follow, the latter film’s relation to the former is in some ways that of an expansion—that is, while each film can be read as a critique of disciplinary
logic as a whole, the former is in some ways confined to its places while the latter becomes more diffuse, both in terms of its depicted disciplinary logic and its critique.

**home (or family) (-less)**

Indeed, confinement becomes a particularly appropriate description of the places of *The 400 Blows*, operating on two levels—that of the thematic limitation of the film’s critique to a set of physical locales, as well as Antoine’s figurative (cum architectural) confinement. Putting aside, for the moment, the most obvious example of the detention camp, we might consider the depiction of the home as a preview, or perhaps doubling of Antoine’s ultimate literal incarceration. In this way, the architectural setting of the Doinels’ apartment becomes especially pertinent. The mise-en-scène reflects the (too) close proximity of its inhabitants—Antoine’s bed blocks the door such thatentrants must climb over him, the narrow hallway becomes a site of constant collision of bodies, Antoine and his father must span two rooms to unfurl a banner (which the mother must duck under), and so on. Here we aptly find Antoine under constant observation—he is unable to complete his homework, he cannot finish forging his absentee note, and he is questioned about the source of his belongings; meanwhile, his parents argue or avoid one another by escaping from the home. This is all to point to the ways in which the home, like the school (and later the “prison”), functions in this film as an almost purely disciplinary place.

In *Salaam Bombay!*, that “disciplinarity” is considered across an expanded set of spatial and social milieus as the home proper disappears along with the “traditional” family. We might thus think of the film in terms of three homes/families—Chaipu’s distant home and absent family, the Baba/Rekha/Manju family and their “red light” home, and the “family” of homeless children (we might also add the brother-like Chaipu/Chillum relationship and the displaced Sweet Sixteen as reflections on the family/home).

The first glimpse we get of Chaipu’s lack of home is in his initial abandonment from the circus—upon returning from his errand trip to town, he finds, in place of circus tents, a
barren landscape. We later learn that he has been forced from home after destroying a motorcycle—condemned to return only after earning money to pay for a replacement. In a way, then, Chaipu’s story sets the film up as a reflection on the possibility of the home, or, as the case may be, the return thereto. This is a proposition, however, that the film portrays without much sense of optimism. We might think here of the scene in which Chaipu has a letter to be sent home transcribed. His inability to precisely describe his mother’s address leads the transcriber to (without Chaipu’s knowledge) discard his attempted communication (“Waste of a stamp!”). Chaipu’s inability to spatially locate his home within an administrative rationality further dissipates him from the possibility of return. Meanwhile, of course, he is dependent on such rationality—that of labor and monetary exchange (the excessive rationality of the tea vendor)—to keep the hope of return alive. Ironically, his attempt to partially escape from that logic—by hiding his money in the brick wall rather than allowing his boss to keep track—causes his hopes to be crushed once again when Chillum takes the money. However, what that theft begins to point to—in its own logic of the drug business and Chillum’s loss of “home”—is the complex series of networks and intersections of practices that (ir)rationally constitute the diffuse disciplinary places of Bombay.

These complexities are further revealed by considering the family comprised of Baba, Rekha, and Manju. Through this more explicitly portrayed family and home we are presented with another set of disciplinary logics which we might read in terms of their legal sanctioning. For if the critique of the film is in part directed at the logic of the anonymous city-subject, that critique is also lodged against, and further fleshed out in relation to, the disciplinary logics existing beneath (while, in a sense, doubling) the city-sanctioned apparatus. The two conflicting logics at work here are, of course, Baba’s drug and prostitution rings and the administrative framework of the city beneath which Baba operates. In this way, we see that Baba creates his own strategic spaces of power in the same ways as the city-subject—exemplified in the rules of the drug trade Baba imparts on Chillum, Baba’s role in “taming” Sweet Sixteen, and the encounter with the western journalist to whom Baba is proud to display his power over the places and denizens of his locale. Ultimately, however, we find that the city reigns supreme, as revealed after
Manju’s capture and placement in the orphanage. At this point, Rekha becomes the center at which these conflicting logics collide. Rekha is unable to bring Manju home because she is a prostitute, a profession that the state sees as unfit for raising a child. In a poignant statement, Rekha pleads to the child welfare officer “She’s my daughter. She’s all I have in the world. How can the State be her mother?” It is in this moment that Rekha finally determines to leave Baba. Upon returning to the brothel and packing her things, she responds to his questions about how she can leave home that “without Manju there is no home.” Rekha thus emerges as one of the loci of the film’s critique—it is in her character that we can read the unsuitability of each of the conflicting disciplinary places. In a sense, the city-subject is privileged as it becomes clear that were she to fit in its rationality she would be able to keep Manju. At the same time, however, that rationality, in its utter disregard for the basic mother-daughter relationship, provides no real recourse for Rekha to retain her family. In the film’s conclusion, then, Rekha is swept into the crowded street, ambiguously (consistent with the film’s overall ambiguity) afloat in the chaotic space between disciplinary logics.

Finally, then, we might briefly mention the family of the homeless street children (briefly because we will more fully address their relation to place and space in a section to come). For the moment, we might merely note this as the film’s most complete (and obvious) departure from *The 400 Blows*. If, as we have said, *The 400 Blows* is best described in terms of confinement, it is in its focus on the street children that *Salaam Bombay!* breaks from that spatial constriction, imparting its critique on the diffuse places made manifest in the children’s journeys. For now, though, let us turn to the films’ disciplinary places par excellence to conclude our specific focus on the disciplinary logics themselves (before exploring the tactical responses to those logics).

**prison**

If the depiction of the home becomes the most obvious point of departure from the former film to the latter, the portrayal of the prison is the clear moment of similarity. In fact, the diegetic scenarios begun upon the respective protagonist’s arrivals at the
detention camps are in many ways almost identical. Put simply, in each case the young boy arrives at the “prison,” learns from another child that he is likely to be held for a long period of time, and jumps at his opportunity for escape. Additionally, the prisons are cinematically constructed in a similar fashion, each placing visual emphasis on confining, or border creating, architectures. In The 400 Blows, those borders are visually rendered through (subjective) camera shots from behind steel bars or on opposite sides of glass; in Salaam Bombay!, the depth of field captures the series of walls that define its prison, while a memorable series of high and low-angle shots capture the divides between prison and escape. The similarities also continue in relation to each character’s escape—each escapes during a sporting event (Antoine during a soccer game; Chaipu during a cricket match), each escape contains a noticeably long shot (or series of shots) of the boy running (each shot from a moving car), and in each case the escape is followed by its film’s ambiguous ending (with, as will be discussed more fully below, their similar final shots).

What else might we say about the disciplinary places of the films’ respective prisons? The administrative logics by which each child is placed in the detention center are, of course, consistent with the films’ concerns with critiquing the treatment and place of children within the city-subject’s rationality. Moreover, in each case the depictions of the detention center double places or situations from earlier in the films (for Antoine, marching in the schoolyard and during physical education; for Chaipu, cleaning out the shopkeeper’s cages). Finally, then, we might consider the significance of the children’s similar escapes. These scenes bring us appropriately closer to both our consideration of the films’ “practiced spaces,” as well as our reading of their final shots. Indeed, in relation to (and as preview of) our discussion of practiced spaces (or spatial practices), the films’ scenes of escape seem almost direct visual definitions of De Certeau’s tactic—as “a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment.”226 Similarly, these moments seem to saliently reflect what Deleuze and Guattari would term “smoothing” operations,

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226 De Certeau, 37.
movements of *detrimentalization*, or “lines of flight.” At any rate, the tactical mo(ve)ment of escape is an appropriate site of transition to a more explicit discussion of the spatial practices depicted in the two films and the ways in which those practices suggest circumventions of the disciplinary logics described in the previous sections. As we will see, those practices are also practically read in terms the places (cum spaces) in which the films most explicitly depict their enactments.

*practiced spaces*

In the previous sections, we outlined the set of disciplinary places around which the films under consideration construct their critiques of the operations of De Certeau’s city-subject and its entrenchment in the strategic or *propre*. In the following sections, we will describe the films’ other spaces, the spaces in which the city-subject’s disciplinary logics are left prey to tactical circumventions and *dis-* or *re-*orderings. Once again, this will be a point of divergence between the two films, with *Salaam Bombay!* expanding the terms of *The 400 Blows* spatially (and critically). Additionally, the section on cinematic and other perceptual spaces will bring us to the final facet of our discussion—the films’ respective concerns with the nature of cinematic perception and the invocation of the spectator.

*street*

In a “hypertextual,” or perhaps cinematic, rendering of this chapter, the current section might have been more aptly layered onto or interlaced with the previous section on the home and family—that is, especially in *Salaam Bombay!* (but also in *The 400 Blows*), spatial consideration of the home is in many ways inseparable from that of the street. At this point it might be appropriate to revisit the terms of the “spatial grammar” developed in the previous chapters as a means for analyzing these street spaces. Namely, our

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227 For our purposes, the deterritorializing move, or line of flight, becomes especially interesting in its dangerous or ambiguous potentiality. The line of flight, as vector of desire, is, in a sense, always a movement toward “freedom” (or the “smooth”), but it is always tempered by the possibility (and danger) of *reterritorialization*, or a return to a situation (not necessarily the same) of striation. In their pure ambiguity, the final shots of the two films at hand seem to me to visually represent the uncertainty (and danger) of the line of flight in fascinating ways.
discussions of tactics vs. strategies, constructions of space out of place, and smoothing vs. striation become particularly useful here.

As described in the previous chapter and alluded to throughout the present one, De Certeau distinguishes between the strategic and the tactical in terms of the former’s mastery of space and the latter’s dependence on time. The tactic, he writes,

must vigilantly make us of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse.\(^\text{228}\)

The “guileful ruse” seems a fitting description for the actions of Antoine and Chaipu, and it is perhaps no coincidence that these actions are spatially located almost exclusively in or in direct relation to the street. If we think of Antoine’s foray into a “street life” of sorts after running away from home, a set of examples quickly comes to mind, each of which involves theft and ruse. These include taking the picture of Harriet Anderson outside the cinema, stealing the tips and clock from the washroom, sneaking off with a jar of milk in the street, and, of course, stealing (and attempting to return) the typewriter from his father’s office, an instance where the act of ruse becomes most evident in the form of Antoine’s gangster-hat disguise. In each instance, these actions are temporally determined, based on the clever utilization of the moment. It is also worth noting that these actions are further evidence of Antoine’s (and René’s) position of powerlessness. Again, their position is a fitting example of De Certeau’s description of the tactic as “an art of the weak” which is determined by “the absence of power.”\(^\text{229}\) This becomes even more pronounced in Salaam Bombay! with the homeless children’s obvious powerless status. The examples are, once again, numerous, but are importantly not always based on theft. In fact, much of the children’s survival is based on moment to moment action, taking advantage of opportunities for income as in the case of their jobs cleaning cages, skinning chickens, or serving at the wedding (theft is also included, as in the scene in which the children use a guileful ruse to rob the old man). More abstractly, we might

\(^{228}\) De Certeau, 37.

\(^{229}\) De Certeau, 38.
suggest that the very state of homelessness is a tactical existence based on the lack of place. De Certeau describes this well, emphasizing the ways in which the tactical operations without place constitute an “urban fabric” (or, we might say, family) within the _propre_ of the city-subject:

To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City.230

The notion of lacking a place and thus functioning based on movements that “create an urban fabric” recalls our discussion from Chapter One of De Certeau’s notion of the construction of _space_ out of _place_. As we noted there in relation to Jacques Tati’s _Play Time_, De Certeau describes space as “composed of intersections of mobile elements,” thus being “actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it.”231 Again, is this not an apt description of the state of homelessness itself? That is, read through the actions of the homeless characters in _Salaam Bombay!_, we can begin to see their actions as re-orderings of their street locales. Their basic lack of place and inability to achieve any means of access to (much less position of “mastery” over) the city-subject’s places requires the creation of their own temporarily inhabitable spaces. We can think of the boy sleeping in the old toy car (and the boys’ “home” on the street in general) or the brick wall (“State Bank, Chillum Branch”) that becomes Chaipu’s “safe” hiding place for his money to go home. It is worth noting here that this is an instance in which Stephen Heath’s notion of the cinematic construction of _place_ out of _space_ may function alongside our use of De Certeau’s space/place relation. This parallel functioning will be described more in the next section, but here we should acknowledge that, for the most part, Heath’s description of the ways in which the camera implies and constructs an ordered perceptual _space_ accurately describes the operation of _Salaam Bombay!_.

230 De Certeau, 103.
231 De Certeau, 117.
Before turning to those more specific perceptual concerns, though, we can complete our analysis—and the re-invocation of our previous terms—by turning to the smooth and striated described in Chapter Two. Both the tactic/strategy and place/space descriptions that we have just deployed point to the smooth/striated distinction in their emphases on re-ordering, circumvention of proper (and \textit{propre}) logics, and creative initiations of mo(ve)ments. We will recall that the striated is defined by its ordering of static space, while the smooth is based on temporality and movement which changes a space. What becomes especially relevant here, then, is the interrelationship of the smooth and striated, or, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it, “how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces.”\textsuperscript{232} This back and forth seems to appropriately describe the movements of the characters in the two films. Antoine in particular seems plagued by the forces of “reterritorialization” which always return him (until the film’s conclusion) to a striated space. The best example of this is, perhaps, his attempt to steal the typewriter and subsequent attempt to return it. The theft, as tactical movement, implies a kind of “smoothing” event in which he temporarily disrupts the rational ordering of the administrative framework. However, his inability to sell the typewriter forces him to return it, thus re-instituting a (new) state of striation. Other instances include when he writes on the classroom wall, when he plays hooky from school, or when he lies about his mother’s death. In each of these instances he temporarily achieves a kind of re-ordering to a more desirable situation, but ultimately he is punished and, in the case of the typewriter, imprisoned in that most striated of places. Thus the film’s ending becomes especially interesting as the smoothing operation is left unfinished—the film does not allow a return to striation, instead choosing to freeze us in the midst of a smoothing event or trajectory (a frozen “line of flight”). The same might be said of Chaipu’s escape and that film’s conclusion—we will more fully consider those endings and their significance at the conclusion of the chapter. First, however, we will complete our discussion of the places, spaces, and practices of these films by considering the only spaces remaining, those of what we might refer to as “perceptual play.”

\textsuperscript{232} Deleuze and Guattari, 500.
Perhaps the only spaces which have been left out of our discussion up to this point are a series of “playful” locations in each film which seem to serve as both diegetic escapes for the characters and breaks from the films’ critiques. On one level, then, we might read these spaces in terms of their simple contrast with the disciplinary places described above. In that way, these spaces serve to emphasize the disciplinary logics of the places that they allow the characters to escape from. We might, though, argue for another level of functioning for these spaces, namely their function as reflexive commentaries on the nature of (cinematic) perception. The spaces or situations to which I am referring are the spaces of visual and (at times) physical play—in *The 400 Blows* these include the cinema, carnival ride, and puppet show; in *Salaam Bombay!* we can think again of the cinema, along with Rekha and Manju’s shadow puppets and, perhaps, Chaipu and Chillum’s trip to the Muslim graveyards. As alluded to in the opening of the chapter, if we are to consider these films (as I argue we should) in terms of their attempts to carve out new cinematic forms in relation to their contemporary cinematic counterparts, these scenes of perceptual practice become particularly interesting. Consistent with the argument developed throughout the prior sections, we might first note the ways in which these spaces allow tactical interventions, or better, constructions of space out of place. Antoine’s carnival ride seems to be a good example. On one level, we simply have Antoine having fun not only with the basic function of the ride, but also creating his own playful rendering of it. On another level, we have Truffaut’s playful cinematic intervention into the space—placing the camera in the ride to capture Antoine’s (and our own) subjective (spinning and upside-down) viewpoint (we can imagine Truffaut pondering what it might look like to film in a carnival ride). Read in that way, this seemingly unnecessary (although not implying that it serves no diegetic function) scene attains another kind of significance. One scene, of course, may not be enough to justify such a signifying attribution, but we have perhaps an even more interesting example in the case of the puppet show. The scene in which Antoine and René take René’s younger sister to the puppet show of “Little Red Riding Hood” seems even more unnecessary in the film’s diegetic progression. Why, we might ask, are we given this rather long
sequence of shots of children’s reactions to the puppet show? The argument is to be made that this is simply a case of, as Marilyn Fabe suggests,

Truffaut document[ing] that magical time in children’s lives when they still have the freedom and innocence to express what they feel, before social constraints oblige them to hide their spontaneity and aliveness. 233

Indeed, that is certainly an appropriate reading of this sequence. At the same time, however, we might again argue for another level of analysis. In this scene, as well as in the scene in which Antoine and René go to the cinema, the camera is placed almost exclusively as if from the center of the screen or stage, capturing the responses of the spectators. Similarly, the cinema scenes in Salaam Bombay! focus on the actions of the children as spectators. If, as I am suggesting, these films are concerned with the nature of cinematic perception and, as we will see in the final section of the chapter, with the experience of the spectator, these scenes seem to make perfect sense. 234 After all, what better way to invite the viewer to reflect on her own viewing experience than to show her what she would look like from the perspective of the film itself? If nothing else, then, these scenes, in combination with the films’ respective final shots, make the question of perception seem more than appropriate. In the final section of the chapter, we will think through this question by considering the possibility for the invocation of thought in the spectator and the phenomenological experience of cinematic viewing.

phenomenological viewing spaces?

At the opening of the chapter, we hypothesized that the concluding shots of The 400 Blows and Salaam Bombay! might be read simply as invocations or promptings of the viewer. This is suggested, on the most basic level, by the direct address of the boys’ faces—eyes gazing into the camera, frozen upon us. Moreover, this attempt at forging a

233 Fabe, 129.
234 Marilyn Fabe also notes that the “Little Red Riding Hood” scene serves as an homage to a scene in Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera in which children are filmed watching a magic show. Once again, I would argue that this homage is part of a larger reflection on the nature of cinematic perception. See Fabe, 130.
direct relation with the spectator seems consistent with the films’ respective concerns with creating new cinematic forms with new perceptual potentialities. If these gazes are to be interpreted as invocations, the previous sections point to the critiques with which those invocations seem designed to engage the audience. But such a reading necessitates that we more fully address the ways in which a “making visible” and cinematic provocation of the sort we are describing might operate. Such an undertaking is obviously too large to be fully developed here, but in this final section we might at least attempt to sketch out a schematic of one final cinematic space—what we might refer to as the phenomenological space of cinematic viewing. Thus, in the subsections to follow, we will trace a set of philosophical ideas that might serve as the girders for such a preliminary theoretical edifice.

**Filmmaker/Film/(Spectator/Observer)**

In her phenomenological account of the film experience, Vivian Sobchack proposes that the act of viewing links filmmaker, film and spectator by means of their “homeomorphic existential performance” of the making visible of the “invisible, intrasubjective commutation of perception and expression.”²³⁵ In this configuration, the film functions, rather than as a merely visible object, as a site of the negotiation of multiple visions—those of the filmmaker, film and spectator. Thus, through the negotiation of vision within the space of film, something that was previously hidden or imperceptible is allowed to emerge.

But within what constraints does this negotiation and emergence transpire? In his account of the historical construction of vision and the changing nature of observation and visuality in nineteenth-century discourses, Jonathan Crary distinguishes the observer (from spectator) as “one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations.”²³⁶ Here Crary sounds much like

De Certeau in his proposition of a kind of visual *propre*. Indeed, if we recall our discussion of *Play Time* in Chapter One, what Crary seems to provide is a perceptual analog to the cinematic *propre* that we identified in Tati’s film—in other words, whereas in *Play Time* we located a toying with perception in the places cum spaces of the film, thus implying a kind of “perceptual playground” for the active viewer, with Crary we can layer on a perceptual space prior to (and in conversation with) that cinematic space. Thus, replacing Sobchack’s spectator in the triadic configuration with Crary’s notion of the observer allows for a better understanding of the negotiation of vision that occurs within a set of conventions which impose limitations on both the filmmaker and the filmic observer. This is not, however, a stable set of conventions. As Crary notes, the status of vision shifts within a constantly changing field determined by “the functioning of a collective assemblage of disparate parts on a single social surface.” As one plane residing on the social surface and constituting the collective assemblage, the film is situated as a central site of both the production and reception of fluctuating notions of the visual and the status of the observer. The film thus exists as a site of potentiality for a radicalization of vision that, as enacted through specific cinematic techniques which make the hidden, imperceptible and overlooked visible, may be expressed in the greater conception of visuality. In *The 400 Blows* and *Salaam Bombay!*, we isolated a small set of such instances (Antoine’s carnival ride, the “Little Red Riding Hood” puppet show, and the cinema scenes) with the final shots being crucial moments for consideration. These moments thus function as key aspects of the films’ larger projects of “making visible” which another set of cinematic techniques (some of which are outlined in the sections on place and space) make manifest.

**The experiential moment of modernity**

Crary’s work on vision is, of course, lodged in a larger theoretical consideration of the status of the subject in modernity, of which cinema plays an important role. As Leo Charney demonstrates, in the context of the modern subject’s fragmentary experience of “fleeting sensations and ephemeral distractions, critics and philosophers sought to

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identify the possibility of experiencing a moment.”

Charney traces this discourse to the point in the work of Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger where the experience of the moment becomes attached to vision. According to Heidegger, the present is always lost because cognition of the moment cannot occur at the same instant as the sensation of that moment. For Heidegger, the consequence of this loss of the present is an alienation from the moment of lived experience; however, redemption from this alienation is to be found in the bodily sensation of the moment, with such a sensation occurring in the instance of vision. This experience of the moment of vision is similar to what Benjamin refers to as “shock.” As Charney notes, Benjamin allied the concept of shock with the sudden changes in film facilitated by montage editing. Charney further traces the discourse to French filmmaker and theorist Jean Epstein, who claimed that the essence of film derived from what he termed photogénie—

Epstein conceived film as a chain of moments, a collage of fragments that elicited not an even flow of attention but sudden, unpredictable peaks and valleys. Inside those bumps of attention the viewer scavenges moments of pure immersion in image. For Epstein, this indefinable photogénie marked the specificity of cinema as a unique art form of modern experience.

The commonality that Charney identifies between Heidegger, Benjamin, Epstein and others is the attempt to locate the experience of the moment in the body. Such attempts, however, given the nature of film’s re-presentation as fragmentation, “played into the evacuation of presence that characterized the modern,” and were thus shown to be impossible. As Charney suggests by citing the Soviet cinematic practices of directors such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, the impossibility of locating a fixed sensual moment did not necessitate a falling back into alienation of the modern subject; rather, through editing practices, the “evacuation of presence, in the technique of cinema, became the means by which the viewer could find a place in film’s ceaseless movement forward,” and thus, “cinema transformed the hollow present into a new form of

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239 Charney, 285.
240 Charney, 292.
experience, as the vacated present opened space for the viewer’s activity.”  

What Charney highlights is the degree to which the experience of film was tied to the experience of daily life and the ways in which modernity was always determined by “the aspiration to seize fleeting moments of sensation as a hedge against their inexorable evisceration.”  

Thus, in cinema, the modern subject found a space in which to (re)experience the very condition of her existence in modernity.

As Crary’s work suggests, if the modern subject found cinema as site par excellence for (re)experiencing the nature of urban modernity, the perception with which the subject experienced cinema was being radically reformulated in the late nineteenth century. “[I]t was at this moment,” Crary asserts, “when the dynamic logic of capital began to undermine dramatically any stable or enduring structure of perception that this logic simultaneously imposed or attempted to impose a disciplinary regime of attentiveness.”  

Thus, with the onset of the cultural logic of capitalism and its acceleration of the circulation of commodities and information, the problem of attention (and distraction) became a central question. According to Crary, this problem of attention signals “a more generalized crisis in the status of the perceiving subject.”  

Through a discussion of the work of Manet, Crary suggests that, despite attempts to rationalize and control the body and vision in modernity, a new subject emerges:

a subject competent both to be a consumer of and an agent in the synthesis of a proliferating diversity of “reality effects,” a subject who will become the object of all the industries of the image and spectacle in the twentieth century.

Crary importantly notes that the reassembly of human perception precedes the invention of cinema, and thus, the subject—in role of consumer and agent of synthesis of early cinema—brings a perception constructed by capitalist modes of accelerated circulation to

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241 Charney, 292.
242 Charney, 293.
244 Crary, “Unbinding Vision,” 50.
245 Crary, “Unbinding Vision,” 68.
bear on the creation of cinema as a technology reflecting the condition of modernity. What this crucially points to is that not only does the modern subject approach cinema with a perception capable of interpreting and responding to visual stimulation, but, moreover, that this very capability is the source of a potential desire to do so. In other words, if the final shots under consideration are to be read as attempts to invoke the spectator, we can here begin to see the potentiality of such an operation. To conclude the chapter, let us briefly return to the two films to imagine the potential consequences of such an operation of invocation as we have described it here.

invocation – cinematic potentiality and the observer

Given our momentary digression to considerations of the condition of cinematic perception and the phenomenological viewing space, it is likely appropriate to remind ourselves of how these concerns relate to our prior discussion of space and place in The 400 Blows and Salaam Bombay!. Throughout this chapter, we have attempted to explain these two films in terms of the ways in which each lodges a critique of the city-subject in a set of disciplinary places and practiced spaces. We have also pointed out the degree to which each film models its critique in relation to its respective cinematic context; suggesting that in each case the film is, in part, an attempt to enact a new cinematic and perceptual mode. Cast in relation to those readings, our brief outline of a model of cinematic perception should become suggestive as it implies a way in which the films’ respective critiques and creations are to be received and interpreted by the viewer. In fact, to the extent to which each chapter has implied new ways in which filmmakers have attempted to connect with the cinematic spectator, this section on viewing could likely have come at the conclusion of any of our chapters. In this chapter, however, that relation between filmmaker, film, and observer becomes more pronounced in relation to the final shots to which we have repeatedly returned. If these final shots function to heighten, or make explicit, attempts by the respective filmmakers to invoke thought in their implied audience, the previous sections have, perhaps, at least suggested a way in which that invocation might operate. As these films demonstrate, that operation can be imagined to have fascinating political potentiality, but, at the same time, our model falls short of
concretely explaining the functioning of such a politics. For even if we are right to posit a negotiation between film and observer at the intersection of the perceptual and cinematic propre, and, perhaps more profoundly, if the tactical potentiality at that intersection is to be somehow revolutionary, we seem still quite far from defining the precise terms (or diagnosing the symptoms) of the (cinematic) creation of such an event.

At the same time, however, our initial proposition that the final shots of The 400 Blows and Salaam Bombay! function as invocations of thought in the cinematic spectator seems, at the least, less hypothetical in the wake of our present discussion—even if we are unable to precisely identify the functioning of these final shots, the combination of Sobchack and Crary, layered onto De Certeau, does at least begin to suggest that such an identification remains on the theoretical horizon. So perhaps, then, it will have to be enough, for the moment, to be able to say I know it when I see it! For even if the inescapable Why? retains a frustratingly indefinable ambiguity, perhaps, like Antoine Doinel’s frozen grin or Krishna’s blank stare of resolve, it is an ambiguity which ultimately remains theoretically pleasant.
Conclusion

Three distinct and interrelated threads have organized our discussion up to this point—Michel De Certeau’s operational conception of the city, a spatial grammar proper to film, and the appropriation and extension of critical cinematic discourses of the city. Each of these threads has operated in accordance with a more abstract concern with space, a concern which, as described in the introduction, lies between—and at the intersection of—a set of theoretical considerations of space itself, a series of discourses on specifically cinematic space, and a group of film texts which explore space on both cinematic and more general levels. At various points thus far, we have also taken the opportunity to consider the ways in which our concern with space speaks to extra-cinematic notions of social and political subjectivity. In the remaining pages, we will again use these three organizing threads to fashion the various strands of our discussion into a more coherent whole, while also offering some final thoughts on our stated concerns with space and a few reflections on the project itself.

Michel De Certeau – an operational conception of the city (and more)

In the introduction we proposed three ways in which we would demonstrate De Certeau’s relevancy to film analysis. In this section, we will briefly discuss each of those aspects of our use of De Certeau as a means to provide summary and further consideration of De Certeau’s usefulness as applied to film. We ultimately deployed De Certeau in three ways—

1. By reading a set of film texts against his critique of an operational conception of the city.
This became the organizing principle around which we structured our three chapters, one for each facet of the operational conception. In Chapter One, we focused on the ways in which rational organization serves to suppress practices falling outside of a disciplinary administrative logic. We read that rationality through modern architecture as portrayed in Jacques Tati’s *Play Time* and Edward Yang’s *Yi yi*. In these films, we also found instances in which user practices manage to circumvent, or re-order, those disciplinary places and logics—an exemplary case being the Royal Garden Restaurant sequence of *Play Time*. In Chapter Two, we examined the tension between the temporal and spatial dimensions of the city, or the ways in which the rationally ordered city attempts to establish a kind of ever-present temporality in which the complexities of history and tradition are discarded or repressed. We read Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* and Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle* as films depicting distinct moments of transition rendered visual in the urban architecture of Rome and Beijing. As in Chapter One, these films also provided interesting portrayals of user practices—in this case, a tactical (temporal) form of practice operating beneath the surface of the city’s rationality. Finally, in Chapter Three, we explored the operations of the “city-subject” through François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* and Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* In these films, we traced the ways in which the city comes to stand for a set of properties which determine the rational workings of its diverse spaces; we also examined a set of spaces which seemed to escape that logic, allowing for practices to again emerge in defiance to the city-subject.

In many ways, the three aspects of the operational conception of the city seem to overlap so as to be almost indiscernible from one another—that is, it seems entirely possible that we might have either shuffled the film pairs, reading each pair for any of the three parts of the concept, or, distilled the concept into one statement encompassing all of its facets under the rubric of rational ordering and disciplinary administrative logic. At the same time, however, here we begin to see the power of the films to tease out the particularities of an abstract theory. In each chapter, the films made it possible to see the fine details and complexities of each facet of the operational concept such that, although much overlap remains, we seem more able, following the previous analysis, to understand the workings of the concept and De Certeau’s critique. This also helps to make more palpable, after the
fact, the mode of our analysis. As described in the introduction, we have sought to operate in the space between film and theory—that is, our analysis “worked” to the extent to which the films and the theories functioned in tandem, teasing out their respective complexities in the service of our general concerns with cinematic space. The relationship between the film pairs and the operational conception of the city seems a cogent exemplar of the ways in which that analysis played out as we had hoped it might.

2. By using his movement and space-based theory of the city to understand the ways in which film becomes a uniquely appropriate representational form for capturing and depicting the particularities of urban space.

The second aspect of our use of De Certeau was a more implicit part of our general hypothesis about the nearly inescapable link between cinema and the city, and was thus more understated in our discussion, despite its ever-present influence. Although De Certeau rarely considers cinema in its own right, his discussion is littered with references which suggest its applicability to film, particularly in his focus on movement and his repeated use of visual descriptors in his examples. Meanwhile, to the extent to which De Certeau seems to merely imply film in his discussion, he makes clear his professed concern with space and the city. Therein lies the foundation of our use of De Certeau—as a single site containing the beginnings of an exploration of cinema, the city, and space. Thus, if this has been at all understated in our discussion, it is because, in many ways, we have presupposed these aspects of De Certeau’s work from the outset and we might have better placed this at the top of our list.

3. By appropriating his notion of space as a grammar to consider the specifically spatial aspects of cinematic language.

Finally, our third use of De Certeau emerged as one of the most pronounced facets of our investigation as we tested out a series of terms—some from De Certeau, others not—which might contribute to our understanding of cinematic language and film analysis. To some extent, this grew out of the just described second aspect of our appropriation—De
Certeau’s focus on movement and space in his theory of practice. Because of the spatial logic behind all of De Certeau’s terminology and his notion of space acting as a grammar, the terms of his discussion became interesting as they might serve as descriptors for film practice. Thus we used De Certeau’s theories of space and place, strategy and tactic, the “pedestrian speech act,” and “walking rhetorics” as potential terms for an extended spatial grammar proper to film analysis. In the next section, we will reflect more on the ways in which these terms operated in tandem with existent film theory and the terms of other theorists to expand the vocabulary with which we might describe cinematic space.

**spatial grammar – final thoughts on film analysis**

It seems worth emphasizing here that our goal has not been to overturn, disregard, or discard any previous work on cinematic space. On the contrary, much of that work has been essential to our project as we have found a salient foundation from which to embark on a new investigation of the spatial particularities of film and its analysis. That said, we have attempted to approach that foundation with a critical eye, not so much hunting for cracks, but rather, finding places ripe for expansion and extension. Stephen Heath’s theories of cinematic place and space are an excellent example of this—while his formulation provided us with a stable grounding from which to begin to understand the function of space in relation to narrative, we also found places which seemed to require extension. Thus we deployed De Certeau—layering his notions of place and space onto Heath’s in order to provide a more complete understanding of the ways in which space might function outside of as well as in relation to narrative. The same might be said of our deployment of Gilles Deleuze’s specifically film-related and more philosophical work—for instance, while the concept of “defamiliarization” provided us with a useful starting point for understanding the edited architecture and spatial traversals of Bicycle Thieves, Deleuze’s notion of the any-space-whatever, combined with his and Felix Guattari’s theory of the “smooth” and “striated,” provided us with another layer of complexity with which to interpret the ways in which that film (as well as Beijing Bicycle and the films in Chapter Three) enacted its critique of disciplinary places and administrative logics. What these examples are meant to point to is the degree to which,
while the theories preceding our analysis have made that analysis possible, we have provided new insights by building on that existent work. In other words, if we can be said to have done anything in the previous pages, let us hope we have opened the door, so to speak, to new considerations of space and architecture in (and of) cinema. In that spirit, let us also hope that our layers continue to prove to be stable (although, perhaps, not too stable) starting points from which to further extend our readings of cinematic space.

_cinematic appropriation – other models_

In addition to the organizing structure of De Certeau’s operational conception of the city, we constructed a model of cinematic influence—the pairing strategy from which we attempted to derive some preliminary understandings of the appropriation and extension of cinematic discourses of the city. As mentioned in the introduction, that model was, first and foremost, a discursive strategy designed to create a richer frame within which to address our primary concern, cinematic space. At the same time, however, we should not negate the value of that comparative strategy in its own right. While the pairings did, ultimately, prove most useful as discursive framings, that is not to say that they did not produce any interesting insights in relation to the appropriations and extensions which we hypothesized. In Chapter One, for instance, we saw the ways in which Yi yi used modern architectural spaces and a particular cinematic construction of space to portray a rationality and disciplinary logic similar to that critiqued in _Play Time_. But we also found that critique to be expanded by _Yi yì_—in both formal and thematic terms—to fit the transnational (postmodern) context of Taipei. Similarly, in Chapter Two, we were able to discuss the transposition of a simple story—the theft of a bicycle—from 1950s Rome to 21st century Beijing—another instance of the “localization” of a story to fit a particular context while remaining true to more generally applicable critical terms. And finally, in Chapter Three, we saw a case in which a similar thematic focus—the lives of children—was deployed in two very different contexts with both strong similarities in relation to cinematic style and content _and_ marked differences in terms of the extensiveness of the respective critiques. What seems to come to the fore from these examples is the degree to which the city remains the site of a certain cinematic fascination, a fascination which, as
we have argued throughout, is, in one sense, of a particular cinematic nature. Moreover, though, these examples seem to point to the ways in which the city prevails as the object of cinematic creation due to its extra-cinematic importance. That is, to the degree to which the older films embody a set of critiques which prevail in the newer ones, we can see the ways in which the city remains the site of a particular set of socio-political struggles which cinema is interested in confronting. These themes, although consistent, are not entirely stable—thus the importance of the ways in which the latter films extend and rework the terms of the former films’ critiques. In this way, a more focused analysis of these appropriations and extensions might usefully reveal the ways in which changes in cinematic critiques over time allow us to analyze the status of the socio-political landscapes in which those critiques are formulated. Suffice it to say, then, that our comparative model seems useful beyond its deployment here as, primarily, a discursive strategy.

That said, though, as also alluded to in the introduction, our model requires some reflection, specifically in relation to two problematic features—its one-way directional influence which, by implication, negates the reverse influence, and the complete lack of other models which might have structured our investigation. We should take a few moments, then, to consider the implications these problems and the ways in which we might, in the future, construct more adequate models for comparative study.

Given the canonical nature of the three Western films in our model, it is, perhaps, not at all problematic to suggest their influence on the latter; in some cases it is made explicit—for instance, Mira Nair (who was herself trained at Harvard University) has commented that during the training of the non-professional actors of Salaam Bombay!, in her effort to expose them to (and create) an alternative to popular Hindi cinema, she screened both Bicycle Thieves and The 400 Blows. Similarly, it seems no stretch to assume that the students of the Beijing Film Academy (Wang Xiaoshuia being one) would be exposed to these films, as would be the case for Edward Yang, who, although enrolled for only one year, attended film school at the University of Southern California. Be that as it may, though, we should certainly not neglect the potentially endless influences which may
have contributed to all of the films at hand. Indeed, if part of our task is to think about cinematic appropriation, we are right to immediately question even our own implied flows of influence. One need not look far to see the very opposite, whether it be to recent films such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* volumes and the Wachowski Brothers’ *Matrix* trilogy—each symptomatic of Hollywood’s explicit appropriation of Eastern cinematic styles and themes—or to any number of canonical Eastern films and filmmakers (we might think of Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, or Satyajit Ray, to name only a few) whose influence is easily found in the West. Even in the case of the films to be examined here, for instance, it is well-known that Truffaut was familiar with (and a fan of) the films of Kurosawa, Ozu, and Kenji Mizoguchi. Moreover, we must ask ourselves to what degree these flows, or spheres, of influence can even be geographically situated in the present context. Certainly, if we take seriously the theories of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and Saskia Sassen with which we began this thesis, we begin to see the degree to which such geographic localization is, at the least, unstable, if not entirely illegitimate.

More endemic, perhaps, to the problems of our model, and directly related to the absence of entire axes (North-South) from our discussion, is the question of curricular canonization of certain geographies of film production. In other words, it is, of course, no coincidence that our model falls on a West-East axis. This is the point where a reflexive consideration of my own influences becomes useful. The reader is not likely to be surprised to learn that I have taken film courses focusing on Asia, but none dealing specifically with Africa, South America, or Australia. This lack of knowledge of a large region of cinematic production creates an immediate problem in the construction of any comparative model. Certainly these regions would have provided valuable examples of urban films which might have further extended our arguments on many levels—in terms of cinematic style and its construction of space, as well as in relation to our suggestion that cinematic appropriations might be saliently deployed in extra-cinematic readings of socio-political climates. At any rate, for now we will have to be satisfied to understand this as a limitation of our model. More optimistically, this might also be cast as a valuable entry point for further study. Indeed, if our model has worked as both discursive strategy and as comparative lens in its own right, we can easily imagine how the addition of entire
geographic contexts might offer a rich space of analysis. At this point, then, we will leave that as a point for future consideration, and bring our project to a close with some final thoughts.

**tapping the remainder**

Reflecting again on the inspirations on which this project was founded, I am reminded of a set of non-existent (but seemingly obvious!) relations which I have tried to make more concrete in our discussion. I am referring primarily to the degree to which the work of Michel De Certeau seems to share a strong commonality with that of Gilles Deleuze and Hardt and Negri. If we imagine this three-way relationship as a triangle, the third side, that connecting Deleuze with Hardt and Negri, is quite obvious in the latter pair’s extensive use of Deleuze. However, to my knowledge at least, either’s connection with De Certeau’s work on “the practices of everyday life” seems non-existent, at least in terms of direct citation. Thus, part of what I hope to have accomplished here is to suggest the ways in which these three systems of thought might relate and work together in further theoretical explorations—for instance, as I described in Chapter Three, De Certeau’s notion of practices seems particularly useful as it might be discussed in relation to Hardt and Negri’s configuration of the “multitude.”

Another figure who seems to stand in the background of the considerations of space which, in part, link the thinkers just mentioned, is André Bazin. Although Bazin appears very seldom in this thesis—mostly in Chapter Two in relation to *Bicycle Thieves*—his theories of cinematic space speak to many of the issues we have been working through here. As Dudley Andrew writes of Bazin,

> We talk about many kinds of reality, but cinema depends first upon a visual and spatial reality, the real world of the physicist. Thus cinema’s core realism is “not certainly the realism of subject matter or realism of expression, but that realism of space without which moving pictures do not constitute cinema” (*What is Cinema?*, p. 112).²⁴⁶

Thus, if our work has functioned as a layering of fresh insights onto existent theories of cinematic space, we might say that Bazin stands as the silent foundation upon which nearly all of this layering must take place. That is not, however, to suggest that Bazin is to remain silent or covered by what we have done here. On the contrary, if we were to imagine a continuation of the terms of the present study, it is likely that we would benefit from a return to Bazin for a more careful and complete examination of his work in relation to our present conclusions. But that, of course, is for another day and another project. For now, we might be satisfied to say that our understandings of the relationship between cinema and space (and architecture) have been bolstered by looking through the lenses provided by theorists such as De Certeau and Deleuze. But it is also likely that these are not entirely sufficient either. Is that terribly surprising, though? Moreover, is that not a somewhat pleasant place to find ourselves at the conclusion of a long project—that is, with new roads to travel and old ones to retread? Indeed, if De Certeau and Deleuze have offered us new ways in which to understand cinematic space, there are certainly other theorists waiting to do the same. Similarly, if the films we have cited here have allowed us to better understand film’s relationship with the city and urban space, there are many more waiting to be explored. And thus, whether it is to those unnamed theorists or some unknown films, it is to these, perhaps, that we now turn.
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