Easy Credit: Driving Two Hundred Years a Day in Los Angeles

On Sunset Boulevard, in the Echo Park District of Los Angeles, there is a Latino furniture store called Casablanca. Forty years ago, it was an international grocery before the area declined. A banner on the front window declares *easy credit*. It offers overpriced loans to newly arrived immigrants, often in the U.S. illegally, who cannot get credit for furniture any other way. This was how the immigrant peddlers in Chicago sold carpets to other immigrants in the twenties. It remains a staple of the ethnic ghetto.

A mile east of Casablanca, Sunset Boulevard ends at the old pueblo district, formerly Chinatown, now a Mexican shopping area known as Olvera Street. Old Chinatown was torn down over sixty years ago, replaced by the Union Station and the Terminal Annex post office. Both feel to many like museum pieces now remnants of a city that cannot find its way back to the postwar years, though recently, some of the "inner city" has become pricy, over $400,000 for slum housing.

Nonetheless, the global economy by 2003 has not made much headway on south Chinatown. Even though large banks and upscale condos stand three blocks south, here no upscale tourist amenities have survived—no latte parlors, no gaudy restaurants, only a string of Anglo art galleries tucked in a northeastern corner. The 110 Freeway roars just below, like a cattle drive heading north to Old Pasadena, where all the tourist amenities can be found, of the new Gold Line trolley. A few blocks south, a campaign to convert Grand Street into a "promenade" is about to launch, now that the Disney Symphony Hall is about to open (during a period of near bankruptcy in the city treasury). With luck, in the genteel districts, you can become a tourist in your own city; even in your own body. Historic facades are tuck-pointed, and brightly painted, while all the original businesses are forced out, and global franchise shops are installed. The inside and the outside politely ignore each other.

Of course, the schizophrenia of Los Angeles 2003 is hardly unique. In many "world class" cities, you can drive easily from the touristed twenty-first century back to the twentieth century; or even back into a consumer-driven version of the Baroque. Two myths erase each other—scripted spaces for the rich; and noir exoticism about the poor.

Thus, cities are being rescripted as special effects. You can drive a hundred years in a few minutes. Before long, the centuries will spread even further apart. The poor may be stranded two hundred years away. In the new global economy, the classes live steadily more apart from each other. And among the camouflages, each from the other, the most famous may be "Global" L.A.

Global L.A. does not exist physically in southern California. It is a portable or exportable—"special-effect place." It "speaks" English, but not "American," and speaks for businesses too vast to be merely American: Daimler-Chrysler; German publishing giants owning American presses; Rupert Murdoch's empire; German and French cinema filmed in English. It is a designer language for consumer glitterati, reflected in the British fashion magazine *Wallpaper*, or in special-effects blockbuster movies by directors who are as likely to be European or Asian as American.

In Vienna, at gambling cafés in working-class districts beyond the Gurtel, neon camouflages are what remains of the Habsburg nineteenth century—indeed two centuries on the same block; it is much the same in Berlin. Traces of American signage mix with graffiti in Paris, London. These seem innocent as far as colonial investment goes; and many of them do not even involve American capital. It is not gunboat diplomacy or armies of occupation. It is a cybernetic order, polite, seemingly innocent.

Until 2001, Global L.A. seemed a playful reminder of all this—a smiling internationalized, catholicized modernity. It was a brand for the accumulated capital of transnational business; as well as for scripted spaces, consumer-built environments. There the old public sector transforms into the Electronic Baroque. What is terribly wrong with that? It is merely a ghostly invasion, even for residents of L.A., who indeed are colonized by these investments as much as the Viennese.

Broadway in Los Angeles is the largest Mexican shopping street outside of Mexico City, but generally ignored by Anglo leadership. Imaginary Japanese streets in Little Tokyo presumably make businessmen from Osaka and Tokyo feel at home. Names in Global English (the nine hundred words that make you a consumerati)[1] crisscross like cities named Caesaria in the Middle East during the Roman Empire.

NATO Special Effects

Let us review how this laminated version of special-effects historicism came into place: During the second wave of the Cold War (1962–1980), consumer industries in the U.S. merged frequently with heavy industry, generating new imaginaries about America. Rituals shared during détente and glasnost turned into odd metonyms, huggable tourist phantasmagoria—more about perverse military/economic alliances than about fantasy L.A.

Checkpoint Barbie

In Berlin, a few streetwalkers used to dress up as Barbie, quite accidentally (or ironically)—and before 1959, before Barbie dolls first appeared. Barbie was originally a bawdy figure in a German comic strip named *Lillie*, soon after the war.[2] Then Lillie dolls were manufactured in Germany, primarily as sloe-eyed pornographic toys for grown men. However, in the fifties, the young daughter of Ruth Handler, founder of Mattel Toys in the U.S., fell in love with Lillie during a family visit to Germany.

Samples of the Lillie doll were then taken to the U.S., like rare dinosaur lizards from Indonesia. Her body was transmogrified, made into a huggable teenager. Designers in L.A. worked with manufacturers in Japan. Through endless revision, they widened Barbies stare, sanded down her nipples, narrowed her hips. Indeed, Barbie may be the most successful toy of this stage of Global English investment. At one time, a Barbie was selling every second—a totem for Global L.A., the blue-eyed, Wasp-waisted anorexic that barely stands on its own, but wears clothes well. She sells anywhere, teaching little girls how to role-play the new global suburban-ism, how to become a tourist in your own house.

Of course, that early stage has ended, during what I call the era of "internationalization" in the eighties, with an "L.A. School" that emphasizes the risks of this downsizing.[3] Clearly by 2003, of course, Global L.A. has surpassed that stage. It has become far more coordinated, spreads its banner much deeper than in 1990; but it shows signs of cracking. The end of the Cold War turned NATO consumerism into a coherent whole, like a colonial system; and then suddenly in 2003, that seemed to reverse itself.

For a time, German investments in Hollywood films were legendary until, the recession of 2002. Profits beyond the American box office accounted for as

much as 75 percent of the income for a so-called Hollywood film. *Independence Day* (1997), that classic American action film, the one most remembered during 9/11, was designed mostly by a team from Ludwigsburg, Germany. When New York is blown up by aliens, they reenact the bombing of Stuttgart in 1945 as much as the fantasy of a blade-runner apocalypse in the U.S.

Graffiti throughout Europe "spoke" Global English, in balloon letters modeled on gangsta L.A. and downtown Manhattan. The dust from MTV mixed with business English, those nine hundred words that allow businessmen in Stockholm to talk to investors in Japan, or on the Internet. Or the English of the European Community, speaking for transnational shake-ups that have driven up unemployment in Europe. It has weakened unions, diminished government services, widened the class structure, blurred national borders, brought a flood of immigration in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the U.S., and bloated the populations of Mexico City to twenty million and São Paulo and Istanbul (and soon Shanghai) to fifteen million. In some cities, the twentieth century grew past itself like a cancer, without much public sector to support its crushing problems.

So, we must see this in neo-Marxist terms essentially, beyond the fantasies. Primitive accumulation began essentially from the sixties through the eighties, what critics called *internationalization*. Then in the nineties the takeoff converted cities and homes alike. To repeat, like medieval walled towns spreading into the countryside, the shopping mall has now colonized city streets. The more historically intact the street appears, the easier to "theme" it, then stock it with franchise businesses.

In short, Global L.A. was a phrasebook for tourist urban planning as special effects—a victory of the "international" shopping mall. From metropolises in East Asia to Baroque capitals in Europe, cities were being remodeled with signage and presence that seemed to "speak" English, even echo myths about Los Angeles. With growing splits between classes, a new set of uneasy alliances took hold, and began building its monuments, using Global English. They heroized "slippages, fissures, lacunae,"[4] very much like Baroque special effects, like a cinematic social imaginary.[5]

It is a twisted joke. We have been struck dumb by gambling cafés and latte parlors, by an elusive cybernetic system that industrializes desire, but also uses essentially the same software for missile simulations as it does for special-effects films. We have gone a long way from Adolph Loos's American Bar in prewar Vienna, now tucked in the corner of the Ringstrasse like a tiny potted palm, while thousands of tourists mill past it. That was the imaginary Manhattan

of 1910, a tiny place locked inside mirrored walls. Now the mirrors are on the streets themselves.

Collecting False Memory

Special effects theatricalize false memories. They are engines of erasure. For example, while researching this book, I tested the waters, tried art projects where special effects erased memory: a sixty-foot Tex Avery cartoon (1999);[6] like landfill, adding two more rooms to Holland (2000);[7] Websites on how downtown Los Angeles has been forgotten;[8] a cinematic database novel about collective erasures (*Bleeding Through*, 2003);[9] and others, generally picaresques into amnesia. In the Electronic Baroque, special effects often reinforce a self-conscious desire to filter memory. Certainly, war has its media filters. Indeed, forgetting may become the monument of the Electronic Baroque, if anyone will care to remember.

At a workshop in 1999,[10] I asked German college students to select forty Hollywood films that represented the image of Los Angeles—to them. That included some westerns, which somehow seemed very L.A:, as collective memory. Only films dubbed into German were permitted; most American films are dubbed anyway in Germany, have been for generations.

I had a sensible filter: a German company in Munich hired the actors. The same actor dubbed Brando and John Wayne. Only American movies on video shelves were selected. It was a highly improvident case study, more like a literary object about the memory locatable only by its absence.

After days of endless viewing, forty sound bites were assigned by the team, based on our mutual discussions about "consequential" scenes (but not my direct input; I don't speak German). In fact, most of my favorite speeches sounded dull in German. And women's roles became even more sexist, buried under the dull brass of dubbed voices. These filtered movies were a clumsy marriage between fantasies of "tough L.A." and existing film imagery. But perhaps L.A. was never made in L.A. anyway, not completely (that occurred to me often). From the arrival of Lubitsch in the twenties to the émigrés of the thirties, many Germans helped invent the Hollywood image that was being imported—both screwball and noir. So was Global L.A. mutually exported?

After a few days more, each selection of dialogue or ambient noise was reduced to twenty seconds. The samplings were delivered to Otto Krantzler, a sound engineer who has worked with Stockhausen, among others. Krantzler,

in turn, put the sound bites on black-and-white keys, like an organist about to accompany a comic nervous breakdown—but in a very orderly way. He invented a notation system for playing the voices, similar to late modernist sound fields (clusters, panoramas, leaks, line breaks). I left for a breather while he spent ten days playing with "memory". At last, he edited the mass down to an eight-minute piece, a *sprechstimmer* of voices, what I call a memory sonata for Global L.A.—a polyphony of roars, chants, complaints, an indistinct chatter (three acts overlapping in a few seconds).

A few days later, the piece was premiered at the Kuenstlerhaus. At the opening, I walked to the center of a blank room where the tape was played. I told everyone that Los Angeles was hovering like bad ventilation on the empty cement floor. L.A. was a floating commodity (not unlike Lyotard's models for the fluid economy, or Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions of nomadic sign systems). And yet, this "fluid" L.A. was highly coordinated, far more than ten years ago. One might say the same about Bombay, southern China, Vienna, Rome, London, Prague. The situation had somehow gone beyond the post-structural paradigms, or should I say, academic assumptions based on the master works—terms like simulation, deconstruction, late capitalism, the panoptical, and linguistic schizophrenia."[11]

At the same time, these sound bites seemed flooded by precisely that, by linguistic paranoia, floating signifiers, filiation/affiliation. What was the difference as of 1999? Without question, this sound mix—like the code for movie production—was as stable as margarine. Outwardly, it seemed highly fractured and incomplete; but underneath, it ran as precisely as an internal combustion engine. It even sounded orderly, phased. Indeed, the sounds in the memory sonata were not "floating" signifiers; nor were they symptoms of random (or rhizomatic) decay. They were samples announcing a reterritorialized system, like a website for a Swiss bank with a Warner's cartoon logo—like a sonata with notation. L.A. movie memories for sale, no matter how perverse they seem, are not flooding the world with incoherence. They are part of a master system, as Electronic Baroque tourism.

The "Last" Twenty Years (Until 2003)

We separate 1985–1990 from 1991–1996, and then after 1996. Consider the problem this way, with L.A. near the center of these changes: Internationalization of the eighties is a response to dislocations already evident by 1970, particularly

a vast widening of the classes.[12] Davis, Soja, and others notice this dislocation, the greed behind it, and make that the herald of their books and articles from 1985–1990, a critique in the afterglow of the new L.A. school of architecture (Morphosis, Gehry etc.). Davis in particular warns of crisis to come; this seems realized in the shock waves that strike Los Angeles from the spring of 1991, with the Rodney King incident, to the uprising of 1992, followed by fires and quakes, in the midst of the terrifying recession and surveillance/enclaving of the mid-nineties.[13]

And then, a sea change: first real estate on the West Side explodes in price (1997). Media capitalism integrates on a scale that was unheard of even in the "golden era" of the studios (1925–1947). Symptoms of the change are evident everywhere: the new flawed subway system seems to lead only to the film industry, to tourist memories on Hollywood Boulevard, or into the heartland of media businesses, in the east San Fernando Valley. Los Angeles boosterism is back, with a global media twist. Those are the essential outlines, a colonization through a fully saturated tourism, a kind of chivalry by way of shopping mall during an era of rampant war-lord consumer capitalism. That is "global"—or I should say transnational—Los Angeles in the era we face next.

Unlike neo-imperialism from 1870 into World War II, Global Los Angeles can colonize the "mother country" as comfortably as the foreign market. It stands in for a mode of production that is as placeless as the media image of L.A. itself. Thus, one can find colonies for the Pacific Rim just west of downtown L.A., in MacArthur Park, where a vendor economy led by Central Americans provides ultra-cheap labor at transnational prices. Global mall/themed architecture reinforces the class structure that transnational economies encourage, a smaller middle class, a much smaller artisanal working class, more mobile job alliances, fewer unions.

The internationalization of L.A. that Mike Davis and Edward Sofa describe eloquently in the late eighties has matured, far beyond the postwar threads of light industry along the freeways, beyond Japanese investments downtown. They are now hubs for exports, film production, software, aerospace. And clearly this is a global trend, toward the sprawling, digitized corporation. We cross the San Fernando Valley, once the classic model for white suburban fantasy. We see belts of high-rises, their own banking centers, and an industrial job base—nearby slums for cheap labor—in short, all the mess we associate with the downtown center they were designed to replace.

What does this suggest about the urban future for portable "global L.A.'s" around the world, for parallels in Europe and Asia? Let us try to engage this

"fluid" model as a mutable form of tourist special effects. It looks oddly free from walls and ceilings, not unlike the blobs and folds that new architects used as a model for a few years, along with work by Asymptote, Bernard Tschumi, Hadid; or Gehry's masterwork in Bilbao. What kind of city will this model support? The term I use is *metropolitan suburb*: a suburban consumer gentility; a link between suburbanism and global tourism that suits architecture like this.

For L.A., I can review the basics of the "Metro" suburb quickly enough, the enfolded or even serpentine cities of the future. "Suburban" Burbank has become arguably the global capital of cinema, with annual media business exceeding $2 billion, led by corporate giants headquartered there: Disney, Warner. Also, Southern California is now the largest export center in the U.S., from the *maquilladora* just below San Diego to the upper desert just below the orchards of central California. There are "Asian" cities in the San Gabriel Valley, now renamed "China Valley." Businesses centered in the city of Santa Clarita are spearheading an expansion toward Ventura County that could add up to 100,000 more people within a decade or more, turning what remains of old orchard land and the battered historic town of Fillmore into a new urban sprawl, with Santa Clarita as its eastern capital.

Variations of this expansion have happened before, often in fact since the teens. Once again, the original green spaces of greater L.A. will be ravaged. And the gulf between rich and poor widens; these suburbs provide an urban plan that makes the gulf look more natural. However, during the recession of the nineties, suburban slums appeared to be growing, in Pacoima, San Bernardino, North Hollywood, Reseda, Van Nuys, Northridge, Santa Ana. Also at the same time: enclaved communities were reinforced, even monumentalized, to match growing Baroque hierarchies in the class structure. Castle/oases meet cybernetic feudalism. Post Cold War neo-chivalry expresses itself through neo-Tuscan mansions down-town to "Mediterranean" shopping malls in the Basin. Boba and Jamba-juices decorate new Chinese suburbs being tucked into Alhambra. South Pasadena literally removes parts of El Sereno that remained frozen due to legal disasters surrounding the 710 Freeway extension that never gets built. In the San Fernando Valley, Victory Boulevard becomes for many the street below which immigrants shall not pass; another Hadrian's wall being assembled through real estate pricing, more urban paranoia.

Beneath this suburban calm lie tensions. Until 9/11, they seemed relatively dormant. Now Los Angeles, and California, like many states, are in virtual bankruptcy, struggling to keep hospitals open; as the Homeland Rule proceeds like a Counter-Reformation, a counter-fundamentalism, like the Spain of

Philip II punishing sea powers on both sides of the Mediterranean. I see a feudalized economy emerging that may separate the city into something like city-states, as support from the federal government dries out. A horizontal transformation, as the vertical order dissolves, will very likely astonish all of us. Certainly, it is rearranging what were suburbs, and what was city.

The ethnic complexity of what used to be "suburbs" surprises me. For example, along Ventura Boulevard, out in Tarzana, beyond what used to be walnut farms and the "ranches" of movie stars, I find a Zionist glatt kosher restaurant, a sushi bar, and an Iranian grill right next to each other, as if they were in east Hollywood. Ventura Boulevard may indeed be the most ethnically mixed business street in southern California, oddly enough.

These "post-suburban" ironies provide a glimpse into Global L.A. as it actually manifests inside neighborhoods. Terms like *privatization*, *Disneyfication*, *enclaving* appear in European literature as much as American—as cyberpunk rereading of Foucault. All this indicates a portable, ruthless colonialism below the glitter of container-ship capitalism.

Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* became the classic summation of the eighties, of that earlier stage dominated by theories of panoptical control, and the "internationalization" of Chiba City—Japan overtaking L.A. And at the same time, since 9/11, it captures once again the paranoia of the emerging era—Fortress L.A. but on an international scale, during the Bush wave of retro-imperialism.

For the next century, L.A. Studies will concentrate increasingly on how globalization is transmogrifying the local, beyond concepts like *Global L.A.* This may include the fiscal dissolution of the state of California during the war on terrorism. The extended Los Angeles region will push more into the hinterlands, as Davis showed in *The Ecology of Fear*[14]—stalking ecological judgment day out in the high deserts or heading closer to the Nevada border. The crisis widens; the model grows even broader. Neoliberal "safeguards" pretending to outrun global disaster will add even more digital amnesia, more scripted spaces.[15]

Increasingly, a new Las Vegas was discussed in the same breath with Los Angeles,[16] two cities where tourist resorts are designed more as "pedestrian" fantasy. Both cities were becoming more walkable, had added more room for pedestrians—but not in the sense of industrial cities, or 1940's forms of the suburb. We see photos of crowds in cities before 1940, but do we study exactly where each person was heading? Or do we simply want to imagine that they were choreographed like furniture some-how, scripted?

Instead of industrial death traps, imaginary older cities are becoming desirable today. But often their makeover resembles movie sets with food courts inside. You walk as if you were driving, or perched on top of a movie crane. For example, in Las Vegas, the casino New York/New York re-creates Manhattan as seen through a car window on the old Staten Island Ferry; but you walk as if you were cruising in an old Buick. Various suburbanized downtowns also resemble cyberspace—a cybernetic C/G fantasy. A 1920's street becomes an outdoor mall scrubbed clean for tourists, and scripted for navigation, like a video game.

Tourism is crosswired with urban suburbanism, f/x scripted. In 2002, L.A.'s newest entry in this double whammy—another fake/real mall /city—opened to record business. It even survived orange alerts and anti-global paranoia. The Grove hit the mark running. It simulated Euro/ Baroque winding streets, betwixt a Disney main street: clock tower, trolley, town fountain. Yet, it stood directly inside the Wilshire Corridor, arguably the densest urban district in LA.

One new paradigm for urban life worldwide is surely a kind of inner city suburb. Old sidewalks lead to stadium seating in the multiplex, latte at the Starbucks; Barnes and Noble not far from a Borders, near an Italian food chain—a nest for franchise businesses. Wherever tourism has expanded, whether in Vienna or Santa Monica, a fussy glow has taken over the storefronts that is both urban and suburban. The malls have indeed invaded the streets themselves. That is Global L.A. as an urban plan. Certainly, that is what overtook Burbank, when the streets around Palm and San Fernando outpaced the Media City mall, literally surrounded them. So too "Old" Pasadena—a mall without a roof—became a "themed," or scripted space. Also, Times Square in Manhattan, and Piccadilly Square in London; all have their share of Global L.A., its advanced suburban amenities.

I don't see anything as conveniently isolated taking place in Mexico City or São Paulo or Istanbul, though we may see it yet in Shanghai, where Starbucks has caught on like a virus. At last we live in a world where we all become tourists in our own city, even while scripts about terrorism change the rules of global special effects. Thus, city streets are policed like malls; while nations are policed like airports. That is the immediate trend in the U.S. The metropolitan suburb may indeed have been prophetic—special effects and paranoia merged into what is presumably a harmonious and walkable script. Meanwhile, neoliberal anti-urban cuts from Washington force cities to restrict the mixing of the classes. Cutbacks favor genteel spaces, more like smaller cities in 1840 than the hubbub of 1900.[17]

Our class divisions have obviously widened. Special-effects monuments and citywalks glorify (ennoble, beautify) this horizontalized, almost feudal class structure. They script "adventures" about political systems, more overlapping, uncontrolled corporate power. Our major industries have been globalized, even beyond the reach of national governments in many cases. Business marriages between media and heavy industry increase. So why shouldn't our cities look like the forms of capitalism that run our culture? The age of master-planned federal public works has ended in the U.S. (and may not last much longer in Germany either). Mega-consumerism (Global English/L.A.) has boxed the compass, and billed it to our MasterCard.

Mutable Space

In the eighties, internationalization suggested three issues primarily: foreign investment; massive immigration; and thirdly, flexible, mutable sites for production. Often, these three together implied a utopian chaos theory for post-industrial capitalism. But by the nineties, we saw how "erratically" this worked. We noticed a new twist in many sweatshops near downtown L.A. An iron grille fence has been added in front, for easy escape when immigration officers come. In the late eighties, to keep production costs "global," sweatshops made shirts so cheaply, they had to sew on used labels saying "Made In Brazil"—to put immigration off the scent. The garment industry in LA grew into the largest in the U.S. Finally, local garment workers rallied for unions. In reply, more than fifty percent of the clothing firms then relocated to northern Mexico, in only five years. Indeed, California's "borderless economy"[18] was not as clumsy as in the seventies. Offshoring apparently went much smoother, and faster.

Mutable space became a crucial piece of every new puzzle. As historian Roger Keil wrote, "exurbanization and edge city developments have taken hold," along with "flexibilization and globalizing."[19] Increasingly, these flexible investments were linked not only to corporations downsizing, but also to planning in the metro suburb. Mario Gandelsonas, in *X-Urbanism*, summarized what brought on mutable spaces: computers; the pleasure of surveillance; text as space. These reinforced a kind of permanent erasure/mutability.[20] What I called *erasure* (1997, *The History of Forgetting*) began to resemble social imaginaries in casinos or malls—and downtown as well. The interior design was supposed to be mutable, so the space could shift gears continuously, maximizing profits.

Mutability as an architectural model clearly had been much less established in the eighties. In Southern California, Horton Plaza (1984, architect Jon Jerde) may have been among the first—CityWalk (1993) the more famous—but many more have appeared since. High-rises in Westwood were refaced in the nineties. Hundreds of streets throughout the U.S. were themed, or "historicized" for tourism. Malls were reconfigured as well. Even the 'Valley Girl" ur-mall, the Sherman Oaks Galleria, got much more than a facelift.[21] It was converted into an office park/entertainment complex, with far more visibility to the street, as well as sixteen new movie screens, with stadium seating, of course; not unlike the pseudo-City Beautiful urban village in Pasadena, called Paseo Colorado. Or the Hollywood and Highland pharaonic temple to movie tourism.

But after 2001, many new partnerships between digital corporate investment failed, lost traction despite the right "walkable space." Flexible malls, from Italianate local convenience strips to malls without ceilings, had screamed at city hearings—to speed up the metro suburban plan. Now they sounded a bit too shrill, or too obvious. The globalized local was proving unstable suddenly. The grander eye candy, and the sim-historicism, did not quite fit the war on terrorism, and higher gas prices. Investors were certain that they knew how each piece fitted together, down to the square foot. But new anxieties had recoded public taste.

June 2003: Cheerful at the Precipice

With this collective anxiety, tourism seems to be separating from suburbanism, but that may be temporary. The "fussy glow" is still popular; it is still in every marketing campaign I see. Even as the fury in Iraq grows day by day, the gentry seem to live in a comfortable Edwardian twilight: essentially white, wealthy, and walled in, protected by real estate apartheid. Housing prices balloon even further. Middle-class districts look even more like citywalks, like condensed copies of themselves, partly to keep the classes separate. I live in an old working-class district again, as deep in the mid-twentieth century as if I were back in Coney Island as a child. The twenty-first century is six minutes away; I timed it this afternoon.

In the leisure and special-effects industries, business marriages between media superpowers and heavy industry have increased. Legal restraints on all monopolies that market pleasure are disappearing rather quickly, for now. TV

news in the U.S. resembles what I often call a brush of peanut butter between two slices of stock market.

And in keeping with Americans' allergic denial of the risks ahead, fancy districts also look more like slices of stock market right now, even compared to three years ago (20 percent more in sales price, at least). The only protection against terror is housing pedigree. The only sure pedigree is a house with four new bathrooms, tested for mold and other allergens. The age of master-planned federal public works has ended in the U.S., and cannot survive much longer in Europe either. But in the words of the silent classic *Nosferatu* (1922), we have crossed the bridge, and the shadows are coming out to meet us. Most likely these will not be American or western European shadows. The first may come from Iraq; then from parts of Africa, South America, Central Asia, perhaps even the eastern Baltic in Europe, or the Balkans. All these places struggle under varying degrees of meltdown. But their trauma is mostly ignored here.

Special-effects summer blockbusters get most of the serious cultural attention. And Vegas casinos have decided to get racier again. The family will not be glorified during this neo-con era. Domesticated pornography will do better. While the crusades against Clinton's penis have thankfully ended, they began this wave of erogenous fundamentalism. And with the home front safely under home rule, special effects have turned instead to happy wars, like politicized happy meals.

All forms of liberation must be downplayed in movies and on TV, particularly while basic comforts for anyone with incomes below $50,000 start to crash. An economic upturn has been signaled, but it is also being called "a recovery without job growth." All sins and all mistakes are the vengeful acts of foreigners. A new placeless yet bloody Thirty Years' War (possibly that long) has arrived, and taken charge.

And yet, fundamentally[22]—that popular phrase in 2003—I am optimistic about the cultural challenges. We are moderns again, caught during the emergence of a world war unlike any known before. We have to practice the old breathing technique, to have a heart of fire and a mind of ice. There is unquestionably a future beyond all this. But we will have to grapple with the seriousness of scripted spaces, media despotism, simulation, political repression, and the Electronic Baroque system far more directly, like it or not. Better to like some of it; the world is not going to turn back. That is certain.