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THE PERFORMANCE OF THE AUSTIN INDIE SCENE IN *SLACKER*: FROM THE BODY OF A SCENE TO THE BODY OF A GENERATION

MARIA TERESA SOLDANI

Résumé

Slacker (1991) de Richard Linklater est considéré comme un jalon d'une importance clé dans le cinéma indépendant américain (King, 2005). Le film en entier a été tourné à Austin au Texas, principalement dans le voisinage de la Drag. La narration de 24 heures de la vie urbaine possède des caractéristiques particulières : un scénario conçu comme une « feuille de route », sans personnages principaux ou moments charnières; des membres de l'équipe de mise en scène et de tournage comme acteurs non professionnels; de la musique d'Austin. Cet article explore la représentation unique de *Slacker* de la scène indépendante locale et de quelle façon sa performance collective est devenue emblématique d'un phénomène générationnel, en mettant l'accent non plus sur l'espace (Austin), mais sur le temps (Génération X).

Abstract

Slacker (1991) by Richard Linklater is considered a milestone in American independent cinema (King). The film is entirely shot on location in Austin, Texas, mainly in the area of the Drag. Its 24-hour narration of city life has specific features: a script conceived as a "Roadmap," with no main characters or turning points; members of the scene and film crew as non-professional actors; and local Austin music. This article explores *Slacker's* unique representation of the local indie scene and how its collective performance became emblematic of a generational phenomenon, thus shifting the culture discourse's emphasis from space (Austin) to time (Generation X).

Slacker (1990/1991) is Richard Linklater's second feature film, following his undistributed debut *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988). It was shot on location in Austin, Texas between 1989 and 1990 and picked up for distribution by Orion Classics in 1991 after several independent showings in the US. Geoff King considers the movie a milestone in the history of American indie film (21) and names it one of the most successful low-budget productions of all time (14). In his history of American independent cinema, Emanuel Levy speaks of Linklater and *Slacker* in relation to regional filmmaking, highlighting the importance of locality as a foundational dimension of indie film culture (172-176). *Slacker* was released the same year as the breakthrough novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) by Canadian writer Douglas Coupland. Subsequently, the mainstream media began to talk about the post-baby-boomer "twenty-something" generation portrayed in the film and novel, grouping together *Slacker*, *Generation X*, and grunge music (especially Nirvana) as works by/from/on "Generation X." Film scholar Peter Hanson grouped *Slacker* within the category of the "Cinema of Generation X" (62-63), his label for certain new films produced in the late 1980s and 1990s, such as Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994), Ben Stiller's *Reality Bites* (1994), and David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). He argued:

Gen-X filmmakers are those directors born between 1961 and 1971, a ten-year period that falls well within the range given by sociologists seeking to identify when Generation X was born. While ten years of birth can't encompass an entire generation, the filmmakers in these years were exposed to key social, political, and cultural factors. Therefore, their collective body of work can be analyzed as a reaction to those forces that shaped their generation as a whole (5).

In the 1980s independent music scenes associated with alternative rock culture flourished in the US (see Straw "Systems of Articulation;" Kruse), producing a phenomenon that the journalist Michael Azerrad later called "the American indie underground 1981-1991." During those years, a prolific independent scene took shape in Austin, involving such bands as Glass Eyes, Ed Hall, Zeitgeist, and Dharma Bums, who steadily played in urban venues and produced DIY records. Moreover, many musicians moved to Austin, such as the band Butthole Surfers and the songwriter Daniel Johnston. In 1985 MTV dedicated an entire episode of *Cutting Edge* to the scene, giving it the title "Austin Avalanche of Rock and Roll". The program was produced by the independent I.R.S. Records and directed by Jonathan Dayton with Valerie Faris (*Little Miss Sunshine*, 2006).

This article explores *Slacker's* filmic construction of the local indie scene, examining the process by which Austin's regionalism became emblematic of a cultural phenomenon that was both national and generational. I will trace the process by which *Slacker* was conceived, written, produced, directed, and shot in Austin, and show how this independently produced film was deeply connected both to the local indie music scene and to the form of the city symphony film. Drawing on Rob Stone's analysis of *Slacker*, I will examine the ways in which the making of the film, involving, as it did, a local cultural scene, produced complex relations between space and time. I will further explore these issues by invoking the concepts of *dérive* (Guy Debord), time-image (Gilles Deleuze), chronotope (Mikhail Bakhtin), and generation (Karl Mannheim), suggesting that *Slacker* constructs a distinctive relation between the visuality of the Austin indie scene and the generational discourse commonly associated with the film.

Slacker depicts a 24-hour day in the city life of Austin's residents. No central character emerges and no professional actors were used. The film's narrative is organized as a flux of meetings between two, three, or more people, in streets, venues, and houses located, for the most part, in the Drag—the neighborhood along the western side of the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. Levy summarizes the film's narrative as a chain of events: "[*Slacker*] travels across the lonely,

eccentric trajectories of dozens of people over a single day (from dawn to dawn), dropping some characters just as they become interesting, finding something peculiar in nearly every episode” (175).

This “Austin movie” (Linklater 3) opens with the image of a bus travelling at dawn as we see a male passenger wake up. The silhouette of the face, captured against the moving landscape, belongs to Linklater himself. Over this image are two sets of titles: “DETOUR FILM PRODUCTION presents” and “SLACKER.” In the second shot the bus stops at the Austin station as the male passenger gets off and takes a cab towards an unknown destination. The third shot is a long take of the passenger as he tells the taxi driver the story of his dreams and his theory of the existence of parallel realities: he explains how, in the exact moment in which a person makes a choice, all other (lost) opportunities

still exist contemporaneously. In the original script, the character is called “Should Have Stayed at Bus Station,” a name defined by function rather than given in a customary act of naming. The movie adopts this approach throughout, giving nameless characters equal weight.

Slacker’s script contains real events, local legends, and fictional stories involving over a hundred characters, young people living in Austin at that specific historical

moment. King describes the film as an innovative choral narration (i.e. “Tangled Webs: Multi-Strand Narrative”), identifying this element as characteristic of American independent cinema (84-85). *Slacker* is a collective urban tale, mapping Austin through the trajectories of multiple figures. Each scene flows into another, connected by at least one character, and this chain of scenes produces the urban, social, and cultural cartographies of Austin, following a script that was, indeed, known as “the Roadmap” (Linklater 23).



James Haley argues that *Slacker* is a non-fiction film and notes how its essence lies in the fact of its being set in the Drag, insofar as what fills the film is the humanity of that neighborhood:

Richard Linklater's Slacker could not have been made anywhere but in Austin, Texas. Oh, sure, a crew could film such footage on any urban location. But that would be fiction. Only Austin—and more specifically, only the eight blocks of the Guadalupe Street Drag that skirts University of Texas—could open its collective trench coat and flash its vitals at an unsuspecting audience—and have it be true in revealing its netherworld of space cadets, goofballs, punk groupies, gently aging iconoclasts, coffee shop feminists-gone-'round-the-bend,' conspiracy dweebs lurking in used-book stores, artists, anti-artists, and a whole purgatory of other refugees from the world of productive sanity. ("GTT," Linklater 5)

In the 1980s, the Drag was the heart of the Austin indie scene, which had flourished since Raul's starting playing punk music at the end of the 1970s, thus establishing that scene's independence from the locally rooted progressive country and blues scenes. As Will Straw points out, establishing a scene produces the key context for alternative rock music culture: "[the scene] is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization" ("Systems of Articulation" 373). The musicians in the scene create "forms of

communication through which the building of musical alliances and the drawing of musical boundaries take place" (373), creating highly hybrid, personal, and eclectic styles developed "within an ongoing process of differentiation and complexification" (376). Austin in the 1980s was defined by such a bounded cultural space, with music practices that involved multiple styles establishing a special relation between space and time, as we shall see.

The Austin Music Scenes: Performers and Sweating Bodies

In his case study of Austin, Barry Shank defines a scene as an "overproductive signifying community" in which "far more semiotic information is produced than can be rationally parsed" (122). Shank speaks of the "interrogation of dominant structures of identification, and potential cultural transformation" that takes place during live musical performance, in "an evident display of semiotic disruption" (122). In the Austin scene, Shank suggests, "the music . . . performed is the result of an entire set of social and cultural relationships intersecting through the 'personalities' of the musicians in the field of musical performance" (138). He further elaborates on the performance of sincerity in connecting the members of the scene to Austin itself:

This belief in the importance of sincere personal expression established a communicative atmosphere that elicited a willing and pleasurable identification among Austin's young music fans. These young fans developed a tendency to group together in the city's music clubs—listening, dancing, and fantasizing along with the performances of local musicians. Once this tradition was established, the clubs of Austin began to function as a cultural synecdoche. (15-16)

The venues Shank surveyed, such as Raul's or Sparky's, were crowded with Communications students from the University of Texas and people whose age, sexualities, genders, and races rendered them marginal (104). Local filmmakers, writers, musicians, record sellers, and promoters began to share interdisciplinary projects that involved several art forms and media, including performance art, music, film, video, and writing. In Shank's terms, the Austin indie scene became "a media-conscious movement" (115).

In 1985, Linklater and some friends founded the Austin Film Society, with the aim of distributing independent, foreign, and experimental films that had not yet been shown in town. That same year Linklater and cameraman Lee Daniel shot and edited a short film on Woodshock, the annual independent music festival staged in Austin. Both the name of the event and the title of the film referenced Woodstock, the legendary rock music festival of 1969. Woodshock 1985 was staged in the natural environment of Dripping Springs, with the participation of Austin's most notable

local bands alongside other US indie acts. Linklater and Daniel edited seven minutes of the recreational activities of the scene's members in the festival area, but did not show any activity transpiring on the stage. The live music performed during the festival was the background sound for some interviews and jokes involving the audience, heard against images of half-naked bodies under the sun as captured by the Super 8 cameras. Among the various people shown, a still unknown Daniel Johnston promoted his self-produced tape of home-recorded music, his behavior exemplary of the sincerity Shank observed in the Austin music scene. In the end titles, Linklater and Daniel ironically called *Woodshock* "a film attempt." At the very least, this embryonic Super 8 film, with its emphasis on showing the bodies of its members, translated into visual terms the concept of the independent local scene. These sun-scorched bodies spurred those processes of identification and differentiation between musicians and audience that, in Shank's account, were part of the "carnavalesque atmosphere" of live performances in Austin:

The bodies of the performers (particularly that of the lead singer) are framed on a stage, where their gestures map out a sexualized field of affect, meaning and desire. The vibrations of the music then circulate an overwhelming eroticism through dancing and listening bodies, an eroticism that in turn is cast upon a widest variety of secondary objects, rapidly translating the libidinal ties of love and identification into one another and back again, in the overproduction of the signs of identity and the overstimulation of the sense. These are the necessary conditions for the development of a scene: a situated swirling mass of transformative signs and sweating bodies, continually reconstructing the meaning of a communion of individuals in a primary group. (128)

Woodshock was Linklater and Daniel's first exercise with content and form: it framed the "transformative signs and sweating bodies" (Shank) of the members of the Austin indie scene in experimental fashion and made use of a specific film format, Super 8, which had played a key role in the history of avant-garde and underground cinema.

Slacker: the Filmmaking Process

Linklater describes *Slacker* as "sort of a group art project" (qtd. in Lowestein 26). The film is a collective narrative in which no scene is more significant than the others and in which there are no turning points; each scene is only connected to the following scene in the chronological order established by the passage of time

(i.e. day/night/day). The only instance of repetition is that the first day's dawn, which opens the film, is mirrored in that of the second day, which closes the film. These two events, marking the boundaries of a 24-hour cycle, are connected to earlier and later films by Linklater. The first sequence recalls *It's Impossible to...*, and initiates the imaginary account of daydreaming which is at the core of *Waking Life* (2001); the topos of the encounter on the road is developed in the trilogy *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013). In addition, the last sequence in *Slacker* recalls the Super 8 films that Linklater and Daniel made over several years at the beginning of their careers, such as *Woodshock*: "In itself, this last sequence is the kind of film I was first making. Lee and I would, say, take a trip out of town and shoot Super 8 the whole time. Then you get the footage back, edit it, and maybe project it while a friend's band plays" (Linklater 128).

In order to prepare his cast and crew, Linklater collected some production notes grouped according to the following topics: "Vertical narrative... Script... Visual... Casting... To the Actor... Characters... Dialogue... This Film... The Viewer... A Method" (Linklater 10-13). These notes were published in 1992 in Linklater's book on *Slacker*, which also included the first script, a history of the production, actors' profiles, cast reminiscences, notes from the crew, and an interview with the author:

VERTICAL NARRATIVE

A film as a long sequence in which each shot, each event and character, lead only to the next.

New scene/New start: each complete in itself, the next is simply juxtaposed to it. The relationship between various scenes can be connected later (or before – cause can follow effect).

The audience will itself construct causal relationships.

The scenes and characters change... but the preoccupations of the movie remain the same.

What seems like a straight line (as narrative) will actually be a circle (emotionally speaking).

"...any apparent philosophical and political contradictions are actually an integral part of the non-narrative..."

SCRIPT

A film where anything goes – anything people do can be integrated into this film.

A film of people posing problems, even in a confused state (possibly to be solved or addressed differently elsewhere).

Optimistic cinema: anything is possible, nothing is prohibited.

"Something filmed is automatically different from something written, and therefore original" Jean-Luc Godard

VISUAL

Camera: quiet but eloquent (especially when it moves).

Colors: muted, not bright, muddied by the environment.

Fiction... entering into documentary. Documentary of characters acting out a fiction?

Lack of establishing shots: as a partitioning effect (same with the characters' lack of development).

Environment: suggests documentary.

Character: passion. (10-11)

Faithful to this methodological framework, Linklater paid particularly attention to the performative aspect of filmmaking, producing notes on actors, characters, and dialogue. In his casting, the director favored finding a *persona*, someone with attitude, physical presence, interesting life experiences, and particular cultural tastes (11). The notion of *persona* has been key in descriptions of independent scenes, especially those involving musicians, and has been a prominent feature of the representation of such scenes within films. One need only think, for example, of those films made within the No Wave scene, which flourished amidst the decay of New York City's East Village at the end of the 1970s and is sometimes considered the first "independent scene" (Yokobosky 127). A key feature of No Wave was the creation of hybrid forms of music, film, media, and visual arts in which scene-based *persona* such as Lydia Lunch were seen to embody certain characteristics of the scene overall. The sense that *persona* and performances are central to the visuality of the Austin indie scene is clear in the case of *Slacker*. Linklater noted in his internal communication to cast and crew that "[p]erformance will depend on the screen presence: the actor must give off the right vibrations, be the surface that represents the complex depths, and be able to capture the essence of the moment of that time" (11).

In *Slacker* the performance of the Austin indie scene is enacted in several ways. First of all, performances by virtually all of those involved in local indie music—Glass Eye, Poi Dog Pondering, Bad Mutha Goose, Daniel Johnston, Shoulder, Sick People, Jean Caffeine, Hickhoids, Butthole Surfers, Triangle Mallet Apron, Not For Sale, The Texas Instruments, Pocket Fisherman, Crust, Ed Hall, The Jackofficers, and St. Cecilia—are almost entirely diegetic. Their music is played live and unplugged along the street, in daytime or, plugged-in, at venues, in nighttime; it is reproduced on sound systems at home, in a car, or in a bar; it is listened to by a few people or by larger groups. All these contexts are the daily experience of music and urban life, not the extraordinary events we might associate with mainstream rock and pop culture. There are only two exceptions in this restriction of music to diegetic sources: the final scene, with its ambiguous use of "Die Graskop Polka," which may be diegetic (coming from the car radio) or not; and the end titles, in which we hear the Butthole Surfers' song "Strangers Die Everyday."

The scene which stands as the fullest performance of the Austin music scene is also the most emblematic scene in *Slacker* as a whole. A guy who comes out of a house (Ultimate Loser) and a young woman (Stephanie from Dallas) are speaking in the street. They are updating each other on their recent lives—UL is still playing with his band, the Ultimate Losers, while SfD has just come back to town after a period in a clinic in Dallas, TX—when another girl (the Pap Smear Pusher) interrupts their flirting to try to sell them what she presents as the "original Madonna pap smear."



The “Roadmap”: *Slacker* as a City Symphony

Shank’s sense of Austin’s music venues as forming a “cultural synecdoche” is one way of understanding *Slacker*’s connections to the film form of the city symphony. Its 24-hour narration and restriction to the bounded space of Austin are the most obvious characteristics *Slacker* shares with city symphonies, “those films,” in Scott MacDonald’s words, “that provide a general sense of life in a specific metropolis, often by revealing characteristic dimensions of city life from the morning into the evening of a composite day” (3). This film form—developed in Europe in the 1920s, in the work of Walter Ruttmann, Dviga Vertov, and Alberto Cavalcanti—inspired the city films on NYC made by vanguard filmmakers such as Rudy Burckhardt. It is useful to see a number of independent, music-centred American films as variations on the city symphony: *The Blank Generation* (Amos Poe and Ivan Kral, 1976), *The Decline of Western Civilization* (Penelope Spheeris, 1980), *The Slog Movie* (David Markey, 1982), *Athens, GA: Inside/Out* (Tony Gayton, 1986). These films suggest affinities between the project of the city symphony form and the documentation of cultural scenes. They make visible “the theatricality of the city [...] [and] the city’s capacity to generate images of people occupying public space in attractive ways [...]. [In them, m]usic provides a pretext for being out in the city, for consuming culture in moments of collective interaction which are embedded in the more diffuse public life of cities, in drinking and in public, in collective conversation” (Straw, “Cultural Scenes” 412).

The performances in this scene are by three musicians active in Austin: Scott Marcus (UL) and Stella Weir (SfD) from the Glass Eye, and Teresa “Nervosa” Taylor (PSP) from the Butthole Surfers. The scene effects an irony of sorts with respect to pop-star worship, and this itself encapsulates the film’s anti-Hollywood attitude. The representation of the Austin indie scene also includes performances by members of the film’s crew: Linklater; D.O.P. and cameraman Daniel (GTO); cameraman assistant Clark Walker (Cadillac Crook); editor Scott Rhodes (Disgruntled Grad Student); sound engineer Denise Montgomery (Having a Breakthrough Day); and script-supervisor Meg Brennan (Sitting at Café). Linklater describes these people as “friends” with “a common aesthetic,” “kind of a film family” (Linklater 128-129). These alliances, emblematic of Linklater’s approach, would continue over several years and movies, adding a strong personal and reflexive dimension to his filmmaking.

MacDonald considers Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) to be a city symphony, noting characteristics of the film that, arguably, are shared with *Slacker*—the combination of genres (i.e. fiction, documentary, avant-garde) and the critical analogy between cinematic and musical forms:

In an orchestra, dozens of musicians play instruments that have evolved over history to produce a multipartite, but unified and coherent performance within which the individualities of the contributing musicians are subsumed; in the city, the individual contributions of millions of people (working with technologies that have developed over centuries) are subsumed within the metropolis’s mega-partite movement through the day, a movement that reveals several predictable highs and lows. (4)

Other elements connect *Slacker* to this film form: the realistic look of the 16mm film, generally used for documentary films; the choral and decentered narration; the first sequence, with its titles at dawn, that functions as a prelude; the presence, at the beginning, of an author who explains his interpretation of reality in self-reflexive terms; the final sequence, with its use of Super 8 film in an experimental fashion to signal a new dawn; and the “fireworks” visually created by the cameras as they are thrown in the air. Further comparisons of *Slacker* with *Do the Right Thing* are useful: while the latter focuses on questions of race, the former foregrounds questions of generation (of the *twenty-somethings*) in its representation of the scene. Both films seek to develop alternative ways of dealing

with social issues. For MacDonald, the alternative dimensions of Lee's film were "demonstrated by the production process of the film, which required individuals with backgrounds even more varied than those of the characters in the film to find ways to collaborate, not just for one day, but for several of the hottest weeks of New York summer, in a neighborhood in Bed-Stuy" (15, original emphasis). This collaborative and alternative work process presumes the existence of a historical *continuum* between time unfolding before, during, and after the events which make up the diegesis.

In *Do the Right Thing* the representation of daily life in a single block (Bedford-Stuyvesant) in a borough (Brooklyn) of an American city (New York) is critical in relation to the national media discourses that debated the film's political and cultural issues. In *Slacker* we find a similar set of relationships, except that, in the case of Linklater's film, the specific political issue is not explicitly addressed but rather conveyed implicitly through the independent means with which the film was made. The filmic representation of Austin and rendering of the visuality of the local indie scene may be interpreted in terms of emerging issues having to do with generational identity.

Using the film form of the city symphony, both *Do the Right Thing* and *Slacker* portray the collective as a living organism, made up of individual pieces that become emblematic of a wider body. As synecdoches of the country, Bed-Stuy and the Drag require that we shift our perspective as "viewers" from the local

to the national. The underground independent scene represented in *Slacker* shared many features with those scenes proliferating during the 1980s across trans-local networks, moving on from the effervescent experience of No Wave in NYC and punk scenes in Los Angeles. *Slacker* offers a representation of the Austin indie scene as a cultural synecdoche; the film moves from showing how venues embody the urban scene to suggesting ways in which the scene is coextensive with a national territory. Indie scenes are visualized from the perspective of two subject positions: one positions the subject in the city and the other locates the subject in relation to a mapping of the nation as a whole. The visualization of the scene is produced by specific independent or alternative media (e.g. DIY recordings and films, graffiti art, and print material such as fanzines, posters, and flyers) which are both made by the members of scenes and circulate between them within larger networks.

The Urban Night as Territory of the Austin Indie Scene

Scenes are inextricably connected to night-time. The daytime parts of *Slacker* are structured around linear narratives established by the chronological chain of events, in which any climax is avoided. Differently, those sequences set in the night represent various kinds of intensification—in particular, an increase in the number of meetings between characters as well as in the loudness of diegetic sound and the frequency of cuts.

In *Slacker*, when day gives way to night, several changes happen, generating a sense of excess in the film's representation of the cultural scene. The night is explored by the eye of the camera as it goes from venue to venue: we see bars overflowing with beer, non-stop smoking, characters jumping into a van to go to a concert, others trying to avoid paying for tickets by using the guest-list or copying an admission stamp onto their skin and so on. Some people are making a video project during a Triangle Mallet Apron performance, or attending an Ed Hall concert at the Continental Club, or drinking and speaking about photography, or hopping onto a car to finish the day in someone's bed. We can read the night in *Slacker* in Straw's terms, "as a circumscribed, territorial phenomenon, with its distinctive practices, sensory features and characteristic sites of narrative action (like night-clubs). In particular, the sense of night as territory follows the recognition that night has its own populations, personality types and distinctive forms of behaviour" ("Chrono-Urbanism" 54). The night in *Slacker* can be conceived as a "territory" to pass through, with its characters—and the camera which follows them—constantly in motion.

In the night section of *Slacker* the elements that characterize the cultural scene in Austin are enhanced by specific filmic choices: not only do virtually all of the shots take place in public locations, but new media formats are introduced (video, Super 8) and the diegetic music is mainly played live on stage. TV and VHS appear during sunset in the media lab of the character "Video Backpacker," and video, in

the form of Fisher Price PixelVision, returns in the nighttime to capture in a club the dark performance of an experimental ensemble. The already mentioned Super 8 sequence, during the final dawn, is both a celebration of night-life in Austin and an expression of Linklater's own excitement at the films previously made to portray that artistic scene and its members. In addition, these two sequences are shot from the viewpoint of a filmmaker "inside the scene"—in both the cinematic and social senses of "scene"—who is

attempting to capture its life just as Linklater and Daniel had attempted to do in *Woodshock*. In this way, Linklater includes other elements of an advanced self-reflexivity within the film. The director notes, with respect to the ending, that "*Slacker* is a celebration of day-to-day life. Especially the last scene, with the all-night partiers driving around and filming each other. It's a microcosm of the whole film, ordinary people saying 'Hey, my life's worthy of cinema'" (17).

Slacking in Time-Images

The creation in *Slacker* of fictional characters whom Linklater (12) called "not developed," in a narration with no protagonists or antagonists, produces a narrative that is "alternative" relative to those of Hollywood classic cinema (see King 82-86). These non-professional actors and actresses perform a story that avoids leading roles and engages in a collective construction. Rob Stone suggests that *Slacker* embodies the "politics of slackness" as a form of opposition both to established Hollywood cinema and to the doctrines of Reaganomics. Musicians, promoters, artists, poets, video amateurs, students, writers, and bartenders mix their roles, shifting continuously between fiction and reality. The local scene is represented as a collective body sharing a commitment to independent principles. This way of making the movie, its adoption of DIY media and practices, suggests, to individuals who mostly belong to the same generational cohort, an alternative way of positioning oneself within American society. Linklater noted:

I think this generation has drifted farther away from any kind of ideologies: seeing all official systems of thought as alienations. And when you look at the American political system, there's nothing to feel aligned with, you're not represented. (18)



Work isn't mandatory in our society. [...] If you're willing not to have a family, a new car, nice living conditions, nice clothes, and eat out every night; if you are willing to go, "I just want to work part-time or not at all and spend most of my time making music, writing, reading, or watching movies," you can consciously drop out. (19)

A deeper analysis of the spatial and temporal categories in *Slacker* adds further elements with which to interpret the shift from the local space of Austin to the larger historical category of Generation X. Guy Debord's notion of *dérive*, Gilles Deleuze's time-image, and Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope help illuminate the film's "reterritorialization of a part of America called Austin" (Stone 22). Stone describes the filmic space in *Slacker* as "a mundane space of transit," "a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible" (21-22). The camera drifts along the street space, from character to character and from place to place. Debord's account of *dérive* is useful in capturing the ways in which chains of events are organized in the film: "In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (50). The drift could unfold over a day or a few hours and involve the entire city, a neighborhood, or at least a few blocks. In *Slacker*, the drift is conveyed through the shooting process, the use of long shots which mostly involve motion, and a style of editing marked by a limited use of cuts.

These elements, together with the collective narrative, the absence of main characters, the frustration of any action-directed plot, and dialogue which takes the form of monologues lead towards the accomplishment of the time-image, as Gilles Deleuze has described it. The French philosopher identifies a rupture in Italian Neorealismo, marked by the "art of encounter--fragmented, ephemeral, piecemeal, missed encounters" (Zavattini qtd. in Deleuze 1) where "the real was no longer represented or reproduced, but 'aimed at'" (1). What Deleuze calls "the crisis of the action-image" emerges first in "the form of trip/ballad films" and "the slackening of the sensory-motor connections" (3), whose result tends towards a "pure optical-sound image" (4). Speaking of the Japanese director Ozu, but in terms whose pertinence for *Slacker* seems clear, Deleuze suggests that it is in the framing of daily life that the film image becomes time-image:

There is becoming, change, passage. But the form of what changes does not itself change, does not pass on. This is time, time itself, 'a little time in its pure state': a direct time-image, which gives what changes the unchanging form in which the change is produced. The night that changes into day, or the reverse, recalls a still life on which light falls, either fading or getting stronger [...]. Ozu's still lifes endure, have a duration, over ten seconds of the vase: this duration of the vase is precisely the representation of that which endures, through the succession of changing states. [...] Each is time, on each occasion, under various conditions of that which changes in time. Time is the full, that is, the unalterable form

filled by change. Time is 'the visual reserve of events in their appropriateness'. (17)

Characters in *Slacker* are framed in their changing everydayness, with each scene lasting as long as their encounters on the road. Characters, as well as actors, share a time that presumes a time before and after the moment of shooting: the time of their lives within the spaces of Austin.

In the street the camera meets that varied humanity whose collective life is celebrated in Bakhtin's conception of the carnival, as "a spirit of resistance" and "an organic form of life" (Stone 99). Even if the characters in *Slacker* may appear purposeless, they avoid stasis by expressing an energy for social and cultural activities: the drifting camera explores the space they occupy in small groups and their collective time is experienced as duration, even by the viewers. According to Stone, the concepts of time-image and carnival converge in the "chronotope," a narrative temporal-spatial unit wherein time becomes visible and space makes the passage of time into movement—"a concrete whole" (Bakhtin 84). A key connection is made "between the motif of meeting and the chronotope of the road" (98), while the "public square" is considered the "real-life chronotope" (131). This specific unit makes possible "the *temporal contiguity* of phenomena" as "collective," "differentiated and measured only by the events of *collective life*" (206, original emphasis). For Bakhtin, what novels shared with the chronotope of the road is that "[t]he road is always one that passes through *familiar territory*"; "it is the *sociohistorical heterogeneity*

of one's own country that is revealed and depicted" (245, original emphasis). In reading *Slacker* through the framework of the chronotope, the urban context of the Austin indie scene becomes a synecdoche for the young adults of the US whom the film represents: "[t]ime, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); [...] [the] road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time" (243-244). The characters of *Slacker* meet each other at street level, avoid any official trajectories through the drift, and join a communal life founded in the passing of time without being caught in any hierarchic order or social roles. Their collective activities blossom in what Bakhtin defined as "the time of *productive growth*": "[t]he passage of time does not destroy or diminish but rather multiplies and increases the quantity of valuable things. [...] This is a time maximally tensed toward the future. [...] Generally speaking there is as yet no precise differentiation of time into a present, a past and a future" (207, original emphasis).

The particular relationship here between *Slacker's* real, filmic, and metafilmic dimensions is held in the chain of events framed by the lens, which maintains a constant distance between camera and characters. The camera drifts through the multitude of characters of equal status who are, in real life and at the same time, members of the local scene. This filmmaking strategy may enact the co-existence of two types of time-image: the presence of "sheets of pasts" and of "*a present of the future, a present of the present and a present of the past, all implicated in the event, rolled up in the event, and thus simultaneous and inexplicable*" (Deleuze 100, original

emphasis). In such a strategy, all the encounters—the concerts, the car rides, and the possible realities they open up—represent events: "From affect to time: a time is revealed inside the event, which is made from the simultaneity of these three implicated presents, from these de-actualized *peaks of present*" (100, original emphasis). In *Slacker* the characters live in a tense that bears no clear distinction between past, present, and future; they experience collectively "the time of *productive growth*" of which Bakhtin wrote (207). They express a state of becoming which is framed in time-images, rather than the indirect representation of themselves induced by an action-oriented plot.

From the Body of a Scene to the Body of a Generation

Slacker seeks to re-territorialize the local scene by treating it as a circumscribed unit of time and space with both particular and universal meanings. The film represents those members of the Austin indie scene in 1989/1990 who share cultural and social practices (e.g., chatting in bars, attending a concert, playing music) and, at the same time, a multitude of sketched characters caught up within narrative strategies and topoi (e.g., *dérives*, encounters, the road, and collective life). The constant drift of the camera in the streets of Austin brakes the sensory-motor schema which is the basis of Hollywood films, creating a filmic construction that avoids plot-oriented actions and characters. According to Stone, "time-images create this incessant flow of life and dissolve the patterns of street based impressions

and encounters within the film. The reterritorialization of American values thus occurs in *Slacker's* alternative history of the neverending moment" (99).

Slacker encourages personal ways of living for a collectivity Linklater refers to as "my generation" (4). In this way, the movie suggests enjoying apparently purposeless public and private activities, such as chatting or reading, as part of a common itinerary, that of living in the passage of time:

*In a very short time, I went from thinking [...] that my generation had nothing to say to thinking that it not only had everything to say but was saying it in a completely new way. It was a multitude of voices co-existing and combining and all adding up to something that certainly "meant" something but couldn't easily be classified. Each individual had to find it in their own way and in the only place society had left for this discovery—the margins. I think that's where *Slacker* takes place—the accredited sources of information or the image we officially have of ourselves as a society. This seems the place where the actual buzz of life goes on, where the conspiracies, schizophrenia, melancholy, and exuberance all battle it out daily. (Linklater 4)*

Linklater's words reference a sense of generational identity that runs through *Slacker*. This generational sensibility is manifest, first of all, in the alternative filmmaking strategies employed. The film is independently and collectively produced, with no professional actors. At the level of scriptwriting, *Slacker*

is an urban choral narration conceived as a roadmap with no main characters or protagonists. The style of shooting is one in which the camera drifts through city spaces and keeps the same distance from the characters. Linklater made the movie with his friends and fellow scene members, engaging the social and cultural spaces and practices of the Austin indie scene. He also places himself, as filmmaker, “within the scene”: at the beginning, when he acts as the first character and looks forward to the narratives of the films that will follow (e.g., *Before Sunrise*, *Waking Life*), and at the end, when he inserts a film sample of his work with Daniel before *Slacker* (e.g., *Woodshock*).

With *Slacker*, a lively representation of the Austin indie scene became central to a discourse of generation which circulated in mainstream media. Both John Ulrich and Catherine Strong have traced histories of the term “Generation X” which came to be applied both to the Austin scene represented in *Slacker* and to the broader musical phenomena known as grunge. Ulrich follows the history of “Generation X” from Robert Capa’s first photographic studies of the post-World War II generation (3-8) to its association with the phrase “Blank Generation” (the title of a song, album, and film) and “appropriation” as a “signifier of punk style” by Billy Idol’s band when it took the name “Generation X” (12-14). For Strong, sociological definitions of “Generation X” remain unclear, and media uses tend to apply it to any overlooked generational phenomena (131-152).

According to Karl Mannheim, a generation is not defined by sharing a decade of birth but rather by the cultural and social sharings that render a collectivity conscious of itself. His work offers a number of insights into generational phenomena whose pertinence to our understanding of *Slacker*’s generational sensibility seems obvious:

The social phenomenon “generation” represents nothing more than a particular kind of identity of location, embracing related “age groups” embedded in a historical-social process. (292)

Members of a generation are “similarly located,” first of all, in so far as they all are exposed to the same phase of the collective process. [...] What does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data, etc., and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly “stratified” consciousness. (297)

A further concrete nexus is needed to constitute generation as an actuality. This additional nexus may be described as participation in the common destiny of this historical and social unit. (303, original emphasis)

Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units. (304, original emphasis)

A generation as an actuality is constituted when similarly “located” contemporaries participate in a common destiny and in the ideas and concepts which are in some way bound up with its unfolding. (306)

In these terms, generational collective belonging is defined by the sharing of social and cultural spaces, practices, and media. Cultural scenes, we might suggest, are the spaces in which this “sharing” takes place, but generational sensibilities are revealed in the ways in which these scenes are represented. The visuality of the local scene in *Slacker* is crucial to accomplishing a rupture of the sensory-motor schema characteristic of American cinema more widely. The drift of the film’s camera through the spaces of the scenes reveals the varied humanity of a new generational phenomenon. The multitude of scene members, themselves characters in the film’s own scene, inhabit the open, stratified temporality of Austin’s streets. *Slacker*’s fascinating approach to filmmaking turns the performance of the Austin indie scene as collective body into a representation of that scene as the body of a generation.

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