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The Fictive Sense of Place: Los Angeles in Word and Image

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Preconception is critical to how we perceive the character of place. Pre-exposure to a place can come about through many channels. Among them are word-of-mouth, written correspondence, the various news media, and perhaps most poignantly the fictions of literature and film.

This fictional vision of place plays such a major role because we consume it detached from the critical filter of direct physical experience. The artist's condensation of the presence of a city moves us. Eager to dissolve into the fictional world created for us, we readily attach the qualities of a film or novel to the place in which it is presented.

Los Angeles is a convenient case study of this phenomenon because it has been the subject of so much scrutiny by the arts. The perceived reality of the city comes as much from the expectations generated by pre-exposure as from the direct experience of dwelling in Los Angeles itself. In the last 40 years or so, a way of seeing has emerged that has become indispensable in fully absorbing the environment of the Southland.

Novels such as Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*, John Fante's *Ask the Dust*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, and all of Raymond Chandler's Marlowe stories can set the reader in a position to accept common, even

brutal landscapes in an altered and dramatic light.

Film also influences our conception of place. Particular pieces of Los Angeles are consistently used as stand-ins for distant parts of the world, or to evoke specific moods. The desert roads east of the city have been the setting for so many James Dean movies, biker films, "Route 66" and "Highway Patrol" episodes that traveling through them now yields a heightened sense of desolation and futility.

Undoubtedly, the places used in the works presented here must themselves suggest the seed of the setting or mood desired. But isolated on film or in print, and made consumable independent from an environmental context, these qualities become magnified beyond their natural measure. This circularity of artifact, intervention, and reflection is critical to the perception of place, and is precisely what this portfolio of literary and film images means to suggest.



I **Sunset Boulevard**, Paramount Pictures, 1950.

"We've got the flash restaurants and nightclubs they run, and the hotels and apartment houses they own, and the drifters and con men and female bandits that live in them. The luxury trades, the pansy decorators, the Lesbian dress designers, the riffraff of a big hardboiled city with no more personality than a paper cup. Out in the fancy suburbs dear old Dad is reading the sports page in front of a picture window, with his shoes off, thinking he is high class because he has a three car garage. Mom is in front of the princess dresser trying to paint the suitcases out from under her eyes. And junior is clamped onto the telephone calling up a succession of high school girls that talk pidgin

English and carry contraceptives in their make-up kit."

"It is the same in all big cities, amigo."

"Real cities have something else, some individual bony structure under the muck. Los Angeles has Hollywood—and hates it. It ought to consider itself lucky. Without Hollywood it would be a mail-order city. Everything in the catalogue you could get better somewhere else."

"You are bitter tonight, amigo."

from *The Little Sister*
(p. 203),
by Raymond Chandler¹



2 **Sunset Boulevard**, Paramount Pictures, 1950.

“Isn’t it marvelous!” exclaimed Mrs. Schwartz, clapping her hands and jumping up and down excitedly like a little girl.

“What’s it made of?”

“Then you weren’t fooled? How impolite! It’s rubber, of course. It costs lost of money.”

“But why?”

“To amuse. We were looking at the pool one day and somebody, Jerry Appis, I think, said that it needed a dead horse on the bottom, so Alice got one. Don’t you think it looks cute?”

“Very.”

from *The Day of the Locust* (p. 13), by Nathanael West²



3 **Day of the Locust**, Paramount Pictures, 1975.

He spent his nights at the different Hollywood churches, drawing the worshippers. He visited the “Church of Christ, Physical” where holiness was attained through the constant use of chest weights and spring grips; the “Church Invisible” where fortunes were told and the dead made to find lost objects; the “Tabernacle of the Third Coming” where a woman in male clothing preached the “Crusade Against Salt”; and the “Tabernacle Moderne” under whose glass and chromium roof “Brain-Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs” was taught.

from *The Day of the Locust* (p. 92), by Nathanael West²

You are a coward, Bandini, a traitor to your soul, a feeble liar before your weeping Christ. This is why you write, this is why it would be better if you died.

Yes, it's true: but I have seen houses in Bel-Air with cool lawns and green swimming pools. I have wanted women whose very shoes are worth all I have ever possessed.

I have seen golf clubs on Sixth Street in the Spaulding window that make me hungry just to grip them. I have grieved for a necktie like a holy man for indulgences. I have admired hats in Robinson's the way critics gasp at Michelangelo.

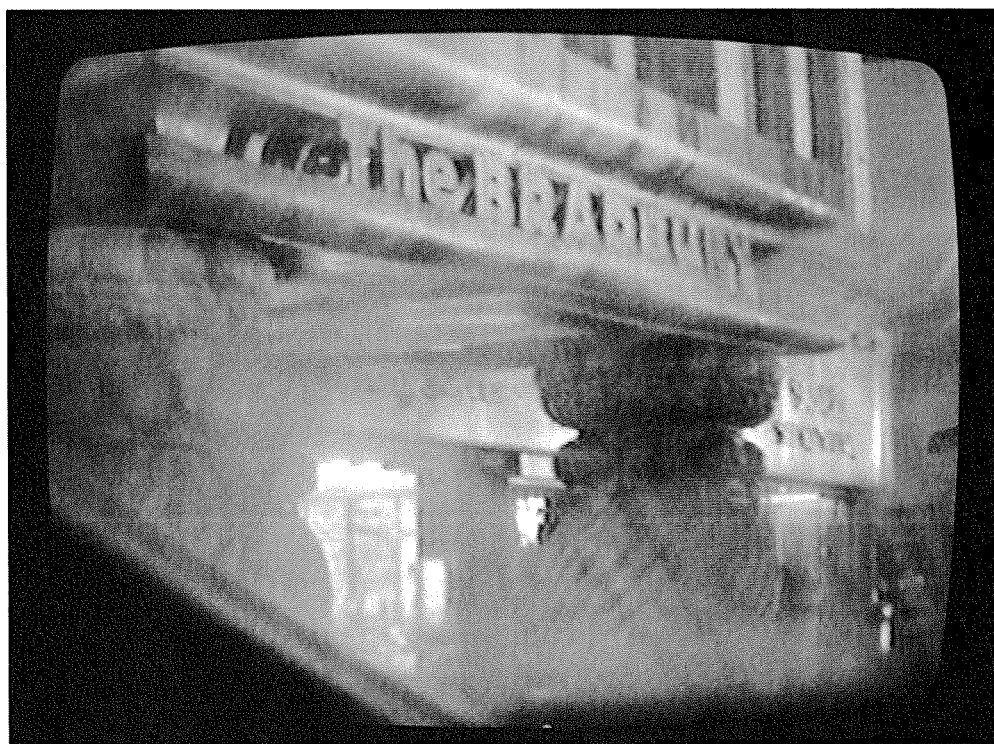
from *Ask the Dust* (p. 20),
by John Fante³



4 *Sunset Boulevard*, Paramount Pictures, 1950.

Ah that first day! Mrs Hargraves opened the door to my room, and there it was, with a red carpet on the floor, pictures of the English countryside on the walls, and a shower adjoining. The room was down on the sixth floor, room 678, up near the front of the hill, so that my window was on a level with the green hillside and there was no need for a key, for the window was always open. Through that window I saw my first palm tree, not six feet away, and sure enough I thought of Palm Sunday and Egypt and Cleopatra, but the palm was blackish at its branches, stained by carbon monoxide coming out of the Third Street tunnel, its crusted trunk choked with dust and sand that blew in from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts.

from *Ask the Dust* (p. 16),
by John Fante³



5 *Blade Runner*, Michael Deeley/for Ridley Scott, 1982.



6 *Day of the Locust*, Paramount Pictures, 1975.

They turned to the right, sped past a Rosicrucian Temple, past two cat-and-dog hospitals, past a School for Drum-Majorettes and two more advertisements of the Beverly Pantheon. As they turned to the left on Sunset Boulevard, Jeremy had a glimpse of a young woman who was doing her shopping in a hydrangea-blue strapless bathing suit, platinum curls and a black fur jacket. Then she too was whirled back into the past.

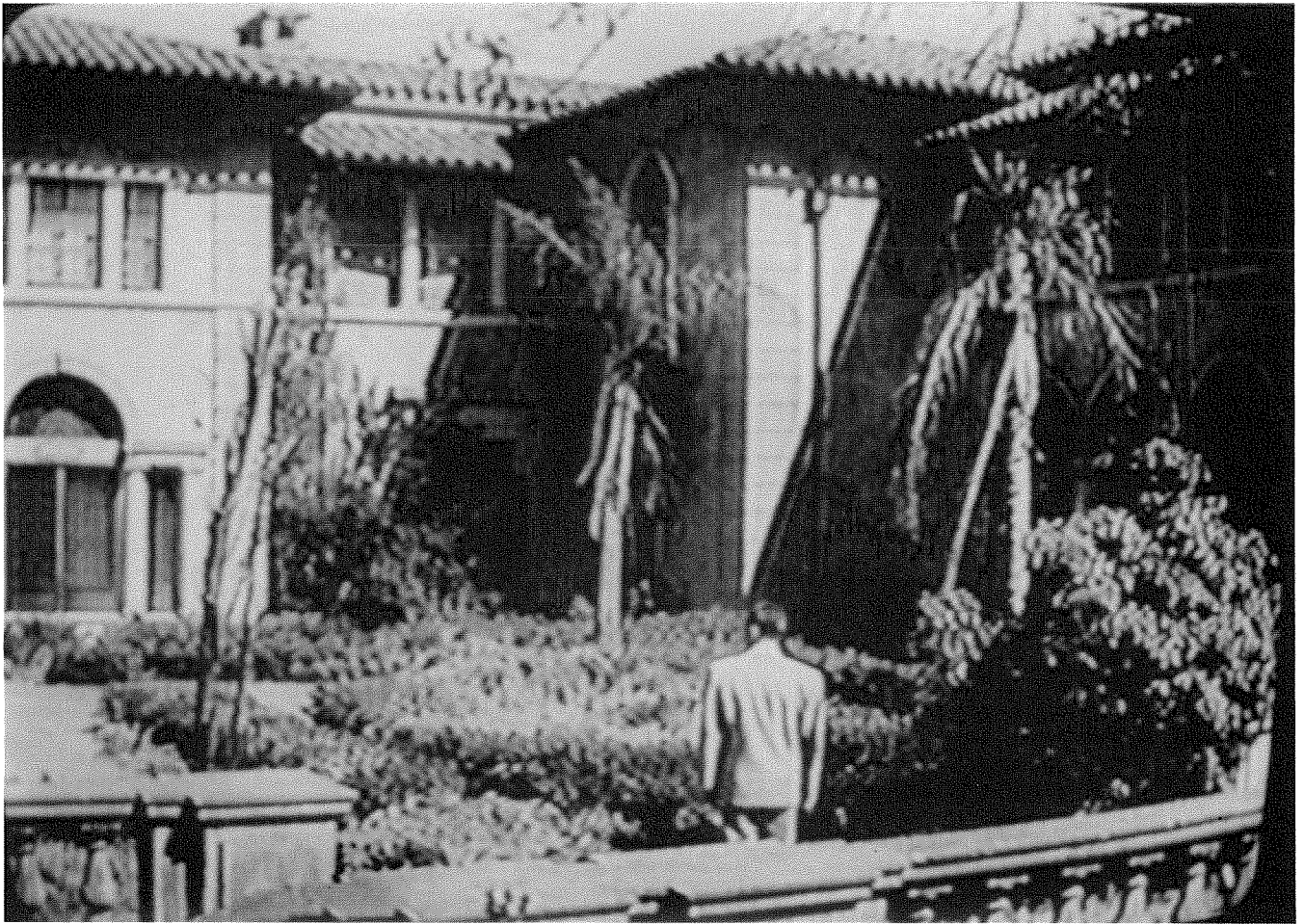
The present was a road at the foot of a line of steep hills, a road flanked by small, expensive looking shops, by restaurants, by

night-clubs shuttered against the sun-light, by offices and apartment houses. Then they too had taken their places in the irrevocable. A sign proclaimed that they were crossing the city limits of Beverly Hills. The surroundings changed. The road was flanked by the gardens of a rich residential quarter. Through trees, Jeremy saw the façades of houses, all new, almost all in good taste—elegant and witty pastiches of Lutyens manor houses, of Little Trianons, of Monticellos; lighthearted parodies of Le Corbusier's solemn machines-for-living-in; fantastic Mexican adaptations of Mexican

Haciendas and New England farms.

They turned to the right. Enormous palm trees lined the road. In the sunlight, masses of mesembryanthemums blazed with an intense magenta glare. The houses succeeded one another, like the pavilions at some endless international exhibition. Gloucestershire followed Andalusia and gave place in turn to Touraine and Oaxaca, Düsseldorf and Massachusetts.

from *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*,
by Aldous Huxley⁴



7 **Sunset Boulevard**, Paramount Pictures, 1950.

The building was a huge white stucco affair, Moorish in style, with great fretted lanterns in the forecourt and huge date palms. The entrance was at the inside corner of an L, up marble steps, through an arch framed in California or dishpan mosaic.

A doorman opened the door for me and I went in. The lobby was not quite as big as the Yankee Stadium. It was floored with a blue pale

carpet with sponge rubber underneath. It was so soft it made me want to lie down and roll. I waded over to the clerk with one of those mustaches that get stuck under your fingernail. He toyed with it and looked past my shoulder at an Ali Baba oil jar big enough to keep a tiger in.

from "Trouble Is My Business,"
by Raymond Chandler⁵



8 *Blade Runner*, Michael Deeley/for Ridley Scott, 1982.

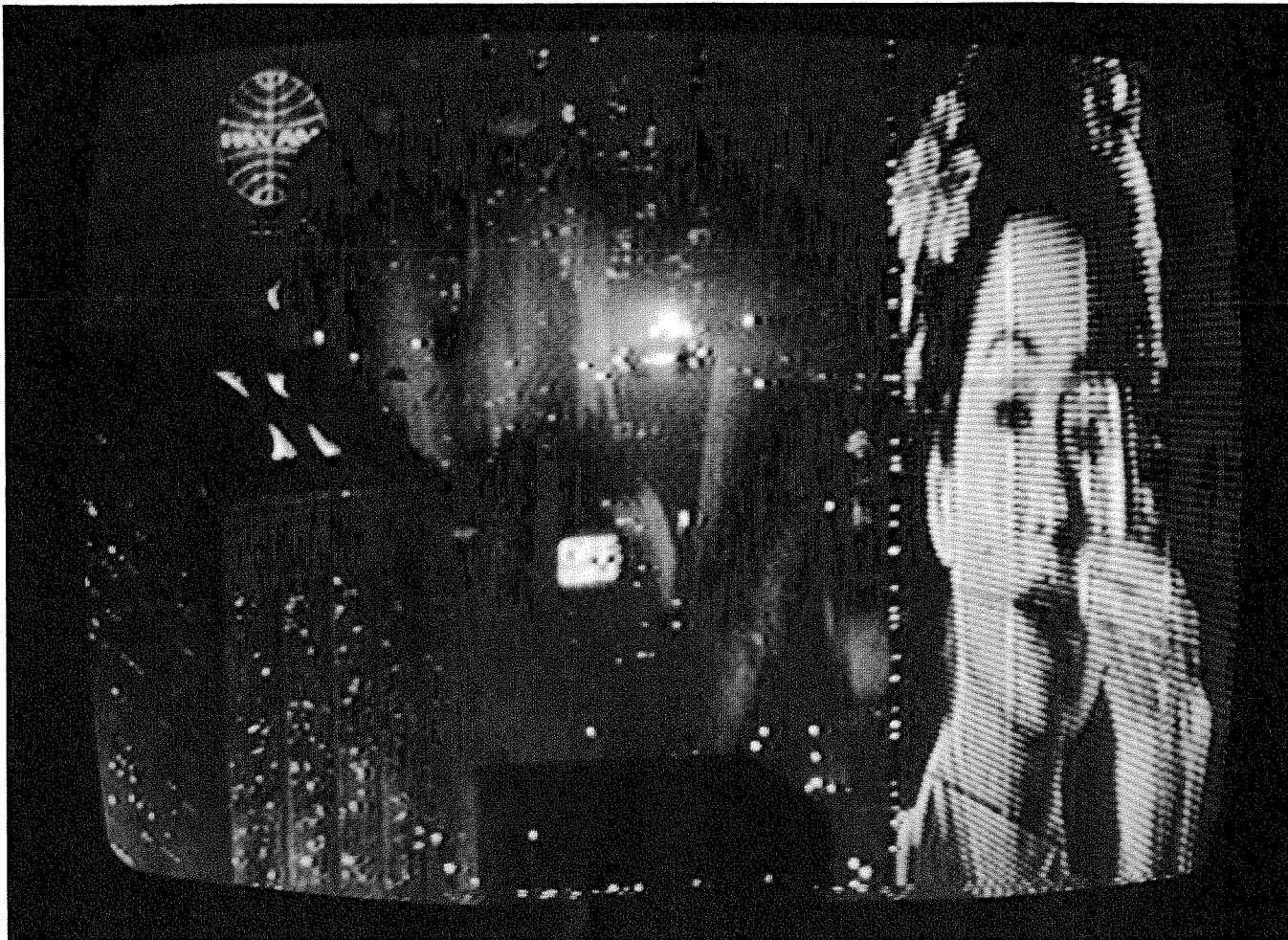
“It’s as though one were walking into the mind of a lunatic,” he said, smiling happily, as he hung up his hat and followed the others into the great hall. “Or, rather, an idiot,” he qualified. “Because I suppose a lunatic’s a person with a one track mind. Whereas this . . .”—he made a circular gesture—“this is a no-track mind. No-track because infinity track. It’s the mind of an idiot of genius. Positively stuffed with the best that has been thought and said.” He pronounced the phrase with a kind of old-maidish precision that made it sound entirely ludicrous. “Greece, Mexico, backsides, crucifixions,

machinery, George IV, Amida Buddha, science, Christian Science, Turkish baths—anything you like to mention. And every item is perfectly irrelevant to every other item.” He rubbed his hands together, he twinkled delightedly through his bifocals.

“Disquieting at first. But, do you know? I’m beginning to enjoy it. I find I really rather like living inside an idiot.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Mr. Propter, matter-of-factly. “It’s a common taste.”

from *After Many a Summer
Dies the Swan*,
by Aldous Huxley¹



9 **Blade Runner**, Michael Deeley/for Ridley Scott, 1982.

I smelled Los Angeles before
I got to it. It smelled stale
and old like a living room
that had been closed too
long. But the colored lights
fooled you. The lights were
wonderful. There ought to
be a monument to the man
who invented neon lights.
Fifteen stories high, solid
marble. There's a boy who
really made something out
of nothing.

from *The Little Sister*
(p. 96), by Raymond
Chandler¹



10 Sunset Boulevard, Paramount Pictures, 1950.

I drove east on Sunset but I didn't go home. At La Brea I turned north and swung over to Highland, out over Cahuenga Pass and down onto Ventura Boulevard, past Studio City and Sherman Oaks and Encino. There was nothing lonely about the trip. There never is on that road. Fast boys in stripped-down Fords shot in and out of the traffic streams, missing fenders by a sixteenth of an inch, but somehow always missing them. Tired men in dusty coupés and sedans winced and tightened their grip on the wheel and ploughed on north and west towards home and dinner, an evening with the sports page, the blating of the radio, the whining of their spoiled children and the gabble of their silly wives. I drove on past the gaudy neons and the false fronts behind them, the

sleazy hamburger joints that look like palaces under the colors, the circular drive-ins as gay as circuses with the chipper hard-eyed carhops, the brilliant counters, and the sweaty greasy kitchens that would have poisoned a toad. Great double trucks rumbled down over Sepulveda from Wilmington and San Pedro and crossed towards the Ridge Route, starting up in low-low from the traffic lights with the growl of lions in the zoo.

Behind Encino an occasional light winked from the hills through the thick trees. The homes of screen stars. Screen stars, phooey. The veterans of a thousand beds. Hold it, Marlowe, you're not human tonight.

from *The Little Sister*
(p. 87), by Raymond
Chandler¹

Notes

- 1 Raymond Chandler, *The Little Sister* (New York: Ballantine, 1984).
- 2 Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (New York: Bantam New Directions, 1975).
- 3 John Fante, *Ask the Dust* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1984).
- 4 Aldous Huxley, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).
- 5 Raymond Chandler, "Trouble Is My Business," in *Trouble Is My Business* (New York: Ballantine, 1980), p. 13.