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The Dream Scene and the Future of Vision in The City of Lost Children and Until the End of the World

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Abstract: In her article, "The Dream Scene and the Future of Vision in *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World*," Donna Wilkerson-Barker examines how these films investigate the place of imagination (or representation) in postmodern visual culture through their portrayal of technologized vision as an obstacle to experience. Drawing parallels between the dream scenes in these films and virtual reality and cyberspace, she argues that image technologies in *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* lead to a dissociation of experience from corporeal reality, a dissociation that is ultimately linked to a loss of vision (understood as sight and imagination). Exploring the question of how image technologies affect the way we see and relate to the world in depth, these films interrogate the foundations upon which we construct experience and make meaning from it as well as our potential for productive social engagement in the future.

Donna Wilkerson-Barker

The Dream Scene and the Future of Vision in *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World*

What would happen if the content of our dreams became the stuff of television? *The City of Lost Children*, co-directed by French filmmakers Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, and *Until the End of the World*, directed by German filmmaker Wim Wenders, confront us with this as yet unrealizable scenario in their portrayal of two scientists on a mission. On the surface, these films could not seem more disparate. *The City of Lost Children,* released in 1995, is a highly fantastical allegorical tale about a scientist who abducts children in order to steal their dreams. Set in a timeless surreal cityscape and populated with grotesque, hallucinatory characters, the film has been described as "the sort of universe children might dream of if they've had Perrault tales read to them while they're delirious with the measles" (Romney 29). In contrast, *Until the End of the World,* released in 1991, is more realistically embedded in postmodern culture; cast as a science-fiction love story that takes place in 1999 in the midst of an impending nuclear disaster, the film revolves around a scientist who seeks to restore vision to the blind, chief among them his wife. His mission involves sending his son on a "dance around the world" to collect material that he urgently needs for his experiments; the world that we see in the film is a logical extension of the present; "it's the technology-dominated future of videophones and videofaxes and computerized cars … It's a toy world with its boundaries opened up" and within which characters move "as if they were pieces on a giant game board" (Hinson <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/untiltheendoftheworldrhinson_a0a732.htm>). Upon closer analysis, however, *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* are similar in their complex use of advanced technology as central plot and theme. Indeed, the question of how image technologies affect the way we see and relate to the world lies at the heart of these films, interrogating the foundations upon which we construct experience and make meaning from it. Ultimately, in their portrayal of technologized vision as an obstacle to experience -- understood here as our (emotional) relation to reality and the (sensory) nature of our engagement with the world or "the possibility of being touched by the unknown" -- the films investigate the place of the imagination (or representation) in visual culture and the potential for productive social engagement in the future (Robins, *Into the Image* 29).

    The City of Lost Children and *Until the End of the World* share many of the same preoccupations in their approach to visuality. Drawing on predominantly visual aesthetics and centering their stories around the problematic of vision itself (understood here in the sense of sight and imagination), these films recognize one of the most striking paradoxes of postmodern visual culture: the more sophisticated technologies of vision become, the less we are able to truly see. For if, as Nicholas Mirzoeff comments, "Human experience is now much more visual and visualized than ever before," it is also true that "the visualization of everyday life does not mean that we necessarily know what it is that we are seeing" (1-2). This state of metaphorical blindness, brought about through the high-speed global circulation and consumption of (virtual) images, is a byproduct of the time-space compression that characterizes perception today. As Andreas Huyssen explains, in postmodern visual culture, "a sense of historical continuity or, for that matter, discontinuity, both of which depend on a before and an after, [has given] way to the simultaneity of all times and spaces readily accessible in the present" (253).

    The City of Lost Children and *Until the End of the World* foreground this experience of deterritorialization: in each film, audiences inhabit a world that is both familiar and strangely dislocated, a world that is both here and nowhere. In *The City of Lost Children*, as Jen Webb and Tony Schirato describe, the "buildings, machines, street lights and other aspects of the cityscape all seem to be made of the same material, and to merge into a largely undifferentiated mass" (58). In like fashion, *Until the End of the World* -- which begins and ends in space -- evokes the postmodern city as a largely undifferentiated mass via a telescoping of time and space, for even while the characters travel

to nine different cities in nine different countries during the film, their high-speed trajectory renders the cityscape uniform. In Gerd Gemünden's words, "the cities of Paris, Berlin, Lisbon, Tokyo, and San Francisco all look alike, resembling in their gratuity the sets for James Bond thrillers. They are the mere backdrops for the speedy chase across countries and continents, leaving neither time nor space for the camera to discover, that is, to see" (216).

Evoking the discourse on cultural homogeneity that has often been problematically associated with the globalization of mass media, *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* openly acknowledge the logic of commodification that informs the proliferation of images today. This logic finds its ultimate expression in *The City of Lost Children* in the film's representation of mindless (mechanical) reproduction: the scientist aptly named "l'Original" and his six identical clones whose existence shatter the very concept of origin and individuality; the Octopus, conjoined twin sisters whose symbiosis is so absolute that they function as a single person; and the Cyclopes, a fundamentalist cult whose members dress alike and elect to be blinded and then outfitted with a prosthetic eye in an attempt to flee "the world of appearances" to form a superior race, are prime examples. Engaging directly with Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal and the culture of the simulacrum, and conjuring up scenarios that resonate with those of the global modern (such as trafficking in children and religious fundamentalism), *The City of Lost Children* presents a world where appearances proliferate according to their own logic. In *Until the End of the World*, the globalized marketplace surfaces as "a world of fluid identity, multiple languages, shifting genres, proliferating plots, and complex interlocking networks of information and capital" (Berger 8). Significantly, the primary way the multiple characters relate to and keep track of each other in this film is through the money they spend or the money they need -- when credit cards are used, computer tracking software lights up; when the main protagonist Claire phones home, it is only because she needs money. Indeed, both films highlight the predominant role of money and consumerism in social interactions, presenting consumption as the driving force of social organization.

If Caro, Jeunet, and Wenders go to such great lengths to represent modern consumption, it is because *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* document, in Kevin Robins's words, a "fundamental transformation in the epistemological structure of our visual culture," (156) one that has emerged in the rise of digital culture and the so-called death of photography and the cinema and that has resulted in a substantial devaluation of the image and its connection to subjectivity, truth, and experience. As Robins describes, "Digital technologies put into doubt the nature and function of the photograph/image as representation. The essence of digital information is that it is inherently malleable … Through techniques of electronic montage and manipulation, what we once trusted as pictures of reality can now be edited and altered seamlessly and undetectably. … Whole new vistas are opened up for the manufacture of fakes, fabrications and misinformation" ("The Virtual Unconscious in Postphotography" 156). Images today function as a sort of currency, to be fabricated, used, sold, or manipulated at will. More importantly, in their suppression of and substitution for the real world, image technologies are facilitating greater detachment and disengagement from the world. As Baudrillard explains in *La Transparence du mal*, while screened images simulate direct contact with the other, "the other, the interlocutor, is never really involved: the screen works much like a mirror, for the screen itself as locus of the interface is the prime concern. … This is communication in its purest form, for there is no intimacy here except with the screen, and with an electronic text that is no more than a design filigreed onto life" (12). Given that "modern life takes place onscreen" (Mirzoeff 1), and considering a wide range of examples from reality shows to postmodern warfare, we can agree with Robins when he claims that "vision is becoming separated from experience" (*Into the Image* 13). Nowhere is this more apparent in *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* than in their representation of dreams which, as they move from the depth of the unconscious mind to the flat surface of the screen in the form of digital images, become mere objects of consumption akin to virtual reality, cyberspace and television. Linked not to self- actualization or the revitalization of

collective life but rather to solipsistic asocial drives, dreams in these films reflect a collapse of vision that ultimately leads to the obstruction, if not repudiation, of experience. This scenario is exemplified in *The City of Lost Children* through the character Krank, an artificially constructed being and scientist who lives in the ordered, simulated world of his laboratory with his "family" -- clones and other forms of artificial life that are represented as his mother, brothers and uncle. At safe remove from the violent chaos of the human world, Krank has but one problem: he cannot dream and is therefore dispossessed of a soul, an imagination and empathy. As a consequence, he is aging rapidly. His solution to the problem closely resembles the empowering scenarios offered up by vision technologies such as virtual reality and cyberspace, which shield us from physical contact with the Other and enable us to transcend the fear of the unknown (the Stranger, Death) by providing us with an insulated environment open to our manipulation and control: Krank has invented a machine that enables him to project himself into a child's dreams so as to appropriate them and, in the process, substitute himself for the child thereby reversing their positions -- Krank would become young again, the child would age prematurely. Krank's invention, like virtual reality and cyberspace in theory, gives him ultimate power: not only can he see and manipulate that which has never before been seen, but he has access to an environment where he is delivered from the constraints and defeats of physical reality and the physical body; this omnipotence grants him the ability to appropriate another's experience and, in so doing, control his own death. To acquire the children he needs to conduct experiments with his invention, Krank has recruited the services of the Cyclopes, cyborgs who kidnap children and trade them for another of Krank's inventions: a mechanical or "third" eye that, when inserted into the users' flesh, can enable them to see despite the fact that they are blind. Engaged in mining the dreams that are necessary to their survival, what the Cyclopses and Krank have in common is their quest to transcend their physical and psychological realities through the technological mastery of vision, a desire that is ultimately linked in this film to the fragmentation and even destruction of society.

Until the End of the World inscribes similarly the fantasies of omnipotence associated with new vision technologies through the character Henry Farber. Like Krank, Henry lives cut off from society, isolated in his lab remotely located in the Australian desert. His singular ambition is the technological control and mastery of vision; to this end, he has created a machine that can record and transmit the neuro-chemical event of seeing. Henry's invention, because it can make the blind see and allow people to record and watch their own dreams, puts him symbolically in the position of God, a position he openly admits when, in viewing his son Sam's dreams for the first time, he describes the experience as "the human soul singing to itself, to its own God." Henry's desire drives the main plot of the film: having originally invented the camera with the protection and funding of the United States government, Henry decides that he cannot accept the uses to which it will inevitably be put. He therefore "steals" the camera and goes into hiding with his blind wife, Edith, an anthropologist. They hide amongst the Mbantua people, an aboriginal society with whom they have established family ties, living together as brothers and sisters. The Farbers' children originally think they are dead. Sam, their only son, manages to discover the truth and, once reconciled with his parents, is sent by Henry into the world to capture the images of family members whom, because of the Holocaust and the onset of blindness, Edith has been unable to see since the age of 8. Sam, and through him Claire and a whole host of other secondary characters, thus become part of Henry's quest. Their existence is reduced to nothing more than the drive to record and extract images. Henry's invention is itself an incarnation of disembodied vision (tele-vision), for even while a person must wear the camera to first record the images and later to view them so that they may be configured digitally, the vision that is extracted and subsequently implanted or screened is neutral, that is to say devoid of senses, of the bodily experience of seeing. This has radical implications for the construction of meaning and experience, for as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has explained, vision involves our corporeal involvement in the world: "the enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. … It is not a self through transparence, like thought, which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into

thought. It is a self through confusion, narcissism, through inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees, and through inherence of sensing in the sensed" (qtd. in Robins, *Into the Image* 135). Within this existential framework, vision is inherently relational: "Meaning is generated through a re-ciprocating motion between subject positions: between immersion in the visible, which is open to the indeterminacy of the world, and the detachment of elucidation, reflection, interpretation" (Robins, *Into the Image* 135).

Henry's invention, like Krank's, creates a direct connection between technology and the human nervous system; it therefore elides the embodied aspect of seeing and forecloses the space required to make meaning of visual experience. The technological inventions of these films, like those of virtual reality and cyberspace, enable users to transcend the body by creating a mind-to-mind interface; in Stelios Arcadiou's words, "it is no longer meaningful to see the body as a *site* for the psyche or the social but rather as a *structure* to be monitored and modified" (qtd. in Mirzoeff 120). Irvin, the brain in *The City of Lost Children* who floats in an aquarium in the lab and who was created as a confidant for his creator, "l'Original," is a figuration *par excellence* of contemporary screen gazers' dissociation of experience from corporeal reality—a dissociation that is specifically linked to technologized vision in both films through a range of devices that not only mediate vision, but serve constantly to underscore the troubled relationship between seeing and knowing or seeing and experiencing. Obstructed experi-ence also manifests itself in *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* through the alter-nating conditions of blindness and seeing; the loss of memory; and the fact that although vision is presented to us viscerally -- we cringe when the Cyclopes implant their mechanical eyes or have them violently torn out; we feel pain when Sam's eyes are infected and he becomes temporarily blind -- the characters' predominant mode of being is that of isolation or detachment. Vision technologies, these films suggest, have facilitated, in Giorgio Agamben's words, "the expropriation of experience," and the subsequent "imposition of a form of experience as controlled and manipulated as a laboratory maze for rats" (16). This is certainly the case for Edith Farber, for while it could be argued that her husband Henry is obsessed with conquering vision in order to restore her sight, his disregard for the effect it has on her, and the excessively technological and not emotional way in which he goes about restoring her vision, makes his wife's experience no more than an experiment: she is his lab rat. It is not sur-prising that Edith dies as a result of Henry's work; in substituting her memories and imagination for digital images, Henry effectively deprives her of the very space she needs to make her life meaningful. For, as Robins explains, electronic images replace the imaginative space of representation with the immediacy of presence; "there is immersion (shock, stimulus, emotion), but there is no subjective location from which to effect the (psychic or creative) transformation of experience: "The viewer is incorporated into a quasi-disembodied 'meta-world,' experiencing 'a purely spectacular, kinetically ex-citing, often dizzying sense of bodily freedom.' The temporality of the electronic image is that of the instant -- which can also be, countless times, instantly re-run … (and, consequently, it produces not memory but forgetfulness). In this placeless and timeless meta-world, one may feel intensities of af-fect -- the euphoria of electronic presence -- but at the same time, there is a weakening -- numbing -- of the real emotions that depend on a grounded and embodied existence and connection with, and commitment to, a real world of objects" (*Into the Image* 141-42).

Abandoned to the immediacy of presence brought about via electronic images, Edith withdraws into a state of non-experience (the typical conception of blindness as a handicap or deprivation is thus reversed and revalued here: Edith's blindness connected her to her experience in the privileged space of the imagination and thus constituted a paradoxical gift); she dies because she has lost her hold on the world. The same could be said of Sam and Claire who, once they begin to consume their own dreams, become so intoxicated with these phantasmagoric projections that they completely withdraw from the world. Theirs is the position of contemporary screen gazers who -- in their consumption of reality shows, virtual reality, and cyberculture -- participate in the world through the construction of alternative realities filled with "feelings and sensations, at the expense of reason, analysis, reflection …

A narcotic is made out of reality itself; there is sensory distraction through a compensatory reality" (Robins, *Into the Image* 121). Visual captivation here leads to metaphorical blindness -- an inability or even a lack of desire to see and experience the world as it is. From within this context, it is clear that the dream scenes in *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* are linked to a loss of (personal and social) vision. Dreams -- perhaps the ultimate signifiers of hope, potential, imagination, and self-awareness -- are stripped of their aura and their ability to inspire us; rather they are transformed into commodified images to be extracted, consumed and manipulated at will. What is at issue in the deterritorialization of dreams from their subjective and bodily origins is the very possibility of transformative experience and imaginative investment in the world.

What would happen, then, if the content of our dreams became the stuff of television? *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* suggest that this may have already taken place. Setting their stories in the global system of late capitalism, these films highlight the degree to which images function not to communicate experience, but rather to create experience as a commodity. Claire's tendency in *Until the End of the World* to record her surroundings with a hand-held video camera instead of experiencing the physical world first-hand is a particularly apt example of the way images in technoculture configure the individual consumer's dream which, it its turn, comes to stand for that individual's model of life experience. For John Berger, it is precisely this commodification of experience that leads to the denial of the social function of subjectivity and, indeed, to the repudiation of experience itself (or, in Agamben's words, the "destruction of experience"), for in such a system, "all subjectivity is treated as private, and the only (false) form of it which is socially allowed is that of the individual consumer's dream. From this primary suppression of the social function of subjectivity, other suppressions follow: of meaningful democracy (replaced by opinion polls and market-research techniques), of social conscience (replaced by self-interest), of history (replaced by racist and other myths), of hope -- the most subjective and social of all energies (replaced by the sacralisation of Progress as Comfort)" (100).

As cautionary tales, *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* require that we take a closer look at the broad cultural effects of devotion to the (commercialized) image and its impact on forms of sociality. The fragmentation and dissolution of the family -- the classical locus of socialization -- in both films is illustrative in this regard since it suggests that whatever the gains of an image-based culture may be, the losses may come at too high a price. Among such losses, as Christine Rosen comments, is the capacity "to distill the deeper meaning of common experience. We will become a society of a million pictures without much memory, a society that looks forward every second to an immediate replication of what it has just done, but one that does not sustain the difficult labor of transmitting culture from one generation to the next." From this perspective, Henry Giroux's work on the exploitation and socialization of children and youth by commercial consumer culture and on "the lack of public spaces and sites for the young to develop agency and learn democratic and cooperative social relations and values in an increasingly commodified and privatized culture and society" provides an interesting parallel to the representation of children and childhood in *The City of Lost Children* and, to a lesser degree, in *Until the End of the World* (Kellner 146).

If these films constitute a form of critical discourse on the obfuscations of screen culture, however, they also remind us that a space of redemption persists. For as these extremely high-tech films demonstrate at the level of their own production, the remedy to what ails contemporary visual culture lies in the images themselves, that is in their ability to, in Wim Wenders's words, "correct bad habits of seeing" such as those encouraged by television and consumer/corporate society. In this respect, for Wenders, the latest advance in the field of vision -- High Definition Video (which he was one of the first filmmakers to use) -- "has the historic opportunity … to come up with a less terrorist, and a kindlier, more human way of seeing" precisely because it could potentially "sharpen our sense of reality" ("High Definition" 357-58). It is not the technological innovation that is valued here by Wenders but rather the uses to which it will be put: "High Vision could balance the loss of reality by the gain in im-

age resolution. The loss of reality is a serious affliction for civilization. … 'High Vision' will one day be judged for its moral effect on vision" and for the way it answers to "the human need to see and to be informed about the world" ("High Definition" 357). What is at stake in visual culture and in the stories of *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* is our ability to remain open to creative and critical ways of seeing that bring us into meaningful and imaginative contact with reality; "it is about our capacity to be moved by what we see in images" (Robins, *Into the Image* 159).

Such open ways of seeing are inscribed in *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* through the eyes of children and artists, two groups closely associated symbolically with visionary powers. In *The City of Lost Children*, the child-heroine Miette, an orphan, is the only person capable of seeing through the corruption that surrounds her to recognize genuine love and affection; the relationship between the child-like One (who is portrayed as fully adult only at the level of his anatomy) and Denrée, the little boy he finds in a garbage can and who becomes his little brother, represents the only example Miette has ever seen of authenticity (One's association with an extreme physicality and Denrée's association with pure appetite are interesting in this respect since they represent the embodied or "real" level of experience that is occulted by the larger cultural framework of the film). Prepared to sacrifice her life in order to become a part of this atypical family, Miette helps One to save Denrée by entering into the simulated dream space in order to protect Denrée from Krank. When confronted with Miette's self-sacrificing vision of hope for the future (represented by her willingness to die in Denrée's place), Krank is unable to maintain control over the dream experiment and he dies. The other abducted children are, in turn, liberated from the dream laboratory, which is destroyed in the final sequence of the film by its creator. Whether this liberation will lead to social revitalization or engagement remains, however, ambiguous. At the end of *The City of Lost Children*, two boats filled with survivors are rowing toward the future: one boat contains Irvin, the brain in the aquarium, and the six clones (who are now, ironically, orphans themselves); the other contains Miette, One, and all the abducted children. This metaphorical separation between a technologically produced and rationally envisioned society (the "family" constituted by artificial life forms) and humanity itself leaves the audience questioning precisely what the future holds -- how do we imagine societies of the future to be; what is our (moral) vision for humanity?

In *Until the End of the World*, the future of vision also remains an open question. On one level, the film questions society's ability to maintain cohesive relationships in the face of the invasive force of images: virtually all of the film's primary relationships -- those between husband and wife; parent and child; brothers and sisters; and lovers -- are destroyed. In fact, childhood itself is present only through its own sacrifice -- memories of lost childhood are precisely what surface in the dream images Sam and Claire consume so obsessively. Wenders, like Jeunet and Caro, turns to childhood not as a return to innocence but rather to recuperate a certain openness toward the world, a different way of looking to reveal new possibilities. As he explains, in his films, "children are present as the film's own fantasy, the eyes the film would like to see with. A view of the world that isn't opinionated, a purely ontological gaze. And only children really have that gaze. … Children have a sort of admonitory function in my films: to remind you with what curiosity and lack of prejudice it is possible to look at the world" ("Perceiving Movement" 323). The loss of childhood in *Until the End of the World* amounts to the elimination of a vital component of vision. On another level, even as the film presents the devastating effects of society's addiction to (commodified) images, *Until the End of the World* also suggests that older, simpler forms of art (such as literature and painting) and community (such as that provided in the film by the "adopted" aboriginal family) can provide contemporary screen gazers with a framework by which to understand their experience in contemporary visual culture. In curing Sam and Claire of the "disease of images" by having Sam draw, paint and participate in an aboriginal healing ritual and by having Claire read a book about her own experience, Wenders is not embracing a technophobic view of postmodern visual culture or expressing nostalgia for tradition; rather he is suggesting that positioning oneself critically and imaginatively in relation to visual culture requires contextual-

ized ways of seeing. In other words, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam remark, dealing with images "depend[s] on a certain cultural or political preparation that 'primes' the spectator to read [and look] critically. … while disempowered communities can decode dominant programming through a resistant perspective, they can only do so to the extent that their collective life and historical memory have provided an alternative framework of understanding" (354).

In globalized late capitalist culture, however, "collective life" and "historical memory" are rapidly changing if not vanishing forms of experience, as *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* amply illustrate. What, then, will provide the basis for the cultural or political preparation that is necessary for the development of resistant perspectives? If the dystopian and post-apocalyptic set-tings of these films are any indication, visions of a better way of life may be difficult to imagine, but not impossible. Like Miette rowing toward her uncertain future, and Claire floating in space surveying the planet Earth, audience members at the end of *The City of Lost Children* and *Until the End of the World* must open their eyes and confront the impoverished visions of contemporary technoculture if we wish to revive our experiential connection and engagement with the world.

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