

Citeations

The Astronomer's Garden And the Levitator's Towers

The Parklane Collection
Photography by George O. Jackson
Sponsored by the Transco Energy
Company
Transco Gallery West, Houston, Texas
18 December 1986 - 9 January 1987

Reviewed by Christopher Genik

The terrace is on two levels: a loggia or belvedere dominates the hurly-burly of the roofs over which Mr. Palomar casts a bird's-eye glance. He tries to conceive the world as it is seen by birds. Unlike him, birds have the void opening beneath them, but perhaps they never look down, they see only to the side, hovering obliquely on their wings, and their gaze, like his, wherever it turns encounters nothing but roofs, higher or lower, construction more or less elevated but so thick that he can move only so far down. That, down below, hemmed in, streets and squares exist, that the true ground is the one at ground level, he knows on the basis of other experiences; at this moment, from what he can see from up here, he would never suspect it. . . - Italo Calvino, Mr. Palomar

Amidst Houston's infinitely mobile generation of obsessive freeway dwellers, George O. Jackson conjures an extravagant landscape of stationary giants. Safely propped up 28 stories above the city's uncertain ground, a levitated living-room armchair becomes a surrogate astronomical observatory of the city. Two measuring lenses - one wide-angle, the other telephoto - are set up as voyeurs to taunt the Bayou skies. Viewfinders feverishly monitor 270 degrees of the horizon, as they discern, howel and redigest it into a "video" frenzy of endless suspended panoramas. A relentless profile of a Babel of towers is unleashed. Mesmerizing mirrored mirages, as well as uncommon vistas of Cyclopean monoliths, compete with the thunders of nature and command the passage of day into night. This is the familiar spectacle captured by Jackson's magic machine.

Jackson presents Houston as a wanton and mythical cosmopolis. It is a city which reaches a kind of metaphoric state of apotheosis when viewed through his schizophrenic apparatus - part lens, part mirror. Indeed, the object of his scrutiny, a towered skyscape, is no less a construction of mirrors and lenses than the camera which seeks to record it. In between the inverted world of the camera body and the "upright" world beyond, a conspiracy of phenomenal lenses and mirrors yields a legendary towering metropolis enriched by its own infinite refractions. These optical mechanics concoct a mirage as the genesis of a city whose fundamental genius lies in its ability to be an optical illusion. It is a landscape supplemented by a refracted moonbeam that is capable, if only momentarily, of stunning gravity.

George O. Jackson's uncanny proposition for Houston, the sky and the city, must be interpreted as the work of an inspired artist as much as it should be enjoyed as the trickery of a skillful prestigiator. As an almanac narrating the forecast of what Houston would become, the Parklane Collection remains the work of an astronomer turned levitator.

At the edge of his 28-story balcony, Jackson longs for the city's moons. With two cameras to augment his vision, a makeshift observatory is set up that recalls the twin observatory towers of the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. The

father of modern telescoping, Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) dwelled on a magnificent observatory on the island of Hveen in the strait of Sund, near Elsmore in Denmark. He called his research institute Uraniborg, the "City of Heavens." The main building was situated in the center of a large square garden surrounded by high walls like a fort, with the corners directed to the cardinal points. Furnished with a rich supply of sextants, equatorial armillae, parallactic instruments, and clocks of various types¹, it had the special property of being in great part underground, probably because instruments could better be shielded from the effects of weather.² The buildings of his observatory were the progenitors of a landscape of skies and permitted Brahe to finally align the map of his "City of Heavens" to the cardinal imperative of polar coordinates.

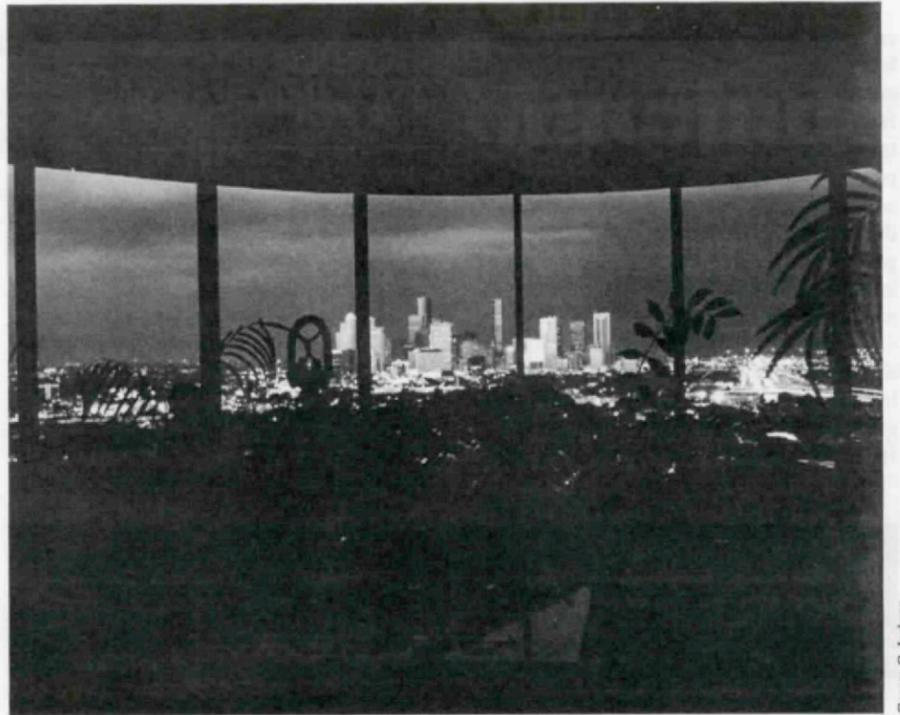
Brahe removes himself to the splendid isolation of his "City of Heavens," while Jackson sequesters himself in his Parklane condominium. Both rely on the recalibration of their instruments - synchronized to the changing skies - to provide us with the specifications of their world. As viewed through their respective mirror, the "City of Heavens" and the City of Houston become endowed with an agenda which metamorphoses them into extraordinary lenses for measuring the sky; Tycho's is virtual while Jackson's is abstract.

Brahe's dynamic skies are the guarantee that his "City of Heavens" will remain firmly anchored to the ground where it will trace a kind of orrery garden for measure and gravity. Jackson's city knows no such boundaries. Prompted by the exceptional spectacle of towering mirrors reflected 28 stories in the air, a suspended horizon is enraptured with its own apparent weightlessness.

Not unlike the manner in which the Franciscan monk Joseph of Copertino (1603-1663) would raise his feet and remain suspended in mid air while provoking the magical rearranging of altar furnishings³, Jackson's willed levitations attempt to "rearrange" our perception of the city. Through the use of magic as much as through the conspiracy of coincidental mirrors (those of the city and those of the camera), a skyscape is conjured. In the abstract compression of a virtual plane, reflected and refracted images facet a new geography for towers of sky. As George O. Jackson's observatory prepares to focus on a ubiquitous, surreal landscape, his subject assumes lense-like dimensions. Viewed through these spectacles, Houston the mirage is prodigiously transformed into Houston the miracle.

If Jackson fails at all in his task, it is to reveal the extraordinary circumstances of Houston's weightlessness without resorting to the nostalgic and the cliché. Fireworks, melodramatic moonrises, and sentimental sunsets only demean what is surely a tremendous, if slightly frightful, agenda for a city like none other. Perhaps these are images that might be more appropriately kept for the pages of theme calendars, or glossy picture-postcard views.

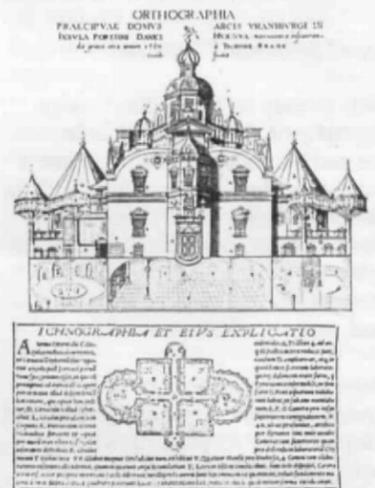
Whether perceived from the miasmic network of elevated freeways or the precocious levitated vantage point of a 28-story terrace, Jackson inaugurates the possibility of an eccentric exurban city of sky. Like Jonathan Swift's suspended observatory kingdom of Laputa⁴, the invention of Jackson's dioptic towers is ensured by their foretelling revision of



View from George O. Jackson's studio at the Parklane

urban conventions. They exist as positive and idiosyncratic aberrations within the landscape of their own tectonic tradition, and are inventive exceptions to themselves and to their environment.

If Joseph of Copertino was banished from choir and left to levitate for the last 35 years of his life in his isolated cell, so Jackson might also be exiled for the next three decades or so to the rooms of his Parklane condominium. Though we may wish momentarily to dispel the tremendous impact of his trance, let us make no mistake: Houston is the city in which the ground plane has been all but canceled, gravity admonished, and scale irreparably distorted. This does not imply, however, that we are condemned to perspectival purgatory. Quite the



Tycho Brahe's observatory, "The City of Heavens"



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contrary. By hoisting himself some 250 feet in the air, Jackson has been able to reveal how a city, weary of the frustrations of the ground, can be transformed to one obsessed with the promise of the sky. Assisted by his lenses and mirrors, Jackson has spectered a city destined to become the astonishing garden for disbelievers and the towering capital of luxurious possibilities. His messianic timepiece – a levitated observatory – premonishes questions left unanswered by the Parklane Collection's bi-focal views: What provoked this generation of prodigious tower-builders from the Texas plains to first lay the

foundations for their totemic skyscrapers, and who are they and what do they do as they lurk in the shadows of their magnificent Babels? ■

Notes

- 1 J.L.E. Dreyer, *Tycho Brahe*, 1890. Gives full, authentic information on Brahe's life.
- 2 R.A. Gray, "The Life and Work of Tycho Brahe," *Royal Astronomical Society of Canada Journal*, XVII, 1923.
- 3 *The Acta Sanctorum* credits Joseph of Copertino with more than 70 separate flights, and relates witnessed accounts of his levitations.
- 4 Jonathan Swift, *Travels Into Several Remote Nations of the World by Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, Then Captain of Several Ships*, first edition, October 1726.

Charles Moore: Buildings and Projects 1949-1986

Eugene J. Johnson, editor, *New York, Rizzoli, 1986, 305 pp., illus., \$45.*

Reviewed by Gerald Moorhead

There is already an astoundingly large bibliography on the work of Charles Moore and his collaborators. This latest offering, compiled in conjunction with an exhibition of the architect's work at Williams College, is not an *oeuvre complet*, but it does give, perhaps, the best insight into the personality, ideas, method, and joy of Charles Moore.

The book consists of a series of brief, very readable, unpedantic essays followed by illustrations of 59 projects, selected and arranged by Moore into four groupings: Houses for the Architect, Houses as the Center of the World, Frivolous and Serious Play, and Fitting. Topping it off is a collection of fantasy drawings and decorated Christmas cookies which themselves deserve a volume of explanation.

The essays delve into various aspects of Moore's work and ideas. Kent Bloomer sets the stage by squaring us with three concepts which are the foundation of Moore's architectural thought: *form*, which represents the basic organizing principle of a structure; *shape*, the peculiar configuration of the form; and *order*, which gives to architecture values, meanings, or metaphors. From Bloomer's essay we realize something which is continually reiterated in the following articles: Charles Moore the person cannot be separated from his architecture.

Donlyn Lyndon describes his experiences with Moore as a collaborator and teacher, his deft ability to allow, encourage, and to infuse projects with his own will and style all the multitudinous changing and conflicting aspects of a project. Robert A.M. Stern describes Moore as an architect in search of the means to create "places" in an American environment worsened by a transient, ambivalent culture and a failed modernism which "never offered the public the fundamental gift of architecture – a sense of place."

Heinrich Klotz plays with Moore's toys, finding hope and strength in his sense of humor in defiance of "good taste." And Dorothy and Frederick Rudolph contribute their experiences as clients for two Moore-designed houses, including intimate details like: "Charles Moore has slept in both our houses. He snored and left his pygamas [sic]." Richard Song details the client-participation process that the Moore team used in designing St. Matthew's Church in Los Angeles.

Editor Eugene Johnson provides the major critical article. Using detailed descriptions of numerous projects, he chronicles and analyzes the complex assortment of inspirations, methods,

organizations, and forms in Moore's work. Investigations of the progress drawings for several projects (Sea Ranch and the Jobson, Klotz, Johnson, and Rudolph houses) help to unlock the geometrical evolution of these complex plans. Johnson goes to some length to explain the sources of inspiration (especially from Kahn and Aalto) for Moore's designs. It is never entirely clear, however, if these sources are Moore's own or speculations by the author. Moore's work does show a personal and progressively more literal use of architectural history culled from his vast memory of the famous and the obscure, grand schemes and minute details, both past and present. But we are left with a feeling that perhaps Johnson takes the source search a bit too far, attributing the work to too many references and leaving too little room for Moore's own manipulations. For example, the false river-boat recreation center in the Berlin Tegel Harbor housing competition is compared to the marble barge in the pond of the Peking garden of the Empress of China, the boat-like Isola Bella in Lake Como, Italy, and ocean liners admired by Le Corbusier; the glass exterior of the recreation center is related to Berlin examples of the use of glass in early modernism. In discussing the face-like arrangement of openings in the St. Matthew's Church tower, Johnson overreaches again, attributing it to a photo of a Dogon building in Africa on the cover of a book published the same year as the building was designed.

Johnson makes frequent, subtly derisive comments about Moore's collaborators, as if everyone who works with him is only awkward and struggling until the master intervenes to bring order and style to the work. Working closely with other professionals is such a vital part of Moore's method that Johnson might have made a more positive analysis of their contributions.

But for the most part Johnson's article is balanced and clear. His last remarks put very directly a continuing problem of Moore's work "being misunderstood, partly because his instinct for joy can easily be mistaken for frivolity. Moore is sometimes seen as the master of the architectural joke... but anyone who knows his life knows that he, too, is a man of learning and intellect. Anyone who looks seriously into his work will find it filled with complex architectural ideas and an extraordinary sensitivity."

The finely printed illustrations show many of the now familiar projects, from the Jones's House of 1949 to last year's addition to the Museum of Art at Williams College. One of the real pleasures of the book are all the previously unpublished sketches and drawings which, together with Johnson's informative text, provide new insights into the development of familiar designs. ■

Bad Day at Hard Rock, Thunderbird Branch

Hard Rock Cafe
Houston, Texas
Stanley Tigerman, architect

Reviewed by Drexel Turner

Stanley Tigerman's uncharacteristically subdued, neoclassical casing for the newest in the line of Hard Rock cafes, nestled at the edge of River Oaks, could scarcely give offense. Disinclined to rock around the block, it adopts instead the becolumned countenance of the somewhat distant River Oaks Country Club, a preference it shares on the Kirby Drive strip with a drive-in bank and a funeral emporium. In fact, the Hard Rock is so well-mannered that it requires the brashness of Ant Farm's latest sequel to Cadillac Ranch – an aqua blue '63 Thunderbird with operable headlights inclined skyward more than 40 feet atop a golden shaft – to make itself heard above the genteel din of upper Kirby.¹

Where the Hard Rock fails to connect adequately, though, is inside, where one might have hoped that the hamburgers and strawberry daiquiris would be served up in the midst of a sort of rolling Soane museum. But what one finds is a post-pubescent, sub-Polo fern bar freighted with less-than-riveting, mostly rock, memorabilia; a bibulous MacDonald's of thematic disarray and quasi-touristic dimension, inspired by such blithe digressions as an inflatable facsimile of the ill-fated space shuttle displaying on its underside the legend: "God Bless Michael Smith, Dick Scobee, Ron McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Christa McAuliffe, Judy Resnik, Greg Jarvis," a note echoed by the headline of a framed tabloid close by, "JOHN LENNON SHOT DEAD."

Which is too bad in a way, because the cafe might have possessed a more apposite, if not entirely deathless, charm, had Ant Farm or Red Grooms or even George Lucas been turned loose on the inside. One could imagine tail-finned booths, electric guitar shaped bars, and, for spin, a dance floor in the form of a record player, unfolding beneath friezes of L-P album and Rolling Stone magazine covers – something comparable to the inside of a jukebox flocked with blue suede, chrome pipes, and neon. Should this prove too extreme by itself, the ensemble might be tempered with Eggleston photographs of Graceland, Friedlander glimpses of Madonna, and Avedon portraits of the Stones, amplified by assorted rock Warholia and culinary Oldenburgers, and perhaps even brought into the present by brick curtains to suit



Outdoor: High rider, flags, and porte cochère

David Byrne (a conceit devised by Bill McDugald for the new All Records shop several blocks away in the River Oaks Shopping Center).

Instead, the space within is shrouded in a down-home, faintly Texanic veneer of embossed plastic imitation pressed tin, narrow paneled oak wainscoting, and striped awning upholstery. This armature is encrusted with various small-scale relics ranging from Tina Turner's outerwear to the non-seigneur of Akeem Olajuwon's sneakers, set in a sea of pedigreed cast-off guitars, gold records, and letters to fans from a minor constellation of stars, professionally assembled and disposed by the Hard Rock organization's full-time director of interiors. The only legibly scaled, somewhat transformational aspect of this assemblage are two over-sized Coca-Cola bottle "sconces" appended to the half-rising promenade on the Kirby side, which seem to want to become caryatids without quite knowing how. Otherwise, Houston's Hard Rock is soft inside, hardly the thing to save the planet from life in the fast-food lane. But if people will stand in line to get in anyway, why bother rocking the cafe?

Notes

- 1 The piece, titled the *Save the Planet Sculpture*, is by Doug Michaels, Hudson Marquez, and Chip Lord, who initially collaborated as Ant Farm, but have lately refrained from that collective assignation.



Inner space: Shuttle craft Challenger and Lone Star bar

What Could Have Been: Unbuilt Architecture of the '80s

Curated by Peter Jay Zweig; organized by Lorry Parks and Roberta Mathews, Grace Design Exhibits

Sponsored by the Dallas Market Center
28 January - 30 January

Reviewed by Jay C. Henry

Entering the exhibition in its Dallas installation, one immediately encountered projects by Charles Gwathmey and Michael Graves. Gwathmey is represented by his addition to the Guggenheim Museum; Graves by his beautifully rendered project for the Phoenix Civic Center, the *pièce de résistance* of the show. It is a shock for someone with a middle-aged memory to realize how far apart Gwathmey and Graves have traveled since their common brotherhood in the New York Five of the 1960s. Gwathmey remains a discreet modernist, standing aloof from fashionable historical quotation (at least from history before Modern Movement), whereas Graves affirms his role as archpriest of postmodern eclecticism, whose highly mannered, classical forms are exaggerated almost to the point of caricature. Both of these strands of

contemporary design are represented elsewhere in the exhibition, but the postmodern eclectic predominates.

The 30 designs on exhibition are difficult to evaluate comparatively because there is no consistency in what is shown. The projects range from skyscrapers to playground furniture. Some are viable proposals for specific buildings; others are visionary concepts without serious prospects for realization. Some projects are shown with complete drawings, while others are represented only as models, sometimes without context. This makes for a stimulating show, but hardly "what could have been." Some of these designs are so outrageous that they could never have been built.

Of those projects for which a specific site is indicated, a wide variety of contextual responses are on view. Gwathmey's Guggenheim Addition is a reticent backdrop to a transcendent historical monument. The complicated site planning of Graves' Phoenix Civic Center recalls the formalism of the Beaux Arts/City Beautiful milieu, ignoring the alternative American environmental tradition of locating public buildings in

parks. Frank Gehry's and William Turnbull's design for the Triton Museum in Santa Clara, California, on the other hand, seems to merge formalist planning elements with the naturalistic landscape tradition through the expedient of colonnades of vines or topiary.

Entries to the skyscraper competition for New York's Columbus Circle by both Helmut Jahn and Cesar Pelli are included in the exhibition. Both respond admirably to the picturesque diagonal moving up Broadway. Jahn's helical, spiral, grid-framed structure is totally without historical allusions, however, whereas Pelli's grouped towers suggest a resurrection of the art déco skyscraper. On the other hand, the New York Skyscrapers of George Sowden would be blatant intrusions on their site in central Manhattan, violating the scale and historical context of Grand Central Station and the Chrysler Building.

The work of the Texas firms included in the exhibition is inconclusive, as none of these projects are given complete presentations. They do represent the range of current possibilities in architecture, however, from the non-eclectic modernism of Peter Jay Zweig's House of Walls, through the classicizing eclecticism of Taft Architects' Austin Office Building or the romantic schmaltz of Charles Moore's Theater for Beverly Hills, to the almost literal revivalism of Larry Speck's Lakeside House for Austin.

The exhibition, for all of its inconsistencies of scope and presentation, conveys a provocative series of concepts and images. It does not suggest a single clear direction in contemporary architecture, nor even a plurality of approaches, so much as a fecund muddle out of which a new consensus, or school, or style of design may eventually emerge. ■

Work of Emerging Architects

Sponsored by the Young Architects Forum, a committee of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

Innova, Houston, Texas
1 October - 15 November 1986

Reviewed by William Hartman

The fall lecture series, "Work of Emerging Architects," offered up contrasting lessons in how to "make it" as a young architect. The four lectures featured work by Team HOU, Carlos Jiménez, Craig Hartman, and Chris Genik, all Houston architects who have distinguished themselves through their work in a short time since completing their professional education.

Team HOU opened the series, telling the story of their participation in the Houston Sesquicentennial Park Competition held last year (see *Cite*, Fall 1986). These guys "made it" by winning an important competition. Acquaintances before working together on their entry, the three formed a professional partnership after winning the prize money and the contract. Robert Liner explained the symbolism and historical references in the initial park design. Guy Hagstette presented a realistic explanation of how a novice team learns to put together a developed architectural design for a very demanding client. John Lemr gave a humorous recounting of how the team managed, after countless bureaucratic revisions, to maintain some of the original intentions of their design.

At the second lecture, Carlos Jiménez presented several of his designs, including his own house and studio and the recently completed building for the Houston Fine Art Press. In the few years since finishing school at the University of Houston, Jiménez has put together a significant catalogue of built work, mostly houses. How did he do it? With some hard work, clever organizing, and by building his own house to showcase his ideas and having it published in an architectural journal. Jiménez's buildings have a simple, reposeful quality, evoking an almost pastoral sense of place. The

best qualities of his work are seen in his excellent design for the Houston Fine Art Press building.

Craig Hartman presented his work in both the Chicago and Houston offices of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Hartman, who made it by going directly from college to a large, prestigious firm and working his way up to a partnership, has been responsible for the designs of many large projects involving the coordination of large design teams. Hartman's designs exhibit a concern for formal order at the large scale and for patterning at the scale of the individual. The designs eschew the highly personal styles and theories of the other architects in the series, seeking instead to satisfy clients' needs through high quality, responsive designs.

In contrast, Chris Genik, the final lecturer, presented the case for an academic architecture, one which requires a change in the order of the environment. Genik "made it" by initiating collaboration with his teacher at Rice, Peter D. Waldman, and designing several projects for which they received important recognition. Genik began his presentation of his thesis project at Rice and the work of this collaboration with Waldman with the notion of "the geography of cyclical invention." He cited the revolutionary developments of the Italian Renaissance as the point in time when man altered his perception of reality from an indeterminate state of consciousness to one determined and clearly defined by the order of the natural world. In the 20th century, he explained, mankind has dismantled parts of the Cartesian-coordinated consciousness to create a reality which includes the revolutionary changes of the modern world. Provocative images in his work evoke a recognition of a new society and a different place for man within it.

The lectures attracted audiences ranging in size from 30 to 75 people, and those who wore their woollens were fortunate since the Innova rooms where the lectures were held were chilly. ■

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True Stories

Directed by David Byrne; screenplay by Stephen Tobolowsky, Beth Henley, and David Byrne; executive director, Edward R. Pressman; director of photography, Ed Lachman.

Reviewed by Neil Printz

In *True Stories*, David Byrne's Texas reminded me more than once of William Eggleston country. Take a look at Eggleston's *Guide* (Museum of Modern Art, 1976), an acid portrait of the New South, or the half-dozen color photographs by him published in *True Stories*, the book of the movie (Penguin, 1986). Byrne's travelogue ambles along, a little queasily I thought, through a putatively average Texas town, whose namesake is Virgil, classical poet of the bucolic, and Dante's guide.

Virgil, Texas, is part Main Street, U.S.A., part shopping mall, part industrial park. It epitomizes placelessness. Just about everyone in Virgil either works for or lives off the profits from Varicorp, a mega micro-chip corporation, which provides the community glue. Byrne, both tourist and guide, takes us down the assembly line and the freeway, giving us repeating vistas of chips and subdivisions, corrugated metal "architecture," and the utterly uninflected horizon of the Texas prairie.

The operative model for Byrne in his role as narrator in *True Stories*, as Barbara Kruger has noted in *Artforum* (December 1986), would appear to be Mister Rogers, the video Virgil for the younger set. "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood," croons Mister Rogers as he makes TV contact with the kids, and overrides all crucial distinctions of weather and neighborhood, of climate and class. There were moments when I began to wonder, but I don't think that David Byrne really wants to teach the world to sing in demotic harmony. Driving a red Chrysler LeBaron convertible, Lee Iacocca's new American dream machine, and got up in country-and-western attire, Byrne never quite strikes the balance between *flâneur* and yahoo, between *boulevardier* and local yokel. His deadpan and aw-shucks demurs tend to turn rancid right out of the jar. The real trouble with Virgil is with Virgil. If you get my drift.

As *True Stories* more or less tumbles into a series of skits and music-video *divertissements*, performed by a cast of highly diverting *secondarios* putting on the hits, a king of shaggy-dog silliness overtakes the movie, stifling dissent. One character, Louis Fyne, the country bachelor, and one story line - his holy matrimonial quest - is pushed with apposite bashfulness into the foreground. He even manages to get under Byrne's



David Byrne in *True Stories*

otherwise placid mien. When Byrne shows up at Virgil's penultimate Sesquicentennial event - the parade down Main Street - in the same C & W threads as Louis, he recapitulates a telling sight-gag in the movie, that of twins. Looking for love, Louis finds a clone. And, at the big moment on stage during the Sesqui shindig, when Louis croons, "People like us/ We don't want freedom/ We don't want justice/ We just want someone to love," the town of Virgil is right behind him. David Byrne might well paraphrase Flaubert on Madame Bovary, "Louis Fyne, *c'est moi*." ■



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