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DUSTING OLD ANGELS: BOOSTERISM AND THE L.A. DREAM IN JOHN FANTE'S *ASK THE DUST* AND ITS FILM ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT. L.A. boosterism is one of the longest-running and most effective city advertising campaigns, shaping much of the imagery associated with this West Coast metropolis since the late nineteenth century. Against this backdrop, this paper analyzes John Fante's 1939 novel *Ask the Dust* and its debunking of L.A. myths, alongside Robert Towne's 2006 film adaptation. The study examines how Fante's critique of boosterism translates to the screen, exploring the parallels and divergences between the two works. Adaptation is here approached as a dialogical process, where films reinterpret and expand on their sources, rendering questions of (in)fidelity secondary to their ability to open new dimensions. On these grounds, the paper seeks to determine if, how, and to what extent Fante's critique of L.A. boosterism resonates in Towne's cinematic vision.

Keywords: John Fante, Ask the Dust, L.A. boosterism, film adaptation, fidelity studies.

POLVO DE ÁNGELES VIEJOS: EL "BOOSTERISMO" Y EL SUEÑO ANGELINO EN *ASK THE DUST* DE JOHN FANTE Y SU ADAPTACIÓN CINEMATOGRÁFICA

RESUMEN. El "boosterismo" de Los Ángeles es una de las campañas publicitarias urbanas más largas y efectivas de la historia, forja, además, de gran parte del imaginario asociado con esta metrópolis desde finales del siglo diecinueve. Este contexto enmarca un artículo que yuxtapone la deconstrucción del mito angelino en *Ask the Dust* de John Fante (1939), con la adaptación cinematográfica de Robert Towne de 2006. El estudio examina cómo la crítica de Fante al "boosterismo" se traduce a la pantalla, explorando los paralelismos y divergencias entre ambas obras. Aquí, la adaptación se entiende como un proceso dialógico en el que las películas reinterpretan y expanden narrativas, abriendo nuevas dimensiones exegéticas y dejando en un segundo plano cuestiones de (in)fidelidad a la fuente. Sobre estas bases, se busca determinar si, cómo y hasta qué punto los latigazos de Fante al "boosterismo" de L.A resuenan en la visión cinematográfica de Towne.

Palabras clave: John Fante, Ask the Dust, boosterismo angelino, adaptaciones cinematográficas, estudios de fidelidad.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Almost everything around us is subject to advertising, from small items like books and electronics to larger assets such as cars, homes, even cities, and entire regions. These campaigns, promising much and sometimes delivering less, have long-shaped perceptions. One bold example is the Los Angeles Booster Era in the late nineteenth century, when a sweeping campaign promoted L.A. as a land of wealth, fine weather, and opportunity to revive its economy (Meares). Creative writers, real estate moguls, and artists fueled this boosterism that extended its tentacles nationwide to places like Washington, D.C., Atlantic City, and Chicago. Over time, promotional strategies evolved to suit L.A.'s rapid expansion, and today many symbols of this idealized imagery—like the sun, sand, or the ever-sparkling Hollywood lights—remain central to the City of Angels.

Yet, literature has often contested this idyllic image. From Nathanael West and Raymond Chandler to James Ellroy and Walter Mosley, various writers have depicted a more conflicted L.A. Somewhere in between glamour and grime, John Fante wove his novel *Ask the Dust*, which would inspire a homonymous film that premiered in 2006. The story follows Arturo Bandini, an immigrant drawn in by the city's flair only to face its harsher realities. Although more nuanced than those of his contemporaries, Fante's novels also challenged the Booster Myth meticulously devised to lure Americans from all over the country into a manufactured dream. In this regard, *Ask the Dust* is a work that shows the flaws and feet of clay of this carefully crafted utopia.

While the book played a fundamental part in Fante's late revival and is regarded by most as his crowning novel, its 2006 film adaptation, directed by Robert Towne, attracted fewer viewers and limited scholarly interest (with recent studies by Peralta and Orsitto or Echauri-Galván as notable exceptions). The following chapters aim to fill this void by examining the portrayal of L.A. in both the novel and the film, assessing if—and how—Towne's adaptation echoes the novel's critique of boosterism.

2. L.A. BOOSTERISM AND RESISTANT LITERATURE

Carey McWilliams described Los Angeles as "a kind of utopia: a vast metropolitan community built in a semi-arid region, a town based upon improvisation, words, propaganda and boosterism" (293), for the way in which a small town in the middle of nowhere turned into one of the leading cities in the United States and in the world has certainly some kind of magic in it. In this long race to the top and the impressive growth that paralleled it, McWilliams' last terms, "propaganda" and "boosterism," played a pivotal role.

According to Zimmerman, L.A. boosterism began in the early 1870s as a response to the economic depression impacting the U.S., particularly affecting Southern California (22-24). The 1860s drought, for instance, devastated Los Angeles County's cattle industry and disrupted the local economy, but also set the stage for the city's transformation into a booming metropolis (22-23). Early boosters, organized under the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, launched a national campaign to attract settlers, investors, and consumers for the land acquired by speculators at low costs (22-23). The different stages of this process produced an extensive gamut of ads, brochures, and bibliography that cemented the embellished imagery linked with Los Angeles from the early 1900s onwards.

While Chamber of Commerce materials spearheaded this effort, many other publications soon joined, spreading the L.A. Myth state and nationwide. This myth, as Starr describes it, was built on oil (69) and water (46) and showcased an interwoven mix of attributes: a paradise-like landscape, untapped economic markets (Kordich 76), optimal real estate, oranges, and sunshine (Laurila 112) were just some of the L.A. ensigns waved from coast to coast on ongoing publicity campaigns. Magazines like *Land of Sunshine* (later *Out West*) and *Overland Monthly* devoted nearly 40 years to countering the East's historical dominance, instilling this vision into American culture in at least two generations (Watts 339-42). Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times*, led by booster Harry Chandler, spent almost a decade promoting the exponential growth of the city and, in parallel, the exponential growth of its owner's pockets (Starr 102-03). The economic substrate of the L.A. Dream was bolstered by a diverse industrial sector, notably tire manufacturing (Starr 94), frantic real estate development (69-70), an adamant local banking sector, and the growth of the Port of Los Angeles, which soon became second to just one (New York's) in the country (90). As the city grew in size and financial muscularity, so did its appeal. Boosters then focused on L.A.'s pending subject: tourism. In the 1920s, the city saw a strategic

surge in hotels and other short-term accommodations, all meticulously planned, executed, and widely promoted. The strategy succeeded, gradually transforming Los Angeles into a popular tourist destination that promised entertainment, excellent accommodations, and scenic beaches for visitors across various interests and budgets (Starr 95-96).

Not far from the waves of Topanga Beach or the endless sands of Malibu, a new "money monster" was etching its name in big white letters on the hills—a name that would captivate the entire country, and soon the world, becoming another of the city's focal points. After World War I, bolstered by a favorable business climate and creative boom, Hollywood overtook New York as the center of the movie industry (Scott 28-29). Major studios like RKO, Warner Brothers, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer were established in Los Angeles, with "Hollywood" soon synonymous with the entire U.S. motion-picture sector (29). In just over fifteen years (1921–1937), despite the Great Depression, Southern California's share of American filmmaking employment jumped from under 50% to 87.8% (Scott 30). This was not merely *The Birth of a Nation*;[1] it was the beginning of modern moviemaking and a regional boosterism that promoted Los Angeles through films and marketing campaigns (Frank 72).

To most Americans, Los Angeles combined the glam and frenzy of a major metropolis with the financial promise of an untapped market, set against an Oz-like landscape. In short, it was an oxymoron sustained by collective belief and a colossal advertising campaign. Such illusions, however, fade with time: by the 1960s, the idealized scenery promoted by early L.A. boosters was a distant memory (C. Davis 358), now buried beneath concrete, glass, and steel. The city had become the most automobile-centric area in the nation (Starr 94-95). Yet, the expansive growth characterizing the turn of the century was never concerned with preserving this Western Arcadia for the long term. Instead, it was built with a singular vision of greatness, aimed at attracting a specific demographic: white Americans.

It matters little that the ebb and flow of immigration waves propelled strategic sectors like tourism, agriculture, or construction (Camp; C. Davis; Ortiz). Building and keeping the dream spinning was one thing; partaking in it was a very different story. Throughout the early twentieth century, the L.A. ideal was veiled by overt racism. Tales of Aryan supremacy and racial purity spread through figures like Abbot Kinney and Joseph P. Widney (C. Davis 28), while other influential boosters, including Harry Carr and Charles Fletcher Lummis, portrayed California, and especially Los Angeles, as a "promised land" for Anglos, where they alone could flourish (Laurila 116-17).

This discrimination was not only in words but also in the visuals that advertised Los Angeles for decades. Ethnic and racial minorities were rarely shown in booster propaganda, and if they were, it was typically in ceremonial or limited contexts

[1] *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith and released in 1915, is a controversial film that became one of the first major blockbusters in American cinema. Much of it was filmed in the Los Angeles area, contributing to the rise of Hollywood as the center of the North American film industry.

(Zimmerman 32). Brochures, handbooks, and travel guides portrayed Mexicans and Native Americans as relics of "dying" cultures, depicted as part of the rural outskirts rather than integral to the city's community (Camp 282-283). This slanted portrayal established an implicit social hierarchy privileging Anglos over other races and creeds, including Mexicans and Jews.

Mass media also played a decisive role in the stratification of L.A. society. They were not just selling sunshine and advertising the improbable paradise: they were engineering space too. *The Los Angeles Times* and other publications driven by similar ideological gears promoted suburban expansion not simply as a sign of growth, but as an instrument of social control that surgically insulated white middle- and upper-class homeowners from labor unrest and ethnic diversity through carefully designed zoning laws and booster narratives (M. Davis 112-117). African Americans, for example, were systematically precluded from homeownership in many neighborhoods, confined to industrial or marginal zones, and subjected to discriminatory policing and the ongoing, KKK-like harassment of homeowners' associations (161-164).

In fact, the spatial logic of the city was never neutral. Freeways were routed to facilitate white suburban access while slicing through and displacing working-class neighborhoods, especially communities of color (M. Davis 106), and every booster Eden (Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Hancock Park) was shadowed by a corresponding "place of terror" (224). This was not the latent nightmare in every dream, but its very foundational principle: a city on a hill that exiled those who built it to the base through racially-biased policing, surveillance, and exclusionary zoning (229). In essence, L.A. boosterism for years functioned as a White-America-first campaign.

Despite boosters' clear success in transforming Los Angeles's cityscape, economy, and image, their efforts encountered numerous enemies and detractors, with literature serving as one of the most prolific arenas of dissent. In the 1920s and 1930s, several writers actively challenged the myths created by boosterism, dismantling the symbolism it promoted, questioning the very foundations of the city through critiques of the skewed or fable-like versions of its history (C. Davis 32-36), and incardinating their stories in the dark end of L.A. fiction, a literature rooted in opposition, in a city that can be "America's Utopia and Dystopia, the site of its national Heaven and Hell, the best and worst place the country has to offer" (Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles* 14). Mark Lee Luther's parody *The Boosters* (1924) stands as a direct example of this trend. Other notable "debunkers" included prominent West Coast voices and influential Eastern figures, ranging from essayists and (auto)biographers like Louis Adamic and Carey McWilliams to noir[2] authors like James M. Cain, Nathanael West or Aldous Huxley, and Raymond Chandler's hardboiled detective fiction (Laurila 113; Fine, "John Fante and the Los Angeles Novel" 124; M. Davis 38-40). This "L.A. School," as Margaretto names it (214), also spurred a tradition consolidated by a literary offspring including California's *enfant*

[2] According to M. Davis, *noir* was a literary, later cinematic, antimyth movement that turned "each charming ingredient of the boosters' arcadia into a sinister equivalent" (38).

terrible Charles Bukowski (214-215), Joan Didion, and Kate Braverman (Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles* 4).

Most of these authors approached Los Angeles from an outsider's perspective, one "of removal, of displacement" (Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles* 13) "that runs to disaster and dark comedy" (15) as it exposes the city's contradictions and deconstructs the L.A. myth not from within but from without. This external prism also bolstered their debunking rationale and strategy, for the same people boosters tried to lure towards the city were the ones leading the counteroffensive (Fine, "John Fante and the Los Angeles Novel" 124-125). Someplace in between the black or white depictions of Los Angeles, the figure of John Fante arose as a more nuanced voice, reverberating across the gray areas, capable of sprawling debunkers' ideas while admitting the distinctive beauty and unique attributes of this concrete jungle. *Ask the Dust*, his second novel, perfectly instantiates this dichotomy.

3. A DUSTLAND FAIRYTALE: BANDINI'S MERCURIAL ROMANCE WITH LOS ANGELES

Among the many who decided to buy a ticket to the L.A. Dream was the Italian American writer John Fante. In 1930, he left Colorado for the harbor area of Los Angeles, drawn by the abundant promises of prosperity radiating from El Dorado State. However, his early years in the City of Angels soon revealed the downsides of this urban utopia.

Fante's experiences—the good and the ugly—deeply influenced his writing, with much of his work grounded in self-experience. Pieces of his life were often embodied by alter-egos like Henry Molise, the lead of *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, or Arturo Bandini, his most iconic character and protagonist of four novels, including the lately celebrated *Ask the Dust*.

Ask the Dust, Fante's second novel and third installment in the so-called Bandini saga [3], became his most influential work and marked his entry into the periphery of the literary mainstream. But this did not happen in a split second. His first two novels, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *Ask the Dust*, did not achieve immediate commercial or critical success, although they garnered favorable reviews from notable publications. Critics like John Chamberlain and E.B. Garside lauded the prose of *Ask the Dust*, calling it a strong work and a turning point in Fante's career (Collins 90). *The New Republic* praised its "inventive" narration, and *The Nation* highlighted its bittersweet tone, which balanced humor and sadness without veering into melodrama (Kordich 21). Some reviewers even compared Fante's style to that of William Saroyan, James T. Farrell, or John Steinbeck (Margaretto 197). However, not all feedback was glowing: critics like Harry L. Binsse deemed the novel "strange," while *The New Yorker* found it less compelling than its predecessor, *Wait Until*

[3] The second volume of the tetralogy, *The Road to Los Angeles*, was published posthumously in 1985.

Spring, Bandini (Collins 91). Other responses were even more dismissive. *The Sunday Times,* for instance, delivered a perplexing *crescendo* of criticism that escalated from a warm nod to the book as "charming" albeit fantastic and unrealistic, to coldly suggesting that Fante should cast Bandini into the Tartarus of literature to "feel the really great prangs of mortality" (qtd. in Collins 1).

Although *Ask the Dust* sold about 1,600 copies in its first few months (moderately promising figures for a second novel) those numbers quickly plateaued. After a brief reprint in 1954, the novel was soon consigned to the forgotten corners of bookstores and readers' collective memory (Holiday 225). But despite this rocky release and early reception, *Ask the Dust* gained momentum several decades later, in 1980, propelled by the publication of a new edition with a prologue by Charles Bukowski. According to Collins, Bukowski uncloaked Fante to the new generations and sparked a revival of the author that spanned the 80s and the 90s (262-263). Not only were his novels reissued; academia, in geometric progression, deepened its engagement with his bibliography and started to chart Fante's influence on contemporary writers and movements the likes of the Beats, Charles Bukowski, Raymond Carver, or Richard Ford (Shacochis qtd. in Collins 267).

In this late vindication of John Fante, *Ask the Dust* has always played a paramount role. The novel traces Bandini's baby-crawling around L.A. as he struggles to find his footing in both the city and the literary world. This journey runs parallel to Arturo's turbulent romance with Camilla Lopez, a Mexican waitress at his regular haunt. Despite setbacks in these areas and more, Arturo's life eventually seems to stabilize: his debut novel is accepted for publication, and he imagines a hopeful future by the sea with Camilla, away from Los Angeles. Yet, inevitably, his plans go awry. Camilla leaves Arturo, disappearing into the desert. Unable to locate her, Arturo dedicates a copy of his novel to the girl, tosses it to the desert, and drives back to the L.A.'s seductive yet deceptive lights.

Bandini's ups and downs, shifting moods, and evolving relationship with Los Angeles reflect Fante's own complex feelings toward the city. Numerous passages in *Ask the Dust* definitely align with the debunker's decalogue. If weather, real estate, or oranges constitute pillars of boosterism, Fante's novel hits each one of them like a wrecking ball.

For starters, the idyllic setting that boosters promoted nationwide is darkened throughout the book. Boosters' campaigns often focused on California's sun, weather, and beaches, but Fante steadily pierces this fragile facade. Here, the sun—once synonymous with health and vitality—is cast as an agent of decay. Bandini notes how people arrive in L.A. only to "die in the sun with just enough money to live until the sun killed them… doomed to die in the sun" (Fante 456). His neighbor, Mr. Hellfrick, laments the poor-quality steaks produced "in this land of the eternal sun [where] the cattle ate nothing but dead weed and sunshine, where the meat was full of worms, and they had to paint it to make it look bloody and red" (486-487). This unsettling picture torpedoes both a quintessential icon of the city and one of

the economic mainstays of boosterism: the cheap and fertile agricultural land of Los Angeles County (Zimmerman 26).

Additionally, boosters' propaganda neglected a gigantic elephant roaming the streets, too big to be eternally concealed: L.A. was built on the San Andreas Fault, and its citizens, consciously or not, sat (and sit) on it waiting for "The Big One" to come. Shockingly, boosters managed to suppress awareness of earthquakes in the area until the Long Beach-Compton quake of 1933 (Zimmerman 32). This disaster, a setback for booster efforts, becomes a focal point in Fante's novel, with the quake's aftermath starkly illustrating L.A.'s precarious, temporary existence: "Los Angeles was doomed. It was a city with a curse upon it" (Fante 527)—hardly the most welcoming message for newcomers.

Other passages further unravel the idealized landscape promoted by boosters. As Bandini wanders the city, it is shrouded in "dust and fog" (Fante 554), symbols that deepen the divide between marketed paradise and gritty reality. Dust itself holds a central symbolic role in the novel, far more than a word in a catchy title. As Kordich notes, dust punctuates pivotal scenes, notably the earthquake's fallout, but permeates many other sections of the story as well (82-84).

In fact, in a full-circle maneuver, dust opens and closes Arturo's experience in L.A. He arrives in the city "dusty to the skin" (Fante 459), a hint at the novel's demystifying tone. By the end, dust merges with another underplayed feature in booster's lore: the surrounding desert. Often linked with death, this "white animal, waiting for men to die, for civilizations to flicker and pass into darkness" (Fante 548) is depicted as a lifeless, menacing wasteland, starkly contrasting the sunny beaches and scenic cliffs boosters promoted. Ultimately, it is in the belly of this beast that Camilla vanishes, symbolizing the hidden darkness of the city and its outskirts. Again, Fante's portrayal dismantles boosters' mythologies, exposing L.A.'s underlying and underrepresented netherworld.

California's perennial sunshine and endless beaches are iconic symbols of Los Angeles, yet a postcard of its coast would be incomplete without a third feature: palm trees. As Zimmerman notes, palms and eucalyptuses became prominent in L.A.'s promotional literature, adding an exotic flair to the city (31). The palm trees Bandini encounters, however, are far from paradisiacal. On his first day at the Alta Loma Hotel, he sees his "first palm tree" (Fante 417). Though he initially associates it with "Egypt and Cleopatra", he quickly notices that it is "blackish at its branches, stained by carbon monoxide coming out the Third Street Tunnel, its crusted trunk choked with dust and sand that blew in from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts" (417). Later, Bandini's impression darkens further as he observes "oil and grease choking the futile palm trees standing like dying prisoners, chained to a little plot of ground with black pavement hiding their feet" (456). Once more, Fante contrasts boosters' propaganda with gritty urban reality, revealing the struggle of this "so-promoted" paradise to balance its alluring image with the real-world issues of a burgeoning twentieth-century metropolis, including heavy traffic and unchecked pollution.

Fante's critique extends to L.A.'s architecture and urban planning, with the Alta Loma as the prime example: built upside down into a hill, the hotel's structure is so chaotic that Bandini can enter his room through a window, and guests in room 862 must "get in the elevator and go down eight floors" (Fante 416). Similarly, the apartment of Vera Rivken—Arturo's brief, intense, and scarred Jewish romantic conquest—underscores the misleading promises of real estate in Los Angeles. The exterior of the building and the dreary rooms that resemble "ten million California rooms" (513) exemplify the disconnect between the splendid constructions boosters touted and the more modest properties available to L.A.'s working- and middle-class residents.

These two are not the only reflections of L.A.'s frantic, unbridled, and oftentimes absurd architecture. Throughout the novel, Bandini offers readers a collection of snapshots portraying the stark neighborhoods where the other half lives and awaits to die. In contrast to the wide avenues, well-organized city planning, and stunningly efficient architecture promised by boosters, Arturo ventures into the forgotten zones left behind by the city's early 1920s building boom (Starr 69-70). He wanders through L.A.'s underbelly, journeying east of Fifth Avenue and guiding readers on a city tour that spans "the burlesque houses on Main Street, the cheap bars and greasy spoon cafes and … the Black ghetto" (Fine, "John Fante and the Los Angeles Novel" 128), the "horrible frame houses reeking with murder stories" on Olive Street (Fante 412), and a zigzagging maze of "mysterious alleys, lonely trees [and] rotting old houses" (588). Fante's map of L.A. highlights these forgotten spaces, shedding light on the corners uncharted in booster's brochures.

Although now overshadowed by a constellation of more contemporary symbols, oranges are emblematic of L.A. in boosters' promotional materials. In *Ask the Dust*, Fante uses oranges to reflect Bandini's complex relationship with the city. Initially, they fill some of Arturo's fleeting moments of relief from the sadness, struggles in his writing, and the harshness of L.A.'s heat and hunger. Oranges become the one piece of the dream he can afford, tenuously linking his reality to his hopes:

> The days of plenty — plenty of worries, plenty of oranges. Eat them in bed, eat them for lunch, push them down for dinner. Oranges, five cents a dozen. Sunshine in the sky, sun juice in my stomach … My teeth tore them to pulp, the juices skewering down there in my stomach. It was so sad down there in my stomach. (Fante 432)

However, Bandini's mood capsizes as his situation worsens, reflecting the evanescent nature of this symbol in his life. On the next page, he laments that his only companion, a mouse named Pedro, no longer visits since all he can offer is orange peels—prompting memories of his mother's cooking (433). Later, Arturo feels sick at the thought of eating more oranges (449); apparently, compulsive consumption of "sun juice" may cause nausea and general unrest. Thus, *Ask the Dust* subtly undermines boosters' idyllic imagery of orange groves, revealing the hidden downsides in every promise. Rather than rejecting the symbol, he critiques the unbalanced portrayal propagated by L.A. boosterism.

While *Ask the Dust* offers a detailed depiction of Los Angeles's physical and existential layers, it omits the iconic "Hollywood mystique." This absence might surprise readers expecting a full account of 1930s L.A. culture, but Fante would right this wrong in his next and last chronicle of Bandini's odyssey in the City of Angels, *Dreams from Bunker Hill*. This novel—his final work, dictated to his wife Joyce after he lost his sight—delves into the film industry with a sardonic, "Bandinian" lens, exposing the contradictions and eccentricities of Hollywood that Fante experienced firsthand during his years as a screenwriter.

Finally, *Ask the Dust* conveys another key feature of boosterism: a clear-cut racial hierarchy. An important part of the plot unfolds spurred by the pace of Arturo and Camilla's relationship, a saw-tooth dynamic with constant ups and downs framed in a pervasive racial tension. By using this element as a driving force, Fante gets to convey the acid reality and conflicts that stem from this commonplace of L.A. boosterism. Racism is instilled in Bandini and voiced via the disparaging remarks he addresses towards his lover throughout the novel: "filthy little Greaser" (Fante 454) or "sweet little peon" (476) are only some of the "tender" epithets Arturo uses to address Camilla as the story develops.

Racism does not only intoxicate Arturo and Camilla's *amour fou* but permeates many other passages of the novel. As Laurila notes, racial discrimination severely limited social relationships in 1930s Los Angeles (119). This is evident through scenes such as Arturo's hotel refusing Mexicans and Jews (Fante 460), the exploitative treatment Camilla receives from her part-time boss, part-time abusive lover Sammy, and Bandini's shock and disdain upon witnessing a white prostitute interacting with a Mexican man, referring to him as "the Spick, the Greaser" (427).

To a certain extent, Arturo's arrogance stems from his own fear of prejudice, a reaction to both his childhood experiences and anxieties about fitting into L.A.'s social *mélange*. As Kordich explains, Bandini admits he will never fully belong with the Anglos (79). His gradual acceptance of this marginal status softens his attitude toward those he once scorned, like Sammy and Vera (Cooper 93). This shift also brings a more empathetic view of Camilla, though their relationship remains defined by racial tension. Despite moving from disdain to romanticism, Bandini still emphasizes Camilla's "otherness" (Elliott 538-39), revealing both his personal hypocrisy and the toxicity of L.A.'s Anglocentric substratum.

Page after page, *Ask the Dust* shakes a series of stanchions of L.A. boosterism and deconstructs the urban myths on which the new Los Angeles had been and was being erected. In fact, Bandini addresses boosters directly in one of his tirades against the city and the state of California, ironically underscoring the misleading depiction boosters have painted of the land of sunshine:

> As for the folks back home, you can lie to them, because they hate the truth anyway, they won't have it, because soon or late they want to come out to paradise, too. You can't fool the folks back home, boys. They know what Southern California's like. After all they read the papers, they look at the picture magazine

> glutting the newsstands of every corner in America. They've seen pictures of the movie stars' homes. You can't tell them anything about California. (Fante 457)

And yet, Fante and his volatile alter-ego Arturo Bandini partly embrace the fables of boosterism, diverging from the bleak portrayals of Chandler or West. As Laurila suggests, despite all the nightmares within, L.A. remains Bandini's "City of Dreams" (120), a "pretty town" (Fante 414) where he can "smell the stars and the flowers" (421) and marvel at the city lit like "a Christmas tree" (421-422). It is here he finds literary success and indulges in the boosters' vision, even buying a car to drive along the shore—a paradigmatic image from promotional literature. Despite heartbreak, he chooses to go back and stay. The love-hate relationship with L.A. of Fante and his persona can thus continue in future works, and even in a totally different medium: 67 years later, *Ask the Dust* was recovered for new audiences by Robert Towne and his film adaptation of Arturo's most popular adventure.

4. LAZARUS RISES… AGAIN: FIDELITY IN ADAPTATION STUDIES

As this paper examines whether Fante's debunking tone resonates in Towne's film adaptation, it touches on the (in)famous concept of fidelity, a recurring and recurringly questioned topic in adaptation studies. Initially central to the field, fidelity has been heavily critiqued, especially since Bluestone's *Novels into Films*, which argued that adaptation involves a mutation process, inherently creating differences between literature and film (2-5). Different media operate under different conventions, making fidelity an entelechy that revolves around the ideal of analogy in a context in which change is the rule. Scholars like Brian McFarlane and Thomas Leitch further this perspective, with Leitch describing fidelity as "the bad object" (103) of adaptation studies and a vestige of early research.

Nonetheless, fidelity remains a recurring topic in adaptation studies, continually revived as scholars explore its nuances. Towering figures like Cahir liken adaptation to translation, hence perpetuating fidelity as an essential feature of film adaptations, opening new angles to approach its study, and finally posing a question that has pestered translation studies for centuries: "fidelity to what?" (15). Other scholars, like Lopate, suggest fidelity should not be dismissed but rather approached more thoughtfully. This *ideé-force* has later evolved in various directions: Hurst, for example, redefines adaptation as a hybrid product, transcending the fidelity-infidelity poles (186-87), while Cattrysse draws on polysystem theories to explore whether fidelity serves as a guiding norm in adaptations and how it interacts with other norms (306). Clarke, meanwhile, argues that adaptations can reframe a source's meanings in new contexts (39), a unique power with applications in other areas like education (Clandfield 140-141).

These perspectives support Hermansson's argument that academic criticism has not eradicated fidelity's resilient relevance (149). This paper aligns with MacCabe's view (which in turn dovetails with Hurst's), that fidelity and its opposite coexist in adaptations and the discussions they inspire. Building on Bazin, MacCabe posits that

novels and adaptations are not independent products but works that dialogue and intertwine in an "ideal construct" that multiplies the meanings of the source (6). This complementary relationship suggests that the quality of an adaptation need not hinge solely on its fidelity but also on its intrinsic value and capacity to expand the original work's significance.

The precited ideas lead to opposing yet compatible directions: while books and films are expected to share plot points, adaptations also bring inherent differences—even in "overliteral" approaches (MacCabe 14). Thus, (in)fidelity is a connatural feature of adaptation, not a value judgment. The upcoming analysis of Towne's adaptation, acknowledging shared elements and variations, uses these differences to explore how each version reflects, adds, or omits aspects of L.A. boosterism, offering contrasting perspectives of Los Angeles to viewers and readers alike.

5. ASK THE SCRIPTWRITER: L.A. ANTIBOOSTERISM IN ROBERT TOWNE'S ADAPTATION

Certain cities are closely tied to films and filmmakers. New York has Woody Allen to caricature its intellectual elite and anatomize the crazy, stupid love latent all over the Manhattan district; and only a few blocks away, it has Spike Lee as a narrator of the life in the ghetto and the African American struggle in The City That Never Sleeps. Without Allen's comic height or Lee's social depth (save *Chinatown*), Towne's filmography presents an evolving narrative of L.A. through varied emotional tones. From the moral bankruptcy of politicians and institutions in *Chinatown* (1974) and *The Two Jakes* (1990), to the noir romance of *Tequila Sunrise* (1988), or *Shampoo*'s (1975) satirical detour into the town's aristocracy, Towne captures L.A.'s moral complexity. *Ask the Dust* revisits Jake Gittes' L.A. through the eyes of Arturo Bandini. A shared time and place for a film that lands galaxies away in terms of sentiment and scope: if *Chinatown* "depicts the founding of a city" in which "corruption is so pervasive" and "conspiracy so immense that no individual can get to the bottom or do anything about it" (Gamel 210), *Ask the Dust* paints a portrait of the artist as a young man learning to burn under the California sun.

This was not Towne's first shot at filming John Fante's work, although it was the only one that eventually hit the target. In 1975, Towne and Francis Ford Coppola agreed to adapt *The Brotherhood of the Grape* for film. Fante himself approved Dennis O'Flaherty's script (Cooper 311). However, after the grueling production of *Apocalypse Now* drained Coppola's resources and ended in a significant box office failure in 1978, he canceled multiple projects, including the movie based on Fante's novel (Collins 259).

All in all, this was a deeply personal project for Towne, who discovered Fante's novel while researching for a Chandleresque script (Rabin 239). Captivated by the book, he envisioned a film adaptation but faced years of obstacles. The 1970s demanded his attention with career-defining scripts (*Chinatown*, *The Last Detail*, *Shampoo*), the 1980s unleashed a storm of personal struggles, and the 1990s met

with Hollywood's apathy and disinterest. Still, the idea simmered until Towne's project was greenlit a decade later, and filming could finally begin (Rabin 240-242).

The movie, starring Colin Farrell as Arturo Bandini and Salma Hayek as Camilla Lopez, premiered in March 2006 after a limited run at independent festivals. Reception was mixed: while critics like Dargis and Fox praised the film, others, such as Stein, dismissed it as a "plodding drama" and "dry as dust." Opinions also varied on its fidelity to Fante's novel—Hornaday and Papamichael lamented the loss of Fante's wit, narrative muscularity, and essence, while Lawson and Ringel-Cater (qtd. in Metacritic) lauded Towne's ability to channel Fante's passion.

Among the varied critiques, a recurring subject is the description of L.A. as a crucial element in the movie. Towne himself underscores its importance by opening with an expansive shot of the city and by enlisting acclaimed cinematographer Caleb Deschanel and Oscar-winner Dennis Gassner (*Bugsy*) for production design. In fact, the rendering of the City of Angels is one of the few—if not the only—aspects that reaches some sort of positive critical consensus (Echauri-Galván 97-98) in which opinions are filled with adjectives like "extraordinary" (Swietek), "wondrous" (Lemire), or "stellar" (Puig).

Notably absent from media reviews, however, is any exploration of the film's connection to L.A. boosterism. While such a nuanced analysis is beyond their typical scope, considering the city's pivotal role on both the page and the screen, studying this dimension holds unquestionable significance.

Following the spirit of the Alta Loma, this analysis can start with a conclusion: Towne's adaptation is at least as debunking as Fante's novel. Some may contend even more: if Fante's work occasionally conveys Bandini's love for the city, Towne's portrayal befogs this sentiment. The following pages will hence explore how key elements of boosterism are recreated, altered, emphasized, or eclipsed in the film and examine how the novel-film interplay enhances the original work's meanings.

Racism, a hallmark of L.A. boosterism, is central to Arturo and Camilla's tumultuous relationship in both the novel and Towne's adaptation. Ethnic-based insults exchanged between the protagonists remain a focal point in the film, which faithfully reproduces moments like Bandini's derogatory comments about Camilla and her shoes during their first meeting (Towne 00:14:10). Towne's script, however, amplifies this theme in the scenes leading to the film's conclusion. Unlike the novel, where Camilla vanishes without explanation (Fante 597-598), the film attributes her departure to a racially charged incident: a movie theater confrontation where white patrons express disgust at their presence (01:37:30). While they are heading back home, the event fuels their millionth argument, in which Camilla accuses Bandini of being ashamed of loving a Mexican (01:39:45). These changes have, at least, two consequences: the most noticeable is that they heighten the drama between the characters, offering a clearer causal link to Camilla's demeanor; at the same time, they underscore the prominence of racial conflicts for the audience, surrounding with neon lights this (rotten) pillar of the L.A. imagined and peddled by boosters.

The adaptation also exposes how racial prejudice disrupts relationships beyond Arturo and Camilla's dynamic. The discriminatory policy of the Alta Loma—"no Mexicans, no Jews"—is underscored throughout the film. Bandini's sarcastic observation about the pathetic, naturally "short Filipino holding (the) arm" of the redheaded girl from the Alta Loma (Fante 464) is mirrored by Farrell as he watches the merry couple through the bus window en route to San Pedro (Towne 00:22:50). Similarly, Camilla's contempt for "those Japs" (Fante 564) is again spat at Arturo's face yet at a different beach and stage of their relationship (01:22:39).

Another interesting deviation from the novel frames a scene where the L.A.'s racial hierarchy is once again delineated. Unlike Fante's book, where Camilla urges Arturo to help Sammy with his writing career, the movie has Sammy approach Bandini for advice on shaping his stories. In the novel, this mentorship earns Bandini a letter of appreciation in which Sammy asks him how he is "getting along with the Little Spick" and advises him not to be too kind to Mexican girls (Fante 549) The conversation in the film follows this scent and turns it into a stifling racist dialogue that culminates with Sammy calling Camilla a *spic* (again), disjoining Mexicans from women from other races, and advising Arturo to make sure he shows her he is the boss and rides "her hard," lacing his speech with unsubtle horse-cowboy metaphors that culminate in a "memorable" statement: "Camilla's one pony who's worth a ride" (Towne 00:54:22).

Towne further employs the Sammy-Camilla dynamic to expose the racial pyramid ordering L.A. society. In the film, Sammy's surname is changed from Wiggins, as in the book, to White. The intentions behind this shift are transparent, as is the message conveyed in the scenes where this surname becomes significant. The first instance occurs when Arturo and Camilla are driving to the beach, and Bandini mockingly teases her about her ambition to become "Mrs. White" (Towne 00:31:12). This casual and humorous tone subsides during a later quarrel. In this heated exchange, Camilla declares she would never take the name Bandini, arguing that becoming Mrs. White would offer her—and her future children—a better chance to succeed in life (00:58:50). It is not, by the way, the first time Camilla tramples on the Bandini surname. Earlier in the scene, she lashes Arturo's ego with the same whip remarking that going from Camilla Lopez to Camilla Bandini would not be much of an improvement (Towne, 00:58:01). And even though she takes a step back (and away from the novel) on her deathbed when she whispers, "Camilla Bandini… I think I can get used to it" (Towne 01:46:55-01:47:02), I believe this works more as a bow tied atop the romantic story Towne packages for the audience than as evidence of L.A.'s social redemption. Despite this last moment of sugarcoated tempering, preceding scenes underline, once again, Fante's core critique: Los Angeles was a racially stratified city, where prejudice shaped opportunities, status, and personal relationships.

Beyond racial discrimination, Towne's script highlights additional critiques of the L.A. Myth perpetuated by boosters' imagery. As in Fante's *Ask the Dust*, the region's idealized weather and climate are demystified through various means, ranging from subtle to overt. For instance, the film beclouds the boosters' iconic sun, echoing

Bandini's reflection on the causal link between the bright star and death—"until the sun killed them" (Towne 00:22:01)—or Mr. Hellfrick's observation about its adverse effects on the pastures and the cattle feeding on them (00:38:49). Moreover, the film disrupts the land-of-eternal-sunshine motto with fog-drenched shots and scenes that shatter traditional luminous depictions of the city.

On a different note, Farrell-Bandini "quotes" his literary counterpart by calling attention to the unsightliness of the black palm trees (Towne 00:05:39), a recurring symbol in the film that contrasts sharply with the idyllic postcards propagated by L.A. boosterism for decades. Both Bandinis type the words *palm tree* compulsively, trying to breathe life into stifled inspiration and win an inner creative "battle to death … the palm tree won" (Fante 419; Towne 00:37:35). Furthermore, Towne's Arturo reveals an L.A. sin of stunning omission when he rhetorically asks the dust and the wind, "What jerk is gonna believe I made it all the way from Colorado to downtown L.A. without seeing a goddam palm tree?" (Towne 00:05:50). Similarly, we are witness to the ever-present yet booster-neglected chaotic traffic that clogs the arteries of Bunker Hill and pumps noise and smoke into the *dusty* streets of the city. Dust, a key motif in the novel, retains its symbolic weight in the film as a marker of decay, squalor, and impending disaster. It appears as an irritating layer blanketing various scenes, as one of the forces suffocating the city's palm trees, and as a bad omen before the Long Beach earthquake (01:10:07).

The movie also razes the foundations of "paradise" in more overt ways, though these moments lack the intensity of their counterparts in the novel, and their impact dissipates quickly. The Long Beach-Compton earthquake and the desert backdrop in the film's final segment serve as two notable examples. Given the significance of these elements in Fante's mimetic structure, their inclusion in the adaptation was almost inevitable. Yet, considering Towne's unwavering fixation with the novel, it is surprising to observe the alterations he made and the marginal role they play in his picture. The earthquake and its aftermath, which present a prime opportunity to exploit the multimodal potential of film, are condensed into a brief two-minute sequence (Towne 01:10:33–01:12:33). This depiction omits the original Bandini's post-traumatic stress and his philosophical musings on the city's inevitable doom. Moreover, Arturo's decision to write a story about Vera following the earthquake is only superficially mentioned. Overall, Towne seems eager to move past these "distractions" and refocus on the Bandini-Camilla storyline, sidelining other thematic dimensions of Fante's work.

Both works feature two trips to the barren outskirts of the city, though they differ notably in tone and dramatic pulse. In Fante's novel, Arturo visits Sammy's cabin in the desert twice: two moments that shape a kaleidoscope with images of illness, despair, and mortality. The first one shows us the dusk of a tubercular Sammy, his bravado and egotism still pumping, but already ensnared by the darkness of crumbling walls and the stench of illness and soiled underwear (Fante 569). Later in the novel, Bandini returns to the shack looking for Camilla, only to discover Sammy kicked her out into the jaws of the *white* abyss, never to return. After a fruitless search, Arturo throws away a dedicated copy of his novel in a final act of

"acknowledgement of permanent loss" that overwrites "a deleted Camilla" (Ryan 208), yet another sacrifice to the desert that will "cover [her] memory with ageless wind and heat and cold" (Fante 602) while Arturo is once again left facing a blank page.

In Towne's adaptation, however, the first visit is strategically positioned near the movie's conclusions, serving to witness Camilla's final moments and provide viewers with the ever-effective, Hollywood-style closure. Although this scene may suffice to remind viewers that the Los Angeles area is more than idyllic beaches and vast blue oceans, the desert's portrayal as a menacing, silent predator is noticeably softened. Camilla does not vanish into the "white animal waiting for men to die" (Fante 548). Instead, she passes away in bed, and her death is imbued with sentimentality, contrasting starkly with Fante's bleak and despairing resolution.

Towne tries to get back on the book's track in the final scene, where an older Bandini drives away after leaving a dedicated copy of his first book at Camilla's grave. As the wind blows, dust and sand cover the book, flipping its pages rapidly (Towne 01:51:30). This concluding image resonates with Fante's denouement, albeit it is questionable whether it is as striking as Arturo dedicating his book to Camilla and then discarding it in the desert upon realizing she is gone forever (Fante 602). All in all, while the earthquake and desert remain defining elements of the plot, their force as symbols that threaten the idyllic metropolis is diminished by Towne's inclination to use the pastel tones in his palette and add more romance to the story.

The earlier examples illustrate that while the film undeniably reflects and even amplifies certain messages from the novel, some meanings are inevitably lost in the transition between both media. Likewise, other critiques of L.A. boosterism present in the novel are either downplayed or entirely overlooked in the movie. Oranges, for instance, illustrate this point. Towne acknowledges their contextual importance by incorporating them as recurring elements in Arturo's room: thus, either the fruit or its peels appear in the background of several scenes. However, the film offers fewer instances of engagement between them and the protagonist compared to the novel. Their iteration on-screen helps viewers infer their significance as a staple of Arturo's impoverished diet. Towne even infuses the fruit with implications of poverty: paired with the protagonist's reflection—"I didn't have a nickel for a cup of coffee"—Arturo bites into an orange, only to spit it out with a grimace of disgust (Towne 00:17:02). Yet this is as far as it goes. In the novel, the scent and taste of oranges ingrain the senses and guide the character's subconscious through introspection and reminiscence; the movie, however, shows no inner monologue uncloaking the emotional resonance behind the ongoing consumption of oranges, its inherent connection with financial woes, or how Arturo's stomach winds up rejecting the juices of the finest offspring of the Californian soil.

Ironically, Towne's adaptation downplays one of the most prominent axes of L.A. boosterism: its architecture. Admittedly, the film refrains from portraying a city where prime real estate flourishes or groundbreaking structures dominate the landscape. Instead, the neighborhoods depicted—primarily Bunker Hill—are far

from the blending of programmatic design and exotic aesthetics championed in booster promotional materials (Zimmerman 31). Notably absent are iconic landmarks like the Bradbury Building, the lush gardens described as "vivid icons of local identity" (Starr 184) that once formed the city's green belt, or the Spanish-style developments that gusted Mediterranean winds all across Southland (196-200). The closest glimpse at the town that tried to rival Chicago's architectural splendor is the Romanesque tower of the City Hall piercing the horizon behind Bandini's back as he desperately searches for Camilla (Towne 01:41:55) or looming over the midnight sky after Arturo abandons Vera in a dingy bar (00:46:00).

In contrast, the movie attempts to point up the decadent flanks of L.A. by interspersing critical observations about its architecture, depicting beggars in several sequences, shrouding much of its runtime in the aforementioned fog, and including an original reflection by Bandini. At one point, he muses on those "too poor and unlucky to call any place their own, even for a while" (Towne 00:23:22) as the camera follows a family pushing a cart of meager belongings and captures a group of vagrants being evicted from a small park by police officers. Despite these efforts, however, the movie's value as a reportage of L.A.'s "mean streets" and architectural oddities does not match that of the novel.

The decision to devote so much running time to Arturo and Camilla's protean *je ne sais quoi* pushes the film through a tubular lens that cages the protagonist in very specific areas of Los Angeles. Towne's *Ask the Dust* foregoes many of Bandini's exploratory ventures into its back alleys and industrial areas and turns Bunker Hill into the main and almost sole landmark of the movie. This choice introduces distortions between the book and its adaptation on both quantitative and qualitative levels. For example, the film omits significant portions of Fante's extensive map of the sordid corners of the town. The screen fails to parallel the author's rich and varied descriptions, diluting the sharp contrasts of the novel. The list of excised scenes is long and encompasses iconic passages like Arturo's nocturnal wanderings through L.A., its brothels and its "neon tubes and a light fog, honky tonks and all night picture houses. Second-hand stores and Filipino dance halls, cocktails 15 cents" (Fante 425), or the episode where he and Camilla drive into Los Angeles Black Belt looking for pot and wind up in her apartment on Temple Street, "a sick building, a frame place diseased and dying from the sun" (Fante 575).

Furthermore, Towne's depiction of Bunker Hill is notably peculiar, deviating from Fante's almost cartographic exactitude. Marsark pinpointed the inaccuracies in the film's main setting and defined Towne's portrayal of the neighborhood with terms like "askew," "anatopistic," or "weird". One cannot help but think that Fante's gloomy depiction of the city could have greatly benefited from the unique potential of the cinematic medium to capture the ugliness, obscurity, and architectural eccentricities that defined Bandini's world. His granular mapping and pitch-perfect blueprint of the metropolis' golden miles and sewers could only be matched with an equal *tour de force,* a creative concrete of imagery, lighting, and sound that glued literary elements together to raise the impossible yet undeniably real beacon of the West Coast. Unfortunately, despite Deschanel's superb and critically acclaimed

cinematography, Towne's *mise-en-scène* falls short in this regard, and the urban background he crafts lacks the dreary and panoramic quality of Fante's L.A.

Additionally, some passages in the novel in which architecture assumed a central role take a different course in the movie. A notable case in point, given the significance of the chapter in both media, is Bandini's visit to Vera Rivken in Long Beach. In the movie, Bandini's reflections about Vera's apartment and its similarity to myriad other California houses are replaced with an original dialogue absent from Fante's *Ask the Dust*. During the scene, Arturo admits to his habit of insulting and taunting Camilla, and upon mentioning her Mexican heritage, Vera reacts with alarm, pleading with Arturo not to hurt her (Towne 01:05:15). Vera, let us not forget, is Jewish. Again, the script underscores the racial and ethnic prejudice that permeated the city in the 1930s, even if the racial component is foregrounded at the expense of bypassing one of Fante's bottom lines, as the flaws and bleakness of the apartment and the universalizing intentions of the protagonist's remark—remember, that room "like ten million California rooms"—are neither articulated in dialogue nor visually represented.

However, as anticipated before, one of Towne's most cogent debunking strategies is somewhat surreptitious, not based on what he decides to show but on what he decides to neglect. While the film faithfully captures Bandini's cynicism, dark humor, and scorn for the city, it conspicuously downplays moments where the protagonist reveals his genuine affection for L.A. Some of the novel's most poignant expressions of this sentiment are absent, most notably Arturo's heartfelt plea near the opening of the story: "Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town" (Fante 413-414). Decidedly, adaptation means choice, and choice means sacrifice, but some omissions are more conspicuous and consequential than others, especially to Fante's enthusiasts.

The few positive remarks about L.A. in the film are juxtaposed with even more pointed critiques. Returning to the scene in Vera's apartment, Towne takes a concept from the novel, reconfigures it, and dilates upon it in a different direction. The book recounts a role play with sexual connotations where Vera pretends to be Camilla. During the exchange, Bandini conjures an alternate reality where Los Angeles and California do not exist, and there are "no dusty streets, no cheap hotels, no stinking newspapers, no broken, uprooted people from the East, no fancy boulevards" (Fante 517). In his imagined scenario, Camilla is a princess ruling over an unspoiled land "with the deserts and the mountains and the sea" (517).

The film retains the role play but shifts its emphasis. Here, Bandini also likens Camilla to pre-Los Angeles California (Towne 01:06:33)—West of Eden, a pristine paradise to settle in untouched by human interference—, but the comparison now sets the stage for a broader critique: as Arturo digresses into a lament about the exploitation and desecration of this once-virginal place, he outlines a historical trajectory of degradation, beginning with the search for gold, followed by oil drilling, and culminating in the construction of "crappy hotels," "dirty streets," and the

emergence of a movie industry (01:06:43) that drained the land of its purity. This hopeless view is more political and less symbolic than Fante's, offering an expansive historical condemnation that transcends the particular moment when the novel was written. In other words, Fante's is a synchronic depiction from the very heart of the *zeitgeist* of the 1930s Los Angeles, even if it foreshadows concerns that, alas, still hit close to home today; Towne's, however, broadens the lens and becomes a diachronic reflection that uproots the dialogue from its original context, making it partly extemporaneous, partly perennial.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis thus far demonstrates that both Fante's and Towne's *Ask the Dust* possess a distinctly antiboosterist tone and effect, albeit expressed in different forms and intensities. Towne chooses to mirror, with varying degrees of emphasis and success, those aspects that may resonate more immediately with contemporary audiences, such as racism, urban challenges, natural disasters, and the trials and tribulations of the protagonist's professional and romantic pursuits. This approach amplifies a bleaker and more pessimistic portrayal of the city, as Towne omits many of Bandini's most rhapsodic and fervent declarations of love for Los Angeles. His vision of L.A. emerges as a selfish, insatiable body that takes relentlessly from the protagonist while offering little in return. Fante's Bandini, per contra, conveys a resilient optimism that counterbalances his criticisms of the city; at the same time, the author's debunking strategy is more nuanced and layered, addressing dimensions whose prominence likely stems from Fante's personal experiences and building an intimate connection between the work's background and that of the writer.

These bottom lines intersect with Bazin's perspective on film adaptations, which posits that adaptations inherently create a dialogue between the source material and its derivative, enriching the original work with new interpretations and opening alternative dimensions to the former via the approach(es) of the latter. Towne's *Ask the Dust* thickens Fante's critique of Los Angeles as a deceptive purveyor of dreams, using this decaying urban backdrop to foreground the Camilla-Bandini plotline and sharpen its focus on themes of racial conflict and societal hierarchy. These choices reshape the story into a more conventional Hollywood romance while addressing enduring issues such as urban decay and the entrenched bigotry staining the American social fabric—topics that resonate strongly with the collective consciousness of twenty first-century audiences. Like Fante's book, Towne's film is a product of its time, infused with contemporary concerns and sensibilities that naturally permeate its narrative.

Still, the novel remains distinctly recognizable in the film, and numerous sequences—true to Fante or not—are likely to linger in the minds of readers as they revisit the book. Like a hall of mirrors, adaptations reflect their source material while simultaneously distorting it, revealing unique angles and interpretations of the original work. Sometimes these reflections resonate loudly, and at other times, they

hum with subtle harmonies or dissonances. Debates over whether the source material surpasses its adaptation or vice versa are ultimately subjective and extraneous to this analysis. Such discussions are probably inevitable and better suited for a different setting: a cozy couch, oversized sodas, heaping bowls of popcorn, and ample time for leisurely, lighthearted conversation.

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