

Notes for an Artwork. Robert Altman's *Quintet* and Future Past

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Abstract – This paper is based on a collection of notes I made after watching the film *Quintet* and after taking a walk in one of the locations where this film was shot. I considered how the film presents an Arctic climate as the weather conditions of an unknown, catastrophic future. The second part of the paper comes from the notes made in 2011 while walking on Île Notre-Dame, where the film was shot. Looking for any possible traces of the *Quintet* set, I speculate on how the barren landscape of the artificial island evokes its own uncertain situation and temporality.

The action of the science fiction film *Quintet*¹ takes place in a frozen post apocalyptic future, possibly during a nuclear winter.² The sets are barren and strewn with redundant technology; a snow-covered landscape is punctuated by derelict modern architecture and frozen machinery. *Quintet* was shot in Canada, in what is now the territory of Nunavut and on Île Notre-Dame in Montréal in the remains of the pavilions of the world exposition that took place there in 1967.³ Altman uses the (nuclear) winter setting of *Quintet*, the expanses of white snow, the ice-encased structures and the fogginess

1 Robert Altman, *Quintet*, United States, 1979, 118 min.

2 The permanent winter setting of *Quintet* is one that was explored by many filmmakers in the time before Glasnost when the threat of nuclear war was very present in the collective imagination. A study published in the *Journal of Geophysical Research* in 2007 maintains that the negative effects of a nuclear winter would be catastrophic: “A global average surface cooling of -7°C to -8°C persists for years, and after a decade the cooling is still -4°C . Considering that the global average cooling at the depth of the last ice age 18,000 years ago was about -5°C , this would be a climate change unprecedented in speed and amplitude in the history of the human race.” Alan Robock, Luke Oman and Georgiy L. Stenchikov, “Nuclear Winter Revisited With a Modern Climate Model and Current Nuclear Arsenals: Still Catastrophic Consequences,” *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres*, vol. 112, n° D13, July 6, 2007, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1029/2006JD008235/full> (accessed August 31, 2013).

3 The location for much of the film was the former Man the Explorer pavilion, demolished in 1986. For an analysis of the Expo 67 locations used by Altman in the filming of *Quintet* please refer to Steve Lyons's comprehensive article from 2009: Steve Lyons, “Memory of a Post-Apocalyptic Future. Whitening Skeletons and Frozen Time in Robert Altman's *Quintet* and Expo 67's Man the Explorer Pavilion,” http://cityaspalimpsest.concordia.ca/palimpsest_II_en/papers/Steve_Lyons.pdf (accessed August 31, 2013).

produced by condensation in the cold to construct a diegesis that exists beyond our understanding of time and space. In an interview in *Fantastic Films*, Altman claims he uses the winter setting as a cinematic device to disorient the viewer, “[...] to orient you to the disorientation.”⁴

The where and the when of the film’s diegesis are never revealed in the script or in the location and sets. No places are named; Essex, the protagonist played by Paul Newman, speaks in the beginning of the film of the city he remembers without naming it or placing it in an identifiable history.

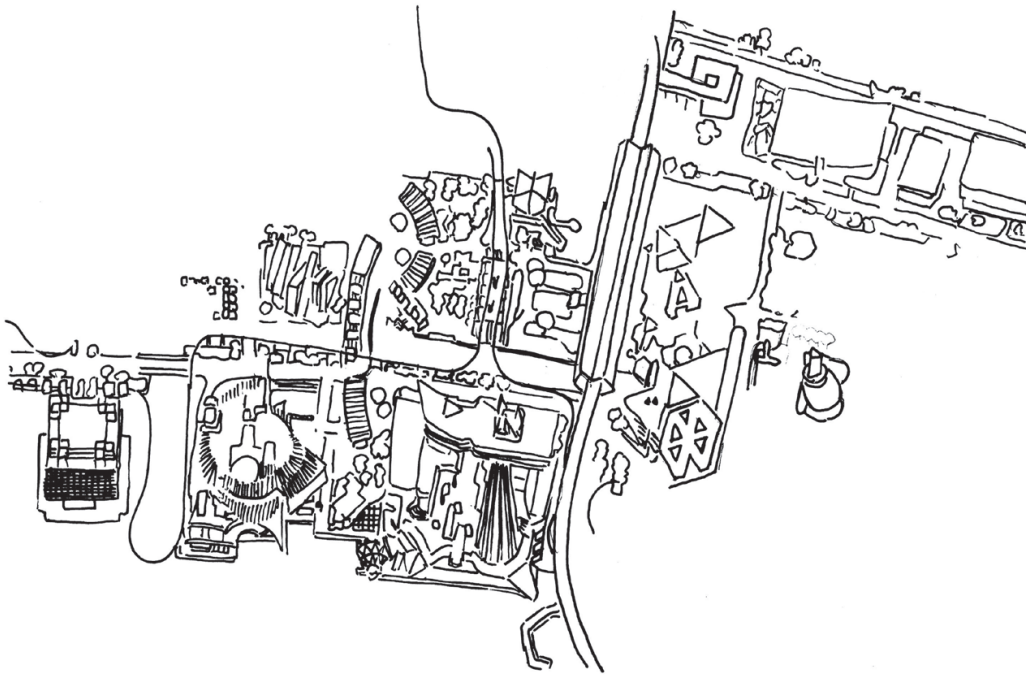


Figure 1.
(All drawings and photographs by the author.)

Northern Time and Place

In his book, *The Idea of North*, Peter Davidson writes of the North as the end of our geographical imagination: “Direction is suspended at the North and South Poles; they are places outside place.”⁵ Due in part to the snow

⁴ Robert Altman interviewed by James Delson, “Quintet,” *Fantastic Films*, June 1979, p 28.

⁵ Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, London, Reaktion Books, coll. “Topographics,” 2005, p. 13.

and icescape effacing details of the land, the winter setting of *Quintet* exists outside of place. It also exists beyond time. Nuclear winter results in a North beyond our temporal imagination. The action of *Quintet* seems to take place in the future, but it is hard to determine how many years into the future. Again it is the winter landscape that obfuscates our understanding of the time period. The film opens with a long traveling shot showing a train frozen in the snow. The aforementioned scenes indicate a time after an environmental catastrophe has left the world as a frozen wasteland. Davidson writes that since Robert Falcon Scott's ill-fated polar expedition, "[...] there is a presupposition attending ideas of North of disaster, loss, expeditions that fail to return."⁶ The image of Scott's failed expedition to the South Pole is recalled in the first scene of *Quintet* as two figures are shown struggling to make their way through a harsh frozen landscape reminiscent of cinematic depictions of Antarctica.

The first scenes of *Quintet* are those filmed in Nunavut (the train was a model used in a composite shot). In these, the vastness of the arctic terrain stands for the barren frozen landscape of the future. Essex and Vivia, his companion played by Brigitte Fossey, are heading towards his native city. Most of the action of the film takes place in the ruins of this city. The architecture and layout as well as the way in which Essex describes it to Vivia suggest a technologically advanced city, a metropolis of 5 million divided into 5 sectors and 25 levels. After the expanses of the first scenes, the action is now confined to the claustrophobic city complex and mostly to interiors. While the architecture and design of the city are modern, the economy and society would seem to have regressed to medieval models.

In the film's diegesis, *Quintet* is a participation game popular before disaster struck the world. It is still played and it consumes most of the inhabitants' time in the city. There is nothing else for them to but to wait to die from starvation or from the cold. When, at the end of the film, Essex discovers that the rules of the game have changed and that the goal is to kill off one's opponents, he decides to leave the city, alone. The film ends in the same landscape as it began with the solitary Essex walking into the whiteness of the snow.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

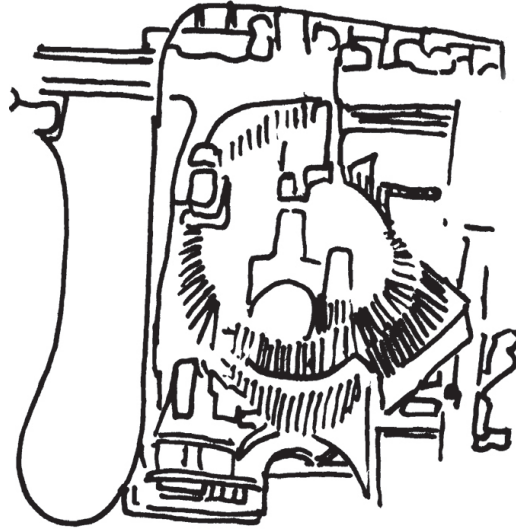


Figure 2.

In this last scene, Altman employs a type of shot that uses the light and atmospheric conditions of the northern landscape to play with our perception and disorient us. This blurring of perception is something that Altman was interested in shooting in the cold. He said in the 1979 interview:

I was trying to never show the audience the perimeter of the film. Keep you in a kind of interior claustrophobia. A residual effect we got out of it was that we found we could make people appear and disappear right in front of your eyes. I mean they don't leave the hard sharp frame when they walk out. They walk toward the edge and they just disappear.⁷

The last shot of the film, which lasts over 2 minutes, shows Essex disappearing into the landscape. It is impossible to determine at what moment we lose sight of him. In an experimental video work made in the same year, *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*,⁸ Bill Viola recorded on video a similar and now classic scene in a blizzard in rural Saskatchewan. In this scene, a solitary figure walks towards the camera; we are not at first aware of the figure's presence, blurred by the cold and snow, and cannot say when we first notice that there is someone walking towards us. In *Images de surface. L'art vidéo reconsidéré*, Christine Ross writes of this scene:

⁷ James Delson, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁸ Bill Viola, *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, United States, 1979, 28 min.

*Comme le remarque Gene Youngblood, les prairies enneigées de la Saskatchewan sont géographiquement sans limites et se présentent visuellement comme des espaces sans profondeur qui minent la perspective quattrocentriste. D'emblée, les yeux se cognent contre une surface sans repère constituée par la confusion mimétique de la neige et de l'écran.*⁹

The lack of depth of field that the Saskatchewan snowscape presents us with in Viola's video, is, as well as a characteristic quality of the electronic image of video art, an effect the cold and the winter landscape have on our perception.

Frozen Time

Altman describes the opening of *Quintet* in the 1979 interview in *Fantastic Film*:

When the film opens up, we're above the tree line, with nothing but frozen wasteland, and here is this modern train. You don't really know it's a train until you reach a certain point, but it tells you this is not *Nanook of the North*. But that there's a train, and it's obviously been frozen in for God knows how long. And then you see these people walking. And then we take them into this first shelter. Which again, has a futuristic look to it, so you know that you're in some time.¹⁰

While *Quintet* is not *Nanook of the North*,¹¹ the initial shock upon seeing the train frozen in the snowscape is reminiscent of another film with a northern theme from the same year as Flaherty's classic documentary, but made in a different spirit. Buster Keaton's comedy short *The Frozen North*¹² opens with a shot of a New York subway entrance standing in a snow covered field. Keaton's character first appears coming out of this structure, suggesting

⁹ Christine Ross, *Images de surface. L'art vidéo reconsidéré*, Montréal, Arttexte, 1996, p. 84: "As noted by Gene Youngblood, the snow-covered prairies of Saskatchewan are without geographical limits and appear as a depthless space contradicting Renaissance perspective. The eye is confronted with a picture plane lacking any indication of depth or scale. This lack of perspective is caused by the surface of the screen mimicking that of the snow" [my translation].

¹⁰ James Delson, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹¹ Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, United States, 1922, 79 min.

¹² Edward F. Cline and Buster Keaton, *The Frozen North*, United States, 1922, 17 min.

he reached the Arctic by subway. The juxtaposition of urban transportation infrastructure with an empty wilderness is used by Altman, not as a surreal gag in the style of Buster Keaton, but to destabilize the viewers' expectations of where the action in his film might be taking place.

Anticipating Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*,¹³ the next scene in *The Frozen North* takes place in a bar where the patrons are playing cards and gambling. Like with *Quintet*, the North of *The Frozen North* is a place where time is occupied by playing games. The characters of the Altman film have nothing left to do but play *Quintet*. The alternative is to wait to eventually die of cold and starvation. Waiting is replaced by playing a game. Altman borrows from a common leitmotif of the frozen North, existing at least since the time of the Yukon Gold Rush, the gambling house.¹⁴ In the Yukon, gambling served as a dubious method for the unlucky miner to profit from the luck of his fellow prospectors, but it also served to help pass the time in a harsh place and climate. In the relative comfort of the bar or brothel, the gambler was, temporarily, oblivious of the cold and darkness outside. Caught up with the strategy and unfolding of the game, the obsessive gambler knows neither night nor day, summer nor winter, occupying a temporal dimension that exists beyond the hours of the clock and the days of the calendar. The dark winter of the Arctic, like the nuclear winter of *Quintet*, is seemingly endless; in the continual darkness, time is not marked by the passing days, but by other, more psychological, conditions.

Like gambling, watching a film in the climate-controlled, darkened cinema, also takes us outside of diurnal time, to the time of the diegesis, to a time of memories and dreams. The American artist Robert Smithson, in "A Cinematic Atopia", an essay written for *Artforum* in 1971, posits the cinema as a space of corporeal inertia and of apathy, one in which the spectator succumbs to entropy and reverts to near catatonic state: "Going to the cinema results in an immobilization of the body."¹⁵ Roland Barthes sees the cinema as a psychological space where we encounter our unconscious selves. In his essay, "En sortant du cinéma,"¹⁶ Barthes remarks on the shock one feels when leaving the cinema and returning abruptly to the time

¹³ Charles Chaplin, *The Gold Rush*, United States, 1925, 95 min.

¹⁴ Ironically, part of the set of *Quintet*, the former French pavilion of Expo 67 was later transformed into a casino. Open 24 hours, its climate-controlled interior exists outside of seasonal and diurnal time.

¹⁵ Robert Smithson and Jack Flam (eds.), "A Cinematic Atopia," *Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996 [1971], p. 138.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, "En sortant du cinéma," *Communications*, n° 23, 1975, p. 104-107.

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and space of the exterior world. The immersive cinematic experience has changed much since the release of *Quintet* and since Barthes and Smithson were writing. Technological, commercial and social developments have made going to the cinema a less common activity. Disorientating immersion occurs elsewhere, in the mediatized home theatre perhaps, but certainly often in museums and galleries showing contemporary moving image based art practices. Claire Bishop refers to both the Barthes article and Smithson's text on cinema, when she writes of the immersive qualities of much video installation art:

Since he accounts for our experience of cinema in spatial (rather than simply psychological) terms, Barthes's essay permits a consideration of video installation as a practice distinct from cinema. His starting point is an evocative description of how we leave cinemas: in a slight daze, with a soft, limp and sleepy body. He thus compares the experience of watching a film to being hypnotized, and the ritual of entering the dimmed space of a cinema as "pre-hypnotic."¹⁷



Figure 3.

¹⁷ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art. A Critical History*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 95.

This controlled state of darkness outside of daily time would have been the way in which most of Altman's audience would have first experienced *Quintet*, at a screening in a cinema. The audience would have presumably experienced the disorientation that Altman intended through the diegesis and effects of the film to produce in them. And they would have experienced a second disorientation through in the darkened contained space and time of the cinema.

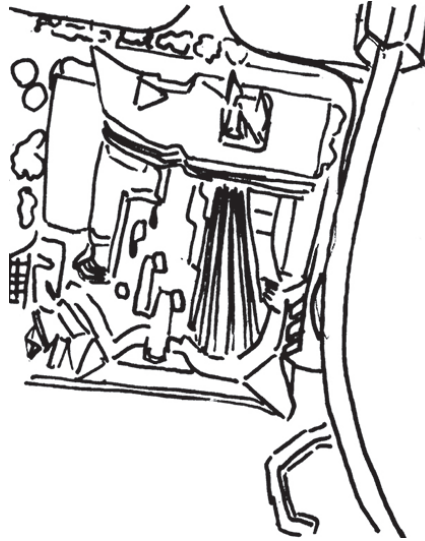


Figure 4.

Another Time and Another Place

Let us return to the absent set of *Quintet*, to the site of Montréal's 1967 world exposition, Expo 67, to Île Notre-Dame. The remains of the temporary city are barely perceptible. Looking closer, the physical features of the artificial island built from the earth dug to make the first tunnels of Montréal's subway system show themselves, the basins, canals and embankments. Some of the roads and footpaths can still be followed. Most of the bridges, which cross the canals, but now lead nowhere, are intact.

A landscape made accessible to the public, a park, a place for recreation, for repose, is under surveillance and subdivided into sections with different levels of accessibility. A section that generates revenue, a casino, is cordoned off, behind parking lots and guard boxes, from casual strollers who

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might wander into the complex.¹⁸ Beyond the defined tourist attractions are landscaped green spaces interspersed with the infrastructure of spectacle (the Formula 1 track and grandstands), with the architecture of municipal operations, with administrative buildings and sheds and with features that seem redundant and anomalous to the goings on in the park and to the layout of the artificial island, black columns, electrical posts carrying no wires, punctuate the canal banks at regular intervals. It is in this curious geography that the more effaced traces of the Expo site are to be experienced, and where the locations for *Quintet* could somehow be imagined.



Figure 5.

Like most inhabitants of Montréal, I have been quite often to Île Notre-Dame and to neighboring Île Sainte-Hélène, but I am not really familiar with the activities that go on there; the islands are not part of the city that I make use of. Disembarking from the subway in a morning in mid-November at a time of year just before the snow would cover the city, I am surprised by the number of people getting off the train with me. There are a few tourists

¹⁸ In this way, the space of the islands hints at that of the North of nationalist economic speculation. Ostensibly a sublime landscape offering adventure and tourism, it is mapped out with designated restricted areas of mineral extraction, energy generation and military occupation.

who head towards a museum and the rest of the people make their way to a bus waiting at the stop across from the station. I quickly understand that their destination is the casino on the other end of the other island. I am left pretty much alone as I make my way across the Cosmos Bridge that straddles the Lemoyne channel leading to Île Notre-Dame. A few city workers, a couple taking photographs, are all the people I see before I approach the former French pavilion from Expo 67. The casino occupies not only the pavilion, but also several outlying buildings including the former Québec pavilion, forming a concourse surrounded by barriers, parking lots, roads, a basin and canals, and the river. But this is not where I want I go. I am not interested in what has been rebuilt and reconstructed. I am looking for traces, traces of a temporary city, traces of a film set that remembered a city that no longer existed.

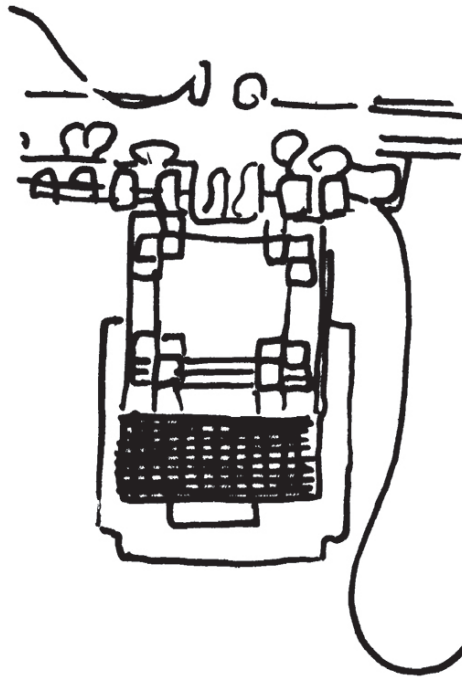


Figure 6.

Walter Benjamin wrote of 19th century world expositions as places of spectacle and alienation: “They open up a phantasmagoria that people enter to be amused. The entertainment industry facilitates this by elevating people to the level of commodities. They submit to being manipulated while

enjoying their alienation from themselves and from others.”¹⁹ Like their 19th century predecessors the postwar world expositions were, often, artificial spaces that existed outside of place, heterotopias with their own logic and geography and modes of operation.²⁰ But they also existed outside of time. Expo 67 was open from April 28 until October 29, 1967; it did not operate in the winter. As such, it was not really experienced as taking place in a northern land. The publicity and documentation of the exhibition showed sunny scenes and visitors in shirtsleeves; the mild climate enjoyed at Expo 67 was that of anywhere and of nowhere.

If the northern climate was not a significant characteristic of the Montréal world’s fair during the summer of 1967, it was a factor in the sustainability of its architecture. Many of the pavilions were kept open until 1981 as part of what was the, intended to be, permanent exhibition, “Man and his World”. As many of these pavilions were built as temporary structures, and not built to withstand the harsh Québec winter, they were eventually abandoned and demolished.

My interest for Expo 67 is not simply nostalgia for a future in the past, for a time and a place that never really were. Like Expo 58 in Brussels, Montréal’s world exposition featured artists’ experiments in new forms of immersive image and sound production. One of these productions was the architect-composer Iannis Xenakis’ “Polytope for Montréal”, installed and performed in the French pavilion. This influential immersive sound and light work (purportedly) remained installed until 1992 when the building was transformed to house the Casino. These experiments influenced future generations of artists in Québec, including myself, and internationally. Montréal media artist and co-founder of the Société des arts technologiques Luc Courchesne said in an interview in *La Presse* that his interest in immersive art forms began when he visited Expo 67 as an adolescent.²¹

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, New York, Schocken Books, 1986, p. 152.

²⁰ Expo 67 took place in Montréal, a North American city which had been in the postwar years adapted to automobile transportation. Most people drove to Expo in their cars, but once inside the exhibition ground, they rode a variety of forms of public transport to move from place to place. All of these devices were dismantled and removed from the site once it stopped functioning as an exhibition.

²¹ Éric Clément, “Luc Courchesne saute dans le vide à Toronto,” *La Presse*, January 27, 2011, Section “Arts et spectacles,” p. 2.



Figure 7.

I visit the island in November, long after the picnickers, the festival-goers and the Formula 1 fans have left. Remnants of the different recreational facilities, racetrack barriers, fences and park benches, exposed in the brown grass and leafless trees mix with and confuse what might have been the foundations of the pavilions of Expo 67. The geodesic dome of the United States pavilion, the French and Québec pavilions now incorporated into the Casino complex, as well as a few other recycled pavilions have been restored or renovated. The others were long ago dismantled or left to crumble and removed when the ruins became dangerous. The vast Soviet pavilion was dismantled after the end of the world exposition.²² It was said to have been shipped to Moscow to be reassembled in the VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy) park there.²³

²² The fate of the Soviet pavilion has recently been researched by Fabien Bellat. His findings were presented in the conference: Fabien Bellat, "Pavillon de l'URSS, Montréal 1967," *Maison de l'architecture du Québec*, Montréal, August 27-28, 2012.

²³ I visited the VDNKh park in the summer of 2010. I did not see the reconstructed Soviet pavilion from Montréal. There were other buildings there, built in a similar architectural style and probably at the same time as the Montréal pavilion. These former exhibition halls once displayed the products of the regions and the industries from the republics of the Soviet Union. When I visited them, the ones that were open housed makeshift shops selling handicrafts,

With the foliage gone and before the snow has settled, the short history of the artificial island bares itself to me. The landscaped park gives way to wide expanses of gravel, bleak and empty in the grey half-light of November. In the summer, these parking lots and maintenance yards are background to the natural and recreational attractions of the island. In late autumn, they dominate the landscape like the fields of snow and ice that set the scene in the opening shots of *Quintet*. From the graveled parking areas narrow roads lead across rusted bridges crossing half drained canals. The expo site was laid out on islands of reclaimed land surrounded by a network of canals, basins and small lakes. A small-scale cityscape built on water, reminiscent of Venice or Amsterdam, but designed on a modern grid, was conceived.

I find curious metal posts vertically marking the banks of the canals at regular intervals. Possibly posts that carried electrical or telephone lines in the temporary city of Expo 67? I photograph these. Their geometric near perfection (as a series of repeated measured vertical lines), and their blackness stand out against the jumble of grey brown bushes and tree branches that have taken over the once manicured landscape of the site.

The remains of the un-restored pavilions, the sets of *Quintet*, have all but vanished. A few blocks of concrete foundations jut out from the earth. The cold and damp of many long winters have eroded the wondrous structures of that imaginary city. I walk, trying to envision the layout of the landmarks, but they remain invisible, lost in the vegetation that has overgrown the site. The infrastructure of mass entertainment, the casino complex and the Formula 1 track make me lose my bearings. Like “the essential Siberia” referred to by Jan Borm in his article “Yakutsk, lieu de mémoire sibérien et européen interculturel”²⁴ that could only exist in the absence of the author, the fantastic, impossible city that was Expo 67 can only exist in its own absence:

souvenirs, and inexpensive clothing and household goods. I did see a building resembling very much the Soviet pavilion when I visited Lithuania. The abandoned, but still standing, Vilnius Palace of Culture and Sports, built in 1971 on the banks of the Neris River is perhaps what some of the pavilions of Expo 67 would have looked like before their demolition.

²⁴ Jan Borm, “Yakutsk, lieu de mémoire sibérien et européen interculturel,” paper given at the 7th International Multidisciplinary Conference of the International Laboratory for the Comparative Multidisciplinary Study of Representations of the North, *Vers une cartographie des lieux du Nord: mémoire, abandon, oubli*, Montréal, 2012. See his article in this book.

LE LIEU DU NORD

If I showed you the city, you would see something that you had never seen before, and you would consequently not believe it. It would look like a model. ... I leave that to your imagination, because if I had shown you what it looked like, the magic would have been gone.²⁵

The last dialogue from *Quintet*, spoken just before Essex disappears into the snow enunciates the uncertain place that is the diegesis of the film and that is also the ruins of a city that never was:

St. Christopher (played by Vittorio Gassman):	Where are you going?
Essex:	North.
St. Christopher:	North? There is nothing there. You won't last a day and a half. You'll freeze to death.
Essex:	You may know that. I don't. ²⁶

²⁵ James Delson, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²⁶ Robert Altman, *op. cit.*