6. "Noir as the Ruins of the Left"

A docufable on Walter Benjamin in Los Angeles

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Mike Davis has occasionally thought about writing a piece tentatively entitled "Walter Benjamin in Boyle Heights." Benjamin does not commit suicide; instead he takes the boat to New York and winds up among the German émigrés in Los Angeles. Being too much a scholar of the city street, he elects not to live in the Pacific Palisades, not to bow at the feet of Thomas Mann. But he does show up at modified barbecues at Feuchtwanger's[1] estate, chats with Schoenberg, and hopes for some beneficence from Mann, for the phone call that could bring a hefty literary contract perhaps, anything to improve the pittance that the Frankfurt School in Exile provides. (I can feel myself embroidering here.) Benjamin moves instead to Boyle Heights, a Jewish/Mexican/Japanese/Serb enclave just east of downtown, across a bridge that reminds him of bridges in Berlin perhaps. After a somewhat tortured version of a power lunch with Bertolt Brecht, he decides to write a *Chronik* on Hollywood studios, particularly those at Gower Gulch, the marginal ones that produce horse operas and cheesy Flash Gordon serials.

Benjamin takes the Sunset Red Car to Gower, feels his suit in need of pressing under the baking, dry heat, but walks another mile until the

1 Lion Feuchtwanger, whose home in Pacific Palisades (at Paso Robles) was the literary meeting place for the German writers in exile (interview with Richard Hertz, 1995).

Crossroads to the World[2] display catches his eye. A globe of the planet, continents included, spins serenely and idiotically in front of a patch of stores, and what might resemble an arcade (there is also an arcade in downtown Los Angeles). But he feels too far away from all that shopping history to bother anymore. All his notes are crated somewhere in Paris, probably being used as briquettes for heating a flat in the winter.

Years later, a scholar tries to interpret the writings of Walter Benjamin in Los Angeles. Apparently, Benjamin became very interested in meeting Harry Raymond, the detective who had cracked open the Shaw Administration downtown, forced it out of office, to be replaced by the reform mayor Fletcher Bowron. Raymond, who still lived in Boyle Heights just blocks from Benjamin, had survived being blown up by a bomb planted in his car by Earl Kytelle. Later, after continued threats on his life, he "blew the lid off of City Hall" in a very steamy trial.

Benjamin also ate at Clifton's cafeteria downtown, and met the owner, Clifford Clinton, formerly an employer of Harry Raymond, for a very politically explicit radio program back in the thirties. Benjamin spoke with him for a while about radio itself, about the shows each had written (Benjamin had worked in radio in the late twenties in Germany). But, most of all, Benjamin had trouble addressing the ruins, allegories and street energy of Los Angeles, the intricacies of its local politics. Flâneurship took on a disengaged spirit, until he located his subject.

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2 The actual name was Crossroads *of* the World (Benjamin's problem with English – at first). This was a complex built in 1936–37, along Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, as "an outstanding landmark and civic attraction as well as a centralized shopping district." It was generally perceived more as a "stage set than most retail facilities of any sort." Each building had a national theme: England, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Persia, Colonial New England, etc. It also had a midway, like a fair or a carny; and the project overall was continuously advertised as the first consumer space to function immediately as a public space as well, however exaggerated the sense of 'public'. Benjamin missed many of these details, but saw it as a composite of "American Surrealist evasion," and found the French simulacrum a bit "terrifying, along with what they thought passed for coffee" (see Longstreth 792ff.).

I can see him taking notes in a movie theater, taking in the used bookstores on Third Street, working as a tutor, trying once again to position himself within a university. His study on B films as baroque irony took four years to write, while he drifted uneasily inside the margins of the German/noir film community. His descriptions of walking through La Cienega Boulevard undoubtedly influenced Sartre's visit to L.A. right after the war, and Sartre's essay "American Cities," where he declared in somewhat omniscient fashion that neither New York nor Chicago had neighborhoods in the purer European sense, and that streets in America were generally nothing more than "a piece of highway."

> In certain cities I noticed a real atrophy of the sidewalk. In Los Angeles, for example, on La Cienega, which is lined with bars, theaters, restaurants, antique dealers and private residences, the sidewalks are scarcely more than side-streets that lead customers and guests from the roadway into the house. Lawns have been planted from the façades to the roadway of this luxurious avenue. I followed a narrow path between the lawns for a time without meeting a living soul, while to my right, cars streaked by on the road; all animation in the street had taken refuge on the high road. (Sartre 123).

Benjamin actually filed this quotation in 1956, a few months before his death. Beside it, he wrote, in that clipped style he developed later in his life: "A city is a blind courier. It brings nothing. It takes nothing. That is why we grow so fixated on roads. Sartre should have watched the dust settle more."

The scholar found this inside fifty pages of notes for a Los Angeles *Passagenwerk* – nothing as elaborate as what Benjamin planned to write about the Parisian arcades. But on page 14 Benjamin had circled the same quotation from his writing that Davis used, quite coincidentally, as the preface to *City of Quartz*:

> The superficial inducement, the exotic, the picturesque has an effect only on the foreigner. To portray a city, a native must have other, deeper motives – motives of one who travels into the past instead of

> into the distance. A native's book about his city will always be related to memoirs; the writer has not spent his childhood there in vain.[3]

The term "memoir" is the link; more specifically, the memoir of buildings inhabited by political ghosts. In Benjamin's writings about Berlin and Paris, city streets resemble what he defined as ruin in his first book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Ruins are shells of faded memory recovered as theater – stylized, aestheticized; an exotic memory of distilled torment. No matter how authentic the ruin, it is received, or read, as simulated memory: phantasmagoria, dioramas, arcades. Every building is faintly warped to the eye, as if by glaucoma. The built environment is both political critique and nostalgia. So also is his literary style; the montage of quotations on the surface of the page draws attention to the quotations he finds on the surface of buildings.

The memoir then is a contradiction. It describes actions taken, but in the spirit of lost opportunities – deeds left unfinished, barely desired any longer; moments when the writer was a flâneur. As a somewhat metaphysically inclined Marxist, Benjamin was very aware of how paradoxical this approach was[4], as is Mike Davis for that matter, by no means a metaphysician, but often, in his own words, a "reteller of the Book of Apocalypse." In that spirit, I can imagine Benjamin inserting this quotation in his archive about Los Angeles:

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3 The passage is from Benjamin's 1929 review of Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*, entitled "Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs", known in English as "The Return of the Flaneur". Here quoted from Davis's book.

4 Benjamin describes this contradiction clearly in his oft-cited essay on Surrealists as "profane illuminators." The surrealist use of optical paradox reminds Benjamin of the crisis among revolutionary intelligentsia during the 1920s: "We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday… Nowhere do … metaphor and image collide so drastically and so irreconcilably as in politics … This image sphere, however, can no longer be measured out by contemplation… [That is why] the revolutionary intelligentsia … has failed almost entirely in making contact with the proletarian masses, because [its imagery] can no longer be performed contemplatively." (*Reflections* 190f.).

> Language clearly shows that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lay interred. (*Reflections* 25f.)[5]

Davis was aware when he wrote *City of Quartz* that much in the language of academic history functions as "dead cities interred." Its reliquary function helps distract, rather than spark urban politics. He did not want a style that divided him from deeply held commitments, centrally to the labor movement, but to others as well – the politics that evolved into the gang truce; architectural *charrettes* that occasionally change city policy; more broadly to political journalism for newspapers or for the *Nation*. He therefore chose an activist writing style for *City of Quartz* – the historian using elements of noir fiction and polemical criticism – to build an imaginary lively enough to compete with the sunshine mystique of L.A. promotion. He wanted the book to cut more deeply into muscle tissue, and perhaps make some political difference.

That is not to say that this style is immune to the crisis that Benjamin describes, when history "seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" ("Theses" 255). Any critique that uses a noir aesthetic can transform the agonies of the inner city into an exotic descent. On one level at least, that of popular memory, there is no such thing as bad publicity for the crimes of capitalism, any more than there is for pornography.

The popular success of *City of Quartz* has bred an exotic reading that resembles a cyber-noir opera. There seems no way to avoid that. In the minds of many fans of the book – certainly the many students who speak to me – "Fortress L.A." flashes internally like a movie scenario. Despite its effect on local journalism and on urban studies generally, that paramnesiac imaginary seems impossible to shake. Students describe helicopters pulsating beneath a huge crane shot. A futuristic swat team crashes through a window, as if from a *Die Hard* scenario.

5 *Berliner Chronik* was started in 1932.

William Gibson, at the back of his novel *Virtual Light*, cites Davis as a singular influence. "His observations regarding the privatization of public space" (Gibson 351f.) can be seen in the character Rydell's life in Los Angeles. Rydell is a rent-a-cop who works for the IntenSecure company, which also specializes in "gated residential" policing, particularly out in the "edge cities" (Gibson 77f.), clearly a term that is part of a much larger debate that includes Davis (cf. Klein ch.2, fn 27). I could not say precisely if other cyber novelists have worked directly with Davis's critique. If they have, their stories would seem to merge two contraries that he discusses: upscale enclaving, and the boom in prisons and surveillance. Novels like Stephenson's *Snow Crash* do happen to resemble Davis's version of the panoptical, as expressed in 1990. One can even sense elements of "Fortress L.A." in the staging of the movie version of *Johnny Mnemonic.* It is a vision of opportunities shattered, of saving democracy after it has died, in a world twenty years after passages from Davis like the following:

> Anyone who has tried to take a stroll at dusk through a strange neighborhood patrolled by armed security guards and signposted with death threats quickly realizes how merely notional, if not utterly obsolete, is the old idea of the "freedom of the city." (250)[6]

I also see a secondary reading of "Fortress L.A.", less essential perhaps. In phrases about the "obsolescence of freedom," Davis's text becomes an ironic confession about political activist literature in the 1990s. American politics at the moment leaves a lot to feel nostalgic about. To some degree, the left is also a phantom limb, much as I regret to say it. Conservative promotion has matured much faster than leftist literature. Our political culture has been emulsified by advertising. Policies and politics continue to skew deeply to the right. And the arc has not turned to the

6 Let us examine this image in an innocent way. As a child, I used to wander through Coney Island day and night, watch people knock each other around, hear the groans of prostitutes under the boardwalk, and yet feel immune, as if I had a right to drift through the city. That would seem quite risky for my son, and he instinctively knows it.

left yet. In response, activist literature has begun to take on a baroque theatricality, such that Benjamin used when describing the cultural politics of the twenties and thirties in Western Europe. He sensed, as many on the left do today, that mass promotion had become thorough enough to be a civilization like the Baroque; it delivers its own policies and politics. And while Benjamin was hardly as cynical about this effect as Adorno, he felt its phantoms very personally. They spoke to his own predicament while in exile, an activism distracted, partly erased – like noir literature in yet another way. It is the "detective" describing vagrancy and marginalization, the Jewish Communist intellectual waiting in Paris during an emergent Nazi era.

The linkage in my fictional essay has gone from Benjamin to Davis, and back to noir nostalgia, and finally to cyber-noir. Descriptions of the city street as ruin are at the core of each of these. Benjamin was not deeply involved in noir fiction when he lived in L.A., but he did collect a few quotations from the *Black Mask* school, mostly the moody openings to stories about the climate, particularly the dry winds, driving people to crime. They described for him ruins in the making, similar, he noted, to "the curling wallpaper in my tiny kitchen." One citation came from the story "Goldfish," written by Raymond Chandler in 1936, who was at a low point financially at the time (perhaps Benjamin empathized):

> I wasn't doing any work that day, just catching up on my foot-dangling. A warm gusty breeze was blowing in at the office window and the soot from the Mansion House Hotel oilburners across the alley was rolling across the glass top of my desk in tiny particles, like pollen drifting over a vacant lot. (Chandler, 1st parag.)[7]

That is very much the mood of Chandler interiors, memory dissolving at the edges, like old wallpaper. "I'll Be Waiting" appears in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 14 October 1939, only a month after the start of the war in Europe:

7 This is the opening paragraph of "Goldfish", cited in many editions now (e.g., *Trouble is My Business*, originally in *Black Mask* (1936), and reprinted in the Chandler anthology *Red Wind*.

> At one in the morning, Carl, the night porter, turned down the last of three table lamps in the main lobby of the Windermere Hotel.[8] The blue carpet darkened a shade or two and the walls drew back into remoteness. The chairs filled with shadowy loungers. In the corners were memories like cobwebs.

The most prescient symbol that Benjamin collected was about the Santa Ana winds, in what probably has now become the most famous Chandler opening, from "Red Wind" (1938):

> There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen. You can even get a full glass of beer at a cocktail lounge. (Chandler 1938).[9]

In the sixties, this passage was made famous in Joan Didion's *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*[10], a bit of dark flânerie in its own right. But more important to an understanding of what Benjamin sensed, these winds are mentioned by other writers of Chandler's era. Simmering hatreds gather in an uncanny stillness. Ozymandias waits for a dust storm. The dryness is faintly stinging, like a slightly sour amphetamine. (I actually love the Santa Ana sensation, by the way.)

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8 Years ago, a student made a film about this short story. He began by asking for advice about locations, and found a hotel intact from the thirties. He was disappointed though. It wasn't "dark" enough. I told him that a white, neoclassicist look was very trendy in hotel interiors back then. He remained unconvinced. It simply wasn't "real" enough.

9 See note 7 above. I rarely find an L.A. crime novel that does not mention the Santa Anas somewhere, particularly since 1990 (e.g. Michael Connelly, Alex Abella).

10 The section that mentions Chandler and the winds originally appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* as "The Santa Ana."

In 1941, Benjamin clipped a section written by Erle Stanley Gardner, then one of the veteran L.A. *Black Mask* writers. It was an extraordinary two pages on santanas. Before they strike, the sky glows with a "startling clarity," "dustless," the air "listless devoid of life." Then the blast of heat "churns up particles of dust so fine they filter between dry lips, grit against the surface of the teeth." (Fair 19f.). The narrator in the story is a writer at work when the dust hits. He has to shutter the windows, but hears the crackle and rattling. His nerves get edgier. The narrative hook has been established, like an undertow. The story begins – in this case about clues to a murder that can be seen in female accessories left on the furniture. A woman appears suddenly in the room, and startles the writer. While the santana continues, she begins to talk about a pair of leather gloves[11] that the writer notices have an inexplicable but telling graphite stain in the corner. (I can't write this without thinking of the gloves in the O.J. Simpson trial being "extra large" but too small, presumably shrunk because they were soaked in blood: another empty trope in that ludicrous trial. Descriptions of trials remain a continual source of threnodic irony in crime books, even parody. Justice is turned into a theatricalized ruin, like the edgy testimony of a hostile witness in a crime film.)

Noir literature emerged in the twenties during many such cases – during the Teapot Domes of the Republican era, during Prohibition, in the vacuum after the Progressive movement was wiped out immediately after the First World War. It was social realism as baroque; leftist activist intentions faintly remembered, then re-enacted with futile results. The crime stories that appeared in *Black Mask* magazine bore out this ambivalence – militant tales about grotesque waste of life, red harvests. The

11 Also: the photo of gloves in André Breton's surrealist novel *Nadja* (1927, 57): an aleatory clue to a badly remembered event – in this paramnesiac satire of the gothic. *Nadja* is a prelude to Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers (Les Gommes*, 1953), where American noir is clearly a source. Again, the clues lead to a circle of undetection, then in the final scene mutually eradicate memory of any crime at all. And note Robbe-Grillet's pun – *gomme* as gummy eraser and the gumshoe (as eraser). Both are "a soft crumbly eraser that friction does not twist but reduces to dust" (Robbe-Grillet 126).

writing generally retains that divided spirit into the thirties, both militant and wistful, despite the enthusiasms of the New Deal – more as a statement about the Depression. It is hard-boiled nostalgia, hinting at periods of moral clarity that have become vestigial in characters like the Continental Op, the Thin Man, or Philip Marlowe. They all booze about a past they cannot entirely forget. And while they have, in Chandler's words, "a disgust for sham and a contempt for pettiness," their world is a withering joke.

> It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in … It is not funny that a man should be killed, but it is sometimes funny that he should be killed for so little. (Chandler 1972, 21)[12]

After they finish with the crooks, and the dust has settled, the crime remains to some degree past the point of no return. The corpse will not be brought back to life.[13] The evil is still in the atmosphere. Often no one seems all that interested in seeing the crime solved anyway. The decisions that could have made for an easy solution were allowed to lapse. The crime scene is also a ruin. The detective suffers a phantom urge for moral correction, like a bout of malaria. It is a nostalgia for activism during deeply treacherous conservative eras.

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12 I should add that Chandler's politics did veer to the right, as one might expect for a former oil executive; but always very nostalgically, as if out of disgust for lost chances more than as a commitment to anything resembling the right-wing politics of the forties and fifties, which he generally felt were a pox to the life of the writer. He also found postwar Los Angeles too scrubbed and artificial, even while he is so remorseless in his stories about the decayed districts of prewar Los Angeles. Chandler flourishes in ambience, from the Latin *ambiens*, meaning to "go round," not very far from another Latin root, *ambigere* (as in ambiguity), "to wander."

13 This point brings me to the oddness of the film *Laura* (1944), where the corpse is essentially brought back to life, but the life of the woman who actually was shot to death by mistake, while opening a door, disappears and is barely noted – yet another variation of distraction used as a story hook in crime films, like *Vertigo* (1958), or even *The Third Man* (1949).

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