Los Angeles is vast, a quality that is integral both to the way the city is conceived in the popular imagination as well as to the reality of its urban planning. Artists and filmmakers who depict the city are faced with the challenge of representing this immensity and giving it meaning. This talk argues that one of the most common ways to represent this aspect of the city, the panorama, is also the most inauthentic. Though iconic, especially since the widescreen format of Cinemascope glamorized this perspective in the 1950s, the panorama is distant and unengaged, lacking the detail and complexity that marks the real, lived experience of the city. Other more quotidian perspectives, notably the street view – especially tracking shots seen from a car window – much more effectively articulate the complex, contingent and unfolding nature of life in a megacity. Furthermore, I argue that thinking about the scale of the infrastructure of a city such as L.A. is a good way to apprehend its total size. Photographs, paintings and films that allow our intellectual faculties to reconstruct this infrastructural enormity, especially that of the road system and water supply, effectively evoke a true sense of the urban sublime.

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