

DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPERS • 13

DARK RAPTURES

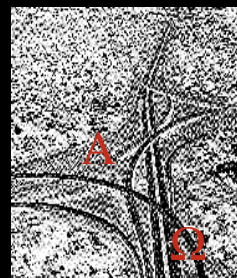
MIKE DAVIS' L.A.

MIKE DAVIS

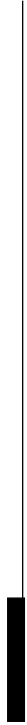
DAVID REID

KERWIN KLEIN

TIMOTHY J. CLARK



Dark Raptures



THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, discussion groups, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

In a residency planned to launch the Center's 1997–98 program on Futures—in history, the arts, and literary studies—urban theorist and environmental historian Mike Davis visited Berkeley in September and October, 1997, as Avenali Professor in the Humanities. Introduced by Berkeley art historian Timothy Clark, *DARK RAPTURES: MIKE DAVIS' L.A.* contains the text of the chapter that informed Mike Davis' first Avenali Lecture, "The Literary Destruction of L.A.," as well as the responses of two commentators: historian Kerwin Klein and writer David Reid. Mike Davis' visit to Berkeley and the publication of this Occasional Paper were made possible by the gift of Peter and Joan Avenali, who endowed the Avenali Chair in the Humanities at the Townsend Center. The Chair is occupied for a portion of each academic year by a distinguished visiting scholar whose work will be of interest to faculty and students in a broad representation of humanities and related fields.

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*Celebrating 10 years of the
Townsend Center for the Humanities*

Preface

Dark Raptures: Mike Davis' L.A.—appropriately enough, #13 in the Occasional Papers series—is an amalgam of a chapter, a lecture, and a panel discussion. Mike Davis delivered, on September 30, 1997, at Alumni House on the Berkeley campus, the first of his two Avenali Lectures on “Last Rites and Secret Histories in the Southland.” The text he has included here is a chapter that was written originally for a book in progress, the work on which the Berkeley lectures were largely based.

Having extended his meditation upon Los Angeles to include “Maneaters of the Sierra Madre,” Davis then joined historian Kerwin Klein and writer/critic David Reid in a program entitled, “The Dark Raptures of Mike Davis’ L.A.” We take our title from this discussion, and offer also the responses of Klein and Reid. The former gives an alternate reading of Los Angeles apocalyptic; the latter assesses, from a broadly cultural and literary perspective, Davis’ singular achievement in *City of Quartz*.

It is either irony or coincidence that, if darkness and destruction were pervasive themes in Mike Davis’ tenure as Avenali Professor at Berkeley, his lectures launched the year in which the Townsend Center celebrated its 10 year anniversary. Anniversaries are occasions for looking forward and back—our sense of being between pasts and possible futures is one reason why the Center especially wanted to invite Mike Davis to be with us this year. The past in Davis’ work is never a subject for

nostalgia—it's about constraint, hard scrabble, disillusionment, bottoming out. Still, as I read him, the dark view of the past hinges in some large measure on an almost palpable sense that it could be otherwise, that one must think it to be so. There is a way in which Mike Davis' work is, after all, scouting for the millennium, as a well-deserved end, of course, but also as some kind of beginning. In "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," William Blake writes that the Tigers of Wrath are wiser than the Horses of Instruction. In Mike Davis, the Tigers and the Horses run together.

—Randolph Starn

Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities
Marian E. Koshland Distinguished Professor in the Humanities

Introduction

T.J. Clark

Mike Davis is a rare—and certainly a lonely—phenomenon in late-twentieth-century America. He is a Marxist intellectual whose voice counts for something in the public sphere. Note that the claim here is modest: I’m not saying he will ever be one of the “balanced” panel of experts on McNeil-Lehrer, or be recruited to an Al Gore task force. He does not, it is worth saying, have a regular job, inside or outside the academy. But none the less it is extraordinary that Mike’s book *City of Quartz* has come to stand for Los Angeles in the way it has, and that you are likely to come across Mike Davis’s voice, especially if the city is visited (as it regularly is) by fire, flood, pestilence, or class struggle, doing an item on “Market Place” or writing a column for the *LA Times*. It seems that this is a voice—even when it pronounces the words “capitalism” and “fascism” with the quiet fury Mike Davis is capable of—that for some reason our culture cannot ignore.

I have been thinking about why this is so. For a start, there is the sheer intensity of Mike Davis’ passion for the city he lives in and its surrounding desert and mountains—the insatiable appetite he has for their geography and history. I regularly have the same feeling listening to Mike that I have with Noam Chomsky: that is, I start to wonder how any one person can know this much, and organize what he knows with such urgency. It is a bit of a chill feeling, this, because inevitably it makes you wonder what the hell *you* are doing with your time. And then (and here I think we get closer to the heart of the matter) there is the unique ethical temper of Mike’s dealings with Los Angeles and its popular culture—the

extraordinary mixture of passionate affection for the lives and representations of ordinary people, and yet horror and anger at so much of what claims to serve their needs, or feed their fantasies, or give them a good time. It is truly a special moment, in the academy or anywhere else, when a speaker these days earns himself the right to say to a crowded hall, as Mike did a week ago, that maybe, when you look at the dirty lower reaches of the alimentary canal of American mass culture, its deepest obsessions are as bad or worse than anything the Third Reich came up with. I say “earns the right” to say this, because I take it we agree that Mike Davis cannot be dismissed, as most other people making the same argument would be, as one more elitist or Left-melancholic. For who could listen to Mike for ten minutes and not be convinced of the depth of his love for the common and no account, the nameless and voiceless, the manipulated—the oppressed? He just thinks that too much of what claims to be “popular” culture is part of the oppression. He is a true utopian, I think, for whom Los Angeles matters precisely because it is still a great image of uncentered and un-monumental sociability, with no pompous cities-on-the-hill proclaiming a “Beam Me Up Scottie” version of culture (at least until the Getty is formally inaugurated). But he is also, deeply, a *noir* writer, coming out of the great Angeleno tradition—capable of calling evil by its name when he sees it, and of summoning up a terrible, sardonic laughter at the city’s official image of itself (“official” here meaning everyone from Johnny Cochrane to Madonna)—*Noir* but utopian: that is the distinctive mix of voices. It is an honor and pleasure to introduce Mike Davis.

Golden Ruins/Dark Raptures

The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles

Mike Davis

A swelteringly hot day in Los Angeles, 1962. A pretty girl (“she reminded him of well water and farm breakfasts”) is absentmindedly taking off her clothes at a bus stop. The corner newsboy gawks delightedly, but most passers-by simply glance and continue on their way. A nerdish mathematician named Potiphar Breen comes to the rescue. As he wraps his coat around her, he explains that she is the victim of a strange epidemic of involuntary nudism known as the “Gypsy Rose” virus.

It is a small omen of approaching chaos, Breen has discovered that Los Angeles is the global epicenter of a sinister convergence of pathological trends and weird anomalies. All the warning lights are beginning to flash in unison: the mercury soars, skies darken, dams creak, faults strain, and politicians wave rockets. And, at the worst possible moment, the suburbs are gripped by a death wish to water their lawns:

Billions in war bonds were now falling due; wartime marriages were reflected in the swollen peak of the Los Angeles school population. The Colorado River was at a record low and the towers in Lake Mead stood high out of the water. But Angelenos committed communal suicide by watering lawns as usual. The Metropolitan Water district commissioners tried to stop it. It fell between the stools of the police powers of fifty sovereign cities. The taps remained open, trickling away the life blood of the desert paradise. (29)

Epic drought is quickly followed by flood, earthquake, nuclear war, plague, a Russian invasion, and the reemergence of Atlantis. It is the ultimate cascade of catastrophe. Breen hides out in the San Gabriel mountains with his new girlfriend, amusing himself by shooting the odd Soviet paratrooper or two. Then, when the worst seems over, he notices an unusual sunspot. The sun has begun to die...

So ends Robert Heinlein's tongue-in-cheek novella, *The Year of the Jackpot* (1952).¹ In coronating Los Angeles as disaster capital of the universe, Heinlein cannily anticipated the cornucopia of disaster to follow. According to my own incomplete bibliographic research, the destruction of Los Angeles is a central theme or image in at least 136 novels and films since 1909. More precisely, since Heinlein's heroine first took her skirt off, the city and its suburbs have been destroyed an average of three times per year, with the rate dramatically increasing in the 1990s.

table one

L.A. Disaster Fiction: Frequency

pre-1920	2
1921-1930	5
1931-1940	7
1941-1950	8
1951-1960	16
1961-1970	21
1971-1980	29
1981-1990	31
1990-1996	19
total	136

On the multiplex screen alone, during the grueling summer of 1996, Los Angeles was parboiled by aliens (*Independence Day*) and reduced to barbarism by major earthquakes (*The Crow*, *City of Angels* and *Escape from L.A.*). Six months later, magma erupted near Farmer's Market and transformed the Westside into a postmodern Pompeii (*Volcano*), all to the sheer delight of millions of viewers. The City of Angels is unique, not simply in the frequency of its fictional destruction, but in the pleasure that such apocalypses provide to readers and movie audiences.

The entire world seems to be rooting for Los Angeles to slide into the Pacific or be swallowed up by the San Andreas Fault.

DOOM CITY

“This is so cool!”
—a typical angeleno
(*Independence Day*, 1996)

No other city seems to excite such dark rapture. The tidal waves, killer bees, H-bombs and viruses that occasionally annihilate Seattle, Houston, Chicago and San Francisco produce a different kind of *frisson*, whose enjoyment is edged with horror and awe. Indeed as one goes back further in the history of the urban disaster genre, the ghost of the romantic Sublime reappears. For example, the destruction of London—the metropolis most frequently decimated in fiction between 1885 and 1940—was a terrifying spectacle, equivalent to the death of Western civilization itself. The obliteration of Los Angeles, by contrast, is sometimes depicted as a victory for civilization.

Thus in *Independence Day*, the film that Bob Dole endorsed as a model of Hollywood patriotism, the alien holocaust is represented first as tragedy (New York), then as farce (Los Angeles). Although it could be argued, in an age of greedy suburbs and edge cities, that all traditional urban centers are equally expendable, the boiling tsunami of fire and brimstone that consumes Fifth Avenue is genuinely horrifying. When the aliens turn next to Los Angeles, however, it is a different story. The average film audience has little sympathy with the caricatured mob of local yokels—hippies, new agers and gay men—dancing in idiot ecstasy on a skyscraper roof at the imminent arrival of the extraterrestrials. There is an obvious comic undertone of “good riddance” when kooks such as these are vaporized by their ill-mannered guests. (As one of Dole’s senior advisors quipped: “Millions die, but they’re all liberals.”)²

The gleeful expendability of Los Angeles in the popular imagination has other manifestations as well. When Hollywood is not literally consumed in self-immolation, it is promoting its environs as the heart of darkness. No city, in fiction or film, is more likely to figure as the icon of a really bad future. Post-apocalyptic

Los Angeles, overrun by terminators, androids and gangs, has become as cliché as Marlowe's mean streets or Gidget's beach party. The decay of the city's old glamour has been inverted by the entertainment industry into the new glamour of decay.

At the risk of sounding like a spoilsport (who doesn't enjoy a slapstick apocalypse now and then?), Los Angeles's reigning status as Doom City is a phenomenon that demands serious historical exegesis. Although the city's obvious propensity toward spectacular disaster—its “chief product,” in the recent words of one critic—provides a quasi-realist context for its literary destruction, environmental exceptionalism does not explain why Los Angeles is the city we love to destroy. There is a deeper, Strangelovian logic to such happy holocausts. We must be recruited, first of all, to a dehumanized, antipathetic view of the city and its residents.

In the analysis that follows, I explore the underlying politics of the different sub-genres and tropes of Los Angeles disaster fiction. If I appear heedless of Darko Suvin's strictures against using locale as a classificatory principle in science fiction, it is because I am interested in the representations of the city, not the debates about canon or genre per se.³ My methodology, moreover, emulates the heroic example of jazz historian Gunther Schuller. In his magisterial survey of the Swing era, he committed himself “to hear *every recording* of any artist, orchestra, or group that would come under discussion—and to listen systematically/chronologically in order to trace accurately their development and achievements.”⁴ This entailed careful attention to some 30,000 recordings and took Schuller more than twenty years to accomplish.

In my case, “comprehensive reading” has been a much more modest enterprise, involving only a hundred or so novels and a few dozen films.⁵ Before I opened the first book, moreover, I searched for a vantage-point that offered some vista of how imagined disaster fits into the larger landscape of Los Angeles writing. The bibliographic equivalent of Mullholland Drive is Baird's and Greenwood's superb inventory of California fiction to 1970.⁶ Out of 2711 separate entries, I found 785 novels that obviously qualified as “Los Angeles based.” Nearly two-thirds of this vast output is devoted to either murder (255 crime and detective

novels) or to Hollywood (224 novels), with considerable overlap between the two categories.

Novels with disaster themes comprise 50 titles or 6% of the total, just ahead of cult (39 titles) and citrus/ranching (30 titles) fiction, and just behind historical novels (66 titles).

These statistics, of course, are extremely crude indices of the relative popularity, let alone influence, of different themes and plot-types. Chandlerian *Noir*, for example, continues to define the Los Angeles canon in the eyes of most critics, yet it is a tiny subset, possibly 20 or less examples, within the larger universe of regional fiction. Literary census methods, while indispensable for setting the stage, must quickly yield to qualitative and historical analysis. Thus, three simple theses, formulated midway in my “Schullerian” reading, structure my understanding of what Los Angeles disaster fiction is about.

First, there is a dramatic trend over time toward the identification of all Los Angeles fiction with disaster or survivalist narrative. Despite the one-sided obsession of formal literary criticism with Los Angeles as the home of hard-boiled detective fiction, the disaster novel is an equally characteristic, and culturally symptomatic, local export. It is true in the strict sense that, after 1980, a decisive quorum of the region’s best young writers—including Octavia Butler, Carolyn See, Steve Erickson, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Cynthia Kadohata—routinely site their fiction in the golden ruins of Los Angeles’ future. It is also true in the broader sense that disaster, as allusion, metaphor or ambiance, saturates almost everything now written about Southern California.

Secondly, with surprisingly few exceptions, most of the work under consideration is easily mapped as coherent sub-genres like “romantic disaster fiction” or “cult catastrophe.” Although genre analysis is a notoriously subjective business, the repetition of basic thematic and plot patterns—e.g., women’s redemptive role, inadvertent bio-catastrophe, the identification of cult with catastrophe, white survivalism in an alien city, disaster as creative alchemy, etc.—provides logical, if not exclusive, taxonomic guidelines. Eight major story-types and their principal periods of popularity are listed in table two, while an inventory of the diverse “means of destruction” is provided in table three.

table two
 L.A. Disaster Fiction: Story types
 (periods of popularity)

1. Hordes	1900–40s
2. Romantic Disaster	1920–30s
3. Cult/Catastrophe	1930–50s
4. The Bomb	1940–80s
5. Ecocatastrophe	1960–80s
6. Cinematic Disaster	1970s
7. Survivalist	1980–90s
8. Magical Distopia	1980–90s

table three
 L.A. Disaster Fiction: Means of Destruction
 (novels & films)

1. nukes	49
2. earthquake	28
3. hordes (invasion)	10
4. monsters	10
5. pollution	7
6. gangs/terrorism	6
7. floods	6
8. plagues	6
9. comets/tsunami	5
10. cults	3
11. volcanoes	2
12. firestorms	2
13. drought	1
14. blizzard	1
15. devil	1
16. freeways	1
17. riot	1
18. fog	1

19. slide	1
20. bermuda grass	1
21. global warming	1
22. sand storms	1
23. "everything"	1
total	145

Thirdly, race ultimately unlocks the secret meaning of the genre. In spite of the rich diversity of leitmotifs, (white) racial fear is the dominant theme in disaster fiction over time, with the sardonic critique of cults and fringe culture a distant second. In pre-1970 novels, when Los Angeles was still the most WASPish of large American cities, racial hysteria was typically expressed as fear of invading hordes (variously yellow, brown, black, red or their extraterrestrial metonyms). After 1970, with the rise of a non-Anglo majority in Los Angeles County, the plot is inverted and the city itself becomes the Alien. More than any other factor, racial difference is the distancing mechanism that provides the illicit pleasure in Los Angeles' destruction.

Because this last hypothesis is apt to be controversial (political correctness again runs amuck...), it is best to begin by putting Los Angeles disaster fiction in its larger context: the genealogy of the modern fascination with dead cities.

URBAN ESCHATOLOGY (a brief digression)

Lo! Death has reared himself a throne
 In a strange city lying alone
 Far down within the dim West

—Edgar Allen Poe
 "The City in the Sea"

A starting point: Lisbon was the Hiroshima of the Age of Reason. Goethe, who was six at the time of the destruction of the Portuguese capital by earthquake and fire in 1755, later recalled the "Demon of Fright" that undermined belief in the rational deity of the *philosophes*. "God, said to be omniscient and merciful, had

shown himself to be a very poor sort of father, for he had struck down equally the just and the unjust.”⁷

The Lisbon holocaust, together with the rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum a few years earlier, were profound shocks to the philosophical “optimism” (a word coined in 1737) that had infused the early Enlightenment under the influence of Newton, Leibniz and Pope. The “best of all possible worlds,” it seemed, was subject to inexplicable and horrifying disasters that challenged the very foundations of reason. Following the famous debate with Rousseau that led Voltaire to produce his skeptical masterpiece *Candide*, Lisbon and Pompeii—and, later, the Terror of 1791—became the chief icons of a fundamentally modern pessimism that found its inspiration in historical cataclysm rather than the Book of Revelations.⁸

An influential literary template for this anti-utopian sensibility was Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s *Le dernier homme*. Written in 1805 at the apogee of Napoleonic power, this strange novel by a bitter enemy of the *philosophes* depicted mankind’s disappearance as the result of soil exhaustion, human sterility, and a slowly dying sun. Although religious motifs do appear (de Grainville was a cleric of the *ancien regime*), it is likely the first book in any language to sketch a realistic scenario of human extinction. Moreover it provided the dramatic conception for Mary Shelley’s three-volume epic of despair, *The Last Man* (1826), which chronicles how a utopian age of peace and prosperity in the late 21st century is transformed, by plague and religious fundamentalism, into a terrifying End Time whose sole survivor—the Englishman Lionel Verney—is left alone in the howling ruins of the Roman Coliseum. As various critics have appreciated, *The Last Man*, although a bad novel, was an intellectual watershed, the first consistently secular apocalypse.⁹

From the dandified fringe of Shelley’s circle also came the most popular urban disaster novel of all time, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompey* (1834). Bulwer-Lytton, who started as a Godwin radical and ended as minister for the colonies, eulogized the cultured and cosmopolitan decadence of the doomed Roman summer resort under the shadow of Vesuvius. In its immediate context (the passage of the first Reform Bill in 1832 and the rise of Chartism), it can also be read as a premature elegy for the equally decadent British upper classes, whom

Bulwer-Lytton saw as threatened by their own volcanic catastrophe: the gradual advent of universal suffrage. In the century-long run of its popularity, however, *The Last Days of Pompey* simply offered the typically Victorian titillations of orientalised sensual splendor followed by sublime, all-consuming disaster. With the advent of cinema, it immediately became the most filmed novel, with at least four movie versions made between 1903 and 1913 alone.¹⁰

In American literature, with its notorious “apocalyptic temper,” the city of doom was already a potent image in such early novels as Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) and a “Lady of Philadelphia”’s *Laura* (1809), both of which portray the horror of the “yellow plague” (yellow fever) in Philadelphia.¹¹ In succeeding decades, the great city, with its teeming masses of immigrants and papists, is routinely demonized as the internal antipode of the republican homestead and small town. This plebeian-nativist anti-urbanism reaches its hallucinatory crescendo in George Lippard’s gothic tale of oligarchy and corruption, *The Quaker City* (1844).¹² Philadelphia is depicted as a nocturnal labyrinth of temptation and crime, whose evil center is the mysterious Monk Hall guarded by the monstrous “Devil Bug.” As Janis Stout points out, Lippard may be the first literary portraitist of the American city to move beyond “simple terror of place” to the “explosion of reason” and metaphysical catastrophe. “At the end of the book, in an apocalypse which the reader scarcely knows how to accept, ‘Death-Angels,’ ‘forms of mist and shadow,’ hover over the city.”¹³

Although Edgar Allan Poe continued to add his own amazing glosses to the Last Days, secular doom fiction virtually disappeared during the long sunny afternoon of mid-Victorian expansion, between 1850 and 1880. In their different ways, the Crystal Palace and Jules Verne’s novels exemplified the bourgeois optimism of the Age of Capital. After Sedan, the Paris Commune, and the Depression of 1876, however, the spell was broken. An explosion of copy-cat novels speculatively explored the possibilities of a mechanized world war between the great powers, usually with an invasion of Britain and the sacking of London. More intrepidly, a few writers, influenced by vulgar Darwinism, questioned the long-term survival of Victorian civilization in the face of growing revolts by the lower classes and “lower races.”¹⁴

Significantly, one of the earliest of these social apocalypses was published by a California populist, Pierton Dooner, in 1880. His *The Last Days of the Republic* describes the conquest and destruction of the United States by a “human ant-colony” of Chinese coolies.¹⁵ The novel begins in San Francisco where selfish plutocrats have encouraged unrestricted Chinese immigration to depress wages. Desperate white workingmen attempt to massacre the Chinese, but are shot in the back by militia under the command of the oligarchs. The Chinese are then given the franchise which they use to enlarge their political and economic beachhead, ultimately producing a civil war which the coolies win by virtue of their superior numbers and insect-like capacity for self-sacrifice. The banner of the Celestial Empire is raised over the smoking ruins of Washington, DC.:

The very name of the United States of America was thus blotted from the record of nations... the Temple of Liberty had crumbled; and above its ruins was reared the colossal fabric of barbaric splendor known as the Western Empire of His August Majesty, the Emperor of China and Ruler of All Lands. (257)

Dooner’s novel created a sensation in English-speaking countries and provided a plot outline—alien invasion/yellow hordes—that, like the “last man” narrative, has been copied right down to the present. It was followed the next year (1880-81) by four emblematic visions of future cataclysms. In Park Benjamin’s satirical short story, “The End of New York,” an invading Spanish armada uses balloon-borne nitroglycerine bombs to destroy Manhattan from the air. Total American capitulation is only avoided by the fortuitous appearance of a friendly Chilean fleet(!), as Benjamin denounces “the weakness of our navy and the unprotected position of our seaports.”¹⁶

Mary Lane’s *Mizora: A Prophecy* describes an elite, subterranean society of women living in a lush paradise under the North Pole. As Naomi Jacobs points out, however, this parthenogenetic utopia is premised on a genocidal eugenics:

At the very foundation of Mizoran perfection is the racial purity Of its inhabitants, who are all blond-haired and fair-skinned—emphatically the “cool” type of beauty. Dark-haired Vera objects only silently to the Preceptress’s argument that “the highest excellence of moral and mental character is alone attainable by a fair race. The

elements of evil belong to the dark race.” For these reasons, dark complexions have been “eliminated.” Gender is also considered a racial category by the Mizorans, and Vera eventually learns that the first step in the eugenic campaign to purify the race had been the elimination of men some 3000 years earlier.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the popular English writer and advocate of “Anglo-Saxon union,” W. Dellisle Hay, published back-to-back novels, *The Doom of the Great City* and *Three Hundred Years Hence*, portraying alternative futures. In the first, London is choked to death by its poisonous fogs and toxic wastes. In the second, white civilization is on the verge of transforming the world into a super-industrial utopia that includes greenbelts in the Sahara, flying machines and television. The major obstacle to progress, however, is the continued existence of “worthless Inferior Races but a step above beasts.” The “Teutons” solve this problem by sending air armadas which unleash “a rain of death to every breathing thing, a rain that exterminates the hopeless race, whose long presumption it had been that it existed in passive prejudice to the advance of United Man.”

As I.F. Clarke has emphasized, Hay’s chapter on “The Fate of the Inferior Races” (“a billion human beings will die”) was an eerie anticipation of *Mein Kampf* (and, more recently, *The Turner Diaries*).¹⁸

These tales, those by Dooner and Hay especially, opened the door to a flood of apocalyptic fiction after 1885.¹⁹ Overwhelmingly it was a literature written and consumed by the anxiety-ridden urban middle classes. It depicted the nightmare side of rampant Social Darwinism. Growing fear of violent social revolution and the “rising tide of color” was matched by increasing anxiety over the inevitability of world war between the imperialist powers. Microbes, radioactivity, poison gases and flying machines provided new means of mass destruction, while Schiaparelli and Lowell’s “discovery” of canals on Mars gave temporary plausibility to an extraterrestrial threat. The result, as W. Warren Wagar has shown, was a proliferation of doom fiction that established virtually all the genre conventions still in use today.

Between 1890 and 1914 alone, almost every sort of world’s end story that one finds in later years was written, published, and accepted by a wide reading public. Great world wars that devastated

civilization were fought in the skies and on imaginary battlefields dwarfing those of Verdun and Stalingrad. Fascist dictatorships led to a new Dark Age, class and race struggles plunged civilization into Neolithic savagery, terrorists armed with superweapons menaced global peace. Floods, volcanic eruptions, plagues, epochs of ice, colliding comets, exploding or cooling suns, and alien invaders laid waste to the world.²⁰

In the United States this genre remained immovably fixated upon the spectre of subversive immigrants and non-whites. The Irish-led “Draft Riots” of 1863, suppressed with great difficulty by the regular army, provided a precedent for nativist fears. Thus in John Ames Mitchell’s *The Last American* (1889), the alien hordes turn green and destroy New York after massacring its Protestant bourgeoisie. A Persian expedition, reconnoitering the wasteland of Manhattan in the year 2951, excavates dramatic numismatic evidence of this Irish-led insurrection: a 1937 half-dollar (illustrated in the book) with the bulldog image of “Dennis Murphy imperator,” “the last of the Hy-Burnyan dictators.” The explorers also discover the rusting hulk of the Statue of Liberty, Delmonicos, Astor House, and a mouldering thousand-year-old blonde in her bed. In a side trip to Washington D.C., they encounter the “last American” of the title sulking in the ruins. He is slain in a brief scuffle and his skull taken back to Persia to be displayed in a museum.²¹

Late-twentieth-century New York is consumed by an even more terrible revolutionary holocaust (again led by the immigrant proletariat) in Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (1890). Inverting the utopian plot of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), Minnesota populist Donnelly portrays the historical alternative to the Peoples’ Party moderate platform, a genocidal final conflict between a debased, polyglot proletariat and a Jewish-dominated financial oligarchy. With the aid of mercenary airmen (the “Demons”) who drop poison-gas on New York’s wealthy neighborhoods, the slum hordes, led by the ogre-like Italian giant, Caesar Lomellini, ruthlessly annihilate bourgeois society. A quarter-million well-dressed corpses form the pedestal for Lomellini’s grotesque column commemorating “the Death and Burial of Modern Civilization.”²²

Racial cataclysm meanwhile also remained a popular theme in Gilded Age catastrophe fiction. While the annihilation of native Americans was almost universally accepted as a necessary cost of progress, some Social Darwinists experimented with other genocides. In *The Last Days of the Republic*, for instance, Dooner already had disposed of the entire ex-slave population in a single, enigmatic line. African Americans, he claimed, “rapidly and noiselessly disappeared, perished, it seemed, by the very act of contact” (with Chinese conquerors) (127).

A decade later, in the Jim Crow novel *The Next War* (1892), King Wallace openly exulted in the biological extinction of Black America. Northern and Southern whites, finally overcoming their Civil War animosities, unite in a war of extermination against a rebellious Black population. After a failed attempt to poison all whites on the first day of the twentieth century, thirty million Blacks flee into the Southern mountains where, completely surrounded by the white armies, they die of exposure and starvation. With cool matter-of-factness, Wallace describes the “continuous and unbroken line of dead infants, none of whom were older than six or seven years old.”²³

Dooner’s and Hay’s yellow hordes, meanwhile, returned in a bloodthirsty trilogy by M.P. Shiel (*The Yellow Danger* (1899), *The Yellow Wave* (1905), and *The Dragon* (1913)) in which hundreds of millions of fiendish Chinese are slaughtered by British naval heroes who, when firepower alone fails, resort to the bubonic plague. Shiel was widely imitated by other writers, including Jack London, whose 1906 short story, “The Unparalleled Invasion,” also solves the “Chinese problem” with all-out germ warfare followed by the massacre of survivors. “For that billion of people there was no hope. Pent in their vast and festering charnel house, all organization and cohesion was lost, they could do naught but die” (119). As the white races recolonize China, “according to the democratic American program,” “...all nations solemnly pledged themselves never to use against one another the laboratory methods of warfare they had employed in the invasion of China”(120).²⁴

Some petit-bourgeois phobias, of course, were quite fantastic. A rather quaint obsession of the *fin de siècle*, for example, was the specter of anarchists in airships, like Donnelly’s “Demons,” raining death upon the bourgeoisie. In addition to *Caesar’s Column*, this is also the common plot of Douglas Fawcett’s

Hartmann, the Anarchist: or, the Doom of the Great City (1893), George Griffith's *The Angel of the Revolution: A Tale of Coming Terror* (1893), and Mullett Ellis's *Zalma* (1895). The fictional aircraft described in these novels—dark dreadnaughts of the skies with names like *Attila* (Hartmann)—helped excite the first worldwide wave of “UFO” sightings in 1896-97, six years before Kitty Hawk and a half-century before Roswell. Anarchists and Martians were equally popular explanations.²⁵

Griffith, who rivaled H.G. Wells in popularity, was the world's most prolific writer of chauvinist science fiction. He thrilled and terrified his reading public of clerks and shopkeepers with a virtually annual production of doom-laden tales *Olga Romanoff* (1894), *The Outlaws of the Air* (1895), *Briton or Boer?* (1897), *The Great Pirate Syndicate* (1899), *The World Masters* (1903), *The Stolen Submarine* (1904), *The Great Weather Syndicate* (1906) and *The World Peril of 1910* (1907). Like Hay earlier, he preached Anglo-Saxon racial unity against the twin evils of urban anarchy and colonial revolt.

Within this emergent genre of apocalyptic futurism, only two important English-language novels broke ranks with reigning xenophobic obsessions. One was naturalist Richard Jeffries' influential *After London, or Wild England* (1885), which anticipated the environmental collapse of the unsustainable industrial metropolis. As Suvin points out, Jeffries was the only major writer of British catastrophe fiction before Wells “to spring from the working people,” in his case the yeomanry. Like Donnelly, he despised the urban financial oligarchy that had starved the countryside of credit and ruined the small farmer. The miasmatic ruins of London express “a loathing... of upper-class pride and prejudice based on money power.”²⁶ Although Jeffries helped pave the way for the Gothic socialist vision of William Morris (whose *News from Nowhere* is a utopian reworking of *After London*), the sheer ferocity of his anti-urbanism put him in a category apart, as a kind of Victorian Edward Abbey.²⁷

The other novel, of course, was H.G. Wells' great anti-imperialist allegory, *The War of the Worlds* (1898), which stood white supremacy on its head by depicting the English as helpless natives being colonized and slaughtered by technologically invincible Martians. His description of the Martian destruction of London (“it was the beginning of the rout of civilization, of the massacre of man-

kind”) stunned readers who were forced to confront, for the first time, what it might be like to be on the receiving end of imperial conquest. The novel, in fact, had grown out of a conversation with Wells’ brother Frank about the recent extinction of native Tasmanians by English settlers.²⁸ Within a year of its serialization in *Cosmopolitan*, moreover, American newspapers had already plagiarized the story and printed terrifying accounts of Martian attacks on New York and Boston. (Los Angeles, thanks to Paramount Films and director Byron Haskin, was to follow in 1953.)²⁹

Yet even Wells, who ends *The War of the Worlds* with a powerful call for a “commonweal of mankind,” was obsessed with race, and in his most radical early novel, *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910), did not shrink from depicting a cataclysmic race war between the London poor and the African police sent to suppress them. Previously in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) he had horrified readers with the image of animals transformed into humanoid monsters (analogues of mutant, inferior races), while in *The Time Machine* (1895) he forecast the evolutionary divergence of the human race into the antagonistic species represented by the gentle, retarded Eloi and the hideous, troglodytic Morlocks.

The Yellow Peril, moreover, makes a sinister appearance in *The War in the Air* (1908), Wells’ extraordinary “fantasy of possibility” about Armageddon in the skies over New York, which Patrick Parrinder has described as science fiction’s first analogue to Gibbon’s epic of imperial decline and fall.³⁰ Hungry for New World colonies but blocked by the Monroe Doctrine, Wilhelmine Germany unleashes its secret zeppelin armada against the United States. After sinking the American Atlantic Fleet in a surprise attack, the great airships, emblazoned with black iron crosses, punish New York City’s refusal to surrender with a merciless bombardment of the congested neighborhoods of lower Manhattan. Prefiguring the Martian attack in *Independence Day*, Broadway is turned into a “hideous red scar of flames”(213). Wells pointedly compares this first “scientific massacre” of a great metropolitan center to routinized imperialist atrocities:

As the airships sailed along they smashed up the city as a child will scatter its cities of brick and card. Below, they left ruins and blazing conflagrations and heaped and scattered dead; men, women, and children mixed together as though they had been no more than Moors, or Zulus, or Chinese. (211)

The victorious Germans, however, have fatally underestimated the other powers' equally clandestine and fanatical preparations for strategic air war. As the enraged Americans strike back at the Germans with their own secret weapons, France and England unveil huge fleets of deadly long-range airships. In short order, Berlin, London and Paris all suffer the fate of New York City. Finally, while the Americans and Europeans are preoccupied with an attack on the German "aerial Gibraltar" at Niagara Falls, thousands of Japanese and Chinese airships suddenly darken the sky.

The Japanese and Chinese have joined in. That's the supreme fact. They've pounced into our little quarrels... The Yellow Peril was a peril after all! (240)

The modern integration of science into warfare, Wells warns, will inevitably erase arrogant Victorian distinctions between Europe and Asia, civilization and barbarism. Yet the threat of a new "dark age" is precisely what provides a romantic plot for the most popular American end-of-the-city novel from the Edwardian era: George England's *Darkness and Dawn* (1914).³¹ England's story (actually a trilogy serialized in *Cavalier* magazine during 1912-13) is a rather banal specimen of the renewed interest in the catastrophic that preceded, and in eerie ways, prefigured the holocaust of the First World War. (In Europe, the shrieking urban apocalypses of Ludwig Meidner's 1912-13 paintings and George Heym's poems were incomparably more oracular; terminal points of prophetic despair after the successive omens of the first Russian Revolution (1905-06), the San Francisco and Messina earthquakes (1906 and 1908), Halley's Comet (1910), and the sinking of the Titanic (1912).³²

The chief novelty of *Darkness and Dawn* is in the opening pages where England depicts the destruction of New York's newly-built skyline. Allan and Beatrice (a handsome engineer and his beautiful secretary) awake from a century of suspended animation on the 48th floor of the ruined Metropolitan Tower (tallest building in the world in 1912) overlooking Union Square. From their high perch, they survey a scene of unprecedented devastation. The great Flatiron Building is a "hideous wreck," while the Brooklyn Bridge has collapsed and the Statue of Liberty is just "a black misshapen mass protruding through the tree-tops." Manhattan has become the first skyscraper ghost town.

They quickly leave this “city of death” (translate: “dead immigrants”) to search for other Anglo-Saxon survivors of the unexplained holocaust. England, like Jack London, was both a socialist and Aryanist.³³ Inevitably, on the road to rebuilding civilization, his “white barbarians” must fight a pitiless war of extermination against the “Horde,” a species of cannibal ape-men whom the reader is led to assume are the devolved offspring of interior races. Once the ape-men are annihilated, progress is rapid because “labor reaps its full full reward” in the cooperative commonwealth established by the survivors. In the last scene, Allen points to a swift-moving light in the sky: “Look Beatrice! The West Coast Mail!” (670). It is a biplane bearing the hope of a new age from Southern California.

END NOTES

1. Heinlein, Robert, *The Year of the Jackpot*, 1952, reprinted in Donald Wollheim, ed., *The End of the World* (Ace: New York 1956).

2. For Dole’s reaction to a screening of *Independence Day*, see *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 1996, p. A19.

3. Discussing the subgenre of “Victorian Alternative History.” Suvin argues that “fictional locus is more vehicle than tenor; hence, it is not a narratively dominant element and cannot serve as a meaningful basis for classification with SF. To constitute a class of “Martian stories,” or, say “Symmes’ hole” stories would make as much sense as allotting the biblical parable of mustard seed to “agricultural stories” or Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechuan* to “Chinese stories.” Darko Suvin, “Victorian Science Fiction, 1871-85: The Rise of the Alternative Sub-Genre” *Science Fiction Studies*, 10 (1983), p. 150.

4. Schuller, Gunther, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* (Oxford University Press: New York 1989) p. x.

5. In order to view the whole landscape of imagined disaster, I have purposefully sought out ephemera—religious rants, privately printed tracts, occult speculations, soft-core pornography and B-movies—as well as pulp fiction and

“serious” literature. The eccentric works offer uncensored access to the secret sexual and racial fantasies that rule the genre’s unconscious.

6. Baird, Newton and Robert Greenwood, *An Annotated Bibliography of California Fiction, 1664-1970* (Talisman Literary Research: Georgetown, CA 1971).

7. Quoted in Kendrick, T.D., *The Lisbon Earthquake* (Lippincott: Philadelphia 1955) p. 222-3.

8. Cf. chapter 7, “Optimism Attacked,” in *ibid*; and Otto Friedrich, *The End of the World: A History* (Coward, McCann & Geohegan: New York 1982) p. 179-212.

9. “The Last Man is an anti-Crusoe, conquered rather than conquering, crushed by his solitude, and sure of his defeat.” See W. Warren Wagar, *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington 1982) p. 13.

10. On its film history, see Mick Broderick, *Nuclear Movies* (McFarland: Jefferson NC 1988) p.2.

11. Brown, Charles Brockdon, *Arthur Mervyn*; and *Laura*, by a Lady of Philadelphia (Bradford and Inskoop, Philadelphia 1809).

12. Lippard, George, *The Quaker City: or, The Monks of Monk Hall* (G.B. Zeiber: Philadelphia 1844).

13. Stout, Janis, *Sodoms in Eden: The City in American Fiction before 1860* (Greenwood: Westport 1976) p. 50-54.

14. For 1871 as the literary birthday for UK science fiction, see Suvin p. 148.

15. Dooner, Pierton, *The Last Days of the Republic* (Alta California Publishing House: San Francisco 1880). In the same vein, see also Robert Wolter, *A Short and Truthful History of the Taking of California and Oregon by the Chinese in the Year 1898*, San Francisco 1882.

16. Park, Benjamin, “The End of New York,” *Fiction Magazine* (31 October 1881).

17. Jacobs, Naomi, “The Frozen Landscape,” in Jane Donawerth and Carol Kolmerten, eds., *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference* (Syracuse: Ithaca 1991) p. 194-95.

18. Clarke, I.F., *The Pattern of Expectation* (Cape: London 1979) p. 158-60.

19. The best, although by no means exhaustive, discussion of American futuristic novels from this period remains Thomas Clareson, *The Emergence of American Science Fiction: 1880-1915*, PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1956. See also Roberta Scott and Jon Thiem, "Catastrophe Fiction, 1870-1914: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Works in English," *Extrapolation* 24:2 (Summer 1983).

20. Wagar, op. cit., p. 20.

21. Mitchell, J.A., *The Last American: A Fragment from the Journal of Khan-Li, Prince of Dimpf-Yoo-Chur and Admiral in the Persian Navy* (Frederick Stokes: New York 1889) p. 32-33. The Illustrations are spectacular.

22. Donnelly, Ignatius, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (F.J. Schulte: Chicago 1890). See also David Anderson, *Ignatius Donnelly* (Twayne: Boston 1980) p. 67- 80.

23. King, Wallace, *The Next War: A Prediction* (Martyn Publishing: Washington DC 1892) p. 204-5. Wallace claimed that the absurd Black conspiracy in his novel is "based on the facts already firmly established" and that "the very day fixed for exterminating the white race, December 31, 1900, as given in the story of 'The Next War,' is the identical date fixed upon by the (actual) conspirators." (15).

24. London, Jack, "The Unparalleled Invasion," in Dale Walker, *Curious Fragments: Jack London's Tales of Fantasy Fiction* (Kennkat Press: Port Washington NY 1975). Written at the end of 1906, this "freak short story," as London described it, was published in July 1910. See Earle Labor, Robert Leitz, and I. Milo Shepard, eds., *The Letters of Jack London, Volume Two: 1906-1912* (Stanford University: Stanford 1988) p. 680 (letter of 28 March 1907 to Robert McKay).

25. See the fascinating description in Dave Jacobs, *The UFO Controversy in America* (University of Indiana: Bloomington 1975) p. 29.

26. Suvin, p. 164-5.

27. Jeffries imitators have been legion. Aside from the Mitchell novel already mentioned, Van Tassel Sutphen's *The Doomsman*(1906) freely purloined

scenes from *After London* to tell a tale of romance and knightly derring-do in a ruined and mediaevalized New York.

28. It is important to reemphasize that *War of the Worlds* was originally read within a context of widespread popular acceptance that intelligent life, as evinced by the “canals,” existed on Mars. For a fascinating discussion of the imperialist nations as “cosmic savages” in light of extra-terrestrial civilizations see Karl Guthke, *The Last Frontier: Imagining Other Worlds from the Copernican Revolution to Modern Science Fiction* (Cornell: Ithaca 1990) p. 358 and 386-9.

29. *New York Journal* writer Garrett Serviss serialized a pro-imperialist sequel, *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1989), which depicted the Great Inventor invading the red planet and exterminating all of its inhabitants. In a climax of vulgar Darwinism, “it was the evolution of the earth against the evolution of Mars. It was a planet in the heyday of its strength matched against an aged and decrepit world...” (reissued by Carcosa House: Los Angeles 1947) p. 35.

30. Wells, H.G., *The War in the Air* (Macmillan: New York 1908). For the Gibbon analogy, see Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (Syracuse University: Syracuse 1995) p. 78-9.

31. England, George Allan, *Darkness and Dawn* (Small, Maynard: Boston 1914).

32. What darker epiphany is there of the rest of the twentieth century than Meidner's 1913 canvas, “Burning City”? See Carol Eiel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner* (Prestal: Munich 1989).

33. His most explicitly anti-capitalist novel is *The Air Trust* (1915).

Response

Kerwin Klein

I would like to thank everyone for inviting me to speak today. I gather that I was invited partly because I “do” California history here at Berkeley, partly because I have spent many years in Southern California, and partly because I am writing a book about California and the end of history and that makes me the only other person in America who has read the same trashy endist novels as Mike Davis [laughter]. And so tonight I would like to comment on the chapter which was the basis for Davis’ lecture: “Golden Ruins/Dark Raptures: The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles.”

Davis has identified over 100 novels and a number of movies in which he finds scenes of Los Angeles being destroyed, and he has tried to unlock their deeper meaning. His argument has two parts. The first involves a sort of Los Angeles exceptionalism: Los Angeles apocalyptic differs from endism in New York or San Francisco because we *love* to see Los Angeles destroyed. The second part of his argument is that “we” enjoy watching Los Angeles destroyed because of our racial anxieties. The fascination with the end of Los Angeles reflects a potent if sometimes subconscious white horror of the city’s emergence as a “Third World” metropolis.

The first part of the argument, that we love to watch Los Angeles die while we are horrified by the destruction of other places, is really a presumption rather than an argument. I cannot imagine a good empirical test of that claim, and Davis (perhaps wisely) does not try to provide one. No one has conducted a random sample survey that asks, “Which of these cities would you rather see

destroyed: New York, Washington, D.C. or Los Angeles?” In these latter days, we might find D.C. coming in first.

The second part of Davis’s argument, the racialization of apocalyptic, is more interesting. I think that he has seized upon a key element of apocalyptic, and that is the way in which racial politics inflect all endist thinking. We should point out, however, that racialism is not in any way unique to Los Angeles; race is a generic figure in apocalyptic discourse. As far as I know, apocalyptic was first identified as a racist tradition in the fifties. Such Jewish scholars as Robert Alter contended that the apocalyptic imagination as we know it today grew directly out of Christian anti-semitism. And in 1957 Norman Cohn’s famous book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, tied apocalyptic to anti-semitism in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Third Reich. On their accounts, apocalyptic was racialized long before the Spanish named Los Angeles, before the Puritans arrived on the shores of New England. We need to be exceptionally careful, then, in construing the exceptionalism of Los Angeles apocalyptic.

We need also to understand that California apocalyptic grows out of a venerable American tradition of mapping the end of history. In America, apocalyptic has evolved through space as well as through time, for it has been bound up with the idea that history rolls from East to West. Apocalyptic, in both its catastrophic and ecstatic forms, has generally followed a westward trajectory. The Puritans imagined the Heavenly City emerging in New England. By the eighteenth century, the millennial imagination projected itself upon Kentucky. By the nineteenth century, the white republic had rolled west to the Pacific, and the gold rush and the rise of San Francisco made California the last, best place for imagining history’s end. And in the journalism of Victorian San Francisco—in the writing of Mark Twain, Alphonso Delano, and Ambrose Bierce—we see all the tropes that Davis associates with Los Angeles: the Heavenly City, Armageddon, natural disaster, race war, the living dead, even the End as simulacrum. As early as the 1860s both Bierce and Twain had written in a campy voice that we today might describe as “postapocalyptic.”

Let me give a couple of quick examples of period apocalyptic in the Bay Area. The postcards sent home by the Forty-niners are illustrative: One of the most popular shows an earthquake in San Francisco. Another shows San Francisco burning to the ground and has a map of all the San Francisco districts that have

been destroyed by fire. Here we see the catastrophic aspect of apocalyptic: San Francisco as Armageddon.

Still closer to home, we also find the ecstatic aspect of millennialism, the Bay as Heavenly City. If you consult your placename histories, you will discover that Berkeley was named in 1866 for an English philosopher named Bishop Berkeley. The founding fathers named the place for Berkeley not because they loved his idealism, but because they liked a poem that Berkeley had written:

Westward, the course of empire takes its way
The first four acts already past,
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;
Time's noblest offspring is the last,

Welcome to the secular millennium. The apocalypse has literally been inscribed in our environs. Berkeley will embody history's end in the fifth and final age of humanity, and here we are, time's noblest offspring. I do not believe that Telegraph Avenue is what the good Bishop had in mind. [laughter]

San Francisco and the Bay plotted the early trajectories of California endism, and Los Angeles followed nearly a century later. In the late nineteenth century, remember, Los Angeles is a tiny, isolated place. Most white Americans do not even know it exists. As Southern California rises in the twentieth century, the tropes go south, disaster follows the dollars, and Los Angeles inherits the old San Francisco traditions. What *is* exceptional about Los Angeles is that Los Angeles apocalyptic, or apocalyptic that centers upon that city's destruction, emerges at roughly the same time as literary modernism and what comes to be called postmodernism. One of the key traditions or tropes of literary modernism and, later, postmodernism, is what one critic has called "the banalization of the end," the reduction of apocalyptic to aesthetic spectacle. That reduction goes hand in hand with the rise of the movie industry in Los Angeles, and the two facts are related but not, I think, in simple causal fashion. What had been novel moments for Bierce or Twain gradually became familiar clichés for literary and cinematic consumers.

This brings us back to the ways in which race figures into America's increasingly catastrophic notions of the end of history. The late nineteenth century is indeed a crucial period for apocalyptic narratives of racial chaos, but San Fran-

cisco and the Bay served as the focus for those fears. Northern California provides the settings for virtually all of the classic “invasion” narratives which depict California buried beneath the racial detritus of universal history. The most famous of these stories is W. Pierton Dooner’s *The Last Days of the Republic*, which shows all of America overrun by Asian hordes, and we should note that Dooner’s invasion begins in San Francisco. (Alexander Saxton’s *Indispensable Enemy* [1971] remains the best study of race, class consciousness, and apocalyptic in the Bay Area.) And Homer Lea’s *The Valor of Ignorance* (1909), which Mike Davis describes as a foundational text for Los Angeles apocalyptic, does depict a Japanese invasion of California, but Southern California is peripheral to Lea’s story, which is actually centered in the Bay Area. Indeed many, if not most of the books Davis cites as part of a “genre” of Los Angeles apocalyptic are set primarily in Northern California or elsewhere, and Los Angeles figures only in an occasional scene or chapter. As Los Angeles grows larger and more famous over the course of the twentieth century, invasion narratives increasingly use Southern California locales, but their plot forms grow out of that earlier San Francisco tradition. And apocalyptic never quits the Bay. We should not forget that the mean streets of polyglot humanity and nuclear rain described in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1967) (filmed by Ridley Scott as *Bladerunner* [1982]) were the streets of San Francisco.

This leads me to a second comment about racialism and apocalyptic. Not all and perhaps not even most apocalyptic discourse generated in and about California, particularly in the 20th century, is produced by whites. There is in fact an astounding millenarian tradition produced by African Americans, by Asian Americans, and by Asians, in and about California. If we are to understand apocalyptic in California or in Los Angeles, there are several ways in which we could tell the story.

One of the ways of telling the story is to stress white racist varieties of apocalyptic, and here Mike Davis has some important precursors. One of the high points in the identification of Los Angeles apocalyptic as a white discourse came in 1946 with Carey McWilliams’s muckraking classic, *Southern California Country*, which described utopian and endist thought as evidence of the degeneration of the white bourgeoisie. McWilliams cited Dr. William Money as a prime example of

the white endists who moved to Southern California from the Midwest. In the 1850s, Money founded a new church in Los Angeles, preached on a variety of topics, and drew a map that showed San Francisco about to collapse into hell. On this point Davis follows McWilliams, and Money resurfaces in “Golden Ruins, Dark Raptures,” as the paradigmatic Anglo-Saxon cultist. Unfortunately, while we do not know very much about Money, what we do know suggests that McWilliams and Davis are on shaky ground when they use him as evidence of the whiteness of apocalyptic. We know that Money became a Mexican citizen, married a Latina, spoke Spanish, and opposed the U.S. annexation of California. And the people who followed Money, attended his church, and shared in his discourse were Latino.

The second canonical figure in the traditional story of white endism is the flamboyant Pentecostal preacher, Aimee Semple McPherson. But here, too, a thin layer of whiteness masks a more colorful story. Perhaps the single greatest event in California apocalyptic occurs in 1906, when a young African-American minister named William Joseph Seymour arrives in Los Angeles. Seymour is a pioneer in what is going to become Pentecostalism, one of the most explosive religious movements of the century. Seymour begins preaching in a small neighborhood near downtown to predominantly African-American and Latino crowds. He believes that End Times have arrived, and that Los Angeles is witnessing the descent of what Pentecostals call the “latter rain,” the gift of tongues. At meetings the Holy Spirit fills the room, blacks, Latinos, and whites pray together, tremble in ecstasy, and speak in strange tongues. The new movement is known as the Azusa Mission Revival, and it spreads like wildfire. As with many apocalyptic sects, the Azusa Pentecostals regularly predict the destruction of non-believers. But they also believe that a multiracial community will survive the coming disaster. Pentecostalism quickly spreads to Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even to Canada, where a young white woman named Aimee Semple becomes a convert.

Today some scholars claim that Pentecostalism is on its way to becoming the most widely practiced form of Christianity on the globe. It is certainly the most rapidly growing form of Christianity, particularly in Latin America and Asia. The single largest church congregation in the world is a Pentecostal congregation in Korea. And despite our fascination with Sister Aimee’s Foursquare Gospel, I

suspect that if we were to conduct a survey of Los Angeles county enumerating those Christians who believe we are currently living in End Times, we would find that most of them are people of color. And I do not believe that we can trivialize that development by attributing it to the rise of the black right and the false historical consciousness of Louis Farrakhan.

Why am I placing so much stress upon Pentecostalism? It is not simply because I believe that Carey McWilliams or Mike Davis—neither of whom mentions the Azusa Mission Revival—have gotten the story wrong. Davis’s tale shows an amazing eye for detail and rightly criticizes the ways in which white supremacist eschatologies have demonized people of color. But I think that it is only a part of a larger story, and there is some danger, today, as we think about the racial politics of endism, of writing histories that artificially whiten apocalyptic. The irony is that we may identify apocalyptic discourse with white racism at the precise moment in which endist belief among people of color displaces white eschatology in Southern California.

I want to end by saying that I was gratified to learn that Mike Davis, at the first lecture, was very insistent upon rejecting the stereotypical view of Los Angeles as a place without a past, without history, culture, or community. But no matter what Davis’s intentions, I suspect that many readers will nonetheless assimilate his chapter into those bad, old clichés. Readers in New York or, dare we say it, Northern California, may believe that it confirms their classist judgments about Southern California. And I can easily imagine a substantial audience finishing the chapter, “Golden Ruins, Dark Raptures,” and then smugly concluding, “not only is L. A. ugly, shallow and declassé, it is also full of racist weirdos who believe in the end of history—aren’t we lucky we live in Berkeley?”

Response

David Reid

The title of tonight's program, "The Dark Raptures of Mike Davis' L.A.," epitomizes a powerful and singular historical vision. How powerful, as well as how singular, is suggested by way of contrast to some other, more familiar versions of Los Angeles; and for that, let me begin with today's *New York Times*.

Here, under the headline "Decadent Tales From a Naked City," is a review by Janet Maslin of *Boogie Nights*, the current epic-length movie starring Mark Wahlberg and Burt Reynolds about the pornography trade and its players in the San Fernando Valley in the late 1970s and early '80s, a period which, never mind anybody's second thoughts, we are invited to remember as golden.

"Some of the most distinctive American films of recent years—*Pulp Fiction*, *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, *L.A. Confidential* and now this one—have evoked a sleaze-soaked Southern California as an evil, alluring nexus of decadence and pop culture," Maslin writes. "*Boogie Nights* further ratchets up the raunchiness by taking porn movies and drug problems entirely for granted, and by fondly embracing a collection of characters who do the same."

Without prejudice to the charms of *Boogie Nights* or to the exacting historical research its production no doubt required, or the raids on thrift-shops in search of antique polyester finery, the "evil, alluring nexus of decadence and pop culture" familiarly known as Hollywood Babylon has been around, as milieu and mythology, for the greater part of the century. It was a twice-told tale when *Merton of the Movies* was published in 1922, and ancient history by 1950 when Gloria

Swanson did her mad scene in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, on which *Boogie Nights* is a sort of loose variation, a formulaic Hollywood legend of the fall crossed with a porn-movie industry retelling of *A Star Is Born*: Wahlberg, the former Calvin Klein underwear icon Marky Mark, is appealingly cast in the role of ingénue, played in previous versions by Janet Gaynor, Judy Garland, and Barbra Streisand.

Movies like *Boogie Nights* and *L.A. Confidential* appeal to the glib knowingness that the world almost always brings to its perceptions of Los Angeles, despite or perhaps because of the fact that even its agreed-upon iconography is hardly more extensive than the HOLLYWOOD sign, the freeways, and the palm trees. As Mike Davis put it in an interview published in the *Chicago Review* a few years ago, "though L.A.'s the most visualized, endlessly represented place in the world, you generally keep seeing the same thing over and over and over again," and familiarity breeds familiarity, not only do we imagine we know L.A. better than any other world-city, certainly better than mega-cities like Bombay or São Paulo in the Third World (of which, rather unilaterally, David Rieff has declared L.A. the capital)—we congratulate ourselves that *we have its number*.

Now all this is by way of explaining why, reading *City of Quartz* for the first time, which I was fortunate enough to do in typescript and then in page proofs, I had the exhilarating sense of encountering a book certain to be esteemed as a classic, but absolutely no premonition of the future bestseller. It was obvious that Mike had embraced the perilous task of defamiliarization, and, no matter how many admiring things the critics might say, what could be the commercial prospects of a book that afforded so few, indeed no, cheap, gratifying shocks of recognition? Instead of glitz and sleaze, we were invited to contemplate washed-up emigres, faded socialist utopias, haunted suburbs, malls like prisons, prisons like convention centers, libraries like fortresses, zoning battles in La Habra Heights, a derelict steel mill in Fontana! The Hollywoodians in this book were unhappy European exiles with names like Adorno, Brecht, and Doblin. The learning was daunting, the irony was astringent, and the Hollywood sign was nowhere to be seen.

But despite all that, *City of Quartz* was not destined to be one of those classics which are known for being neglected. And as regards the reviews, Mike has modestly protested that more of them should have been critical.

One critic who did oblige with reservations was Greil Marcus. In his essay collection *The Dustbin of History*, Marcus writes: “History is a kind of legend, and we do understand, or sense, buried stories, those haunts and specters, without quite knowing how or why.... Digging up the bodies of the city’s interred, martyred facts, Davis goes for what’s been written out of history—for what, like the wall only dogs can hear, exerts its force-field nonetheless.” (The allusion is to the Berlin Wall, whose former presence, according to a story by the novelist Peter Schneider that Marcus repeats, guard-dogs trained during the Cold War by the Eastern German authorities still sense, though most of its length has been torn down.)

“*City of Quartz* is serious, measured, outraged, flinty, ironic, fast-moving,” he goes on. “As it happened, though, I was reading the book when HBO was running its made-for-cable film *Cast a Deadly Spell*” ...and on balance he preferred *Cast a Deadly Spell*. Let us see why.

“The setting was Los Angeles, just after World War II, ‘when’ —and this was the twist—‘everyone used magic.’” According to this conceit, witchcraft is a licensed profession, goblins brought home from the Pacific by GIs run amok, “gargoyles on mansions come to life and do their masters’ bidding,” and zombies with a six-month guarantee are shipped in crates from Haiti to work construction on the postwar suburbs. The detective-protagonist, all-too-allusively named H. Philip Lovecraft, who uniquely disdains to use magical powers, is hired by a demented moneybag who wishes to summon spirits from the vast deep so they can destroy the world... and, Marcus summarizes, “the plot grows ever more absurd and convoluted—and just below its B-movie surface, ever more compelling, more *likely*. As I watched, it seemed as if all of Raymond Chandler, all the books and all the films, had been compressed into a story Chandler had always known was there, but could never get up the nerve to tell with a straight face.”

You remember how Thomas Pynchon defines paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as “nothing less than the onset, the leading edge of the discovery that *everything is connected*.” Raymond Chandler is uncontroversially the great mythographer of Los Angeles, and clearly he was possessed by a Balzacian sense of the hidden connectedness of society in which crime and the guilty knowledge of it are organizing principles, *de haut en bas*. But there was too much of the worldly fox in his

temperament for him to suspect the existence or wish to dramatize the hedgehog's suspicion of One Big Plot. This, really, is the moral of the famous story about how Howard Hawks (not Humphrey Bogart, as Frederic Jameson says somewhere), who was going to direct the movie of *The Big Sleep*, and William Faulkner, who was writing the screenplay, realized during a long night of whisky-soaked collaboration that neither had the faintest idea how a body had ended up in a sunken Buick by the Lido fish pier, and when they telephoned Chandler, who was sitting up late with a bottle himself, neither did he. While Chandler believed that lots of things are connected, he did not believe that *everything* is. This is why his thrillers, unlike those Greil Marcus admires, like Thomas Gifford's *The Wind-Chill Factor*, are not paranoid, and why his effects, though sometimes uncanny, are never supernatural. There are many cunning corridors in his novels, but they do not reach into the bowels of the earth. The story that Marcus imagines Chandler being afraid to tell is surely not one he ever thought to write; for something like it, one must look to a true masterpiece of paranoia like the "Report on the Blind" in Ernesto Sábato's great novel *On Heroes and Tombs*. The suggestion that Chandler's novels, and the movies based upon them somehow secretly revolve about some chthonic Theory of Everything like H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu "mythos" is truly bizarre.

In any case, history being less artful than HBO (Aristotle, I believe, makes this point), Marcus is not at all enthralled by an occult affair, related in *City of Quartz*, that actually unfolded in Southern California in the 1930s and '40s; and this despite a cast of characters that includes Aleister Crowley, the "Great Beast" himself, not entirely happily assisting his disciple in necromancy, John Parsons, a Cal Tech professor and founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, in an attempt to produce the Antichrist in green and pleasant Pasadena. All the elements would seem to be there, but Marcus censoriously dismisses the whole lurid business as "altogether incidental to the creation of the postwar world," finding instead that the convoluted absurdities of *Cast a Deadly Spell* "leave you with the fearsome sense that Los Angeles is, by its nature, a place of sorcerers, who can do anything. It is, if not better history than *City of Quartz*, an opening into more history."

At the risk of revealing myself as some kind of benighted positivist, it seems to me that a phantasmagoria like *Cast a Deadly Spell* is an opening into *no*

history, precisely because the “fearsome sense that Los Angeles is, by its nature, a place of sorcerers, who can do anything”—granted it might induce a pleasing *frisson*, or even a few long thoughts—is not a *historical* perception.

Nor does it belong to secret history, as I would define that lively and promiscuous form. Secret history, which a great deal, but not all, of *City of Quartz* consists of, still lacks a proper anatomy. It is easily shown that it has a distinguished ancestry, going back to antiquity and, more pertinently, a good claim to being the central literary genre of the postwar era, spanning fiction, history, criticism, and journalism, with Pynchon, Norman Mailer, and Don DeLillo among its distinguished practitioners in the novel, while in nonfiction its classics include Marcus’s own *Lipstick Traces*, ambitiously subtitled “A Secret History of the Twentieth Century.”

The prototypical secret history is the *Anecdota*, the scandalous chronicle of the reign of the Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora traditionally attributed to the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius: “secret” because it remained unpublished during the lifetime of its supposed author. In his *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson defines “anecdote” in exactly this sense: “something not yet published; secret history.” Sir Frank Kermode says somewhere that everyone knows what secret history is: it is “the dirt beneath the official version.” But it can also refer to scandalous self-disclosure, as in Paul Theroux’s novel *My Secret History*, and, at the opposite pole, to figures in the carpet, those occult continuities in history whose elements are either so dispersed in time or conspiratorially hidden, or both, that the patterns they compose elude notice. Take, for example, Pound’s line in the *Cantos*, “Black dresses for Demeter.” This is intended to condense millennia of secret history into a single line, his belief in the secret survival of the ancient mystery-cults, and how in various ways their mythic origins were literally encoded in the everyday life of peasants uncorrupted by urban life and quite unaware of the existence or meaning of the long continuities they were enacting.

Secret history is often a vehicle for what Peter Brooks calls “the melodramatic imagination,” which, even when it does not actually presume the existence of supernatural agencies, which it often does, commonly exploits the language of the supernatural, as in (Brooks’ examples) Balzac, Henry James, and Mailer. It occurred to Procopius that his depraved subjects might literally be demonic, but

then, refined into metaphor, a similar thought often strikes those who attempt seriously to write about power. In Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is not a superstitious book, written in L.A. during the Second World War, we read of "all the werewolves who exist in the darkness of history and keep alive that fear without which there can be no rule."

But unlike various other forms assumed by the melodramatic imagination, secret history always traffics with fact. In Pynchon, the master secret historian in the novel, this is so to such an extent that, as Richard Poirier writes, "Eventually we get to wonder at almost every point if we have been given not fiction at all, but history." I need not remind this audience of how in Mike Davis' work the analytical finesse and theoretical reach, the novelistic imagination and the journalistic verve, are undergirded and *guaranteed* by immense feats of reading and research in myriad fields, the whole meticulously documented. In *City of Quartz*, which William Gibson describes as "more cyberpunk than any work of fiction could ever be," I count 792 footnotes—a rebuke, parenthetically, to publishers who insist that readers cannot tolerate the sight of reduced type.

In contrast, mere ascertainable fact seems to have a somewhat probationary status in Marcus's *Dustbin*. "We cannot invent our facts," he quotes Eric Hobsbawm. "Either Elvis Presley is dead or he isn't." But though Marcus indeed calls for "hard facts," one has the sense that a fact or historical moment engages him only to the extent that it licenses or provokes what he calls "radical fantasies." But there are fantasies and fantasies, radical fantasies and radical fantasies. Lenin once wrote that when "the revolution is made, at the moment of its climax and exertion of all human capabilities... the *class consciousness*, the will, the passion and the *fantasy* of tens of millions... are urged on by the very acute class struggle"—A very gnomic saying coming from a historical personage who usually was as mad for facts as Mr. Gradgrind.

I believe we are obliged to note the difference between *Gravity's Rainbow* and a supermarket thriller like *The Wind-Chill Factor*, with its paranoid premise that the Nazis "secretly" won the Second World War, and between, let us say, complex novelistic meditations on the Cold War like De Lillo's *Libra* or Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, with its repulsive fantasy of a love affair between Richard Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg. There is a difference

between the meticulous scholarship that has elaborated on the CIA's momentous subversion of democracy in Guatemala in 1954, elsewhere, too, of course, and on the agency's long complicity with drug traders, really going back to OSS days, and the destructive, anachronistic fantasy, now rampant urban myth, that it *created* the crack epidemic in L.A. in the 1980s. Reverting to the L.A. myths promoted in the *New York Times*, James Ellroy's novels do the same ghoulish violence to history that he is found inflicting on the poor abused flesh of his invented characters. I confess to being very doubtful about dignifying such fantasies or indulging them; I fear our discovery someday that, as Yeats wrote,

We had fed the heart on fantasies.
The heart's grown brutal with the fare.

Whatever postmodernity consists of, we all know Los Angeles is supposed to incarnate it. Yet, as long ago as 1976, even as L.A. was luxuriating in the golden age of disco and filmed, not videotaped, pornography celebrated in *Boogie Nights* (like all our golden ages in America, the reviewers agree, it was "innocent")—the travel writer and historian Jan Morris was shrewdly describing the soon-to-be capital of the postmodern as being "essentially of the forties and the fifties, and especially perhaps of the Second World War years.... Los Angeles then was everyone's vision of the New World: and so it must always remain, however it develops, a memorial to those particular times, as Florence means for everyone the spirit of Renaissance, and Vienna speaks always of *fin de siècle*."

In a bookstore in Rome a few weeks ago, my eye was caught by a vivid phrase on the back of a paperback book: "*un grupo di bambini all'angolo della strada che parlano della fine del mondo.*" A group of children, all angels, on the road, who are speaking of the end of the world. Who could these *bambini* be, I wondered. Looking more closely, I realized that this was Jack Kerouac promoting the Beat Generation, half a century ago.

It is a period—the first ten or so years of the postwar—that in retrospect we are perhaps too quick to understand—in popular memory so confident and expansive and suburban, but in fact, especially toward the end of the big war and then in its immediate aftermath, the *noir* years, full of forebodings and shadowed by the sense that history had reached its terminus. In New York City during the

Second World War, the primordial Beats, Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, the younger two under the influence of Burroughs, were haunted by a Spenglerian sense that they were living in the last days of the big cities. In their ruins, sooner rather than later, joining the eternal Fellahin of the earth, they would creep, like beatified mice, among the ruins in a world that had outlasted history.

In Los Angeles, which Kerouac describes in *On the Road* as “the loneliest and most brutal of American cities,” the end of history is plainly at hand: “The beatest characters in the country swarmed upon the sidewalks—all of it under those soft Southern California stars that are lost in the brown halo of the huge desert encampment L.A. really is.” Civilization is a “poor broken delusion,” and later, in Mexico, the mountain Indians who come to beg from Sal and Dean, which is to say Jack Kerouac and Neal Casady, “didn’t know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way.”

The bomb, as I have suggested elsewhere, simply confirmed and deepened forebodings about the fate of the city which had been acute since the beginning of the Great Depression and seemed completely vindicated by the whirlwind of war which had reduced so many of earth’s great cities outside North America to ruins. They are present in poetry, philosophy, political controversy, and pulp fiction; and of course in *film noir*, most memorably in Orson Welles’s *The Lady from Shanghai*, when the crazed lawyer played by Glenn Anders exclaims to Welles as they stand high on a hilltop overlooking Acapulco: “Do you think the world is coming to an end? It’s coming, you know. Oh, yeah. First the big cities and maybe even this. It’s just *got* to come....”

And if the world did not end, as the imagination of disaster expected, surely history would. With the war, the apocalypse had come and gone, and with its end came a sort of Egyptian sense that the world was settling into a pattern down whose grooves things might run for hundreds of years, who could tell how long? Perhaps, it would be something like the Spenglerian “Second Religiousness” expected by the Beats, perhaps something as monstrously evil as Orwell imagined in *1984*, or, as later on appeared likelier, something more subtly oppressive, like an endlessly-prolonged Eisenhower Administration, in Gore Vidal’s phrase, “the dull terror of the Great Golfer.”

Obviously, the mood of which I am speaking was strongest immediately after the war. After visiting the ruins of Berlin in 1945, Stephen Spender spoke of a return to nomadism, “when people walk across deserts of centuries... The Reichstag and the Chancellory are already sights for sightseers, as they might well be in another five hundred years. They are the scenes of a collapse so complete that it already has the remoteness of all final disasters.” And similarly, in “Memorial to the City,” dated June 1949, W. H. Auden, who had toured the ruins of Germany with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, writes of “this night”

Where our past is a chaos of graves
and the barbed-wire stretches ahead
Into our future till it is lost to sight...

After the dreadful tumults of the war, much of the world braced itself for an ordeal not of change but of changelessness in the spacious but shadowed world beyond history. If not tyrannical and bleak, it would almost certainly be regimented and severely, perhaps brutally rationalized; humankind seemed to have entered a long defile. In New York City, soon after the war, a young veteran, Louis Simpson, threw his wristwatch from a high window “because we are all living in Eternity now,” and after a few other extravagances the future Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry was carried off to the madhouse; a decade later, Allen Ginsberg put the episode into *Howl*: “who threw watches off the roof to cast their ballot for / Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads / every day for the next decade.”

Obviously, days were nothing like as dragon-ridden in the U.S. as they were in Europe. But the common fear was that the cessation of war production would mean a return to the stagnant miseries of the Depression, which Lord Keynes had compared to the Dark Ages; and in fact the economy of L.A., abruptly deprived of war work, did collapse immediately after the war. In *The Economy of Cities*, Jane Jacobs, whom I revere, maintains that L.A.’s prosperity was revived by entrepreneurs manufacturing things like sliding glass doors and bathing suits in backyard garages and Quonset huts left over from the war—it is pretty to think so—but most historians are inclined to credit the good times to the boom in “defense” manufacturing that started with Harry Truman’s war scare in 1947 and

continued almost uninterrupted for another thirty years. Not until 1950, as John Kenneth Galbraith notes in *American Capitalism*, did big corporations cease to plan on the assumption of a renewed depression. Meanwhile, conservatives grimly expected collectivism would freeze the arteries of economy and society throughout the capitalist West, as in the communist East, and soon enough, the world would again be at arms. As the wealthy Mrs. Loring says morosely to her future husband, Philip Marlowe, in *The Long Good-bye*, “We’ll have another war and at the end of that nobody will have any money—except the crooks and the chiselers. We’ll all be taxed to nothing, the rest of us.” This, of course, is the apocalypse exactly as it would have been envisioned from La Jolla, where Chandler lived and drank in his later years.

So when we find Jan Morris describing Los Angeles as “essentially of the forties and the fifties, and especially perhaps of the Second World War years” and “everyone’s vision of the New World,” we have to address the irony that in those days the thoughtful expected the New World would be a very grim affair. The flourishing of L.A., at the edge of the Western world, as remote as could be from Europe and its bombed-out pleasure-gardens, seemed somehow connected with the prevailing sense of an ending: the posthistorical transit into eternity was evident even in the movies turned out by the dream factories in Culver City and Burbank with titles like *Tomorrow Is Forever* (starring Orson Welles and Claudette Colbert) or, in a different key, *Kiss Tomorrow Good-bye* (starring Jimmy Cagney), and *Until the End of Time* (starring Guy Madison and Robert Mitchum). In the fifties and early sixties books appeared like Wolf Grunewald’s *Überall ist Babylon* (translated as *Babylon Is Everywhere: The City as Man’s Fate*), in which the history of the city is traced “From Ur to Los Angeles,” and Christopher Rand’s study of L.A., indicatively titled *The Ultimate City*. Once again, there is the sense of having reached history’s terminus, after which... “What is *my* future?” Orson Welles, playing the corrupt sheriff tyrannizing over a border town in *Touch of Evil*, foolishly asks Marlene Dietrich, as she plays her prophetic cards. “You don’t have one,” she says, all steely pity. “*Your future is all used up.*”

With the millennium upon us, the Second World War *still* looks more apocalyptic than any prospect before us. The approach of 2000 or, for the precisionist, 2001, though treading like the beat in a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, does

not seem to be inspiring the sort of premonitory fascination and dread, the extravagant or fearful expectations, that, as erudition tells us, were felt, more or less intensely, more or less widely, at such dates as 195, 1000, 1033, 1236, 1588, and 1666. Rather, as in 1900–1901, the prevailing mood has become more curious than anxious. Beginning in the twelfth century, Kermode writes in *The Sense of an Ending*, we encounter the “myth, if we may call it that, of Transition. Before the End there is a period which does not properly belong either to the End or to the *saeculum* preceding it. It has its own characteristics.” The familiar apocalyptic themes of Terror and Decadence are elaborated in terms of the reign of the Beast in *Revelations*, and its millennial sequel, preceding the End; eschatology dissolves into numerology, and people begin to look for signs of the Antichrist and his antagonist the Last Emperor. As I read the business pages these days, Bill Gates might be either or both. But I offer this observation only as the latest evidence of how, as Kermode says, “apparently unrelated *fin-de-siècle* myths grow together.”

Long perspectives, Philip Larkin writes, only link us to our losses. The historical perspectives in *City of Quartz* are long; in Mike’s next book, *Ecology of Fear*, they are rather longer. In the former—and let me end with this—the sense of loss is vitally connected with the “working-class nostalgia” that critics have noticed in Mike’s work, though without pursuing what seems to me its larger significance.

Nostalgia, as V. S. Pritchett once wrote, is the “generic American emotion which floods all really American literature,” including, I would add, most of our historical writing which deserves the status of literature. If there is a tragic sense of life in American literature, it consists of the troubled suspicion, or perhaps I should say, the repeated realization, that the future is no land of dreams but something mysteriously lost, as it was for Scott Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*, “somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” As Pritchett says, “The peculiar power of American nostalgia is that it is not only harking back to something lost in the past, but suggests also the tragedy of a lost future.”

The connection of lost past and foreclosed future is apparent in *City of Quartz* literally from the first sentence—“The best place to view Los Angeles of the next millennium is from the ruins of its alternative future”—to its last, in which Mike’s hometown of Fontana, where “past generations are like so much

debris to be swept away by the developers' bulldozers," has become "the junkyard of dreams."

It was the novelist Christopher Isherwood who said California is "a tragic land, like Palestine, like all Promised Lands." But more than any other history I know, Mike Davis in *City of Quartz* has documented how and why this has been so. "Excavating the future in L.A.," he has given us images of the Southland that belong with the Big Two-Hearted River, the valley of ashes (along with the green light at the end of Daisy's Pier), and Sutpen's Hundred in that visionary landscape of collective loss and longing whose exploration constitutes American literature.

In pursuit of the millennium, "we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

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