

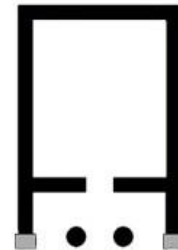
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‘Post-Los Angeles’: The Conceptual City in Steve Erickson’s *Amnesiascope*

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Erickson’s Conceptual Settings

A striking hallmark of Steve Erickson’s fiction—that is, the author’s conceptualisation of setting in order to highlight an environment’s transformative qualities—can be traced from a dual position of personal experience and literary influence. As a native of Los Angeles, it is typically Erickson’s home city that is subject to such treatment. In a 1986 interview conducted by friend and fellow writer Michael Ventura, Erickson offers insight into his time spent growing up in the San Fernando Valley during a period of topographic transformation that has since served to inform a longstanding fascination:

I’d be going to school one year—going from my house to school and walking through an orchard of lemon trees lined by eucalyptus, and there’d be horses and dogs and stuff. And a year later the landscape was different. I mean, completely different. Absolutely transformed, going from the same point A to the same point B—instead of orchards there were malls, theatres, McDonald’s. And when I was 10 years old I thought, ‘Well, this is the way reality is. Things change just like that’.¹

Considering the effect of this on the young Erickson, alongside an admission that ‘John Updike and Saul Bellow didn’t mean all that much to me’ as an adolescent interest in literature is eschewed at the expense of music and film, further understanding of the various cultural elements contributing to the writer’s distinctive style can be assuaged.²

Film, in particular, is a recurring point of personal and professional interest for Erickson, having studied film at UCLA and written extensively on the medium for *Los Angeles* magazine since 2001. Hollywood’s self-mythologising capabilities have also been evoked as a thematic interest in his fiction. Most notably, this is evident in 2007’s *Zeroville*, a novel that spans a period of over a decade from the summer of 1969, where the ‘cine-autistic’ central protagonist Vikar journeys ‘three thousand miles to the Movie Capital of the World’ to further indulge his obsession.³ However, the primary means via which Erickson’s own preoccupation with the medium is presented is in the crafting of a narrative fluidity that naturally lends itself to topographic transmutation. Typically, changes to setting or wider landscapes are initiated via either unseasonal weather conditions or cataclysmic natural disasters; that these modifications are conveyed in a nonchalant tone can be interpreted as being indicative of their frequency. In Erickson’s texts, we often find these shifts to be

¹ Michael Ventura, ‘Phantasmal America’, *The L.A. Weekly*, (August-September, 1986). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/phant.html>. [Accessed 15 April 2018].

² Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, ‘An Interview with Steve Erickson’, *Contemporary Literature*, 38, (1997), 395-421, p. 402.

³ Steve Erickson, *Zeroville* (New York, NY: Europa Editions, 2007), p. 16.

reminiscent of the workings of film itself in the manner with which an array of scenes and depictions seamlessly blur.

Given that these shifts often occur from the perspective of the protagonist, an intrinsic link can be established in Erickson's fiction between the posed setting and the nature of the self. The primary function of setting serving as a conceptual vehicle is affirmed as a result of this relationship. The Faulknerian qualities of such a device are inescapable, particularly given his acknowledged influence on Erickson's creative sensibilities:

Faulkner taught me how reality ticks not to the clock of time but the clock of memory—in *The Sound of the Fury*, the idiot Benjy begins a sentence and by the time the sentence is halfway finished we're thrust into the past, and by the time the sentence is over we're back in the present, or maybe we've gone somewhere else, all of this conveyed as part of the continuum of consciousness.⁴

We find such assimilative qualities inextricably allied with the protagonist's own perceptions, a feature evident at the outset of Erickson's 1985 debut novel, *Days Between Stations*. The agricultural background of native Kansan Lauren is alluded to in conjunction with present day relations with her husband: 'When he was far up inside her she cried a bit and held his black hair, and remembered stroking the fur of the wildest black cat in Kansas'.⁵ Proustian qualities apparent, the intangibilities and sense of obfuscation that stem from a uniquely internalised interpretation of chronology are also referenced in this same passages. This naturally contributes to narrative intrigue:

And then she looked at him in the dark and wondered where he'd come from. And he could never tell her, because he didn't know himself. They were both across the borderland of their youth, travelling with visas on the verge of expiration, imperilled by the pending truth of their trespasses.⁶

This innate uncertainty triggers topographic fluctuation in the text as environment becomes shaped by the self's various faculties, both often segueing in synch with one another. Similarly, we find this notion of topographic instability further explored in *Rubicon Beach*, published one year after. Here, Erickson establishes two overlapping settings in the form of 'America One' and 'America Two'. The first is inhabited by Cale, a recently released prisoner navigating a flooded, futuristic Los Angeles, whereas the second is a much more conventional depiction of the city as the journey to the city by a South American woman named Catherine is charted. Despite this seeming conventionality, Erickson remains keen to emphasise 'Los Angeles as the furthest psychological and geological extension of America-America as far as it goes before it comes to the point of no return'.⁷ A wry comment delivered to Catherine upon her arrival in Los Angeles reaffirms this belief: "'This isn't America. This is Los Angeles.'"⁸

⁴ McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 415.

⁵ Steve Erickson, *Days Between Stations* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 10.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.

⁸ Steve Erickson, *Rubicon Beach* (London, UK: Quartet Books Ltd, 1998), p. 145.

The ‘continuum of consciousness’ that Erickson speaks of in relation to Faulkner’s presentation of time and place is discernible in each of these examples. Explicitly linking the properties of setting with the self’s internal mechanisms is what underpins the narrative and topographic fluidity associated with Erickson’s work. That this is itself reflective of the author’s own personal experience and numerous artistic influences renders his fiction being of a deeply personal nature. Brian Evenson, writing for *The Believer*, expresses this very point:

Erickson’s brilliance is his ability to create a fantastic world that influences and becomes integral to human relationships. At once a romantic and a futurist, Erickson seamlessly manages to fuse real emotional concerns with an odd landscape. The result is haunting, unironic and authentically human.⁹

Evenson’s appraisal of recurring motifs and tropes pertaining to experimental fiction detectable in Erickson’s literature enforces the notion of these acting as a framework enabling an engagement with themes of a more personal nature. Despite the inarguable presence of certain elements typical of experimental fiction discernible in his work, Erickson has expressed feelings of discomfort relating to classification in such a context: ‘my priorities don’t lie in reinventing literary forms’.¹⁰ In the same interview, conducted by Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, Erickson has stressed of his fiction that ‘the central concerns that drive the stories are traditional ones’.¹¹ Though this particular comment appears slightly vague in relation to determining the exact nature of these “traditional” concerns, it at least serves to highlight the mechanics of Erickson’s fiction. The fragility of interpersonal relationships and the formation of individual perceptions can be regarded as two common themes. Persistent topographic fluctuations aid the potency of such thematic portrayals on account of the starkness of contrast between the two, and the relatability of these themes, ultimately, becomes accentuated by the treacherous properties of the posed setting.

With setting very much informed by personal conceptions in Erickson’s literature, owing significantly to cultural engagement and direct experience of geographical changes, the protagonist’s navigation of environment becomes subject to various fluctuations and tangents associated with one’s internal faculties. A relationship between setting and central protagonist can be discerned in a number of these texts. Negotiating the various facets of a conceptualised setting therefore becomes something of a deeply personal challenge on account of the dynamic of this particular relationship, the nature of which is highly reactive. Individual neuroses catalyse external fluctuations, which in turn further stoke intrapersonal anxieties. This piece will explore the very workings of this relationship in one of Erickson’s most personal novels, examining the make-up of the conceptual setting in greater detail and how this relates specifically to the text’s protagonist. The intrinsic connection established here ensures that maintaining one’s sense of self becomes integral to survival.

⁹ Brian Evenson, ‘The Romantic Fabulist Predicts A Dreamy Apocalypse’, *The Believer* (June, 2003). <https://www.believermag.com/issues/200306/?read=article_evenson>. [Accessed 20 April 2018].

¹⁰ McCaffery and Tatsumi, ‘An Interview with Steve Erickson’, p. 399.

¹¹ *ibid.*

Setting and Self

Erickson's fifth novel, 1996's *Amnesiascope*, exhibits a great many of the previously mentioned tropes. The titular presence of "amnesia" is suggestive of the centrality of memory and recollection in the text, an innate faculty of the self that underpins works of an existentialist nature. Parallels in this regard can be ascertained with Philip K. Dick, a figure whom Erickson has cited as an influence. Evoking comparison with his own artistic stylings, Erickson has described it as 'inconceivable' that Dick could be anything other than a West Coast writer on account of a penchant for experimentation that is itself identifiable often by preoccupation with counterculture, geographical exploration and historical tradition: 'That sense of the west coast being as far as the new world can go, I think, is captured in most of what Dick wrote'.¹² Returning to existentialism, Judith Barad notes similarities with Jean-Paul Sartre's work in Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, adapted from Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Fundamentally, this is in relation to the emphasis placed on external centres of consciousness serving to validate the self.¹³ Characterisation in Dick and Erickson's texts is consistently shaped by this notion with the inherent unreliability of memory and the self often the basis for existentialist discourse. It is through recurring emphasis on the various manifestations of these faculties (that is, lengthy periods of introspection, sprawling digression, and tangential thoughts) that internal uncertainty comes to be imposed on one's wider surroundings. External centres of consciousness in these works usually function either as affirmers, debunkers or instigators of this prevailing state that is situationally transposed.

In Dick's literature, we typically find themes pertaining to existentialism manifesting within the confines of a technologised dystopia, a notable feature that serves to exacerbate the individual's internal decline. This has been noted by Amaya Fernandez-Menicucci in her highlighting of an eventual split between one's faculties of perception: 'technology operates both within and without the main character's mind, affecting and shaping internal and external "realities" alike, so that there is no clear demarcation between the dimensions of the tangible and of the psyche'.¹⁴ Though it is the self rather than the psyche that is typically the focus of existentialist discussion, the point that external facets serve to blur points of discussion for purposes of conveying a sense of internal discord appears a pertinent one.

Similarities can be detected in this respect with Erickson, albeit in a different context. Such is the extent of the relationship between setting and self in Erickson's novels that the leitmotif of cataclysmic weather conditions and natural disasters is to be interpreted as a metaphor for internal instability. This particular relationship and outcome has been referred to as "psychotopography" by Erickson; the world first appearing in his seventh novel *Our Ecstatic*

¹² Alan Howard, 'Jonathan Lethem and Steve Erickson: *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*', *Bookworm*, (March, 2012). <<https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/jonathan-lethem-and-steve-erickson-the-exegesis-of-philip-k-dick>>. [Accessed 20 April 2018].

¹³ Judith Barad, 'Blade Runner and Sartre: The Boundaries of Humanity', in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), pp. 21-34, p. 29.

¹⁴ Amaya Fernandez-Menicucci, 'Memories of Future Masculine Identities: A Comparison of Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale", the 1990 film *Total Recall* and its 2012 Remake', In: *Between*, 4, (2014), 1-25, p. 2.

Days, in which a lake suddenly and inexplicably appears in the middle of Los Angeles.¹⁵ The precise nature of a “psychotopographic” setting in an Erickson work can be observed here, with R.L. Litchfield affirming this as perhaps the most ‘explicit connection’ between setting and self; ‘the lake actively ebbing according to Kristen’s feelings and encounters’.¹⁶

It is my opinion, however, that the structure, premise and thematic content of *Amnesiascope* makes this the most intriguing presentation of the symbiotic relationship between setting and self in any of Erickson’s texts prior or since. All of the elements relating to personal experience and spheres of influence are incorporated to create what Erickson has called ‘a post-Los Angeles’: an environment containing ‘fleeting similarities to the one we know, where all the cultural immunities have collapsed, so that any random influence permeates the city’s membrane’.¹⁷ At the centre of this reconstructed, almost sentient city absorbing its own cultural influences is an unnamed narrator bearing a close resemblance to Erickson himself, discernible on account of biographic and occupational overlaps. The conceptualised formation and properties of this ‘post-Los Angeles’ evoke Edward Soja’s ‘exopolis’ vision of the same city with regard to an absence of traditional qualities associated with the city at the expense of a seemingly unencumbered exogenous growth. The title itself—‘post-Los Angeles’—is suggestive of an abandonment of the literal in favour of the conceptual, yet a closer look at Soja’s term invites further comparison between the two models: ‘The prefix can also be seen as denoting a hint of the “end of”, as in the ex-city, the rise of cities without the traditional traits of cityness as we have come to define them in the past’.¹⁸ Clear parallels can be established in this instance with regard to the prefixes “post” and “ex”, and their connotations with endings. The extensive detailing of Los Angeles as an example of an ‘exopolis’ in Soja’s *Postmetropolis* along with the post-apocalyptic cityscape conveyed in Erickson’s *Amnesiascope* allude to this conventional sense of ending, whilst simultaneously highlighting the city’s transmutable properties in both literal and envisioned contexts. Referred to in both cases is the enforced ending of traditional conceptions of the city. Erickson’s heavily conceptualised ‘post-Los Angeles’ appears representative of this very notion.

The employment of the first person narrative mode in the text is also significant in this regard, affirming an overt sense of the self, especially when we consider Erickson’s typical favouring of a third person form. Conceptual aspects of the novel are further verified by Erickson in a conversation with Ryu Murakami, attributing the novel’s slipstream qualities to a close scrutiny of one’s dreams. Again, the centrality of the self in the construction of Erickson’s settings and characters is further emphasised here:

I wrote down my dreams partly because I'm now getting old enough that I don't remember anything. And I've never been really good at remembering my dreams to begin with. It was during a period of time when I was having some unusual dreams; dreams that I sensed were perhaps important. I put some of the dreams in the novel, although I've always tended to

¹⁵ Steve Erickson, *Our Ecstatic Days* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 110.

¹⁶ R.L. Litchfield, ‘(Re)Imagining Los Angeles: five psychotopographies in the fiction of Steve Erickson’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2010), p. 110.

¹⁷ McCaffery and Tatsumi, ‘An Interview with Steve Erickson’, p. 398.

¹⁸ Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 250.

wonder if people don't find other people's dreams a little boring, if dreams only have much resonance or metaphorical importance to the people who have them. Nevertheless I think probably all of my work has been informed by my dreams. Even when I don't remember exactly what happens in the dreams, I remember the sense of the dreams. The echoes of the dreams stay in my head.¹⁹

This leads us onto the various components of the 'post-Los Angeles' setting of *Amnesiascope*. Serving as a catalyst shaping the reconfigured city is a seismic event referred to only in colloquial terms as 'the Quake'. Whilst the nature of the disaster is alluded to via such referencing, specific details are never overtly discussed. Instead, we are left with distinctive "pre" and "post" states of the city, with 'the Quake' functioning as a dividing line irrefutably linking the "post" with the conceptual. This notion is strengthened even via the disaster's very title. Not only do we again see an example of the author's harnessing of the cataclysmic as a modifier, but also evoked is Rudy Wurlitzer's 1974 novel *Quake*, a text which documents the rapid disintegration of social order in Los Angeles over the course of twenty-four hours following an earthquake. Erickson's admiration for Wurlitzer as an author and screenwriter, notably for his work on *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, render this beyond simple coincidence.²⁰ Tapped into via this plot device is the artistic tradition of the destruction of Los Angeles as either a central theme or prevailing image, with Mike Davis estimating in excess of one-hundred-and-thirty novels or films since 1909 depicting this particular motif.²¹

At the outset of *Amnesiascope*, we find the narrator describing his living arrangements: 'I'm moving up to the suite at the front of the hotel. Ever since the Quake I've been living in one of the single units, but now I'm making the move up to the suite'.²² We immediately find a state of transience implied here on account of the narrator's residency at a hotel. Referenced even within this opening portrayal is a further degree of movement as the narrator describes moving to another suite. An opening such as this instantly sets the tone for the 'free-floating Los Angeles' that Erickson aspires to depict; one typified by seamless fluctuations and perpetual topographic shifts.²³ The narrator goes on describe the hotel and its location. Encompassed within this portrayal are allusions to Los Angeles's disorienting geography and the prominence of film as part of the city's cultural make-up, distinct elements that assist in the formation of Erickson's conceptual city:

I live in an old art deco hotel on Jacob Hamblin Road, a small concrete avenue that winds and twists so much on its short two-block journey from Sunset to Santa Monica Boulevard that at the beginning you can't see the end. Even in L.A., city of great non-sequitur streets like National Boulevard and San Vicente, streets of absolutely no linear logic whatsoever that

¹⁹ Yoshiaki Koshikawa, 'Steve Erickson Meets Ryu Murakami: Self-Expanding Into the World of Unconsciousness', *Shincho*, (April, 1997). <http://www.shinchosha.co.jp/shincho/9707/ryu_steve.html>. [Accessed 20 April 2018].

²⁰ Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #57: *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973)', *Los Angeles*, (December, 2013). <<http://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/the-essential-movie-library-57-pat-garrett-and-billy-the-kid-1973/>>. [Accessed 20 April 2018].

²¹ Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 276.

²² Steve Erickson, *Amnesiascope* (London: Quartet Books Ltd, 1997), p. 1. Henceforth cited in-text as (A, page number).

²³ Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.

disappear on one side of the city only to suddenly reappear on the other, Jacob Hamblin Road has some crazy turns in its short life (A, 3).

A focus is clearly turned towards intangibilities here, channelling the city's snaking geography to create a sense of the illusory in the manner with which streets 'disappear' and 'reappear'. Sentiency is even implied in this presentation, reflective of Erickson's own youthful conceptions of environment that he articulated to Michael Ventura. Consistent with Erickson's personal interests, we find film serving as part of the Hotel Hamblin's fabric, '[...] built by the studios to put up young studs and starlets shipped in from all over America for screen tests, which is to say it became a sort of private brothel for producers and casting agents' (A, 4). Compounding allusion to Hollywood's sordid underbelly is a description of the Hotel Hamblin's 'Caligari dilapidation', channelling the sinister aesthetics of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (A, 4).

Though Erickson has rejected the tag of "surrealist writer", arguing that the overarching absurdity associated with the form is absent from his work because 'whatever else my books may be about, they don't express an absurd view of existence', there are nonetheless imagery and scenarios present in *Amnesiascope* that are attributive of such tonal qualities.²⁴ A product of Erickson's conceptualising of the environmental, we find these instances and episodes to be illustrative of deeper personal concerns. Counterbalanced by the striking image of the narrator, his love interest and a kidnapped exotic dander driving through a 'dark abandoned LAX', a feature indicative of this disordered Los Angeles, we often find Erickson's protagonist engaged in periods of introspection (A, 10). One such incident comes as the narrator assesses the various features of 'post-Los Angeles' from the vantage point of the top floor of the Hotel Hamblin before drawing parallels with his surroundings and the very nature of his being:

I love the ashes. I love the endless smoky twilights of Los Angeles. I love walking along Sunset Boulevard past the bistros where the Hollywood trash have to brush the black soot off their salmon linguini in white wine sauce before they can eat it. I love driving across one black ring after another all the way to the sea, through the charred palisades past abandoned houses [...]. I've been in a state of giddiness ever since the riots of ten years ago when I would take a break from finishing my last book and go up onto the rooftop, watching surround me the first ring of fire from the looting. I still go up there, and the fires still burn. They burn a dead swath between me and my memories. They burn a swath between me and the future, stranding me in the present, reducing definitions of love to my continuing gaze across the smouldering panorama (A, 5).

The correlating of city with self is established here via Erickson's utilising of facets associated with Los Angeles. Set against the backdrop of 'the Quake', we find allusion to Hollywood decadence and the artistic trope of citywide chaos conveyed in the form of riots. Such a presentation evokes Henri Lefebvre's work on American social spaces and subsequent individual responses:

Urban order contains and disguises an underlying disorder. The big city is nothing but vice, pollution, sickness (mental, moral, social). The alienation of the city embraces and

²⁴ McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 399.

perpetuates all forms of alienation. [...]. The more it concentrates the means to live, the more unliveable it becomes.²⁵

The various forms of underlying chaos identified by Lefebvre are discernible in Erickson's text. Internal angst is projected onto and literalised in the form of the disordered 'post-Los Angeles'. Similarly, historical and creative precedents are implicit in this depiction. Given the year of the novel's publication, it is difficult for the Los Angeles riots of 1992 not to be evoked in this instance, a social event that Mike Davis observes in the context of the creative destruction of the city, most notably in relation to Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*.²⁶ Flitting from these decaying sights informed by distinct facets of Los Angeles to an introspective digression, we find the narrator suggesting an assimilation of self with city. The 'smouldering panorama' referred to in this context intimates a wide cross-section of city and one's perceptions of time co-existing innately. This fusing of city and self within this conceptualised environment is enforced by such presentations. The narrator's awareness of this relationship as an inherent faculty is what enables much of the novel's intrigue. Consequently, we find matters of intrapersonal decline occurring within a topographic framework subject to and dictated by the same shifts and fluctuations as one's internal faculties.

Memory and the Movies

Much of the text's existential content stems directly from the narrator's characterisation. As previously mentioned, a number of biographical overlaps existent between Erickson himself and the novel's chief protagonist create the impression of the narrator functioning as an author surrogate. In affixing such a character against a backdrop typified by fluctuation and an ongoing process of topographic modification that are consistent features of the writer's works, Erickson has created a piece of fiction that he has described as 'a much more personal book than anything I've done'.²⁷ In an interview with McCaffery and Tatsumi, he elaborates on this in greater detail:

It's a much more naked book. It takes the landscape of my earlier novels and places on that landscape someone who rather unabashedly bears a resemblance to myself. It's set in Los Angeles and is much more contained in time and space and point of view.²⁸

This rooting of a particular environment in 'time and space and point of view' is what fundamentally underpins the very notion of the conceptual setting. When constructed in conjunction with a protagonist inviting comparison with the author, we find this portrayal affirmed even further. This aligning of elements of the personal with a largely conceptual setting is first apparent in Erickson's fourth novel, *Arc d'X*, in which a character named 'Erickson' journeys towards an alternate and eerily desolate Berlin in 1998 following the

²⁵ Henri Lefebvre, 'The Country and the City', in *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*, ed. by Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas and Eleonore Kofman (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 109-159, p. 143.

²⁶ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, p. 396

²⁷ McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 398.

²⁸ *ibid.*

destruction of his home city of Los Angeles from an unspecified cataclysm. In *Amnesiascope*, we find this incorporation of the self in much starker terms on account of the author's unflinching engagement with difficult biographical aspects. The nature of this presentation conforms to Merlin Coverley's observations concerning contemporary manifestations of psychogeography and a general shift away from political and ideological backgrounds.²⁹ On account of the explicitness with which the self and entailing conceptions are documented in the text, coupled with a consistent emphasis on the modifying effects of cataclysmic conditions, it appears reasonable to suggest Erickson's depictions of 'psychotopography' as intrinsically aligned with personal sensibilities.

One of the most prominent of these comes in the form of the narrator—like Erickson—having suffered from a stutter as a child. Erickson's, it has been noted, was so severe that he was presumed illiterate.³⁰ The indelible mark this affliction left on Erickson cannot be overstated, especially considering its recurrence as a trope throughout his fiction in order to highlight the plight of 'the voiceless'. Most notably in Erickson's fiction, it is an impediment associated with the character of Adrien-Michel in *Days Between Stations*, an amnesiac night club owner of dual French-American nationality who enters into a love triangle. Indicated in this construct is the link between communication and identity, where the ability to articulate is presented as an integral aspect of one's self. In *Amnesiascope*, the manner in which the stutter is recalled appears suggestive of childhood trauma:

I don't remember my first word, I don't remember my first stutter, but I'm told they were not the same, that my first word was stammer-free; thus, the moment of my truest eloquence was the moment of my earliest communication, back before the beginning of memory. Did I best know myself then, before the stutter, or have I come to know myself best since, when who I am has been defined by the stutter? I don't have an answer. The stutterer is both the person I really am, and someone I am not (A, 147).

The narrator's returned affliction is affirmed in this instance as central to the narrator's being, due to its origin exceeding that of his earliest memory. Not only is this moment of 'truest eloquence' ironically presented as something of an unconscious idyll, but the more pertinent question is posed as to whether something as inconsistent or ultimately unreliable as memory can ultimately be held as the primary validator of one's being. One of the text's major themes of fragmentation is encapsulated here. Manifesting externally in the chaotic form of the posed 'post-Los Angeles' setting, we additionally find it internalised via the narrator's fragmented speech and fragmented memory, leading to the conclusion of a split self. This naturally informs the text's episodic structure, serving as a reflection of both fluctuating landscape and free-floating internal faculties that are themselves mutually disjointed.

The second most obvious biographical overlap is the narrator's interest in film. Echoing Erickson's role as a film writer for *Los Angeles* magazine, we find the narrator working as a critic of the medium for a newspaper. Typical of the hotchpotch architectural stylings and distorted topography referenced on numerous occasions in the text, we find the newspaper

²⁹ See Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p. 130.

³⁰ Alan Rifkin, 'Soul Survivor', *Buzz*, (April, 1993). <<http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/soul.html>>. [Accessed 20 April 2018].

office based in 'the hollowed-out cavern of the old Egyptian Theater, not far from the mouth of the sunken L.A. subway' (A, 23). Through allusion to such husk entities, a correlation with the narrator's own fractured faculties can be detected: 'in the L.A. of Numbers I am Memory Central, just as in the L.A. of Names I am Memory Void' (A, 16). Such inconsistencies are implied here, with the capitalising of these terms suggestive of location to strengthen the mentioned correlation between setting and self.

Given these parallels, with Erickson's 'post-Los Angeles' setting proving to be subject to the same radical shifts as the narrator's own consciousness, we find evident in the text a number of self-prescribed maxims devised as a means imparting a degree of stability. The narrator's occupation is one notable area in which these arise. Whilst they are often clear examples of trite unthinking, lacking in any significant cognitive value, these maxims are nonetheless intended to serve as false affirmers of experience within an environment in a state of perpetual flux, rendering one's perceptions fallible. In addition to the erroneously-titled 'Three Laws of Women' ('They're different'; 'They're crazy'; 'They're funny') formulated by the narrator's friend and colleague, a fictional representation of Michael Ventura, we find film influencing these maxims (A, 20-1). One of these relates directly to the field of criticism, as the narrator muses:

There was only one rule you had to know about being a critic, which was that everything that isn't underrated is overrated. You can plug into this equation any movie or director or actor and stake out a position accordingly, taking into account of course that something is underrated right up to the moment it becomes overrated, which it remains until the inevitable backlash and it becomes underrated again (A, 50).

This notion especially can potentially be regarded as the most obvious example of the unthinking nature of these maxims due to its binary methodology. When factoring in the frequency of fluctuation existent in 'post-Los Angeles', it is possible to determine that such a simplistic critical approach is wholly incompatible with the nature of this particular milieu. Developing from this is the narrator's 'Cinema of Hysteria' theory, 'a clandestine cinema' consisting of a selection of 'movies that make no sense at all- and we understand them completely', which encompasses films such as *A Place in the Sun*, *Vertigo*, and *The Manchurian Candidate*, among others (A, 51). Though attempting to ascertain a cinematic zeitgeist is hardly unheard of for a film writer, certain contradictions are apparent in this instance on account of such films being major studio pictures and hardly an example of 'clandestine cinema'. Similarly, the intimated notion of nonsensical understanding is problematic. These maxims, despite being unable to stand up to scrutiny, assist in enforcing a link between existentialism and film imposed against a wider fluctuating backdrop.

Though Erickson has previously spoken of the 'Cinema of Hysteria' in a critical capacity during interviews, allusion to it in the context of *Amnesiascope* simply serves to enforce the various intangibilities that make up 'post-Los Angeles'.³¹ In contrast to the fixed certainty imposed upon the medium by the narrator in the face of external flux, Erickson himself has

³¹ See Anthony Miller, 'Steve Erickson', *Susan Henderson's LitPark* (April, 2008). <<http://www.litpark.com/2008/04/02/steve-erickson/>>. [Accessed 20 April 2018].

stressed the subjective qualities of film in relation to interpretation and the actual act of viewing:

I'm convinced that one of the reasons *Vertigo* rose in the pantheon of great films since its original failure when it was released in the late Fifties is that a whole generation of budding young film lovers saw it on TV around 1962 as I did, at the age of twelve, alone in my living room when my parents were down the street at a party, and everything about it blew me away and unsettled me- the surrealism of it, the eroticism, which I understood only as well as twelve-year-olds in my day understood eroticism. [...] I've never seen *Vertigo* 'work' with an audience in a theater, and I've seen it with an audience at least four times. Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* is the most recent example I can think of- a movie that seems absurd in the collective dark, shared with other people, but watched alone on DVD has the force of a private dream.³²

The subjectivity that Erickson speaks of in the above excerpt is a fundamental truth that comes to exacerbate intrapersonal anxiety in the text. Such qualities of the medium, juxtaposed starkly with the narrator's own perceptions as a film writer, are modified in the novel in order to highlight this very truth whilst signifying an existential crisis. The inherent surrealism of film that Erickson references can therefore be assuaged as a direct informer of 'post-Los Angeles' to further notions of the symbiosis evident between setting, medium and the self.

The collapse of the narrator's perceptions of film and of his work manifests in two particular plot strands. Consistent with the novel's episodic form, these intermingle with other events and recollections specific to the narrator before being revisited. The first of these sees the narrator submit a review of a fictitious film, *The Death of Marat*, directed by the invented French director Adolphe Sarre for purposes of adding credence to his 'Cinema of Hysteria' theory (A, 52-3). A point of interest stemming from this, however, is that Adolphe Sarre's making of *The Death of Marat* is a significant feature of Erickson's *Days Between Stations* as the narrative reverts to France at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the claim that Erickson's fiction exists in the context of a wider literary universe can be deemed a contentious one, numerous overlaps between characters and plot points from his works are apparent in order to enforce the significance of the conceptual setting in his novels. Fleeting allusion to a 'post-Los Angeles' landmark called 'Black Clock Park'—taken from the title of Erickson's third novel *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989)—is an additional example of this (A, 10). Emanating from the narrator's hoax is the discovery that his article is actually grounded in true life events upon overhearing a conversation in a bar:

The more I listened, the more it sounded- Well, the more it sounded like they weren't talking about the review I had written, but a real movie. The more I listened, the more it sounded as if [...] they were talking about the movie as if they had seen it. They were talking about scenes I never mentioned in the review- scenes, in other words, that never existed in my imagination (A, 94).

The result of this is an ironic distinction made between the author surrogate and Erickson himself. Whilst 'post-Los Angeles' is an Erickson construct derived from his own conceptions and texts, the narrator's ignorance of its various facets renders his position of

³² Miller, 'Steve Erickson'.

familiarity within this environment as a wholly misguided one. It is possible to regard 'post-Los Angeles' in this context as a reactive setting, fluctuating in accordance with the narrator's thoughts and actions; the consequence of this, however, is an acute alienation that catalyses an internal crisis.

The second plot strand furthering this concerns an erotic film project the narrator undertakes in collaboration with his lover, Viv. Compatible with the numerous segueing intangibilities suggested in the text, we find this particular episode further signposting the narrator's internal uncertainty. Firstly, the film's title of *White Whisper* is decided upon by the narrator and Viv 'because it doesn't mean anything at all, at least as far as we can tell' (A, 88). The proposed film's protagonist is influenced by a sexually-provocative woman named Jasper, with whom the narrator converses in a bar. Channelling the prevailing climate marked by numerous inconsistencies, we find the source of her name subject to the same unknowns:

'It's a name without reason,' she explained. 'No, my parents didn't think I was going to be a boy. No, they didn't conceive me in a town called Jasper. No, they didn't name me after Jasper Johns or an Uncle Jasper who left them a million dollars... ' (A, 85).

Detectable here is a sense of the ambiguity infecting much of the novel's setting and the narrator's characterisation extending even to other character's backgrounds. Similarly, with an internalised decline being a prominent theme of *Amnesiascope*, it is through such examples of characterisation that the erosion of interpersonal relationships is chronicled. We find this manifest in the eventual casting of Jasper to play the role inspired by her following a frustrating audition process. The narrator's reunion with Jasper, however, takes an additional bizarre turn. Not only is Jasper seemingly unable to remember meeting the narrator, but she struggles to find motivation for her self-inspired character whilst querying the quality of dialogue taken from their previous conversation:

I was explaining the character to her, which is to say the character I stole from her in the first place; I was explaining the things the character said- which is to say the things she originally said. She gave absolutely no indication of realizing any of this. She gave no indication of ever having met me at all. She read the lines like they were completely new to her, like she had never heard them before; she even analyzed and interpreted them as she went along, trying out different inflections (A, 98).

In the same manner that geography appears in the text as a fluctuating conceptual construct influencing individual perceptions, a ripple effect is discernible with regard to relationships. The prominent theme of an all-encompassing amnesia is conveyed here. Whereas in this instance we find such a sentiment expressed in the form of a forgotten meeting, this encounter foreshadows a lengthy period of introspection during which the narrator considers the disintegration of a number of past romantic relationships. Of the women inhabiting 'post-Los Angeles', the narrator muses how 'they're not like women of anywhere else, they rampage in a way that's endemic to Los Angeles, wild like the animals that flee a fire in the hills', as though suggesting an inevitability concerning such deterioration (A, 128).

Emphasising the centrality of the conceptual in Erickson's settings is two of these women linked to the narrator, both of whom function as intersecting and counterbalancing entities: 'Sally dark, Lauren light' (A, 63). A cursory reference to Lauren's background and her

romantic involvement with a cyclist named Jason reveals her to be the same protagonist from *Days Between Stations*. Comparatively, the presentation of Sally as a recurring figure in the narrator's life evokes Erickson's treatment of Sally Hemings, the slave lover of Thomas Jefferson. Hemings has been an enduring source of fascination for Erickson. Featuring in *Arc d'X* and *Leap Year*, the latter intersperses political commentary with an ethereal portrayal of Hemings sporadically impinging on the temporal as a potent form of juxtaposing symbolism. Allusion to Hemings—even her literal or spectral presence—in Erickson's works appears representative of the disorder frequently depicted, symbolic of what Lee Spinks identifies as the 'paradoxical movement of Jeffersonian thought': that Jefferson was a signatory of the Declaration of Independence assuaging the equality of all men, despite being a slave owner who took Hemings for a lover.³³ It is Erickson's preoccupation with contrasts, conflicts and counterbalancing which provides intrigue and narrative thrust within the framework of his conceptual settings.

Interestingly, many of the illusory facets of the text are attributed physical emblems. Most notably, this occurs in relation to memory, attempting to crystallise the fleeting and tangential for purposes of stability. Memories of a dalliance with Sally coincide with the narrator's residence in a disorienting beachside structure known as 'the Seacastle' in the immediate aftermath of 'the Quake'. A tumultuous relationship is implied as the narrator notes of the 'disarray' of bedsheets that remind him, in a Proustian fashion, of Sally (A, 30). Similarly, this same physicality ascribed to memory can be observed in more overt terms in which Viv begins work on a sculpture known as 'the Memoryscope', the purpose of which is to show the beholder 'the memory he or she has most forgotten' (A, 142). This can be contrasted starkly with the novel's title, highlighting Erickson's fusing of converse elements in forming the conceptual setting. The implicitness of memory within such an environment established, the manner in which supposed fixed points of certainty shift and disintegrate in accordance with the faculty's workings, is ultimately affirmed at the novel's conclusion. Here, the narrator appears to acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between setting and self:

I don't promise that the deep fault line that runs from my psyche through my brain out my front door and down the street won't run all the way from L.A. to America and beyond, all the way from memory to the moment and back, splitting me up the middle and leaving half of me on one side and half of me on the other (A, 224).

The very essence of *Amnesiascope* is captured here in this excerpt, as the centrality of this previously mentioned link between the individual and environment is reinforced. The intrapersonal divisions existent within the narrator are reflected in the reconfigured landscape of 'post-Los Angeles' with memory serving as a crucial component in its conceptualisation. Reiterated as a consequence, as the inherent fallibility of one's internal faculties, this is the primary factor underpinning external fluctuations and schisms in the text.

³³ Lee Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson', *Contemporary Literature*, 40 (1999), 214-239, p. 216.

Conclusion

With conceptual settings serving as an identifiable aspect of Erickson's fictions, assisting in the facilitation of thematic and narrative content, engagement with the writer's background and early years proves invaluable in ascertaining the roots of such portrayals. Certain stylistic tropes associative of literary influences such as Faulkner and Dick are also discernible in relation to topography, geography and characterisation. Arguably *Amnesiascope* represents the pinnacle of Erickson's intent in this regard. Affirming this is not only the presence of an author surrogate functioning as central protagonist, but also the setting of a 'post-Los Angeles' marked by disaster and distortion.

The posed implicit link between these two mentioned entities is at the heart of conceptualisation in Erickson's work. With the reconfigured setting subject to the same diversions and tangents as internal processes of thought, a pertinent exploration of various existentialist musings is able to manifest. Self-examination is a critical feature of the text and within the confines of a setting so extensively informed by elements relating to the personal, we gain an appreciation of the distinct ways in which Erickson's preoccupations as a writer are conveyed to the reader. Considering the respective nature of both style and content, of which the conceptual setting is a fundamental feature, Erickson's assertion of *Amnesiascope* being an incredibly personal work appears valid.

The theme of survival manifests in a number of forms as a result. The post-apocalyptic cityscape implies an overt sense of danger with particular reference made to the resultant social dichotomy along with instances of civil unrest. Obvious analogous qualities can be ascertained from such a portrayal. Despite allusions to such dangers, the theme develops most prominently in an internal context. The familiarity felt by the narrator in his drastically altered surroundings gradually comes to erode in a seamless and insidious manner. The confusion elicited from the production of *White Whisper* and *The Death of Marat* newspaper review hoax serve as precursors signifying a crisis of a more personal and candid nature. Repeated reference to the unreliability of memory only serves to exacerbate this internal crisis relating to identity and self-definition. With events filtered through the prism of a first person narrator, external centres of consciousness are consequently relayed to the reader in similarly obfuscating terms.

Ultimately, survival in this field becomes dependent on self-recollection, regardless of how painful an experience this may be. This particular trope is, of course, reflected in the externalised discord of 'post-Los Angeles'. The symbiosis apparent between setting and self assists in accentuating the threats posed by numerous pitfalls specifically applicable to either sphere. The various threats of 'post-Los Angeles', for instance, heighten the severity of the narrator's internal crises. Primarily, this is because it can be considered the one area an individual would be expected to have complete control over. External fluctuations subsequently impacting upon the protagonist's sense of self appears indicative of a prevailing atmospheric and societal chaos permeating and influencing one's innate faculties. Whilst the narrator is surviving physically within the 'post-Los Angeles' setting, ensuring that his internal sensibilities remain intact becomes the overriding source of intrigue in the text.

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