It’s Not the End of the World but You Can See It From There

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‘It’s not the end of the world but you can see it from there.’ My father used to say this phrase often. We’d pull up to a house that didn’t quite meet his precise expectations, an aesthetic which leaned towards a kind of suburban outdoor perfection – bright green lawn edges done to within millimetres of life, garden beds rimmed with concrete delineations, everything clipped, hosed down up to a house that didn’t quite meet his precise expectations, there. ‘It’s not the end of the world but you can see it from there.’ My father used to say this phrase often. We’d pull through a suburb at home or interstate, which dad would declare a mess, all the decay and abandonment we rolled through a suburb at home or interstate, which dad would declare a mess, all the decay and abandonment which you agree, died in the eighteenth century.

Not the end of the world. But you can see it from there. A declaration of disappointment, a phrase that comes to mind when I think of the relationship between architecture and literature. This might surprise – structurally, aesthetically and even philosophically, the connections between the two vocations are tangible. Writers and architects are both inheritors of scholars of the city; they take the city’s pulse, they are the wanderers and dreamers, whose visions manifest in works which, in some cases, can come to defines that city, spatially, figuratively and imaginatively. How far for example is Dickensian London from Norman Foster’s London, or Raymond Chandler’s Los Angeles from Frank Gehry’s, in the public imagination. All of these names conjure experiences, images, textures, vistas and public sites, whether they are real or imagined. What is curious then, is the exception to this sense of connection between the makers and the interpreters of cities flares up in the narrative content. It’s a question of perspective.

Writers have often loved living in cities and been associated with them even if their locales were more often than not in the seeder fringes, the underground dens, warehouses, jazz bars and less officious fauces of the cities they inhabited. When various urban cultural movements erupted in the 20th and 21st centuries the presence of writers and cohorts of artists and musicians could not be separated from the streets they played in. Surely the desire to be in these cities was often (and perhaps still to) generated by these associations. For many people Warhol’s New York, for example, acted as a powerful counter brand to an increasingly consummiserist American life in the ‘burbs, but then became a brand itself, counter-appropriated by advertising, design and architecture into a ‘New York-Left lifestyle’ replete with Edie Sedgwick prints. A cycle of capital in the city, many writers and artists continue to be wary of. As William S. Burroughs once suggested: ‘A paranoid is someone who knows a little of what is going on.’

And in the bohemian, teeming San Francisco? Now synonymous with the beat generation, whose unwilling poster boys were Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg – these writers came to represent a sense of freedom from a normal, ideal of conservative life, whose one-time presence in that city now helps sell cheap beer and coasters in fake saloons. These were writers who sought to tear down the political and corporate structures that built the cities the broader culture decided they defined. When Jack Kerouac was interviewed on the Steve Allen Show in 1959 and was asked how he would describe ‘beat’, he shrugged and then replied, ‘Well, sympathetic’, suggesting that the American culture he was operating in largely wasn’t. ‘All our best men’, he said, ‘are laughed at in this nightmarish land.’ His wingman, Burroughs, agreed.

There is simply no room left for freedom from ‘the tyranny of government’ since city dwellers depend on it for food, power, water, transportation, protection and welfare. Your right to live where you want, with companions of your choosing, under laws to which you agree, died in the eighteenth century with Captain Mission. Only a miracle or a disaster could restore it. Across the Atlantic a similar big city mythology had manifested and played out. Woody Allen’s recent film Midnight In Paris draws on the creative loop that happens when many of us conjure Paris in the early 20th century. Just like Allen’s transported flâneur it is not hard to imagine Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hunter Miller and Ernest Hemingway drinking wine, dancing on tables and arguing in the now infamous Café de Flore. A romantic vision of Paris perhaps, one we can access only now in cinematic or literary dreams, but one that continues to roll out as a real and potent signifier in western culture (and if the popularity of the Café de Flore and the price list suggests, in tourism). You pay four times the price for a Café Americano just for the privilege of imagining where Hemingway might have nearly shot a guy.

The difference is a writer’s flâneur for a city does not necessarily extend to literary depictions of it. Nietzsche once said, ‘An artist has no home in Europe except for Paris’, which is of course as much of a lament as it is a celebration. When writing and architecture meet on the page the mood is often uneasy because literary and philosophical writers like Burroughs, Miller and Nietzsche were often pitching against the spin – distrustful, circumspect, paranoid. Traditionally, many great cities have come under attack in literature more than they have been celebrated.

In Leo Tolstoy’s St. Petersburg the tensions between the old Russia and the new are played out, critiqued, subverted – the idiocy of new statesmen pushing papers, and policy more than the plough, his real heroine not Anna Karenina who, disgraced, is unable to bear her isolation and confinement. ‘What is the city’, Shakespeare said, ‘but the people’. Lonely and without a position in society; Anna turns inward and eventually throws herself...
under a train (the train being a symbol throughout Anna Karenina of encroaching and relentless progress). Lenin and Tolstoy both look at the relatively innocent couple who defy urban progress and seek a more earthly, spiritual connection to each other, in the country. And while Tolstoy does not romanticise the rural – the problems of farming are present in the book also – the city, Tolstoy seems to be saying, may be a place of heady amusement, a prelapsarian state; many have celebrated the joys and headiness of city life, but that they have found it hard to shake the idea of a ‘wild’, unregulated, uncontrolled nature altogether. And so the city and the moon, the skyscraper and the light, the dragstore and the bottle wind, the billboard and the sun hitting it at the shooting hour in Los Angeles cannot be separated. The city has not yet stood in for all forms of reverence. In heat generation narratives for example, the city was a Shakespeare suggested: only ever as wild as its people, who were sometimes in revolt against the city state – the walls and the demarcations, which sought to contain them. Perhaps the poet and the architect are not as enamoured of that development, overall, a sense of alienation and anxiety. A dystopian vision attached poetically to the rise of the machine. To the lost promise of Paradise, of Arcadia, even if these utopias were only ever dreams in the first place. And of course this sense of loss is ‘romantic’, but more potent because of that yearning, that feeling of failing to grasp something we never really had. Again and again we read of urbanised cultures moving further and further away from the earth, literally in the development of the tall building, figuratively in the relentless desire for the American dream, ideologically via the lofty intellectual heights imposed by modernism and in the fragmentation and simulacra we see in the media-saturated landscapes of postmodernism. All of these visions have been represented in literature perhaps to the point where they are nonetheless powerful messages, question the ability of a city to save or protect anyone except perhaps the elite. With more people living in cities than in the country for the first time in human history, the rapidity of this shift seems to have enhanced the poetic panic in an atmosphere of protest as writers try futilely to extract themselves from nature, the classic romantic sensibility, the call of the wild. It’s not so much that the majority of 20th and 21st century writers have posted a return to a prelapsarian state; many have celebrated the joys and headiness of city life, but that they have found it hard to shake the idea of a ‘wild’, unregulated, uncontrolled nature altogether. And so the city and the moon, the skyscraper and the light, the dragstore and the bottle wind, the billboard and the sun hitting it at the shooting hour in Los Angeles cannot be separated. The city has not yet stood in for all forms of reverence. In heat generation narratives for example, the city was a Shakespeare suggested: only ever as wild as its people, who were sometimes in revolt against the city state – the walls and the demarcations, which sought to contain them. Perhaps the poet and the architect are not as enamoured of that development, overall, a sense of alienation and anxiety. A dystopian vision attached poetically to the rise of the machine. To the lost promise of Paradise, of Arcadia, even if these utopias were only ever dreams in the first place. And of course this sense of loss is ‘romantic’, but more potent because of that yearning, that feeling of failing to grasp something we never really had. Again and again we read of urbanised cultures moving further and further away from the earth, literally in the development of the tall building, figuratively in the relentless desire for the American dream, ideologically via the lofty intellectual heights imposed by modernism and in the fragmentation and simulacra we see in the
large white tiled balcony drops into an epic view – the view is impressive without becoming a study in isolation; it’s more intimate than the one a friend had who lived on Appian Way which was so far above the city it seemed as if you were looking at a vast and abandoned world laid out in anonymous grids and quadrants, a view that confirmed you were much more alone than you actually thought you were, a view that lingered the flickering thoughts of suicide. The view from the Doheny Plaza is so tactile that you can almost touch the blues and greens of the design centre on Melrose. Because of how high I am above the city it’s a good place to hide when working in L.A. Tonight the sky is violet tinged and there’s mist.

There are so many contradictions at play here. Initially Clay views his apartment as superior to that of his friend precisely because of the tactile proximity to the city. Ellis reminds us of the sensorial Barragan yearns for; through his plate glass, Clay gazes at the colours of other buildings, reminds us of the sensorial Barragan yearns for; through this tactile, earthy experience. The power and tradition of the European poetic sensibility is still present here; even in a contemporary place of such sensory overload Brecht seems to want to remind us that the natural cannot be constructed, fabricated or replaced, though of course to some extent. Today we see a similar critique accelerated by Ellis, who extends the idea toward a new millennium sensibility where screens in all manner of forms (signs, billboards, intercoms, mobile phones) and flat planes (controlled surfaces, empty streets, still blue pools) permeate the landscape to the point where, for his characters, unreality and reality are no longer delineated. The people who inhabit his narratives are often disoriented, forgetful, confused and this suits his cool, detached, existential style. Ellis’s actual position is much more slippery – he criticizes the landscape of Los Angeles but also clearly represents it. He derides the excess while glorifying it. He seduces while critiquing the landscape of Los Angeles while celebrating it. As a one-time resident of all three cities I felt neither of these literary counterparts for many decades and in ways which have become known, owned and perhaps even old. As a one-time resident of all three cities I felt neither of these literary counterparts for many decades and in ways which have become known, owned and perhaps even old. As a one-time resident of all three cities I felt neither of these literary counterparts for many decades and in ways which have become known, owned and perhaps even old. As a one-time resident of all three cities I felt neither of these literary counterparts for many decades and in ways which have become known, owned and perhaps even old. As a one-time resident of all three cities I felt neither of these literary counterparts for many decades and in ways which have become known, owned and perhaps even old. As a one-time resident of all three cities I felt neither of these literary counterparts for many decades and in ways which have become known, owned and perhaps even old.
When potent mythologies wrap around cities like Los Angeles, Vegas and the Gold Coast theushima of noirish lure, to be true to the characteristic of a place but a place where the sun always shines it’s hard to resist that. The character watching and observing its players – the glitter so easily dismissed or reviled becomes a potent reverie. The challenge for writers, as it is for architects, is to develop ways of seeing and interpreting living, which are appropriate to the city or locale, which respond to the city on its own terms. The boulevards might be constructed on the Gold Coast, the canals might be man-made, but the water which fills them still rolls in from the sea and you can still be taken by a shark. The connection therefore between the real and the man-made, between the constructed and the tangible is necessarily enacted in a binary but within a complex set of relationships – of exchanges, engagements and actions between different states of being. I thought there might be another way to write crime without sacrificing a closer, more open and therefore more interesting vision of the city.

I thought perhaps I could do something different. The result was Ante Up, a novel to be released by Harper Collins in 2012. Ante Up, though it is certainly noir, is deliberately conscious of the influence of the gamut of noir literature, especially that written in and about Los Angeles and is an attempt to wrestle the Australian crime narrative from the historically reductionist treatment it has received in narratives like Underbelly. The Griffith Review in 2008 there to do a major essay for The Griffith Review in 2008 was that my theory evaporated in the dust and the heat as the imagined city began to bounce against the real. I had landed and I was snared, caught in a literary and automated responses to the landscape embedded in our culture – so pervasive that very few Australian writers have actually gone there. Matthew Condon in A Night at the Pink Poodle does well, Helen Garner in Postcards from Surfers less so, as her view is pinched tight – a Melbournian in exile scowling at the perceived vacancy

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Buoyed by the notion that it might be possible to reconfigure long-held, outmoded, perhaps even indispensable ideas of what a city should be and how it should read I became fascinated with the notion and spectacle of Dubai – here was a city I thought was the epitome of relentless progress. As it is for writers or architects we come full circle. How do we write the spirit of both vocations into the problematic textures of human experience as it morphs and progresses? It is not as easy an endeavour as we may like to think. Hard not to rest on laurels, on the assurances, even the entertainment value of an old tale. Hard not to appropriate and paraphrase because something has worked so well before. Perhaps we have forgotten that we need only to continually reach for the essence of corporeal experience in the tastes, textures and aural messages of contemporary life, in the scent of the taxis, the shine of the nature and the body, even if it is through a plate glass, against a slick facade, over a flat screen or from a safer vantage point inside the tallest building in the world. I do not want to be able to see the end of the world from here.

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