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Interview with Guy Bennett & Béatrice Mousli

Yann Perreau

The following is an interview/conversation with Guy Bennett & Béatrice Mousli, co-editors of Seeing Los Angeles: A Different Look at a Different City, and Yann Perreau, contributing editor at Visions of the City Magazine.

Yann: Where did the idea for this book come from?

It came from our perception, as people living in Los Angeles, of the perception of Los Angeles held by people who don't live here. The latter perception (i.e. that of non-Angelinos) of the city tends to be unidimensional and sensationalistic, mediated as it is by the both literal and figurative images of L.A. popularized in films and on TV. It seemed to us that this mediated image was only one part of the story, and that in order to have a more complete sense of the place, it would be helpful to dig beneath the surface image of the city in order to get at the underlying reality.

The idea came to us in Paris, where we spend several months each year. After reading/listening to the umpteenth French book/magazine article/radio spot focusing on the mythologized, spectacular version of Los Angeles, and in which it was mostly a question of gang warfare, Beverly Hills glitz, Hollywood schlock, etc., we decided that it might be of interest to take a different look at the city. So we organized a conference that took place in June 2006 at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. It included a number of French and American scholars, researchers, writers, artists, cultural critics, etc., all of whom specialize in their respective disciplines in the city of Los Angeles. Their presentations were so compelling that we decided to publish them.

Yann: Béatrice, in the introduction you begin with Mike Davis' vision of the city - a dark one, almost apocalyptic. Is there something specifically dystopic, or futuristic about this city?

I do not agree with Davis' view of Los Angeles. He presents it as hell on earth or close to it, a bunker-ghetto-city where everybody is at odds with everybody else, where the only culture is that of drive-by shootings against middle-class suburbia. I am far more optimistic than that. When you look for too long at the horizontal layout of the city, and start to think of it as an endless apathetic suburb, it is good to take a ride up north, to another mythic city, adored by Europeans, and revered

by most: San Francisco is terribly provincial compared to this tentacular sprawl, one of the major megapolises on the planet, which breathes an incredible energy and whose influence goes far beyond the Pacific. But it also goes through all the trials and tribulations you find in such urban environments. And while for some the city is the door to a better life, for others it is a deadly place ruled by gangs and racial confrontations; for most it is a place to live, work. But isn't that the fate of all megapolises today?

Yann: Could you describe Jean-Luc Nancy's vision of Los Angeles, in comparison to the one of Mike Davis *La ville au loin, The City in the Distance*, specially the idea of LA as 'a capital, a hub of human activity, a living place where, despite the ambient ordinariness, everything seems to transform into a "monument or inscription", elevating the ordinary and – you add – the quotidian to the level of art?'

Jean-Luc Nancy has a more human and humanistic view of L.A. than Davis. On one hand, the city is for him just like any other, a place where you go about your business, where you meet people, where you have a home, you sleep, you dream. On the other hand he is taken by the size, the hugeness of it all, and that makes it intrinsically different from any other city he knows. And something that you notice maybe more if you step outside of the glow for a bit, the self-awareness of this city, which constantly looks at itself, constantly justifies its standing in the world - and is constantly rewriting its own history, day after day. That to me is a striking trait of the place: coming from a city where history is simply part of the trade-mark, it is fascinating to observe what happens on this side of the Atlantic, how some places become historical landmarks, how other places cannot be preserved, how the city balances its impulses: make room for the future, and keeping track of the past. Only in L.A. can a donut shop become a landmark, while World War II-era houses are razed to make way for new MacMansions, erasing the meager soul of a whole neighborhood. And another dimension to the egotism of the city is provided by the "industry" itself: the city checks on the image it projects toward the world through its reflection on the screen. Not to mention that this overwhelming presence extends its limits far beyond Southern California: "We are all citizens of Los Angeles, because we have seen so many movies" said D. J. Waldie .

Yann: In his book, *La Découverte du quotidien*, the philosopher Bruce Bé-gout draws a phenomenology of everyday life and of urban life, a "philosophie du quotidien". How would you describe the "quotidian" of Los Angeles?

Getting up, driving, working, driving, shopping, driving, home... Certainly for most a huge part of the L.A. quotidian is driving. And all is conditioned by it. Where you meet people, if you ever go meet them, how you shape your day, how long errands take, and all of this is relative to traffic, parking, freeway access, etc. Arriving somewhere, your first conversation is going to be about getting there, the snags you run into, the tips you can give getting there, how long it took. As for the rest of the day, it is just as quotidian and eventful as it would be anywhere else.

Yann: I would like to move to another point. In her essay *Urban Forms and Migrations to Los Angeles*, Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin writes: "For the past few decades, the composition of the migrant population coming to the city has noticeably changed to such an extent that it has led to a real diversification of the population in favor of Latinos." If Los Angeles is victim of the "ghettoisation" that Mike Davis describes in *City of Quartz*, do you believe that this diversification is a phenomenon which, with time, would make Angelinos more aware of their difference, hence more able to live together, or do you think that the ghettos are impossible to break?

I think that Angelinos are very much aware of their differences, and have always been. How they live them is another story. A recent study showed that people who live in more ethnically diverse areas are more racially intolerant than elsewhere. You probably have the same percentage of racists and xenophobes as anywhere else, but here they exist in different colors and shapes. That is to say that different communities are prejudiced against one another, and confrontations are always possible: the 1992 riots proved it, when several of the groups that inhabit what was South Central at the time fought against each other. Today, this central part of L.A. is called South Los Angeles, and is mostly inhabited by Latinos, just like Watts and other parts of the city that were traditionally African-American. To me there are no ghettos in L.A., the term is inappropriate and does not describe the fluctuant mosaic made of people, languages (98 at the last census) and cultures that constitute the city.

Yann: Guy, in your essay on the "Los Angeles literary landscape" you quote Bertolt Brecht: "Scratch a bit, and the desert comes through." You then explain "Like the desert ... there's a lot more [here] than sand and rocks." Are Angeleno writers invisible creatures that can't be public figures, as they could be (for instance) in New York, London or Paris?

Yes, that was Brecht on L.A., and my allusion to his statement was a comment on the fact that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, there is a dynamic writing/publishing "scene" here. But to respond to your question, I believe that, yes, by and large Angeleno writers are invisible to the local public for the simple reason that what they do only rarely enters the sphere of public discourse here, which is dominated by the products of the entertainment-industrial complex. As I wrote in "The Los Angeles Literary Landscape," reviews and/or discussions of their work only rarely if ever appear in the popular media, so they are essentially invisible for most people.

I think it also has to do with the fact that there is no equivalent social category in the U.S. for the "intellectual" outside of the university, unlike in Europe, where writers are not only interviewed/discussed in major newspapers and magazines, but they also occasionally write for the popular press as literary or social commentators. They thus have a degree of public visibility that their American counterparts generally do not.

Yann: You have recently curated an exhibition about Paris at the Los Angeles Public Library "Beyond the Iconic: contemporary photographs of Paris". If you apply this notion of "Beyond the Iconic" to Los Angeles, what would you get?

You'd get Seeing Los Angeles: A Different Look at A Different City. In fact, the exhibition on Paris was intended to be the pendant of the book on Los Angeles, i.e. an attempt to examine the relationship of the two cities to their "images," whether we understand the latter to mean the actual visual representation of these places, or the mythologized/romanticized/"iconic" mental and cultural representation that we have inherited and which we actively consume and perpetuate. As I mention in the catalog to the exhibit, the most striking thing the two cities share may well be the deeply proprietary relationship they both have to their own images, which have been commodified to such a degree that the "monuments" most commonly used to symbolize them – the Eiffel Tower and Hollywood Sign – have actually been copyrighted, and permission is required to publish representations of them. So the issue of "image" is capital in both cases (no pun intended), and well worth considering, as we have tried to do in these projects.

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