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The Cineautistic Detective

Steve Erickson's *Zeroville* and the New Hollywood Novel

Abstract

This article proposes a reading of Steve Erickson's Zeroville *(2007) as a post-noir mystery novel in which the 'cineautistic' detective Vikar, haunted by the ghosts of his Hollywood myths, brings out the cultural meaning behind the fatal date 1969. Going beyond the tropes of the Hollywood Novel, as a solitary detective who tries to relate to the fragmented space that surrounds him, Vikar will shed some light not so much on the industry's dehumanizing capabilities—which the classic Hollywood novels aimed to uncover—but on the force of the medium and its conventions. Vikar's great skills as a film editor will piece together the clues in order to solve a metaphysical cinematic mystery and to confront the cultural transition represented by the New Hollywood and television. As* Zeroville*'s storyworld proves to be rooted in film experience, this essay also aims to detect the cinematic references and to analyze their meaning in relation to the novel's discourse on medium.*

Keywords: *Steve Erickson,* Zeroville*, noir, New Hollywood, pop culture*

1. Introduction

From the beginning of Steve Erickson's career as a novelist, his works have been pervaded by a major interest in historical narratives and popular media. As his activity as film critic and journalist clearly shows, pop culture, cinema and television have influenced his narrative not only in terms of themes and tropes but also for what concerns the development of his narrative techniques and styles. Although an exhaustive critical work on his oeuvre is missing, his production is often related to the Avant-Pop literary movement and, in most cases, to science fiction. An early attempt to classify his work can be traced back to 1995, when literary critic Larry McCaffery included an excerpt of Steve Erickson's *Arc d'X* (1993) in his famous Avant-Pop anthology *After Yersterday's Crash* (1995). This collection aimed to highlight a subversive aesthetic sensibility, 'avant-pop,' that drew on the forms, images, slogans, characters, and narrative archetypes of mass and pop culture—cartoons, films, music videos, advertising, and

rock music—going beyond the postmodern sensibility (while not necessarily annihilating it, as is the case with Steve Erickson).

Not surprisingly, Erickson's early novels were particularly praised by writers such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon,[1] and it is clear that certain stylistic and narrative conventions inherent to postmodern literature—from intertextuality to pastiche—are present in his fiction, as can be more explicitly seen in his debut novel *Days Between the Station* (1985) and in *Zeroville* (2007), which I will discuss in this paper. However, what is crucial—regardless of these conventions—is that Erickson's interest in 1950s and 1960s narration can be seen as a point of departure for a critical approach to a period in which media forms such as film, music, and television became not only increasingly accessible but also emblematic of cultural changes. These symptoms are evident in Erickson's *Zeroville* (2007), where the references related to Hollywood and film history are essential not so much for what they evoke, but rather for the construction of a new social and collective reality. Moreover, in his novels, the author shows a deep awareness of American popular fiction as well as of the literary tradition of Los Angeles, the city in which most of Erickson's novels—*Amnesiascope* (1996), *The Sea Came at Midnight* (1999), *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005), *Zeroville* (2007)—are set and where the author currently lives. Using the tropes of different genres, such as detective fiction, science fiction, apocalyptic fiction, Hollywood fiction, and film noir, Steve Erickson's narrative proves to absorb techniques and stylistic features, where the references and schema serve as a starting point in order to convey new cultural meanings. For this reason, before moving to a personal noir-driven reading of *Zeroville*, it is important to detect the way in which Erickson's novel diverges from Los Angeles and Hollywood classic narratives while still employing the imaginary of the city's past representations.

2. Beyond the Hollywood Novel

> This is the summer of 1969, two days after Vikar's twenty-fourth birthday…He's been in Los Angeles an hour. He's just gotten off a six-day bus trip from Philadelphia, riding day and night. (Erickson 2013, 1)

The incipit of Erickson's *Zeroville* evokes one of the tropes and narrative situations of the classic Hollywood novel. Vikar moves to Los Angeles from the East Coast in order to become a film director and part of the industry, a narrative cliché which recalls 1930s novels such as Nathaniel

[1] Thomas Pynchon provided blurbs for Steve Erickson's early books (such as *Arc d'X)* and both writers are represented by the literary agent Melanie Jackson, who married Pynchon in 1990.

West's *The Day of The Locust* (1939), Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* (1935) or *I Should Have Stayed Home* (1938), Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941) or Bruce Wagner's works. These novels aimed to debunk the inconsistency of the Hollywood dream or to satirize the industry by emphasizing the tragic destiny of characters that "had come to California to die" (West 2018, 2) and investigating the condition of marginality of Hollywood's 'outsiders' (extras, would-be actors) along with the dissolution (and disillusionment) of their dream. As Steve Erickson notes in his review of David Cronenberg's *Maps to the Stars* (2014)—showing once again an awareness of the Hollywood narrative tradition—"Bruce Wagner is also a novelist, whose fiction—like that of Fitzgerald, West, and Tolkin, with whom I imagine he won't object to being compared—is preoccupied with Hollywood's depravities" (Erickson 2014, 2). Whereas "depravities" and the industry's dehumanizing capabilities have been largely described by these writers, such themes are generally absent in Erickson's narration; *Zeroville*'s readers soon find out that the protagonist does not experience a rejection from the industry nor a tragic destiny. He, on the contrary, manages to be a successful film editor and director. The dismantling of his illusion does not concern his career in the studio system; his disillusion instead lies in the fact that in Hollywood nobody seems to care anymore about film culture and history and that his 'cineautism'—emblematized by the Montgomery Clift-Elizabeth Taylor tattoo on his shaved head—will lead him to a condition of displacement and perpetual anachronism. It is clear that what separates Erickson from the classic Hollywood novelists is precisely his interest in the cinema as a medium rather than as a business. As he writes in the first pages of the novel,

> Is it possible he's traveled three thousand miles to the Movie Capital of the World only to find people who don't know the difference between Montgomery Clift and James Dean, who don't know the difference between Elizabeth Taylor and Natalie Wood? (2013, 29)

If displacement was a common feeling in the Hollywood society depicted by the characters of Nathanael West (Homer) and Horace McCoy (Gloria, Robert), a singular anachronism marks the driving force of Vikar's story inasmuch as it triggers the restless mystery that hovers over the narration. In fact, much of the protagonist's plotline deals with detecting a series of clues hidden in every film ever made, and it mentions dissertations about movies so much that the prose almost becomes film criticism in Vikar's obsession with the power of cinematic image, an aspect which I will discuss later. What the anachronistic attitude of the protagonist brings to light is the deeper cultural change he undergoes, which leads him to a condition of marginality. While 1960s Los Angeles was the home of the car culture, Vikar admits: "I don't know how to

drive" (2013, 60) when asked about his driver license by the police; during his continuous walks "he's startled there are no movie stars walking down the street" (2013, 32). The rise of television during the late 1950s and 1960s allows the narrator to analyze a shift in the perceived cultural importance of film as a medium. More precisely, in the economy of the story the representation of television suggests a reframing of cinema as a popular art, emphasizing Vikar's traumatic impact with Hollywood society. Not surprisingly, Vikar's use of television is reflective of his nostalgia towards Hollywood classic cinema. "Vikar buys a small black-and-white television that he carries home on the bus. He even buys a radio. On the television he watches old movies and the news" (2013, 81).

While Vikar tries not to renounce his idea of Los Angeles—an idea heavily influenced by the cinematic representation of the city—what he experiences upon his arrival is the transition from the Old Hollywood to the New Hollywood, a process that he himself will have to face. "I tell people I've worked for Vincente Minnelli and Otto Preminger," Vikar exclaims, "and nobody cares" (2013, 124).

In fact, at the end of the 1960s, "the old form of the vertically integrated studio system was undermined" (King 2002, 6) and the industrial context was about to reshape itself. Changes happened not only in a broader social, cultural or historical context, but also in the style of filmmaking. Erickson, as well as *Zeroville*'s narrator, is totally aware of this transition; the protagonist Vikar, who showed up in L.A. with a fascination for Montgomery Clift, will be forced to change his attitude and to play a different game.

> The clerk says, "Hey, man, have you seen Easy Rider? I usually don't go to movies. I'm into the Music."
> "What?"
> "The Music." The clerk turns up the radio. There's a song playing about a train to Marrakesh: "All aboard the train," the singer sings. It's horrible; they've forgotten A Place in the Sun for this? Vikar also suspects there's something narcotics-related about the song. (2013, 37)

Easy Rider (Hopper 1969), also mentioned in the novel, is one of the movies which best represent the New Hollywood era as well as Vikar's expanding awareness of this transition, not only for what concerns production and the style of filmmaking but also for the several cultural meanings contained in Dennis Hopper's movie: a folk and pop music soundtrack and the representation of the spreading of narcotics usage are all symptoms of the fervid brew of 1960s radicalism and counterculture, the icy paranoia of the post-Watergate period, and finally the escape from the 1950s red-scare conformity. Through free indirect speech (Herman and Vervaeck 2019, 183)—

or more precisely psycho-narration,[2] as Dorrit Cohn called it (1978, 14)—the reader can perceive Vikar's consciousness and ideological positions in relation to the Hollywood society and its changes. Paradoxically, the odd and outcast aspect of his body will help him personify the unconventionality and avant-garde spirit of the time. In line with Hollywood's ability to reinvent itself at the end of the 1960s, Vikar will become an acclaimed film editor and his career will eventually coincide with the revolution of New Hollywood until the rise of the Blockbuster in the 1980s.

Similarly, the protagonist's relationship with a growing interest in "Music" (capitalized throughout the novel) embodies the birth of a heterogenous cultural scene during the 70s. If at the beginning of the narration Vikar shows his disregard for the Music in what he calls the "Heretic City," by the end "for a while he realizes he's come to care more about the Sound than the Movie" (2013, 350). In fact, Vikar starts going to clubs he first had avoided, seeking the Sound, which the characters identify with the emergence of punk[3] as a countercultural force in the 1970s, one in which Vikar—during his period in New York—seems to find his spiritual dimension. It is not a coincidence that the only made-up film in the novel, for which Vikar is nominated for an Oscar, is called *Your Pale Blue Eyes*, clearly recalling the 1969 song by The Velvet Underground, which were, at the time, among the forerunners of punk and avant-guard music in the United States. It's clear that *Zeroville*'s author seems to put at the core of the narration a multiple range of disruptive cultural impulses, and much of the narrative tension lies in the relationship between Vikar and the different media, and their impact on society. *Zeroville*'s quest does not even remotely evoke the quest featured in the first Hollywood novels—if not in the references to movie icons. After all, Vikar is born to confront change, trying not to be doomed as he's transported, right from the beginning, to a crucial period of American history: 1969 Los Angeles, a moment and place in which the entire nation was asked to revisit its primal values.

3. Depictions of endings and the year 1969

The interest of the contemporary American historical novel in the narrative of 1969 shows that Erickson's fiction is not alone in reviving that particular period of American history, and in

[2] A particular type of indirect discourse in which the narrator analyzes the content of the character's mind, potentially including its unconscious aspects.

[3] Intertextual references to music are no less important than cinematographic ones in Erickson's construction of the storyworld in his novels. Another reference to punk and new wave can be found in his novel *These Dreams of You* (2012) in which subplots involve figures such as Iggy Pop and David Bowie.

particular 1969 Los Angeles. Even considering noir narratives only, we can mention *Inherent Vice* (2009) by Thomas Pynchon and its film adaptation by Paul Thomas Anderson (2014), *Blood's A Rover* (2009) by James Ellroy, Walter Mosley's late novels, and Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019). What these works have in common is a singular approach to a revisitation of 1969, its cultural meanings, its promises, and its quasi-apocalyptic rhetoric. As Mark West suggests in his essay about the contemporary 60s novel:

> For post-boomer authors—writing after the 'postmodern age['s ...] generalized distrust of official facts, and a blurring of the boundary between events and facts as represented' (Currie 2006, 25)—perpetual contestations of the sixties and conflicting interpretations of the decade's meanings exacerbate a basic difficulty: how to link together a series of events into a comprehensible and explanatory narrative. (West 2020, 213)

For instance, while Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009) shows to be more preoccupied (among other things) with retroactively narrating social and economic issues of Los Angeles' late capitalist society of the early 1970s, *Zeroville* tries to reframe the cultural change of the late 1960s and to emphasize its projection towards the next decades. In both cases, however, the Manson family murders—in which the decade of endless summer finds its emotional and metaphorical peak—set the noirish tone of the novels, which translates into rising anxiety and paranoia affecting both Vikar's agency and the narrative events. As Joan Didion states in her famous book *The White Album* (1979), "Many people in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969" (Didion 2019, 776), confirming that the depictions of endings are inherent to the Los Angeles fictional and non-fictional narration. In the case of *Zeroville*, the Manson Family murders do not merely represent the collapse of the countercultural utopia, as it is eventually the case with Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009). They rather contribute to providing a link between the death of classic Hollywood and the emergence of an interest in new media along with the rise of the New Hollywood.[4] If it is true that the Manson murders "turned everything wonderful or explosive or radical or new or amazing into death, paranoia

[4] On August 9, 1969, members of Charles Manson's cult killed five people in movie director Roman Polanski's Beverly Hills, California, home, including Polanski's pregnant wife, actress Sharon Tate. Less than two days later, the group killed again, murdering supermarket executive Leno LaBianca and his wife Rosemary in their home. Some prosecutors, when the events occurred, said that the murders were a sort of revenge on Charles's part; he wanted to become a rockstar and the house where the deaths occurred used to belong to Terry Melcher—a music producer who had refused to collaborate with Manson. This hypothesis would be another symptom—employed by the author—of the representative change in the interest towards the Sound within the society depicted in the novel.

and murder" (Melnick 2018, 681), the atmosphere of paranoia and the specter of death haunt Vikar's narration right from his arrival in the city. In fact, when Vikar arrives in Los Angeles, with his physical aesthetics in contrast with hippie culture, his *A Place in The Sun* intertextual tattoo represents a romanticism that "stands juxtaposed against the moment we first see Vikar, who arrives in LA in the summer of 1969 on the day of the Manson murders" (Miller 2021, 154). He discovers that both the police and the civilians are terrified of Manson's image and that everyone mistakes him for a member of the Manson's family.

> "This one about the pigs. Written on the door of the house in the blood of," waving one photo, "the mother of," waving the other, "this one. Am I supposed to take it personally, Ike? Was this for me, this about the pigs?" but Vikar sobs, wishing he never had seen it […].
> "I'd stay out of those canyons if I were you," one of the cops tells him. 'There's something going on up there." (2013, 66-70)

While Vikar is totally unaware of Manson and cult paranoia spreading over the city, his only concern relates, once again, to his 'cine-phantasmatic' idea of the city. When he visits the Laurel Canyon Boulevard, he talks about the house where "Harry Houdini lived while trying to become a movie star in the twenties" (2013, 45), which now is just a secret passage leading to all parts of the canyon and which is "occupied by an extended family of hippies led by a musician with a Groucho Marx mustache" (2013, 50). In this symbolic handover—a symbolism not by chance built on a mysterious and spiritual figure like Houdini—Vikar detects the first signs of a socio-cultural change. People both from the canyons and the beach are afraid of his presence and it becomes difficult for him to establish relationships due to this pervading paranoia.

> "For God's sake, Sol," Margie says, "he's not one of the Manson Family. He's harmless. I promise you," she says knowingly.
> "He is not harmless," Vikar hears Soledad answer. "He may not be one of the Manson Family," she concedes, "but he's not harmless." (2013, 170)

The invasion of the canyons by the hippies, the looming sense of death and the perception of an impending end were socio-cultural symptoms that peaked with the Manson family murders. The scenario of the novel is organized around this apocalyptic vision of the end of times, hardly a new trope in Los Angeles art and literature. As Mike Davis has explained in his book *Ecology of Fear* (1998), "the destruction of Los Angeles has been a central theme or image in at least 138

novels or films since 1909" (1998, 276), not to mention songs.[5] From Tod's painting called "The Burning of Los Angeles" in *The Day of The Locust* (West 1939) to the raining frogs in San Fernando Valley in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1998), images of destruction still inhabit Los Angeles narration.

Cataclysms and apocalyptic settings, albeit more evident in other works of Erickson's fiction such as *Days Between the Station* (1985) and *Amnesiascope* (1996), in this case allude to the cultural importance of a particular time period. In fact, although in *Zeroville* Los Angeles experiences "the biggest fucking earthquake in forty years" (2013, 136), the real apocalyptic setting is realized in a more symbolic way so that, in the economy of the narration, August 1969 represents the disruptive force that strengthens Vikar's agency; the post-apocalyptic area, in which the protagonist operates, represents the construction of a new world, new values and meanings that Vikar conveys through his relationship with his pupil Zazi, through his travel to Europe and finally through the detection of the "Secret Movie" (Erickson 2013, 758). In this sense, the author tries to offer the possibility of a narration after the disruptive events, a possibility that lies in the cinematic storyworld of the novel rather than in the external reality. On the contrary, Vikar's interactions with the world outside the cinema—and in particular with Zazi—often translate into a cine-religious education, as a way to confront his past and present; thus, Vikar becomes identifiable as a messianic figure which indicates the path to a new reality or, in cinematic values, to a new Hollywood.

4. The cinematic storyworld of *Zeroville*

> *The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city.*
>
> (Jean Baudrillard, *America*)

In addition to being a pop-guidebook of Los Angeles culture and history from the very beginning—Vikar eats at de Filippe upon his arrival in Los Angeles—the real narrative texture of the novel has to do with the history of cinema as well as with the cinematic history of the city and how it intersects with Vikar's idea of Los Angeles.

[5] For instance, two famous songs by Neil Young, "After the Gold Rush" (1970) and "L.A." (1973), describe the author's fantasy visions of the destruction of Los Angeles.

Before analyzing the narrative of Vikar's impact with 1969 Hollywood society, it is important to note that also Vikar's personal history is shaped in order to represent the matrix of his cineautism. Born Ike Jerome, he refuses his baptismal name calling himself Vikar as if to suggest not only a new life but also a bearer of values, which are as cinematic as the world in which he lives. In Pennsylvania, Vikar receives a seminar Puritan education, which is very reminiscent of the upbringing filmmaker Paul Schrader received from his conservative Calvinist parents; Ike is abused by his father and their complicated relationship not only underpins the religious symbolism[6] within the text, such as Abrahamic sacrifice, but it recalls how Hollywood handed its sons and daughters over to death; this is the case of Jayne Mansfield and James Dean, quoted several times in the text, but most importantly of Soledad, with whom Vikar establishes a noir-like relationship which I will discuss later. The turning point is when Vikar finally sees his first movie after he absconds from the seminary; he shaves his head—visually returning to a newborn's shape—and moves to Los Angeles, where the pilgrimage of a cineautistic monk takes place. As his new life begins, Ike searches for the ghost of Montgomery Clift, staying at the Roosevelt Hotel where Clift lived in between filming *A Place in the Sun* and where Steve Erickson "knocked out the first fifty pages" (Miller 2008, 166) of *Zeroville*.

> That first night in the Roosevelt, Vikar has the same dream he always has after every movie he sees, the same dream he's had since the first movie he ever saw. In his dream there's a horizontal-shaped rock and someone lying on the rock very still. The side of the rock seems to open, beckoning to Vikar, like a door or chasm. (2013, 41)

In this passage the narrator presents the real mystery of Vikar's story and the reader can perceive the quest moving toward the oneiric and cinematographic dimension, the one which constitutes the novel's storyworld. In fact, Vikar goes in and out of the cinema just as he goes in and out of his dreams; his wandering is a cinematic voyage that prompts the reader to wonder what he is really looking for. This voyage is built into the narration primarily through two narrative devices. The first concerns the organization of narration through a structure that evokes film editing techniques (intermedial references[7]), the second deals with a perpetual

[6] There would be much space for further investigation on how the Christian mythology merges with Hollywood mythical atmosphere throughout the novel and to understand the influence of Calvinist education in Vikar's role within the storyworld.
[7] Rajewsky defines intermedial references as "for example references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing" (2005, 52).

intertextual reference,[8] or a social/intertextual context (Hutcheon 1988, 79) typical of postmodern fiction, so that the narrator brings together Vikar's tangible and dreaming experience, and stories and cultural images taken from movies.

Zeroville's narrative develops into very brief chapters, on average one page—occasionally one line—long. The chapters are indeed brief takes which help the narration offer an ideology of discontinuity along with the displacement of Vikar. The novel's structure is made of short numbered passages ascending to number 227, before counting down to zero, and is described by Erickson as "a kind of Godardian conceit" (Stubbs 2021, 139).

In addition to the reference in the title,[9] Godardian's jump cuts are adapted into prose enlightening the protagonist's anxiety and disorientation, metafictionally questioning the idea of continuity. As Geoff King suggests, "continuity editing creates a coherent impression of space and time, and the connections between one and the other. Jump cuts and breaches of the 180 degree convention upset these coherencies" (2002, 39).

> 63.
> [...]
> he's too embarrassed to rise from his seat, so he goes on riding …
> 64.
> "… into the night—
> —west on Hollywood Boulevard and then cutting down La Brea to Sunset, turning right."
> (2013, 131)

Similarly, the short chapters enable the narrator to change the focus—just as a camera—and to represent flashbacks, perspectives, and also focalization through close-ups and cuts. In the following passage, for example, the cut is employed to make the transition from the external (ch. 6) to the internal setting of the scene (ch. 7).

> 6.
> "You can let me off here," he says, and she drops him where Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards fork, at a small theater—
> 7.
> —where he goes to the movies.

[8] I tried to consider this kind of intertextuality in terms of optional or obligatory and, however helpful it may be, I do not think the narrative requires a pre-understanding of intertexts or some kind of cinephile knowledge. On the other hand, to admit the opposite would require a closer examination of a hypothetical implied reader, an aspect of the novel that I am still investigating.

[9] The title of the novel echoes the line of futuristic private eye Lemmy Caution in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*: "This isn't Alphaville, it's Zeroville."

> A silent European film from the late twenties, it's the worst print Vikar has seen… (2013, 31)

This technique is also used by Erickson to shift constantly from Vikar's oneiric dimension to the filmic one, presenting an internal focalization thanks to which the reader can understand that the numerous intermedial references (Rajewsky 2005, 52) to other movies are presented through Vikar's consciousness. His mental subjectivity, for example, is fostered by the cutaway (Bordwell 1985, 330) that produces a disorienting effect through an addition of elements—such as the description of a movie scene—which are not supposed to belong to the depicted situation. However, since these elements are employed in order to get into Vikar's psyche, they cannot be considered sheer non-diegetic inserts.

This brings us to a further reflection on the surrealist signature of the novel, inherent to Erickson's oeuvre. If surrealist art sought to register the hidden currents of the unconscious (Bordwell 2001, 452), then *Zeroville*'s art proves to be conscious in depicting Vikar's cineautism, where causality is as evasive as in a dream. Not by chance, many of Ike's cinematic dreams relate to Soledad, as visions of her intersect with Joan Of Arc frames creating a symbolic overlap. In fact, Soledad is mentioned in the novel as Bunuel's illegitimate daughter: "she was in a nuthouse for a while in Oslo, and story has it she was cast as the woman who vanishes on the island in *L'Avventura* and then was dropped at the last minute, for mysterious reasons no one ever has understood or explained" (2013, 159). The fact that Vikar will finally reach Oslo at the end of the narration, searching for the original print of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer 1928), testifies the confluence of different kinds of realities (also in terms of time and space) in the same narration, that is proper to Bunuel's art as well as to *Zeroville*'s narration.

The attention to the forms and history of other media in Erickson's literature is also made particularly clear in the episode in which an African American burglar breaks into Vikar's apartment and they have an odd and analytic conversation about movies. Here the film-essay aspect of the novel breaks out; the arguments shift from actors' qualities to American politics, providing not only some critical discussion about American society—for example the Western myth ideologies from a racial standpoint—but also the representation of television with its inherent form of viewing.

The conversation between Ike and the burglar also presents itself as a reflection on watching television as a type of experience essentially different from watching a movie at a theater, "something that might be scientifically inferred by technical differences in their respective modes of encoding visual information" (Jameson 1997, 205). What is suggested here is

"television's inherent capacity to reduce the filmic medium to its own form" (Randles 2019, 131), where old elements and what Jameson calls "new cultural signs or logos" (Jameson 1997, 86) are brought together and taken away from their specific contexts (the cinema theatre in this case). If television allows a repeated and 'private' viewing of a movie—an event that can take place even after many years from the movie release—it also gives space to a change of perceptions and interpretations of meaning and ideologies according to time and place. When Zazi sees *A Place in the Sun* (Stevens 1951) on television after having seen it in a theater with an audience that laughed at it, she tries to explain to Vikar "how seeing the movie by herself was very different from being part of a collective response" (Miller 2021, 170). What Erickson is suggesting—along with the fact that in modern times movie watching becomes a more solitary experience—is a consequential deconstruction of movies and, of course, of their internal meanings—as postmodern theory has long discussed—brought in a wider context. In *Zeroville* the perpetual references to movies, almost never explicitly named, represent this popularization and decontextualization proper of pop culture. Throughout the narrative, readers often run into movie excerpts or plot references to which—unless he/she is a cinephile or cineautistic—they can hardly give meaning; yet, the narrative's intention is not to start a guess-the-movie game but rather to create a hyper-reality that perfectly fits the time of the story. While in *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999)—one of Erickson's first novels—movies are projected on the city walls, in *Zeroville*'s world those projections are already present in the characters' minds, from Vikar to Zazi, who by the end of the novel dreams about Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) despite having not seen the film, and without "even know[ing] the woman was Joan of Arc" (2013, 632).

Finally, Vikar's life experiences happen to be interconnected with the movie characters' lives in a paranoid and sometimes predictable manner.

> As Vikar traveled on what seemed an endless bus to Hollywood, the Traveler hurtles through space toward infinity. Dimensions fall away from the Traveler faster and faster until, by the end of the movie, he's an old man in a white room where a black monolith appears to him at the moment of death. He becomes an embryonic, perhaps divine Starchild. Vikar has come to Los Angeles as a kind of starchild as well, a product of no parentage he acknowledges, vestiges of an earlier childhood falling away from him like dimensions. (2013, 501)

It is interesting to notice how this parallelism with *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1986) at the end of the novel not only recalls Vikar's dream visions and his searching, but in a certain way also serves to strengthen the reliability of his cine-oneiric investigation. Kubrick's film

helps Vikar to legitimate his voyeuristic search and at the same time provides a further sense of displacement that can be traced back to Bowman's arrival in space.

Of course, this is not the only case in which Erickson operates this kind of parallelism within the narrative; this narrative tool delivers more tension to the prose in the moments when the novel explores Vikar's quest, when the main references to the medium concern more closely the noir tradition.

5. Dreaming and detecting in Hollywood

> *Vikar says, "Continuity is one of the myths of film. In film, time is round like a reel. Fuck continuity. In every false movie is the true movie that must be set free."*
>
> (Steve Erickson, *Zeroville*)

As Los Angeles is the primary setting of the novel, most of the allusions to L.A. literature and film imagery concern the mystery genre or the private eye genre. Erickson's reappropriation of noir tropes is not restricted to *Zeroville*, since also *Rubicon Beach* (1986) as well as *Days between the Stations* (1995) are filled with Chandler and noir influences, particularly in the construction of the characters.[10] In *Zeroville*, references to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) occur several times and perform two narrative functions: the first is the construction of a noir imagery to which Vikar's story is associated, setting the tone for his investigation, while the second, less explicitly, concerns Vikar's relationship with Los Angeles and the other characters along with his agency. In particular, Vikar's relationship with Soledad Paladin is symptomatic not only of his centrality as a male subject in the narration, typical of noir narratives, but also of the existence of a link between his oneiric world and the real experience, an ability that belongs to the film medium and by extension to Vikar.

Soledad Paladin—loosely based on a true European actress named Soledad Miranda, who was a star of soft-core vampire movies—is the tragic actress Vikar falls in love with, playing a fundamental symbolic role in the novel's storyworld. Dying in a car crash, just like her real-life counterpart, she represents Vikar's concern with the father-Hollywood that sacrifices its children. Above all, Soledad's function in the novel is extremely critical with regard to Vikar's complex sexuality. This brings us to another reflection: Vikar in his dreams experiences an

[10]A deep awareness of Chandler's literature and influence on the contemporary novelists and writers is also visible in Erickson's activity as film critic, as his reviews of Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice* (2015), of Amazon's *Bosch* Tv Series (2016), and of Nicholas Winding Refn's *Drive* (2011) show.

erotic desire of Soledad "as Siamese twins," (2013, 161) expressing both a feeling of desire and of guilt in that she represents the screen siren of the time, as Erickson himself states, complicating Vikar's sexual conscience. While initially Elisabeth Taylor had been Vikar's ultimate erotic model, he begins to feel guilty when seeing Kim Novak in *Vertigo* (1958) on the screen and "feels like he's cheating on not only Taylor but Soledad as well" (2013, 514).

This essentially shows us not only that the dream dimension is present in Vikar as a continuum of cinematic vision but also that his dreams represent his repressed sexuality, according to a classic Freudian interpretation. Similarly, in Vikar "scopopholic viewings act as the catalyst for these internalized projections" (Randles 2019, 135) and his centrality as a character is typical of noir narratives in which the female form is conveyed to the viewer through the lens of male heterosexuality. In some aspects, Soledad is evocative of the femme fatale and her agency is divided into two levels, one cinematic and one real. As Vikar yells at her: "'This is the profile of the one who wants you,' and turns his head back, 'this is the profile of the one who would kill you, for sacrificing your nine-year-old child'" (2013, 389). If on the one hand Soledad distracts Vikar from protecting her and Zazi, on the other hand she enacts Vikar's awareness about the rise of a new type of screen siren. Soledad's life, despite her charm and power to seduce Vikar, is doomed to be destroyed. She plays a part in "*Lesbian Vampires*"[11] (2013, 173), a porn film in which she is a seductive vampire and which originates Vamp, the dark lady in European cinema (modeled in the US after Theda Bara). This was the first representation of the woman commercially offered in movies as an object of sexual fantasy and the last gasp of the cult of the *fatale* (Kaplan 1998, 180). Not by chance, Soledad will play a minor role in Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), an iconic noir movie that introduces the New Hollywood transition operating a free transposition of Chandler's novel. Her agency as a *femme fatale* is of course limited, and she cannot even find a role in a movie because of her extreme beauty (both Antonioni and Altman refuse to give her a lead).

Moreover, as Liam Randles claims, "a lustful fascination with Soledad develops from a processing of her screen persona" (2019, 133) and Erickson's recurring presentation of the evocative qualities of movies—the medium acting as a tissue between dream and memory—naturally fits into such a portrayal. In the cinema environment, the character's repressed sexuality can manifest involuntarily and appears to be on the screen as well as in his dreams. Of course, repressed sexuality has always played a significant role in the classic private eye characterization, and in Vikar this dimension is constantly driven by his memory and dreams.

[11] The title of this film can be easily associated with the real film *Vampyros Lesbos* (Franco 1971) in which Soledad Miranda is Countess Nadine Carody.

The resurgence of the past is central to Vikar's investigation and regulates his relationship with Soledad and Zazi; in fact, the idea of a surreal connection between Vikar and Soledad's past is perpetuated throughout the novel and is eventually projected into the future. On the one hand, Vikar's model of the cinema-church he built as an architecture student reminds Soledad of the mental institute in Oslo where she spent her childhood; on the other hand, Vikar's dreams of Soledad projects her in celluloid and frames in films he will eventually discover. In this regard, references to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958)—defined by Erickson as "cinema of hysteria"[12] (Miller 2021, 73)— reveal the nature of this relationship:

> In another movie, a private eye fell in love with the blonde he was hired to follow. The blonde was haunted by past lives and the memory of once having committed suicide by flinging herself from an Old California mission steeple; when she described the steeple, the private eye recognized it, and told her she had seen it not in any past life but this one. But it was the private eye who didn't know the truth, a truth he could never suspect. (2013, 109)

The visions of the mission steeple bring to Vikar's mind his model of the small church and the "vision of this church was so perfectly realized in his mind that he worried it was something he had seen and forgotten, as though in a past life" (2013, 110). Vikar's paranoia increases as he discovers that the model he designs is identical to Soledad's mental hospital in Oslo, where he will discover the original copy of *The Passion of Joan* Arc (Dreyer 1928). Therefore, *Vertigo* (Hitchcock 1958) has the hysteric power of connecting Vikar's past to his future investigation and movies, much like his dreams, serve as premonitory clues in his detection.

A similar connection between the past and the future is conveyed through the allusion to another classic noir movie, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). In the text, this reference is connected to Vikar's viewing of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer 1928) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1986) as similar past and future representations. These movies, as Erickson claims, "share a kind of anarchic spiritualism, even as they tell their stories from opposite ends of both modern history and modern imagination" (Miller 2021, 155). In fact, *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) reflects Vikar's personal history and his travel to L.A., in a moment in which the city represented the future both in a cinematographic and metaphorical way, into a futuristic setting.

[12] Erickson defines as "cinema of hysteria" a particular kind of 20th century cinema that was "beyond rationality, that was ur-rational as opposed to irrational" (Miller 2021, 73). As the narrator of Erickson's novel *Amnesiascope* (1996) claims, these are movies that "make no sense at all—and we understand them completely" (1996, 51).

> "An L.A. private eye of the future executes robots who believe they're human because they remember. The movie takes place in a Los Angeles where everything is reset at zero. The future is reset at zero. Memory is reset at zero, prophecies are reset at zero. All latitudes and longitudes are reset at zero; everything that one believes about oneself is reset at zero. There's no sunlight in this Los Angeles; every day is reset at zero. There's no starchild in this movie because childhood has been reset at zero. In this Los Angeles, there is no Hollywood; in this movie, the Movies have been reset at zero." (2013, 738)

By moving to Los Angeles Vikar resets his life to zero, leaving his childhood and his father behind, exposing his orphanhood; "he's an orphan the way the Starchild in *2001* is the ultimate orphan, the way Joan of Arc became an orphan" (Miller 2008, 155). In Hollywood, Vikar can start his detection, absorbing the cultural fervor of the time; he is the chosen one to the point of being made responsible also for the 1981 discovery of the lost Oslo print of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer 1928). Besides, as Žižek claims apropos of *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), "the hero, the hard-boiled investigator, is sent on a quest […] whose final outcome is that he himself was from the very beginning implicated in the object of his quest" (1993, 200) and Vikar's dreams and memory suggest that he is implicated from the beginning of the narration.

If one of detective fiction's conventions is the revelation of hidden truths, it is clear that the discovery of a clandestine film consisting of hidden stills concealed within every movie ever made shall take place through Vikar's interaction with both the real and the cinematic world. In this regard, the protagonist's acceptance of being, as Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet*, "in the middle of a mystery" (Lynch 1986, 1:03:16), going so far as to travel to Europe, is symptomatic of his agency of editor/detective in search of his own quest.

Not surprisingly, by juxtaposing Vikar and the private eye figure, the narrator eventually links Vikar's experience to Robert Altman's adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), where "the most famous and romantic of L.A. private eyes finds himself at the beach, amid the lazy decadence of the seventies" and in which Vikar can almost "recognize the beach house where he was seduced by Margie Ruth" (2013, 115). In the same house Vikar encounters a young Robert De Niro, another important figure from the New Hollywood, who in *Taxi Driver* (1976) will significantly transform the detective's image. As *Zeroville*'s narrator claims, "Three years later Marlowe will move to New York, change his name to Bickle and drive cabs for a living" (2013, 256).

Vikar will also go to New York, where he will again find himself protecting Zazi from Soledad's conduct, remedying the tradition of parents who sacrifice their children, and saving a William Friedkin picture. Here Ike will also experience the emergence of punk music that can be summarized in his listening of Joy Division's *Shadowplay*, a song that "evokes a displacement

that's as liberating as it is terrifying, and images of a secret city, with wandering streets that spiral down to some forbidden center" (Miller 2021, 164). Like the typical private eye who tries to understand how to relate to the fragmented space that surrounds him, Vikar experiences this displacement, the *vertigo*, and it could not be otherwise since everything in *Zeroville* happens to be circular, every frame tends to come together in the same frame, "each scene is in all times . . . and all times are in each scene" (2013, 200).

Finally, Vikar's meeting with the ghost of Montgomery Clift later in the novel is indicative not only of *Zeroville*'s endless circularity but also of the nature of the quest. "Like a private eye eluding pursuit in the ongoing movie of Los Angeles, Vikar gets off at the seventh floor and takes the stairs the rest of the way to the ninth" (2013, 744) and establishes a surreal dialogue with Clift who suggests to Vikar:

> "That Secret Movie? The one that's hidden frame by frame in all the other movies?"
> "Yes."
> "Maybe we're not dreaming it. Maybe it's dreaming us." (2013, 758)

As also his dreams have become part of the movies themselves, Vikar, much like his skull, becomes "almost literally a blank slate, or a medium (in the spiritualistic sense) for the cinematic medium (in the McLuhan sense)" (Shaviro 2007). Mirroring Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail, the secret Vikar seeks is not fully revealed at the end of the novel. Anyway, if Beekman argues that Marlowe represents the archetype of a "sober knight on a never finished quest" (1973, 166), Vikar, with his cinematic-heroic values, brings cinema to a transcendental dimension, with no definite solutions for its ontology, but rather providing interpretations—if not understanding—for the transition from the Golden Age to the New Hollywood and beyond. From Erickson's 21st century perspective, finally, Vikar's motto "fuck continuity" (2013, 405) should not only be read as a transition to New Hollywood but also as a religious/cinematic prophecy about what Steven Shaviro calls the "post-cinematic age," in which Vikar's "filmmaking abandons the ontology of time and space" (2010, 388) by creating his own kind of post-continuity editing, moved by his punk attitude.

After all, despite his initial naivety, Vikar will be aware of his role of cineautistic detective, floating in the post-noir Los Angeles atmosphere, and finally embracing the (post-postmodern) discontinuity by questioning the essence of the medium.

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