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ITSELF**

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notes

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS

I like to call this new version of *Los Angeles Plays Itself* the "tenth-anniversary edition" because it was completed in 2013, and first screened in September 2013, ten years and two weeks after the premiere of the original version at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2003.

It has been almost completely remastered and slightly re-edited. For me, this new version is significantly different and vastly better: sharper, bigger, funnier. But it hasn't been updated [there are still no films released after 2001], and the narration hasn't been changed, even to correct the minor and major errors that I have noticed or have been brought to my attention: "L.A." is just an abbreviation, not an acronym, unless it's pronounced like the musical note, as in "La La Land;" Los Angeles City Hall has not always played itself; that's just an oil pump, not an oil derrick in *The Learning Curve*; John Lautner's Chemosphere is not a hexagon, it's an octagon (I must have forgotten everything I learned in high school geometry!); there was no provision in the MPAA Production Code banning scenes showing the social intermingling of white and black people, as I claim in the Gilmore

Field sequence from *The Atomic City*, although such scenes were exceedingly rare since very few black actors were able to register as extras through Central Casting; when an urban setting was required in silent comedies, it was more often downtown Los Angeles than Culver City (I must have been watching too many Laurel and Hardy movies). I stand by everything else in the text.

Los Angeles Plays Itself may have been the last analog videotape ever produced. The source materials, mostly VHS tapes, were copied onto Beta SP tape; these tapes were digitized for editing on an Avid system; a tape-to-tape online edit produced the Beta SP master. The new version was mastered onto a digital HD file. The primary source materials are DVDs and Blu-rays. I was disappointed by the way the 16mm film Deborah Stratman and I shot looked when transferred to Beta SP tape. Now it looks great transferred directly to an HD file. We couldn't find better copies of a few films, but they stayed in the movie because they seemed essential: *A Passion to Kill*, *The Glitter Dome*, *Nails*.

Why and how was the film re-edited if it's still almost exactly the same length

as it was before (it is actually one minute longer)? I have had occasion to see it many times in the past ten years, and naturally I came to notice some "mistakes" or infelicities. The physical comedy wasn't funny because we tried to cut the scenes as short as possible; now they are longer and funnier. The most noticeable change is the movement of the intermission forward. At 104 minutes, the first part lost momentum. It began to drag, although the scenes themselves were not too long. I was able to discover another point where there was a natural break, 12 minutes earlier. Now the two parts are more nearly equal in length, 92 minutes and 78 minutes. And each part is close to the ideal length for a motion picture, 87 minutes, as decreed by Roger Corman.

In remastering and re-editing *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, I failed to amend the closing credits, thus neglecting to thank some people who were of great help after the initial production was completed: my wife Christine Chang, whose help in editing the new version was invaluable (she has a better eye and ear for synching dialogue and picture than any of us); Sean Farnel, the movie's first champion who not only

selected it for the Toronto International Film Festival but also helped me to obtain a sales agent; Josh Braun and Roger Kass, the sales agents who failed to sell it but devoted a lot of time to it and spared me from a lot of frustration; Michael Donaldson, the brilliant and unflappable attorney whose unassailable understanding of the fair use provision of copyright law made this release possible.

Editor Yoo Seung-hyun is listed first in the opening credits, but I also owe her a special thanks: she convinced me that a lecture illustrated with clips could be a real movie and that I should keep in *The Exiles* when I was hesitating about it because the negotiations I had begun with the copyright holder were still unresolved.

I am very happy that *Los Angeles Plays Itself* is finally available on DVD and Blu-ray; however, like many movies, it is best experienced in a theater with other people. If an opportunity to see it projected in a theater comes along, I hope you will take advantage of it.

THOM ANDERSEN
August 2014

TOUR- ISTS FROM HELL

More than half a lifetime ago I dressed up each morning in a uniform that made me look like Jerry Lewis imitating an airline pilot and drove one of those Gray Line tour buses that have been prowling Beverly Hills and Hollywood since the early 1920s. ("Now wave, guys – there's Lucy's house!") In training, however, I developed a phobia about the "Hollywood at Night" tour: how was I supposed to cope with the stunned dismay, perhaps even terror, of the librarian from Sioux Falls or the young couple from Grover's Corners when they saw the real Hollywood?

The Boulevard in those days was undoubtedly a great visual inspiration to the future work of Wes Craven and John Carpenter. It was Hippie Skidrow; the outdoor casualty ward for the 1960s. Little Orphan Annie on heroin cowered in a doorway still clutching her doll; a beautiful transvestite who hung around Frederick's of Hollywood claimed she/he was waiting for a ride from Michaelangelo; a longhaired survivor of some inter-galactic war angrily mumbled to the walls except on holidays—a complete declension of pain, addiction and madness

from Gower to La Brea. The LAPD Hollywood Division with routine menace would occasionally frisk a dealer, warn off some Black kids, or perhaps arrest an unlawful defecator.

Tourists from hell might enjoy Hollywood at night but my poor passengers, I fretted, would be no more than prey items. But I shouldn't have worried. Sioux Falls and Grover's Corners absolutely loved the tour. They oohed and awed at the landmarks, sometimes calling out the names of movies and stars, and then like good pilgrims to Mecca, they got down on their knees to take a snapshot of Mary Pickford's dainty footprints in the cement in front of Grauman's Chinese. Although I quickly got into the habit of locking myself inside the bus while passengers worshipped, none of them seemed to sense any menace, and indeed misery seemed to retract into the shadows on their approach.

This went on for months, until I finally took a tourist aside and asked her if she wasn't shocked, even a little, by the human condition all around her. "My goodness, no, I just ignore all that. But I wanted for

years to finally see Hollywood like it looks in the movies." Revelation. Tourists (why hadn't I realized this) didn't come to Hollywood as documentarists or urban explorers; they came to savor the confirmation of images already stored in their minds. Discrepancies were just brushed aside. Hollywood had made the Hollywood in their mind more powerful than any new experience.

No wonder French philosophers love Los Angeles so much. It has been so infinitely filmed, photographed, and stereotyped that the relationship between image and reality seems as complicated as one of those eleven-dimensional pretzels that string theorists believe in it. It's also ground zero for the future (at least until you visit Vegas or Dubai) as well as the motel that keeps the lights on for wandering hyperboles. Philip Marlowe, postmodernist for hire.

Los Angeles Plays Itself is a detoxification program for those of us who carry around too much Hollywood in our heads, who've dabbled too greedily in spectacle and crystal

tourism. Thom Andersen—a native with attitude—interrogates celluloid Los Angeles with the cold eye of Joe Friday. "Only the facts, mam." He's an unabashed patriot who explains "some lies are malignant. They cheapen or trivialize the real city."

His film presents movie-made Los Angeles as a dialectical triad. The thesis is that Los Angeles was raped of its identity by the film industry's insatiable need for "background" and stable clichés. The antithesis is Hollywood's discovery that it was highly profitable to return to the hole it had dug and fill it with conspiracy theories about Los Angeles history. The synthesis is an alternative neo-realist cinema that cuts straight to the bone of blue-collar life in Los Angeles but that tragically few of us have ever seen: *The Exiles*, *Killer of Sheep*, *Bush Mama* and *Bless Their Little Hearts*.

The narration begins with an exemplary challenge: "Movies", Andersen says, "do the work of our voluntary attention, and so we must suppress that faculty as we watch. But what if we watch with our voluntary attention, instead of letting the movies direct us?" (I immediately thought of John Nada

in Carpenter's incomparable *They Live*, finding the magic sun glasses that enable Los Angeles's defeated proletariat to see the alien Reaganites behind their yuppie guises.)

One of his most fascinating but idiosyncratic topics is the usurpation of native utopia by the film industry. He shows how art directors consistently translated Los Angeles's most visionary architecture—the socialist-spiritualist Bradbury Building, Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis house, Richard Neutra's Lovell house, John Lautner's hillside homes—into sinister décor for Asian crime lords, evil music promoters, pornographers, psycho killers and androids. "These pure machines for living were dens of vice. ...The architectural trophy house [became] the modern equivalent of the black hat or the mustache."

The mordant deconstruction of *Blade Runner* as "nostalgia for dystopia" is one of my favorite moments in this extraordinary film. Ridley Scott's future Los Angeles, Andersen points out, is in fact "a city planner's dream come true. Finally a vibrant street life. A downtown crowded with night-time strollers. Neon beyond our wildest dreamers. Only a Unabomber could find this

totally repellant." (Not to mention the fact that Deckard always "finds a parking place next to the front door.")

Real nostalgia remembers the lost Los Angeles represented by Gilmore and Wrigley fields, the Pan Pacific Auditorium, the Richfield Building,

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and Ship's Westwood—all glimpsed in the interstices of old movies. But the soul of *Los Angeles Plays Itself* is its discussion of "another cinema,"

the one created by Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, and Billy Woodberry. "Who knows the city? Only those who walk, only those who ride the bus. Forget the mystical blatherings of Joan Didion and company about the automobile and the freeways."

My favorite passage in fiction is the moment in "Grapes of Wrath" where migrant Oklahoma farmers gather at a California roadside, doodle in the dust with sticks, and begin to figure the necessary transformation of the Family into the People. In cinema, it's the scene in Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* when Charlie's wife is going home on the bus from Beverly Hills to Southcentral. Woodberry focuses on her hands lightly placed on the back of the seat in front of her. But as she thinks about the angry, defeated, unemployed man she'll face at home, her hands tighten around the steel bar until they almost bleed.

This was the Odessa Steps of LA neo-realist cinema, but also, as Andersen observes, the road not taken. Woodberry's masterpiece has still not found commercial distribution. In the meantime, Los Angeles went from the Space Age to Dickensian inequality. The median

household income compared to other metropolitan statistical areas fell from third to forty-third. *Singing in the Rain* became *Boyz N the Hood*. And despite a so-called Hollywood "renaissance" (the traditional synonym for an explosion in speculative land values), homeless kids still lurk in the alleys and tourists still see what they've been programmed to see. *Los Angeles as Subject* remains as urgent as ever.

MIKE DAVIS

Author of *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*

LOS ANGE- LES: A CITY ON FILM



In 1927 the surrealist poet Robert Desnos wrote, "Bow down, oh imbecile censors, before the rare honorable films which mostly come to France from this corner of America, Los Angeles, a free city among slavish places!"

The great silent comedies—the works of Sennett, Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and Langdon—were all filmed in and around Los Angeles, their most exciting sequences were filmed outside on location, and even today one can sense the exhilaration Desnos must have felt then.

Perhaps Desnos was thinking of Mack Sennett's slapstick comedies, for example, his 1924 one-reeler *Lizzies of the Field*, in which automobiles ("tin lizzies") assume a surrealist mutability. They stretch out as watches melt in a Dali painting. Tires, even wheels, fall off, but they keep on running. Or the 1918 Fatty Arbuckle film *The*

Garage in which a "tin lizzie" falls apart spontaneously. In the end, it looks like one of those cars wrecked by Laurel and Hardy ten or so years later in their "tit for tat" comedies. In their films, civilization breaks down entirely when the slightest breach of decorum occurs. But in *The Garage*, the destruction comes about without any human intervention. Or the 1918 Sennett film *Catalina, Here I Come*. Chased by a crazed flying swordfish, Eddie Quillan (a Harry Langdon imitator) doesn't walk on the water, he runs on the water. These films aren't always still funny (maybe they weren't funny then), but they are always free and open.

Often the plot of a Sennett film seems devised by a process akin to automatic writing. He and his writers often concocted fictional plots around real events. The most famous example is *Kid Auto Races in Venice*, Charlie Chaplin's second film and his first as the Tramp, filmed at the Junior Vanderbilt Cup Race and the Pushmobile Parade in Abbott Kinney's seaside resort Venice of America on January 10-11, 1914 (and released less than a month later). Henry Lehrman, the film's director,

plays a newsreel director trying to document the races, but the Tramp keeps thrusting himself in front of the camera. He does nothing more than pose for the camera, but already he seems like a star.

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Another example, which I cite in *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, is Sennett's 1913 film *A Muddy Romance*. Here Sennett turned the draining of Echo Park Lake into a spurned lover's elaborate revenge.

But Josef von Sternberg outdid Sennett: he based an entire fiction feature on the dredging of the Los Angeles Harbor in San Pedro. In

The Salvation Hunters (1925), he turned the repetitive operations of the dredger into a grand metaphor for the sluggishness of his human characters who live almost under its shadow and seem to live under its spell: "Children of the Mud," he called them. And perhaps a real sign inspired that forlorn little real estate promoter's sign, on a patch of scrubby hillside apparently in the middle of nowhere, that proclaims "HERE your dreams come true."

The Salvation Hunters does not paint a flattering portrait of Los Angeles. It is characterized, in a title card, as just "A city—like all others—stone, smoke, and sometimes sun."

In this regard, *The Salvation Hunters* was exceptional. By the 1920s, even the city's professional boosters had come to recognize the value of the movies in promoting the city. At first, they were leery. Was the nomadic motion picture industry in Los Angeles to stay? They received reassurances from producer Joseph Schenck in 1922, who wrote in *Southern California Business*, "the motion picture people have adopted Los Angeles—this is their

home—and they are proud of the fact.” The city may not always have been proud of the motion picture people, but it had to value their work. As Tom Zimmerman has put it in his history of the booster campaign, *Promoting Paradise*, “Promoters from the railroad to the Automobile Club all attempted to paint the view of Los Angeles as a glamorous, unique place where dreams could come true, but none promoted the place as strongly as Hollywood did, albeit with no concerted effort. The common knowledge that the movies were made in Southern California, and the stars who so intrigued the country lived there, was invaluable to anyone selling the city of dreams.”

In *Reynier Banham Loves Los Angeles* (1972), Banham provides a personal testament to the power of these silent films: he attributes some of his affection for the city to the influence of these movies, which he saw as a boy at the penny picture show in provincial Norwich, a small city in East Anglia weighed down by the past: “There we were transported to Los Angeles because all these marvelous old Hollywood silents were made on location as Los

Angeles was being built. I knew Los Angeles long before I got there.”

Is it really surprising that these films (especially the classic comedies) have inspired a fanatical brand of scholarship devoted to discovering the exact site where each shot was filmed? I share this interest myself, although I am just a dilettante. I felt a thrill when I happened to recognize the Venice apartment building where George Hamilton resides in the 1959 Denis Sanders film *Crime and Punishment*, U.S.A. (still little changed after forty-five years), but my researches have always been passive and never systematic.

The pioneer was Leon Smith, a former detective in the Los Angeles Police Department, who published “A Guide to Laurel and Hardy Movie Locations” in 1982, “Following the Comedy Trail” in 1984, and a number of subsequent books. His works are simply guidebooks illustrated with photographs of the locations as they appeared at the time of writing. He avoided film stills for comparison to avoid potential copyright problems.

The more recent work of John Bengston is far more elaborate. In

his work, this genre has attained the sublime madness of Raymond Roussel. Bengston’s “Silent Echoes,” about the films of Buster Keaton, “Silent Traces,” about the films of Charlie Chaplin, and “Silent Visions,” about the films of Harold Lloyd, are books, but they are books unlike any others. Through movie stills, vintage photographs, recent photographs of the same sites, and incredibly detailed old maps from the Sanborn fire insurance company (in which, as he notes, brothels are identified by the initials “F.B.,” an abbreviation for “female boarding”), Bengston recreates in vivid detail the world just beyond the frames of these films and shows how it has changed in the intervening years.

For a film fan who resides in Los Angeles, his findings are fascinating. It is amusing to learn that the sidewalk plaque marking the site of Buster Keaton’s studio is misplaced. The studio was actually located a block south of the plaque. Actually this kind of error is more the rule than the exception in Los Angeles. The obelisk marking the location of Mack Sennett’s studio (“the birthplace of film comedy”)

that I photographed for *Los Angeles Plays Itself* was located two blocks north of the studio site (it has since disappeared).

Many buildings from the 1920s are still there, although a fire station has become a bridal shop, and the city has been built up around what were once isolated dwellings. Of course, the trolley lines, the gas towers, and the industrial plants are gone. But most remarkably, through the films of Keaton and Chaplin, Bengston has rediscovered and documented a neighborhood in the heart of the city, just north of the civic center, that has left no traces, even in civic memory. Unlike Harold Lloyd, who favored the central business district and the then-fashionable Bunker Hill neighborhood, Chaplin and Keaton often filmed in the slums and the old Chinatown around the city’s original plaza. These slums were demolished soon after, first to build a low-tourist simulation of the old Mexican city on Olvera Street in 1930 and then to build the new Union Station just to the east, a project completed in 1939.

Bengston contends that knowing where these films were shot gives

them another level of meaning, and his research does give the films a documentary, almost archaeological value that had previously gone unnoticed.

He demonstrates that the era of silent cinema was not a more innocent time. Just around the corner, there were brothels, illicit saloons, pool halls, and opium dens. The seaside amusement parks and piers were still full of scary attractions (they were made obsolete by the fake innocence of "theme parks" in the 1950s). Just off the old plaza, a few yards away from where Chaplin and Keaton often filmed, was a narrow, one-block street called Negro Alley, a testament to the pervasive acceptance of racial segregation in the city. "According to earlier maps," writes Bengston, "the alley originally had a more offensive designation." Near the Inglewood train station, a few yards away from the railroad tracks where Buster Keaton's newly built house is demolished by a locomotive in *One Week* (1920), there were two long buildings designated in a 1923 map as "Mexican Tenements." Bengston comments, "no doubt an extremely

unpleasant place to live, sandwiched between two active rail lines."

In any case, what time could be more innocent than the present (at least, in the United States of America) when movies are computer-generated comic books about "super-heroes," when the U.S. armed forces can occupy a foreign country without anyone bothering to notice, when our environment has become completely "user-friendly" and technology has become completely opaque?

With the advent of the talkie, the movies could have come from anywhere. They moved inside, except for the occasional comedy chase. The city almost entirely disappeared from movies, both as a backdrop and as an implied subject, except in movies about the film industry. In these movies, Los Angeles is reduced to Grauman's Chinese Theatre, the Brown Derby, a few blocks along Hollywood Boulevard, some mansions in the hills, a few fancy nightclubs, and the movie studio lots.

The movies had already begun to take the mystique of their creation as a subject in the 1920s, applying

a light touch at first. The ambitious kids who came to Hollywood with dreams of stardom and only enough money for the train or bus ticket somehow always made it, even when (like Harold Lloyd in *Movie Crazy*) they radically misappreciated their talents. He thinks he's the matinee idol type, but of course his gift is for slapstick comedy. Absurdly naïve, he is loved by everyone for his guilelessness. Within a few days, he has won the love of a sophisticated movie star and gotten the acting contract he wanted.

But a darker tone emerged in the thirties. The washed-up, embittered silent film star became a standard figure, and the alienated screenwriter appeared in *Hollywood Boulevard* (1936), the most satirical of the thirties films about the movie studios. Its pipe-smoking writer hero Jay Wallace thinks he's too good for Hollywood, but his enthusiasm for the work picks up fast when a glamorous leading actress takes a flattering interest in it.

Both these stock characters developed in the thirties would get new life in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.* (1950). There's an oft told

story that when M-G-M studio chief Louis B. Mayer saw the film at an industry preview, he called Wilder a bastard and a traitor. One of Wilder's biographers, Ed Sikov, characterized

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Sunset Blvd. as "one of the nastiest and most derisive films about Hollywood ever made." They're both wrong. Most movie people loved the film, and why not? Wilder reserves his scorn for the losers,

the has-beens and the wannabes, while the powerful figures, such as star director Cecil B. DeMille are portrayed sympathetically. DeMille is scrupulously polite and considerate in his treatment of former star Norma Desmond, even though he is busy shooting a film and she counts for nothing in the Hollywood of 1950. Wilder is not so kind. To put it uncharitably, *Sunset Blvd.* is like *A Streetcar Named Desire* as written by Stanley Kowalski.

Movies about the film industry are like war movies. Every war movie ever made is an anti-war movie—according to its creators. So it is with movies about the film industry: they're all anti-Hollywood. But just as war movies almost always romanticize warfare, movies about movie-making almost always glamorize the Hollywood studio system. The only real villains or objects of ridicule are the malcontents, the outsiders, the failures, or the nonconformists with artistic pretensions who reject the rules of the system. *Sunset Blvd.* is no exception.

By the time of *Sunset Blvd.*, Los Angeles had reappeared in movies,

most famously in Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, but it had changed radically since the days of silent cinema. Downtown looks a bit more garish, maybe because it is more often seen at night. The trolleys are still there, at least on Broadway (they provide Frank Bigelow a means to escape the sinister Majak and his psychopathic henchman Chester in *D.O.A.*). And the suburbs had filled in, with houses occupying every lot and shopping centers at every major intersection. It had become a real city, and thus an appropriate setting for film noir. These noir films created the portraits of the city in the 1940s and 1950s that are best remembered today.

Paradoxically, the most studio-bound films were those adapted from Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe detective novels. Chandler had not yet been canonized as the first novelist to create a vision of Los Angeles, a vision of pervasive civic corruption and private vice, and make that vision an enduring mythology. What we admire today in Chandler's novels are the descriptions and the atmosphere, but the novels have too much

plot, and the first wave of movie adaptations in the 1940s became mired in his labyrinthine intrigues and neglected the atmosphere. Hollywood didn't yet understand Chandler and didn't know what to do with Philip Marlowe. That's why the most convincing versions of Marlowe aren't incarnations of Chandler's Marlowe, but extrapolations by other writers influenced by Chandler: Jake Gittes in *Chinatown* (1974), Al Hickey and Frank Boggs in *Hickey & Boggs* (1972), Phil Gaines in *Hustle* (1975).

And Hollywood still didn't know what to make of Los Angeles. Many of the films set in Los Angeles and filmed on location make the city look like any other American city. The Bradbury Building on Broadway and Bunker Hill became iconic locations, but they were valued precisely because they were nineteenth-century vestiges of an older, more traditional city, and that is why today we still cherish the Bradbury Building and mourn Bunker Hill. The newer city, "the city of the future," lay in the suburbs, and so the sub-genre sometimes called "suburban noir," beginning with *Double Indemnity* and *Mildred Pierce* (1945), may best

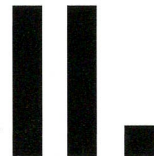
reveal the essence of the city. Violent impulses erupt into a seemingly tranquil world of carefully crafted moderation, the world from which Richard Nixon emerged.

We can easily imagine Nixon himself as a character in "suburban noir." In *Nixon at the Movies*, Mark Feeney points out the affinities between Nixon and Walter Neff in *Double*

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Indemnity, but there is an even closer kinship between Nixon and another movie insurance agent, John Forbes in *Pitfall* (1948), the most sobering and under-rated "suburban noir" film. Played by Dick Powell, who looks even more like Nixon than Fred MacMurray, Forbes is just an "average American" with a perfect

family and a nice hillside tract house, but his talents and ambitions are too big for his job. His frustration and sense of failure leads to a brief affair with a free-spirited department store model. Despite his regrets and his muddled attempts to set things right, the affair puts his family and his marriage in jeopardy. Unlike Walter Neff, he's alive at the end of the film, but just barely.



In 1947, in "The Little Sister," Raymond Chandler wrote, "Los Angeles has Hollywood—and hates it. It ought to consider itself damn lucky. Without Hollywood it would be a mail-order city. Everything in the catalogue you could get better somewhere else." When he wrote these lines, what is now called simply "the industry" was known as "the movie colony," a foreign body on the society of Los Angeles. Its settlers held themselves apart from the civic life of the city, and the city's

putative leaders excluded them from its power structure. Richard Nixon, the power elite's newest protégé, was a freshman Congressman, while in the movie colony, Ronald Reagan (future Governor of California, future President of the United States) had just been elected president of the Screen Actors Guild, defeating, among others, former Guild president George Murphy (future U.S. Senator from California). In 1947, no one could have imagined that these three men would achieve such political prominence.

I was especially surprised by Reagan's success. When I was a child, he and I attended the same church. He was remarkably inept in church politics, and he and his wife Nancy were detested by almost everyone in the congregation. He was apparently one of those persons who can completely charm anyone of a higher station or anyone who might advance their careers but don't bother to hide their disdain for those they regard as inferior or unimportant. I had no idea he would become a gifted politician: a genius with a photographic memory who still

never let the facts get in the way of a good story or a political point. Maybe my childhood memories of Reagan prejudiced me against him during his public political career. Do these early impressions explain why my favorite Reagan film performance is his final one, as the sneering, double-crossing mail robber Jack Browning in Don Siegel's version of *The Killers* (1964)? In "Reagan's America: Innocents at Home," Garry Wills answers the question "Could He Act?" with a qualified yes, but he dismisses this final performance: "mainly he relies on a trick he had used to comic purpose theretofore, the ability to lift his left eyebrow independently of his right." But there is more to the characterization than a raised eyebrow. His scowl and the traces of annoyance in his voice capture perfectly a nasty crook for whom larceny is just business. It was a role he regretted, but it seems to me that he brought more of Jack Browning to his performance as President than any other character he played in the movies. While he was President, he would do imitations of Clint Eastwood, but

they drew more from Jack Browning than from Dirty Harry, the character he was quoting.

As a politician, George Murphy was more of a natural than either Nixon or Reagan, and he was the first movie star to win major political office in California. He won election to the Senate as a moderate Republican in 1964, beating John F. Kennedy's former press secretary Pierre Salinger by over 100,000 votes while Democratic presidential candidate Lyndon Johnson carried the state by more than 1,200,000 votes. But Murphy was only a one-term Senator. His Hollywood ties dragged him down when he ran for re-election in 1970. He was discredited by the revelation that he had secretly received large payments from the Technicolor Corporation during his time in the Senate. It also didn't help that he downplayed the problem of air pollution at a time when smog was at its peak and the Los Angeles cityscape could have passed for a landscape on Mars: when I fly into Los Angeles, he declared, the smog seems to disappear.

On the other hand, Nixon and Reagan became the first politicians from southern California to achieve national prominence, perhaps the two most fascinating and important figures in recent American history; both were masters in harnessing resentment and riding it to political power, creating a new politics that has radically transformed American political culture.

And they both had close connections to the movies. Reagan was a small movie star, and Nixon was a big movie fan (as documented by Mark Feeney in his fascinating book "Nixon at the Movies," he watched movies more frequently than any other President). Nixon was President during what Feeney calls Hollywood's "silver age," its second and last artistic peak (after its "golden age" when Franklin Roosevelt was President). The movies mattered then. That's what Feeney and most other critics have claimed, and I remember it that way. It was certainly the golden age of Los Angeles movies: Jack Hill's *Pit Stop* (1969) and *Coffy* (1973), Floyd Mutrux's *Dusty and Sweets McGee* (1971), Melvin Van Peeble's

Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song (1971), John Cassavetes's *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), Robert Culp's *Hickey & Boggs* (1972), Jacques Deray's *The Outside Man* (1972), Fred Halsted's *L.A. Plays Itself* (1972), Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), H. B. Halicki's *Gone in 60*

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Seconds (1974), to mention only the greatest. There haven't been that many good Los Angeles movies made since.

How much credit should we give Nixon for this brief renaissance? It can be argued that a "cultural revolution" was well underway in the United States before his election (indeed, a backlash against this revolution helped to put him in

office) and Hollywood movies were just late in catching up with the Zeitgeist. But Nixon did inspire a new genre: the paranoid thriller, which had both left-wing and right-wing versions. From the right came *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*; from the left came *Executive Action* and *The Parallax View*. More generally, his divisive politics and personality inspired a new radicalism in the cultural movements of the 1960s. It was enough to stir even Hollywood into reveries of disillusionment and loss. These new energies dissipated quickly after Nixon was gone from the political scene.

Then came Reagan. He was President during Hollywood's second precipitous decline, the era of hyperfascist cinema, the heyday of Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris. In the 1980s, American movies came as close as they ever have to the pure self-righteousness of a lynch mob. The ostensibly liberal film *Mississippi Burning* (1988) devoted itself entirely to constructing an elaborate justification for torture. Stallone, playing an LAPD hostage negotiator in *Cobra* (1985), expressed the era's

credo in a pithy one-liner: "I don't deal with psychos, I put 'em away."

Reagan destroyed American television by eliminating restrictions on commercial time. He claimed that competition would prevent TV stations from increasing the number of commercials they ran. His hatchet man, Federal Communications Commission chairman "Madman Mark" Fowler (the nickname came from his earlier career as a disc jockey), who called himself "the mad monk of deregulation," also argued that deregulation would have little practical effect. Announcing the new FCC policy on June 27, 1984, he said, "The character of television won't change by leaps and bounds by today's decision." But it did. Now there are commercial breaks every eight minutes on broadcast television, instead of breaks every fifteen minutes. These interruptions frustrate any attempt to achieve an Aristotelian catharsis in TV drama, and they create an alienation effect, but it is one that fosters distraction, not thought.

His influence on movies was less direct, but his simplistic,

hyperbolic, and often vicious political rhetoric (Nixon expressed American conservatism's Superego; Reagan expressed its Id) permanently coarsened both American political discourse and American popular culture.

In the early 1980s, there was still a sense of a culture being born (it is evident in Penelope Spheeris's 1980 record of Los Angeles punk rock, *The Decline of Western Civilization*), but it was a culture dying. Punk became new wave. The Sex Pistols and then The Clash disintegrated. It was a time of too many real (and premature) deaths. The deaths of James Blue, Claude Jutra, Hollis Frampton, Klaus Nomi, Jack Smith, and John Dorr, the first film-maker to understand the potential of video as a medium for narrative features, struck me particularly hard because they were friends of mine. It was the time of AIDS and the shockingly callous response to it, with the intellectual thugs in Reagan's administration leading the way. In Los Angeles, you would see bumper stickers that proclaimed "AIDS Cures Homosexuality." After the death of his lover Joey Yale from

AIDS, Fred Halsted, the director of *L.A. Plays Itself*, killed himself in 1989, the same year John Cassavetes died, also of a broken heart.

There were still good films made in the 1980s, but they were more and more marginal. Cassavetes had two more films in him. In 1983 there was *Love Streams*, his messiest, most despairing, and most personal film (with the most beautiful shot ever of Los Angeles at twilight). I like to remember it as his last film, but it was followed in 1985 by *Big Trouble*, his least personal and most negligible film. Charles Burnett managed to shoot his second feature, *My Brother's Wedding*, in 1983, but he couldn't edit it to his satisfaction until the DVD release of 2007. He helped Billy Woodberry make *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984), but *Bless Their Little Hearts* has never had a theatrical release and Woodberry hasn't been able to direct another film since.

I ended *Los Angeles Plays Itself* with Burnett's first feature, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* (1961), Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1975), and *Bless Their Little Hearts*.

The irony of ending an account that is roughly chronological in its organization with four old movies has not escaped me. Of course, there have been many more movies made about Los Angeles, some of them creditable works. *Always*

"In the early 1980s, there was still a sense of a culture being born (it is evident in Penelope Spheeris's 1980 record of Los Angeles punk rock, *The Decline of Western Civilization*), but it was a culture dying. Punk became new wave."

Outnumbered, *Always Outgunned* (1997), *Jackie Brown* (1997), and *The Limey* (1999), for example, are worthy successors to the "neo-noir" films of the 1970s. They are sharp, witty, and infused with feeling.

They also have a sense of the city enriched by a subtle choice of unfamiliar locations.

The deterioration in other genres has been more dramatic. The viciousness of eighties movies faded, but the brittleness remains. Dominic Sena's 2000 remake of H. B. Halicki's *Gone in 60 Seconds* (1974) is a sincere homage to Halicki, but it completely lacks the spirit (and the literalism) of the original. It is unconvincing and soulless, like other recent films that have attempted to revive the Halicki tradition of fast cars and conspicuous destruction, such as *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001), *Torque* (Joseph Kahn, 2004), and *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007).

Movies about junkies and drug dealers have gotten a lot flashier than Floyd Mutrux's *Dusty and Sweets McGee* (1971), but they haven't been able to recapture the lyricism, the sense of wonder of the Mutrux film—or even its humor. The junkies in *Dusty and Sweets McGee* are stuck in the daily ruts we all face, only more so. Recent movies about junkies and tweakers are just standard thrillers

with bizarre plot twists that can be justified by the irrationality of the drug-addled characters.

So can we say, they don't make movies like that any more? Apparently they don't. When *Killer of Sheep* and *The Exiles* belatedly received theatrical release (in 2007 and 2008, respectively), critics treated them as revelations, and they attracted larger audiences than anyone could have expected. Reviewing *The Exiles* for the Village Voice, Jim Ridley wrote, "this 50-year-old film about a Los Angeles neighborhood on the skids and its barely tethered dwellers stands as the freshest movie in theaters." *Killer of Sheep* was the best American movie released in 2007, and *The Exiles* was the best American movie released in 2008.

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