# Regional Horizons in *The Last Detail*

The term 'establishing shot' is perhaps misleading, implying as it does that the location of a film's drama can be introduced authoritatively and unambiguously. Establishing shots go some way towards informing us, as viewers, when and where the action of a scene or a sequence is taking place. Nevertheless, a great deal remains undefined. Immediate locales may seem obvious – a school, an isolated house, a train, a rowing boat – but to stretch much further beyond this 'zone' is to enter what Deborah Thomas calls a 'sliding scale of generality' (2001: 9). Does *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) take place on the eponymous street, or in Los Angeles County, or in North America? The question is, of course, not unique to cinema, but it may be especially vexed here, because the ostensible content of the image will invariably be intensely localised (even an extreme long shot might only 'cover' one or two acres); we are obliged to develop a sense of wider framing beyond the camera's, a frame without which virtually no narrative cinema would make sense. Manny Farber describes 'the area of experience and geography that a film covers' ([1971] 1998: 3) as 'negative space'; as he explains, 'the command of experience which an artist can set resonating within a film, is a sense of terrain created partly by the audience's imagination and partly by camera-actors-director' (9). This is a terrain which can never be established as such, but rather negotiated. In film studies, the language we use to describe, analyse and evaluate fiction is – deliberately or otherwise – constantly locating the action of films somewhere on Thomas' sliding scale.

V.F. Perkins (2005) has argued that we should remain alert to a film's capacity for expansiveness in this regard; that the 'horizon of events' in cinema can most fruitfully be understood in terms of 'worldhood'. And through interpretations of films such as *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *All I Desire* (Douglas Sirk, 1953) and *Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955), Perkins demonstrates the importance and the potential of doing just this. To appreciate and understand the richness of dialogue, mise-en-scène, performance and narrative in these films demands that we recognise their capacity for meaning beyond the limits of frame and soundtrack. Watching and rewatching *The Last Detail* (Hal Ashby, 1973), I have become curious about the way in which its own 'worldhood' feels narrow, circumscribed, disconcertingly finite. Perkins, of course, does not celebrate expansiveness *per se*, but in order to respond to *The Last Detail*, I would like to suggest an alternative to the term 'world', which seems to me to emphasise the outward-reaching impulses in a fiction, perhaps at the expense of its boundedness (although restriction of course always implies a beyond). Ashby's film, like those discussed by Perkins, becomes rich and moving by weaving its immediate contents together with an expanded narrative reality. And yet the restrictedness of its worldhood seems as dramatically important as its breadth.

*The Last Detail*, I will argue, can be thought of as a regional film. Not only does the literal ground it covers (from Virginia to New Hampshire) constitute a relatively distinctive subnational area, but its 'horizon of events' can likewise be thought of as more narrow than we are accustomed to in popular American cinema. A film's regional qualities, though, are not solely a question of constriction, and the diminished importance of the city in this film is a case in point; so often treated as a world unto itself, New York in *The Last Detail* is but one point on a *slightly* broader terrain. I want to suggest that the term region – with its slight trace of parochialism, and its ability to encompass urban, suburban and rural environments – can help us better understand the peculiar horizons of that terrain. A regional film, such as *The Last Detail*, presents us with an unusual type of worldhood, and one with a particular kind of dramatic potential.

### ***The Last Detail*: some first impressions**

*The Last Detail* begins at a naval base in Norfolk, Virginia, where two officers – Buddusky (Jack Nicholson) and Mulhall (Otis Young) – are assigned the job of escorting a young sailor, Meadows (Randy Quaid), to naval prison in New Hampshire. The film follows this mission, and the sailors' diversions along the way, to its conclusion. When initially summoned, separately, to their superior, Buddusky

and Mulhall are each reluctant to come. Buddusky is dozing in a chair, apparently drunk, and Mulhall is ironing. Not only do both activities answer to aspects of the Navy stereotype (and offer succinct character introductions to the two officers), but both display a kind of corrupted domesticity – these men are *almost* at home. The instructions for their 'detail' immediately make clear, however, that the setting offers no permanence or stability. Although these early scenes are extremely deliberate in their exposition of vital narrative information (what the order is, how long it will take to complete, who the culprit is and what he is guilty of, etc.), there is also a sense that we have joined the situation *in media res*, precisely because the officers, it is suggested, are constantly in some form of limbo. The base represents neither a status quo which is disrupted, nor a significant place against which the characters define themselves; instead, it seems more like one of many quasi-homes in a life of intermittent movement. In this sense, the very last lines of the film are telling. After finally delivering Meadows to the prison, conversation between Buddusky and Mulhall turns toward their trip back to Norfolk. 'Maybe our fucking orders have come through', Buddusky fumes, bitterly. Return is desirable inasmuch as it leads the way to another journey. Not that these officers are adventurers or wandering men in any romantic sense; the film is careful to mock such a suggestion (most comically in a scene where Buddusky tries to seduce a woman by talking wistfully about life on the open sea, an open sea which is significantly absent from the film). Journeying in *The Last Detail* is not adventure so much as inevitable movement between different – relatively local – places.

This tempered rootlessness seems to be a sensibility which informs many aspects of *The Last Detail*. It is something distinct from the spiritual or psychological journey often outlined in films of movement – which might depict, for example, the 'descent' into the city or the regenerative potential of the open road – and which dampens the contrast between different spaces. Another way to describe this would be to say that, while the officers are never at home in *The Last Detail*, they are never quite outsiders, either. A trip from Norfolk up to Portsmouth is a journey of sorts, but not to unchartered territory (Buddusky even claims it qualifies as a trip to his 'Old stomping grounds'). In this sense, the region of *The Last Detail* is simultaneously an area of limited expanse *and* a check on the drama's expansiveness; not only do the characters physically navigate something like a region, but their histories, futures and ambitions also come to seem just as restricted. Similarly, there is no centre in *The Last Detail*, nothing like a domestic sanctuary, and while this no doubt goes some way towards explaining the film's bleak fatalism, it also means that neither is there an essential 'other'; for all the travelling that goes on, nowhere is really foreign. In this regard, *The Last Detail* stands as a fascinating, and revealing, counterpoint to *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). Both films are structured around an internal military mission to bring a deviant comrade to justice, but they could hardly be more different in their plotting of that mission; Willard (Martin Sheen), in *Apocalypse Now*, travels into environments which seem to embody the very idea of otherness, while Buddusky and Mulhall retread ground with which they are reasonably familiar. The horizons invoked tend not to be distant enough to suggest the promise, or even possibility, of adventure.

Some elements of the film have thus come to the fore. The act of travelling, so often granted a special, almost transcendental, privilege in American popular culture, is stripped of some of its dramatic cachet. The characters themselves become difficult to 'pin down' as either natives of, or visitors to, the narrative terrain. And, related to this, the distinction between places in the film becomes muddied; there is no sharply delineated small-town or rural or urban orientation against which the journey can be defined. These are the features which have prompted me to reach for the term 'regional'.

**The means of movement**

To travel within one's region offers neither the comfortable familiarity of domesticity nor the exciting unfamiliarity of faraway places, and this is a shortfall that can be traced in the forms of transport used by the sailors in *The Last Detail*. Their journey effectively starts on a Greyhound bus. Buses, like cars, allow their passengers a convenient vantage point from which to view territory and the spaces between places, but unlike cars, they force us to share that perspective with any number of people. The boat in *Apocalypse Now* is a small slice of military America floating through Vietnam. Travis Bickle's taxi is a bubble of angst and prejudice gliding through New York. John Ford's stagecoach is a minor fortress of civilization racing through a savage wilderness. But the Greyhound bus in *The Last Detail* is far more difficult to characterise, or essentialise. Presumably it contains people who make this journey regularly, and perhaps some who have never seen this stretch of country. Mulhall is the only one to show any interest in the landscapes scrolling by (of the three, he is the least local), but then he is the only one with access to a window. In one small but rich moment, a boy sits up on his seat and turns around to look at the sailors, who are squashed into the back seat. We briefly share his perspective, and sympathise with his curiosity, but we also see him from the perspective of Buddusky, whose curiosity might mark the boy as either foreign or local, depending on how and where we position

Deliverance: *Ed (Jon Voight) and Drew (Ronnie Cox) spot the young Lonnie (Billie Redden) on a bridge above them.*

the sailors. Does the boy view them as strange visitors to his familiar environment, or is he himself unfamiliar with these surroundings, and trying to place the sailors within it?

In *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), there is a moment which offers a revealing contrast to this scene, wherein a young boy, on a bridge, stares blankly at two men passing below, in a boat. *Deliverance* is, on the face of it, a film about a region, but its standpoint is resolutely cosmopolitan – we enter the place alongside worldly urbanites at the film's opening, and leave with them at the end – and the stark lack of ambiguity in this small exchange is an indication of that. The young boy's unnerving display of hostile silence makes absolutely clear his alignment with the local environment, especially when positioned in direct opposition to the communicative and curious visitors. The drama of *Deliverance* is dependent on there being a 'normal' world beyond Appalachia, against which its inhabitants are judged; the region and its people are on view, and their distinctiveness is clear from start to finish. *The Last Detail* develops scenes of travel in which people's foreignness is almost impossible to determine, amongst which are numerous shots of waiting rooms – a locale in which anyone might conceivably be either of the place or new to it.

In the bus, the three men *tolerate* travelling, jostling for comfort, suppressing their impatience with one another; on the train, they are generally indifferent to it. After the group connect from bus to train at an unidentified station, Mulhall, it is true, does show some glimmer of enthusiasm: 'Man, I sure love trains', he tells Buddusky. Buddusky is, as ever, more jaded: 'Yeah, sure beats the shit out of sitting up in shit city, don't it?'. The journey is welcome as a temporary diversion, but there is little hope or expectation that it could promise anything more fundamental or life changing. (It is a telling detail that Mulhall professes his love for trains, rather than travelling.) The staging of the scene brings across this sense of limited prospects with subtlety and clarity. By placing the sailors facing one another within mirrored pairs of seats, Ashby not only sets up an enclosure whereby the characters' focus falls between, rather than beyond, each other – he also introduces a visual arrangement to be mirrored almost exactly when the men reach Washington DC, and visit a diner. The appearance and atmosphere of travel are, here, almost indistinguishable from those of stasis, as if the distinction between the two barely registers. *The Last Detail* may depict a great deal of travelling, but the details of these scenes often run counter to what we might call 'journeying effects'. The effect is, rather, not of an outlying world which characters can always potentially move out towards, but a state of limbo in which movement is constant yet limited. We could suggest that Ashby consigns both the characters' actions and their emotional trajectories to this same limbo; the back-to-square-one fatalism of the film's final scene, as Buddusky and Mulhall revert to their original character types while simultaneously beginning their journey back to Virginia, bears this out.

**City limits**

I have so far emphasised the restrictiveness of *The Last Detail*, a drama whose literal and affective scope seems to operate according to a kind of reduced worldhood. But this brings with it the risk of characterising the regional frame as essentially claustrophobic, whereas of course region can also imply relative breadth – in comparison to the town and the city. The muted significance of cities in *The Last Detail* is one of its most curious features, denying as it does urban settings (including New York and Washington DC) their conventional roles as icons, epicentres or spectacles. The fact that Ashby establishes a correspondence between the sailors' experience of the train journey and their experience of Washington DC (as explained above) not only tempers the drama of travel – it also renders the city as little more than part of a broader journey. Cities in American cinema, especially New York and Los Angeles, are often depicted (and interpreted) as all-encompassing spaces, with distinctive customs and dangers and opportunities. *The Last Detail* instead downplays their dramatic significance, charting a territory in which the characters pay remarkably little heed to city limits.

*Travel and stasis as almost indistinguishable*

Above: *New York as seen through an aimless point of view.*

Left: *New York as an accessible spectacle.*

The unavoidable counter example here is *On the Town* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1949), which seems to have been a deliberate reference point for *The Last Detail*. In it, three sailors have a day's leave, which they spend immersing themselves in New York City. Probably the film's most famous sequence is the 'New York, New York' song, during which the sailors tour the city ecstatically and frenetically. It begins with an unambiguously 'native' New York dock worker, who is taken aback by the sailors' excitement, and then proceeds through snippets of major attractions (the Statue of Liberty, Rockefeller Centre etc.), all of which are framed in such a way as to evoke a tourist guide – monuments and stereotypes form the place, and are without exception prominent and accessible. The sequence is an extreme example of a pattern that recurs throughout numerous films, and one which positions the city as a structuring centre. (*Letter from an Unknown Woman* [Max Ophuls, 1948] and *Mulholland Dr.* [David Lynch, 2001] immediately spring to mind as vivid instances of this.) New York becomes an all-consuming experience which newcomers cannot help but submit themselves to, for good or ill. By invoking *On the Town*, *The Last Detail* seems especially determined to avoid this approach, and instead characterises cities as little more than places amongst other places. Sometimes, of course, a character's disinterest in a city (or distinctions between cities) might be a marker of their cosmopolitanism, as seems to be the case with James Bond or Jason Bourne. In *The Last Detail*, however, the sailors' immunity to 'the urban experience' is of a piece with the film's regional character, stemming as it does from the close proximity of the cities themselves and the truncated dramatic scope of the experiences which develop in them.

Buddusky, Mulhall and Meadows, like their counterparts in *On the Town*, arrive in New York for a short stop off, but Mulhall's plan is for them not even to leave the station, and instead wait for a connecting train to Boston. (His futile attempts to impose an itinerary seem to mimic those of Chip (Frank Sinatra) in *On the Town*.) This changes when Buddusky is taken by the urge to start a fight with a group of Marines, which forces the sailors to flee the station and jump into the first passing taxi. Already we can see how New York (as an attraction, a challenge, a stimulus) does not feature particularly significantly for the characters; Mulhall is driven by his urge to complete the mission and avoid any disruption to his career in the Navy, while Buddusky is preoccupied with petty Armed Forces rivalry. In other words, the sailors bring with them perspectives and priorities which are not overawed by the city, and New York is one point within a broader web. The film cuts from the taxi to a scene of all three walking briskly through a park, and Buddusky's adrenaline is still racing, as he tries to convince the others of what a good time they're having. Moments into this, there is a cut to possibly the strangest shot in the film; its placement in time and space suggests it to be a point-of-view shot – it 'walks' in the same direction and at the same pace as the sailors – but there is little to indicate the source of the viewpoint. The simple fact that we hear Buddusky's voice directing the group ('Right over here they've got the finest Italian sausage sandwiches in the world') suggests that we may be seeing the park through his eyes, but the languorous camera movement hardly tallies with Buddusky's manic excitability in this scene. Also, the shot is curiously unmoored by any particular point of interest in the frame. We see two couples walk away from the camera, and one old man (quite possibly homeless) rummage in a waste paper basket, but a somewhat haphazard pan then takes us leftwards, towards an empty stretch of path. The uncertainty registered in this shot is a telling introduction to the characters' stop-off in New York; while their counterparts in *On the Town* view the city from atop the Empire State Building ('The most fabulous sight is New York in the light of the day'), Buddusky, Meadows and Mulhall approach the city with a kind of roving indifference, neither daunted nor energised by it.

Equally, however, they are not blind to the city's singularity. After taking his companions to his favourite New York sandwich shop, Buddusky then leads them to a bar, where he successfully hustles his way through a darts match. But just when the sailors seem to be behaving, with some nonchalance, as if on home territory, they stumble across a small New Age chanting session, which they stare at for some time, puzzled – not unlike the bemused but titillated visitors in *Deliverance*. *The Last Detail*, then, does not flatten out all differences between the places it depicts; it is not so much that all places are created equal, but rather that cities, whatever their status as icons or power centres, should also be understood as in-between environments. After the New York adventure comes to a dispiriting end – Meadows and Buddusky fail miserably in their efforts to seduce women, while Mulhall doesn't even bother to try – the first words spoken in the next scene are Buddusky's: 'When do we get to Boston?'. New York, as experienced in *The Last Detail*, is a city which is in turn familiar and alien, a place of leisure and a place of transit. One of the most famous of all *New Yorker* cover cartoons (from 1976) shows a map-cum-diagram of 9th and 10th Avenues in Manhattan; beyond them is a tract of earth representing the rest of the nation, and beyond that are three plain white blobs representing China, Japan and Russia. A great number of

Hollywood films, whether 'gritty' of 'glitzy', betray a similar sense of geography with regard to New York, and *The Last Detail*'s deliberate refusal to do so reveals a great deal about where its dramatic horizons lie.

**Placing the people**

I discussed above the ways in which the methods of travel in *The Last Detail* prevent us from deciding whether the sailors occupy an insider's or an outsider's perspective – and in doing so I characterised them as a unit. (Many scenes, it should be said, encourage this, by positioning all three men as passengers, characters without the opportunity to exert themselves through free movement.) My sense of the film as a regional work, however, also stems from the way in which the three individual sailors bring to this journey their own personal histories, prisms through which they come to regard *this* terrain in particular ways. Mulhall, for example, is from Louisiana, and the fact that he is a black man from the South gives some insight into why he might be more hesitant than Buddusky to risk upsetting his superiors and putting his hard-won career prospects in jeopardy. Buddusky's fast-talking wiriness and his impatient yearning for instant gratification might be interpreted as signs of an urban sensibility, but he would hardly blend seamlessly into Los Angeles or San Francisco the way he does into New York and Boston. Neither character is anything like an embodiment or stereotype of his geographical roots (unlike, say, Jon Voight's fish-out-of-water Joe Buck in *Midnight Cowboy* [John Schlesinger, 1969]), but each is developed in such a way that his horizons and perspectives seem neither cosmopolitan nor intensely localised. In films such as *All I Desire* and *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943), the vast chasm separating small-town cultures and exotic, worldly-wise visitors forms the crux of the drama; such narratives are premised on a cultural geography of extremes (and, in the case of Hitchcock's film especially, those extremes are channelled through the actions of the characters). *The Last Detail*, once again, offers us something in between.

Two scenes in particular warrant close attention in this context. In one, a bitter bar-room argument stems from Buddusky's failed attempt to buy a beer for Meadows, who is underage. Meadows himself, still quite demure at this early stage, raises no complaints, but Buddusky is incensed. In this regard, he appears to be occupying the familiar role of an outsider who makes an example of his right to be served in a public place (one thinks of *Shane* [George Stevens, 1953] and countless other westerns), but Buddusky also claims to have visited the bar before, characterising the space as simultaneously foreign and familiar. The barman, resisting Buddusky's charm offensive, tells him 'That don't work here no more'. It is not so much that Buddusky is a foreign threat, but more that he is not quite local enough to avoid friction and misunderstanding. Matters get even more complex after the barman makes a subtly racist reference to Mulhall; Buddusky angrily calls him a 'redneck', and thus accuses *him* of being an unwelcome intruder, from south into north. Jack Nicholson's uncanny ability to switch between affability and menace is used to remarkable effect in this scene, but the changeability is not simply the behaviour of an unhinged naval officer. It is also the product of Buddusky's strange hybrid of rootedness and rootlessness; turning back to *Shane*, we might say that he has traces of that hero's (Alan Ladd's) worldly righteousness, but also the volatile parochialism of Jack Palance's Wilson.

This limbo, given a different inflection through all three sailors, is taken to its fullest extent with Meadows, and most strikingly in a scene where the three men briefly visit Meadows' home in Philadelphia. On their way there, Buddusky asks Meadows where his father lives. 'Seattle, Washington', replies Meadows ('I know where it is' is Buddusky's sardonic response). The use of this nomenclature speaks volumes about Meadows' scope of experience and imagination; the implication is that, for him, Seattle is another place entirely, one which he has not visited and does not expect to visit. At the house, only Buddusky ventures beyond the front door and he almost recoils at the sight of such an unwelcoming environment, in which clothes and bottles are strewn across the dingy living room. Meadows stands behind him, resigned to the fact that his experiences have undone whatever ties may have existed between himself, his childhood home, and his hometown. He suggests a strange refraction of George Bailey (James Stewart) in *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), one for whom parochialism cannot be balanced against communal enlightenment. When plunged into the dystopian Pottersville, George's failure to find the mother he once knew vividly illustrates the nightmarish displacement which is euphorically solved by the film's climax. In *The Last Detail*, Meadows also returns home and fails to find his mother, but must continue like that, caught between a hometown (and mother) he has outgrown and a country too vast for him to contemplate.

**Conclusion**

Towards the end of the film, there is a scene in which the three sailors while away their last few hours before Meadows is due at the prison. They attempt a barbecue, and the bitterly cold conditions, in a scene of profound sadness and pessimism, might at first appear to be a simple case of the pathetic fallacy at work. But it is important to recognise that coldness has featured throughout the sailors' journey; it has ushered them into bars and diners, kept them in waiting rooms, obliged them to find a hotel. In other words, it has been a governing factor from start to finish, an important contributor to their camaraderie as well as their impatience. For it *still* to feature at this late stage is a reminder that they, and we, have not really travelled that far – even if it has been an apparently life-changing experience for Meadows (and the mixed blessings of a 'life-changing experience' is one of the film's ever-present concerns), the odyssey has been a relatively localised one, contained within and determined by certain conditions. 'He's come a long way in the last few days, ain't he?', Buddusky asks Mulhall, with uncharacteristic sentimentality. If this at first appears to be an invitation to understand the scene as a kind of meditative coda, declaring once and for all the primarily symbolic character of Meadows' journey, then the young man's feeble attempt to escape moments later promptly revokes that invitation. Meadows is, still, immature and naïve; the journey may have offered him sparks of pleasure and insight, but it has not opened out towards new horizons of any kind.

There is, of course, still a world beyond all of this. I quoted above Buddusky's closing lines – 'Maybe our fucking orders have come through' – and it is difficult to ignore the likelihood that these orders will relate to service in Vietnam. Regionalism in *The Last Detail* is not an absence of worldhood, it is a particular weighting of it, whereby 'the area of experience and geography that a film covers' (to return to Farber) feels distinctly limited – but not

*The sailors' defiant picnic.*

absolutely or fundamentally detached from broader currents. In this sense, the unspoken prospect of involvement in the Vietnam War only makes the film's limitedness more poignant, expressing the chasm which exists between the lives of these servicemen and the conflict they are about to enter. Many American films of the 1970s (including Ashby's own *Coming Home* [1978]) have been justly criticised for characterising the Vietnam War as an American trauma in which Vietnam and its civilians barely register. *The Last Detail* leaves itself open to the same criticism, but it can hardly be taken to task for its restricted outlook. Few American films have so deliberately and thoughtfully truncated the horizons of their own drama – it is almost as if *The Last Detail* confesses the inevitable myopia of its own Vietnam story. Perhaps therein lies its most profound variation on worldhood.

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