

La Mémoire des villes The Memory of Cities



Sous la direction de / Edited by
Yves CLAVARON et Bernard DIETERLE



Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne

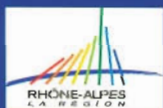
D u l l e t i n d e c o m m a n d e

Les villes sont des hauts lieux de la mémoire. Elle a son versant officiel (celui de l'auto-représentation) constitué par des bâtiments publics et des monuments. Et puis il y a tout le reste, un ensemble peu programmatique de signes ou de traces, souvent de nature plus discrète et plus fugitive, offerts au décryptage des artistes et des auteurs. En tant que dépositaires de ces divers codes historiques, les villes sont aussi des espaces de prédilection pour le travail de la mémoire subjective, elles suscitent des textes (et des images), invitent à se souvenir, à découvrir et à construire le passé.

Paris, London and Rome, old European cities, are places of memories, *lieux de mémoire*, *luoghi della memoria*, *Erinnerungsorte*. To this list, we could add a younger one, New York, which recently suffered a terrible wound. When the monumental towers collapsed, so too did the United States' dream of inventing a new conception of urban space in the age of globalization. The dreadful events that occurred on September 11th produced an instantaneous ruin encoded with the memory of a traumatic event within the urban landscape.



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l'écrivain tel qu'il est figuré dans *L'Emploi du temps*, le moyen de se constituer en individu²¹ – en individu qui devient une mémoire. Qu'il devienne une mémoire forme le jeu même de l'écriture, qui se traduit par la forme paradoxale du journal. Dans son architecture et ses bâtiments, cette ville, vue comme moderniste, peut être toute la mémoire, toute perspective de la mémoire. Le sujet ne se réidentifie que selon cette mémoire. Par quoi, l'écriture n'est que selon l'esprit objectif, ainsi que l'individuation du sujet. Où il y a la réponse à l'ambiguïté de la mémoire de la ville des surréalistes et à la clôture du temps individuel et collectif qu'illustre T. S. Eliot.

On le sait de Baudelaire et de Walter Benjamin: la question de la mémoire de la ville n'est que la question de l'historicité. Que cette question de l'historicité devienne donc, avec Baudelaire et Walter Benjamin, celle de la commémoration et de l'euthanasie du souvenir – il faudrait lire le *Waste Land* comme une illustration de cette euthanasie, à laquelle est liée, dans *Four Quartets*, l'aveu de la nécessité de la catastrophe – traduit que l'historicité n'est pas perçue suivant la puissance du temps que figure l'histoire même dans ses réalisations – le temps est la potentialité de son actualisation dans l'événement et l'action présentes. La ville moderniste et la perception des villes suivant le paradigme de la ville moderniste, suivant la vésitation du temps, parce que cette ville est exemplairement, selon son *skyline*, une somme et une puissance temporelle, donnent à supposer une mémoire qui est l'identification de la puissance du temps. Où il y a la caractérisation temporelle de l'esprit objectif. Où il y a l'indication de la vanité d'un débat sur l'ancien et le nouveau, sur la mémoire qui est remémoration et commémoration, inévitablement mémoire de la catastrophe et de l'attente de quelque rachat.

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From Street Scene to Dead End: Hollywood and the Urban Ethnic Immigrant, 1931-1937

Steven Alan Carr

1.

In a remarkably lucid essay following September 11th, Jean Baudrillard¹ observes that the attack on the World Trade Center represented not a war between the West and Islam, but a “triumphant globalization at war with itself.” According to Baudrillard, globalization remains just as responsible for terrorism as it does for erecting the once monumental towers. “When the world has been so thoroughly monopolized,” he notes, “when power has been so formidably consolidated by the technocratic machine and the dogma of capitalism, what means of turning the tables remains beside terrorism?”

In the West and particularly in the United States, most discussions of globalization tend to locate its effects as a recent phenomenon. While this phenomenon has achieved great momentum in the past decade, the belief in the recent emergence of globalization is a luxury held by the centers of cultural and economic power that for centuries have colonized, slaughtered and exploited indigenous peoples across the globe. What happened on September 11 does not represent an alleged Islamic hatred for the West, but as Baudrillard describes, the very process of globalization itself. The platitudes of U.S. foreign policy notwithstanding, no one explanation can ever fully render this complex set of circumstances. However, one can better understand the new globalism by taking a closer look at globaliza-

1 – Baudrillard, J. (2002). *L'Esprit du Terrorisme*. Harper's: 13-18.

tion as a much older, more extensive and multifaceted process spanning hundreds of years.

In the past century, globalization has arguably achieved an accelerated momentum, in large part due to significant shifts in political, economic and cultural life. Although this is not a paper on September 11th, I propose to read the vicissitudes of the World Trade Center as part of a larger narrative involving the rise and fall of the American assimilationist fantasy. Built atop the remnants of the ethnic immigrant urban neighborhood at the turn of the last century, urban revitalization projects such as the towers realized the Horatio Alger-like success of a melting-pot America by erasing the ethnic urban identities that once occupied its ground-level space. The erasure was hardly accidental. As Sander Gilman notes, assimilation carries a deeply ambivalent attitude, particularly toward the ethnic Other. Too different from mainstream culture, and the Other appears to reject the very culture that bestows its privileges. Not different enough, however, and the assimilation of the Other threatens to produce an inferior but easily and dangerously concealed counterfeit. The World Trade Center answered what Gilman calls the "double-bind" by obliterating the contaminant neighborhoods signifying difference and thus undermining the purity of the culture at large. Obliterating the ghetto, urban revitalization replaced Old World with a sleek architectural monument to a burgeoning internationalism, modernity, technocracy and global capital. When the towers collapsed, so too did the dream of both inventing and inverting urban space from old world ghetto to a new world global financial center.

2.

As Marc Ratner notes in a 1997 review, literary naturalism has undergone a scholarly reassessment only in the past decade. Easily dismissed as an outdated and ill-advised 19th and early 20th century blend of Social Darwinism and Psychology, naturalism depicts individuals as "trapped in their biology or in the toils of economic and social determinism" (Ratner). More recently, as Ratner notes, scholars have attempted to show naturalism not at odds with modernity's rejection of determinism, but as a response to modernity's indiscriminate celebration of individualism, freedom and social mobility. In particular, recent scholarship finds this response addressing a variety of shifts taking place with profound consequences for modernity: the shift from rural to urban, a growing middle class, as well as the rise of media technologies and consumerism (Ratner).

In an era that today pits individual freedom against national security, yet handily conflates individualism with national security in its rhetoric, one might do well to heed the entreaty of naturalist author Emile Zola. Nearly one hundred years before Nancy Reagan implored the country's

youth to “just say no,” Zola implored a younger generation of more genteel Symbolist writers to just “say shit to the century” and all of its so-called progress (qtd. in Kleeblatt). Where “just say no” offered up propriety and personal choice as a weapon against environment, “just say shit” offered up frankness as a weapon against decorous disregard for the truth of human suffering and social injustice. Shit could signify a chain of other signifiers: human excrement; vile, animal-like living conditions; a basic function of all human bodies; a reminder of what makes humans animals. In addition to its frankness, shit also could signify waste and excess. Described in profuse detail, it could rub one’s nose in the less pleasant and comfortable aspects of human existence. But most of all, at least in the context of Zola’s message, saying shit meant a politicized provocation to both authority and apathy.

For all of its provocative frankness, however, the anti-authority sentiments of “Just Say Shit” could just as easily mutate into the seemingly rebellious “Just Say No.” One of the enduring hallmarks of the Ronald Reagan presidency, First Lady Nancy Reagan’s invocation to “just say no” has resounded through public discourse for nearly 20 years. Its deceptively simple turn of phrase enlists a corps of American youth as individual foot-soldiers in the fight against alleged social evils like drug use and pre-marital sex. In one brilliant exclamation, the First Lady launched a rhetorical blast aimed squarely at the nurture part of the nature vs. nurture debate. Social context — so daunting to naturalist sensibilities — turned out to be irrelevant; individualism with individuality *was* the context. While President Reagan urged the country to “just say no” to a century’s tradition of federal protection and regulation, First Lady Reagan encouraged the country’s youth to apply Reagan-era deregulation principles on a more intimate, interpersonal scale. Both preached individualism without identity — whether for corporate or personal gain — as a way to negotiate complex social and institutional problems.

As in any civil society, one must negotiate the complexities of both shit and shifts amid the swirling flows of imagery and discourse. As modern American society underwent profound shifts throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the ethnic immigrant often served as a powerful, intersecting focal point of representation. The representation of the ethnic immigrant provides a safe surrogate to express concern over modernity, displacing such concerns away from the diffuse but deeply-felt structures of lived experience and on to the visible, squalid bodies of marginalized ethnic Others. Like any symbol, the image of ethnic immigrant represents not just the Other, but the position from which one sees this Other. This position operates in constant flux, subject to ongoing ideological negotiation. Thus, while naturalism could inflect two critically acclaimed film adaptations of stage plays produced by Samuel Goldwyn — *Street Scene* (1931) and *Dead End* (1937), their naturalist inflections could serve different ends from

Zola's initial project. If Zola intended to say shit to progress and modernity, the Goldwyn-produced films say shit to the ghetto for its incompatibility with progress and modernity.

Admittedly a fine distinction, just saying shit to progress and modernity nonetheless justifies a different social critique from just saying no to the isolated crimps in modernity and progress. The former offers a critique of the entire modernist paradigm, conveying skepticism toward such modernist hallmarks as democracy and social mobility. The latter approach addresses the ghetto as the social problem. Still critical of modernity and progress, the social problem genre only goes so far in its critique, for it expresses faith in the ability to reform and assimilate a variety of social Others. Nonetheless, this overlap between social critique and social problem made naturalism uniquely suited for discussing American immigration in keeping with the ambivalent discourse on the ethnic immigrant.

In order to understand how naturalist determinism could resonate with an American discourse on immigration, one must first understand the broader cultural context within which both naturalism and immigration operated. A literary movement, naturalism remains closely associated with the novels of French authors such as Emile Zola. In depicting the biological, economic and social forces determining the fate of an individual, naturalist authors unapologetically engaged sordid or tawdry subjects in unrelenting detail. As Betsy Berry notes, Zola's novels often contain pages of unappetizing details on "seedy rooms and dirty streets, economic determinism and animal and insect imagery" (Berry).

While the detail of these works appears tedious in relation to the more recent sparer tenets of modernist realism, one must not forget that their elaboration — particularly upon the sordid — remained highly politicized. Though a modernist and not a naturalist, Gustave Flaubert suffered the consequences of offering description. Within a year of *Madame Bovary's* publication, a French tribunal indicted Flaubert on immorality charges but failed to convict the author. Although achieving international stature, Zola similarly remained a controversial figure within the public sphere. The *Académie Française* frequently rejected his application for membership, and both the Vatican and British Parliament denounced his work (Kleeblatt).

Interestingly, protests against Zola's naturalism in the French popular press have a keen propensity to appropriate naturalist excess as a means of decrying naturalism. Kleeblatt finds a good deal of animal, sexual and excrement imagery in 19th century caricatures of the author. When Zola publicly defended military officer Alfred Dreyfus in an 1898 court-martial case, the popular press intensified its caricatured attacks upon the novelist. Dreyfus, accused of selling military secrets, was Jewish. As Kleeblatt

argues, imagery of pigs, their excrement and bestiality with the animals figures prominently in discrediting Zola's defense of the Jewish officer (Kleeblatt).

The inclusion of pigs in caricatures of Zola suggests the ease with which one could both appropriate and undermine naturalist discourse. As Kleeblatt notes, the image of the pig has traditionally appeared in anti-Semitic imagery. Often associated with both filth and excess, the pig as symbol works to justify putting various Others at the social margins. Associated with Jews, pig imagery takes on added meaning, as in the 1628 German picture showing a pig suckling Jewish children as Jewish elders molest the animal. (Kleeblatt). Anti-Semitic imagery often relishes the irony of these associations, since Jewish dietary law forbids consumption of the animal.

As a way to discredit both Naturalism and those who opposed anti-Semitism, caricatured attacks upon Zola reveal that protests against filth and excess do not necessarily preclude using images of filth and excess to make those protests. While Naturalism used graphic imagery to rail against social conditions brought about by progress, opposition to Naturalism re-contextualized this imagery. Negotiating the meaning of filth and excess, discussion of the Naturalist style sought to discredit it by moving its signifiers onto the bodies of identifiable individuals. Thus, locating such excess upon these bodies could neutralize the threat of politically charged meaning posed by Naturalism.

Naturalism could also resonate with a discourse on photography, although again, both worked for very different political ends. Both Naturalism and popular photography posited a scientific, objective stance from which to observe. In establishing the position of an unseen, dispassionate and detached observer, both arguably shared the same ideological blind spot. Any framing — literary or visual, and no matter how avowedly objective — exerts its own highly selective subjectivity. Yet popular photography and Naturalism differ in the consequences of this professed objectivity. Literary Naturalism uses objectivity for shock value, selecting sordid details of a taboo world. However flawed in its assumptions, the scientific veneer of Naturalism justifies the confrontation. Such confounding of aesthetic expectations, substituting science for melodrama, constitutes another layer of shock.

Popular photography — the countless postcards, stereoscopes and even early film — achieves a different end. It parallels the emergence of modern incarceration and the Panopticon, an architectural design articulated by Jeremy Bentham. The layout of this modern prison affords an ideal position from which a supervisor may survey deviant bodies. The Panopticon arranges these bodies into individual cells, illuminated with backlight and encircling a central guard tower. While photography does not of necessity imprison in a literal sense, it does parallel the function of

arranging "spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and recognize immediately" yet at the same time see subjects who do not see back. Under this arrangement, the Other is "the object of information, never a subject of communication" (Foucault 200).

3.

Both Naturalism and photography remained uniquely suited to the discourse on immigration to the United States. Many had already expressed concern over an incoming flood of foreigners. Yet annual figures for immigration between 1881 and 1910 — the greatest in this country's history — never accounted for more than 1 to 2 percent of the entire U.S. population. In fact, after a devastating economic depression in 1897, immigration had dropped from 790,000 in 1882 to below 230,000 in 1898. Of course, annual immigration continued to rise in successive years, reaching 1.3 million by 1907. Even this figure, however, never amounted to more than a few percent of the total population (Joseph 174).

Nonetheless, many believed an immigrant flood was washing over the land, bringing with it a host of socially undesirable consequences. With the rise of race science in the 19th century, many viewed immigrants as racially inferior to those of Anglo-Saxon heritage. Others — including President Woodrow Wilson — feared that the so-called hyphenated American would bring Old World animosities to a New World melting pot. *New York Sun* police reporter Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) furthered concern over immigrants and the ghettos in which they resided. Riis argues that the living conditions of the tenements bred disease — both in terms of individual health and social vice. The book's photographs depict the tenement dwellers in a matter-of-fact style. Riis' book led to widespread social reforms in housing and education. It also established a way of discussing and looking at immigrants.

Unflinchingly realistic and exhaustively researched, stage productions of both Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* (1929) and Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End* (1935) borrowed extensively from Naturalism to expose the negative effects of the ghetto environment. Both Rice and Kingsley address taboo subjects and use animal and insect imagery to depict New York tenements. In both plays, dialogue makes frequent reference to the ghetto as a breeding ground for anti-social behavior. In *Street Scene*, an adulterous affair triggers a tragic and irrevocable chain of events. In *Dead End*, a gangster returns to the neighborhood that bred his early life of crime, thus setting into a motion a tragic sequence of events. The latter play features a band of juvenile delinquents meant to parallel the gangster's own boyhood. Both plays also include important naturalist details. Early in *Street Scene*, an elderly woman snatches food from a baby. In a dramatic moment from *Dead End*, one of the characters goes to visit her lover, a

starving artist. She runs out of the apartment building, however, after recoiling at the sight of a cockroach.

Both *Street Scene* and *Dead End* received critical and audience accolades. Rice won the 1929 Pulitzer for Drama, and Kingsley's play enjoyed hundreds of performances. The popularity of both plays appears to capitalize upon different images of the immigrant. *Street Scene* makes much of how various ethnic groups remain crowded together, mistrustful and barely tolerant of one another. Part ethnic comedy, part assimilation tragedy and part inter-ethnic romance, *Street Scene* emphasizes the value of assimilation. The first half of the play treats ethnic differences comically, with Jews, Italians, Germans, Norwegians and Irish broadly displaying their respective cultural traits. A romance between Rose Marrant and Sam Kaplan alludes to another phenomenally popular play of the day, *Abie's Wild Irish Rose*. The cross-ethnic romance articulates the assimilationist ideal, in which the next generation will cast off the Old World ways of the parents to better integrate with society. By comparison, *Dead End* elides ethnicity even though Kingsley sets the drama on New York's Lower East Side. Without overt ethnic attribution, the play much more self-consciously addresses the ghetto as both breeding ground and social problem. However, Kingsley's play does allude to some vestiges of ethnicity. For example, the sympathetic character of Drina is both a garment worker and labor activist, two attributes closely associated with Jews throughout the thirties.

The arc from overt depiction of ethnicity to the self-conscious social problem film parallels a shifting discourse on immigration. In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act. The Act established a quota system, limiting immigration to no more than 2% of any one nationality residing in the United States in 1890. Once Congress effectively terminated immigration to the United States, the discourse began to shift from one that fretted over ethnic difference to one that asserted a cohesive national identity. A naturalist style could remain consistent with both overt depictions of ethnicity as well as a more streamlined depiction of the ghetto as social problem. In both *Street Scene* and *Dead End*, the ghetto determines human behavior. The way in which the ghetto determines behavior differs; harboring Old World hatreds in *Street Scene*, the ghetto stands in marked contrast to the gentrification in *Dead End*.

Film adaptations of these stage productions could heighten their incipient realism, yet such potential remained bounded by a series of cultural and institutional constraints upon the motion picture industry. Produced at a time of remarkable cultural ferment within U.S. culture, both films offered potentially radical critiques of American society. Both *Street Scene* and *Dead End*, for example, feature characters who espouse anti-capitalist rhetoric. Such dialogue resonates with the efforts of the Popular Front, a leftist attempt of the early to mid-1930s to articulate a

Marxist perspective through popular culture. At the same time, however, the statements of *Dead End*'s Drina and Abe Kaplan, the elderly patriarch of *Street Scene* remain subordinate to other narrative functions. Drina emerges as the love interest of the play, while the film version of *Street Scene* emphasizes Abe's thick, guttural accent.

In certain other respects, *Street Scene* remains a franker attempt to depict the ghetto than *Dead End*. *Street Scene* predates the strict enforcement of the Production Code in 1934. In response to a threatened boycott by the Catholic Church, the film industry created a self-regulatory censorship arm. Among other things, the Code forbade sympathetic depictions of adultery, a key element of the narrative of *Street Scene*. In the 1937, *Dead End* could escape some Code strictures through cinematic gestures. Both the spectator and Gangster Baby Face Martin discover that Martin's ex-girlfriend has become a diseased prostitute when she moves into a harsh shaft of light. Although she never says anything, the inference remains clear. At least in spirit, however, *Dead End*'s narrative hews more closely to the Code. In Lillian Hellman's screen adaptation of the Kingsley play, the original character of a crippled artist metamorphoses into a struggling architect. After his own mother disowns him, Baby Face Martin dies after police officers unload their rounds into the gangster.

Visually, the naturalist tendencies nonetheless link both films in powerful ways. Both films share many of the production personnel responsible for their respective "looks." Independent Samuel Goldwyn produced both films. Sylvia Sidney stars in both films, although in *Street Scene* she plays Irish love interest Rose Maurrant while in *Dead End* she plays a character whose ethnicity must be read in terms of her politics and her occupation. Richard Day designed elaborate sets for both films, which earned a great deal of applause for their realism. Gregg Toland, the cinematographer for *Dead End*, studied extensively under *Street Scene*'s cinematographer, George Barnes.

As adaptations of stage plays, both films construct a kind of naturalist panopticon to look at the ghetto and tenements. Each film begins with a similar establishing shot of Manhattan. In both films, a montage follows of successive dissolves, in which the camera tracks downward, locating the respective streets of the films. This macroscopic to microscopic trope remains consistent with the scientific veneer of naturalism. The trope suggests the possibility of surveillance, in which the one who sees can obtain an ideal position without being seen.

The cinematography — particularly the camera angles — extend this trope. Both films include one extreme, low-angle shot of a tenement building. In *Dead End*, motivation for this point-of-view shot remains unclear. In *Street Scene*, however, a nearly identical angle and framing occurs, but with the body of an immigrant with her back to the camera. In a naturalist flourish, the shot depicts the immigrant obviously scratching her but-

tocks as she talks to her neighbors from a window above. The neighbor in the window clearly does not see this take place; only the audience does. From its ideal vantage point, the audience can survey the animal-like behavior of immigrant bodies.

In keeping with the Production Code strictures of good taste, the low angle shot in *Dead End* effectively erases the body and movement of the immigrant from its view. Yet it leaves the construction of the viewing position in place. A way of looking thus triumphs over what one sees. Just as one could use the characteristics of Naturalism to espouse an anti-Naturalist position, one could also deploy Naturalist flourishes in such a way that did not challenge power, but rather, reinforced its ideology.

As scholars continue to reassess the impact and influence of naturalism, one would do well to carefully consider the nature of this impact and influence. Thus, while naturalism may have had far more profound consequences for artistic and political expression than previously believed, naturalism also may function in a more malleable fashion than is readily apparent. One must place the naturalist gaze upon the ghetto and the immigrant body within the context of authors who readily disavow ethnicity in favor of assimilation and nationalism. Goldwyn, Sidney, Rice and Kingsley all changed their surnames from more ethnic-sounding antecedents. Asserting assimilation over a distinctive ethnicity retained a powerful ability to structure both one's existence and subjectivity.

Neither *Street Scene* nor *Dead End* functions in a particularly unique manner in condemning the ghetto. In *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), author Budd Schulberg answers the eponymous question to the amorality of Sammy Glick — the novel's central character — by having the book's narrator return to the breeding ground for the predatory germ that thrived in Sammy's blood, leaving him one of the most severe cases of the epidemic.

What Makes Sammy Run? does not demonize Glick for the sake of demonizing Jews, as much as it demonizes the Jewish Glick to critique the American Dream. The book's narrator, Al Mannheim, is particularly hostile to Glick's immigrant background. He thinks of

Sammy Glick rocking in his cradle of hate, malnutrition, prejudice, suspicions, amorality, the anarchy of the poor; I thought of him as a mangy little puppy in a dog-eat-dog world. I was modulating my hate for Sammy Glick from the personal to the societal. I no longer even hated Rivington Street but the idea of Rivington Street, all Rivington Streets of all nationalities allowed to pile up in cities like gigantic dung heaps smelling up the world, ambitions growing out of filth and crawling away like worms.

At a time when many Jews placed nationality above ethnicity, the highest form of assimilation would be to renounce one's ethnic roots. Schulberg's vision of this renunciation, seen through Mannheim, overdetermines the assimilation process. Not only does Mannheim deny ethnic

identity as compatible with Americanism; Schulberg appropriates anti-Semitic imagery to show how ethnic identity provides the breeding ground for all that is at odds with the American Dream.

Certainly, few discourses operate in a completely stable fashion. The appropriation and sublimation of a Naturalist style in the representation of immigrant bodies appears rather noteworthy, however. What once meant to challenge power eventually could function as surveillance meant to disempower. What once could just say shit to the century eventually came to just say no the ghetto and one's immigrant heritage. Ultimately, the shock of September 11th is not the often and easily posed question of "why do they hate us?" It is the shock of realizing that trading ethnic identity for non-descript individualism, excrement for excess and the ghetto for the global offers no security against a globalization that can bring down its monuments just as quickly — perhaps more quickly — as it can build them.