

# "Keeping Them Peeled": *Falling Down*, Vision and Experience in the Modern City

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"What are you doing out?"

"Walking," said Leonard Mead.

"Walking!"

"Just walking," he said simply, but his face felt cold.

"Walking, just walking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Walking where? For what?"

"Walking for air. Walking to see."

Ray Bradbury, *The Pedestrian* (Bradbury, 1953: 11-12)

## Introduction

In 1845, Friedrich Engels published the results of his peripatetic journey around the UK, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. The book's subtitle, *From Personal Observation and Authentic Sources*, suggests Engels spent much of his time looking around the city, as any decent urbanist should. What he found, as is well known, provided Marx with much of his empirical material for the *Communist Manifesto*, published three years later.

Engels observed how the rich mansions of the Manchester bourgeoisie were connected to the heart of the city by a regular omnibus. From the bus he noticed how difficult it was to see any of the city workers, on whose backs, presumably, the rich had got rich. "I have never seen," he declared, "so systematic a shutting out of the working-class from the thoroughfares, so tender a concealment of everything that would affront the eye and the nerves of the bourgeoisie, as in Manchester" (Engels, 1973: 86). "The finest part of the arrangement," he claimed, was that:

the members of this money aristocracy can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of business without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left (85).

Engels is sending us two messages here. The first, as Andy Merrifield (1996: 57) has pointed out, is that the rich really don't care about the poor as long as they remain out of their sight. But of equal importance, Engels is suggesting that to grasp what is really going on around us, it is necessary to get back on one's feet and into the streets, to peer round corners and behind walls. It does us little good to be cocooned in a vehicle, insulated from the environment outside; we need to get out and about.

Joel Schumacher's 1992 film *Falling Down* charts a day in the life of someone who does exactly that: D-Fens (real name William Foster, and played in the film by Michael Douglas) abandons his automobile in Los Angeles gridlock and sets off on foot. He heads for the house of his estranged wife and daughter, which he still conceives of as home even though he is prevented by a court order from going near them. A far-from-complicit city stands in his way, and Foster erupts with increasing anger, that produces increasingly serious consequences and culminates in what was effectively a suicide at the hands of the police.

Issued in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, the film has provoked some heated debate concerning its central message. On the one hand, Douglas and Schumacher seemed to endorse the right of the white middle-class male to be furious. African-Americans, according to the director, were "not the only angry people in the United States" (Salisbury, 1993: 77). In a climate of "political correctness", white-collar unemployment and heightened concerns over bilingualism and immigration, the need for "ordinary Americans" to find a voice seemed evident, as cover stories of magazines like *Newsweek* suggested. On the other hand, the way this voice was manifested in *Falling Down* hardly seemed progressive and, moreover, could be construed as downright racist and sexist. This is not just the case for Michael Douglas' character either: "good cop" Robert Duvall's moment of greatest satisfaction comes from finally putting his neurotic wife in her place. As several writers have noted, Foster's odyssey does little to overcome glaring contradictions within the film's paean for the "victimized" white male (Mahoney, 1997; Davies 1995a, 1995b; Rose, 1993). Yet, notwithstanding these objections, I want to explore the extent to which *Falling Down* supports Engels' conclusion: it is only by abandoning his vehicle and immersing himself in the city that Foster can begin to make sense of the world around him. He can understand nothing stuck behind his steering wheel.

Through his journey Foster grapples with questions that have exercised the minds of many chroniclers of the urban condition. The first is the impossibility of "going home". As Berman (1983: 333) concludes, "our past, whatever it was, was a past in the process of disintegration; we yearn to grasp it, but it is baseless and elusive; we look back for something solid to lean on, only to find ourselves embracing ghosts."

Second, the film says much about the question of space and its privatised nature in the modern city. Foster's trek involves a series of spatial conflicts of the kind identified by Jane Jacobs (1961) under the rubric of "turf". Yet it also highlights an inextricable relationship between turf, space and mobility, made clearer through a comparison with Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) in which a not dissimilar protagonist (though, as I will argue, the differences are greater than the similarities) wages war on society. The fact that Scorsese's film is set in a more compact New York which we experience largely from the inside of a moving vehicle deepens the contrast, and I will explore the extent to which *Falling Down* can be construed as specifically Californian.

Finally, the film reminds us of the temporary nature and uncertainty of many of our positions within modern urbanity. As Davies (1995a: 224) puts it, in the final scene the main determinant is economics. The modern economy is increasingly capable of throwing any of us into the "whirlpool" (to borrow from Engels once more) at very short notice. The transition from being useful to use-less is so rapid as to be bewildering, as Foster discovers at great (and fatal) cost.

The point, though, is that it is only through engagement with the streets that these issues are brought to a head. Such engagement, for me, moves beyond the well-worked constructions of *flanerie*, with its specific emphasis on strolling, that has been the subject of film criticism in general (Friedberg, 1993) and applied to Schumacher's film in particular (Fox, 1998). *Falling Down* is more the latest in a long line of narratives from Dostoyevsky's to James Kelman's whose characters have used the city streets as a testing ground on which their souls may be laid bare. The conflicts and contradictions so often found in the streets are the lifeblood not just of the city but of humanity itself. We need to continue to engage with those streets. To pretend they aren't there not only runs the risk of glossing over potentially catastrophic forces with a disingenuous veneer of stability (as in the case of much modern "city marketing") but also prevents us from approaching anything close to a convincing comprehension of the world around us. It is *Falling Down*'s ability to remind us of these essential issues that make it such a valuable film.

### **Home is where the heart is**

*Falling Down* is constructed around three characters: Foster, his ex-wife Beth (Barbara Hershey) and cop Prendergast (Duvall). There is no scene in the film in which at least one of these characters is not involved and the plot develops through jumping from one to another in a way that allows, as Rose (1993: 52) argues, their details to unravel very gradually. One other person of note is Prendergast's wife (played by Tuesday Weld).

The film's opening presents Foster in the nightmare of a sweltering traffic jam. A long tracking-shot moves from a close-up of his perspiring face, out of the windscreen and around his car taking in a series of staring non-white children, irate businessmen and a symbolic Stars and Stripes draped from a school bus. The intensity of the staring faces recalls the opening of Fellini's *Eight and a Half* (1963) as well as Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980). Like the protagonists in those two films, Foster has to escape such claustrophobia and, since his car is going nowhere, he finally snaps and abandons it.

We are then immediately introduced to Prendergast, who is on his last day on the force, having decided to take early retirement. He and his wife are moving to Lake Havasu City in Arizona, infamous as the site of the transplanted London Bridge (the millionaire who shipped it across the Atlantic thought, of course, that he was buying Tower Bridge). The bridge, as the old song says, may be falling down, but Lake Havasu City has nothing of the problems facing Los Angeles. The retirement is, in short, an escape, mainly instigated, one is led to believe, by Duvall's neurotic wife and the traumatic loss of their daughter to Infant Mortality Syndrome.

"Home" and the return to it is a first, major theme of the film. In fact, "I'm going home" are Foster's first words having deserted his vehicle: "Clear a path, motherfuckers! I'm going home," he screams at two of his assailants/victims. Home, it transpires, is not the abode he currently shares with his mother in Pasadena but his former marital one in Venice Beach. It is

his daughter's birthday and thus it seems perfectly natural, he informs his estranged wife, for him to come home to celebrate. His daughter seems to agree: late in the film she is genuinely excited when "daddy" appears, in contrast to her petrified mother.

Home, however, is more than a geographical location, though Prendergast's ability to plot it on a map helps him track Foster cartographically through the city. Home, for both men, is also a state of mind. It is a place where Foster believes that he was once happy, though old home-movies reveal the ease with which such happiness shifted to familiar and unpleasant domestic bickering (and implied violence). Equally, for Prendergast, home is something he aspires to *re-create* in the move to Lake Havasu City. Inevitably, home connotes female domesticity, nurturing, care and safety for both characters: the respective wives remain static appendages whose only connection to the outside world is the telephone. Indeed, Davies (1995a: 223) identifies "home" in this sense as an area of male working-class power when defeated in the public sphere, a construction he sees as straight out of classic Engels.

For Foster, the search for home is of course fruitless, but it is articulated in the presentation of what has been lost. "Guess what," he asks his wife, "they turned our ice-cream parlour into some kind of Southwestern American New Age kind of thing." Yet the sense of loss is also felt by Prendergast, who is eventually forced to shoot Foster into the Pacific. Though his ultimate dialogue with Foster is an obvious attempt to stall for time, it is loaded with nostalgia for a world long gone. The two concur that the town is "sick". The cop used to fish off the pier on which they stand at the film's climax, a particularly contemplative pastime. Now fishing is impossible, due to pollution. Swimming is too, as one could end up with some form of bacterial infection. Indeed, with their foreboding of imminent environmental catastrophe the two men seem to bond around the kind of shared Angeleno paranoia recently conjured-up by Mike Davis (Davis: 1998).

As Sibley (1995) points out, emphasis on the pathological has a long history in attitudes toward the city. Travis Bickle, the avenging cabbie in *Taxi Driver* notes how the streets are "sick, venal; some day a real rain will come and wash the scum off [them]." Equally, Prendergast is told by his superior that he is "up to the neck in human scum every day." Like Bickle, and his need to "rescue" purified innocence in the form of a child prostitute, Foster and Prendergast need to recapture their former carefree days from the horror of 1990s Los Angeles. But, of course, they (and we) can't go back. Just as Foster's odyssey to his former home proves to be his undoing rather than his salvation, so Prendergast realises that his home is in the here and now, and not in some mythical re-creation in the Arizona desert. To his credit (and to complete the story) Prendergast stays on the force and deals with the city as it is, not as it may once have been.

## **Turf Wars**

Foster's straight-line odyssey-on-foot brings him directly up against the territorialised nature of 1990s Los Angeles. Thirty years ago, in her path-breaking work on American cities, Jane Jacobs pointed out how the concept of turf had moved from the "hoodlums" into the planning concepts of urban design. "Islands within the city" or "cities within the city" became the norm, reinforced by stricter lines of demarcation. "At first the fences were never visible," Jacobs writes, "but in the past few years [they] have become literal" (Jacobs, 1961: 57-58). Most recently have come a plethora of security-driven devices, from gated communities to private armed-response teams, from neighbourhood watch to community covenants that

homogenise a district. At the same time, maps of American cities, especially the poor areas, can be redrawn according to gang jurisdiction (Davis, 1992).

What is intriguing about Foster's spatial conflicts is the sense of progression involved, and the concomitant increase in the sophistication of the weaponry he uses to deal with them. The first involves a clichéd encounter with two Latino gang members. Foster has failed to read the "no trespassing" sign posted by graffiti. "If you wrote it in fucking English perhaps I'd understand," he tells them. Wielding a knife, one of the youths demands that Foster pay a "toll" (his briefcase) to allow him safe passage. Eventually reacting with fury, Foster displays his army training, attacks the youths and forces them to flee. They are to return later packing a car full of heavy weaponry with which they fail to exact revenge on Foster, but manage to decimate a city street. Having crashed the car in the process, the gang are unable to stop Foster making off with their guns.

The second conflict involves a similar, though less dangerous, dispute with a homeless man in MacArthur Park. Originally spinning a yarn in an attempt to get money, the man is incredulous at the depth of Foster's questions. Resorting to insults, he tells Foster: "you walked into my park"; the latter advises the man to get a job. Leaving the park, Foster attempts to board a public bus, the only alternative form of transport he tries to take. Waiting in the queue, he is forced to rub shoulders with more "others" - African-Americans, Latinos, the old, and the poor. As the bus pulls up, he is jostled and knocked, not an unusual experience on any major city's transit system but enough to put him off the venture, and quickly abandons the idea. The rest of the journey he conducts on foot.

Foster's third encounter is a wickedly funny scene on a private golf course. Attempting to take a short cut across a fairway, he is nearly mowed-down by a golf ball, driven by an ageing player. The player is furious that someone is "on his hole"; what does he pay his annual fees for? "Fore," the golfer yells, to which Foster replies "Five," pulling out a sophisticated rocket-launcher. Collapsing with a suspected heart attack, the ageing golfer is afforded little sympathy. "Oh dear," Foster remarks, "now you're gonna die wearing that stupid hat."

In a final example, Foster climbs into a wealthy garden, cutting his hands on the razor-wire fence. The gardener, who is having an illicit family barbecue, originally mistakes him for the private security. Foster harangues him about the dangers of such fencing while wondering aloud how "plastic surgery" (the homeowner's career field) "could buy all that."

Foster's perception of the forces standing in his way thus progress beyond encounters with the poor. The early conflicts with the Latino gang-members and homeless man indicate his gut reaction, and rather obvious Hollywood stereotyping of "undesirables". Several techniques are used to underscore the alien nature of the environment: continual background radio chatter in non-English languages, menacing music, and the whirl of unseen helicopters, not exactly an unusual sound in Los Angeles but in filmic terms a connotation of Vietnam. The alien theme is most explicit in Foster's racist harangue against a Korean storeowner whom he accuses of overcharging (a scene that provoked enthusiastic applause in some Los Angeles cinemas). As Davies (1995a: 232) notes, it is no accident that the argument that initially sets Foster on his rampage concerns a perceived overpriced can of Coca-Cola. The drink signifies everything that is definitively American, and the excessive price the extent to which its associated values have been "polluted". During the ensuing melee, one of the first things to be knocked over is a cup holding small replica American flags.

People, and even worse "other" people, are in Foster's way, something that he, with his hitherto assumptive dependence on untrammelled freeway mobility, finds in itself completely alien. With the Latinos he attempts an understanding formed no doubt from his reading of the newspapers; "This is a gang thing, right?" he asks at one point. But his conception of why he is being challenged is limited. He is "not surprised" that his would-be assailants are angered at his intrusion into their "pissing ground" just as he wouldn't like "their sort" wandering around in his backyard.

Foster is still "going home", perhaps in his mind "back to 1965," the date to which he "reverts the prices" of the Korean shopowner. If this is so, his encounter with the homeless man in MacArthur Park belies how much his world had changed since then. The park is pregnant with "others" - Aids sufferers, Vietnam paraplegics, non-English speakers. Foster's dismissal of the homeless man is as complete as that of the Latino gang members. His questions are straight from the conservative op-ed sections: "Let me see your driver's licence if you've got a car"; "Let me see your vehicle registration"; "why don't you get a job?" He is irritated at having to deal with the homeless man, but still his responses are little more than splenetic.

From this point, however, Foster has no more encounters with the urban poor and is moreover increasingly harassed by representatives of the rich. By the time of the golf course incident, the target of his anger has widened considerably. Indeed it has correspondingly deepened. His diatribes against the gang members and homeless were gut reaction; his verbal assault on the pensioner golfers is more sophisticated. He is incredulous that so much space in the city can be fenced off just for their "stupid little game." "You should have children playing here," he yells, "families on picnics, a zoo. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

In other words, it is not solely the poor who are preventing him from going home. The evocation of community and familial images of picnics and zoos indicate that Foster can find nothing in even the "safe" areas of the city that closely resemble home. Indeed, the continued "unattainable" status of home is indicated by the increasingly dangerous weaponry he employs in his spatial encounters. He attacks the gang members with a baseball bat, a rudimentary weapon stolen from the Korean shop owner. By the end of the film he is opening up with a heatseeking missile, as city-government construction bars his way. The escalation in the level of weaponry matches his psychological distance from home (even as he draws physically nearer), and the degrees of drastic action he feels required to redress the imbalance.

### **The Transition to "Otherness" - Ditching the Car**

Just before forcing Prendergast to shoot him, Foster is aghast at discovering his standing in the cop's eyes. "I'm the bad guy?" he asks in astonishment. "How did that happen?" He had done everything they told him to; he had helped build missiles to protect America. He, the fairly ordinary, white, professional Angeleno, had finally metamorphosed into the "other". The inability ever to go home is thus complete. Foster has been rendered an alien within the landscape of his former family's "favourite place" - the end of the pier. The brutal reality of the situation does at least shake him into one saving sacrifice. Threatening Prendergast with a gun (that turns out to be a water pistol) Foster presents him with an ultimatum as the pretext for a Western-style draw: either the cop gets killed (impossible, as it transpires) or Foster gets killed and his daughter gets his life insurance (which would have been negated had he committed suicide).

Yet Foster has been metamorphosing into "the other" all along, just as his "business" attire is substituted for the G.I. Joe-look. His change of clothes marks the "point of no return" with which he threatens his wife. Foster has just committed his only murder, that of a neo-Nazi (an obvious ploy by Schumacher to distance his protagonist from any accusations of similar political leanings). During the preceding scuffle Foster literally shoots his own reflection in a mirror, thus effectively killing his former "normal" personality and emphasising that there is no turning back. By the time he reaches the private golf course, he has thus become the undesirable - the outraged member's partner "doesn't like the look of this guy." As such, he now has more in common with the "excluded" of society than the "included".

The key moment in this respect is when Foster happens across an African-American protestor outside a Savings and Loan institution. Holding a placard, the man delivers a speech to passers-by informing them of his "not economically viable" (the words on his sign) status. "There goes a man with a smile," he says, pointing at an emerging customer. "He must be ECONOMICALLY VIABLE." Eventually the police are called and the man is arrested. "I'm going away now," he informs by-standers. As the police car pulls off, his eyes meet Foster's square-on. "Don't forget me," he tells him. The latter nods in acknowledgement.

This episode, I would argue, represents an epiphany for Foster. Up to that point, one may have supposed he would lump the protestor into the same category as the other "undesirables" he has encountered. But he does not forget the man. Indeed, before the end of the film he will co-opt his language. "I lost my job or it lost me," he tells the plastic surgeon's gardener. "I'm overqualified, underskilled, obsolete...I'm not economically viable." In other words, by the end of the film Foster has come to realise that he is not the only victim. Prendergast, as the cop tells him, has suffered too, through the death of his daughter. But, more importantly, the Savings and Loans protestor has provided him with the words to articulate his position precisely. The connection between the two is underscored, subtly, by the use of the same music. Just as a lone trumpet accompanies the protestor's arrest, it also sounds Foster's death knell as he lays in the Pacific Ocean. As a piece of junk floats past his body, his transition from the valued to the flotsam of society is complete.

## **Travis Bickle v William Foster**

*New York Times* critic Vincent Canby suggests that *Falling Down* is a quintessentially American film, indeed, it is more particularly Californian, with its "mix of identity politics, unemployment and 'coloring'" (quoted, Clover, 1993: 9). If so, it would cast doubt on the universality of the film itself and of its relevance to Engels' more general desire to force confrontation back onto the streets. One way into this area is to compare it to *Taxi Driver*, as more than one critic has done - Rose (1993: 53), for instance, asserts "they [Schumacher and Douglas] clearly wanted to make a *Taxi Driver* for the nineties, to update the toll of urban stress on the 'working man's' psyche."

The similarities are clear: both protagonists embark on a spree of mayhem, part driven by outrage at the pathological state of society; both films are redolent with the explicit and implicit legacy of Vietnam; the protagonists share a common misogyny; suicide is the ultimate sacrifice, though Bickle's attempt fails when his gun jams. Finally both films *appear* representative of a particular time and place: *Taxi Driver* of cash-stripped, garbage-strewn New York of the 1970s; *Falling Down* of post-riot, racial inferno Los Angeles of the early 1990s.

I want, however, to draw some distinctions between the two films. The first is that Bickle is obviously seriously disturbed from the start, taking a job because he cannot sleep. His monologue dictation (which sounds more like Confession) has the ring of Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, embarked upon a chain of thought that has inevitability in its existential, violent conclusion. In contrast, Foster, though clearly troubled (travelling everyday to a non-existent job - quite where he has actually been going is indeed a mystery) is forced into violence. There are no pre-meditated violent acts on the part of Foster in *Falling Down*. Compare that to *Taxi Driver*, where Bickle sets off to achieve his five minutes of fame through the murder of a Presidential candidate and then, having failed in that attempt, attacks the pimps. Though Foster's behaviour is clearly inexcusable, there is an undoubted element of comedic fantasy about his reactions. As John Gabriel (1996) notes, the narrative of the whole film is based around specific episodes and how one reacts to them, episodes that Clover (1993) dubs "Everyone scenes", in which any of us could get irritated and want to lash out, if only in our minds (the Whammyburger confrontation is perhaps the best of these). Overcoming his frustration often involves an enactment of fantasy by Foster more akin to Walter Mitty than the kind of will to power espoused by Bickle.

A second major difference is the extent to which Foster externalises himself in contrast to Bickle's internalisation. One illustration can be found in the two major poster-shots used for the two films. Foster standing on a hill looks almost superimposed, as Gabriel (1996: 130) notes, onto the background of downtown LA. Bickle, shuffling along the sidewalk, appears fully integrated into the grainy New York environment. But whereas the latter has his head down, lost in contemplation, Foster is surveying his surroundings, no matter how incongruent in them he may seem. A second, more developed example is the differing camerawork techniques. In *Taxi Driver*, the most resonant shots are through the cab window, with the taxi acting as a dolly, that, as Martin (1997: 89) suggests, fuses the perception of the viewer with that of Bickle himself. "Travis' journey through the mean streets of New York," he continues, "becomes, by extension, a journey through his own troubled psyche, an impossible quest for spiritual purity and integrated identity" (Martin, 1997: 84). This sense of fractured identity is reinforced by his continual use of mirrors not just to look at himself but to observe the world around him. As a result, that world is always mediated through the distortion of the car mirror or windscreen. As much as Bickle tries to understand it, it remains increasingly opaque and unintelligible. The world maintains the status of object, with Bickle the subject of change. His final solution is hence totally disproportionate (so much that Scorsese was forced to make the blood seem fake for fear of the censors).

In contrast, the number of point-of-view shots in *Falling Down* is limited. The most repeated technique is for the camera to revolve around Foster, with him standing stock-still. This renders him both *in* the world but *of* it also, as both subject and object. Rather than descend into the narcissistic turmoil of Bickle, Foster struggles, above all else, to make sense of his own position *within the world as it is*. Bickle's blurred, refracted view is juxtaposed with Foster's sharp, clean-lined features often shot from below against a brilliant blue sky. The irony is that these images contrast with their respective views of the world. Bickle is unequivocal in his belief that "action" must be taken; Foster is much more confused and uncomprehending. It is only in the final scene that he comes to terms with his situation.

### **The Californian Paradigm**

The final obvious difference between the two films is the question of mobility. Bickle spends most of his time in his cab; Foster walks. There is an ironic symmetry here: New York is one

of the few American cities that remain "walkable" (in size at least); in Los Angeles, as Reyner Banham (1971: 23) noted, it is necessary to learn to drive to "read [it] in the original." It is doubtful whether *Falling Down* would work as a New York film - it is Foster's pedestrian status that makes him conspicuous - yet this does not necessarily confine it to Southern California.

In his influential work, *Edge City*, Joel Garreau (1991: 3) declares "Every single American city that *is* growing, is growing in the fashion of Los Angeles." This theme corresponds to the broad conclusions of various urban theorists who identify the metropolitan area as the defining region of the nation, if not the world. For Ed Soja (1989: 193), "Los Angeles seems to be conjugating the recent history of capitalist urbanization in virtually all its inflectional forms." Meanwhile, Manuel Castells and Peter Hall (1994: 188) claim "Southern California first emerged from entrepreneurialism and innovation linked to a new kind of urban culture." Most famously, Mike Davis (1998; 1992) paints the city as a formative hybrid of fortress paranoia, ecological disaster and clear spatial demarcation between rich and poor.

Even allowing for the excesses of Davis' vision, Los Angeles is clearly considered paradigmatic (importantly, Davis [1999] has also highlighted the city's bellwether status in the Latinisation of American urban areas). But does this also mean *Falling Down* can be credited with wider applicability by implication? I would argue that it could, on two counts. The first concerns the ease with which Foster's "uneconomically viable" status takes hold. The connection between the Savings and Loan protestor and Foster gives the film a relevance that is both specific and universal. In the shakeout of the California defence industry and in light of the worst recession in the state for fifty years, Foster was no doubt representative of real-life, highly qualified people who were suddenly consigned to the scrapheap. At a wider level, the fact that Foster has moved from indispensable to disposable in a matter of weeks strikes a resonant chord for many in the current climate of downskilling, out-contracting, short-termism and worldwide employment-insecurity. Of course not many of us would react to such misfortune in quite the same incendiary way (and real-life ex-defence workers protested over the film lest anyone think Foster was too representative). But the pathos of Foster's muttered question "do they have correspondence courses in plastic surgery?" speaks volumes to those of a similar age who are suddenly obsolete and in sudden need of re-training. This is hardly a problem unique to California.

The second universal aspect of the film is that Foster would not have been aware of the full implications of his position and how it fits into the wider scheme of things if he had not got out of his car and engaged with the streets. By getting out of his car, Foster moves from the world of the mobile (predominantly that of the unfettered choice of the private motorist) into that of the immobile. His world up to this point represents Banham's "autopia", consisting of a series of freeways, freeway signs and traffic jams. Only by leaving behind the car, literally and metaphorically, is Foster able to begin his odyssey across a city that he quickly finds unrecognisable.

Mobility, in other words, is of fundamental importance to the experience of cities. But mobility is not a fixed concept: one person's speed is another's sloth. Speed of transport is a luxury provided only to those who can afford it. With increased speeds of communication, it is important to grasp how the differentials between the mobile and immobile have increased in recent years at a global level. In a more mobile, urban, geographical setting, those without access to cars are increasingly those without access to the most basic requirements of

existence: jobs, shops, health and education services. And those without access to cars tend to come from the marginalised spaces of society: the poor, women, ethnic minorities.

In short, the spatial ghettoisation pinpointed by Davis that has long been a feature of many cities has been exacerbated by the new emphasis on high levels of mobility. William Foster, a man who worked in the defence industry of Southern California, has been locked in to a transportation network that privileges the affluent over the unaffluent. As Walzer (1986: 472) observes, "The more privileged we are, the more quickly we move from place to place, the less time we spend in public. The ideal is door-to-door: private airplane, helicopter, limousine." Like many of his peers, Foster would be able to live and die in Los Angeles without ever coming into contact with the urban poor. Yet by getting out of his automobile, he moves into the world of the immobile and is able to see and experience a side to the city hitherto unknown to him. In doing so his own predicament becomes externalised, as his eyes tell him that it is not unique. Richard Sennett (1990: 123) notes how Baudelaire thought "the modern city can turn people outward, not inward...in the presence of difference people have at least the possibility to step outside themselves." Foster, ultimately, steps outside himself and realises he has much to share with the other sufferers of the planet. But he needs to leave his automobile to do so: as Berman (1996: 164) puts it, "so long as [such sufferers] don't see each other, they are bound to feel totally isolated and smashed by the whole structure of the world."

### **Conclusion: The Vision Thing**

The journey back to a place we once called home is a familiarly modern refrain. In recent years it has come to animate the political rhetoric of, say, Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Bill Clinton with their evocation of simpler, safer days of yesteryear. Yet the truth is there is no going back. How many of us have returned to our old haunts, only to find them obliterated - the shops closed, the bus routes unrecognisable? Facing up to this often-painful realisation is an important step in comprehending our place in the world. This is why the right-wing politics that often accompany nostalgic conceptions of "heimat" are usually little more than an attempt to refute the impossibility of turning back the clock.

According to Mahoney, Foster's journey in *Falling Down* is "an impossible, nostalgic fantasy" (Mahoney, 1997: 174). This may be so, but it is a fantasy in which many of us have indulged. What is significant (and why I would argue with those who posit the film as reactionary) is that Foster himself *comes to realise this*. On the end of the pier, the horror of his situation and the totality of his failure stares him full in the face. If he feels unable to continue living in such a reality, he is again surely not alone. To that extent, Foster's tale is a particularly modern *tragedy*, a story in which the central character is drawn to disaster through the working-through of an inner causation. Once he had embarked on his journey, there was no going back. Yet having started it, Foster was inexorably drawn to the final point where he was forced, in Marx's famous phrase, to "face with sober senses his real conditions of life" (Marx and Engels, 1967: 83). Had he remained in his automobile on the freeway, home for him would have retained a degree of attainability, a psychological safety-valve to which he could one day flee. He would never have known how alarmingly easy it is to become "the bad guy". Only by physically engaging with the streets does he grasp the truth, no matter how unpalatable it may be.

This is not to suggest that all one needs to do to understand what is going on in the world is take an observational stroll through a major city. There are forces that remain hidden from us

always. For example, as Harvey (1992: 312) insists, "It is impossible to see the circulation of capital in the built environment in ways that rely upon a purely perceptual and phenomenological relation to the world." The streets, however, remain the place where connections can be made. It is essential to remember this, especially at a time when telematics and talk of the "virtual city" threaten to undermine the street's function completely (see Graham and Marvin, 1996: Ch. 3). In a society made ever more vulnerable to the vagaries of capital flows, it is vital that we keep our shared experiences in the open. As John Gabriel (1996: 151) concludes, "At times, D-FENS [Foster] successfully speaks to black women, not because he is a white male, but because there is more to him than these two facts alone." The capacity for such connections is vital: without them links such as those between Foster and the Savings and Loan protestor will not be made, and we will be left fumbling on our own in the dark.

Three years after Engels wrote about Manchester, Marx proposed some theoretical underpinnings to his observations. In the wake of capital's destruction, he argued, huge swathes of hitherto privileged society would be thrown into the ranks of the proletariat. The task is to enable these cast-offs to recognise their shared condition and experience with the mass of other ordinary men and women. *Falling Down* reminds us how visual encounter and experience of the city streets can help in this task. Its tragedy, in documenting the bewilderment of a person of no apparent use any more to society and who is unable even to find sanctuary in the memory of home, is a tragedy repeated the world over. Though the depiction of the film is obviously extreme, William Foster's economically unviable position is one of mundane familiarity to millions. Foster could only appreciate this position (and his similarity with others like him) through his interaction with the streets. To begin to make similar connections, we need, like Engels, to get back on our feet and look.

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