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**CINEMATOGRAPHIC SPACE AS A MATERIAL AND THE AMERICAN TERRITORY AS A SUBJECT:  
*DUEL AND THE SUGARLAND EXPRESS*<sup>1</sup>**

Antoine Gaudin

in David Roche (dir.), *Steven Spielberg, Hollywood Wunderkind and Humanist*, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018.

As his recent film *Bridge of Spies* once again illustrates, Spielberg has always been a rigorous stylist of cinematic space. From the layered deep focus composite shots of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, to the malleability of the digital scenery of *The Adventures of Tintin*, the experimental scenery of *Hook* and editing of *Saving Private Ryan*, and the exploration of emblematic locations like the amusement park in *Jurassic Park* and the airport in *The Terminal*, this concern for space takes on various forms throughout the filmmaker's work. The aim of this chapter will be to describe and analyze the way this concern unfolds in the theatrical version of *Duel* and his first feature film *The Sugarland Express*, with special attention to the singular relationship both films have with the American land.

Both are road movies—a very popular genre at the time—filmed in areas that are part of the American imaginary partly created by the classical Western: the desert of the California backcountry in *Duel*, and the vast Texas plains in *Sugarland*. As in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), the thematic and iconographic heritage of the Western is often present in both films and immediately conjured up by their titles. Visually, we can observe that the scenery at the second gas station in *Duel* (the one where the truck upends cages full of snakes) features an explicit recreation of the history of Western conquest, including a saloon sign, a wagon, a stage-coach [56.00]. The recurring very long shots of vehicular convoys in *Sugarland* explicitly call to mind the caravans of American pioneers. Also notable in *Sugarland* is the casting of Ben Johnson, an actor whose career is mostly associated with the classic era of Westerns and who especially starred in *Wagon Master* (John Ford, 1950).

Beyond the similarities in genre, the two films differ in many ways. *Duel* is a pure action film, almost completely stripped of any dramaturgy beyond the issue unfolding on the road between the two main characters (the protagonist, David Mann, and the truck driver whose reason for pursuing Mann remains unknown). *The Sugarland Express*, however, focuses on the human and psychological side of the tragi-comic escape of its protagonists (an outlaw couple and the police officer they've taken hostage), which allows the filmmaker to depict a rich collective portrait of rural America in the background. There are many stark contrasts between the two films: the dryness and intensity of *Duel* as opposed to the farcical and melancholy mood of *The Sugarland Express*; the frantic rhythm of

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Caitlin Vanessa Smith and David Roche.

*Duel* as opposed to the languid pace of the 1974 film; David Mann's deep feeling of solitude as opposed to the Poplins' attempt to reconstruct a community.

In spite of these differences, both films are concerned with the central theme of the relationship between men and the land they inhabit. This chapter proposes a comparative analysis of the *mise-en-scène* and editing that are used to represent this spatial configuration. In order to fully understand the different forms these poetics take in Spielberg's work, the meaning of "cinematographic space" must be considered in all its dimensions:

(1) as a visual motif that is present in the images (landscapes in outdoor locations) through an approach to space that is regulated by a figurative paradigm;

(2) as a fictional element (a series of locations for the action, linked together to create the diegetic universe) through an approach to the filmic space that is regulated by a narrative paradigm;

(3) as a formal organizational principle through an approach to space that is regulated by a scenographic paradigm. By this I mean the particular way in which the *mise-en-scène* and editing construct, by combining a great number of expressive elements (movement within the image and camera movements, framing, focus, splicing, soundtrack, etc.), a "dramatic space" that becomes the filmic "scene" of an action—all the while revealing an offscreen space that could be indicated more or less emphatically to the viewer.

(4) as the abstract and moving arrangement of shapes and volumes situated within the boundaries of the frame, enabling an analysis of the filmic space regulated by a plastic paradigm.

Approaching space through these different paradigms (for a more detailed typology, cf. Gaudin 2015) will allow us to articulate the study of fictional locations and depicted landscapes by taking into account the power that cinema has to shape space. More than a visual motif or a fictional element, the term "cinematographic space" designates a fundamental expressive material in film. I argue that the unique use of this material allows Spielberg to recreate the land being explored not only as a context or as scenery, but also as a profound subject of representation. Attention will be paid to specific characteristics of the two films in order to foreground the way that the young Spielberg's directorial vision of the world would evolve at this nascent stage of his career.

The analysis will finally be grounded in (5) a *genetic* paradigm, based on studies of the production contexts of both films, identifying the shooting locations and technical equipment used to set up certain shots; and (6) a *phenomenological* paradigm that, contrary to approaches attempting to reduce space to a purely visual or intellectual category, also highlights the corporeal and kinesthetical dimension of the viewer's spatial experience. Crossing and confronting these different approaches to space will enable an examination of the poetics of the American territory at work in these films, in the hope that this study will be the occasion to establish a dialectical presentation of the possibilities that an awareness of the problematics of cinematic space allows.

Let us begin with what appears to be the most obvious. *Duel* and *Sugarland* are both car chase films; almost every scene depicts the journey of a fleeing vehicle, pursued by one or several other vehicles. The distance between the fleeing vehicle and its pursuers constitutes a permanent stake in the narrative and the *mise-en-scène*. It inscribes within the film's structure an evolving dynamic of distance and proximity, which carries its own emotional tension (danger/security, tension/relief) that we can compare to the pure spatial movements identified by Eric Rohmer (1970) in F.W. Murnau's *Faust* (1926). However, *Duel* and *The Sugarland Express* work through this proprioceptive dynamic<sup>2</sup> in very different ways.

*Duel* is unquestionably the film that uses this idea in its "purest" form. As soon as the truck appears onscreen (often framed by the rearview mirror or David's rear windshield), the intensity returns and peaks each time the road "predator" dangerously approaches the salesman's vehicle. As in a fabulous episode of *The Road Runner Show* (CBS, 1966-1968; ABC, 1971-1973), the emotional organization of the film rests largely on this dynamic, exploited for its immediate effects of fear and comfort, and based largely on the photographic realism of a film shot entirely on location (a condition that Spielberg managed to impose on the production company<sup>3</sup>).

The use of the wide-angle lens (which would become a hallmark of Spielberg's style) is an integral part of this dynamic, allowing the filmmaker to occasionally arrange the images in very deep focus, for instance when the truck appears in the background and the protagonist in the immediate foreground. One of the most striking examples of this visual composition is a shot in which the truck barrels toward the telephone booth in which Mann is making a call to the police [57.45].

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<sup>2</sup> Defined as the continuous but unconscious flow of senses that run through the body to adapt our interoceptive organs, at each moment, to the volume of perceived emptiness, proprioception is an integral part of our physical and psychic identity and can, in that respect, be used in a virtual way (as is in the case of the spatial experience of a film viewer) (Sherrington 1906).

<sup>3</sup> The executive producer of *Duel* had in fact planned that a large part of the shoot would take place in a studio, with images of the road projected in the background behind the lead actor (Wasser 51).



The impact of this shot is largely due to the fact that Mann, who is practically facing the camera, is unaware that the truck is heading toward him, whereas we, the viewers, are very much aware of the its approach<sup>4</sup>. We are, then, much more invested in the depicted action, as it makes us briefly concerned for the actor's safety during the filming. At that instant, Spielberg's direction evokes the "double reality" at the heart of the film—at once an open window on a fictional world and a document of its own filming—in order to increase the emotional intensity of the human "David" and the mechanical Goliath drawing closer spatially, and to underline the solitude of the former to the threat of the latter.

Similarly, the wide-angle allows the framing of a plastic/abstract interplay between shapes in movement at the surface of the image (what Eisenstein called "*mise-en-cadre*"<sup>5</sup>), notably in shots in which the radiator grill of the truck approaches the camera very quickly, suddenly "covering" the image with its occlusive surface (the first shot of this kind appears when the two vehicles stop side by side at the first gas station [9:30]). In many sequences, the wide angle also highlights within the frame the abrupt reduction of distance between the two vehicles, therefore accentuating the proprioceptive (or spatial-emotive) dynamic described above.

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<sup>4</sup> As Warren Buckland remarks, it is one of the rare shots in which the spectator has an omniscient view of the action and is not limited by Mann's subjectivity. For almost a minute of screen time, as the truck moves in the background before charging toward the booth holding Mann, the viewer knows more than the protagonist does (Buckland 78).

<sup>5</sup> In the meaning that is given to this term by Sergei M. Eisenstein in his article "La mise en scène théâtrale" (1935), in *Mettre en scène*, Paris, UGE, 1973, that is to say that of an autonomous spatial composition in the interior of the frame, an organization of pure shapes in movement that is determined in advance, which is the "primary reason" that the *mise-en-scène* must be made concrete during the shoot, and the editing must be organized with respect to a sensory and dialectical confrontation between the different successive "frames".

At the same time, the narration depicts fewer and fewer specific dramatic elements and repeats them several times in a quick succession—the face of the pursued driver, his hands on the steering wheel, the brake and accelerator pedals, the speedometer, the tires, the glare from the rearview mirrors, the oil level indicator gauge, the gear shift, etc.—producing a B-movie version of the general rule of composition used in the famous “speeding train” sequence in *La Roue* (Abel Gance, 1922) (Icart 142). Watching *Duel*, we experience the same sense of kinetic energy and a feeling of panic provoked by the approaching entity. This can be observed in two sequences, when the truck pushes Mann’s car toward a moving train [51:30], and at the end of the film when Mann’s car engine is stalling and he must reach the summit of a hill to regain speed [77:50].

In this dramatization of the space separating two bodies in movement, Spielberg happily exploits, at certain key moments—e.g., the very “animistic” scene in which the truck, like a predator, positions itself on the side of the road to lie in wait for Mann’s car [63:20]—the variation in the volume of space felt by zooming in and out, an effect that is used for the scenographic impact of the sense of the elasticity of space. Nor does he shy away from the occasional use of discreet “naturalizing” acceleration effects, i.e., effects that are meant to be perceived by viewers as representing the natural movement of mobile objects on the screen.

Editing, focal length, the speed of images, the movement of frame and camera—these are some of the devices used in a permanent plastic-dynamic interplay with the matter that is space; it is deployed to the benefit of the principles of pure action (very straight-forward dramaturgically and limited to a range of fundamental affects). The combined action of these composition techniques results notably in images in which the truck seems to be advancing at an irrational speed to pursue its prey. The uncertainty regarding the supernatural aspect of this event inscribes the film within the realm of the Fantastic; in so doing, indeed, it respects one of the most restrictive (in the cinema) criteria of composition within this genre, that of “hesitation” in Todorov’s 1970 sense of the word<sup>6</sup>.

The other obvious element in *Duel* that connects it to the Fantastic is the fact that the truck driver never appears onscreen; his identity and nature remain a mystery throughout the film. The consequence of this representational strategy is the constant focus on the perceptive and moral universe of the driver the truck is pursuing. Moreover, it must be noted just how much the narrative and formal choice of this unique point of view greatly contributes to the intensity of the interplay between space and movement—the variations in distance between the two vehicles become much

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<sup>6</sup> In his famous book “Introduction à la littérature fantastique”, Todorov calls “Fantastic” only the narratives that, grounded in a fictional world with the same physical laws than ours a priori, make the reader *hesitate* about the strange events that occur in the plot. According to him, if the supernatural hypothesis is confirmed (“Merveilleux”), or on the contrary if a rational explanation is finally given (“Etrange”), we’ve just left the “Fantastic” generic dimension, that lasts only the same time than the reader’s hesitation is maintained. This Todorov’s criteria of hesitation is even more restrictive in the cinema narratives than in the literary one ; this is due to the fact that a film has to show with images, while a novel can only suggest with words and this way leave more space for the reader’s uncertainty. See Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris, Seuil, 1970.

more surprising and anxiety-inducing as they are always being observed, interpreted and experienced from the point of view (which is necessarily limited) of the man being pursued.

Focused as it is on the pure dramaturgy of distance and proximity, *Duel* is a film that gives its viewers relatively few geographical clues as to where the story takes place. Thanks to its long opening credits sequence, we know that Mann's car begins its journey in the greater Los Angeles area, driving along the Pasadena freeway and heading north toward California State Route 14 (Wasser 50). On the way, we can recognize some of the characteristics Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin (2002) has identified with the area (suburban housing, the horizontality of the cityscape, the large size of the freeway, etc.) and hear local weather and traffic reports on the radio that explicitly refer to the area. However, once the action leaves the city and its outskirts, the film does not provide any clues as to its location: the names of cities<sup>7</sup> and highway numbers are not given, though they are highly emblematic in the North American road system. If the film takes place somewhere in the vast California backcountry, it is impossible, after the first five minutes, to identify the precise location of the action.

So it appears that Spielberg is less interested in mapping the United States than in the mineral topography of the desert. Thus, the film is structured according to the fundamental divide between civilization and wilderness, reviving this important aspect of American culture (Kitses 1969; Arnould et Glon 2006). The desert symbolizes a return to nature; it is the site of a confrontation between predator and prey in a fundamental battle for survival, in an "ecosystem" containing motorized machines and asphalt roads, but without the benefits usually provided by civilization. In *Duel*, the "desert" as a location is used above all as a generic environment, bringing its own values into play; it would have been counterproductive, given the intention of the film, to provide any specific information about Mann's itinerary.

The opposite is true of *The Sugarland Express*, which allows much more room for an analysis blending cartography and a genetic approach to films<sup>8</sup>. This is obvious from the first image in the film, which is a close shot of a State of Texas road sign, which features the shape of the state itself (as is typical on North American roads) [0:50]. The geographical location had already been mentioned in an intertitle stating that the film was inspired by true events that took place in Texas in 1969, here we have yet another mention of the geographical location. The camera then moves back and shows us that the initial road sign sits atop a remarkable stack of signs announcing important road crossings between routes 90, 59, 36 and 6 (as well as two highways and two alternate roads). While the landscape is a flat farmland, it is thus possible that this first shot, that mentions the location of the penitentiary Clovis Poplin is incarcerated in, was filmed at the crossroads of Rosenberg, about 10

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Matheson's original short story frequently mentions San Francisco as Mann's final destination.

<sup>8</sup> In this respect, my approach resembles Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne-Guigues in their book on classical Hollywood Westerns, *Les Cartes de l'Ouest : un genre cinématographique, le western* (1986).

kilometers to the west of the real town of Sugar Land (spelled as two separate words, and located in the suburbs of Houston).



Considering the real town of Sugar Land as the protagonists' final destination would therefore make the film's action fairly unlikely, as it takes the couple two days to reach it. By offering hints throughout the film, through the dialogue and road signs (route numbers 28 and 87, the localities of Danbury and Leming, the counties of Bastrop and Lavaca), we can then reconstruct a westward route along Highway 90 Alternate, then toward the South following Route 87, and understand that the film situates the small town of Sugarland (which doesn't actually exist in real life) somewhere between San Antonio and the Mexican border.

The name of the town has a fairy-tale connotation, evoking Neverland, Peter Pan's "imaginary land where everything is perfect," a story that is dear to Spielberg who would adapt it to the screen twenty years later with *Hook* (McBride 42-43). This semantic universe brings together two principal themes in the film: the confrontation between the dream of two child-like young adults (becoming a real family by snatching their child from social services, who had taken him away), and the laws of the real world (symbolized by the law's opposition to their foolhardy behavior). Sugarland is the utopian location where this dream, to which the protagonists hopelessly cling during their escape, could become a reality.

On this view, what really counts is not the exact geographical destination, but rather its implantation in a tangible way within the territory. This preoccupation is not only represented narratively and visually, but also plastically. The relationship to the ground is a frequent feature in the composition of the images, notably in certain long-focus shots; for instance, when the fugitive couple leaves the scene of an accident, they emerge from underneath a planted slope, the flat tint effect giving the impression, at the surface of the screen, that they are literally coming out of the ground [20:40].



Conversely, when the fugitives run out of gas, the car hurtles backward on the small slope it had been climbing: the camera that was filming the oncoming car in the process of approaching, shows that the car, due to the flat tint effect, seems not to be backing up but rather to be descending, disappearing behind the hilliness of the road, as if it had suddenly been swallowed by a wave of tar [34:15].



These artistic experiments with the bi-dimensional space of the screen, more forceful than in *Duel* (which for its part used the more kinetic effects of the wide-angle), emphasizes the materiality of the Texas land, to the point of producing an effect of being bogged down (*The Sugarland Express* can in this respect be described as a slow-motion road movie).

Moreover, on a narrative level, Lou Jean, the main female protagonist, continually collects Texas Gold Stamps<sup>9</sup> and hoards these local markers throughout the journey. To do so, her body must partially exit the car, therefore linking the passenger compartment of the fugitives' car to the state that provides a backdrop to their escape. This is what distinguishes *The Sugarland Express* from *Duel* above all. In the TV movie, there is no element that specifically refers to the state of California (significantly, Mann refuses the stamps that are offered to him at the first gas station [14:20]). The 1974 film, on the other hand, is soaked in Texas culture: its routes, landscapes, climate, environment and residents.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that, in comparison to the sparse dramaturgy of *Duel*, which is focused entirely on the dynamic between Mann and the invisible truck driver, *The Sugarland Express* features many significant characters: in addition to the four main characters (the Poplins, the police officer being held hostage, and the police officer tracking their every move), there are also many well-developed secondary characters (the foster parents, the police snipers, the amateur

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<sup>9</sup> These are not real stamps, but rather vouchers given away by HEB, a supermarket chain, to loyal customers.

militiamen, Lou Jean's father), as well as a large number of background characters representing a broad swath of the American population throughout the journey. Contrary to *Duel*'s plot, which explores the erosion of a sense of family and community (which we will return to), the 1974 film deals with the idea of the reconstruction of a community born from a desire for solidarity, which is created through the desperate crusade of its marginalized heroes<sup>10</sup>.

In short, although their respective structures can be compared on certain points, the "human density" of space in *The Sugarland Express* is much greater than in *Duel*. In the 1971 film, the action on the road is linear: there is no exit and no direction but straight ahead—making a detour or a U-turn or stopping completely is not an option for Mann. In Spielberg's first feature film, however, we can observe a clear emphasis (with obvious metaphorical overtones) on the motif of the intersection, of the crossing of two roads. This is especially palpable in the scenes when the main characters first appear: at the beginning of the film when Lou Jean appears behind the stacked road signs [1:30], just before talking Clovis into their absurd getaway; or, a little later, when the camera first shows the car of Maxwell, the young police officer the couple will take hostage later, the camera depicts a path that is perpendicular to that of his car, before reframing and changing directions to follow his itinerary [11:50]. The use of the "autonomous camera" method also endows our first meeting with this character with an impromptu feeling, that stresses the arbitrary nature of the crossing between different human destinies in this road "ecosystem."

Moreover, whereas the land in *Duel* is especially interesting for its topographical characteristics (the desert as a natural primitive world), that in *The Sugarland Express* contains many more cultural signifiers, as it is saturated with hyper-realistic traces of rural America: road signs, gas station and fast food logos, small-town Fourth of July celebrations, etc. With her body slipping in and out of the car window to collect objects along their drive, Lou Jean makes a connection with this surrounding world. Thanks to her, the fugitives receive, while passing through towns that are favorable to their cause, not only supplies and necessary foodstuffs, but also cosmetics, magazines, toys, and all kinds of rural American goodies that begin to overcrowd the passenger compartment of the car. Once the euphoria provoked by these new trinkets has worn off, the protagonist are taken by a feeling of weariness and excess in the face of overwhelming and unchecked consumerism<sup>11</sup>. During the final chase scene, while Lou Jean angrily throws all these objects out the window, the narration stresses the act of unloading by including inserts of each of the items falling on the ground, one by one [from 104.00]. The heroes charging towards death seemingly relieve themselves of all the material objects that had been weighing them down and had invaded their environment.

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<sup>10</sup> Spielberg's film shares this narrative motif with another New Hollywood road movie, Richard Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971).

<sup>11</sup> This type of symbolic representation led some critics to see a Marxist subtext in the film (Wasser 52).

America, and especially Texas are also depicted (and denounced) as lands littered with firearms. Weapons are always on the brink of being fired, from the trunk of an individual's car (the self-proclaimed militiaman [68.00]) to a living room cabinet (at the home of the adoptive parents in Sugarland [83.00]) to a small-town fair (during which the police, body-searching the residents, collect a veritable arsenal [87.00]). Spielberg's first feature film confronts America's obsession with guns with a ferocity rarely seen in his work, emphasizing the negative consequences of living in a land with guns galore.

The focus on the family unit has, however, remained a constant in Spielberg's work since *The Sugarland Express*. As often is the case in Spielberg's later films, the separation of a child and his parents is, the main thrust of the narrative. The situation and its stakes are neatly encapsulated in a handful of very elaborately composited shots, filmed from the height of the child in question; positioned beside "Baby Langston," the camera reveals, in the background, the instruments of the institutional machine (his foster parents' house, the police car) that keep him separated from his biological parents—indeed, the child is soon removed from the foreground and blended into the superstructure of the background [33:15].



In fact, the only moments in which the child and his true parents “meet” are constructed through the editing, for instance when a shot of Lou Jean diving into an open door (of the portable toilet the policemen have brought for her) cuts to a Fordian shot (reminiscent of the beginning of *The Searchers*) of her son opening the door of his foster home [47.45].



Though dozens of miles separate them, it is almost as if he were opening the door to tell his mother to come and join him. But this soon makes way for a feeling of disillusionment. Contrary to other Spielberg films in which, at the end, the bonds between parents and children, who have been temporarily separated, are permanently restored, here the only “space” of coexistence allowed between the child and his parents is created by the editing. By doing so, the film offers a sort of utopian place that allows the injustices of the world to be resolved, even though the narrative does not deny the existence of these injustices, as it does not have a happy ending.

Unable to accomplish the task of taking their child back and reestablishing a nuclear family, the Poplins create a veritable substitute family in the cramped environment of their getaway car (that is nonetheless open to the outside world). The car contains Patrolman Maxwell, whom they have taken hostage and who becomes increasingly involved in their naive and friendly vision of the world. However, the car also “contains” Captain Tanner, who is in charge of the operation trailing them, and whom the narration often integrates into the communal compartment of the car (without him being



physically present) by resorting to various devices. In the first scene where Tanner engages with the fugitives, his car passes from behind, to the left of, then in front of, then to the right of, then again behind their car, while they converse over the radio. Here Spielberg uses the innovative possibilities of the Panaflex camera, which *Sugarland* was the first Hollywood film to use, to construct a majestic, panoramic long-take sequence shot from the interior of the car, incorporating the police captain's car as a permanent extension of the confined compartment (Fig.) [30:00]. A little later (0:35:00), in a sequence in which Tanner's car must push the fugitives' after they run out of gas, the rear-view mirror within the shot creates a sort of horizontal split-screen that includes him in the family portrait.



As one can see, *The Sugarland Express*, like *Duel*, makes extensive use of car windows and rearview mirrors, suggesting that, in crossing of the American space, the car works as a sort of “vision machine,” connecting the kinetic energy of movement to the dromoscopic<sup>12</sup> potential of the windshield. In *Duel*, this combination opens to a space that is hollow and marked with hostility—whatever appears in Mann's window frames and rearview mirrors is potentially hostile. In the 1974 film, however, the interplay between frames and focal length showing the area in and around the passenger compartment represents an attempt to include all the protagonists in the same shot, in the same image, to allow them to take part in the same community and even family space.

<sup>12</sup> I borrow the notion of dromoscopy from Paul Virilio: “Like an embu, the ground of the landscape rises up to the surface, inanimate objects are exhumed from the horizon and come each in turn to permeate the glaze of the windscreen, perspective becomes animated, the vashing point becomes a point of attack sending forth its lines of projection onto the voyeur-voyageur, the objective of the continuum becomes a focal point that casts its rays on the dazzled observer, fascinated by the progression of landscapes. [...] We are before a veritable ‘seventh art’, that of the dashboard. Opposite to the stroboscopy which allows us to observe objects animated by rapid movement, as if they were in slow-motion, this dromoscopy displays inanimate objects as if they were animated by a violent movement. [...] Each dashboard is nothing but a moment in the *mise-en-scène* of the windscreen, the rushes of landscape are nothing but a cinematic hallucination which is the opposite of stroboscopy. In dromoscopy the fixity of the presence of objects ceases....”

Throughout the film, the captain's paternal voice—a character who sympathizes with the Poplins and does his best to find a solution to avoid resorting to violence—resonates in the compartment of the fugitives' car through the police radio. The analogy between its function in the narrative and the character's status as guardian angel—an invisible, protective presence—is reinforced by the fact that, during the shoot-out in a car lot, Lou Jean calls out to him for help, again through the radio waves, as if she were addressing a prayer to him directly [75:20]. Pointedly, she addresses him, not her biological father with whom communication has been difficult (he was previously shown spouting out hateful words at his daughter on the radio, which Lou Jean fortunately did not hear). Significantly, it is at the critical moment of the shoot-out that she chooses the police brigade's wagon master as a surrogate father.

The shoot-out scene occurs at the end of the only lengthy pause in the protagonists' road trip [58:00-79:00]. Having temporarily escaped the cavalry's watch, the Poplins spend the night in a used car lot, the festive decor (colorful pennants waving in the breeze, cartoons projected against the screen of a neighboring drive-in theater) of which could constitute a stage on the road leading to the utopian Sugarland, the place where Clovis and Lou Jean's naive dreams might come true. Incidentally, before potentially becoming a family again by taking back their baby, the two characters spend the night in an R.V. This family vehicle, that they transform into a spousal (at night) and domestic (in the morning) space, becomes a concrete medium for their dreams of a simple and harmonious everyday life.

During the night these characters spend together at this location, Spielberg creates a striking and audacious artistic experiment. From the window of their room in the R.V., Clovis and Lou Jean watch images of *Beep, Beep* (Chuck Jones, 1952) and *Whoa, Be-Gone!* (Jones, 1958) projected onto the screen of the neighboring drive-in theater [65:00]. The space of the drive-in remains through and through offscreen; it is never contextualized, and we never see its paying customers. Does the film give us any information regarding the theater's location in relation to the lot in which his characters have taken refuge. In short, the coherence and homogeneity of the dramatic space are not represented. The traditional demands for the narration (for most Hollywood fiction) disappear for the benefit of a symbolic and plastic interplay with the animated image.

First, a mirroring effect is produced between the characteristic motifs of the road movie and the cartoon, which depicts images of the road and a chase between the famous characters of the Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote. Driven by the energy and the overwhelming environment typical of these kinds of cartoons<sup>13</sup>, the film watched by the protagonists features many images of firearms, as well as recurring images of falls, when an animated character, in cartoon fashion, walks on air a few

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<sup>13</sup> The cartoons' kinetic and madcap nature may have influenced the many car stunts in the film.

moments before realizing his feet are no longer on solid ground. The moments when Wile E. Coyote is reminded of the existence of gravity is an apt metaphor for Clovis and Lou Jean's situation, as the latter still want to believe, at this stage of the narrative, that their crazy plan will work out (and that life will go on as before), even though they are occasionally reminded of the fact that they have already gone too far, and that they, like the coyote, are walking right out onto a chasm.

At this stage, Clovis in particular is painfully aware of this. Significantly, the image of the fall in the cartoon reappears, in a sort of "natural" super imposition, in one of the rare shots of him alone, thus reflecting his worries that contrast with Lou Jean's instinctive and immature optimism that usually "infects" him—for almost the whole running time of the film, their relationship creates the illusion that theirs will be a happy ending, to the detriment of the true circumstances of their situation.



Already in this sequence, when the couple kiss in a medium close-up, the protagonists are filmed so that their faces conceal the screen of the drive-in, thus temporarily erasing the animated motifs of impending doom which represent the couple's true condition. However, more generally, in *The Sugarland Express*, all the sequences of intimacy between the couple are constructed in a way that renders the space around them abstract, and, using a narrowed frame and a longer focal length, contains a reserve of positive energy that then spreads throughout the land, most often through Lou Jean's actions. This is notably the case in the opening scene where their intimacy will lead them to escape the prison and attract the attention of the whole state.

The two instances where a dolly zoom (a technique Spielberg was to use again in a famous shot inside *Jaws*) is used at each end of Clovis' journey are highly significant in this respect. The first occurs during his first appearance onscreen, when Lou Jean leaps toward him (and convinces him to escape) [4:50]; the second during his last appearance alive, when the snipers take aim at him in front of the Sugarland house [109:20]. At that moment, the effect of the variation in volume due to the

dolly zoom, depicting the snipers' ability to hit their target (by taking advantage of the short distance separating them), condemns the character, as surely as his wife had by bringing him into her escape fantasy. The use of the second dolly zoom can, therefore, be seen as the long-term consequence of the first<sup>14</sup>.

The frantic road trip in *Duel* also contains a lengthy pause, when Mann finds temporary respite in a roadside diner, before the truck returns and parks outside, triggering a bout of paranoia in the hero: who, among the clients of the peaceful restaurant, could be the driver of the infernal machine [29:20-42:00]? Given how spare *Duel* is formally speaking, the scene's treatment of space is relatively exceptional. Shot completely indoors, the scene begins with a long take that lasts several minutes and follows Mann the entire time he is inside the building, the handheld camera creating strong variations in points of view and focal points reminiscent of expressionism. In the fiction of suspicion that is *Duel*, the combined interplay between Mann's delirious mental voiceover and close-ups of his face show us what, at first sight, appears to be a banal and familiar public space, subsequently filtered through a murky subjectivity that suddenly reveals its potential for ambiguity and anxiety.

In *The Sugarland Express*, it is Baby Langston's foster parents' home that is subjected to similar treatment. Metonymically representing the utopian "Sugarland" the characters hope to reach (the imaginary land in which they could become a family again), this mundane suburban home is filmed in a very stylized manner, with wide-angle shots and distortions in focus that emphasize the bleak, inhospitable nature of the house. The dark and gloomy lighting make it look like a sort of Victorian manor, the threatening connotations of which are intensified by the fact that it is filled with firearms (those that Baby Langston's foster father retrieves from the living room cabinet and gives the police, and also, of course, those that the police snipers use to shoot Clovis on the threshold of the house). Patrolman Maxwell had tried to warn the protagonist: "Ain't no way in the world I'm going up that path" [100.40]. By associating those words with the troubling images of the house, Spielberg was still expressing, in 1974, a certain defiance to a certain bourgeois and family-oriented American way of life.

Even though it is far from obvious in Spielberg's overall body of work, a certain countercultural anti-institutionalism is at work in *The Sugarland Express*. The family is only relevant when it takes the form of the protagonists' dream throughout their dead-end escapade, or that of the temporary, surrogate family the Poplins create with the individuals they meet on the road, rather than the concrete example of an idealized consumerist and reactionary middle-class existence that negatively permeates

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<sup>14</sup> In this respect, it is difficult to disagree with Nigel Morris who writes of the character of Lou Jean: "She is nevertheless a femme fatale who personifies uncontrollable female instincts and operates according to a sexist view of destructive dumb-blonde illogicality, narcissism, spontaneity and manipulative sexuality" (134).



the film. Of course, it was only after *Sugarland* (and not during) that Spielberg's films would take a turn toward family-oriented fare.

Spielberg's fixation on family life is not present in *Duel* either. On the contrary, Mann is ripped away from his suburban-family environment as early as the opening credits, a necessary condition for the forthcoming adventure that concerns him alone. The only scene that indicates that Mann has a family involves a phone conversation with his wife, during which he is humiliatingly rebuffed, while the camerawork depicts him framed by the window of a washing machine door, a sign that Mann is trapped in domestic life and/or caged by the women alluded to in the dialogue (his wife and his mother) (Gordon 64). In the background of the same shot, the truck awaits to pull him out of this routine.



*Duel*, from the outset, invites the equation between Mann and “man” in the traditional gendered sense of the term, alluding more to the traditional masculine universe of the classical Westerns than to that of the counterculture. But the equation is also made possible because, at this stage of the narrative, the salesman represents a bland, shallow character, an incarnation of the Average Joe without any special qualities.

The first five minutes consists of a series of tracking shots taken from the hood of the car. As previously mentioned, these shots relate the first steps of a journey from a suburban garage to the wide open spaces of the California desert, passing through a downtown area and the outer limits of a city, the different settings becoming less and less populated [0:00-5:00]. It is significant that the forward movement of the car removes the driver from the screen for a long while, as if he were

unaware of the movement and automatically carried by the autonomous machine.

Moreover, during this forward movement, the spatial arrangement of the cities, which initially appear crowded visually, opens up in a spectacular fashion. Certain shots slide along the asphalt, the wide angle lens increasing the volume and emphasizing the sensory dimension of the broadening of the landscape due to the increasing sparsity of population in the area. This broadening of the setting, which opens up the landscape and acts as an expansion of being, is compromised by one exhausting element: the soundtrack of the car radio, which, from the opening of the garage in Los Angeles until the immense desert routes of the backcountry, calmly spews the same inept programming (useless news, ads, labored comedy sketches). The American land in its entirety, from the city to the desert, is made uniform by the aural presence of these mundane words. This vise of sound makes the space appear smaller by conflating all of the locations in the same closed-in universe; it puts into perspective the film's bucolic, transcendental landscape imagery, mercilessly transporting us back into a confining reality.

Thus, the spatial experience of the film evinces a contradiction, as the expansion of space remains a mere potential within the images. The rest of the film aims to restore the protagonist (a timorous employee and submissive husband leading a humdrum life) to a position where he may conquer the Western space, by forcing him to find the resources to survive in a setting that, at least for him, has returned to a primal wildness. The intrusion of this threat in the character's life—which takes on the form of a crazy and murderous truck he manages to beat by sacrificing his work briefcase (a symbol of his old life, which he places on the accelerator of his car)—integrates the narrative in a dramaturgy of the American landscape that had just about disappeared with the classical Western. *Duel* features a rite of passage—a journey that is at the same time spatial and moral—for an initially passive character, driven by his vehicle as by the other elements in his life, a character so bland that he need not even appear onscreen at this point (and significantly, he does so for the first time when a sketch on the radio touches on the “emasculatation” of the modern man). The first shots of the film impart to the viewer the essence of its being in the form of a large potential expansion of space (the majestic opening of the territory, dynamically stressed by the volume-inducing forward tracking), largely put into perspective by a restricted awareness of itself and other things (such as the attention paid to the sonic litany of radio programs).

Yet if the protagonist does not immediately appear in the image, it is also to highlight the universal nature of this Everyman's journey. The elements that build up the spatiality of his existence could concern a large swath of the American population, reflecting a human and motorized existence largely spread across the vast land in which cars reign. *The Sugarland Express* also touches on this notion, as every vehicle on the road has its own moral compass, its own spatial-kinetic energy, that the narration attempts to adapt and link to the personality of its owner, whoever it may be (the police

captain, the retired couple, the militiamen, the two hotheads on the Louisiana road patrol, etc.).

In short, vehicles in these two films are indistinguishable from the characters who drive them, and the road becomes the ultimate American space, on which the issues of a car-based, open-space civilization can express and resolve themselves. In *Duel* and *The Sugarland Express*, Spielberg works with the material constraints of shooting a road movie in order to give his *mise-en-scène* the most diverse palette of frames, camera movements and focal lengths as possible, and bring together the sensory and meaningful richness of the movements that are characteristic of this veritable “ecosystem.” In the middle of the 1974 film, when the night falls on the first day of the Poplins’ escape, this leads to a series of shots of the road in the respective journeys of all the protagonists. Although these shots appear to be fairly useless when it comes to advancing the plot, yet, more than just demonstrating a certain craftsmanship (e.g., the splendid interplay on the lights of dusk), they continue to say something important about the characters and the society they form [53:00-56:00].

In conclusion, it is possible to analyze the cinematographic space of *Duel* and *The Sugarland Express* from a wide variety of angles:

(1) as a primary narrative stake, this is how cinematographic space is used in road chase movies. Taking into account space as a perceptible phenomenon has allowed us to observe a clear difference between Spielberg’s two films. While the physical problem of space separating the hunter from his prey is used in a very pure and dynamic way in *Duel* (in which nothing interferes with the viewer’s relation to a kinetic action that is stripped of any extraneous elements), in *The Sugarland Express*, on the contrary, it is revisited to serve a role in a more human and psychologically dense chronicle, in which movements of distance and proximity between the fugitives and policemen, that are much slower and more distanced on a dramatic level, are essentially used to discern the evolving boundaries of the cultural landscape in the heartland of America. It is important to specify that the stripped-down action of *Duel*, focused on an original form of mechanical existentialism, touches just as convincingly on the question of the movement of the Average Joe of America, even though it resorts to different narrative and formal devices.

(2) as a motif within the image, cinematographic space allows the young director to offer, in *Duel*, a new way of experiencing the gray zone consisting, culturally and historically, of the famous American Frontier between civilization and wilderness. In the opening credits, the road on screen appears as a veritable “ecosystem,” a sort of autonomous environment with its own mechanisms. This explains how it can represent a meeting place or a crossing of paths between different fates, as the iconographic crossroads attest to in *The Sugarland Express*, a film that is much more concerned with the idea of community.

(3) as a topo-cartographical structure, cinematographic space makes it possible to assess to what

extent these films are grounded in landscapes reminiscent of the classical Western. Here again, a clear difference between the two films can be noted. Where *Duel* specifically exploits the desert setting of the California backcountry (stripped of any geographical markers throughout the film), *The Sugarland Express* pays closer attention to the cartographical coherence of its protagonists' journey (bringing them toward the imaginary Sugarland), and to the particular socio-cultural environment in which this journey takes place. From prison (where Clovis escapes at the beginning of the movie) to a middle-class suburban home (where he is shot down), the character's destiny is framed by two dolly zooms, underlining, from the disillusioned perspective of New Hollywood, the impossible aspiration to the American Way of Life, which is shown elsewhere to be a clichéd, shallow existence.

(4) as a principle of scenographic arrangement, cinematographic space fully uses the possibilities of organizing the movement of images (the meaningful framing of characters within the frame itself, experiments with elements occurring offscreen, variations between volumes carved in short focus and the tint effects of long focus, etc.) and cinematographic editing (such as the *intellectual montage* that allows a mother and her son, who never meet in the story itself, to "meet" in the filmic space by splicing their images together) in order to shape the environment according to the demands of a view of American society that is unique and enjoys a specific relationship with the vast land.

(5) finally, as a plastic form of the image, cinematographic space is occasionally brought to the viewer's attention. This is notably the case of the abstract-dynamic broadening of the visual field in *Duel*, when the ground-level tracking shots in short-focus seem to quickly displace the urban structures and throw us into the desert—while the sound field stays trapped in a litany of radio entertainment programs, evoking right away the coming conflict between the wild individuality of the state of nature and the domesticated community of civilization (which Mann initially embodies). In *The Sugarland Express*, this is expressed by flat tint compositions in which the asphalt surface of a Texas road seems to slowly swallow the protagonists' car, representing the dynamics of imprisonment in which the characters find themselves in relation to the land they are crossing (its location, but also its residents, its logos, its mass-market consumer products, its firearms) and will never escape, escape through their daydreams of a family Neverland.

Combining these different approaches to study Spielberg's early films allows us to fully understand how they make the cinematographic space a central material for the expression of the relationship between individuals and a vast land, where something like the "collective soul" of America emerges at the intersection of the solemnity of the classical Western (*Duel*) and the anti-establishmentarianism of New Hollywood (*The Sugarland Express*). This collective soul has been reinterpreted in an evolving movement that the comparative approach employed in this chapter has striven to shed light on. This movement is pursued in the director's later films, but with less intensity

as in *Duel* and *The Sugarland Express*, whose hallmark is this preoccupation with the construction of space.

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