

CHAPTER ONE

SUNSHINE OR NOIR?

BLANK PAGE

LOS ANGELES INTELLECTUALS: AN INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a *commodity*; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash. *Morrow Mayo*¹

In the summer of 1989, a well-known fashion magazine constantly on the prowl for lifestyle trends reported from Los Angeles that ‘intellectualism’ had arrived there as the latest fad. From celebrities buying armloads of ‘smart-looking eyeglasses’ to the ‘people of L.A. who . . . have elevated intellectualism to a life style’, the city was supposedly booming with bookish behavior for its own sake: ‘There’s a real feeling here about becoming intellectual, removing superficiality, getting culture.’² The magazine’s West Coast editor noted approvingly that the ‘new intellectualism’ was sweeping Los Angeles on the same wave of messianic hype that had brought its local predecessors, ‘the perfect body’ and ‘New Age spirituality’. Angelenos, moreover, had already recognized that the crucial point of the new pastime was that ‘books are for sale’ and that a surge of commodity fetishism and feverish entrepreneurship would accompany the laying on of Culture.³

As this anecdote implies, to evoke ‘Los Angeles intellectuals’ is to invite immediate incredulity, if not mirth. Better then, at the outset, to refer to a mythology – the destruction of intellectual sensibility in the sun-baked plains of Los Angeles – that conforms more to received impressions, and that is at least partially true. First of all, Los Angeles is usually seen as peculiarly infertile cultural soil, unable to produce, to this day, any homegrown intelligentsia. Unlike San Francisco, which has generated a distinctive cultural history from the Argonauts to the Beats, Los Angeles’s truly indigenous intellectual history seems a barren shelf. Yet – for even more peculiar reasons – this essentially deracinated city has become the world capital of an immense Culture Industry, which since the 1920s has imported myriads of the most talented writers, filmmakers, artists and visionaries. Similarly, since the 1940s, the Southern California aerospace industry and its satellite think-tanks have assembled the earth’s largest single

CITY OF QUARTZ

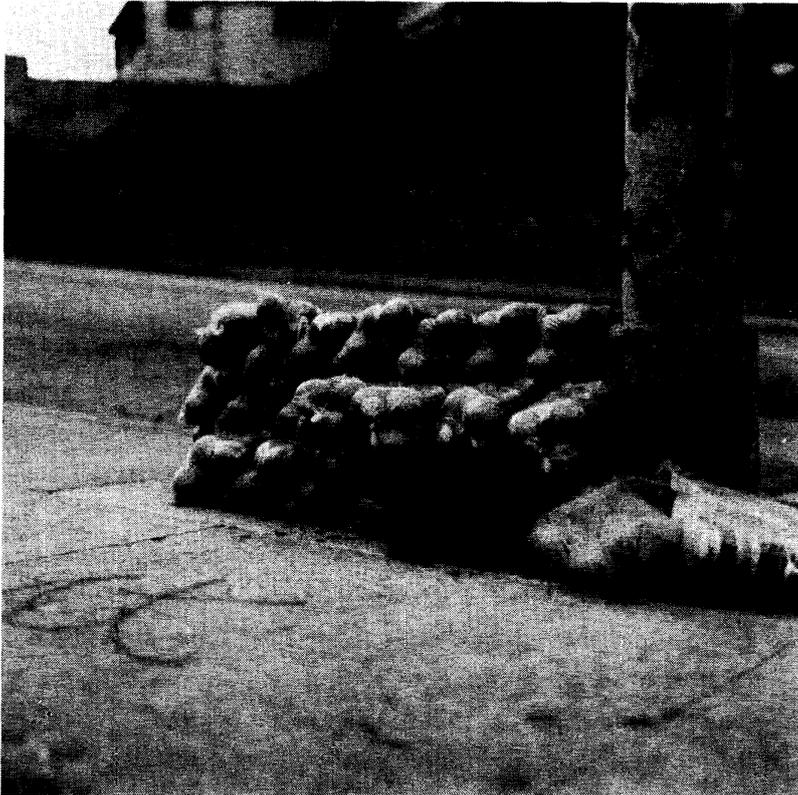
concentration of PhD scientists and engineers. In Los Angeles immigrant mental labor is collectivized in huge apparatuses and directly consumed by big capital. Almost everyone is either on a corporate payroll or waiting hopefully at the studio gate.

Such relations of 'pure capitalism', of course, are seen as invariably destructive of the identity of 'true' intellectuals, still self-defined as artisans or rentiers of their own unique mental productions. Snared in the nets of Hollywood, or entrapped by the Strangelovian logic of the missile industry, 'seduced' talents are 'wasted', 'prostituted', 'trivialized', or 'destroyed'. To move to Lotusland is to sever connection with national reality, to lose historical and experiential footing, to surrender critical distance, and to submerge oneself in spectacle and fraud. Fused into a single montage image are Fitzgerald reduced to a drunken hack, West rushing to his own apocalypse (thinking it a dinner party), Faulkner rewriting second-rate scripts, Brecht raging against the mutilation of his work, the Hollywood Ten on their way to prison, Didion on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and so on. Los Angeles (and its alter-ego, Hollywood) becomes the literalized Mahagonny: city of seduction and defeat, the antipode to critical intelligence.

Yet this very rhetoric (which infuses a long tradition of writing about Los Angeles, since at least the 1920s) indicates powerful critical energies at work. For if Los Angeles has become the archetypal site of massive and unprotesting subordination of industrialized intelligentsias to the programs of capital, it has also been fertile soil for some of the most acute critiques of the culture of late capitalism, and, particularly, of the tendential degeneration of its middle strata (a persistent theme from Nathanael West to Robert Towne). The most outstanding example is the complex corpus of what we call *noir* (literary and cinematic): a fantastic convergence of American 'tough-guy' realism, Weimar expressionism, and existentialized Marxism – all focused on unmasking a 'bright, guilty place' (Welles) called Los Angeles.

Los Angeles in this instance is, of course, a stand-in for capitalism in general. The ultimate world-historical significance – and oddity – of Los Angeles is that it has come to play the double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism. The same place, as Brecht noted, symbolized both heaven and hell. Correspondingly, it is the essential destination on the

SUNSHINE OR NOIR?



ORANGES ON SIDEWALK
Temple-Beaudry district

CITY OF QUARTZ

itinerary of any late twentieth-century intellectual, who must eventually come to take a peep and render some opinion on whether 'Los Angeles Brings It All Together' (official slogan), or is, rather, the nightmare at the terminus of American history (as depicted in *noir*). Los Angeles – far more than New York, Paris or Tokyo – polarizes debate: it is the terrain and subject of fierce ideological struggle.

With apologies for the schematic compression inevitable in so cursory a survey, I explore, first, the role played by successive migrations of intellectuals (whether as tourists, exiles or hired hands), in relation to the dominating cultural institutions of their time (the *Los Angeles Times*, Hollywood, and, most recently, an emergent university-museum mega-complex), in constructing or deconstructing the mythography of Los Angeles. I am interested, in other words, not so much in the history of culture produced *in* Los Angeles, as the history of culture produced *about* Los Angeles – especially where that has become a material force in the city's actual evolution. As Michael Sorkin has emphasized, 'L.A. is probably the most mediated town in America, nearly unviewable save through the fictive scrim of its mythologizers'.⁴

I begin with the so-called 'Arroyo Set': writers, antiquarians, and publicists under the influence of Charles Fletcher Lummis (himself in the pay of the *Times* and the Chamber of Commerce), who at the turn of the century created a comprehensive fiction of Southern California as the promised land of a millenarian Anglo-Saxon racial odyssey. They inserted a Mediterraneanized idyll of New England life into the perfumed ruins of an innocent but inferior 'Spanish' culture. In doing so, they wrote the script for the giant real-estate speculations of the early twentieth century that transformed Los Angeles from small town to metropolis. Their imagery, motifs, values and legends were in turn endlessly reproduced by Hollywood, while continuing to be incorporated into the ersatz landscapes of suburban Southern California.

As the Depression shattered broad strata of the dream-addicted Los Angeles middle classes, it also gathered together in Hollywood an extraordinary colony of hardboiled American novelists and anti-fascist European exiles. Together they radically reworked the metaphorical figure of the city, using the crisis of the middle class (rarely the workers or the poor) to expose how the dream had become nightmare. Although only a few works directly

SUNSHINE OR NOIR?

attacked the studio system,⁵ *noir* everywhere insinuated contempt for a depraved business culture while it simultaneously searched for a critical mode of writing or filmmaking within it. Although some principal *noir* auteurs, like Chandler, went little further than generalized petty-bourgeois resentment against the collapse of the Southern California dream, most claimed Popular Front sympathies, and some, like Welles and Dmytryk, alluded to the repressed reality of class struggle. Despite the postwar witch hunt that decimated Hollywood progressives, *noir* survived through the 1950s to re-emerge in a new wave in the 1960s and 1970s. The huge popularity of Didion, Dunne, Wambaugh, *Chinatown*, *Blade Runner*, the Chandler and Cain remakes, and, finally, the arrival of the 'post-*noir*' of James Ellroy's *Los Angeles Quartet*, stand as proof of the genre's durability. Although recuperated as an ambience shorn of its 1940s radical affinities, *noir* has nonetheless remained the popular and, despite its intended elitism, 'populist' anti-myth of Los Angeles.

While the cinematic translation of the *noir* vision of Los Angeles engaged some of the finest European writers and directors resident in Hollywood in the 1940s (giving them an invaluable medium for political and aesthetic resistance), the relationship between the city and the community of anti-fascist exiles deserves separate consideration. It was a potent common moment in the cultural histories of Southern California and Europe, generating its own mythology that helped shape critical reaction to the postwar Americanization of Europe. Without necessarily subscribing to the 'nightmare' anti-myth of *noir*, the exile sense of Los Angeles was unremittingly pessimistic. Here was the ultimate city of capital, lustrous and superficial, negating every classical value of European urbanity. Driven by one epochal defeat of the Enlightenment to the shores of Santa Monica Bay, the most unhappy of the exiles thought they discerned a second defeat in Los Angeles as the 'shape of the things to come', a mirror of capitalism's future.

It is hard to exaggerate the damage which *noir*'s dystopianization of Los Angeles, together with the exiles' denunciation of its counterfeit urbanity, inflicted upon the accumulated ideological capital of the region's boosters. *Noir*, often in illicit alliance with San Francisco or New York elitism, made Los Angeles the city that American intellectuals love to hate (although, paradoxically, this seems only to increase its fascination for postwar

CITY OF QUARTZ

European, especially British and French, intellectuals). As Richard Lehan has emphasized, 'probably no city in the Western world has a more negative image'.⁶ To repair this image, especially among the cultural elites, local corporate patrons have sponsored a third major immigration of intellectuals, comparable to the Hollywood-bound diaspora of the 1930s, but now dominated by architects, designers, artists and culture theorists.

As Los Angeles – propelled by financial, real-estate and military booms – has rushed forward to Manhattanize its skylines (increasingly with offshore capital), it has attempted to Manhattanize its cultural superstructure as well. The largest land developers and bankers have coordinated a major cultural offensive, whose impact has been redoubled, after decades of mere talk, by a sudden torrent of arts capital, including the incredible \$3 billion Getty endowment, the largest in history. As a result, a wealthy institutional matrix has coalesced – integrating elite university faculties, museums, the arts press and foundations – single-mindedly directed toward the creation of a cultural monumentality to support the sale of the city to overseas investors and affluent immigrants. In this sense, the cultural history of the 1980s recapitulated the real-estate/arts nexus of early twentieth-century boosterism, although this time around with a promotional budget so large that it could afford to buy the international celebrity architects, painters and designers – Meier, Graves, Hockney, and so on – capable of giving cultural prestige and a happy 'Pop' veneer to the emergence of the 'world city'.

These, then, are the three major collectivized interventions by intellectuals in the culture formation of Los Angeles: what I somewhat awkwardly abbreviate as the *Boosters*, the *Noirs*, and the *Mercenaries*. The *Exiles*, as a fourth, more parenthetical, intervention, have linked the indigenous process of city-myth production and its *noir-ish* antipode to European sensibilities about America and its West Coast. They have integrated the spectre of 'Los Angeles' into fundamental debates about the fate of Modernism and the future of a postwar Europe dominated by American Fordism.

It may be objected that this historical typology is one-sidedly slanted towards literateurs, filmmakers, musicians and artists – that is, toward fabricators of the *spectacle* – and neglects the role of practical intellectuals – planners, engineers, and politicians – who actually build cities. And where

SUNSHINE OR NOIR?

are the scientists, Southern California's most precious crop, who have shaped its rocket-propelled postwar economy? In fact, the fate of science in Los Angeles exemplifies the role reversal between practical reason and what Disneyites call 'imagineering'. Where one might have expected the presence of the world's largest scientific and engineering community to cultivate a regional enlightenment, science has consorted instead with pulp fiction, vulgar psychology, and even satanism to create yet another layer of California cultdom. This ironic double transfiguration of science into science fiction, and science fiction into religion, is considered in a brief account of the *Sorcerers*.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the paramount axis of cultural conflict in Los Angeles has always been about the construction/interpretation of the *city myth*, which enters the material landscape as a design for speculation and domination (as Allan Seager suggests, 'not [as] fantasy imagined but [as] fantasy seen').⁷ Even though Los Angeles's emergence from the desert has been an artifact of giant public works, city-building has otherwise been left to the anarchy of market forces, with only rare interventions by the state, social movements or public leaders. The city's most Promethean figure – water engineer William Mulholland – was enigmatic and taciturn to an extreme (his collected works: the Los Angeles Aqueduct and the injunction 'Take it'). Although, as we briefly note, residential architecture has episodically served as a rallying point for cultural regionalism (for example, the Craftsman bungalow of the 1910s, the 'case-study' home of the 1940s, the Gehry house of the 1970s), celluloid or the electronic screen have remained the dominant media of the region's self-expression. Compared to other great cities, Los Angeles may be *planned* or *designed* in a very fragmentary sense (primarily at the level of its infrastructure) but it is infinitely *envisioned*.

Yet we must avoid the idea that Los Angeles is ultimately just the mirror of Narcissus, or a huge disturbance in the Maxwellian ether. Beyond its myriad rhetorics and mirages, it can be presumed that the city actually exists.⁸ I thus treat, within the master dialectic of sunshine and *noir*, three attempts, in successive generations, to establish authentic epistemologies for Los Angeles.

First, and at some length in the section called *Debunkers*, I examine immigrant writer Louis Adamic's anti-romantic insistence upon the

CITY OF QUARTZ

centrality of *class violence* in the constitution of the social and cultural landscapes of Los Angeles, an interpretation that was carried further in detail and scope by his close friend, Carey McWilliams. McWilliams's *Southern California Country (An Island on the Land)* is analyzed as the climax – and terminus – of Popular Front attempts to unmask Booster mythology and to recover the historical roles of labor and oppressed minority groups.

Secondly, I survey the careers of several very different avant gardes (the Black Arts Movement, the Ferus Gallery group, the alternative Hollywood of Kenneth Anger, the solo flight of Thomas Pynchon) which formed a Los Angeles cultural underground during part or all of the 1960s. These collaborations (*Communards*) – broken up or expatriated by the early 1970s – represented the coming-of-age of the first L.A.-bred bohemia (indeed, in some cases, tracing their roots back to local high-school cliques of the 1940s), unified by their autobiographical search for representative phenomenologies of daily life in Southern California in experiences as different as those of Black jazz musicians, white hotrodders and gay bikers.

Thirdly, in a concluding section I sketch, in broad and very tentative outline, the fledging attempts (after an intellectual/cultural hiatus in the 1970s) to contest the current corporate celebration of 'postmodern' Los Angeles. I argue that neither the neo-Marxist academics of the 'Los Angeles School' nor the community intellectuals of 'Gangster Rap' have yet fully disengaged themselves from the official dream machinery. On the other hand, the cultural definition of the poly-ethnic Los Angeles of the year 2000 has barely begun.

THE BOOSTERS

The missions are, next to our climate and its consequences, the best capital Southern California has. *Charles Fletcher Lummis*⁹

In 1884 a malarial journalist from Chillicothe, Ohio decided to change his fortune and improve his health by going to Southern California. Unlike the thousands of other health-seekers beginning to discover the curative powers of sunshine, Charles Fletcher Lummis did not take the train. He walked. On his arrival in Los Angeles 143 days later, the owner of the *Times*, Colonel