

**CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPES: JOHN DIVOLA AND THE CINE-
GEOGRAPHY OF SERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY**

Charles Wolfe

Histories of visual technologies conventionally treat photography as a precursor to cinema on three related counts: as an antecedent mechanism of photographic inscription, as a set of normative image-making practices, and as a repository of images upon which early makers of moving pictures drew. A different perspective opens up, however, when we reverse the terms of this inheritance, attending to the perspective later photographic work provides on early histories of cinema. This essay extends such a perspective across many decades, taking up the question of how our understanding of early location filmmaking in Southern California is newly illuminated by contemporary photography produced in the Los Angeles region. I am inspired to consider this topic by the work of John Divola, whose four-decade career as a photographer was the subject of a 2013 retrospective – *John Divola: As Far as I Could Get* – exhibited among three west coast venues: the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Pomona College Museum of Art. The dispersion of exhibition sites was in keeping with a key theme of the retrospective, which stressed the variety of locations in Southern California that have been ingredient to Divola’s photographic projects and the central role that cultural geography has played in his art practice.

Curators and commentators have often identified Divola’s art work as exemplary of a “California aesthetic” or sensibility. In a review of Divola’s retrospective in *The Los Angeles Times*, Jeffrey Fleischman offers a representative assessment, describing Divola’s “photographs and conceptual art as organic to Southern California—beaches, deserts, cities, mountains, the tug

of light and at times a desolation playing amid a land of endless reinvention where human bonds can be provisional and many define themselves through the parade of popular culture.” In this regard, Fleischman adds, “Divola’s work is a pause in the noise, an escape from the clamor.”¹ In the remarks to follow I wish to pursue, but also redirect, this line of inquiry so as to consider the relationship of Divola’s photography to cinematic practices a century before. Divola’s contemporary approach to photographing the built environment, I believe, helps to clarify the ways in which the changing landscape of Southern California, during the explosive development of the region at the turn of the 20th century, occasioned innovative thinking about the relation between physical environments and the production of images, with long-term impact on the location-based comedy that emerged and coalesced into the genre of California slapstick in the 1910s.

Locations play a central role in the trajectory of Divola’s career. Born in the coastal community of Venice in 1949, he grew up in the West San Fernando Valley, not far from the 20th Century Fox movie ranch, and his first photographic project focused on street views of houses in his mixed rural-suburban neighborhood. After returning to Venice in the mid-1970s, Divola worked extensively in the coastal areas of Los Angeles, and two of his most celebrated early projects – *LAX/Noise Abatement Zone* (1975-76) and the *Zuma* series (1977-78) – juxtapose the disintegrating interiors of abandoned and vandalized houses with exterior landscapes and seascapes viewed through doors and windows, at times registering a discordantly beautiful "picture window" effect. After joining the faculty at UC-Riverside in the late 1980s, Divola began to explore photo projects set in various inland desert communities, including Morongo Valley, Wonder Valley, and Twenty-nine Palms, the latter the site of his 1993 installation and 2000 photobook, *Isolated Houses*, in which dwellings set at the far edge of the

region's urban landscape are identified by their longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates, fitting markers for homes that might otherwise appear "off the map."²

Divola has described his working method as involving an interaction among three elements: the characteristics of a particular place and situation, the nature of the photographic medium, and his own disposition in that place at that time.³ He grants himself license to intervene in an environment prior to producing a photographic record of the encounter. When taking pictures of abandoned houses, for example, Divola will paint interior walls and alter the arrangement of objects so as to "activate" the space for the camera. Yet he also refuses to tamper with an image after the shutter has been snapped, and expresses deep respect for the hidden or surprising aspects of an environment that a photograph retrospectively brings to light. If traces of Divola's own performance are inscribed in the finished images, then, so too are many other attributes, yielding fresh discoveries. "I was always interested in intervening in a way that was visual or sculptural or performative," Divola recalls, "but not particularly interested that there be a clear line between what I had done and what was there."⁴ Early in his career he described his role as "directing" the "play of elements," rather than seeking to exercise total control.⁵ "You can't control it totally," he has more recently explained; "that's the thing about photography, it pulls you into the world."⁶

Divola's familiarity and fascination with the history of older photographic and cinematic practices is evident throughout his work. For his 1995 installation, *Seven Songbirds and a Rabbit*, he isolated and re-photographed animals found in stereoscope negatives in the Keystone-Mast Collection at the California Museum of Photography, printing the new images on linen, and framing them in the fashion of 19th-century library or museum displays. In "Occupied Landscapes: Yosemite" from *Four Landscapes* (1989-1992), a portfolio of four pictorially resonant California sites, he references 19th-century photographs of the Yosemite Valley by

Eadward Muybridge and Carlton Watkins. Two of Divola's curatorial projects, *Continuity* (1997) and *Artificial Landscapes* (2002), involve the culling and conceptual arrangement of production stills of interior and exterior sets constructed on Hollywood sound stages in the high studio era, treating the images as photographic works whose aesthetic and social implications exceed their initial instrumental function. Divola also photographed the demolition of MGM's New York City set on the studio's back lot in Culver City in 1979-80, a project in keeping with his career-long exploration of the transitory quality of fabricated environments in Southern California, for which the MGM lot served as a prime symbol well in advance of its final razing.

The relation of Divola's work to motion picture history in Los Angeles runs considerably deeper, however, with roots in filmmaking prior to the emergence, growth, and consolidation of the Hollywood studios. Several of Divola's projects, in fact, might be said to clear the ground for rethinking location cinematography in Los Angeles in advance of the studio years. In these works Divola steers clear of the clichéd, highly mediated images of the region upon which the film and television industries later came to rely. I take this to be what Fleischman means in part when he refers to Divola's photography as "a pause in the noise, an escape in the clamor" of "the parade of popular culture."

The power of still images to both suggest and arrest movement is crucial to this "pause" effect. Divola has long emphasized serial and sequence photography over and against the individual photograph as an art object, a contributing factor in the complex temporality of his photo-works. The concepts underpinning these serial arrangements take a variety of forms. In some cases Divola organizes photographic series in proto-cinematic ways. With a nod toward early animal locomotion studies, for example, Divola's *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert* (1996-1998, book 2004) alludes to early forms of instantaneous series photography while exploring a form more attuned to the flexible cine-geography of the comic chase, with the

photographer as both agent and object of pursuit. The project's straightforward title cues us to its recurring premise: a photographic encounter between the mobile photographer and the domesticated animals that chase his car along a desert road. Desire shapes the terms of the encounter. "Here we have two vectors and velocities," Divola has commented, "that of a dog and that of a car and, seeing that a camera will never capture reality and that dog will never catch a car, evidence of devotion to a hopeless enterprise."⁷ The photographs emphasize the vitality, persistence, and elusiveness of the dogs in their home environment, rather than the capacity of Divola's motor-driven camera to dissect the way the animals move, as might a Muybridge motion study staged against an abstract grid.



Fig. 1 *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert*

The largest multi-panel sequence Divola assembled for the project offers an especially suggestive example of the complex possibilities of this multi-panel form [Fig.1]. The sequence is comprised of seven photographs across and five rows down, or 35 panels in all. If we follow the images left to right and top row down, a lateral chase comes into view. The position and scale of the dog change from panel to panel, an impression left by the jostling of Divola's hand-held

camera as his car traversed the irregular surface of the road. In his assembling of the photographs, he retains these disjunctive elements, even as he preserves the possibility of our reading the chase as a linear form, reconstructed in halting measure, frame by frame. As depicted, the chase is also deeply embedded within the desert environment, with four clusters of buildings serving as visual anchors at intervals in the mid-ground, and a third plane delineated by the reappearance of a ridge of mountains in the distance. In composite, the panels thus offer an emblematic if fragmented portrait of an inhabited California desert, including its vast expanses, scrub vegetation, and outlying mountains, and the scattered dwellings that signal the human aspirations that have occasioned the dogs' occupation of this world.

Serial arrangement, on the other hand, functions comparatively in Divola's *As Far as I Could Get*, another "action" landscape project, this one lasting from 1996 to 2010 and set in diverse locations throughout the Los Angeles region. For each photograph in the series, Divola framed a path or roadway receding into the background, set the camera's timer for ten seconds, sprinted in a direct line from the camera, and recorded the distance he was able to travel before the shutter fired – in effect, repeatedly staging his own race against the camera's clock [Figs.2a and 2b]. Here the temporal interval is marked within rather than between each photograph, a ten-second period measured by the space between the apparent placement of the camera and the position of the photographer-performer at the moment of capture. Recurring compositional elements – an expansive foreground, deep space, and a distant horizon, with the fleeing figure frozen near the midpoint of the image – provides a common graphic template within which to compare different regional landscapes. Even as the ten-second interval is translated into a fixed physical distance, moreover, the composition of the pictures invites us to consider other temporal registers: the time expended by Divola in the scouting of locations and precise staging of the images, for example, or the history of images on which the compositions draw.⁸ Among other

tropes, photographs in this series evoke the durable myth of the lone traveler setting out – as far as he can get – employing a motif of movie westerns as well as silent slapstick races and chases in which the recessional quality of the action is enhanced by camera placement [Fig.3a], a device sentimentalized by Chaplin in his staging of the tramp’s final exit in a variety of Southern California settings over time [Fig. 3b].⁹



Fig. 2a *As Far as I Could Get*



Fig.2b *As Far as I Could Get*



Fig.3a *Cruel, Cruel Love* (Keystone, 1914)



Fig.3b *The Pilgrim* (Chaplin, 1923)

Serial forms are also central to Divola’s approach to photographing abandoned houses, the very desertion of which presupposes a history of habitation and leave-taking. A simple but powerful use of temporal ellipsis, for example, is at work in *House Removals*, a companion

project to Divola's exploration of homes abandoned under the terms of the Los Angeles airport's noise abatement program of the mid-1970s. Comprised of two-panel diptychs, *House Removals* pairs color photographs of residential properties before and after a house has been "removed." The fixed relation of the photographs permits the viewer to closely examine the similarities and differences between the two images, to arresting effect. In each instance, a family home has vanished, as if by way of an optical trick. Divola elides the act of demolition itself in favor of a time-lapse "cut," succinctly and eerily evoking the ephemeral nature of shelter and the vicissitudes of time and loss.

Divola's photographs of damaged and demolished houses offer a stark perspective on what cultural geographer Donald Meinig identifies as one of three core symbolic landscapes in the U.S: in this case, the "California suburb," an idealized image born of the population boom in Southern California in the early 20th- century and disseminated widely through visual media, including motion pictures. Carving the region's valleys and expansive basin into neatly articulated properties, the prototypical "California suburb," Meinig proposes, was designed to facilitate "indoor—outdoor living, with an accent upon individual gratification, physical health, and pleasant exercise."¹⁰ In his studies of deserted suburban houses, Divola's camera in contrast is drawn to signs of violation, deterioration, and entropy, to evidence of the deconstructive aspects of "indoor-outdoor living," a potential anticipated in the comically flimsy shelters and inefficient construction sites found in California slapstick, and perhaps most richly and intricately explored by Buster Keaton, from the pre-fabricated home building project at the center of his first released short, *One Week* (1920), through the leveling of a small city by gale force winds in the climax to his final independently produced feature, *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928). A scene in Keaton's *The Scarecrow* (1920) in which Buster seeks refuge from a dog in the ruins of a roofless Spanish adobe may provide the most apposite example [Fig. 4a]. See especially the

closing shot of this elaborate chase sequence, in which a single image anticipates three motifs we have seen in Divola's photographic projects: pursuit by a dog, a sprint away from the camera, and a landscape view through the window or door frame of an abandoned home [Fig.4b].



Fig. 4a *The Scarecrow* (Keaton 1920)



Fig.4b *The Scarecrow* (Keaton, 1920)

In his exploration of interior spaces, Divola appropriates the framing function of doorways and windows to recast the distinction between inside and outside in striking ways. Photographic series in Divola's *LAX/Noise Abatement Zone*, for example, offer varied perspectives on particular entryways, viewed from outside and inside an abandoned house at different times of day, and on occasion feature a landscape view through the damaged window or door. In the *Zuma* series, which Divola shot from within a Malibu beach house that had been repurposed for training firefighters, he uses even more opulently desecrated interiors to frame stunning views of a seemingly limitless ocean, with water and sky illuminated by diurnal cycles of daylight, dawn to dusk [Fig.5a]. I am reminded here of the poignant but passing evening beach scene in 1916 Triangle-Keystone comedy, *Fatty and Mabel Adrift*, featuring Roscoe Arbuckle and Mabel Normand, in which a matte shot of an incandescent sunset is embedded within the window frame of the young couple's home on the evening before vandals, aided by a wind storm, send the seaside cottage adrift on the ocean [Fig.5b]. This momentary hiatus in the slapstick finds its complement sixty years later in Divola's meditative exploration of Pacific vistas from a vantage point within the ruins of an oceanfront home.

Fig. 5a *Zuma Series*Fig.5b *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (Arbuckle, 1916)

The cyclical temporality of the changing sunlight in Divola's *Zuma* series, placed in tension with the progressive deterioration of the beach house structure, reminds us that the historicity of a "California aesthetic" – or any location-centered aesthetic for that matter – requires attention not simply to linear developments but recurring and regenerative patterns in art practices. The enduring photographic qualities of particular California landscapes are part and parcel of the complex sense of time evoked by Divola's reworking of such images. Even as they foreground the provisional and transitory nature of the built environment of Los Angeles, and gesture obliquely toward the social processes through which the urban landscape has been transformed, Divola's photographic series feature durable topographical elements, including inland deserts, coastal waters, and the flat plains upon which the "California suburb" first gained culturally legible form.

Divola's photography may also have special purchase in an era when we now capture and inspect stilled cinematic images digitally with ease, effecting the very "pause" that Fleischman finds distinctly productive in Divola's work. As Laura Mulvey has argued, our capacity to seize and store a still image from a movie's digital file has enabled new forms of possession of and critical reflection upon moving images within and across historical periods.¹¹ Drawing attention to the moment of photographic registration, the still image provides occasion to consider choices

made in its production – camera placement, composition, the choreographic opportunities topographical contingencies inspire – and to identify clues to location that the flow of moving pictures may mask or veil. In a similar fashion, the “pause” of Divola’s still photographs provides us with an opportunity to reflect on earlier photographic encounters with the changing urban landscape of Los Angeles, including places not yet territorialized by the pictorial land grab of the motion picture industry. They have the potential to revive our sense of the exploratory efforts of early filmmakers charged with the task of transforming physical locations into performance spaces, and to foster fresh ways of thinking about the places in which – and performances through which – motion picture genres took root in California a century ago.

Endnotes

¹ Jeffrey Fleischman, “Just Beyond the Frame,” *Los Angeles Times* (15 December 2013): E1, E6.

Also see lead curator Karen Sinsheimer’s contribution to the exhibition catalogue, “California and John Divola,” *John Divola: As Far as I Could Get* (Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013): 91-101.

² John Divola, *Isolated Houses* (Tucson: Nazraeli Press, 2000/2001)

³ Dinah Portner, “An Interview with John Divola,” *Journal of Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies* (September 1978). Reprinted in *American Suburb X* (19 April 2014). <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2014/04/interview-interview-with-john-divola.html>.

⁴ Jan Tumlrir, “John Divola: On the Vandalism, Forced Entry, and Zuma Series” (May 2005). <http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~divola/Statements&Reviews/Three%20Acts/Interview.html>.

⁵ Portner, “An Interview with John Divola.”

⁶ Tumlrir, “John Divola: On the Vandalism, Forced Entry, and Zuma Series.”

⁷ John Divola, *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert*, Artist Statements & Reviews,
<http://www.divola.com/>

⁸ Concerning the temporality of creative labor, Divola has observed: “The beauty of the photography is distance. I can make an incredibly naïve and stupid mark, and then make an interesting photograph about a naïve and stupid mark....if I don’t like it, I’ll do something else with it, or somebody will come and burn it and cover it up, and I can try again” (Simon Baker, “Interview with John Divola,” *John Divola: As Far as I Could Get*: 180). In his remarks at the exhibition’s opening, Dick Hebdige elaborated on Divola’s employment of a spatial metaphor: “Distance – in other words, the length of time. The length of time it takes to set something up, to execute an action, to make a mark, to take a shot or lots of shots, to stitch the shots together” (“John Divola...As Far as I Could Get in Twenty Minutes,” Santa Barbara Museum of Art, October 13, 2013). It is but a small step here to a consideration of the history of such choices across longer time periods, a perspective that I am arguing Divola’s still and mute photographic projects provide the analyst of California landscapes in silent cinema.

⁹ Concerning the *As Far as I Could Get* series, Christopher Knight writes: “The deeper into the scene that the artist penetrates, the more he’s swallowed up and the more oddly bereft a viewer feels, ignominiously left behind. It’s a frankly – Shane, Come back! – yet disconcertingly devoid of the emotional manipulation of a Hollywood movie.” See Knight, “Out of the Ruins,” *Los Angeles Times* (13 November 2013): D1, D4. The ending to Chaplin’s *The Pilgrim* might be said to draw concurrently on the tropes of both slapstick comedy and westerns in this regard.

¹⁰ D. W. Meinig, “Symbolic Landscapes: Some Idealization of American Communities,” in Meinig, ed., *The Interpretations of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 164-192; quotation, 171. In addition to the “California

suburb,” Meinig identifies the “New England village” and “Main Street” as key symbolic landscapes.

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24X a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006): 144-196.