A blurry if beautiful haze of varying colours, or a doomed jungle thriving on its own decadence: the city of Los Angeles has long polarised those who have fictionalised its ambiguous promises in novels, captured its apocalyptic demise in photographs, or banned its seductive images on celluloid film. Indeed, as Graham Clarke put it so succinctly, “Los Angeles seems endlessly held between these extremes: of light and dark – of surface and depth. Of the promise, in brief, of a meaning always hovering on the edge of significance” (Clarke 1988: 142). That the meaning of Los Angeles seems always imminent yet just beyond grasp must be a major reason why Los Angeles stands as one of the prime cities that not only “American intellectuals love to hate” (Davis 1992: 21). To capture an array of the meanings and interpretations of this peculiar place that is, in a sense, always already imagined and continuously reconstructed (both on the ground and in our minds), as well as represented by and through cultural products such as literature or visual culture, is a major aim of this essay. In fact, the pages that follow engage with two closely interrelated topics: on the one hand, with the urban space that holds such a sway over people’s imagination that the Southern Californian culture industry will not run out of steam in representing its own spectacle anytime soon, and, on the other hand, with theories of space and place in literary and cultural studies more generally, and in American Studies particularly.

While the paradigmatic American city of Los Angeles shall serve as a case example in thinking about space and place in American literary and cultural studies, it has also functioned for quite a while as an ideal place for thinkers who came up with and continue to develop spatial theory in a way that has made it not only a key theory in the study of literature and culture, but also a key method for how to read, analyze and interpret literature and visual media such as film and images today. As the term ‘spatial turn’ implies, this movement marks a major shift in theory from the focus on time...
to a stress on space, topography and mobility. My essay is divided into three parts. To begin with, I will offer a quick overview of all that ‘Los Angeles’ can stand for (making clear along the way why Los Angeles should be thought of, as it is here, in quotation marks): a tangible, geographical place; a place we imagine; and a place that is constructed by the media. The second part of this essay will present a select number of theoretical approaches that students and scholars of literary and cultural studies can use to study space and place as they are represented by and in various media. Finally, the third part will interconnect these theoretical approaches with exemplary studies of representations of Los Angeles. In other words, the spatial paradigm, which has existed since the mid-1980s, will be exemplified by scrutinizing a representative sample of the city’s cultural output. Close readings and analyses of photographs, architectures, novels and film, which are all examples of objects that cultural studies in general, and American Studies more specifically, is interested in, will map the space of this equally glamorous and disorienting city.

This application of theory to an actual locale, that is, a paradigmatic global city, should not be thought of as exclusive to Los Angeles. On the contrary, the theory could, to similar ends, facilitate readings of other cities in the United States, including New York, Las Vegas and Chicago. Moreover, it could be extended to global cities beyond the United States, such as Buenos Aires, Berlin or Tokyo. While this essay offers an array of representations of Los Angeles as one specific city through which to read the spatial turn, it intends to introduce concepts and ideas of spatiality that could be applied, in term papers or theses, to literary, visual and material representations of the United States and transnational places alike, depending on the particular field of study and the specific geography of interest.

2. Los Angeles: A Geographical Location, a Construction of the Media and a Place of the Imagination

Los Angeles has been given many nicknames. Chief among its designations are the ‘City of Angels’, an artificial dreamscape or an apocalyptic desert. Los Angeles is not so much a city as it is a collection of cities. A vast expanse of a gigantic metropolitan area, it consists of a tightly-knit grid of freeways that span their web over suburbs sprawling in all directions. The city is a promise of global capitalism and a fact of dire poverty. It is sun-drenched and smog-filled. It is a disaster-prone environment – which includes frequent earthquakes, massive pollution and fierce racial tensions. It is a multicultural haven and a segregated ghetto, filled with illegal immigrant labour. Taking this even further, it is a city that is new, without much of a history, an invention that had been dreamed up by urban planners before it was actually built. Consequently, it is a city where myth-making has become a highly lucrative industry. The myths and dreams attached to Los Angeles are what nurture the celluloid factories to this day: they form the base of the movie industry in Hollywood; they underlie television and
entertainment companies such as Warner Brothers and Disney in Burbank, the so-called ‘Media Capital of the World’; and, last but not least, they feed the pornography industry in the San Fernando Valley, or, as it is bluntly called, Porn Valley. Los Angeles is saturated by dreams and the will to achieve those dreams. One is pressed to describe both the way in which events happen there, and the way in which one traverses the space that is Los Angeles, as speedy. The city takes place along gigantic horizontal axes that stretch far beyond what could be called a city centre, its surrounding suburbs and something resembling a periphery. What marks the topography of Los Angeles is, in fact, that it (literally) spills over its own borders and that it (metaphorically) crosses its own borderlines. In accordance with changes in social, political and cultural demographics, as well as real estate development, both kinds of borderlines are constantly redrawn.

But what Los Angeles also is, is a name for a place; or, more precisely, letters for a place, namely L.A. – which is as easily recognisable as it is identifiable. The critic Julian Murphet has gone as far as calling Los Angeles an “epic national myth” (Murphet 2001: 8). This is a conception to which many critics ascribe: that there is something about Los Angeles that is not quite real. This logic could easily be turned on its head: the place is just as real as one imagines it to be – which, somewhat paradoxically, implies that Los Angeles could be anywhere. As this essay demonstrates, Los Angeles, in many ways, is only as real as the images that are conjured up of it. Like travellers who wish to see exact replicas of the sites they have read about in tourist guides in anticipation of their trip, one is prone to thrust those features and qualities onto the place that one has imagined it to have beforehand. That said, the site naturally exists on location as well. As Edward Soja, a cultural geographer and one of the founding fathers of theories of space and spatiality, has put it, Los Angeles is neither simply real nor imagined. It is a third type of space – which Soja aptly called “thirdspace” – that is, a space that is always and already “real-and-imagined”, by us as much as by cultural products including film, literature and photography (Soja 1996: 64-65).

Los Angeles has long been defined in positive and negative terms alike. The urban theorist and social activist Mike Davis, to name the most prominent example, displays this typically ambiguous attitude towards the city. In his seminal book on the urban sociology and social history of Los Angeles, entitled City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles, Davis describes the city in starkly opposed terms: as both a myth and an anti-myth, as both a utopia and a dystopia, even as both a city and an anti-city (Davis 1992: 15-97). Life in this (anti-)city may be utterly fabulous or miserable, depending on whether one is Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (or Brangelina, a name that makes their union perfect), celebrating its latest addition to the Jolie-Pitt bunch with a sushi dinner (as one fan website’s slogan proclaims, “Saving the World, One Child at a Time”), or whether one is Rodney King, a young African American man beaten so brutally by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1992 that the public outrage over the acquittal of the white officers charged for the beating resulted in the infamous Los An-
geles race riots that lasted six days and killed 53 people. With his book, Davis managed to predict some of the tensions that would lead to the Los Angeles riots.

Fittingly, Davis’s opening chapter is entitled “Sunshine or Noir?”, capturing a Janus-faced Los Angeles by way of a question that remains irresolvable: the city as either sunny and bright and/or as dark and doomed. The myth of the American Dream is its promise, according to which everyone can ‘make it’, and thereby achieve the triad of wealth, happiness and freedom. The most clichéd example of this is, of course, the waitress waiting to be discovered and made the latest starlet by the movie industry. Apart from the celebrity status aimed for here, the local variant of the American Dream in Los Angeles includes a Mediterranean climate on what is considered an ‘innocent’ West coast, a single family home against the backdrop of the gleaming Pacific or a lush mountain range, and the kind of mobility that extends itself not only along freeways but also along borderlines that can make the distinctions between the various members of different classes, races and ethnicities so impenetrable. To this day, people move to Southern California, and to Los Angeles in particular, for its promise of freedom and the chance to reinvent their lives (Beverly Hills is not by accident the Mecca of plastic surgery in the United States). That these dreams falter all too quickly is vividly illustrated by popular reality TV dramas such as The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills and Orange County, in which some of the characters are married to successful cosmetic surgeons, while others have to deal with the effects of rhinoplasty or botox injections gone in unforeseen directions. As the latter example shows, the double-facedness of Los Angeles can contain beauty-and-the-beast images in one single image. More often than not, the myth of Los Angeles is saturated with unbelievable qualities.

The anti-myth of Los Angeles also becomes apparent, for instance, in sombre if lustrous black-and-white detective movies of the 1930s and 1940s, the so-called genre of film noir. Noir films, based on contemporary crime novels by authors such as Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain, showcase contempt for corrupt business cultures as much as they expose depraved love affairs. But noir also exists within African American culture. The black version of the production of space tells stories of race relations and racial tensions which take place against the nightmarish backdrop of a particularly racist version of urban hell, such as the armed industry of the Second World War in Chester Himes’s crime novel If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945). In either case, both the myth and the anti-myth of Los Angeles are not simply things that exist but also things that are constructed. As Wolfgang Hallet and Birgit Neumann phrase it, space is a social construction that is a “signature of individual and social actions” (Hallet/Neumann 2009: 13, my translation). Space is, indeed, a construction of which we, as inhabitants, readers and interpreters, are a crucial part and that depends on how we act – as much as it is a construction that other individuals and/or the social forces around us enact: this either makes the city appeal to us, or deters us. Likewise, it is the media and art, its texts and images, which purport the myths and anti-myths of a city that is prone to enter our subconscious and resurge where we might least expect it.
As mentioned earlier, Davis also thinks of Los Angeles as a utopia and a dystopia. The utopian version of the city comprises the culture industry, which consists of a cosmopolitan set of artists, filmmakers and visionaries; its dystopian version points to the kind of pure capitalism that has no use for culture and is at risk of destroying the realm of art. According to this dystopic version, Los Angeles is seen as a commodity to be sold, major results of which can be witnessed in the financial meltdown peaking in 2008, and, especially important for Los Angeles, in the bankruptcies related to real estate speculations. Morrow Mayo phrases it this way: “Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is [...] a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes, and mouth wash” (Mayo quoted in Davis 1992: 17). Oversized billboards along the freeways crisscrossing all throughout the city are the most obvious visual marker of the capitalist logic that underlies so many of Los Angeles’s transactions, be they of economic or cultural value.

Finally, as an anti-city, the urbanity of Los Angeles is, somewhat paradoxically, determined by a negation of urban space: it is not an orderly space but a fragmented conglomerate of metropolitan areas that, moreover, have no real centre to speak of. Tellingly, the tensions and contradictions inherent in the city’s spatial layout are precisely what the theorists, filmmakers, novelists and photographers discussed in this essay are most interested in. But, before their textual and visual representations of Los Angeles are examined in more detail, theories of space and place will be foregrounded in the following – as will the spatial turn.

3. The Spatial Turn: Theories and Concepts of Space and Place

The first question that should be clarified is this: why study space at all? Why might it be useful to focus on questions of space and place when it comes to the analysis of cultural artefacts? Why might we want to know about a specific location and the ways in which both inhabitants and visitors navigate it? As has already become clear, space is not simply a static entity that can be located on a map, has existed throughout history in a certain way and will remain the same in the future. To think that space is simply existent and ready to be explored would neglect the complexities in thinking about spatiality. A space such as Los Angeles depends on, and consequently adapts to, the ways in which it is imagined and handled, by sightseers and scholars alike. To be sure, when literary and cultural studies scholars first thought about the importance of space, they took the concept of space precisely as what one might still intuitively consider it now: the backdrop to events, or the location where character development takes place. If, up to about a decade and a half ago, literary and cultural studies wanted to describe the ways in which action or narratives unfolded, and how characters lived their lives, it did not so much look at how this might have been determined by a particular space, but it investigated how this happened over time. In other words, theory
before the spatial turn prioritised the perspective of time over space, in order to make statements about the ways in which personal and social histories developed – in the form of individual stories, as well as in the form of larger historical and political narratives such as the building of nations and the conflicts that arose with the construction of empires.

Gradually, however, scholars came to realise that spaces and places are also subject to change, just like time. Spaces do not remain the same but adjust to the ways in which people engage with them and move through them. What counts as the centre of a city, which borderlines exactly determine the circumference of a nation, and which frontier remains yet to be explored (the North Pole, planets other than Earth, or outer space) – all these are constantly readjusted and redefined. In other words, literary and cultural studies came to think of space as not existing *per se*; rather, it is something that becomes what it is through the ways in which we look at, conceive of and interpret it. As the inquiry into Los Angeles up to this point has already demonstrated, space is as much a mythical place of the imagination, a socially, politically and aesthetically constructed entity, and an invention of the media, as it is a geographical location. While one may visit the latter in person, one may, alternatively, locate it on a printed map or a virtual globe and geographical information program such as Google Earth: for virtual space, that is, space firmly lodged in the heads of both programmers and ourselves, is considered space as well. Contemporary means of technology allow us to bring far-flung places right into our libraries, offices and living rooms. This ability intimately interrelates the conquering of space with the overcoming of time, if it does not do away with it entirely. In brief, it takes no more than a mouse click to zoom in on Los Angeles.

As the literary and cultural critic Aleida Assmann puts it, time has become a category in scholarly and scientific discourse that is “continually meant to be diminished”: it is meant to be made smaller and to eventually disappear, so that time is finally overcome by space. We traverse both freeways and the virtual spaces of the internet and other channels of communication with ever more speed and impatience (Assmann 2008: 153, my translation). In fact, the spatial dimension is inherent in both parts of the word internet, “inter” and “net”: in-between nets, or webs. We expect everything to happen at once, rather than chronologically, so that our idea of time morphs into a frame of reference in which past, present and future melt together, and ultimately become indistinguishable. In this regard, we can speak of the simultaneity of events, as well as of the synchronicity of places. We are, as the French philosopher Michel Foucault declares, “in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and far, the side by side and the scattered” (Foucault 1997: 350). As has previously been shown, Los Angeles is a prototypical example of a major global city that presents us with places and proceedings “side by side”, even occurrences that stand in stark contrast to one another. This is one of the reasons why theorists behind the spatial turn have latched on to such a great degree to Los Angeles. Yet, to be sure, space and time remain closely interrelated: the fact that things happen simultaneously means that there
is still a dimension of time inscribed in them. Time and space cannot really be thought apart from each other, and the Russian literary critic Mikhail M. Bakhtin borrowed the term “chronotope” (which is derived from the Greek words for time, “chronos”, and space, “topos”, and thus literally means “time-space”) from mathematics and introduced it to narratology to describe the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 2002: 84). But it is important to keep in mind that time tends to shrink, as in Assmann’s notion of diminishing time. If, for instance, we choose to look up historical data and images of the Southern Californian gold rush or the first transcontinental railroad that are in large part responsible for Los Angeles’s wealth, this information is available instantly, at our fingertips, so to speak, on an assorted conglomeration of linked websites. Typing the term “transcontinental railroad” into a search engine will yield approximately 2,270,000 hits, while “California gold rush” will clock in at 42,700,000 entries. Whoever is connected to a computer terminal does not need to use up actual time in order to travel to Southern California.

The increasing importance of virtual spaces created by the internet, GPS (“Global Positioning System”, a space-based satellite navigation system that tracks location and time information anywhere on or near the Earth), and voice communications and multimedia sessions over Internet Protocol networks such as Skype, is part and parcel of what has been responsible for the growing interest in the study of space over the past few decades. So are the promises and menaces of a globalised world, frustrations with which lead people to focus on local movements such as political grassroots movements or, to offer a more mundane example, urban farming – or, to a combination of the global and the local, where one is willing and capable to “think globally and act locally” in environmental, educational, business and other contexts. This more sustainable fusion of globalisation and localisation, meant to temper the potentially devastating effects of globalisation by going local, has been termed ‘glocal’, a designation popularised by the sociologist Roland Robertson. According to the logic of the ‘glocal’, being a sophisticated global business player who travels thousands of miles in airplanes every year while offsetting carbon dioxide emissions by raising chickens on the rooftop of a fancy downtown Los Angeles loft might not be as paradoxical a combination of lifestyles as it may sound. Adding other political constellations and events to the ever-increasing significance of virtual spaces, globalisation and localisation, which have reshaped the world over the past twenty years, one begins to gain a fuller picture of the interest literary and cultural studies scholars have been taking in space, in the United States and elsewhere. The tearing down of physical and psychological borders with the end of the Cold War, other revolutions of the late 1980s and early 1990s (including German reunification), as well as wars that do not pay much heed to national borderlines (such as the ‘War on Terror’ waged against Al-Qaeda and other Islamic militant organisations and regimes), are just a few examples of the re-spacing of the globe currently taking place. Doris Bachmann-Medick provides the most succinct account of how this revolution of space operates according to the interrelation of
globalisation, geopolitics, the mapping of empires and a postcolonial world order (Bachmann-Medick 2009: 284-328).

To summarise: with the rise of global, local and glocal movements over the past twenty years, the question of space has increasingly gained significance. Accordingly, in the humanities and social sciences generally, and in American literary and cultural studies more specifically, the so-called ‘spatial turn’ has marked a major shift from questions of time, chronology and history to inquiries into location, topography and mobility. The critic Susan Stanford Friedman has coined the pithiest maxim to act on in relation to this turn when she emphatically proclaimed, “Always spatialize!” (Friedman 2006: 426), infusing the famous imperative to “always historicize” by Fredric Jameson, a cultural theoretician and leading figure of the postmodernist movement, with the new interpretive framework of spatiality (Jameson 1981: 9). Once more, this is not to say that literary and cultural studies scholars have done away with time and now merely concentrate on space. On the contrary, space seems to disappear from view as well. Our virtual life, for instance, a vital part of how we perceive ourselves and are perceived by others, is not dependent upon a specific locale. Again, as long as we have a functioning internet connection at our disposal, it does not matter where we check our email to send or retrieve information or interact with family and friends (as well as strangers) via Facebook or Twitter posts. But actual, geographical spaces also exist, into which neither a sense of a specific place nor a sense of a particular historical time is inscribed. These are transitory spaces that we frequent only in passing, such as motorways, airports, hotel rooms, supermarkets and amusement parks. The French anthropologist Marc Augé has phrased the term “non-places” to describe these transient places in his book of the same name (Augé 1995). Non-places are places that are, technically, concrete places but not quite worthy of that name, because one cannot really do anything with them but waste time and pass through, all in order to get somewhere else – and as quickly as possible at that.

Yet it is precisely these kinds of non-places that cause people to seek out, yet again, places which have enough significance to be called actual places. This significance has to do with the spatial ways in which identities are constructed. Often, people feel most like themselves where they consider themselves to be at home. As a consequence, the rediscovery of local spaces, notions of home and Heimat return with a vengeance. The idea of space, in other words, crops up once more not only in people’s minds but in literary and cultural studies as well – if now as a concept that is unstable, complex and submitted to ever-changing processes. These processes can, as has been shown, be of social, political or psychological nature. Whereas social space is a location where social actions and interactions take place, political space negotiates questions of power, hierarchies and decision-making. Last but not least, there is the psychological dimension of space, which concerns the ways in which we affectively experience spaces and are, in fact, made to feel by these spaces. For spaces do possess agency: they can act, causing us to feel one way or another and wielding power over our state and even well-being. To give just one example, a lecture hall makes students...
(and the professor) feel differently than a beach does. Moreover, this lecture hall might be experienced in various ways, depending on whether one is paying attention to the lecture, waiting for time to pass, or thinking about the beach – whereby the conjuring up of images of beaches, the ocean and palm trees is obviously a major aim of Los Angeles literature, art and culture. Whether a space is socially, politically, psychologically or aesthetically determined (the literary and cultural examples that make up the third part of this essay will exemplify the latter shortly): in every case, space is understood as something that is made, a concept that is produced.

Henri Lefebvre, a French philosopher and major theorist of space, wrote the fundamental book on how space is produced; fittingly, it is called The Production of Space. Lefebvre is mostly interested in the social side of spatial matters, that is, in a sociological perspective on space. Yet he also alludes to the vital role culture plays in the production of space. Indeed, the role of culture, and in particular the images culture creates, cannot be underestimated in the way space itself is produced. Lefebvre distinguishes between three concepts of space, which Murphet, in his book Literature and Race in Los Angeles, also draws on for his literary and aesthetic criticisms of Los Angeles (Murphet 2001: 21-25). Firstly, Lefebvre speaks of “representations of space”, which refers to the knowledge we have about a space and the discourses that define how we perceive it. It is “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers […] all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived. […] This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (Lefebvre 2010: 38-39). In other words, “representations of space” are about what can be known about a certain space, how it can be talked about – and, also, about the ideologies inherent in it. Secondly, Lefebvre posits the concept of “representational spaces”: “space as directly lived […], and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists […]. This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (Lefebvre 2010: 39). Thus, “representational spaces” mean those that are lived, imagined and, finally, represented, by inhabitants and artists alike, as well as the literature, music and visual arts that spring from such artistic imagination. Thirdly, there are “spatial practices”: how we use a space in everyday life and, thereby, simultaneously produce and consume it. “Spatial practices” refer to how people move around, for instance, in cities. Los Angeles, typically, is seen out of a car window; very few people actually walk on the sidewalks. Exceptions include Hollywood Boulevard and Rodeo Drive: the former, with the famous Hollywood Walk of Fame that memorialises all the names of the movie stars with embossed stars on the ground, serves sight-seeing purposes, whereas the latter imitates a pedestrian-style area for shopping purposes. Tourists who venture from Hollywood Boulevard to see, say, the famous Hollywood sign on foot are directed through a fancy, residential neighbourhood in order to reach a parking lot – from which a splendid view of the sign can indeed be enjoyed. But the irony that these spatial practitioners, who try to make the images they previously had in mind of Los Angeles come true, are asked to walk to a parking lot in
order to see the sign, cannot be missed. Yet, at any rate, and with Lefebvre’s three concepts in mind (in particular the concept of “representational spaces”), I will now turn to the third, and final, part of this essay: mapping the space of the city with exemplary studies of visual art, architecture and literature that take Los Angeles as their prime subject.

4. Exemplifying Literary and Cultural Studies of Los Angeles: Fine Arts, Photography, Architecture, Literature and Film

4.1 Fine Arts and Photography: Ed Ruscha

A number of images by Ed Ruscha, a photographer and painter who moved from Oklahoma to Los Angeles in the late 1950s, shall serve as the starting point. Ruscha was one of the pioneers of what came to be called the movement of ‘West Coast pop’ or, alternatively, the seriously playful yet sometimes mysterious ‘California cool’ that functioned as a counterpart to the New York school and the grandiose ethos of East Coast Abstract Expressionism. Ruscha’s paintings, drawings and photographs draw on the urban language of Los Angeles as a subject, in particular its everyday scenes. His images play a critical role in creating the Los Angeles myth, but they also, as will be seen, undermine this myth. Moreover, they revel in the fact that Los Angeles is something that springs from the logic of production; that Los Angeles is, in other words, a mere figment of representation. “Hollywood is a Verb” for instance, a pastel from the late 1970s, makes the case that Hollywood is nothing but a word. In this word-image composition, the words are printed upon a window that is apparently transparent, but it offers the viewer no outlook onto a landscape that would be recognisable as Los Angeles. It simply points to a sky that could be anywhere. But then, of course, images of windows refer to spaces in which we might reach to the sky and enact our dreams, adhering to a distinctly Los Angelenean idea of chance. Ruscha, in general, was fascinated with word-image combinations, pointing, over and again, to the fact that a place like Hollywood is, first and foremost, a linguistic and visual sign. That Hollywood, as the image literally says, is indeed a verb, proves, once more, the point that Hollywood is something that does not simply exist but is fabricated. Curiously, Hollywood consists of letters even in material life – and massive, rather imposing steel letters at that. Ruscha depicts the iconic Hollywood sign that is so familiar to us in various forms in his paintings from the 1970s and 1980s: at times from the front, at times from the back. In his billboard images, he applies a wide-screen format and vivid colours to create an atmosphere that could be read as either bright or doomed. Especially interesting is “The Back of Hollywood” (1977), in which he literally switches around the perspective we are most acquainted with and shows us the back of the sign, alluding to the idea that Hollywood might be quite different than the ways in which we imagine it.
Actually, the Hollywood sign as we know it today did not always look the way it does. The letters that tower high over the Santa Monica mountains that now read “Hollywood” are, in fact, only the remnants of a word, a word that is half broken off. When the sign was created as an advertisement in 1923, it read “Hollywoodland”. In the 1920s, rather than denoting a district, as it does today, the sign promoted a new housing development. Yet another Hollywood image by Ruscha, “Hollywood, Sunset, Santa Monica, Vine”, offers a bird’s eye perspective onto a grid of street names many people would associate with Los Angeles. This image maps out Los Angeles in a geometric way: the city’s streets are marked by diagonal lines that cross each other. But it is a map of Los Angeles that only points us to what we already know – the street names, that is – and, thus, replicates nothing but a previously conceived image of Los Angeles. What appears in the shape of a map, in other words, does not help us find our way around the city. Consequently, the image shows us the limitations of our perception. It does contain words, but these words do not aid us in reading the city in a way that would yield any meaning beyond the self-referential discourse, according to which the image points to nothing more than its own status as an image.

Nonetheless, at least in his photographs, Ed Ruscha likes to depict recognisable public spaces in serial form, including parking lots, stadiums and swimming pools. In his black-and-white photograph “Dodgers Stadium, 1000 Elysian Park Ave.”, part of the 1967 series Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles, which shows a snippet of the home of Los Angeles’s major league baseball team, we can detect myriad rings of parking spaces that circle the stadium. Curiously, we are presented with a partial view of the parking lot around this enormous stadium that holds 56,000 people, rather than the stadium itself, and we see no people whatsoever. This is not the only absence shown in this image. Cars are also missing, lending a suspicious atmosphere to a city in which cars are essential to cover and navigate any kind of terrain. What Ruscha lays bare in “Dodgers Stadium” is the infrastructure of a city, a city that is sprawling and knows no centre. In fact, in order to take this aerial photograph of the vacant parking lot, he was forced to wait for a Sunday, leave the grounds of city and fly high up in the air with a hired helicopter. The ghostly emptiness of the city he captures, however structured it may appear, cannot be overlooked.

Ruscha also conveys this ghostly emptiness in his photographs of apartment complexes and swimming pools, which are part of the series Some Los Angeles Apartments (1965) and Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass (1968), respectively. One of the swimming pool images, for instance, shows material traces of human presence, but they are rather eerie. Why are there muddy tracks leading towards and on the diving board in this otherwise so sanitised environment? Has a crime taken place? And, again: where are all the people, given that there are still ripples in the water? The same kinds of questions arise when one studies the apartment building in “818 Doheny Drive”. Instead of depicting the building’s inhabitants, this photograph parades a sun-baked façade, crossed by a number of horizontal wires. “Doheny Drive” is overlaid by technology, so to speak; certainly more than by nature, telling from the lone palm trees
in the lower right hand corner. Rather than a city of people, Ruscha’s Los Angeles is a city of architecture and objects, advertisements and billboards, posters and lights, as can also be seen in a photograph entitled “Sunset Strip”. Sunset Strip can literally only be viewed through smudges, technical failures that may point to technological and other shortcomings of a city that might or might not be inhabitable. Yet, while the themes of emptiness and isolation are certainly inherent in an image such as “Sunset Strip”, life does enter the lonely scenery and turns it into a backdrop for human action once more: in the lower left-hand corner, a car drives into the scene. It begins to populate the space, suggesting that advertisements may purport a certain image of a city but do not necessarily make us experience it completely; in Los Angeles, you need a car to engage in the “spatial practices” to which Lefebvre refers.

4.2 Architecture: The Bonaventure Hotel

Both in the visual and literary arts, the role people play – or, to phrase this in more narratological terms, the idea of subjectivity – was a contested topic in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Incidentally, this was the heyday of the era of modernity and the movement of postmodernism. Before the postmodernist movement began to determine the ways in which literature was studied, however, postmodern style was something that theorists discovered in manifestations of architecture. Postmodernism became a buzzword in theories of architecture before it entered the realm of literary criticism. One of the prime examples of postmodern architecture is the Bonaventure Hotel, which has been described in detail by Fredric Jameson, the theorist of postmodernism and space discussed earlier, in his well-known essay “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”. The Bonaventure Hotel, to this day, is a famous landmark located in downtown Los Angeles, now the major centre of finance in the city; home to a gigantic entertainment complex called L.A. LIVE, which is deemed “the most entertaining place on the planet” on its website (http://lalive.com); and a hub of the tourist industry, complete with a number of newly built luxury hotels.

Frank Lloyd Wright, a pioneer of modern American architecture, supposedly characterised the lure and threat of the equally glamorous and disorienting urban landscape that is present in downtown Los Angeles as follows: “Tip the world over on its side and everything loose will land in Los Angeles”. In fact, it speaks to the myth of Los Angeles that this quotation is often attributed to but was probably never uttered by the architect. In the 1960s, Los Angeles architects turned the high modernism that Frank Lloyd Wright had propagated entirely on its head. The Bonaventure Hotel, by architect and developer John Portman, is a space that was built to deliberately confuse those who visit it. It is marked by a reflective glass skin which, rather than allowing visitors to look inside the hotel, mirrors the city around it. The windows function like “reflector sunglasses” (Jameson 1984: 82).
There is no central entrance, and once visitors, after some searching, find their way across a hidden outer bridge and are eventually able to enter the building, they are surprised not to be in the lobby but rather on a floor up high, facing rather brutal-looking slabs of concrete walkways, walls, stairs and indoor balconies. Already disoriented, the few signs are not of much help either. Wherever visitors turn, they find themselves in a similar-looking maze. The question they are confronted with is: what does this kind of disorientation they are exposed to do to them, that is, to those who experience this space? As has been seen earlier, spaces possess agency: they wield power over the way we feel. Confused by their surroundings, and not quite knowing what to do, visitors become increasingly aware both of themselves and of their bodies. To put this slightly differently, their attention gets refocused, namely on themselves and on the space their bodies occupy. Not knowing whether to turn left or right, they start to feel torn. Postmodernist theory would term this experience the condition of the fragmented subject. The subject moves through space but no longer knows where he or she is, and, by extension, who he or she is. This feeling of being lost is accompanied by losing one’s sense of time (compare this to the diminishing of time mentioned earlier). It is no longer the individual who structures the space through which he or she moves but the space that structures the individual, even if that space is a mere surface that reflects nothing but the people inside it (or the city surrounding it). This space can be considered an extension of the individuals, as paradoxically as that may sound, given that it seems so utterly hostile to those who temporarily pass through it.
4.3 Literature: Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*

Let us now turn to a literary example in which a similar postmodern logic is at work, except that, here, it is not so much the space that structures the reader but the reader who structures the space. Thomas Pynchon’s short novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in 1966, is an exemplary postmodern text. Written in the form of a detective story, it provides its reader with many clues but no real solution to the mystery presented. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this is done on purpose. Postmodern detective stories mean to confuse not only their characters but also their readers. To be more precise, they are parodies of detective stories. The main character of the novel, Oedipa Maas, tries to track down the mystery of a secret postal service, a peculiar version of an underground system of communication. But what she actually chases is the mystery of her own life. Whatever track she follows in the spatial set-up of the novel, she only arrives at herself. During a trip to Mexico with her lover Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who sets her on the quest in the first place when he passes away, she encounters an image in an art museum that perfectly encapsulates how self-contained her world is:

In Mexico City they [Oedipa and Pierce] somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled ‘Bordando el Manto Terrestre,’ were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (Pynchon 1999: 11)

As it happens, the painting Oedipa looks at is the second image of a painted triptych that actually exists, titled “Bordando el Manto Terrestre” [“Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle”], created by the Spanish-born Mexican Surrealist artist Remedios Varo in 1961. As an inter-artistic reference, this painting depicts a number of ladies who, in their appearance and demeanour, closely resemble the fairy-tale figure Rapunzel. Out of a tower, they weave the world on a tapestry around them. Curiously, they are weaving a world into a world that already exists. In other words, they are already part of the world they are weaving. What is more, their tower is only one of several towers that populate the landscape in which they are situated. Like a self-referential riddle, their world is one they are creating themselves. Caught in a tower of subjectivity, there is no space that could be called objective, just the space that the ladies themselves are producing. There is no objective reality. The ladies are locked up in their own fiction. This self-imprisonment is characteristic for Oedipa as well: her view of the world appears to be objective, but she, too, is caught in her fantasies, her very own tower, based on her having taken in the sight of the painting:

She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower,
was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there’d been no escape. (Pynchon 1999: 11)

Trying to solve the pitfalls of (inter-) subjective reality, Oedipa rides around in her car through the sprawling town of San Narciso for long stretches of the novel. Reminiscent of the Greek mythological figure of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool while failing to recognise it as his own image, San Narciso might not exist on an actual map of Southern California. But while it is a name for an invented place, it nonetheless resembles the innumerable suburbs of Los Angeles that consist of a conglomeration of spaces designed for specific, mostly commercial purposes:

San Narciso lay further south, near L.A. Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts – census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway. (Pynchon 1999: 13)

Threading her way through a maze of roads, Oedipa drives to a lookout high above the city, trying to find further clues to solve the mystery that she suspects is contained in the patterned layout of this very place:

The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns, a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. (Pynchon 1999: 14)

From high above, the city appears like a printed circuit to Oedipa, as if it were an orderly place of which one could easily have an overview. It seems filled to the brim with meaning. In fact, Oedipa’s stance here closely resembles that of the reader, as the reader’s main business in reading detective fiction is, likewise, to figure out the meaning of the mysterious events represented. In this regard, the literary analysis of post-modern literature resembles the detective work in which Oedipa is engaging. But the reader’s expectations, just like Oedipa’s, become frustrated again and again. There is no orderly, rational world in Pynchon. As the mystery grows, the truth gets less and less objective. Finally, Oedipa gives up her quest and stops at a random motel:

Oedipa resolved to pull in at the next motel she saw, however ugly, stillness and four walls having at some point become preferable to this illusion of speed, freedom, wind in your hair, unreeling landscape – it wasn’t. What the road really was, she fancied, was this hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain. (Pynchon 1999: 15)

Oedipa is interpreting the road she had been driving on as a “hypodermic needle”, feeding its drugs into the veins of the freeway, nourishing Los Angeles in a way that figures the city as a self-enclosed circuit: a junkie who needs a needle to be satisfied. In and of itself, the city is inaccessible to Oedipa. Her attempts at interpreting it remain in her head. To put this differently, her view of the city is no more than a figment of her imagination.
In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Los Angeles is shown as a space that takes place mostly in Oedipa’s head. In this sense, we could say that Pynchon’s Los Angeles is a psychological space rather than a geographical location. A similar phenomenon can be found in Nathanael West’s novel, *The Day of the Locust*, in which Hollywood is depicted as a strangely dark and artificial place. While the novel was published in 1939, close to 30 years before *The Crying of Lot 49*, it is often considered a prime predecessor to the postmodern novel of the 1960s. Nathanael West, born Nathan von Wallenstein Weinstein, went to college with a fake high school diploma and worked as an illustrator before becoming a writer, changing his name, and moving out West. He, thus, literally followed Horace Greely’s call to “Go West, young man”, assuming a new name along the way. Folding his destination and moniker into each other, Weinstein went West as a man who called himself West. The author was interested in re-inventing not only his own identity but also that of the space to which he moved. Fittingly, he would become a screenplay writer in Hollywood in his later years, writing stories about dreams and nightmares typical for Los Angeles. *The Day of the Locust* is a so-called Hollywood novel, and it takes place mostly in and around film sets. Yet the film industry the novel depicts is not glamorous: it is shown from the margins, from the perspectives of extras as well as unsuccessful actresses and actors. Dreams in West are sold, not lived. Calling *The Day of the Locust* an anti-Hollywood novel might actually be more apt. It is filled with characters who pretend to be people they are not, as can been seen in the following passage, in which the screenwriter Todd Hackett, the main character of the novel, observes people on their way home from work:

He [Todd] left the car at Vine Street. As he walked along, he examined the evening crowd. A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with brass buttons were fancy [fake] dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneakers with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court. (West 2009: 60)

The obese lady with the yachting cap does not go sailing; the man in hiking gear does not return from the mountains; and the sporty-looking girl has not just won a tennis match. Notwithstanding the fact that Todd sees all these characters on the street, and not on a movie set, everyone here is playing a role, as if they were actors in movies. Any notion of a ‘real’ place is, thus, mocked: the streets of Los Angeles, in West, are as unreal as the movies. Its inhabitants have internalised the logic of the dream factory to such an extent that Hollywood becomes a psychological projection. Celluloid dreams have taken over real life, in desperate attempts to make life more glamorous than simply sticking to the roles of an insurance officer or a telephone operator. West’s novel is, thus, a caricature of the motion picture industry. But like Pynchon’s novel, it is also a parody of something else: in Pynchon’s case, that of a detective story; in West’s case, that of a Hollywood novel. Parody, too, is a major mode of the postmodern novel.

Additionally, postmodern literature is interested in everything that is not quite real, only a quotation of something else, even an outright fake. In West’s novel, not only the characters under scrutiny belong to the counterfeit variety – so do their houses. Generally speaking, Los Angeles is marked by an agglomeration of building styles that are often no more than flimsy quotations. Homeowners like to dwell in European-style castles, Midwestern ranches, Spanish-style stucco homes, make-belief Irish homes and Mediterranean beach houses. In West’s novel, we find, for instance, this description of a so-called ‘Spanish’ home:

After living for a week in a railroad hotel in Los Angeles, he rented a cottage in Pinyon Canyon. […] The house was queer [strange]. It had […] a thatched roof that came down very low on both sides of the front door. This door was of gumwood painted like fumed oak and it hung on enormous hinges. Although made by machine, the hinges had been carefully stamped to appear hand-forged. The same kind of care and skill had been used to make the roof thatching, which was not really straw but heavy fireproof paper colored and ribbed to look like straw. The prevailing taste had been followed in the living room. It was ‘Spanish.’ (West 2009: 80-81, my italics)

The house is so odd because great pains have been taken to make the hinges appear old, handmade and, thus, valuable; the roof thatching only looks like straw, and the interior solely pretends to be ‘Spanish’, which is made clear by the quotation marks. What attempts to come across as Spanish is an imitation, and a poor one at that. That the Spanish style – as potentially any other style as well – is imitative of some kind of an original (assuming an original exists in the first place) does not, however, diminish its popularity among the inhabitants of Los Angeles. On the contrary, it is considered one of the most popular forms of architecture through which to express one’s good taste. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright assumes a rather polemic tone when he points out the cheapness of taste and pompous deception behind the predilection for building houses based on the blueprints of Spanish style:

Despite the elaborate effort that went into the scheming to make these [Spanish] houses ‘original’ or ‘different’, they all looked exactly alike. […] All was flatulent or fraudulent with a cheap opulent taste for tawdry Spanish Medievalism. (Quoted in McWilliams 1946: 359)

The desire to express one’s individuality through a style that is conceived of as European, and, thus, both historical and refined, turns into its opposite: plain US-American conformity. Not only Hollywood but also the homes in which Hollywood inhabitants dwell are mere façades. Houses masquerade as much as people do. This renders the environment both inhabitants and their houses occupy deeply artificial. This artificiality, in turn, does not allow for any notion of an authentic self, or any kind of reality that could be considered reliable. Consequently, all the characters in West’s novel could be considered more poses than persons. But then: is that not what each and any fictional character is – an act? And is that not what places in fiction are – not real locations but façades? Are not all these places, as West would put it, “dream dump[s]” of the imagination (West 2009: 132)?
4.4 Film: Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly*

To conclude this investigation of Los Angeles as a space where sunshine and *noir* meet, let me turn to a film that, like West’s novel, stands as an example of the supposed dream dump of Hollywood: *Kiss Me Deadly*, a film *noir* directed by Robert Aldrich and released in 1955. Like other *noir* films, it is a stylish but morally ambiguous Hollywood crime drama. As hinted earlier, many of these dramas are based on crime novels from the 1920s and 1930s. Their most prominent feature is a so-called ‘hard-boiled’ detective, a figure we encounter in *Kiss Me Deadly* as well. Hard-boiled detectives live up to their name: they are tough men who are cocky, disillusioned and ironic, always ready to not only tackle violent mysteries but also confront dangers in ways that risk their own lives. Preferably, they operate in urban settings like Los Angeles, mostly at night, and, rather sooner than later, they run into a mysterious, sexy and seductive woman, who, in turn, complicates their lives.

![Fig. 3: Robert Aldrich, *Kiss Me Deadly*, Screen Shot of Opening Scene](image)

From the very start of Aldrich’s film, the viewer is aware that something is off. A woman is running along a deserted street, at night, and with bare feet. She does not seem to be wearing much under her trench coat either. As we learn a bit later, she is running away from a mental institution as fast as she can, yet the manner in which she pants not only expresses her fear of being caught and returned to the institution but also carries sexual connotations. She is almost run over when she thrusts herself in the middle of the street in order to stop the sporty car coming her way. Defying the speed limit, the car goes so fast that it swerves right off the road when its driver hits the brakes. The driver is, of course, the hard-boiled detective, who greets her in typical nonchalant fashion: “You almost wrecked my car”. This does not keep him from inviting her into his vehicle, though. The opening scene establishes the car as one of the crucial devices of the film, for entering into contact with dangerously attractive people...
and for navigating the space of Los Angeles, in both literal and metaphorical ways. The sporty car is what allows the woman to escape; it is what lets her hide when they run into the police blocking off the street; and it is what creates some respite from the dangers lurking about everywhere in the city, underlined by the Nat King Cole jazz song playing softly on the car radio, “I’d Rather Have the Blues”. How much car culture structures not only the space of Los Angeles but also that of the film becomes abundantly clear when the two of them drive along the dark street and through the credits, as if these credits were painted on the street, or as if the credits were slowly unrolled on a movie reel. This must be one of the most unusual and successful ways in which movie credits have ever been overlaid onto a film’s opening sequence:

![Fig. 4: Robert Aldrich, Kiss Me Deadly, Screen Shot of Unrolling Credits](image)

The credits unroll from top to bottom, in the direction of driving – but this means that the credits unfold in reversed order. The direction of the unrolling words is as upside down as is so much in the murder mystery that follows. What the film shows, through the way the credits are used here, is that the street produces the movie and, in reverse, that the movie constructs the street. Kiss Me Deadly, thus, provides a perfect union of the various headings under which Los Angeles can be studied and under which it has been investigated in this essay: firstly, Los Angeles as an actual, geographical place (the street the couple-to-be drives on); secondly, Los Angeles as a construction of the media (the credits straight-forwardly point to the fact that this is a movie that is being ‘driven through’); and, thirdly, Los Angeles as a space of the imagination – where cool men meet sexy women, where the police can be bypassed, where one can drive off into a somewhat ambiguous yet exciting future and where, as the officer who lets the couple off the hook requests, one in fact needs to always “move on”. Being in Los Angeles...
les – studying, analyzing and writing it – always means being on the move, taking its shifting and, more often than not, ambiguous images into account.

Literature

Annotated Bibliography


A brief if concise introductory chapter on the spatial turn of the postmodern age, foregrounding the individual identity of places in the era of globalization (‘glocalization’) and the opening up of new virtual and interstitial spaces (the latter are defined as territories that resist colonisation). This is followed by a useful application of the spatial paradigm to exemplary literary spaces and places in various texts, including metropolitan London as a space of experience and perception in Thomas De Quincey’s autobiography and Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “A Man of the Crowd”; colonial space with its concepts of centre and periphery, border and frontier, in Frederick Jackson Turner and Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness; and Native American cultural space in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel Ceremony, in which the land turns into a mythical landscape. Other chapters introduce a variety of key concepts for the reading of literature, such as media, time, memory, body and identity.


A fascinating study on the anthropology of non-places that are produced by the shift from modernity to supermodernity (understood as excessive information and space). Airport lounges, hotel lobbies, shopping malls and high-speed highways are presented as examples of sprawling spaces that are neither defined by history nor much concerned with identity, as they can be constructed at anytime as well as anywhere. Provisional spaces of circulation and consumption, they profoundly alter and fragment people’s consciousness, as they temporarily pass through them and are confronted with their solitary individuality.


An excellent source to turn to in order to become familiar with key theories that mark the current landscape of cultural studies. A profound cartography of theoretical turns across a wide range of disciplines, it includes, besides the spatial turn, the performative turn, the postcolonial turn, the translational turn, the iconic turn, amongst others. The chapter “Spatial Turn” stands out not only for its in-depth discussion of the spatial turn as a critical tool for analyzing and acting in contemporary constellations of space, but also for its close attention to social geographies.
and political events that have attributed new and urgent meanings to the study of space.

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