

“Quit stalling...!”: Destiny and Destination on L.A.’s Inner City Roads

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Abstract

If driving has today really become a Western “metaphor for being” (Hutchinson), then common roadside signs proclaiming “Right lane must exit” or “Through traffic merge left”, inventions such as the automatic transmission, and the agreeable straightness of freeways can all be understood as symptoms of an ongoing socio-political struggle between the driver as democratic agent, and the state as institutionalized regulatory force. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the context of urban traffic, where private motorized transportation represents both the supreme (if illusory) expression of personal freedom, and official efforts to channel individualism by obliterating its sense of direction and ideological divergence. On the concrete proving grounds of the clogged inner-city freeway, “nomad science” and “state science” (Deleuze & Guattari) thus oscillate between the pseudo-liberatory expressivity of mainstream car culture and the self-effacing dromoscopic “amnesia of driving” (Baudrillard). Are a city’s multitudes of cars resistant “projectiles” (Virilio) or, rather, hegemonic “sites of containment” (Jane Jacobs)? This essay approaches the complex tensions between “untamable” democratic mobility and state-regulated transit by way of two Hollywood-produced films that focus on traffic in Los Angeles: in *Collateral* (2004), a cab driver comes to recognize and transcend the hopelessly directionless circularity dictated by his job; in *Falling Down* (1993), a frustrated civil service employee abandons his car on a rush-hour freeway and decides to walk home, forced to traverse the supposedly unwalkable city without the “masking screen of the windshield” (Virilio). As they “quit stalling”, both protagonists become dangerous variants of the defiant nomad – one a driver who remains on the road but goes “under the radar”, the other a transient pedestrian whose movement becomes viral and unpredictable. My analysis of the films’ metropolitan setting and of the incessant movement that marks both narratives links political and philosophical economies of motion, speed, and transit to a discussion of the various *bandes vagabondage* (Deleuze & Guattari) that are formed between city and driver, driver and car, and car and pedestrian. In this discussion, the inner-city road emerges as a primary site of conflict between civic rule and individual subject, and the flow of urban traffic comes to represent the tensions generated in spaces where movement is understood as both liberating and as a form of control.

Keywords: Traffic, Urbanism, Los Angeles, *Falling Down*, *Collateral*

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The time has come, it seems, to face the facts:
revolution is movement, but movement is not a
revolution.

(Virilio 2006: 43)

In her 1961 study of the socio-political structure and overall livability of American urban centers, Jane Jacobs famously detailed how the material circumstances of our living environments influence social relationships and inform our “sense of connection to the world” (Jacobs 1961: 19). In this essay, I expand Jacob’s dictum with the assumption that cars, too, are part of the circle of material circumstances that constitute our homes, and that car-centered politics and economies of transportation, therefore, strongly influence our sense of belonging and situatedness. By pairing two relatively recent mainstream feature films with prominent commentary on ideological regimes of mobility (by Deleuze, Virilio, and Baudrillard), I will discuss how driving serves a double function of manipulating our interaction with the world around us, and simultaneously of veiling this restrictive mediating function. Given the specifically cinematic context of two narratives that primarily deal with experiences of urban mobility, a further subtext of this essay will be the implication that an ideological critique of the ways in which the windshield frames our perception of the world might be productively extended to cinematic experiences in general.

Similar to the collective experience of life in the urban neighborhoods discussed by Jacobs, the use of cars and our dependence on them shape a strong sense of our lifeworlds and of our ways of interfacing with them. All kinds of movement – and especially motorized transit – may consequently be understood as multi-faceted metaphors for “being” in general. Based on this understanding of the car and its inhabitants as more or less autonomous vectors, the sociologist Sikkivu Hutchinson, for example, has argued that “the automobile has not only destroyed meaningful experience with and attachment to “place” in the city, but has played a big role in effacing its history” (Hutchinson 2003: 110). Despite the fact that they help us traverse space, cars can thus effectively blind drivers to the material and social realities they move through – a function that has a clear political dimension insofar as it is maintained through a state-regulated system of roadways, traffic regulations, and public transportation services.

This essay is based on the assumption, then, that an urban population’s interfacing with the realities of its lifeworlds is impacted not only by the parameter of “location”, but that it is, furthermore, strongly inflected by the processual circumstances of how connections between such locations are realized and experienced. As the most prominent state-controlled modality of private transportation, driving is, in other words, an ideal site for investigating how the material and po-

litical realities of contemporary urban life are generated, manipulated and obscured. In what follows, I thus scrutinize the tense and precarious relationship between driving and civic agency in two Hollywood films that focus on the complex struggle between driver and road, and that centrally hinge on the suggestion that the sense of "freedom" that driving is said to give us may be a mere simulation – a by-product of a highly efficient system of control. In Michael Mann's *Collateral* (2004), a L.A. cab driver (Jamie Foxx) comes to recognize and ultimately transcend the hopelessly directionless circularity dictated by his job; in Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993), a frustrated civil service employee (Michael Douglas) abandons his car on a grid-locked L.A. freeway, and decides to traverse the supposedly unwalkable city on foot, thereby pushing through what Paul Virilio calls the masking screen of the windshield (Virilio 1998: 11-22). Both films are set in Los Angeles, and acknowledge the city as a site that stereotypically represents both the utopian vision of democratic motorized liberty and its dystopic opposite of a smog-polluted, four-wheeled abyss that enslaves its inhabitants in the name of mobility, rather than freeing them. Both *Collateral* and *Falling Down* thus invoke L.A.'s omnipresent web of freeways, on- and off-ramps and filthy roadsides as major antagonists vis-à-vis the lead actors, and posit driving and traffic as the primary sites of the ideological and socio-political conflicts played out in the narratives.

As I will show, both films portray road and car, as well as more abstract notions of the ordered flow of traffic, gasoline and capital as zones of never-ending conflicts between the vague cipher of the state (or law) and its mobile subjects. On the road, varied constellations of a hegemonic power structure are constantly being generated, openly put in question, and surreptitiously reconfirmed – and both *Falling Down* and *Collateral* are in this sense representative of the fluid ideological constellations that continuously play out in the unceasing, yet always-impeded flow of traffic. Drivers are thus perpetually faced with the following problematic: at what point does a drive to the movies, to the pier, or to the mall cease to represent a volitional, deliberate activity, and become, rather, an act of "being-driven" towards these somewhat disingenuous symbols of democratic liberty? If driving has truly become a metaphor for being, then common roadside signs proclaiming "Right lane must exit" or "Through traffic merge left", inventions such as the automatic transmission, and the agreeable straightness of freeways can all be understood as symptomatic of ongoing realignments of the power dynamics between the driver as democratic agent and the state as an institutionalized regulatory force. How, then, are the ordered and controlled structures of mobility that comprise our experience of driving constituted and deployed? How are they utilized by State apparatuses, and subversively appropriated by resistant democratic subjects? Is driving ever "a way out", or are more radical measures required – perhaps what the A.L.A.R.M.A. group of activists and media artists has called the performance of the unimaginable: walking in L.A. (Gonzalez, Ramon & Chavoya

1998: 82)? How, finally, might such a metaphor be extended to the experience of cinema more generally? Are the Hollywood films discussed herein flattened representations – like the roadside attraction seen through a windshield – that invite or that obstruct “walking in L.A.”?

In “Dromoscopy, or The Ecstasy of Enormities”, Paul Virilio reflects on the spectacle that unfolds before the eyes of the driver of any automobile, and describes it as a “dromoscopic simulation” – as the projection of a plethora of moving images into the interior of the car, a simulation that creates, for the driver and passengers (who remain stationary in relation to the vehicle), the sensation of being moved.¹ On the screens of windshield, rearview mirror and dashboard, the observers of this great picture show of driving – the “voyager-voyeur[s]” (Virilio 1998: 13) – behold the virtual movement and animation of the inanimate objects they are passing by. “So long as the dromoscopic simulation continues”, Virilio writes, “the comfort of the passenger is assured” (1998: 13). Yet this comfort, founded on the illusion of autonomous movement, actually “depends upon being immobile while moving”, a state imposed on driver and passengers by the regulated system of transportation (1998: 14).

This state of comfort, of course, is that of utter immobility at the heart of a moving machine, a fact that driver and passengers may remain unaware of. Virilio’s argument thus points to the already-mentioned tension between standstill and motion (or progress) on which both *Falling Down* and *Collateral* focus: it implies that behind every drive we go on, there is present a concealed ideological force that creates and perpetually recreates the spectacle of individual freedom that is embodied in the seemingly unlimited mobility of the passengers. *Collateral*’s protagonist Max, therefore, initially embraces his job as cabdriver as one that gives him access to the ultimately illusory freedom of always being on the road. The protagonist of *Falling Down*, on the other hand, is deprived of the safe, manipulative haven of his car’s interior right from the beginning, and as a result is forced immediately to perceive his surroundings differently. As will be seen, Virilio’s arguments throughout “Dromoscopy” thus approximate the premise of both films discussed in this paper – namely the drivers’ paradoxical “mobile inertia”, i.e., their passivity vis-à-vis the dromoscopic simulation that focuses their attention on a distant goal, blinds them to their surroundings, and strengthens their belief in the inevitability of the modalities of driving. The fact that this simulation largely goes unnoticed suggests that its state-controlled staging contains a mechanism which enables it to veil itself from the driver’s view (who will be distracted by traffic lights, construction sites, and the flow of traffic in general), while the conditions of the driver’s exposure to the spectacle are perpetually reproduced and maintained. Again, this argument tentatively links the “projection” of a car’s exterior onto the windshield to the viewing of film: as Virilio expands our concept of driving by describing it as the stationary perception of “moving” images, so the event of movie-watching can be compared to the activity of driving. The cinema-

machine, it could be argued, imposes – or tries to impose – a set of parameters on the completeness of the audience’s experience that is not unlike the range of conceptual and practical limits that govern motorized transit. The implied suggestion that cinema, whether as ideological or technical apparatus, veils as much as it illuminates is, of course, by no means new; but in the context of *Falling Down* and *Collateral*, it brings up the interesting question of how mainstream “driving films” in general may engage (or ignore) this issue.

Most of *Collateral* is a literalization of the above-mentioned comfortable state of unrecognized immobility, and it is only towards the end of the movie that the cabdriver Max abandons his vehicle and is thus able to break through the surface of the fraudulent sense of freedom that driving had previously provided him with. In *Falling Down*, on the other hand, the dromoscopic screen of the windshield is removed at the very outset, and the rest of the film is a violent meditation on its function as a veil covering up the actual on- and off-road realities outside the car. But what are the specific political functions of such an elaborate “spectacle”? Most literally, it would seem, they rest in the fact that movement, as an exertion of physical force, holds the promise of violence, resistance and chaos. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note in *A Thousand Plateaus*, it is therefore “a vital concern of every State ... to control migration and ... to establish a zone of rights over an entire “exterior”, over all the flows traversing the ecumenon” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 385) “There is”, in other words, “a need for fixed paths in well-defined directions, which restrict speed, regulate circulation, relativize movement, and measure in detail the relative movements of subjects and objects” (1987: 386).

Beyond the institution of traffic rules, this containment of mobility is also achieved by Virilio’s dromoscopic simulation, which he primarily describes in appropriated aesthetic terms, reminiscent today of the act of interfacing with a virtual reality. Based on Virilio’s notion that “[t]he driver’s seat of machines offers a political image of the future” (Virilio 1998: 20), the car becomes – in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s argument – a prosthetic, naturalized (and thus invisible) extension of contemporary human beings’ sense of their surroundings. In equating the windshield, rearview mirror, etc. with screens, Virilio consequently posits the car as a “machine of surveillance” (1998: 20), rather than as a machine that subjects its users to state surveillance. This implied complicity of driver and passengers again points to the fact that their continuous subjection to the spectacle of driving serves to obscure its own double function of creating, on the one hand, a sense of liberty and mobility, and, on the other hand, of blinding them to the anti-dynamic and circular nature of the “spectacle” in which they continuously participate.

Driving the LA freeway system, then, may well be a way of performing individual, “untamable” democratic mobility, and thus of asserting one’s sense of freedom; but simultaneously, the same act of driving always feeds the ideological

machine that continues to direct, control, and (literally and figuratively) immobilize all drivers. Both *Falling Down* and *Collateral* are shot through with implied references to stereotypically American notions of “Manifest Destiny” and a “Westward Ho” mentality that have helped to purport and consolidate a very particular set of myths of the limitless opportunities a motorized, mobile America holds in store. But like most road movies that most prominently engage such myths, neither *Falling Down* nor *Collateral* formulates a conclusive strategy for successfully breaking down the windshield-screen, and for the most part, both films’ protagonists struggles (reflecting, again, those commonly picked up in the popular road movie genre) acknowledge the bounds of the greater regime of autonomous mobility, rather than conquering them.

Yet since both films are set exclusively against the geographical setting of Los Angeles’ network of roads and freeways – not exactly known to represent “progress” – the films nevertheless manage to strongly (if inconclusively) challenge the idea that driving embodies freedom. The road emerges as the most immediate point of contact and conflict between the state and its subjects. Forced to engage this conflict, *Collateral’s* protagonist Max thus slowly comes to terms with the deceptive myth of motorized mobility’s freedom, which he himself perpetuated by driving his taxi through the nocturnal city for twelve years. Once he realizes the extent to which he had fallen prey to the illusory spectacle of the freedom of mobility, the narrative allows him to finally transcend what Jean Baudrillard, in *America*, has called the state-induced “amnesia of driving” (Baudrillard 1988: 9). He does so by actively resisting the stasis of his immediate environment, wrecking his car, and, notably, by getting on the subway. *Falling Down*, as noted, sets out at a different stage in the power struggle between lawful road and defiant driver: here, a former employee of the Ministry of Defense abandons his car on a congested freeway and embarks on a westward journey home on foot. Having penetrated the ideological façade of allegedly liberatory motorization, the protagonist then performs a series of violent outbursts – fierce acts of resistance directed against the dominant ideologies that restrict and regulate his movement – that call to mind the phrase “road rage”, but that cannot fit the category simply because he is no longer driving.

The ideological conflicts that both films locate in the tension between driving and being-driven also figure importantly in Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of nomadology. If, as they state, it is indeed a “vital concern of every State [to] restrict speed, regulate circulation [and] relativize movement”, then the road is, undoubtedly, an ideal site for the deployment of a complex set of organizing and controlling mechanisms. As an important point of contact between a state’s laws and surveillance apparatus and its subjects (citizens who feel free because they can drive wherever they choose), the street-grid thus functions to uphold law and order, since uncontrolled movement would constitute the threat of potential resistance. Ideally, Deleuze and Guattari point out, a state must subordinate its subjects

in ways that make movement manifest itself as a naturalized law. In an interesting analogy to the realm of physics, they thus argue that “it cannot be said that a body that is dropped has a speed, however fast it falls: rather it has an infinitely decreasing slowness in accordance with the law of falling bodies” (1987: 371). Cars, in this sense, do not speed along a freeway of the driver’s own volition. They are, rather, hurled along by the authorities and by the rules that regulate direction and pace of all motorized movement. Virilio, accordingly, describes cars as “projectiles” (Virilio 1998: 17), a term that again stresses the passivity of all vehicles in relation to the laws that govern their movement.

In *Collateral*, the protagonist for the most part willingly assumes this position of subordination. *Falling Down*, however, posits an interesting alternative that works well within the argumentative framework proposed by Deleuze and Guattari as well as by Virilio: once the film’s protagonist has abandoned his car, he becomes an uncontrollable threat to the state’s rule of law as embodied by the rules of the road. By arming himself, he becomes, in fact, the “driving force” of the movement around him. No longer is he contained in a projectile-car bound by the naturalized laws of the state; rather, he is now the commander of his own arsenal of projectiles (at one point even a portable rocket launcher), and thus poses a nomadic threat to the order he has more and more disturbed ever since his seemingly straightforward act of deserting his vehicle. This transmutation is also reflected in the naming of the protagonist: not knowing who they are dealing with, the police identify the man by his car’s license plate, which, appropriately, spells “D-Fens”. Throughout much of the film there is, consequently, a sense that he is a vigilante actively defending his personal rights in lieu of the freedom of all drivers. In an added twist, it finally emerges that he is a former employee of the Ministry of Defense, so that the desertion of “D-Fens” begins to look even more like a politically motivated form of resistance. By abandoning his car, and by repudiating the dominant deterritorializing strategy of the never-ending, circular drive (something that *Collateral*’s Max only achieves towards the end of his journey), D-Fens is able to tentatively resist internalization by the state order, and to evade its sphere of control while spatially remaining within it. After abandoning his car in the clogged arteries of L.A.’s freeway system, he acquires the elusive distinction of a viral organism on an infectious rampage – infectious but at the same time contaminated with the poison of the system he seeks to undermine; a nomad who can for a limited time freely roam the otherwise clearly regulated strata of Los Angeles.

Whatever the motivation, D-Fens’s unruly and uncontrollable movement, which becomes possible only once he leaves his car behind, strongly works against the state’s scheme of what the political scientist James Scott calls “the making legible” of space (see Scott 1998: xiv, 445 p.). Yet while Scott discusses the project of “legibilization” (again a control measure designed to channel the position and movement of the public into a manageable order) in primarily static terms (such

as "forest hygienization" and strategies of restricting the rezoning of urban regions), the concept is relevant also in terms of a more dynamic mobility, as evidenced by Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the long history of state-ordained repression of *bandes vagabondages* (1987: 368), or by Virilio's extensive discussion of the politics of mobile warfare (see Virilio 2006: Chapter 2). All ideological ordering schemes of making urban space legible for the state, then, may be seen to simultaneously serve the function of rendering the socio-political realities of the street-grid illegible for its inhabitants. Arguably, naturalizing particular modes of transportation such as motorized private transit, which can easily be bound by constrictive systems of rules and regulations, is very useful for upholding the integrity of Virilio's dromoscopic spectacle, which works to remove the possibility of friction between subjects. And indeed, as Hutchinson points out in *Imagining Transit*, the propagation of private mobility has in many contexts eliminated the necessity for contact between urban dwellers, and has erased social awareness in large parts of urban and suburban populations (Hutchinson 2003: 111). The metal veil of the chassis, Virilio's windshield-screen, and the appendant impact that driving has on the human faculties of vision and peripheral perception thus all prevent passengers from encountering, seeing, feeling, smelling, or touching the urban "Other", and may indeed shroud all problems related to it.

The spectacle of driving keeps intact, then, an unwittingly selective and yet whole vision of that which lies outside the vehicle, and conveniently enables the mobile population to live, consume, and converse on the figurative "diamond lane" (on North American roads often the only, reserved lane affording the privilege of speedier transit), rather than facing exposure to the material and ideological reality of urban environments. Yet the system may be liable to falter and fail when drivers break through the dromoscopic simulation's "fourth wall". In the first half of *Collateral*, the critical difference between the car's interior and exterior is strictly upheld and foregrounded. Early in the film, Max agrees to take on a single passenger, Vincent, for the entire night. Max's compliant and even gratefully submissive position vis-à-vis the law and order of driving quickly becomes obvious when compared to his passengers' radically different type of mobility: Vincent constantly exits and re-enters the car, and is able to conceptualize it as a quasi-nomadic tool useful in countering the rules of the road (and the rule of law in general). For Max, on the other hand, the cab is a vehicle of complicity. This is strongly conveyed, for example, on the level of sound: as soon as Max starts his engine, calm and soothing pop music usually starts playing in the background, giving him a feeling of freedom and peaceful, content unity with the streets. Whenever his car stops, on the other hand, the unwelcome and threatening noise of the exterior immediately shatters this harmony of the seemingly peaceful and open city that otherwise unfolds upon the screen of his windshield. Driving, then, subjects all passengers of a vehicle to what Baudrillard discusses as a hyperreality that is manifest, again, in dromoscopic simulations. Like Virilio, Baudrillard, too,

observes that the drivers “have no sense of [this] simulation” (Baudrillard 1988: 28); caught in a self-perpetuating system of the observation of channeled movement, “they are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model”, and therefore constitute part of the model’s continuous reproduction apparatus (1988: 28).

The way in which the music playing on Max’s car stereo blends into the extradiegetic soundtrack strongly evokes this concealed nature of the control system of transit; it emphasizes the functions of the windshield as veiling device, and together with the observed speed of driving, it induces – in Baudrillard’s argument – a paradoxical immobility of the mind that can easily be exploited by dominant ideological forces who have the power to influence general experiences of driving. With the soothing music and the tentative goal of his passenger’s destination before him, Max is thus relaxed and content, and filled with the joy of the felt meaningfulness of driving. Fittingly, it is also at these times that he likes to dismiss his current job as temporary, as something that he is only doing until the realization of his dream project – a limousine company. This make-believe company, appropriately called “Island Limo”, is envisioned as the perfect fulfillment of Max’s impossible dream of attaining freedom by driving through a street-grid of state-controlled mobility: “You won’t want to get out of the limousine”, he says, “because the ride is so comfortable”. In the imaginary pursuit of this dream, the real Sisyphean character of Max’s profession – as a cabdriver, he is constantly under way but never arrives at a final destination – is lost on him, and instead he feels encouraged to recede still further into the hyperreal simulacrum of a perfect dromoscopic simulation.

Falling Down, on the other hand, abandons the myth of the liberated motorist from the very beginning. The film opens with the breakdown of the barrier that conceals the system of automated movement, shown in what amounts to a powerfully executed reversal of the soothing interior soundscape of Max’s cab. In *Falling Down*, the hero’s car is never seen to move – it is always already stuck in a traffic jam near a construction site. Quickly, the overwhelming heat and dust, a malfunctioning A/C-system, and a plethora of minor but obtrusive exterior images and noises that crowd the immobilized driver’s audiovisual field amalgamate into a hellish song that raises the protagonist’s awareness of what Virilio calls the state’s “vehicular prohibition”, i.e. its prohibition of mobility (Virilio 2006: 51). Had the deceptive spectacle of driving been left intact, D-Fens would not have noticed any of this. Once he is exposed to the hostile environment of the obstructed street, however, he realizes, with a pang, that immobility indeed equals death, and is prompted to do what Max does not achieve until the climax of *Collateral*: he quits stalling and sets out on foot.

Streets, roads and freeways bear the institutional mark, then, of the government agencies that build and maintain them. But sometimes, the private, itinerant mark of the individuals navigating them may also inscribe itself on them – most likely,

perhaps, at the accidental sites of traffic jams, blown tires, missed turns, or ticketed parking. And while large parts of the mobile population are effectively assimilated by the self-perpetuating and self-veiling apparatus of private transportation, occasionally resistant drivers (or pedestrians) may indeed be established as Deleuzian "nomads", representing a threat to the state power because they continue to traverse state territory while remaining on an ideologically exterior plane of deterritorialization. As noted, *Falling Down* and *Collateral* each revolve around the conflicted relationship between nomad and state, and portray the resistance against sedentarization in different stages of development. In both narratives, the male hero's story is embedded in typical mainstream narrative conventions (in *Falling Down*, loss of social and professional status interfere with everyday life; in *Collateral*, a happenstance buddy narrative provides the background for an emerging "rags-to-riches" story). Yet by way of these conventions, both films posit the breakdown of the flow of traffic as a proto-nomadic moment of crisis.

This reading again brings into play the related question of how "driving films", with their common focus on the uncertain link between mobility and autonomy/independence, engage their own complicity in a visual regime that dictates and channels perception as much as the dromoscopic spectacle does. In the cases of *Collateral* and *Falling Down*, it must be noted that the films do not challenge this problematic implication. In fact, the narrative logic of both films hinges on the integrity of the system of rules that controls mobility as well as our perception thereof. In *Collateral*, this regime is implicitly acknowledged, but not explicitly defined, and is needed as the backdrop for the protagonist's moral awakening; similarly, in *Falling Down*, the law of the road serves as an abstraction of the protagonist's adversaries, so overpowering that his travails take on a noticeably quixotic character. Ultimately, both films' protagonists become aware, to some degree, of the dromoscopic spectacle's artificiality. However, neither of the two manages to overcome the power that hides behind the screen; Max simply shifts his position, and comes to term with the realities of quasi-autonomous mobility by ultimately choosing the subway over the car, while D-Fens, eventually, accepts the powers he provoked by breaking through the windshield-screen as insurmountable, and admits defeat. Both films thus work with the dromoscopic spectacle as a useful image that becomes, it seems to be assumed, an universally understood reference point for the wrongs done to their protagonists. This does not mean, however, that awareness of the powerful visual regime that rules over drivers and passengers is pushed to extend to the Hollywood cinema-machine itself.

Like the resistant drivers of *Collateral* and *Falling Down*, Deleuze and Guattari's nomads are ideologically positioned at the threshold of the state and pose a threat to the established order because they have access to a "minor science" – a nomad science of resistant mobility that must continually be "barred, inhibited, or banned by the demands and conditions of State science" (1987: 362). State power's aim must be to immobilize, to "limit, control [and] localize nomad

science” (1987: 363), so that it cannot become an alternative model to the state-regulated mobility that keeps in check the flows of individual movement while upholding a vision of democratic freedom. The ideological double function of controlled movement as a mode that simultaneously liberates and controls a subject is thus realized when the “State does not give power, [but] makes [its subject] a strictly dependent organ with an autonomy that is only imagined yet is sufficient to divest those whose job it becomes simply to reproduce or implement of [sic] all of their power” (1987: 363). Because “the State never ceases to decompose, re-compose, and transform movement, or to regulate speed”, in regulating traffic it therefore manages to reverse and delay the formation and realization of (urban) nomad resistance (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 386).

How well this scheme works becomes obvious in Max’s resistance to giving up the mind-numbing lure of a sanitized, aestheticized driving experience. As it turns out, his passenger Vincent is a contract killer, and while Max loses himself in the picture show of the limousine he will likely never be able to afford, Vincent commits his first murder of the night – and blows apart Max’s dream when the dead body, hurled out a window, smashes the roof of the cab. This is the decisive moment that marks, quite literally, the first showing of cracks on the screen on which Max’s dromoscopic simulation plays out; from now on, Max will be forced more and more to take on nomadic qualities, to act on his own volition; more and more, he will have to violate the system of rules and regulations by which he usually lets himself be guided through the well-maintained network of streets, signs and traffic lights. When the passenger Vincent continues on his mission to drive through the city and kill a total of six stationary victims, he also continues to repeatedly expose Max’s dream as unrealistic and illusory, and, like *Falling Down*’s D-Fens, the cabdriver is severely shocked by the narrative literalizations of Virilio’s dictum that to drive is to remain immobile, and that this immobility equals death.

Almost exactly halfway through the film, Max is finally forced to take a more active role of resistance vis-à-vis both Vincent and the spectacle of driving. Now, he is pushed hard to take initiative, to transcend (speed)limits and to veer off the orderly straightness of the road – and when Vincent provokingly yells at the cabdriver to “QUIT STALLING!”, Max finally embraces the potential of nomadic mobility. Forced upon the realization that his low-paying and dependent job is nothing but a perpetual deferral of his actual plans, Max recognizes that during the twelve years of his “temporary” job, he was driven rather than driving of his free will; that for him, motion equaled immobility rather than progress, speed equaled deceleration, and even the straightest roads eventually led him back to his starting point. From this moment onward, Max’s driving assumes a more subversive quality, and when he finally rebels against the order of the street, he does so by purposefully crashing his car. While earlier, his mobility had no direction, his speed is now no longer decomposed by the state’s regulatory schemes, and he can,

for once, really be on his way. As the movie's showdown commences, Max chooses Los Angeles' public transit system over the street – a choice that represents an individual act of defiance which will allow him, within the film's diegetic logic, to evade the controlling reach of the never-ending circulatory flow of steel, capital and time on the inner-city road.

In *Speed and Politics*, Paul Virilio, too, outlines the potential of speed and movement to empower public forces against a dominant ideology that in turn seeks to contain it, and states that “[t]he masses are not a population, a society, but a multitude of passersby” (Virilio 2006: 29). Virilio thus defines the road as a primary site of political conflict, historically used to forestall unruly and uncontrollable mobility. When the state succeeds with these schemes of mobility-management, the opposition of “stasis to circulation” (2006: 31) gains significance not merely in relation to the practical usefulness of organizing the flow of motorized vehicles, but, again, also in relation to the containment of all political, resistant movement. Speed limits (which, ultimately, fail to contain Max's rebellion) are exemplary for these schemes, and represent a practical state intervention designed to limit “the extraordinary power of assault that motorization of the masses creates” (2006: 51). Ideally, however, the control of traffic and of the general economic role of motorization turns the democratic “freedom to move” into an “obligation to mobility”, a forced and controlled mobility (2006: 53). The road then ceases to be what Deleuze and Guattari identify as the traditionally proletarian site of traveling laborers and craftsmen, and instead turns “every social category, without distinction, into unknown soldiers of the order of speeds – speeds whose hierarchy is controlled more and more each day by the State” (2006: 136f.). For Virilio, the authorities' control over the modes and modalities of individual movement is hard to reverse – “the more speed increases”, he concludes, “the faster freedom decreases. The [vehicle's] self-propulsion finally entails the self-sufficiency of automation” (2006: 158).

A somewhat less negative picture of the relationship between controlled space and motorized movement is painted by Baudrillard, who, while acknowledging the positive all-importance of American popular myths of speed, nevertheless describes the experience of driving in ways that are reminiscent both of Deleuze and Guattari's gravity analogy and of Virilio's projectile analogy. Baudrillard's view provides, perhaps, the best approximation of the conceptual overlap between the spectacle of driving and the allure of mainstream cinema, when he states: “movement which moves through space of its own volition changes into an absorption by space itself – end of resistance...” (1988: 10). What distinguishes this account of the politics of driving (and of the effects of partaking in the spectacle of driving) from Virilio's theory is that here, the sense of freedom felt when driving is, by all accounts, taken to be “real” (if deceptive) – and perhaps it is this potentiality of real freedom that accounts for the temporary success that *Falling Down*'s D-Fens has with his quasi-nomadic resistance.

Ultimately, however, D-Fens must fail. Throughout his trek on foot, it becomes obvious that he cannot overcome the pull of popular American myths of westward movement, pastoral settlement, and individual freedom, which are just as much part of the dominant ideology as is the discourse of motorized mobility that he aims to abandon. While Max the cabdriver eventually realizes that driving his taxi confines him to a never-ending circular motion with no way out, *Falling Down*'s tragic hero arrives at a literal dead end: when the film has him winding up on a pier out on the Western-most shore of the continent, the protagonist must irrefutably accept that Los Angeles really is the end of his world. Interestingly, prior to this tragic climax the defiant act of walking seems no less alien to police and city authorities than it is to D-Fens himself. Even though notions of "moving on/up" and of "just passing through" permeate the entire narrative (and, temporarily, become more plausible because D-Fens is able to walk where no one else can drive), the protagonist's nomadic mobility immediately forces him to acknowledge a new set of emerging obstructions: the dead ends of routes blocked by construction, of line-ups at gas stations and fast food restaurants; the downtown and gangland frontier of run-down housing projects, dying immigrant businesses, and looming drug- and poverty-related crime; and, last but not least, the suburban frontier of indifferent employees and alienated customers. D-Fens must navigate them all, and for a little while, it appears that without the mediating interface of his car, he now is able to see them in a new light – but in fact, it is due to the film's representation of walking as abnormal that its implied critique of the myth of seemingly liberating motorized mobility is never realized.

The freeway section from which D-Fens escapes cuts through a bad neighborhood, and thus the irritated and baffled pedestrian has his first violent encounters (one with a frustrated, uncooperative corner store-owner, and one with two gang members on the prowl). The disputes that immediately flare up concern territory and propriety: in a city in which life has adapted to the rule of motorized vehicles, in which most people try never to stop, and in which the relative safety of a car's interior has obliterated most residents' awareness of social, ethnic, and political issues, everything must remain in its right place and retain its proper pace. Transgression of boundaries will necessarily result, it seems, in violent conflict. Once D-Fens is deprived of the protective frame of his car, the narrative thus constructs him as being on the brink of realizing that only to walk is to see, whereas to drive is to remain blind to the outside world. Yet in Hollywood's extra-diegetic logic, the critical suggestion that acceptance of one's position as a mere viewer (whether as driver or as moviegoer) means giving in to an oppressive_ visual regime is perhaps too self-critically radical – and the truth of D-Fens's existence, in this sense, seems to fleetingly dawn on him when, in a poignant scene, the smoggy cityscape of L.A. is re-framed yet again, visually bound no longer by the chassis of his car, but by a hole in the sole of his shoe, held up to the eye in angry disbelief.

From now on, the protagonist experiments with what to him appears like a new kind of mobility; in a car, his navigational, evasive, even offensive options had been severely limited. “If everyone just cleared my path”, he declares repeatedly, “everything would be alright”. But once on foot, D-Fens finds that it is becoming easier to clear his path, and he begins to do so by force. Paralleling Virilio’s portrayal of the car as a useless bullet rather than a gun, D-Fens updates his armory, acquires a baseball bat, a knife, an arsenal of semi-automatic weapons, and finally a bazooka. Now that he is no longer bound to a projectile but rather commands a whole arsenal of them himself, this weaponry is supposed to assist him in the fight to get ahead. Accordingly, the protagonist’s opponents mistake him for a rebel with a political mission, and cannot see that D-Fens is merely a citizen on the defensive, an individual who insists on his right-of-way and who, quite tellingly, only attacks stationary objects that block his way. D-Fens’s rather irrational acts of resistance culminate in blowing up a section of freeway: after encountering yet another construction site, he recalls that the route had been perfectly passable the day before, and confronts a worker. The anti-hero’s distrust in the state-controlled system of organized movement finally erupts in all its force, and before firing his bazooka, he paranoically accuses the city authorities of deliberately interfering with the residents’ choice of where to go and of how to get there.

In the film’s safe narrative logic, this, of course, is madness, and D-Fens’s fatal trek ends, accordingly, in Venice Beach, one of Los Angeles’ western-most neighborhoods. Marking the impossibility of the popular American theme of perpetual westward-expansion, for D-Fens the pier quite literally represents the end of the world. But motorized mobility, it is intimated, is not bad per se, and for the film’s other characters, it is not advisable to follow the protagonist’s example and begin traveling on foot. In this sense, D-Fens’s ex-wife (the ultimate goal of his pursuit) puts herself at high risk when she walks out onto the pier and the open water, entering what in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical model is understood to represent potentially empowered nomad resistance because water is a sphere exterior to the state’s ordering reach. Since the street-grid of control that is imposed onto the city does not reach out this far, the woman is in grave danger – and to the audience it must be clear that fleeing her troubled ex-husband in a car would have been safer, after all.

It is at this moment that *Falling Down*’s narrative most powerfully squares off the critical difference between Deleuze and Guattari’s “sedentary” and “nomadic” mobility, which is, by implication, also the difference between passive viewing and empowered, interactive observation. For a moment, it seems that D-Fens has finally reached a place that might allow him to transcend the oppressive structure represented by the urban freeway system. After the protagonist’s initial crossing over from Deleuze and Guattari’s “conceptual” state science of metrical, ordered movement to the “ambulant” nomad sciences that choose to cope with problems by way of “real-life operations” (1987: 374), the former civilian scientist of war-

fare has ceased to partake in the reproduction of the abstract organizing scheme of the road. D-Fens's pedestrian mobility has taken on the viral and rhizomatic qualities of nomad movement, and confronts the arborescence of sedentarized space, here embodied by the ex-wife's house with its lush garden, and by the danger of stasis that the viewer has begun to associate with it. Yet, true to the conventional narrative arc we have come to expect from films such as *Falling Down*, the film will entertain the possible success of this radical mobility no more than it would entertain the suggestion that its own structure of visualization supports (or challenges) such a mobility.

A similar notion is played out in *Collateral*, where the cabdriver's bedridden mother is bound to the hospital, grounded and artificially "rooted" by tubes going in and out of her body, and who thus becomes, at one point, an easy victim for the angered killer Vincent. But Max, too, has by now understood the passive projectile-nature of his cab; while the assassin passenger assumes that Max is still playing by the state's rules – which had earlier facilitated his immobility, and which had veiled his subjection to the routines of endless, circular driving – the cabdriver is now able to withstand the aggression of his nomadic passenger by responding to it from outside of his car. More successfully than D-Fens, Max has thus broken through the simulacrum of seemingly liberating mobility, and understands that cars are machines that may well render the outside world more beautiful and easier to cope with, but that also obstruct his view of the exterior, and create a sealed, fantastic world of deceptive orderliness and visible yet unattainable freedom in the interior. No longer, therefore, does Max act in favor of "automation", which equals "the absolute miniaturization of the political field" (Virilio 2006: 164); no longer does he unwittingly accept himself as merely a prosthetic extension of his cab, incapable of critical thinking or individual decisions. Until his nomadic rebellion, Max's only hope of breaking free was to "upgrade" his vehicle – a superficial change that would not have constituted a real change of his life's overall direction. It is only now, when he can conceptualize a real, radical change of his modes of transportation that he can fight the nomadic killer-passenger Vincent and, quasi by the way, change his own life. Interestingly, however, *Collateral* structures this supposedly life-altering change as the transfer from car to foot to subway – and thus posits, at the film's happy end, a mode of transportation that tends to be regarded (not only in Los Angeles) with much suspicion, and that is frequently understood as reserved for those who have, thus goes the popular perception, not managed to realize their dreams of independence and liberated mobility.

In my reading of *Collateral* and *Falling Down*, both films speak to an awareness within the sphere of popular culture of the existential conflicts that perpetually erupt on the road, which is treated as a prime site of interaction and conflict between state and subject. Both films thematize the paradoxical tensions generated in a place where mobility is posited as liberating, but where it is also heavily

regimented. Incessant movement and itinerancy thus constitute both a tool of control and a potential threat. In both films, the protagonists break through the “screens” of their windshields, abandon the reassuring guidance of their dashboards and automatic transmissions, and ultimately flee the drive-in theatre of the car, which generates Virilio’s dromoscopic simulation. Transcending their status of voluntary subordination, Max and D-Fens become urban nomads, and in the course of their journeys overcome the immobilizing localization that the state had heretofore subjected them to. Nomad resistance, here, does not emerge on the never-changing scenario of daily commutes, but in the singular and extraordinary event of the faltering of the state-governed spectacle of driving. In both films, as noted, this event is triggered by the malfunctioning of cars and the cessation of the orderly flow of traffic. As a “metaphor for being”, driving eventually fails to satisfy the two protagonists, and once they are no longer locked in the belief that driving is indeed liberating and an expression of individual freedom, they can shed the blinding mask of the chassis. While at the outset, both characters are subject to the blinding mechanism of orderly mobility and the organized “drive to no end” that prevents them from realizing their subordinate position in relation to the state, ultimately both narratives concern the process and consequences of penetrating the metal veil of the car.

Yet – both within the diegetic logic of each film, and in the broader context of comparing the spectacular visual regime imposed by the windshield-screen with the one represented by “driving films” more generally – *Collateral* and *Falling Down* do not stray too far from the path that ultimately upholds, rather than challenges, conventional opinion about that which can happen when non-participatory notions of viewing (and driving) are challenged. In *Collateral*, as noted, Max claims the freedom of a resistant urban nomad by crashing his car; in *Falling Down*, D-Fens’s self-liberating actions are less successful, and finally constitute an ungraceful fall from the only power that the former civil servant continues to recognize, that of American pastoral myths of independent, liberate mobility. While the fate of *Collateral*’s Max remains unclear, and is taking a not entirely unequivocal turn for the better when he mounts the often distrusted public transportation system, D-Fens’s claim of the nomad status ultimately results in absolute alienation, and stigmatizes him as a miscreant who in the end can only find certain death. His resistance is a mere “experimental surge” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 367) that fails to ultimately gain autonomy .

As distinct narratives and as examples of films that thematize driving in general, both *Collateral* and *Falling Down* largely follow the straight road prescribed by countless other films that take up this subject; they deviate from it only in so far as they more thoroughly develop (but never fully realize) the radical potentiality of nomad mobilities that negate the order of the road and the visual regimes it imposes. In this sense, both films stay true to the implications of their narratives to the extent that the circularity, open-endedness, and uncertainty related to popular

urban experiences of driving posit the conventional happy ending as unattainable. Yet in neither of the two films, this unattainability appears as a success: D-Fens is killed, and Max's final subway ride is marked by a new type of uncertainty that is all the more unsettling because it more strongly communicates itself to the character, who still feels unsafe outside of the "screening room" of his cab's steel chassis.

While the two films conclude that "going faster" cannot be the answer to the state's schemes of regimenting movement and of subjecting drivers to the deceptive experience of motorized liberty, they also implicitly reinforce the systems that their protagonists oppose. The anger and resistance of Max and D-Fens is portrayed as justified; yet the dubitable success of the two protagonists' actions provides no tangible clues as to how one might irreversibly break through the dromoscopic simulation's "fourth wall". To walk in L.A., in other words, remains "unimaginable" – as Max's final subway ride and D-Fens's troubled experiences as a flâneur imply, a full recovery from the "spectacular form of amnesia" that is both driving and moviegoing is far less likely than continued complicity in this limited physical and imaginative mobility, in which "everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated" (Baudrillard 1988: 9).

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Notes

- 1 Virilio's *dromology* derives its name from the ancient Greek root *dromos*, which signifies a straight paved avenue, but simultaneously implies acts of lucidly traversing it in a speedy manner, i.e. of running and looking.

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