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Light in a Landscape of Desire

William A. McClung

In Southern California, the imagination of Arcadia includes the sun as well as moderate temperatures and the orange tree. But what kind of light is characteristic of the area?

Today we bemoan the loss of “a pre-smog Los Angeles of sharply contrasting sun and shadows,” which one historian describes as the atmosphere necessary to appreciate the Wrights’ concrete-block architecture of the 1920s. Yet in the early 1930s William Faulkner, in his only Los Angeles short story, “Golden Land,” describes how “the sun, strained by the vague high soft almost nebulous California haze, fell...with a kind of treacherous unbrightness.”²

We may misinterpret his observation. “Trapped down here,” John Rechy laments in *City of Night*,

“by the blanket of smog and haze locking you from Heaven,”³ we feel guilty about filtered light. But the Spanish explorers of 1542 described what is now the port of Los Angeles as the Baia de los Fumos because the smoke of campfires was trapped in the basin’s characteristic inversion layer. Photographs of the San Gabriel Valley taken more than a century ago show the mountains veiled, today we might say “choked,” in haze.

By contrast, recent photographs taken during occasional Santa Ana conditions have publicized a Los Angeles of dazzling but rarely observable. The photos do not show the searing wind, which reverses the normal marine breezes that modulate the desert’s aridity and veil its relentless transparency. In his 1942 novel *A Place in*

View north near Pasadena towards the San Gabriel Mountains, about 1884. Courtesy the California Historical Society Collection, Department of Special Collections, Regional History Center, University of Southern California Libraries.



the Sun, Frank Fenton writes: “The lingering mist of morning fog was rising and in the fog there was the salt flavor of the sea. Then the shreds of fog melted and the great yellow and white city lay at the mercy of the sun.”⁴ In pre-air-conditioned Los Angeles, the haze might have seemed like a shield. Part of it is natural and will remain after, if ever, the air is purged of its filth.

The artificial lights of Los Angeles furnish writers with convenient metaphors of disillusion. “The day wanes,” writes Christopher Isherwood from the crest of the Santa Monica Mountains, “and the lights snap on in their sham jewel colors all over the plain.”⁵ “Los Angeles,” complains Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, used to be “just a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no

style,” but now (in 1949) is a “neon-lighted slum.”⁶ Los Angeles “smelled stale and old like a living room that had been closed too long,” Marlowe observes, “but the colored lights fooled you. The lights were wonderful. There ought to be a monument to the man who made neon lights . . . There’s a boy who really made something out of nothing.”⁷ Marlowe does not sound fooled himself. In Los Angeles literature, the beginning of wisdom is to “see through” the bright lights to the shabby substance, and then angrily and bitterly to denounce those lights as deceptive and insubstantial.

Those who actually look at Los Angeles, however, may discover that its lights say something else. In Julius Shulman’s glamorous and thrilling photograph of Pierre Koenig’s

Case Study House #22 (1959) in the Hollywood Hills, an elegant pavilion overlooks the vast, gridded flatland, echoing its linearity and brilliance. Floating in their successive wraps of evening gown, crystal box and illuminated space, the luxurious young women complete an image of a vast and dramatic natural setting transformed and perfected by the arts of design. The picture is a vision of the heights to which money, technology and the International Style can convey a citizen in Los Angeles. Here is no nostalgia for sunlit orange groves and no sense of a dream betrayed; on the contrary, the dream has been realized, and its medium is (artificial) light.

Natural or electric, light is a contested zone in the landscape of desire. ●

Notes

1. John Beach, “Lloyd Wright’s Sowden House,” *Fine Homebuilding*, April/May 1983, p. 67.
2. William Faulkner, “Golden Land,” *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1950), 706.
3. John Rechy, *City of Night* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 87.
4. Frank Fenton, *A Place in the Sun* (New York: Random House, 1942), 101.
5. Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 112.
6. Raymond Chandler, *The Little Sister* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 202.
7. *Ibid.*, 90.



Los Angeles as Arcadia: the cover of *Los Angeles, California. Illustrated*. (Compiled by Cyrus M. Davis and T. Newman, published by Press of Kingsley-Barnes & Neuner Co., 1899.) Courtesy the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery.

Pierre Koenig, Case Study House #22, Los Angeles. Photo © Julius Shulman.

