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ANGEL CITY

U.S.A. 1977 74 minutes Color

Produced, Directed, Edited, Timed, and Written by Jon Jost. Photographed by Jon Jost & Robert Schoenhut. Actors: Robert Glaudini; Winifred Golden, Pierce del Rue, Kathleen Dramer, Mark Brown.

"Playfully counting down from an academy leader base, ANGEL CITY probes the Byzantine surfaces of Los Angeles. Masked in detective genre clothing, it self-destructs customary narrative forms to eat into the heart of Hollywood. Capitalist motivations of money, spilt blood, the diversions of fiction, the falsifications of mass media unspool in tragicomic form skittering between Dragnet and Godraub."

—Jon Jost

The first and last images of Los Angeles indicate the complexity of Jon Jost's vision of that city (a complexity suggested when, during the title sequence, the title changes from **ANGEL CITY** to **ANGLE CITY**). The opening shot of L.A. is a night view from the Hollywood hills. The city presents a glittering panorama, as the voiceover calls it a "galaxy . . . a universe . . . maybe a dream. . . ." After night dramatically changes to day, while the view remains the same, there are images of archetypal Los Angeles beauty—palm trees, beach and ocean, lush flowers. The final image of L.A. occurs when hit men confront detective/protagonist Frank Goya. The camera is close-up on Goya as he and his pursuers act out an abbreviated and stylized climax. Goya says "I'm out of the picture" and disappears. The camera then zooms slowly back to reveal the just-"murdered" detective standing off to one side, the sound technician lying in front of where the action just took place, and, behind the actors and crew, a huge painted mural against which the scene was just enacted. Behind this painted wall is a smoggy, industrial Los Angeles which is shown in a 360° pan. Ar-

tifice, represented by Goya's "death" and the "landscape" against which it was set, has been exposed by being placed against the "real" city. But that "real" city has just been exposed by the entire film as illusory in much more complex ways. For Los Angeles is a city of images. It is the locus of Hollywood, image-making capital of the world. Jost's film about L.A. is a sustained examination of the nature of images, and of their supposed truth.

The protagonist of **ANGEL CITY** is Frank Goya ("just like the painter"), a cynical and eccentric private investigator who is hired by Pierce del Rue, chairman of Rexion Corp., the world's largest corporation, to investigate the murder of his wife Gloria, former model and aspiring actress (for a studio which belongs to del Rue's company). Goya presents some evidence, questions del Rue's mistress Bunny, who is subsequently murdered, and finally suspects del Rue himself, who then puts out a contract on Goya.

Goya is an archetypal figure—the private detective of Hollywood films and Raymond Chandler novels. Certain scenes—e.g. Goya's visit to a bar where he inquires about Gloria—and some of the voiceover narration, pay homage to and parody the respective models of the detective film and Chandler's prose. But Goya is clearly improbable in this role. While the archetypal detective/hero is often an outsider with respect to society, to the audience he is situated within genre conventions. Goya is, finally, outside the genre as well as outside society, and the reflections of which he is capable exceed those of the typical fictional detective.

Goya introduces himself as a "student," which means, in this film, a student of representation. His education as a detective is contained in Polaroid photographs, the images of which proceed from black and white frames, to colored frames, to images of increasing complexity. Here, as elsewhere in the film, images stand for—are said to mean—more than they appear to. A picture of a person represents missing persons; a picture of a couple making love represents divorce cases.

Goya tells us what these images represent.

The notion of the photograph as evidence is questioned, for we know the meaning of these images is being supplied by Jost's protagonist, their meaning has become a matter of interpretation, not of what one sees, or thinks one sees. Other images are used similarly. In one sequence, the image is masked so that it has the outline of a television image. But the artifice is made clear by the transparency of the masking, which allows the rest of the image to remain, faintly, visible. On one level the image says, "This is television," on another says, "Don't believe it," and on still another says, "Should you ever believe what you see on television?" In Goya's first scene, after showing the Polaroids, there is a transition to the action of the film. Goya says the story has action, and the camera pans within the same space to two men grappling; he then says the story has sex, and the camera pans again to a pair of writhing legs; he then says the film has violence, and the camera pans to a corpse, at which point Goya enters the frame and the story proper begins. Here again the image represents more than it actually contains. There is neither action nor sex nor, for that matter, violence in the film. In each instance, a single, stylized image is said to stand for what normally constitute the major ingredients of the genre.

Interspersed with scenes from Goya's point of view are other "takes" on L.A. There are long sequences shot from a helicopter and from the freeways, accompanied by voiceover narration which combines various types of discourse—statistics, "objective" description, more "poetic" language (often recalling the prose of Raymond Chandler). Here, too, Jost attempts, or pretends to attempt, to represent Los Angeles in images and words. Hollywood occupies a privileged position in the film. In addition to various small references, there are two sequences about Hollywood's image-making. One shows Gloria taking a screen test for the part of Leni Riefenstahl in a remake of **TRIUMPH OF THE WILL**. This sequence presents a character (the murder victim) taking a screentest to play the role of a filmmaker now serving as a character in her own obviously altered film about Nazi Germany. There is an enormous

distance between Gloria and the powerful images of Hitler and Riefenstahl and the sequence comments, in part, on how Hollywood deals with the making and re-making of images.

Another sequence shows an extreme close-up of lipstick being applied to lips, while the voiceover reads a Variety-type report on the marketing and advertising strategies for the film LIPSTICK. The report presents two images—one verbal and deadpan, one visual and sexy—of lipstick, while at the same time it considers the shifting advertising image of that film presented to the public.

The image of Pierce del Rue is central to the film. He is *the* contemporary corporate capitalist. There is one sequence which is an advertisement for Rexion Corp. and which is a superb parody of corporate advertising, especially that of the oil companies. Del Rue walks along a beach explaining, "It's a big world . . . a complex world . . . and it takes a big company to put it all together." Here is typical corporate public relations discourse attempting the imposition on television viewers of an image of the world which validates multinational corporate capitalism.

Goya, who both uses and sees through images, sees through the image of del Rue. At the end, he confronts del Rue's privilege and wealth. It is a confrontation in which Goya must be destroyed because he is an outsider, a threat to those who make and sustain belief in images and their truth. It is at this level, as an enemy of those in power, however stylized the portrayal of the confrontation, that Goya resembles his archetype.

—*Notes from the Whitney Museum
of American Art*