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Nabokov and Wenders: Lost Landscapes and Found Meaning in the Age of the Sign Economy

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Introduction: 'Postmodern Realities'

Protest as David Andrews might against the 'misperception' of Vladimir Nabokov as 'the postmodern author *par excellence*', claiming Nabokov as 'premodernist in outlook' (63), there is one sense in which Nabokov cannot escape the 'postmodern' label identified by Fredric Jameson. Jameson defines postmodernism, in part, as:

A periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism ('Postmodernism and Consumer Society' 1962).

Adopting Jameson's dating of this 'new moment of capitalism' to 'the postwar boom in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s' (1962), this essay opens with an assertion of Nabokov as an author subject to, what Andrews terms, certain 'postmodern realities' (63).

The aim of this essay is a study of these postmodern realities as a product of the consumer society and the emergence and maturation of what Pamela Odih calls the 'sign economy' (126) in two texts from 'high epochs' of late capitalism, Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984). Paramount to the argument herein is Jameson's assertion that the 'formal features' of postmodernism (defined by the era of late capitalism) will 'express the deeper logic of that particular system' (1974). However, the first requirement of this introduction is a situating of the chosen texts within what has been termed 'high epochs' of late capitalism.

Further to Jameson's periodisation of this 'new society' to the late 1940s and early 1950s, Odih offers a definition of the 'sign economy' and the reasons for its emergence. Nabokov's postwar era, she explains, witnessed a 'transition from pre-capitalist societies to a capitalist system' which 'initiated a shift in the forms of

exchange from utility to 'sign value', serving to 'detach objects from a concrete basis of meaning and transform them into signs' (112). Subsequently,

Everyday life became institutionally rationalized and incorporated into an amplifying system of sign values. New arrangements in the circulation of visual imagery [...] laid the foundation for the maturation of a sign economy. Economic and social prosperity [...] released advertising from the task of justifying consumption (126).

Jameson's thoughts in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* may extend this notion further. He asserts that:

Once upon a time at the dawn of capitalism and middle-class society, there emerged something called the sign, which seemed to entertain unproblematical relations with its referent (96).

The emergence of the sign is a result, Jameson claims, 'of the corrosive dissolution of older forms of magical language by a force which I will call that of reification'.

However, this reification, 'a force whose logic is one of ruthless separation and disjunction' which is 'the very logic of capital itself', extends, or in Jameson's words, 'continued unremittingly', so that:

His first moment of decoding or of realism cannot long endure; by a dialectical reversal it then itself in turn becomes the object of the corrosive force of reification, which enters the realm of language to disjoin the sign from the referent (96).

Subsequently, as Odih has similarly suggested, the disjunction between reality and the 'sign' leads to the signs' 'autonomy, [to] a relatively free-floating Utopian existence' (96). This is tantamount to what Odih calls the 'sign economy'; a space in which signs – and in this context specifically commodity signs – divorced from notions of realism and the possibilities of unproblematic decoding, are autonomous. Within the context of this essay and the context of consumer culture, the result of this is a 'sign economy' in which 'advertising has operated to colonize the social world and materialize desire' (Odih 113). This is witnessed in the Shell, Coca-Cola and Marlborough signs that the characters in the texts encounter.

It should be noted that nothing novel is achieved by situating *Lolita* against the context of consumer society, though it remains an important establishment. If the era which gave birth to *Lolita* saw the onset of a new form of consumerism, fuelled

by advertising's 'parcelling out of needs' (Odihi, 113), Wenders' 1980s saw, as Slater asserts, 'one of the most powerful rediscoveries of consumerism' (177). Slater explains how the 1980s

Heralded the subordination of production to consumption in the form of marketing: design, retailing, advertising and the product concept were ascendant, reflected in postmodern theory as the triumph of the sign and the aestheticization of everyday life [...] This consumer society is [...] profoundly about appearances. Materialism is neither good nor bad – it's all there is (178).

Both primary texts may thus be situated within what are recognisable as 'high epochs' of consumerism; *Lolita* at the formation and establishment of the sign economy, and *Paris, Texas* at its maturation. Each may be considered postmodern, by Jameson's definition, in lieu of the realities they necessarily reflect; indeed, when Cook describes *Paris, Texas* as a 'strong critique of postmodern culture' (123) he too subscribes to the definition of postmodernism as a periodising concept akin to the rise of late capitalism. That these texts should reflect the logic of what Jameson calls 'late capitalism' of which Odihi's 'sign economy' is a salient feature will become apparent in what follows.

There remains a further point to be made regarding the choice of texts. Just as Nabokov and Wenders' choice of American locations (America referring here to the United States) is not without reason, so too is the choice to study two European authors portraying America.

Firstly, America is home to the consumer society and is also responsible for the *spread* of consumerism and sign economy. Wenders, in *The American Dream*, writes:

No other country in the world has sold itself so much
And sent its images, its self-image
With such power into every corner of the world (119).

Subject to accusations of attempts to "coca-colonize" the rest of the mankind' (Cunliffe 324), America constitutes an appropriate location for texts confronting the realities of the sign economy, or, 'coca-colonization'ⁱ.

Yet America provides a fitting location for a further reason. As Edward Soja asserts, in the postmodern era

A distinctly postmodern and critical human geography is taking shape, brashly reasserting the interpretive significance of space in the historically privileged confines of contemporary critical thought (11).

Soja's assertion is echoed by *Lolita's* protagonist Humbert Humbert himself: 'It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones' (*Lolita* 16, subsequent citations indicated by *L*). Hugh Honour asserts how in the European imagination, America exists as an open space or blank canvas, citing Hegel as calling it 'a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe' (248). Wenders also asserts the open possibility America represents to the European mind, proclaiming America 'the greatest projection' (120). As will be seen, both Wenders and Nabokov utilise the spatial freedom America offers in portraits of an America that lack the 'nineteenth century obsession with history' (Soja, 11), instead allowing an America lacking in a specificity of 'place' (and the 'semantic density' history inflicts upon itⁱⁱ) mapped instead by the signs of late capitalism and the consumer society, producing what might be termed a 'homogenous landscape' (Entrikin 11). Entrikin, however, states that:

The term 'placelessness,' which has been used in reference to the creation of standardized landscapes that diminish the differences among places, signifies one aspect of the loss of meaning in the modern world. But 'loss' may be too strong a term. Meaning is both 'lost' and 'gained' in such landscapes (57).

This essay will contend that the landscape 'lost' to late capitalism in each text is a reflection of the postmodern realities of the sign economy identified in this introduction. Nevertheless, it will also contend that a 'lost landscape' allows for an open space in which to create new meaning, reflecting the logic of the sign economy.

Lost Landscapes

Totalitarian,

No other word to describe the rule of empty images

Over the country called 'America' – Wim Wenders, 'The American Dream' (143).

Concepts of 'space' and 'place', introduced above, require definition.

Agnew explains how space 'is general as opposed to the particularity of place. Space

is also understood as commanded or controlled, whereas place is lived or experienced'. Defining space as 'commanded or controlled' and 'general' as opposed to the 'particularity' (Agnew 4) of place is important. By eschewing the particularity of 'place' for the generality of 'space' in their portrayals of America, Wenders and Nabokov are privy to what Entrikin calls the 'particularly modern view' of 'our freedom to create meaning' (7). Wenders' title, *Paris, Texas*, with the geographical specificity it suggests, must be read as an ironic statement on the America he creates, as not only is 'Paris, Texas' never visited, furthermore, in this 'road movie', specificity of place is unimportant. 'Paris, Texas' is only encountered in a photograph as an empty space, a bare patch of desert: to all extents and purposes "it", as a geographically specific place, does not exist.

It is important to assert that the American space in each text is *created*; as Nabokov states: 'I was faced by the task of inventing America' (L 310). This is not to suggest pure fiction, rather his America is comprised of what Nabokov calls 'local ingredients' – ingredients allowing him to 'inject a modicum of reality', those 'postmodern realities' (Andrews 63) ascribed by the sign economy – rather than an inflexible landscape tied to geographical specificity. A distinction between "author" or "creator", (in our case Nabokov and Wenders) and the protagonists in each text who experience this space is important. Suzanne Fraysse asserts that 'there are actually *two* texts, Humbert's and Nabokov's' (93) and that the distinction is to be drawn between Nabokov's 'creational logic' and Humbert's 'representational logic' (97). The emphasis in this section is to demonstrate how both "creators", re-draw the American map to represent the realities of late capitalism, substituting its particular geographical landscape for a homogenous space defined by signs. This is akin to Guy Debord's assertion that

Capitalist production has unified space, which is no longer bounded by external societies. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization (165).

That this is experienced as a loss of meaning by their protagonists will become apparent in the conclusion to the argument presented in this essay.

In *Lolita*, Humbert confronts two alternative American maps. 'As a child in Europe', he recalls

gloating over a map of North America that had ‘Appalachian Mountains’ boldly running from Alabama up to New Brunswick, so that the whole region they spanned – Tennessee, the Virginias, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine – appeared to my imagination as a gigantic Switzerland [...] all mountain (*L* 208).

Humbert soon realises this landscape of ‘bluish beauties’ is ‘never attainable’ (*L* 154). Instead the ‘crazy-quilt of the forty-eight states’ (*L* 150) that he encounters is similar instead to a map he later finds, a map with ‘an unfinished outline of Florida and the Gulf’ (*L* 51). This map, with its ill-defined geography and lack of features anticipates the new homogenous America Humbert encounters. Nabokov’s creation of a spatially void America is highlighted in Humbert’s struggles to reassert the geography he knows and find “place” amongst the “space” Nabokov has created: ‘by putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give [...] the impression of “going places”’ (*L* 150). He is unsuccessful. The ‘twentieth Hell’s Canyon’, ‘fiftieth gateway to something or other’ and ‘one hundredth cavern’ (*L* 155) shows the homogeneity Nabokov draws. Humbert is forced to conclude, ‘We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing’ (*L* 173). Local specificity in Nabokov’s America is an impossibility, a problem for Humbert in his attempts to keep *Lolita* pacified:

Every morning [...] I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to [...] the object in view might be anything [...] but it had to be there in front of us, like a fixed star (*L* 149).

The source of this lost landscape is Nabokov’s populating this American space with commodity signs. Humbert’s comparison of this desired ‘fixed’ point to a ‘star’ is ironic as what really defines this ‘quilt’ is the neon glow of signs. A homogenous ‘quilt’ of uniform signs replaces cartographic specificity and mark the features that guides Humbert through the states; ‘If a roadside sign said VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP – we *had* to visit it [...] If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred’ (*L* 146). Motels, too, identifiable by the glow of their neon signs, constitute the real points of reference on the journey, and are similarly uniform:

In later months I could laugh at my inexperience when recalling the obstinate boyish way in which I had concentrated upon that particular inn with its fancy name; for all along our route countless motor courts proclaimed their vacancy in neon lights (*L* 116).

Debord's assertion that:

The *free space of commodities* is constantly being altered and redesigned in order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony' (166)

finds fruition in *Lolita*. Rachel Bowlby is correct when she writes of *Lolita* that:

The driving force of the novel's language, what pushes it from one motel to the next [...] is [...] its incorporation into the mass-cultural modes that make up *Lolita's* American world (172).

The eradication of a landscape and geography expected from Humbert's 'ancient American estampe' (*L* 27) is replaced by the presence of the autonomous sign economy.

One further point on this needs be made. It is through Humbert's European eyes that the onset of the sign economy, with its second generation of advertising in which, as Odih explains, adverts are imbued 'with an aura that extend(s) far beyond a notion of function' (105), is witnessed. This new 'aura' is that which forms the autonomy of the sign and allows its stark message ('VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP') to speak directly to the consumer. Yet as Evans asserts:

The European sensibility is profoundly uneasy in an Eden in which no knowledge is forbidden, where nothing is allowed to remain concealed, unspoken, unrevealed. For a world in which everything is openly displayed can finally come to seem rather two-dimensional to a mind that is accustomed to acknowledging the existence and value of unfathomed and unfathomable depths (59).

Brand, too, asserts that 'only Humbert the foreigner is able to resist the influence of these new and powerful forms of coercion' (14) which he achieves by stripping 'advertising [...] of any power [it] might have had over him by denying [it] the referential nature [it] claims' (16). European Humbert experiences the eradication of specific geography and replacement of a rich landscape with signs with a sense of 'loss' ('We had seen nothing'). This is due to his refusal to accept the message the commodity sign holds. This will prove an important establishment.

Wenders' *Paris, Texas* marks a maturation of the lost American landscape identified in *Lolita*. Critical consensus agrees; Gemünden identifies the film's reliance upon the features of the sign economy and their autonomous presence, stating:

The entire film is abundant with second nature: highway billboards, neon cowboys, motel signs [...] these images are presented [...] as a message into the void. (173).

The 'void' that Gemünden identifies is the American landscape. Wenders presents Travis's emergence from the 'void-like' desert – blank, empty of signs and unreadable. As the doctor at the Terlingua clinic asks: 'you know what side of the border you're on?', Wenders frames a shot of the clinic's sign (Fig. 1). The audience does know, because of the sign. Signs, it is established, are to prove essential in 'locating' Wenders' America.



Fig. 1. 'You know what side of the border you're on?' (*PT*).

Wenders' eradication of the geographical specificity of place is more severe than Nabokov's. Where Nabokov has built a "patchwork quilt" of signs for Humbert to explore, Wenders reduces his American landscape to a linear road between major cities. The highway from remote Terlingua to Los Angeles and from Los Angeles to Houston is all that exists between Terlingua and the two metropolises. Furthermore, it is a linear road walled on either side by signs, directing the flow of the traveller, just

as Humbert and Lolita found themselves directed by ‘VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP’. Beyond the highway and its signs exists a void.

On the journey to Los Angeles Travis attempts to leave the highway boundary established by the motel or commodity signs, prompting his brother, Walt, to ask ‘Mind telling me where you’re headed Trav? [...] There’s nothing out there’ (Fig. 2. *PT*).



Fig 2. ‘There’s nothing out there’.

Waking up in a town devoid of recognisable signs after allowing Travis to drive, Walt looks around lost; finding Travis, Walt asks:

Where are we Travis? [...] Why’d we get off the highway? Jesus Christ, I can’t even sleep for five minutes without some crisis, why’d you turn off? Angry at finding himself in ‘a place that doesn’t have a name’, the real source of Walt’s anger is panic at finding himself in a location *without any signs*, the signs which in Wenders’ portrait of America render the landscape knowable (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. ‘A place that doesn’t have a name’.

The reality, of course, is that every town has a name, even Travis’s patch of desert in ‘Paris, Texas’ has a place on the map. In Wenders’ America the specificity of geography is collapsed; it is the signs that matter. Kuzniar recognises this, too, as she states how in *Paris, Texas*, ‘direction is unimportant [...] what does count is the sheer flux of images washing over the windshield’ (225).

This proves Wenders’ aim as he replaces American geographical specificity with the presence of the sign economy. The Statue of Liberty figure painted on the wall of the peep-show in Houston (Fig. 4) is a case in point.



Fig. 4.

Placement of this iconic New York landmark, reduced to the status of two-dimensional image, highlights how in Wenders' America geography, landscape and landmark are reducible to signs.

The result of this is a set of images that 'masks the absence of a basic reality' (Baudrillard 'From The Precession of Simulacra' 1736), tantamount to lost meaning, what Jameson calls a 'postmodern hyperspace'. Travis's desire to return to the "void", similar to Humbert's thwarted desire to put the geography of the states into 'motion', is illuminated in Jameson's assertion that:

Postmodern hyperspace [...] has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment [...] can itself stand as the symbol [of the] incapacity of our minds [...] to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects (*Postmodernism* 44).

The ‘colonizing forces’ (Cook 122) of the sign economy have replaced specific geography and landscape, leaving protagonists to wander aimlessly from sign to sign. Yet meaning is not absent.

New Meaning: The Logic of the Sign Economy

‘Look, Lo’ I said quietly. ‘Look well. Is that not rather a good symbol of something or other?’ (*L* 224).

Andrews writes of *Lolita* that ‘Nabokov had designed the novel to elude his reader’ (1). Yet Nabokov, ‘the impassive gamester’ (Connolly 1), has also drawn America to elude *his protagonist*. Humbert, the foreigner, who distances himself from the “aura” and stark message of the commodity signs, is not privy to the reflected logic, true to Jameson’s assertion, by which Nabokov’s America is governed. ‘In my youth I once read a French detective tale where the clues were actually in italics’, Humbert states, ‘but that is not McFate’s way – even if one does learn to recognize certain obscure indications’ (*L* 209). The clues in *Lolita* may not be italicised but they exist in the form of the very features of the sign economy that Humbert ignores at his peril. Fraysse asserts that ‘Humbert is wrong when he ascribes the dimly felt pattern to chance resemblance’ (97). Indeed, in Humbert’s flight from Quilty, and subsequent attempt to find Lolita, his refusal to recognise the warnings Nabokov has woven into the signs that surround him is the reason for his failure. ‘We all have such fateful objects’, states Humbert,

it may be a recurrent landscape in one case [...] carefully chosen by the gods to attract events of special significance for us: here shall John always stumble; here shall Jane’s heart always break’ (*L* 209).

The irony of this is clear; Humbert’s continued focus on the lost American landscape and his refusal to conform to the logic of the signs leads him to lose Lolita; here, then, shall *Humbert’s* heart always break.

The concept of cognitive mapping introduced in Jameson’s earlier assertion may prove useful here. Cognitive mapping, Downs and Stea explain, is:

A process composed of a series of psychological transformations by which an individual acquires, codes, stores, recalls, and decodes information about the

relative locations and attributes of phenomena in his everyday spatial environment (9).

Furthermore:

The processes of perception and cognition that lead to predispositions to behave in certain ways toward object classes *as they are conceived to be* are termed *attitude*. The parallels between the concepts of cognitive map and attitude are marked [...]. We assume that knowledge of an individual's cognitive map is necessary to predict his spatial behaviour (14).

Humbert's cognitive map acknowledges lost geographical specificity of 'place': in its absence he recognises meaningless signs that homogenise the landscape. Thus his spatial behaviour with Lolita is tantamount to directionless movement from motel to motel. Sut Jhally makes an important point regarding the commodity signs Humbert encounters within the sign economy, in which he exists:

The construction of signs does not take place at the *denotative* level alone but includes also a *connotative* level [...] In the semiotic tradition this is referred to as the utilisation of *paradigmatic* structures of interpretation (which make use of resources outside the text) rather than strictly *syntagmatic* structures (based on a purely internal reading of the text) (140).

The commodity signs are not merely to be seen as syntagmatic, but rather as paradigmatic, holding external meanings. Stripping the signs of their value, Humbert locks himself out from the connotative meanings imbued in the signs which direct the flow of American life. To comprehend the autonomy of the signs is the clue to Nabokov's puzzle; but this eludes Humbert. As Dennis Cosgrove states:

To understand the expressions written by a culture into its landscape we require a knowledge of the 'language' employed: the symbols and their meaning within that culture (180).

Nabokov, as if to mock Humbert's stubborn refusal to follow the logic of the sign economy, imbues his signs with a meaning so transparent that the point cannot be lost. We may identify this in Humbert's recollections of his flight from Quilty:

What was happening was a sickness, a cancer, that could not be helped, so I simply ignored the fact that our quiet pursuer, in his converted state, stopped a little behind us at a café or bar bearing the idiotic sign: 'The Bustle: A Deceitful Seatful' (*L* 216).

This sign, clearly, is a signal of Lolita's deceit, yet he ignores it. In another instance Humbert recalls that

We had stopped at a gas station, under the sign of Pegasus, and she had slipped out of her seat and escaped the rear of the premises while the raised hood [...] hid her for a moment from my sight' (*L* 209).

The Pegasus, logo of Mobil Oil, might suggest Lolita's impending "flight" from Humbert, but it is also important to note that Lolita's rendezvous with Quilty are consistently drawn with some sign or logo vivid in the picture. Later, Humbert recalls how Lolita:

Had crossed over to the sign of the Conche in the next block. They said they were proud of their home-clean rest homes. These prepaid postcards, they said, had been provided for your comments. No postcards. No soap. Nothing. No comments (*L* 210).

Something is amiss. The sign of the Conche, logo of Shell Oilⁱⁱⁱ, might be expected to 'sound the alarm' to Humbert who, versed in classical mythology (referring to Quilty as 'a veritable Proteus of the highway' (*L* 226)), is surely privy to the fact that 'Triton, son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, played a trumpet made of a conch', as Alfred Appel Jr. reminds in *The Annotated Lolita* (410).

Thus Lolita, 'the ideal consumer' (*L* 146), whom Humbert recalls prior to their departure as 'studying tour books and maps, and marking laps and stops with her lipstick' (*L* 246), uses signs and logos to correlate her meetings with Quilty. Nabokov imbues these signs with what appear transparent warnings for Humbert. These are ignored by a European refusing to submit to the logic of the sign economy and therefore Lolita is lost. Bowlby asserts that Quilty is Humbert's opposite 'in every respect: he is American, popular, famous' (168). He is thus privy to the secrets of the sign economy Humbert ignores. Once Quilty has 'kidnapped' Lolita he mocks Humbert by leaving a trail of 'clues' he knows Humbert *will* respond to. 'One hardly had to be Coleridgian to appreciate the trite poke of "A. Person, Porlock, England" and "Arsène Lupin" was obvious to a Frenchman who remembered the detective stories of his youth' (*L* 248). It is, however, too late. Humbert's knowledge and ability to follow *these* clues, with referents in high culture, is irrelevant in Nabokov's America where the logic of the sign economy, the autonomy of the commodity sign, rules strong.

Where Nabokov's Humbert resists, Wenders' Travis submits. As Kolker and Beicken assert: 'Travis [...] follows a carefully made narrative trajectory' (116). This narrative trajectory is the linear path Wenders creates for Travis which follows his growing understanding of 'culture's ruling patterns' (119). Appearing from the void of the American landscape, Travis, like Humbert, finds himself in an America governed by the logic of the sign economy: the meaning and message of this location is in the signs that populate it. It is Travis' decision to yield to the power of the signs that results in his success in reuniting his son Hunter with his ex-wife Jane. To do this, Travis must submit. Indeed, as Kuzniar asserts, 'Receptivity would be too strong a term' to describe how Travis interacts with his environment; "'susceptibility" sounds better' (232).

Travis appears from the void-like desert and continues to attempt to return there until his brother Walt forces him along the linear highway. It is on this journey that Travis begins to conform to the logic of the sign economy. Fig. 5 shows the first scene in which Travis eats. That Wenders has shot this scene with Travis seated directly beneath a sign starkly bearing the word 'Food' is no mistake; Travis is beginning to respond to advertising's messages and allow himself to be directed by their pull. Walt recognises this progression; 'Before you know it you'll be back in the land of the living' (*PT*).

Baudrillard's thoughts on advertising are of relevance here. He states, 'the collective function of advertising is to convert us all to the code [...] The code is totalitarian; no one escapes it' ('A New Language?' 238). The 'code' he describes is 'a form of socialization, the total secularization of signs of recognition' (238). Travis's journey is an induction into this 'code'; a form of socialisation in which he learns to live according to the logic of the signs that guide his journey. Furthermore, he is a fast learner, and soon, in return for his submitting to the signs, their knowledge guides him.



Fig. 5. ‘Before you know it you’ll be back in the land of the living’.

The journey to Houston is marked by his understanding of this logic. To highlight this Wenders reduces a large part of this road narrative to a shot of a neon sign depicting galloping horses (Fig. 6), indicative of motion. Travis is now following the logic of the signs and thus the journey itself is reducible to a sign. The message is that Travis’ induction is complete. A successful comprehension of the logic the signs hold affords him a linear journey to Houston.

Thus Travis “succeeds” where Humbert “fails”; he recognises this new logic where Humbert resists. Both Nabokov and Wenders’ texts reflect the logic of the sign economy, allowing it to rule autonomously. Following and accepting that logic is the key to understanding, mapping and succeeding.



Fig. 6.

However, whilst recognising this new meaning in the age of the sign economy, both texts also hold a further message that in concluding this essay it is worth noting. As Cook states of *Paris, Texas*:

It suggests a postmodern condition that renders obsolete the heroic will of man in modernity. The individual who can forge his own identity [...] seems to be a relic of the past (127).

This is a statement easily applicable to both *Lolita* and *Paris, Texas*. The postmodern realities inflicted by Nabokov and Wenders upon their protagonists highlight the impossibility of self assertion within the “totalitarian” sign economy. Humbert resists and is haunted by the signs, seeing his own fate in their image: ‘I made out what looked like the silhouette of gallows on what was probably a school playground’ (*L* 239). Travis submits but at the cost of his individual will; he leaves the desert and his dreams of ‘Paris, Texas’ in return for the knowledge of culture’s ruling patterns, a knowledge tantamount to induction to a system that now controls him. Wenders perhaps offers the best example of the lost power of individuality in a shot in which Travis meets a man on a highway bridge (Fig. 7), impotently shouting at the cars beneath, his voice drowned-out and to be heard by no one. Fittingly, he is shot next to what appears as the back of a billboard. The sign economy, then, is not without meaning but the cost of it is the loss of individual autonomy.



Fig. 7.

ⁱ For an instance of Wenders' portrayal of Americanisation, see *Alice in the Cities* (1974) or *Kings of the Road* (1976).

ⁱⁱ Entrikin cites Chernobyl and Jonestown as example of locations imbued with 'semantic density'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although Shell Oil identifies its own logo as a 'Pecten' of scallop shell, Alfred Apple Jr. asserts in *The Annotated Lolita* that Nabokov's intention is that Humbert is confronting the Shell Oil logo, even though he incorrectly identified the type of shell as a 'conch' rather than a 'scallop'.

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