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Depictions of the American psyche in the 1995 post-modern metropolis as written and directed by Michael Mann in his Los Angeles crime saga, HEAT.

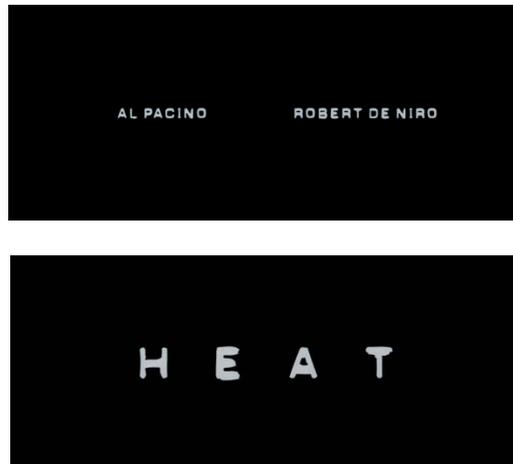


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Essay Contents:	1
Film Introduction	2
Essay Aim and Methodology	3
Accessing Heat and Michael Mann within Postmodern Culture	
-Nostalgia Film	4
-Style	5
-Colour, Music Score and Tempo	6
-Art	6
Hanna House	7
McCauley House	10
Conclusion	13
Bibliography	14

(Approx 4200 words - discounting footnotes, titles and image captions)

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FILM INTRODUCTION

Heat, released in 1995, written and directed by Michael Mann is a film which presents particularly realist depictions of the American psyche against the sprawling post-modern urban battlefield of a selectively captured and aestheticised to the point of becoming, utopian, Los Angeles.

“At a budget of \$60 million, over a 107-day shooting schedule, Mann would forgo soundstages for realism’s sake and use 95 practical locations, more than any other film in the history of Los Angeles.”¹

The plot chronicles the exploits of seasoned career thief, Neil McCauley, (Robert De Niro), who ‘does what he does best.’ “I take scores” he defines his profession in the film’s central scene, within which he sits down, face to face, for coffee with his equal opposite, veteran LAPD Robbery Homicide Detective, Lt. Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino). McCauley continues, “You do what you do best, try to stop guys like me.” McCauley is supported in his masterful and disciplined exploitation of the city’s economic security infrastructures by a “tight crew” in Chris Shiherlis (Val Kilmer), Michael Cerrito (Tom Sizemore) and Trejo (Danny Trejo) whom, along with a large cast of a dozen additional main characters and their intertwining subplots, create a dramatic and realistic depth which ratify the 170 minute film’s exploration of the fractured world of the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

¹ Feeney, F.X., *Michael Mann*, (Paul Duncan Ed.) Taschen, 2006. 99

ESSAY AIM AND METHODOLOGY

I refer to the film Heat in particular of Mann's works as I believe his depictions of our current society are where he has, through pre-production research and feature film presentation, tested, revisited and succeeded in achieving his most refined and realistic feature length picture. Well regarded as a director of key historic stages in the development of his home country, Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) set in 1757; *Ali* (2001) set between 1964 and 74; and *Public Enemies* (2009) set during the Great Depression of 1930s, have demonstrated his position as a keen historian and an insightful author of American culture. Heat as I will argue in the following passage of this essay, can be regarded as the fourth and final in a series of Mann's films wherein he has revisited and challenged the position of the key characters portrayed.

Scott Foundas, author for LA Weekly reflects on a statement by Jean Renoir that "A director makes only one movie in his life. Then he breaks it into pieces and makes it again." Continuing that Michael Mann's 'one movie' is "the story of the night and the city and the men who inhabit it – professionals to the core who operate on instinct, sometimes living inside the law, but often indifferent to it."² This recurring city-by-night aesthetic of Mann's work is most notably achieved in *Heat*, *Collateral* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2006).

In this essay I will aim to explore Mann's "masterpiece to date"³ in its fundamental agenda, the development of the two lead subjects and the nature of their standpoints in their postmodern period. Taking readings of the domestic environments of McCauley and Hanna depicted by Mann as my primary point of interrogation, alongside script analysis and video and written interview's with the director. I will begin to build an understanding of Mann's own position and extract from his highly articulated compositions of architecture and characterization, the intentions within his fictional extrapolation and projection of the 'real' to build a particular notion of the American identity . I will explore these projections alongside readings into film, social, cultural and utopian theoretical writings.

² Scott Foundas "A Mann's Man's World" LAWeekly, July 27 2006
available at www.laweekly.com/2006-07-27/news/a-mann-s-man-s-world/

³ Foundas "A Mann's Man's World"

ACCESSING HEAT AND MICHAEL MANN WITHIN POSTMODERN CULTURE

NOSTALGIA FILM

“Fiction is not imagination. It is what anticipates imagination by giving it the form of reality. This is quite opposite to our own natural tendency, which is to anticipate reality by imagining it, or flee from it by idealising it. That is why we shall never inhabit true fiction; we are condemned to the imaginary and to nostalgia for the future. The American way of life is spontaneously fictional, since it is the transcending of the imaginary in reality.”⁴

In some senses *Heat* could be considered, in terms of the concepts on postmodernism put forward by the prominent American cultural theorist, Fredric Jameson, as a “nostalgia film” although technically not as it takes place in a contemporary setting, it’s original conception and influences certainly trigger nostalgic reactions. Mann had written the 180 page script in the 1970s, had twice explored the character of Neil McCauley in the feature length forms of Larry ‘Rain’ Murphy, (Peter Strauss), in his award winning, *The Jericho Mile* (1979); and Frank, (James Caan) in *Thief* (1981). Mann then directed half of his 170 minute *Heat* script as a, “Lacking in the sense that it’s not fully developed”⁵ 90minute teleplay, *LA Takedown* in 1989. “*Heat* had 6 months of pre-production and a 107 day schedule. *LA Takedown* had 10 days.. pre-production, and a 19 day schedule!”⁶ The criminal contingent in this twice presented story had made their fictional acquaintance and matured to their current state whilst inmates at California’s Folsom State Prison, 400 miles north of Los Angeles, a real place which Mann researched heavily during the making of *The Jericho Mile*, which was in fact ‘filmed among the convict population and within the walls of Folsom state penitentiary.’⁷ So I believe that *Heat* expresses itself as a manifestation of an evolving culture over a period of two decades in American history, with clear connotations of the western and film-noir genres.

“What I try to do – I mean try, because you don’t get there all the time – is to have impact with content,” Mann says. “It’s those moments in which you’re trying to bring people beyond filmed theatre... everything I’m shooting is only a human face. So you start thinking about what you can do to make the places talk.”⁸

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Geoff Dyer, Verso, 2010. 95

⁵ Michael Mann “Mann Made: From *LA Takedown* to *Heat*” 1997, BBC Interview

⁶ Mann “Mann Made” Interview

⁷ Michael Mann “*The Jericho Mile*” 1979

⁸ Michael Mann, Feeney, F.X., Michael Mann, (Paul Duncan Ed.) Taschen, 2006

STYLE

"I don't like style. Style is what happens when form is orphaned because content left..."⁹

Jameson asserts that Postmodernism is "the cultural dominant" since the shift around the end of the 1950's which dawned the beginning of a new paradigm in modernity marked by the "complacent play of historical allusion."¹⁰ And condemned as "a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, [within which] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum."¹¹ This observation promotes an understanding of Mann as a truly postmodern director with "a visual style that owes more to the painting and architecture of postmodernity than to cinema."¹² Signature images of Mann's work, including the shot of McCauley in his home overlooking the ocean, used on the front cover of the namesake Taschen book *Michael Mann*, was based explicitly on a 1967 Alex Colville painting 'The Pacific'.

Mann's compositions often recall postmodern works by American artists such as Edward Hopper and Eric Fischl and in the same way that these works of art demand contemplation upon a key moment in the characterized personae as well as supporting broader commentary on contemporary issues, these allegorical moments of silence and stillness, devoid of narrative or script, and indeed, in the most telling moments (p3 and p4), face, can be considered one of Mann's most powerful cinematic devices. These meditative moments require a visually complete composition, thus critics point to Mann "being too entranced with style."¹³

During a television interview Mann recalls that his stylization of the city in *Heat* was an effort to synthesize "a certain look that Los Angeles has in the winter when the marine layer comes in and the acid yellow lights backlight the fog and it sets the blown-out feel of the place, which is the reality of LA."¹⁴ This vision must be regarded as pioneering in that twelve years later, Christopher Nolan cites *Heat* as inspiration for his blockbuster, *The Dark Knight*, in his "attempting to tell a very large, city story."¹⁵

This discussion of style brings to mind the work of Joseph Conrad, an increasingly well regarded English author who published his greatest novels at the turn of the twentieth century and can be considered integral in the reading of high-modernist literature.¹⁶ Conrad and Mann share a sense of critical ambiguity, Jameson writes on Conrad that "his place is still unstable, undecidable, and his work unclassifiable, spilling out of high literature into light reading and romance." Often the challenge Mann's work faces in it's critical reception is his position; a relatively big-budget director of both film and television projects aimed at a wide audience, never achieving remarkable levels of commercial success he continues regularly collaborating with major film stars, and he is rarely considered in the same category as revered contemporaries such as Malick, Scorsese etc.

⁹ Michael Mann, Feeney, F.X., *Michael Mann*, (Paul Duncan Ed.) Taschen, 2006. 54

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson. "The Politics of Theory. Ideological Positions on Postmodernism Debate" *The Ideologies of Theory Essays*, Volume 2. London: Routledge, 1988. 105

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" *Postmodern Culture*. Hal Foster (Ed.) London: Pluto, 1985. 115

¹² Yvonne Tasker, *50 Contemporary Filmmakers*, Psychology Press, 2002. 254

¹³ Tasker, *50 Contemporary Filmmakers*, 254

¹⁴ Video interview: "Mann Made From LA Takedown to HEAT"

¹⁵ Stax "IGN interviews Christopher Nolan" 2007. www.uk.ign.com/articles/2007/12/06/

¹⁶ Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1960.

COLOUR , MUSIC SCORE AND TEMPO

Conrad notes *"It [style] must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music – which is the art of arts."*¹⁷ Colour and musical score are indeed two key stylistic elements in *Heat*. The colour blue in particular with its intrinsic links to the ocean as a further signifier, but also grey are the colours most associated with McCauley and used in reference to his loneliness is a key visual sign used by Mann in a similar way that Conrad writes his such colourful works of semi-biographical fiction. The music is also used to particularly great effect in *Heat* through its "combining a calming and contiguous track selection with a melting, amorphous score... the film plays sophisticated games in breaking down all distinction between [the two]"¹⁸ contributing intensely to its requiem like "sonorous and elegiac"¹⁹ quality, the largely de-rhythmatized audio supports a 'timeless' aspect of the melancholic epic.

This brings me to finally consider the overall temporal aspect of this long film, Mann fluidly depicts this almost cyclical story which, due to the plot elements of the breakdown of Hanna's marriage to Justine, and the organization of a precious metals robbery and the bank heist on McCauley's part, one would ascertain that developments take place over the course of a month or more, yet is depicted in a day night rhythm which is portrayed in the domain of seven days, the notion of time therefore becomes the surreal aspect in a realist world.

ART

Mann has not only sought to produce moments evocative of the fine arts but also maintained an element of art placement within his films as stylistic telling devices in his efforts to "make the places talk", and *Heat* is a key example; the white replica of Michelangelo's *Pietà* outside a hospital in the opening scene; the green mural which envelops a Mexican fast food cafe; Waingro's white-supremacist prison tattoos, and so on, each contribute to the impression that this film is also a critique and same time quintessential product of postmodern society, Jameson terms the feature of a recaptured and represented "picture of the past in its lived totality"²⁰ as pastiche, and example of this is the "nostalgia film" in which "the history of aesthetic styles displaces real history."²¹

¹⁷ Joseph Conrad, (1897) *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Tredition, 2012. Preface

¹⁸ Philip Brophy, *100 Modern Soundtracks (BFI Screen Guides)*, BFI London, 2004.

¹⁹ Anna Dzenis, "Michael Mann's Cinema of Images" 2002. www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/

²⁰ Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 116

²¹ Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*. Number 146, 1984. 65

Having somewhat established the film and author's position in American culture, I will present analysis and interpretation of the two key households with respect to their subjects in order to begin a reading into Mann's depiction of the American identity in postmodernity.

HANNA HOUSE

Following the initial two scenes of the film, involving a stern McCauley and a glass eyed, spectral Shihlerlis acquiring resources in the form of a stolen ambulance and demolition grade explosives, the first home we are given insight to is that of Lieutenant Vincent Hanna.

We arrive intimately in bed with Vincent and wife Justine, engaged in a state of rapture, their healthily passionate kisses and tender touching accompanied only by the morning sun striking the white cotton of their pillows. The close up camera placing us in amongst the pillows makes 11 captures during a 50 second scene, shots varying from 20 to 1 second in length and these times vary in accordance with the energy of the two equally animated lovers undulating dynamism. Vincent then takes a hot shower and again we encounter this from a close range, a slow panning view of his face and hands shifts to the textured glass-brick wall of the enclosure where diffused daylight fills the white muted space. Justine lights a cigarette and takes a satisfied drag as Vincent finishes dressing, takes his gun from the wooden side table and spiritedly leaves for work (P1). This presentation of Hanna is a stark contrast to the McCauley and Shihlerlis last shown, he is a passionate man with a genuine fondness for his step-daughter, herself a further condition of the postmodern American phenomenon of divorce and remarriage. He is a man with a passion for his loved ones, yet is the first to leave in the morning with no time for breakfast, drawn out to engage in his work life, the conflict of work and marriage is the first stage of a breakdown in the relationship played out through the course of the film.



P1 Vincent Hanna readying for work on the first morning, wife Justine lays in bed as her daughter Lauren needs help to find her hair clips.

The home is vertically organized, centred about a stairwell which connects an upper floor containing the open plan master bedroom and landing, adjoining a washing-dressing room, views out of the windows show lush green tree foliage and one neighbouring rooftop suggesting an all-round degree of privacy. The downstairs focuses on a cluttered kitchen 'decorated' with children's paintings and a plethora of coloured glass vases and food containers lining the shelves, an illuminated fish tank with striking dye-blue water and bright orange fish sits on the worktop in amongst a toaster, coffee and espresso machines. This lower floor also contains the open plan dining and lounge areas with multiple contemporary artworks adorning the walls and an upright piano under the staircase. Views out of the

large windows are again of lush green foliage, there is no sense of a ground or a horizon, placing the entire house somewhere separate from the concrete city, hovering away from the essential ground level upon which Hanna conducts his work, this extreme separation of domesticity from work creates a tension within his character when he is depicted in the home, there feels to be little outlet for his instinctive nature.



P2 Lt. Vincent Hanna unwinds after a long day in front of his television set with a glass of Jack Daniels

Hanna is shown truly at ease at only one moment in the domestic setting, at the point where he returns home late at night and, unable to reconcile his unsympathetic wife, unwinds in front of his television set, this emblem of an American authority figure finds an escape in the CNN news broadcast and seems content. (P2)



P3 Hanna takes a moment of stillness amidst the chaos of his home life

It is in this kitchen adjoining the open plan living space that Mann depicts Hanna's most poignant moment of stillness, realising he has lost control of his marriage he first intends to find therapy in washing up at the kitchen sink, but once faced with the prospect he lets out his frustration on the tap lever and turns away, reaching out in all directions to seek the solid architecture of this cramped and cluttered kitchen, the glowing blue fish tank in the far left corner undoubtedly a signifier of a contained loneliness. (P3). He checks his watch and briskly makes his way out to track down McCauley.

In the final visit to the home, Justine has had another man to stay the night, and we see Hanna take this occasion to act out the rejection of domesticity altogether, an aggressive display of his lyrical prowess culminates in the explosive tearing of his television set from the wall at the point where he pulls the plug on his marriage. The TV temporarily takes residence in the passenger seat of his car, this cockpit which has always been a medium between work on the street and home becomes Hanna's abode in his interim state of homelessness before he certifies this condition and checks in to a hotel, though not before his final rejection of possession by ejecting his television out of the passenger door to smash on the asphalt in front of a bemused group of onlookers at a bus-stand. This is essentially the final manifestation of the 'destructive character' described by Walter Benjamin. "The destructive character does his job. It is only creative work that he avoids. Just as the creator seeks out solitude for himself, the destroyer must continuously surround himself with people, with witnesses to his efficacy."²²

²² Walter Benjamin "The Destructive Character" November 1931

McCAULEY HOUSE

Neil McCauley's modernist home environment is first presented in the late evening (P4) following the events of a turbulent day which, due to the impact of a deranged and impulsive Waingro, did not go according to his otherwise finely executed plan.



P4 McCauley in a moment of still silence at his seafront home

Through a strong cyan-blue filter we first see the spartan interior of a rectangular room with a polished floor, a single glass side-table aligned in accordance with the orthogonal space which is defined by a powerful panoramic view of an empty ocean, framed in rectangles by plate glass sliding doors and windows, the vertical interruptions of the view become suggestive of prison cell bars, as does the impression of this box room, bounded on all but one of the four elevations. As McCauley enters, the 'clink' sounds of the placement of his gun, followed by a set of keys on the glass side-table is the only noise made above his soft footsteps and emphasizes the hard yet fragile materiality of the space, from there we view as he approaches the window. He reaches out with his left arm and draws respite from the architecture of the glass door's stainless handle, taking some of the weight off his feet as he silently reflects, yet the absence of any physical reflection of McCauley in front of him suggests the illusion of his presence in the home. The soft audible wash of the waves fade in to being along with a few drawn out notes of the requiem-like score.

The camera provides an intimate moment, placed as though rested on McCauley's shoulder, sharing with us the sea view, framed by a slice of the left side of McCauley's cheek and brow, initially in focus, it slowly shifts to the open ocean and dark horizon. The intensity and secrecy of this space is sustained throughout the scene in that Mann does not reveal any more than a silhouette of the subject. The entire scene lasts 45 seconds and is one of the key moments of stillness in the film. His mind has clearly transcended the confines of his aquarium-like apartment, but he remains ultimately detached, Mann creates a clear parallel and places McCauley metaphorically behind the bars of his cell and the balcony of his cell block, longing for the utopic ideal of his distant, desolate New Zealand safehaven. "For Mann the sea is the canonical image of impossible journeys, that everyone dreams about but no one is able to take."²³

²³ Jean Baptiste Thoret "The Aquarium Syndrome: On the Films of Michael Mann" Senses of cinema, May-June 2002

The second visit to McCauley's home we experience is during the daytime, we are given a brief shot of McCauley entering via a brightly day-lit, white rendered, part sheltered atrium; metal service boxes, on a wall at the back of the scene suggest the home is situated in part of a complex of similar residences. McCauley handles his keys as his silhouette approaches his plate-glass front door at the end of a shaded hallway, dark in contrast to the bright white atrium in the background. The view into this private environment is prevented by sheets of news paper, which, lining the interior of the glazed entrance, present the home as a temporal no-place, akin to a street-front shop undergoing renovation. The glass is sustained as the permanent and final division of the accessible versus the inaccessible, yet the interior is protected from view as though no official 'dwelling' is taking place, which is key in the reading of McCauley himself.



P5 McCauley (right) and Shiherlis psychoanalyse themselves against each other in the context of McCauley's 'vacant' home

Once inside, Chris Shiherlis is shown asleep on McCauley's wooden floor with just a white pillow as a bed, and we are again presented with the panoramic view of the ocean behind, the space is transformed into a place of habitation; the glass side-table appears again however this time it has been thrown out of sync to the rectilinear room, it is joined by a modern upholstered armchair and footrest equally distressed in their relation to the ordered architecture. This brings a conflicting dynamic to the previously depicted space. Jameson describes the "displacement of architectural space such that the positioning of it's contents – objects and human bodies alike – becomes problematical."²⁴

Chris awakes and appearing hung over, lurches his way towards the interior of the panoramic living space where the kitchen is found. McCauley hands Chris a cup of coffee and we see further into this domestic environment by the glazed kitchen cabinets, McCauley is an expert surveyor in his own right, which allows him to evade surveillance. Beatriz Colomina notes "It would not be an exaggeration to say that twentieth-century architecture is all about surveillance"²⁵ and McCauley is an extreme subject of this condition. McCauley and Shiherlis sit and converse not unlike a psychoanalyst and patient (P5), and in changing the topic from their relationship problems McCauley recites with a poetic conviction:

"Remember Jimmy Mcilwaine in the yard used to say 'you wanna be makin' moves on the street, have no attachments, allow nothing to be in your life that you cannot walk away from in thirty seconds flat if you spot the heat around the corner.' Remember that?"

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", 1991

²⁵ Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War*, MIT Press, 2007. 148

Our view into this unfurnished domestic environment is all the evidence one requires to ascertain that McCauley appears to live his life exclusively by this lyrical philosophy of self-governance. Undoubtedly a product of prison yard politics and survival in a hostile, gang controlled environment, as seen in Mann's *The Jericho Mile*, Murphy structured his lifestyle entirely upon the concept of isolation, which ultimately involved rejection of the notion of time. When we learn that McCauley has spent "*seven years in Folsom – In the hole for three. McNeil before that.*" We gather that he is a man able to contain a great deal of trauma, as studies have shown that "the confinement of a prisoner alone in a cell for all, or nearly all, of the day with minimal environmental stimulation and minimal opportunity for social interaction – can cause severe psychiatric harm."²⁶ The therapeutic aspect of the stabilizing ocean view for McCauley is surely a method of reaffirmation into his melancholic routine. Baudrillard writes "It is this melancholia of systems that today takes the upper hand through the ironically transparent forms that surround us. It is this melancholia that is becoming our fundamental passion."²⁷

With reference to Scheerbart's use of glass and the Bauhaus regarding steel, Benjamin writes "They have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces. "It follows from the foregoing." Scheerbart declared a good twenty years ago, "that we can surely talk about a 'culture of glass.' The new glass-milieu will transform humanity utterly."²⁸ This idea of the modernist experience representing a shift away from trace as evidence of being, Benjamin expresses with descriptions of velour fabrics he encounters in the bourgeois interiors of the 1880s²⁹, therefore we can attribute Mann's placement of the highly professional criminal, in an environment that reveals nothing of his identity.

Benjamin critiques the writings of Freud in his 1920 essay *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* reciting "consciousness comes into being at the site of a memory trace."³⁰ It is in this observation of the relationship between possessions, particularly those on display within the home, and the increasingly visual aspect of our memory recollection evident in postmodernity, that suggests McCauley to be dwelling in a past, longing for the future, and unfavourable of the present.

²⁶ Stuart Grassian, *Psychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement*, 22 Wash U.J.L. & Pol'y 325, 2006

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor University of Michigan Press, 1994. 162

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1927-1934*, Volume 2, Harvard University Press, 1999. 734

²⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. 734

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, trans. John Reddick, London, Penguin, 2003. 64

CONCLUSION

To conclude this essay and to draw from what has been revealed through a closer reading of this film within its broader context, I wish to reflect upon the title, 'Depictions of the American psyche', for I believe the psychological disorientation and resultant nihilism of the male figures explored as a result of their society and cultural climate is shown to be true to their desire to access some sense of liberation within the modern capitalist experience. Described as "the urge to be at home everywhere" the term "transcendental homelessness"³¹ coined by George Lukacs, applied to the understanding of McCauley and Hanna, each in their own respects, raises the problematic issue of the 'stable home' complete with the family unit and monthly mortgage repayments as a utopian ideology sewn within the grounds of capitalism.

The exploitation of society's working man by the economic system and the resultant domestic and urban scenarios explored by Mike Davis in his compelling 2002 book, *Dead Cities*, begins a serious critique of American capitalism in the postmodern era. An economic system manifest in the multiple city, metropolitan landscape of Los Angeles, wherein vehicular transport enables the effective 'family dictatorship' of the City of Vernon and 'rent plantations' of Bell Gardens and Cudahy³², by way of a daily mass migration upon new-America's vast rolling concrete plains of the freeway system, where commuters dwell for hours at a time in predominantly single occupancy cars, resembling the herds of roaming buffalo which once were. Discourse on the problematic constrictions of the 'registered home address' being a pre-requisite on our functional position within society, when, as we have seen, and as is the nature of the 'native' American, the transient lifestyle in a land so concerned with 'freedom' is at some stage, far more naturally becoming.

³¹George Lukacs (1920), *Theory of the Novel*, MIT Press, 1974 (English), 41

³²Mike Davis, *Dead Cities*, The New Press, 2002, 194-197

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