

# FORUM

University of Edinburgh  
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts  
Issue 10 | Spring 2010

<b>Title</b>	Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in <i>C'était un Rendez-Vous</i>
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<b>Publication</b>	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
<b>Issue Number</b>	10
<b>Issue Date</b>	Spring 2010
<b>Publication Date</b>	05/06/2010
<b>Editors</b>	Ally Crockford & Siobhan Fitzgerald

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## **Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in *C'était un Rendez-Vous***

Paul Krumholz, University of Edinburgh

Couldn't an exciting film be made from the map of Paris? ... From the compression of a century-long movement of streets, boulevards, arcades, and squares into the space of half an hour? - Walter Benjamin (83)

In 1976, Claude Lelouch mounted a steadicam to the front bumper of his Mercedes and drove through early morning Paris at breakneck speed, from Porte Dauphine to the Sacre Coeur Basilica. He titled the unedited eight-minute take *C'était un Rendez-Vous* ("It was a date") in reference to its final moments, in which a young woman emerges grinning—and relieved—atop the Montmartre steps to meet the driver. The title's simplicity is a red herring, and the film disavows it quickly. An introductory intertitle opens, stating plainly that the film we are about to see has not been manipulated, before dissolving into a forward-moving shot inside a pitch-black tunnel on Paris' périphérique highway. A rectangle of light grows from the centre of the frame, recognizable as the tunnel's exit, and, as the camera penetrates it, the soundtrack of engine noises and tire squeals kicks in. The proportions of the light box and the darkness around it give it the immediate appearance of a cinema screen, a connection cued doubly by the sound's synchronized introduction when we enter the space (see figs. 1-4). The analogy advertises a lineage of ideas that will emerge during the film, evoking Benjamin's quote and the city symphony film among an abundance of other theorists and works that have thematized the links between the fabrics of the moving image and the city.



Figs. 1-4: Emerging from a tunnel on the périphérique highway

*Rendez-Vous* likely departs from the film Benjamin envisioned in the introductory quote—it forgoes montage, Benjamin's literary technique of choice, for one—but it arguably realizes his suggestion. The camera does more than to depict the aesthetics of Paris' urban design in the film, in the same way that the city's design works harder than to just supply the image with content. Their visual and haptic modes commune, rather, to inform a single spatial-temporal system. The relationship shapes itself from a rich set of intertextualities: Paris' neoclassical design takes inspiration from Greek and Roman classicism, while the film's premise borrows from a diverse group of genres, recalling the car chase, most vividly, but also the non-narrative phantom ride and panorama travel films popular in cinema's early decades. This essay will use the film's exploration of cinematic styles and city space in order to explore elements of Paris' architectural, artistic and intellectual histories. It will map their connections in a constructive way, linking the film's aesthetics to both the principles behind Paris' urban design and the futurist movement in order to frame *C'était un Rendez-Vous* as a unique, sensorially and textually immersive experience.

The camera-car's spatial agenda, if we can assign it one, emerges first by exaggerating Paris' trademark design elements (see fig. 5). Its wide-angle lens, positioned low to the ground, makes the broad Avenue des Champs-Élysées appear even broader by allowing it to block out the frame's bottom half entirely. Though the car tracks a fairly linear path here, the proportions of the road suggest it could become omnidirectional, as its width in the frame almost triples its height.

The car realizes the potential, using the oncoming traffic lane at will. Likewise, the composition pushes the avenue's symmetry to its logical extreme, splitting the frame into equal quadrants, shaped by the horizon line, the dividing line between lanes and the trees that line either sidewalk. As in the tunnel and many of the compositions that follow, the image nominates a focal point at its direct centre in the Luxor Obelisk at the Place de la Concorde.



Fig. 5: Avenue des Champs-Élysées

The aesthetic elements emphasized here—the avenue's width, length, symmetry and sense of rational perspective—are key traits of the unified visual-spatial regime that emerged from Baron Haussmann's renovations in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Haussmannisation of Paris represented the largest and most comprehensive urban renewal project in the city's history, reforming and unifying architectural and urban design standards. To a large extent, the process shaped the architectural image with which the city has since become synonymous. Haussmann's design did not diverge drastically from contemporary Parisian architectural themes, though, as Anthony Sutcliffe notes. He writes that "classicism, far from being undermined, became a unifying force on a gigantic scale" under the Second Empire, alluding to both the size of the project and its tendency "towards exaggerated volumes" (86). The plan projected an architectural homogeneity across much of the city through newly standardised building proportions and façade designs, giving rise to the rectilinear views and archetypical apartment houses that appear frequently in *Rendez-Vous* (ibid. 93). Together, the changes realized a few related principles: a widened city space to accommodate new flows of people in a militarized and industrialized era, the empire's preoccupation with rationalist classical thought, the importance of stylistic continuity at all levels, and the unambiguous primacy of external

appearance. To give the illusion of a single unbroken structure, apartment houses' window grids were typically designed before their interiors and new façades were often made to conform to those of neighbouring buildings (ibid. 78).

The apartment-lined stretches of the Avenue de l'Opéra and Rue Halévy structure the film image similarly to the way the Avenue des Champs-Élysées does (see fig. 6). The image's composition splits into familiar rectangular forms again, with the Garnier Opera House taking the obelisk's place at the centre of the frame and perspective lines emerging from the apartment balconies to orient the eye toward it. Architecture and image work methodically to support a single cognitive mode here, suggesting a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of formal interplay. The sense of spatial and temporal unity created by the long take also accentuates the effects of the composition, reiterating its logical and linear progression of forms in real time. The interlocking rhythms induced by the succession of film frames and repeating apartment windows similarly sustain the connection. Sutcliffe quotes René Huyghe, director of the Musée Jacquemart-André, who summarises Paris' architectural continuity simply: "Do cities make sense? Paris certainly does!" (ix). *Rendez-Vous'* *mise-en-scène* concurs in shots like these.



Fig. 6: Avenue de l'Opéra

The compositional links between image and architecture dissolve and regenerate themselves each time the camera reaches the end of a street and turns down another. Although the film eventually reveals a final destination, *Rendez-Vous* spends most of its running time deferring to new objects of interest, relentlessly pursuing and discarding targets. The car-camera's logic notably breaks with the architecture's in these transitional moments by decentering Paris' landmarks, pushing them to the periphery of the frame and then beyond it. Though

destinations promise their attainability by placing themselves on display, they prove elusive; landmarks appear fixed from a distance, but, as the camera approaches them, it is unable to distinguish between their textural elements, transforming the clean lines of Paris' ornately detailed architecture into a mirage of ambiguous colour and form (see fig. 7). The process is of course constant, if more striking in these particular moments. Outside of the frame's centre, this textural narrative plays itself out continuously, fixing and unfixing visual details of apartment houses, street scenes and the pavement more rapidly and more repetitively. This fissure between the visual modes embodied in the image—between its dual tendencies toward rational assembly and abstraction—alludes to a number of other discourses.

The futurists' aesthetic ambitions announce themselves here full-throatedly. *Rendez-Vous'* textural malleability finds a kindred spirit in particular in the time-lapse photographs of Italian artists like Anton and Carlo Bragaglia and Mario Bellusi, who similarly sought to visualize the transmission of space through time (see fig. 8). The futurist movement, as laid out by its most vocal founder, Filippo Marinetti, looked to "the complete renewal of human sensibility" through a representation of the forms and rhythms of modern technology and the industrialized metropolis (Tisdall and Bozzolla 8). The futurists "rail[ed] against the anachronism of ... museum cities," of which Paris was certainly to be counted, and "turned their backs on the sheltered life of the cultured intellectual," instead emphasizing speed, mobility and efficiency (ibid. 121, 8). *Rendez-Vous* never gets to see the Mercedes that pushes it forward, but the film fetishizes its power nonetheless. If anything, the film enhances the attraction by keeping the car out of sight but in close proximity. Andrew Webber, following Laura Marks, writes that "visual primacy [can be] set in a potentially productive tension with the more subaltern sensory faculties," which the film fulfils. By limiting the audience's field of vision, the camera invokes a bodily sensation each time the car runs a red light. Unable to track potential collisions from left or right, the viewing body instinctively, responsively tenses up in anticipation.



Fig. 7: Blurring the Église de la Sainte Trinité (left)  
Fig. 8: *Modern Traffic* (1930) by Mario Bellusi

Likewise, the mechanics of the car are felt rather than being seen. Some of the film's most dynamic moments occur in the brief periods in which the car slows down and a more defined texture returns to the image's foreground, evident especially during sharp turns. As the car decelerates and lurches toward the ground, the camera brings the pattern and materiality of the pavement into view, inviting touch and likewise reaching out to touch the viewer (see figs. 9-10). Importantly, the film derives its haptic element from a race between its two moving parts, the car and the camera. Moments of clearly defined texture occur when the camera's film reel accelerates relative to the speed of the car, allowing it to fix its environment more rigidly on the celluloid. In our spatial understanding of the film, we might consider that the significant unit of measure here, rather than frames per second, is frames per metre. The synthetic and synaesthetic art form envisioned by the futurists is realized thoroughly in this conception, which translates mechanics through vision, and vision into movement. Giuliana Bruno relates the connection, writing that "As a sensory interaction, the haptic is...related to kinesthesia, or the ability of our bodies to sense their own movement in space" ("Motion and Emotion" 23) When the film renders the foreground hazy, it imbues us with a sense of speed and movement, but our spatial grounding—our ability to locate ourselves within the environment—erodes. Like Bellusi's photograph *Modern Traffic*, *Rendez-Vous* depicts the city as a wash of continually superimposing forms, simultaneously present as objects and palimpsests. In this way, the viewing body and architectural bodies assume multipresence, defying the principles of total order invoked by Haussmann's urban design. By privileging the tactile experience, moreover, the film undermines the architecture's tendency toward ocularcentrism.



Figs. 9-10: Patterns and texture on the street coming into view

In this regard, the car-camera's treatment of the city takes on some of futurism's violent pitch, calling to mind the movement's self-described "attack" on the era's cultural forms and values (Tisdall and Bozzolla 18). As a site that readily advertises its affinity for Graeco-Roman classicism and its revival by the intellectual class, Parisian architecture seems especially vulnerable. The sentiment manifests itself more viscerally, as well: the force of the car, vocalized by the aggressive sounds of its engine, physically threatens the environment and its inhabitants. Keeping a toe outside the realm of aesthetics, it is crucial to remember that Lelouch was arrested by Parisian police after first screening the film in 1976 ("C'était un Rendez-Vous"). Though he often slows the car in the film to preserve pedestrians' safety, the car is nonetheless a disruptive force. (Incidentally, *Rendez-Vous* was shot at dawn to minimise the danger of the operation, as city authorities denied Lelouch's request to block off streets for filming.) By providing such an immersive, sensory experience, the film encourages its viewers' complicity in the car's aggression, as well. When a nervous pedestrian steps back from its path or a group of pigeons scatters, we are reminded that the car's and our unseen phantom body is, in fact, solid, and our viewing position loses some of its passivity.

While futurist architecture was never realized on scale with the movement's ambitions, *Rendez-Vous* suggests the possibility of modernising Paris' static 'museum' aesthetic via its hyperkinetic energy and the new mode of perception it entails. Painter Carlo Carrà introduced the idea of the "Polyphonic Architectural Whole," calling for an architecture "found in the movement of colours" and in "structures when they are expressed in states of mind which are violent and chaotic" (Tisdall and Bozzolla 124). The futurists envisioned their design as part of a bigger city-machine apparatus, in which "habitation and communication systems were to be fused into a whole" and "every aspect of city life was to be...centralized into one great powerhouse of energy" (ibid. 128). Although Haussmannian Paris already conceived of each of its avenues and neighbourhoods as representative cells of the DNA of its whole, *Rendez-Vous'* mode of



perception totalizes Parisian design and space more completely. It offers a uniform view and sensation throughout, and, likewise, its speed overcomes the scalar limitations written into the city by its planners. We navigate 25 minutes' worth of Paris in only eight, evoking a filmic logic of montage without ever breaking the shot.

This desire to totalize Paris also calls to mind the goals of early cinema's sight-seeing travelogue films. *Rendez-Vous* takes the scenic route to Montmartre, guiding us past a handful of the city's most historic locales: the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre and the Sacre-Coeur Basilica in addition to the Opera House, and the Place de la Concorde, which we have already come across. The film complicates the tourist experience by moving so quickly and with such a static perspective, though. The effect is akin to the superficial quality of a vacation snapshot, which conveys the touristic hubris of desiring but being unable to capture a foreign environment. That Paris' own façade features so prominently as a compositional element in the film strengthens the notion. Bruno connects the travelogue film to the phantom ride film, writing that, in the latter, the camera becomes "a spectatorial means of transportation" (Atlas 20). We might expand the idea, relating the function of the travelogue similarly. While the phantom ride visualizes travel at a small scale, the travelogue evokes it at a large scale, alluding to a physical and cultural distance between the spectator and the destination depicted. The two genres were often combined, as *Rendez-Vous* does, doubly invoking travel.

Bruno locates cinema and the city at a more general intersection, as well, thinking of them both as machines of reproduction, a short distance from the futurists' conception. Paris' reproduction in the film is largely a product of Haussmann's unified design, replicating itself from apartment window to apartment window, block to block and neighbourhood to neighbourhood, as well as from era to era, and, on film, from viewing to viewing. It reproduces more than its form, though; it reproduces modes of seeing, of moving and of interacting. The map film suggested by Benjamin in the quote that begins this essay gets to the point more directly, implying patterns of movement intrinsic in the architecture of the city at large. In the futurists' language, the city functions as a *locomotive apparatus* in itself, creating and controlling streams of movement in the spaces between its static forms. *Rendez-Vous*, of course, embodies a highly individualized type of mobility, which becomes and remains interesting precisely by departing from traditional ways of experiencing the city.

The thought summons Benjamin's flâneur, the bourgeois walker who consciously and

subconsciously engages the text of the city by strolling through it. As an act, *flânerie* is passive but perceptive, the privileged ability to simultaneously write and read the city as a hobby. In thinking of the *flâneur's* evolution into other types in the modern era, Sherman Young conceives of the *driveur*, a figure for whom "the urban environment is largely aesthetic distraction" (1). He writes that, among films, *Rendez-Vous* best encapsulates the *driveur*: "The city is mere geography; curves and hills for cars to speed around. Where nineteenth century Paris was the *flâneur's* domain, *Rendez-Vous* demonstrates one of his mutations" (8). If not wholly convincing, the comparison is nonetheless provocative. Although the film certainly appropriates the city space for its own uses, it does not reduce its structures to "mere geography," nor is it apparent that its viewer is "distracted from the streets and buildings of the City by his re-location within the...space created by the film's point of view" (8). While the film finds a cathartic pleasure in obscuring Paris' important landmarks, it also puts them on display, crafting its own compositions from the city's built ones. Young describes the *driveur* as a figure concerned by destination rather than journey, which *Rendez-Vous* contradicts by presenting the journey as a sensorially immersive experience in itself. And though the camera-car does not assume the *flâneur's* aimless gait, it does not track an especially efficient path either, as a route map shows (see fig. 11). More important in Young's statement is the implicit observation that *Rendez-Vous* ignores Paris' street life, which is the *flâneur's* primary attraction. If the film has an equivalent interest, it might be in the actual act of mapping.

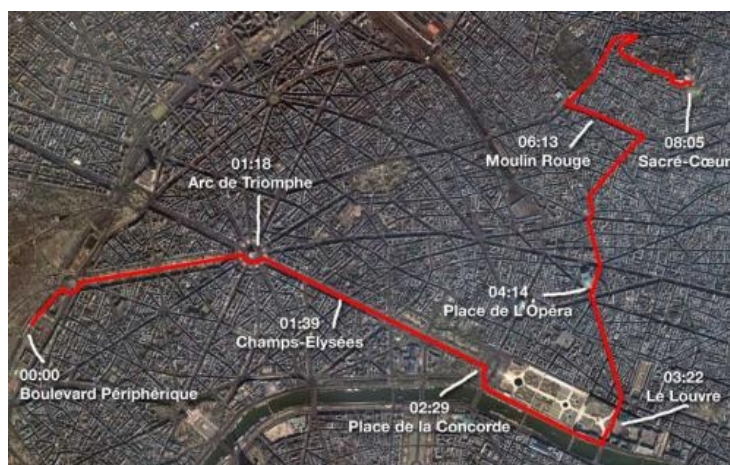


Fig. 11: Route map (Encore un blog)

Mapping as a practice creates strange effects in *Rendez-Vous*. By fixing its sight directly

ahead, the film turns the two-dimensional map above into a one-dimensional progression of locations, so that the Garnier Opera follows the Louvre, which follows the Champs-Élysées, all in a straight line. The disorienting effects are such that it can be difficult at any given moment to discern where the other landmarks are in lateral relation to each other or to the car. They remain, instead, either "behind" or "ahead," ambiguous terms that serve as much as temporal markers as they do spatial ones. The film finds its greatest bond with the flâneur, in this sense, by championing the subjective urban experience. Crucially, both flânerie and *Rendez-Vous* imply a very specific kind of subject. Benjamin's flâneur lacks a particular destination because his social status frees him from the working routine that impels the crowds in the arcades. Likewise, *Rendez-Vous* derives its freedom from Lelouch's privilege, both in the particular mobility of his Mercedes and in his special position as an artist and a public figure. It is worth noting that, after his arrest, Lelouch was let go without punishment because the police chief's children loved the film ("C'était un Rendez-Vous"). Mapping, as a spatial practice, is thus socially inflected, begging the question of who is allowed to map and what their maps might resemble. Perhaps the film's escapist viewing position makes room for class fantasy, as well. Interestingly, *Rendez-Vous* does not completely lose the overhead map's panoptic, omniscient impulse. On the contrary, the car climbs a significant height in its wind up to the Basilica Sacre Coeur, but the film's vertical axis is mostly obscured by the camera's street-level view so that the final shot overlooking Paris arrives as somewhat of a surprise (see fig. 12). As the film's final destination, this more totalised view of the city resolves the tunnel vision of the preceding eight minutes. The moment narrativises the film retroactively, suggesting that the view is an eventuality, the logical conclusion of the car-camera's efforts all along.

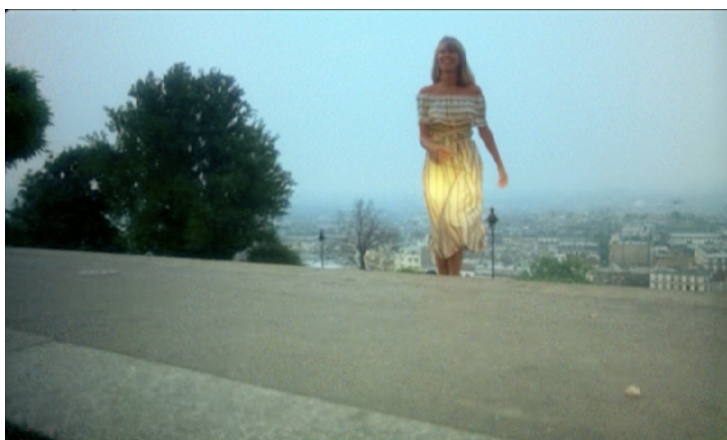


Fig. 12: The final shot, atop the Sacre-Coeur steps

A particular spatial language links the physical and the social here: one speaks of class mobility, 'position,' and 'standing,' terms that realize the fullness of their meaning in *Rendez-Vous*. Tom Conley offers the possibility of synthesizing these somewhat disparate observations, mapping superimposed physical and social planes in *Cartographic Cinema*. He works via Gilles Deleuze's concept of discursive and visible formations, reading film as a diagram, or in Deleuze's words, "the cartography co-extensive with the entire social field" (12). *Rendez-Vous*' first important discursive formation emerges in the spatial-aesthetic principles envisioned by Haussmann during his renovation of Paris, which he sought to manifest in the visible formation of its architecture. Its second discursive formation appears in the city's traffic laws, which exhibit themselves in the lane markers, traffic lights and speed limits on the road. They are both, in other words, social texts that take shape in Paris' physical environment. The former achieves its goals by creating specific modes of perception, while the latter does so by prescribing a set of behaviours and designating a particular body of authority. By way of their collaboration, the architecture and traffic codes begin to realize the city's potential as a locomotive apparatus, producing a particular flow of movement and a specific method for interpreting it. *Rendez-Vous* derives its weight, evidently, from its ability to speak to the film environment's discursive formations by engaging with its visible ones.

Conley invokes Michel de Certeau's 'tactics' to account for the way in which unanticipated behaviours can draw connections between discursive and physical maps in order to bear new points, in Deleuze's words, "'of creativity, of mutation, of resistance'" (13). Importantly, the car's tactics—understood as its speed and disinclination for traffic codes—take on this textual meaning only secondarily. They are foremost rooted in the film's haptic qualities, or in its ability to engage the viewing body first at a sensory level. The film locates Paris' roads and architecture at a discursive level by literally starting from the ground up, translating the visible corpus of the city through the corpus of the viewer. As such, *Rendez-Vous* begins as an immersive experience and grows into a textual practice, mobilising, at the site of cognition, a glut of emergent ideas. The connections that the film draws between Paris' discursive and visible formations are thus what give *Rendez-Vous* its polyglot quality. The shapes created therein resemble others: neoclassicism, futurism, bourgeois flânerie and a proliferation of film microgenres. To exercise Benjamin one last time, we find that *C'était un Rendez-Vous* is indeed "a film made from the map

of Paris," if a pleasantly hectic one. Through it, the film orients not just "a century-long movement of streets," but also a centuries-long movement of some of the creative forms and critical discourses bound up directly and indirectly in the city's history as an intellectual, artistic and tourist site.

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