Theme and Technique in Steve Erickson's Fiction

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy by Liam Randles

(Student Number: 200427356)

January 2019

A number of the arguments that I have made in Chapters 4 and 5 concerning Erickson's fifth novel *Amnesiascope* (1996) have been published in an article titled ''Post-Los Angeles: The Conceptual City in Steve Erickson's *Amnesiascope*' for the summer edition University of Malta's *Antae* journal.

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

Liam Randles

Antae, Volume 5, No. 2 (June 2018), pp.138-153.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, my sister, my girlfriend Katie, and Isla Harrison.

Thank you for all the love, support and encouragement.

Contents

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore the different narrative techniques used in Steve Erickson's fiction and thereby to rectify the critical neglect of his works. Despite being acclaimed by a number of esteemed contemporaries such as Jonathan Lethem and Thomas Pynchon, as well as being the recipient of several prestigious literary awards, the paucity of critical works relating to him remains something of a mystery. A notable contrast emerges in this respect, in the fact that Erickson has given a significant number of interviews to a wide-range of publications since the release of his debut novel *Days Between Stations* (1985). This would suggest that there is wider interest in Erickson's literature, despite the fact that this has failed to translate into comprehensive critical examination of his work.

This thesis will analyse the different experimental techniques and methods used in Erickson's novels. A stylistically-arresting writer whose work often blurs the boundaries of different genre forms, Erickson's interests lie in four particular areas: depictions of endings, the development of the American national consciousness, representations of the process of film, and the implicit relationship between character and setting. Themes recurrent throughout Erickson's work—such as the fallibility of memory and the changeable state of interpersonal relationships—are often channelled through these interests, resulting in literature of distinctive, challenging nature.

Erickson's background and media influences will be explored in order to assess how his creative conceptions have been shaped. Having both a personal and professional interest in film through his secondary career as a journalist, Erickson's fascination with the medium representing an affecting experience will be discussed. A notable result of this influence is the presence of different film techniques used to frame and structure his narrative. Erickson's numerous past interviews and his two non-fiction books, *Leap Year* (1989) and *American Nomad* (1997), will be drawn upon in order to identify a number of recurring preoccupations. Attempts will also be made to locate Erickson in both a postmodern context and in a literary tradition associative of his home city of Los Angeles for purposes of directing future criticism in potentially intriguing directions.

Through identification of the themes and techniques in Erickson's novels, this thesis will argue that he is a writer worthy of rigorous critical study.

The Literary Works of Steve Erickson

Fiction

Days Between Stations (1985)

Rubicon Beach (1986)

Tours of the Black Clock (1989)

Arc d'X (1993)

Amnesiascope (1996)

The Sea Came in at Midnight (1999)

Our Ecstatic Days (2005)

Zeroville (2007)

These Dreams of You (2012)

Shadowbahn (2017)

Non-Fiction

Leap Year (1989)

American Nomad (1997)

Introduction

The intention of this thesis is to redress the paucity of critical material available concerning the literature of Steve Erickson. A stylistically-challenging and thematically-complex writer, Erickson's work has received numerous accolades and consistently garnered praise from his contemporaries. In his appraisal of Erickson's most recent novel, *Shadowbahn* (2017), Jonathan Lethem described him as 'not so much a writer's writer as a tour-de-forcer's tour-de-forcer.'[1] The late David Foster Wallace once viewed him as among 'the cream of the country's younger crop' of fiction writers, alongside Joanna Scott, Richard Powers, and Denis Johnson.[2] Thomas Pynchon has similarly been effusive in his praise, providing blurbs for Erickson's debut novel *Days Between Stations* (1985) and *Arc d'X* (1993). Writing of *Days*, Pynchon asserts that Erickson possesses 'that rare and luminous gift for reporting back from the nocturnal side of reality'; signifying Erickson's fascination with altered states and literary experimentation.[3] *Arc d'X*, meanwhile, is described as 'classic Erickson'; that the novel represents a text as 'daring, crazy, and passionate as any American writing since the Declaration of Independence'.[4]

Although Pynchon's appraisal of *Arc d'X* can be deemed somewhat hyperbolic, the esteem Erickson's work is held in by his peers is undeniable. That this has failed to transmit into consistent critical analysis remains mystifying. Detailed papers from scholars such as Alexandru Budac and Lee Spinks—to name but two—that examine certain tropes associated with Erickson's texts are in existence, but these remain very much the exception. This is in contrast to the significant number of interviews that Erickson has given over the years to an array of magazines, websites and literary journals that suggests of wider interest in his work. Although Erickson can sometimes appear vague during these in relation to textual interpretation, a number of intriguing recurrences concerning early inspirations and childhood experiences are discussed that seem to have influenced his style as a writer. Similarly, his reflections on pop culture developments—particularly in relation to film—and American politics make for interesting reading. Erickson's observations in these fields are often used as subjects in a number of his texts. A selective approach will therefore be undertaken with regard to determining the relevance of a specific issue highlighted or discussed by Erickson during these interviews.

Erickson's name has been conspicuous by its absence, even in a context of discussion of the Los Angeles literary milieu of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. This is despite a large number of his works containing themes and tropes that can be viewed as being typical of the Los Angeles novel. One such rare occurrence of Erickson being grouped alongside other writers associated with the city comes in the updated foreword to Reyner

---

[1] Jonathan Lethem, 'Best Book of 2017: *Shadowbahn*', *Granta* (December 2015). <https://granta.com/best-book-20-shadowbahn/>. [Accessed 7th August, 2018].
[2] Stacey Schmeidel, 'Brief Interview with a Five Man Draft', *Amherst* (Spring 1999). <https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/magazine/extra/node/66410>. [Accessed 7th August, 2018].
[3] Steve Erickson, *Days Between Stations* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), front cover. Henceforth cited in-text as (*DBS*, page number).
[4] Steve Erickson, *Arc d'X* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), front cover. Henceforth cited in-text as (*AX*, page number).

Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971); a book that examines on the distinct and disparate make-up of Los Angeles. Here, Joe Day groups Erickson alongside Bruce Wagner, Bret Easton Ellis and James Ellroy as notable examples of writers whose preoccupations lie in distorting certain cultural and environmental facets of the city into evocative 'kaleidoscopic vortices'.[5] Although Day's analysis here is brief and—at best—cursory, it at least serves to shed light on Erickson's modus operandi as a writer. As will become evident from discussion of Erickson's background, the integration of personal experiences and interests into his fiction is a defining aspect of his writing. Most notably, he draws upon his recollections of growing up in Los Angeles as well as his long-standing personal and professional interests in film to inform matters extending to plot, setting and characterisation. These reference points also afford Erickson a lens through which to convey other concerns that recur throughout his novels, including the role and function of memory, the processing of history, and the literal and metaphorical manifestation of endings. The end result is numerous environmental depictions, characters, and presentations of certain time periods that are largely conceptualised in order to become thematic vehicles.

Considering film's prominence in Erickson's professional life—having studied film at UCLA and written extensively on film and popular culture, most notably for *Los Angeles* magazine since 2001—it is perhaps unsurprising to find that a fair portion of the scarce criticism available on the writer tends to be drawn towards this particular feature. This brand of criticism, however, is typically superficial in nature. A potential reason for this could be an unthinking and, frankly, lazy assumption of Erickson's concerns in this field being allied with a satirical mode associated with writings about the film industry or the medium itself.

This appears to be the issue for a number of critics. Erickson's eighth novel *Zeroville* (2007), for example, is mentioned by Stephanie Zacharek in a review of Bruce Wagner's *Dead Stars* (2012) as a point of comparison. Whilst the focus of both texts centres on the film and entertainment industry, this is where any meaninful comparison should end. The contrasting time periods of the two texts reflect the respective concerns of both writers. Erickson's text chronicles a period of seminal change in the film industry in his depiction of 1970's Hollywood, whereas the present day setting of Wagner's novel allows for exploration of the public's engagement with developing digital media forms. This illustrates the difference between both writers' respective preoccupations. A satirist of the industry, Wagner's work stands in stark contrast to Erickson's. Zacharek's odd paralleling of both texts extends even to prose style, with Erickson's work described as 'sturdily poetic', in contrast to Wagner's 'gassy ramble of a novel.'[6] The comparison itself demonstrates scant understanding of the role film typically plays in Erickson's works. Similarly, Ivan Kreilkamp praises *Zeroville*, observing that 'the mode is less satirical, more reverent and appreciative of Hollywood's history.'[7] An absence of detailed analysis is conspicuous in both pieces, with Kreilkamp's

[5] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, fore. by Joe Day (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), p. xxiv.
[6] Stephanie Zacharek, 'Hate the Players', *The Slate* (3rd August, 2012). <http://www.slate.com/culture/2018/03/alan-hollinghurst-hates-similes.html>. [Accessed 27th March 2018].
[7] Ivan Kreilkamp, 'Steve Erickson's Cineautistic *Zeroville*', *Ivan Kreilkamp* (15th May, 2012). <https://ivankreilkamp.com/2012/05/15/steve-ericksons-cineautistic-zeroville/>. [Accessed 27th March 2018].

assumption that a Hollywood setting automatically indicates a degree of satirical intent somewhat puzzling. Whilst the focus of both is undoubtedly turned towards film, there are obvious differences between their priorities. The most notable is that Erickson typically uses filmic facets and techniques as a means of developing thematic interests.

Examples such as those given above do little to help foster a deeper understanding of the intricacies of Erickson's novels. Whilst film undoubtedly plays a prominent role in his texts, the notion that it represents the sole point of his definition as a writer is both unhelpful and misleading. The result of this is ill-thought comparisons or incorrect assertions relating to form and content, both of which are evident in the above instances. Even when consideration is given to the manner in which Erickson's interest in film manifests itself textually, it still often leads to simplistic analysis and slapdash attempts at classification. Anthony Slide's monograph *The Hollywood Novel* (1995) serves as a case in point. Here, Slide catalogues a staggering number of writers, all of whom have made film a feature of their fiction. The obvious drawback in this approach is a disregard for nuance or context. The titular use of 'Hollywood novel' represents a convenient umbrella label in this regard, drawing little distinction between genre, form or style. As a consequence, descriptions of texts are often basic, lacking in sufficient detail. This is especially apparent in Erickson's case. In his profiling of *Days*, Slide neglects to detail any of Erickson's preoccupations as a writer or mention particular thematic interests. A questionable attempt at classifying Erickson's novel is made instead: 'This original science fiction novel is surrealistic in form and makes use of various cinematic techniques translated to the printed page.'[8] Slide's assertion here represents the limit of his critical analysis of the text, oddly labelling the novel as science fiction without any further explanation. The brief nature of these cited excerpts perfectly illustrate why a more detailed study of Erickson's literature is needed.

A brief outline of the form that Erickson's novels typically take is an essential aspect of gaining an understanding of his interests and concerns. Invariably, Erickson's novels are structured in a divergent fashion. Narrative focus often switches suddenly to depict a series of events seemingly detached from what has previously been described. It is not uncommon for these shifts to redirect the narrative across continents, or to document a different time period entirely. The setting or time period is usually described in a non-realist mode to gradually integrate wider thematic concerns. Such radical and abrupt shifts can be seen to occur several times in any one text. As such, the narrative itself can appear fragmented as a series of disparate characters existing in ostensibly different environments intersect. The stories are often non-linear and conveyed in a stylistically complex manner. Narrative voices tend to blur as it becomes difficult to establish the exact state of a particular interpersonal relationship. Distinctions between external actions and internal thought erode, as do the perceived boundaries between actuality and artifice. The result is that the reader becomes as disoriented as the portrayed characters. Often the numerous plot strands fuse at the novel's denouement to demonstrate the strength of Erickson's textual interconnections. The seamlessness with which characters and stories overlap and distinctions blur naturally lends

[8] Anthony Slide, *The Hollywood Novel: A Critical Guide to Over 1200 Works* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1995), p. 91.

itself to a fluid narrative style that exhibits tropes from a range of genres. Erickson's prose that captures these various states and stories has been observed accordingly and seen to exhibit a 'dreaminess' that is 'hypnotically poetic', as Brian Evenson notes.[9] The scope of Erickson's novels and the arresting manner in which his interests are conveyed is ultimately what makes classifying Erickson as a writer so difficult. This issue concerning classification can also considered a reason for the lack of critical material available relating to Erickson.

This is not to claim that Erickson's style or focus hasn't altered over time, however. Having published ten novels and two journalistic texts, beginning with *Days*, it is perfectly reasonable to expect even subtle, gradual changes in the manner in which his authorial interests and concerns are presented. The fact that Erickson's oeuvre stands at twelve books without much critical focus being devoted to these works can itself be considered problematic. Whilst it is the intention of this thesis to provide a thorough critical study of Erickson's literary interests and concerns, identifying these in the context of each specific work would require an inordinate amount of time and risk compromising the requirements of the thesis itself. A further problem emerges here in that to condense each of Erickson's books into a single chapter solely discussing relevant interconnections between certain interests and concerns would jeopardise the intention to provide a comprehensive study. Content could possibly appear flimsy, analysis ill-thought and references cursory. Each chapter would potentially exhibit the same flaws as much of the existing available critical material. As such, this thesis has been structured with the intention of referencing each one of Erickson's texts to varying degrees in the context of a specific chapter devoted to a particularly prominent theme, interest or concern.

Erickson's interests can be seen to occupy four particular fields: a fascination with endings in both literal and metaphorical senses, an interest in charting the American national experience and consciousness, a fascination with film that influences both narrative form and content, and in the presentation of evocative, aesthetically-arresting landscapes that reflect the ever-changing moods of the protagonist in question.

Whilst Erickson has maintained that the central concerns that drive his texts are of a 'traditional' nature—a rather vague comment that will be returned to in the following chapter—there is little doubt that the manner in which these are conveyed can be considered strange, even difficult to interpret.[10] Typically, Erickson's primary interests and preoccupations are depicted in a manner that explicitly reveals a number of flawed character psychologies and complex interpersonal relationships. The disorienting nature of these presentations belies a number of deeply personal interests and concerns. Erickson elaborates on this, describing it as a process of wanting 'to make the reader exchange his or her reality

[9] Brian Evenson, 'The Romantic Fabulist Predicts A Dreamy Apocalypse', *The Believer* (1st June, 2003). <https://believermag.com/the-romantic-fabulist-predicts-a-dreamy-apocalypse/>. [Accessed 5th September 2018].

[10] See Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', *Contemporary Literature*, 38 (1997), 394-421 (p. 399).

for the reality of the artist's […].'[11] The notion of Erickson's characters and settings serving as non-literal representations of personal concerns and conception is indicated here.

Each chapter of this thesis will either engage with these interests selectively to highlight how certain issues and presentations overlap across Erickson's texts or through close reading, depending on how pronounced the issue relating to the chapter is. Certain features of Erickson's novels that resonate with aspects of theory from fields such as psychology, sociology, film and spatiality will also be noted for purposes of providing further context.

Chapter 1 will familiarise the reader with Erickson both as an individual and as a writer. An exploration of Erickson's background and early years reveals an engagement with films, literature and pop music that have all served as influences in his fiction. The significance of other experiences will also be discussed. His childhood stutter, for instance, is made a recurrent feature of his texts as an affliction that some characters suffer from. It is through analysis of these early years and Erickson's engagement with a variety of popular media forms that an early sense can be gained of the strength of interconnections across his works. The manner in which themes, settings and characters can overlap throughout Erickson's oeuvre—albeit in a consciously discontinuous fashion—highlights the very nature of these different engagements. A host of genres, forms, preoccupations and interests are processed and subsequently refined into a unique conception. The end result is a distinctive literary style that conveys his personal interests and concerns.

This chapter will also address the issue of classification. Classifying contemporary writers can be problematic for the simple reason that the writer in question is continually contributing to their oeuvre, making sudden shifts in style, tone and preoccupations a real possibility. As such, they can be difficult to locate in the context of any single particular form or genre. This obviously applies to Erickson, but the fact that his work has been shown to exhibit tropes associated with genres as varied as disaster fiction, science fiction, historical fiction and surrealism suggests further issues. Erickson's own reticence at being labelled has been an additional problem in this respect. Despite his protestations, an attempt will be made to locate Erickson in a postmodern context. Whilst Brian Evenson highlights the problems in doing so, contrasting Erickson with the 'Big Boys of Postmodernism' in Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon whilst referencing the author's 'anti-macho' prose, it should be stressed here that the decision to locate Erickson in such a context is due to instances of intertextuality, pastiche and structural experimentation within his work.[12] What will be argued here is that whilst Erickson may be denying his status as a postmodernist in perfectly good faith, the presence of these devices in his texts is more a reflection of growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, in which media forms such as film, music and television became increasingly accessible. 'There's no doubt films and television were formative influences on my work, but what writer of my

[11] James Mx Lane, 'Steve Erickson', *BOMB* (1st July, 1987). <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/steve-erickson/>. [Accessed 7th September 2018].
[12] Evenson, 'The Romantic Fabulist…'.

generation *can't* say that?' Erickson has said.[13] The effect of such media developments on his fiction will be examined here.

Chapter 2 will explore Erickson in relation to the literary, historic and social contexts of his home city of Los Angeles. This will serve to create further understanding of Erickson as a writer. The chapter will begin by identifying certain recurrent features of Los Angeles literature that are present in Erickson's novels. A number of writers whose literary output has been associated with the city—Nathanael West, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, Bret Easton Ellis to name a few—have been explicitly mentioned by Erickson in various articles or interviews. The most noticeable recurrent feature of works from these aforementioned writers is a thematic interest in death and destruction that manifest both literally and metaphorically. The chapter will go on to explore how this fascination stems from Los Angeles' social and cultural histories. Each of these writers can be observed to take influence from facets of their own milieu to create literature that conveys the notion of the city representing forms of chaos concealed by glamorous aesthetics, and the true-life frequency of disaster in Los Angeles. Though Erickson's own impressions of the writers named above differs to varying degrees—as will become evident—a focus on these areas contextualises his own interest in endings.

Analysis of Erickson's third novel *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989) will show how the author's fascination with temporal distortion allows a sense of an impending disaster to build as a result of the twentieth century splintering into two separate timelines. The novel represents a foray into the field of alternate history with Erickson reimagining the outcome of the Second World War in order to give this notion of approaching doom a tangible form.

Arc d'X will then be referenced in order to depict how this interest in alternate histories develops. The book begins in a manner typical of historical fiction with a presentation of the complicated relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave lover Sally Hemings, the narrative suddenly changes focus in a sharp, tangential fashion. Awakening from a night's sleep, Sally finds herself accused of murder in the theocratic city of Aeonopolis in an alternate world in which the United States was never envisioned. Functioning as a representation of the conflict between secularist thought and religious zealotry existing in contemporary America, Amy Elias has commented on the novel's ability to present these seemingly disparate states as '[…] Chiasma, places of reversals, but also denials of representation.'[14] This very sentiment underscores a particular area of interest for Erickson concerning America's interpretation of itself and its history. From this point, the full significance of the novel's title becomes apparent after a plot divergence that depicts the discovery of Jour d'X ('X-Day') as a period of indeterminate, non-linear time between 31st December 1999 and 1st January 2000 that suggests an approaching inexplicable ending. A final divergence depicts a character named Erickson drifting aimlessly around a disaster-ravaged version of Berlin in an imagined 1998. His murder at the hands of a far-right thug, who subsequently absconds to America and unknowingly retraces Sally's earlier steps—

[13] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 403.
[14] Amy J. Elias, 'The Postmodern Turn on(:) the Enlightenment', *Contemporary Literature*, 37 (1996), 553-558 (p. 550).

albeit in an alternate portrayal of time and setting—brings the novel full circle. As with *Tours*, notions of reconnection and redemption are often suggested in Erickson's presentations of endings.

This chapter will also observe how Erickson applies the theme of endings to distinct social contexts. *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999)—Erickson's last novel of the twentieth century—references a litany of true-life events intended to signpost a coming apocalypse to demonstrate how Erickson invokes cultural memory to create an atmosphere of uncertainty that reflects collective pre-millennial anxieties.

Examination of *Zeroville* will highlight how this theme of endings is channelled metaphorically. The arrival of Vikar, the novel's protagonist, in Los Angeles during the summer of 1969 represents a crucial starting point for the novel. The time period's correspondence with the Manson Family killings casts a dark shadow over the narrative. A further impression of endings is implied at the outset of the novel, albeit in a cultural sense. Set at the intersection of the move away from the Old Hollywood methods of film production—its 'Golden Age'—towards the New Hollywood style of filmmaking, *Zeroville* notes the effect of this industrial change. As is consistent in Erickson's novels, an intrinsic link between endings and new beginnings is established in reference to this particular period.

'Over all of my novels hovers the ghost of America', Erickson has remarked of his recurring preoccupation of national identity and experience.[15] This will be the subject of Chapter 3. Using past interviews and essays, a sense of Erickson's own beliefs in this field will first be established. Reference to his own political awakening as a teenager has often been a feature of Erickson's past interviews. Erickson's belief that the American right has consistently failed to address the country's issues with race led to what he has described as his 'first sense of political alienation.'[16] For Erickson, Robert Kennedy symbolised the possibility of America finally beginning to address its chequered past in order to fulfil its Jeffersonian potential. Kennedy's assassination in 1968 has since extinguished this possibility according to Erickson; an assertion that forms the basis of his second novel *Rubicon Beach* (1986).[17] The novel presents three seemingly disparate plot strands that ultimately entwine at the novel's conclusion. The novel's primary settings of America One and America Two, expressed via two radically different conceptions of Los Angeles, highlight the notion of conflict and paradoxes being at the core of American national identity. Comparable to Aeonopolis' function as a representative vehicle in *Arc d'X*, the post-apocalyptic America One and the more conventional America Two being posed as separate entities that ultimately fuse crystallizes the notion of subliminal conflicts. Kennedy's death is suggested as the catalyst for this split.

---

[15] Steve Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*', *Science Fiction Eye* (Summer, 1993). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/arceye.html>. [Accessed 5th September 2018].
[16] Steve Erickson, 'I Was a Teenage Conservative', *The American Prospect* (5th December, 2012). <http://prospect.org/article/i-was-teenage-conservative>. [Accessed 11th September 2018].
[17] See Michael Ventura, 'Phantasmal America', *The L.A. Weekly* (29th August, 1986). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/phant.html>. [Accessed 6th September 2018].

Erickson's journalistic work will also be discussed in this chapter. *Leap Year* (1989) and *American Nomad* (1997) are two interesting books in that they combine Erickson's work as a journalist for *Rolling Stone* with elements of his fiction. The end result is a pair of texts that could easily be as considered companion pieces that convey impressions of the national consciousness at the approach of the twenty-first century in a wholly personal way. Ostensibly, both are political campaign books. *Leap Year* sees Erickson describe the Democratic and Republican primaries in the run-up to the 1988 presidential election, whilst the Clinton versus Dole contest in 1996 is made the subject of *American Nomad*. Reflections on pop culture, however, intersperse both accounts as political figures are likened to contemporary celebrities. Similarly, the personal and professional lives of a range of pop culture icons are evoked in order to convey various forms of national experiences. Both books capture the political climate of the time whilst hinting at a number of pre-millennial anxieties concerning what the future holds for an increasingly polarised nation. 'From dismal campaign to dismal campaign, we demand "change" and then give every indication of wanting nothing of the sort and of not having the slightest idea what we ever meant by it in the first place', Erickson has observed in this regard, indicating that these anxieties stem from both a disenchantment with contemporary politics and a collective inability to decide on a viable direction for the country's future.[18]

A sense of the directionless nation is channelled in Erickson's most recent novel at the time of writing, *Shadowbahn* (2017). Undertones of pre-millennial angst that are detectable in a number of Erickson's books are made explicit in this novel as it depicts a nation seemingly beyond redemption. The notion of 'the directionless nation' is interestingly conveyed via the familiar American motif of the open road. A fractured country divided along the lines of class and race is presented at the outset of the novel. The sudden and unexplained reappearance of the Twin Towers in the Badlands of South Dakota prompts mass pilgrimage to the site. The novel's basic premise counterbalances pervading feelings of hopelessness and interpersonal separation with emblems signifying some form of higher, yet unknown meaning for those visiting. In this respect, the Twin Towers function as powerful symbols of the twenty-first century. The structures are seen to represent lost possibilities, with their presence reminding of the events—i.e. the War on Terror—that have served to direct America to its current state.

Erickson's *These Dreams of You* (2012)—which will be mentioned briefly in this chapter—touched upon the potential for American redemption in reference to Barack Obama's 2008 presidential victory. That *Shadowbahn* features two central characters from *These Dreams* in the form of Parker and Zema Nordhoc appears significant when considering the novel's theme of lost possibilities. The siblings representing post-racial promise in *These Dreams*—with Parker a white American and Zema an Ethiopian adoptee to the Nordhoc family—their presence in *Shadowbahn* as pilgrims to what is dubbed 'the American Stonehenge' illustrates the full extent of this failed promise. Textual references to literal border checks express Erickson's fear of polemic discourse becoming entrenched and commonplace; a symbol of

[18] Steve Erickson, 'American Weimar', *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* (8th January, 1995). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/weimar.html>. [Accessed 30th December 2018].

the country eventually 'coming apart not just philosophically but geographically.'[19] In *Shadowbahn*, the numerous national concerns detailed in works such as *Rubicon Beach*, *Leap Year* and *American Nomad* are taken towards a nightmarish conclusion.

Chapter 4 will explore Erickson's interest in film. Erickson's preoccupation with the medium is directed more towards consideration of film as a process, typically centred on viewing as a conscious act and its subsequent affecting of a character. A series of psychologically complex characterisations are presented as a series of unconscious desires announce themselves to the spectator within the confines of the cinema environment. A feature that emerges through analysis of Erickson's depictions of viewing is that of a strong interconnection between film, dreams and memory. The blurring of external points of distinction a common perpetuation throughout Erickson's fiction, this very interconnection represents a vehicle that can engender such a process. The three entities are depicted as being interchangeable as forms as the character is usually framed as a passive witness to their own deep-rooted desires and memories

Days will be the first novel discussed in this chapter, in particular a plot thread documenting the early life and career of the enigmatic French film director Adolphe Sarre. Introduction of Adolphe's character constitutes a deviation from the main plot strand. During this portion of the novel, significant emphasis is placed on Adolphe's different 'mode of seeing.' Having spent much of his young life living a clandestine existence inside a secret room in a Parisian brothel, the effect of this on his perceptual faculties is described at lengthy by Erickson as the presence of mysterious lights and a compromised view of the outside world are compared with the workings of a camera obscura. The first ever film that he sees—D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—proves a profound moment for Adolphe, representing a literal projection of his own distinct way of seeing. After finding menial employment in the film industry, he is eventually tasked with directing the French Revolutionary epic *The Death of Marat*. It is during production of the film that the boundaries between apparent actualities and artifices become indistinguishable as subtle psychological changes in the character become noticeable.

Amnesiascope (1996) will also be examined in this chapter. Arguably Erickson's most intriguing work, the novel features an author surrogate navigating what is effectively a post-apocalyptic version of Los Angeles. A number of familiar reference points exist in this Los Angeles—most notably through allusions to the cultural prominence of film in the city—but the presentation is one that owes a debt to the confusing geography and history of civil unrest of its true life counterpart. The unpredictability of the environment sees the narrator uses film as an external signifier of security in his own mental faculties; a relationship explained by his occupation as a film critic for a local newspaper. Essentially, this very relationship underpins the narrator's 'way of seeing' his surroundings. The gradual deterioration of his faculties—as becomes detectable through the presentation of this relationship—ultimately signals a lengthy period of introspection that causes him to re-evaluate a number of issues in his personal life.

[19] Jim Knipfel, 'This Binary Moment: Novelist Steve Erickson on Our Cold Civil War', *The Believer* (10th September ,2018). <https://believermag.com/logger/this-binary-moment/>. [Accessed 9th January 2019].

The interconnection between film, dreams and memory is arguably most explicit in *Zeroville*. The impaired mental faculties of Vikar—described in the text as being a '*cineautistic*'—expresses the fluid manner in which this overlap occurs.[20] A description of the film that Vikar is watching, for instance, is shown to naturally segue into a portrayal of some form of unconscious yearning or repressed memory. The chapter will also examine an episode in which Vikar encounters an African-American burglar in his Los Angeles apartment. Although this is a relatively minor plot detail, their subsequent discussion of film and its societal representations constitutes an interesting facet of the novel. Such notions are implicitly connected to a particular mode of seeing as the spectator's own world view is a major influence on their ability to interpret a film's properties and extract some form of meaning from it.

Chapter 5 will explore Erickson's portrayals of 'psychotopography'. The term is used in *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005) and refers to the intrinsic relationship between character and setting in Erickson's novels.[21] Fundamentally, psychotopography is underpinned by character psychology and their interpretation of their geographical surroundings. Essentially, it denotes a radical shift in the character's surrounding topography that represents an external mirroring of their changing thoughts, moods and emotions. The notion of a mutable landscape stems from Erickson's own perceptions as a child growing up in the San Fernando Valley. 'By the time I was a teenager in the mid-Sixties nothing about where I grew up looked like it had only a few years before,' Erickson has said in reference to the scale of environmental change occurring around him during his early years as the landscape develops into an urban sprawl from a pastoral idyll.[22] Erickson's recollections in this sphere will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter itself, highlighting how these early conceptions helped form the basis for psychotopography.

Days and *Amnesiascope* are the novels that will be examined in this final chapter. Despite both of these works predating Erickson's use of the term 'psychotopography', they arguably constitute the best examples of the effect from the author's oeuvre regardless. As Erickson's literary debut, *Days* signifies the first employment of the effect. The focus here will turn to the novel's central plot strand which features a love triangle between married couple Lauren and Jason, and the amnesiac nightclub owner Michel in an offbeat depiction of Los Angeles. Events in the text move to Europe as the characters journey to Paris and Venice. Brief interludes also take place in Kansas and San Francisco early in the novel. Each of these settings is depicted in a free-form manner. Their properties are sighted through Lauren and interpreted in a manner comparable to the seamless working of her internal faculties. Character and setting are intrinsically correlated, resulting in a connection that enables incidents of personal and environmental change.

[20] See Steve Erickson, *Zeroville* (New York: Europa, 2007), p. 75. Henceforth cited in-text as (*Z*, page number).
[21] See Steve Erickson, *Our Ecstatic Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 110. Henceforth cited in-text as (*OED*, page number).
[22] Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*'.

Amnesiascope represents an intriguing development of the effect, taking place in a Los Angeles that Erickson has said represents a city 'of my imagination'.[23] This functions, in Erickson's words, as 'A fantastical backdrop against which I've addressed more personal concerns.'[24] A sense of the personal is implied in the connection between author surrogate and conceived setting in the text. Environmental changes are seen to occur in conjunction with the protagonist's internal crisis, as is also evident in *Days*.

It is the aim of this thesis to address an area of academic criticism that is severely lacking in the form of a comprehensive critical study of Steve Erickson's work. Although the depth and complexities of his literature ensures that there are unfortunately certain areas that will be neglected, it is hoped that identifying Erickson's primary and concerns and examining how these develop over time will represent something of a welcome start in this area.

[23] Rob Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson', *The Blue Moon Review* (Summer, 1996). <http://www.thebluemoon.com/4/ericksoniv.html>. [Accessed 7th September 2018].
[24] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 398.

Chapter 1: Erickson as A Writer

Early Life and Interests

Exploration of the life, career and creative influences of Steve Erickson gives an impression is of the various factors that have shaped his literary conceptions as a writer. A number of narratives can be read as an amalgamation of lived experience and recollections, wide-ranging pop cultural allusions, and certain tropes, motifs and devices associated with writers for whom Erickson has expressed admiration. The achieved effect is fiction that Brian Evenson calls 'haunting, unironic and authentically human', describing Erickson as 'at once a romantic and a futurist'.[1]

Erickson was born in Santa Monica, California in April 1950. His mother was an actress who ran a small theatre in Los Angeles, and his father was a photographer. Immediately, an insight can be gained as to the sources of Erickson's authorial interest in film as a medium, and with different modes of seeing and changing perspectives. Erickson's initial interest in literature came in the form of L. Frank Baum's *Oz* series of books. Referencing in particular *Ozma of Oz* (1907) and *Rinkitink in Oz* (1916), Erickson recalls 'how they were strange books, dark in a way the movie just hints at' before describing them as a form of 'American surrealism'.[2] Erickson's fascination with these works developed into an interest in comic books, science fiction and crime fiction.[3] During these early years, it is possible to gain a sense of the influence various narrative forms and stylistic elements have had on Erickson's unique literary portrayals. His parents' respective occupations also suggest an early familiarity with both performance and the shifting nature of individual perspective; two features that have consistently been referenced throughout his oeuvre.

A childhood stutter left an indelible mark on Erickson's consciousness. The affliction was so severe that Erickson recalls 'alienated me from other children and convinced my early teachers I couldn't read.'[4] The stutter itself along with the reaction from fellow children can be offered as a reason for his interest in the solitary pursuit of reading. Reading *Ozma of Oz*, for instance, is referred to as being his 'first alternate reality.'[5] The phrasing here appears significant upon consideration of Erickson's fascination with 'multiple—and competing, and contradicting—realities' throughout his works, as noted by Evenson.[6]

The isolation Erickson felt as a result of his stutter prompted him to start writing fiction from an early age. He recalls an incident from his childhood in which he was accused of plagiarism by his teachers; such was their surprise at the quality of a short story he wrote at the age of seven. This was a common occurrence throughout Erickson's schooling, as he reflects: 'This was a common assumption through much of my schooling except for those occasions when the work was somehow regarded as too disturbed to have been plagiarized; following one

[1] Evenson, 'The Romantic Fabulist…'.
[2] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 412.
[3] ibid.
[4] Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*'.
[5] Alan Rifkin, 'Soul Survivor', *Buzz* (April, 1993). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/soul.html>. [Accessed 5th September 2018].
[6] Evenson, 'The Romantic Fabulist…'.

such episode I stopped writing for several years.'[7] The notion of reading and writing representing a form of cathartic release for the young Erickson is strengthened through such recollections. The effect of the accusation levelled at Erickson is obvious in this respect, essentially denying him a viable means of channelling his thoughts and conceptions. Evident throughout Erickson's fiction are a number of characters who are either denied a voice, or who struggle to articulate their feelings. The thematic recurrence of 'voicelessness' highlights the personal significance of this memory.

His childhood affliction has been incorporated into his texts, often as a means of conveying this same 'voicelessness'. Michel—the amnesiac owner of the Blue Isosceles night club in *Days Between Stations*—represents one such example; the character's stutter symbolising his status as a marginalised figure unsure of his own past. The other comes in the form of the unnamed first-person narrator of *Amnesiascope*. The narrator in question is an obvious author surrogate due to the presence of a number of biographical and occupational overlaps with Erickson himself, he finds that the return of his childhood stutter coincides with a period of self-loathing brought upon by romantic difficulties: 'I've been working on my stutter. I almost lost it for a while but I've gotten it back, better than ever.'[8] A degree of dark humour concealing a very real fear is detectable here, with the affliction presented as a shameful, grotesque extension of the protagonist's being: 'Standing in the shadows of street corners I open my mouth and let go at the passerby' (*A*, 146).

Erickson's interest in film can also be traced back to these formative years. He particularly recalls watching *Invaders from Mars* (1953) on television as part of Channel 9's *The Million Dollar Movie* series 'every day for a week' as a child, claiming that 'things like that shape the way you conceive of narrative in ways that are difficult to explain.'[9] Certain facets of the film appear to have had an effect on Erickson's literary conceptions. Firstly, events in the film are depicted from the perspective of its child protagonist, David. An obvious connection can be made in this regard concerning the centrality afforded to an individual character's perceptual faculties in Erickson's texts. The second point of interest arises from the film's dreamlike, surrealist atmosphere. This comes from a central premise of distorting familiar surroundings to foster a sense of unease, achieved through unconventional production methods that emphasise the perspective of the child protagonist. Low-set camera angles and oversized set designs are employed to give such an impression. A key motif of the protagonist awakening from sleep adds a layer ambiguity to events. As such, the film has been retrospectively compared and contrasted with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939):

> Dorothy's Kansas world may have been dull, but it had one quality David MacLean's sorely lacks: a sense of security. David's frantic dream is a symptom of the pressures of his daily life, not an escape from it. It's not a magical place Over the Rainbow that one can enter like a Tex Avery cartoon character ('Technicolor Begins Here'). David's dream is an alternate reality so

[7] Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*'.
[8] Steve Erickson, *Amnesiascope* (London: Quartet Books, 1997), p. 146. Henceforth cited in-text as (*A*, page number).
[9] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', pp. 403-404.

> close to his real world he doesn't even know he's left it. Like Dorothy's Oz, David's dream is populated by people he knows, but now they are sinister doppelgängers of their 'real' selves.[10]

Given Erickson's interest in Baum's *Oz* series of books, it should perhaps come as little surprise to find that allusions to *The Wizard of Oz* frequently recur throughout his fiction, as though intending to transmit a sense of the strange or other-worldly. Erickson's fluid prose style can therefore be viewed as a notable means of attempting to channel the fluid properties of film.

Erickson's fascination with film also focuses on viewer engagement with the medium. Erickson's recollection of repeatedly watching *Invaders from Mars* on television as a child exemplifies this very fascination. The significance of television as a prominent cultural touchstone of the late 1950s and early 1960s is alluded to here. In addition to enabling repeated viewings of films, the rise of television represented a considerable resizing of the medium itself. The subsequent emergence of video in the 1980s took the concept of repeated viewings of a film to an even greater level. Such developments have signalled an irrevocable change not only in expectations of the medium, but also in viewing habits. Given television's elevation to a position of cultural prominence during Erickson's youth, it can be reasoned that the beginnings of an interconnection between media forms are traceable here.

Interconnections across different media forms caused by the proliferation of viewing modes are often highlighted in Erickson's texts. The most notable occurrence of this can be found in *These Dreams of You*. The novel opens with description of a family's viewing of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election victory on television. The unfolding events are described with a similar enraptured wonderment that Erickson usually reserves for portrayals of characters enthralled by the spectacle of cinema. The election of America's first African-American president is described as 'science fiction'; the televised image of an 'anonymous young black woman, who in the grass of the park, has fallen to her knees and holds her face in her hands' encapsulating the euphoria of the moment.[11] The patriarch of the family, Zan Nordhoc, watches the scenes on television and thinks that it is 'the sort of history that puts novelists out of business' (*TDY*, 12). The comparison itself demonstrates how Erickson's depictions of viewing operate, with different media forms often referenced analogically to signify a prevailing mood or emotion. Science fiction's inherent strangeness is evoked here, for example, to express Zan's thoughts on Obama's election. The personal significance of the viewing experience itself is heightened.

Erickson's main concern in this field, however, is in demonstrating how perceptions and experiences of a film or a particular event can be entirely dependent on the viewing mode itself. Here, Erickson discusses how he has found this to be the case in relation to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958):

---

[10] Glenn Erickson, 'The Ultimate Savant Essay: *Invaders from Mars*. Part Two: Cinematic Dreamscape', *DVD Savant* (n.d.). <https://www.dvdtalk.com/dvdsavant/s97InvadersB.html>. [accessed: 6th September 2018].
[11] Steve Erickson, *These Dreams of You* (New York: Europa, 2012), p. 12. Henceforth cited in-text as *(TDY*, page number).

> 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.[12]

This aspect of viewing is explored in *Zeroville*. Various characters come to separate realisations that they in fact 'love' particular films after initially being dismissive of their respective properties. The change in opinion is facilitated through repeated viewings, as well as in differences with regard to the mode of viewing. The above excerpt makes reference to this happening in a personal context, with Erickson establishing distinctions between watching Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) at the cinema and alone. His assertion of the film's apparent absurdity as part of a collective viewing experience is juxtaposed with a suggestion of entrancement that comes from watching alone. The suggestion of a film having 'the force of a private dream' affirms the notion of an individual having a personal connection with a film, whereby the effect it imparts on a character is a wholly unique one. Whilst the psychoanalytical implications of associating a film with a 'private dream' will be explored in Chapter 4, the impression gained here is of the ability of a media form and a particular mode of viewing to leave an indelible mark on a protagonist's psyche.

The 'private dream' that Erickson speaks of often characterises his various descriptions of different characters watching films. These presentations often convey facets of the viewer's own subconscious back to them. This enables the film itself to resonate with the viewer on a deep and profound level. The dark environment of the cinema acts as a mimetic substitute for sleep. Consequently, the screen projections themselves have a dream-like feel. A number of Erickson's depictions in this respect conform to Freud's observations on the nature and properties of dreams, most notably in terms of drawing upon experience in order to ascertain meaning from signals, the evocation of memory, and the stoking of repressed desires.[13] Freud identifies the dream process as being the result of the id's unconscious content—either originally unconscious or repressed—asserting itself upon the ego. Sleep is essentially the mechanism via which this conflict is able to manifest; as means of 'the unconscious dealing with preconscious thought processes.'[14] The relationship between film and dreams is established as irrevocable and intrinsic in Erickson's fiction.

Music represents another of Erickson's recurring motifs. An obvious connection with film can be made in this respect relating to the respective fluidity of both media forms. Although film occupies a greater position of prominence within Erickson's fiction, the influence of

---

[12] Anthony Miller, 'Steve Erickson', *Susan Henderson's LitPark* (2nd April 2008). <https://www.litpark.com/2008/04/02/steve-erickson/>. [accessed: 6th September 2018].
[13] Sigmund Freud, 'An Outline of Psychoanalysis', in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 1-63 (p. 21).
[14] ibid, p. 22.

music cannot be underplayed. As with film, features and facets relatable to music influence both setting and characterisation on occasion. This employment relates to the haunting melodies drifting from the abandoned buildings of the submerged Los Angeles of America One in *Rubicon Beach*, to the playlist intended to soundtrack twenty-first century America that a deceased father bestows to his two children in *Shadowbahn*.

As an adolescent, Erickson's love of music superseded even his interest in literature. He has described the post-war era of mainstream American fiction as 'pretty dismal', in addition to claiming that 'John Updike and Saul Bellow didn't mean all that much to me.'[15] He asserts that the music of Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Van Morrison, Neil Young, Lou Reed and Bruce Springsteen had as profound an effect on him as any literary influence.[16] Ray Charles, in particular, is described by Erickson as having 'rearranged all the furniture in my head.'[17] Having grown up in what he recalls as 'a very white-bread childhood', Charles' music, Erickson claims 'may have changed me more than any single artist of any medium.'[18] The young Erickson at this point became preoccupied with the very nature of the creative process, which saw him subsequently develop a working habit typified by a maxim of 'refinement by passion, polish by energy.'[19] This has been articulated further by Erickson:

> I would be thinking about the novel for a while before I start. I feel the need to, what we call in the United States, "build up a head of steam," to gather my energy for the work, which is not to say that I spend too much time thinking it out exactly. I want to have a sense of the work, I want to have a sense of the characters. I have a general map in my head where I'm going to go, but at the same time, I want to leave room for the surprises, the accidents. And then I usually write a book relatively quickly, within somewhere between eight and twelve months.[20]

Erickson, however, concedes that what he considers his greatest flaw could be attributed to this same approach, saying 'I'm really not as careful an observer as I should be and my books wind up being a little too imagined when they ought to be better observed.'[21] Consideration of the content of Erickson's novels implies that he may mean that his narratives themselves are the product of his own consciousness and unique perceptual faculties, over literal depictions of time periods or settings. The extent to which this could legitimately be viewed as a flaw is debatable though, given that much of the intrigue that surrounds him as a writer stems from his ability to weave together a series of disparate and mutable landscapes that are typically inhabited by a range of equally disparate and mutable characters. Erickson attributes this partly to having spent 'a whole lifetime living inside my own head and I'm more comfortable there. I'm more fascinated with what's in my own head than I am with the world around me.'[22] Erickson has elaborated on this assessment, discussing how his settings are

---

[15] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 402.
[16] ibid, p. 402.
[17] ibid, p. 403.
[18] ibid, p. 402.
[19] ibid, p. 403.
[20] Yoshiaki Koshikawa, 'Steve Erickson Meets Ryu Murakami: Self-Expanding into the World of the Unconsciousness', *Shincho* (22nd April, 1997). <http://www.shinchosha.co.jp/shincho/9707/ryu_steve.html>. [Accessed 7th September 2018].
[21] Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson'.
[22] ibid.

influenced more by impressions than actuality. 'I can create a Los Angeles of my imagination that may come closer to the true spirit of Los Angeles,' he has stated in this respect. [23] The centrality of unique, individual perceptions in his work is suggested here.

In addition to writing novels, Erickson has enjoyed a successful secondary career working in journalism. An alumnus of UCLA, Erickson graduated first with a B.A. in film studies in 1972 and then an M.A. in journalism the following year. He has written freelance for a number of reputable publications including *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, *Conjunctions*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. Since 2001, he has written a regular column for *Los Angeles* magazine on film and developments in popular culture. Between 2012 and 2014, Erickson used his column to compile what he called the 'Essential Movie Library', listing one-hundred-and-one films (or film series where relevant) that he has claimed 'ought to be in every well stocked home library.'; beginning with Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990) and concluding with Francis Delia's *Nightdreams* (1981).[24] A list of the films catalogued by Erickson as part of his 'Essential Movie Library' feature can be found as an appendix.[25]

Two particular areas of interest arise from the 'Essential Movie Library' series. Firstly, it serves to highlights Erickson's interest in various modes of viewing, as well as its subsequent affecting of the spectator. This is self-evident in the very notion of an 'Essential Movie Library'. The potential for the reconsidering of a film's merits is often referenced by Erickson during the course of the series to indicate not only the importance of repeated viewings in critical appraisals, but also demonstrate the ease with which this has been enabled in the post-video era. Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953), for instance, is noted as not having been screened in America until the mid-1960s, and even then it was largely assumed that Japanese cinema 'began and ended with Kurosawa.'[26] Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) is referenced as an example of the benefits of these technological advances on account of the film's original recording only having been made available on DVD during the early-2000s.[27] Both of these observations resonate with Erickson's recollection of having watched *Vertigo* on television with regard to the influence of the viewing mode itself. Having previously discussed differences relating to the 'experience' watching of a film, Erickson uses his column here to observe how the changing nature of these viewing modes allows for a deeper level of critical engagement.

Secondly, the 'Essential Movie Library' can be considered worthy of interest on account of the series' implicit relationship with Erickson's fiction. With film representing one of his

---

[23] ibid.
[24] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #1: *The Godfather* Trilogy (1972, 1973, 1990)', *Los Angeles* (16th October, 2012). <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/the-essential-movie-library-1-the-godfather-trilogy-1972-1974-1990/>. [Accessed 10th September 2018].
[25] See Appendix 2.
[26] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #17: *Tokyo Story* (1953)', *Los Angeles* (26th February, 2013). <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/the-essential-movie-library-17-tokyo-story-1953/>. [Accessed 10th September 2018].
[27] See Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #20: *Persona* (1966)', *Los Angeles* (19th March, 2013). <http://www.lamag.com/laculture/the-essential-movie-library-20-persona-1966/>. [Accessed 10th September 2018].

greatest interests as both a journalist and a novelist, references to a number of the films listed in the series recur throughout his books. The most prominent of these include *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *A Place in the Sun* (1951), *Vertigo*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The nature of these references varies between texts, be it via brief allusion or certain aspects overtly detailed so as to highlight its centrality to the narrative. San Francisco, one of the early locations of *Days* and the setting of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, is described by Alexandru Budac as a 'melancholic city', as he notes similarities between both works' shared themes of 'lost loves and missed opportunities.'[28] In *These Dreams*, a character's viewing of *2001: A Space Odyssey* during their childhood in Mogadishu is recalled as having been projected on a monolith similar to the one that features as the film's primary motif ('When Viv saw the movie about the monolith surrounded by apes who hurl a bone into the sky that becomes a space station, it actually was on a monolith.') (*TDY*, 15-16). *Zeroville* sees comparable references at the forefront of the narrative, with central protagonist Vikar arriving in Los Angeles with a still of Montgomery Clift embracing Elizabeth Taylor from *A Place in the Sun* tattooed on his shaved scalp, before he begins searching across Europe for a lost copy of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Each of these examples demonstrate how Erickson's texts can be read intertextually, drawing on his interest in film and other forms of pop culture in order to convey particular themes or concerns.

A similar intertextual relationship between different spheres of popular culture is present in two of Erickson's most intriguing books. *Leap Year* and *American Nomad* stand as difficult works to classify in many respects. Both texts are worthy of comparison in that they each feature Erickson covering presidential campaigns—albeit at different stages—for *Rolling Stone* magazine. *Leap Year* sees Erickson cover the Republican and Democratic presidential primaries ahead of the 1988 election. *American Nomad*, in contrast, charts the 1996 presidential election between the incumbent Bill Clinton and the Republican nominee Bob Dole. Both books undoubtedly exhibit strong journalistic content as Erickson travels across the country to critique different aspects of the respective campaigns.

Distinctive fictional elements, however, are traceable in both works. This is more obviously relevant to *Leap Year*, in which a vision of Sally Hemings—the slave lover of Thomas Jefferson—trails Erickson on his journey as an evocative reminder of America's chequered racial history. Whilst nothing of the sort occurs in *American Nomad*, the text's premise of Erickson taking a road trip across the country with a carefully selected musical accompaniment—termed 'the American Soundtrack'—is later referenced in the plot of *Shadowbahn*.[29] Interspersing Erickson's political observations are musings on popular culture in an attempt to analogise both the political climate and the national condition. Specific details of these works will be discussed in a later, relevant chapter, but the style and structure of each—a marrying of elements of new historicism and gonzo journalism—ensure that these texts can not only be regarded as integral to Erickson's literary oeuvre, but are also demonstrative of his scope as a journalist.

[28] Alexandru Budac, 'The Blue and White Visual Narrative in Steve Erickson's *Day Between Stations*', *British and American Studies*, 22 (2016), 65-71 (p. 68).
[29] Steve Erickson, *American Nomad* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 180. Henceforth cited in-text as (*AN*, page number).

Concurrent to his journalistic endeavours, Erickson has also been involved in academia. From 2004 until it ceased publication in 2016, Erickson edited the *Black Clock* literary journal, published by the California Institute of the Arts. Released semi-annually, the journal was intended to showcase fiction, poetry and creative essays from a host of writers of varying stature. Previous contributors include Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Lethem, Mark Z. Danielewski, and William T. Vollmann. A sense of the journal's breadth and scope can be gauged from these names, indicative of a desire to promote innovative and exceptional writing regardless of form or genre. Past editions of the journal's anthology have been nominated for O. Henry and Pushcart prizes.

Erickson is currently a faculty member at the University of California, Riverside, where he serves as a Distinguished Professor in the institute's Creative Writing department. He has been the recipient of a number of accolades, including a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1987, a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for his fiction in 2007, an American Academy of Arts and Letters award in literature in 2010, as well as a Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014. His journalistic work has also been well received, having twice been nominated for the National Magazine Awards for criticism and commentary, first in 2010 and then again in 2012. A full list of Erickson's awards and accolades is given as an appendix.[30]

Literary Influences

Purported to stylistically resemble J.G. Ballard and Angela Carter by readers, Erickson has actually claimed to be largely ignorant of their respective oeuvres in the past.[31] Instead, he has observed how he has rarely been likened to the authors from whom he has admitted to being influenced by: 'When I think of writers who have had an impact on me, I come up with people that never get named. Faulkner, Henry Miller, the Brontës, Stendahl, Paul Bowles, Philip K. Dick, Raymond Chandler.'[32] He does, however, agree with comparisons to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whilst going on to describe Thomas Pynchon's influence as 'pervasive […] You can't help but be influenced by him.'[33]

Of those referenced by Erickson, it appears Miller, Faulkner and Dick represent his most notable literary influences following considered analysis of his oeuvre. Numerous structural features, themes and tropes one would typically associate with these three figures are certainly identifiable. Erickson's works owe much to Miller's vivid surrealism, Faulkner's structural experimentation and Dick's penchant for weaving narratives around portrayals of personal and collective paranoias manifesting within authoritarian systems.

[30] See Appendix 1.
[31] See Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*.'
[32] Lane, 'Steve Erickson'.
[33] ibid.

The influence of Miller is one that is detectable on a number of levels. The shared prominence of Californian settings in the respective works of both is one obvious connection to make, as is the recurring presence of an author surrogate. Comparable thematic preoccupations between Erickson and Miller include social commentary, philosophical reflections and free-associative surrealism. These elements are all often conveyed via arresting and experimental means. For the emphasis Miller places on the stream of consciousness (*Tropic of Cancer* [1934], Tropic *of Capricorn* [1939], *Sexus* [1949]), one can view Erickson's frequent switching of narrative modes (*Arc d'X*, *Our Ecstatic Days*, *Shadowbahn*) or integration of filmic techniques into a text's structure (*Days*, *Zeroville*) in similar terms. Indeed, Erickson's *Ecstatic* sees the stream of consciousness evoked as the personal conceptions of a character cut directly through the events unfolding in the narrative.

Erickson describes Miller as the 'literary inhabitant of a place in the psyche where human experience recognizes no forward or backward, where the shadows of the soul know no time.'[34] Though the diction used to articulate Erickson's sentiment here could be described as obfuscating—perhaps even slippery—there is a case to be made that a template for characterisation in his own texts is identifiable. The centrality of perceptual faculties within Erickson's fiction already stressed, his protagonists invariably share something of a detached relationship with temporality. Explicit reference to the passage of time is an incredibly rare occurrence in Erickson's texts in order to centralise the respective protagonist's conceptions in the narrative. When time is referenced—as in the case of Banning Jainlight, protagonist of *Tours*—it is usually done so with the intention of bringing attention to an alternate depiction of history or a temporal detachment that indicates of nightmarish possibilities. Again, this is intended to highlight the influence of a character's perceptual faculties in Erickson's novels. Significant emphasis is placed on the extent to which individual responses and interpretations of different states assist in shaping a text. The end result represents something of a modifying of the character study form through the narrative and structural incorporation of surreal and disconcerting facets.

Erickson even goes as far as to apply the metaphor of having the 'furniture rearranged in his head' used to describe the effect of Ray Charles' music in reference to Miller. The literary 'anarchy' that Miller demonstrates in *Tropic of Cancer*, whereby 'the sofa of "aesthetics" had been placed just so, against the window, and the reclining chair of "taste" had been moved ever so carefully before the fireplace.'[35] Although Erickson's terminology here could be considered self-indulgent as he exhausts his own metaphor, it does, however, offer a crucial insight with regard to how these forms of influence are processed. This is reflected in the different intriguing ways in which Erickson channels his interests and concerns to the reader; typically conveying these via experimental means intending to map the workings of internal faculties.

Miller's association with film represents another interesting point of connection with Erickson. At the time of writing, there have been three screen adaptations of Miller's novels.

[34] Steve Erickson, 'Henry Miller: Exhibitionist of the Soul', *Conjunctions* (Fall, 1997). <http://www.conjunctions.com/print/article/steve-erickson-c29>. [Accessed 7th September 2018].
[35] ibid.

These are Joseph Strick's 1970 adaptation of *Tropic of Cancer*, along with two separate adaptations of *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1956); the first by Jens Jorgen Thorsen in 1970, the second by Claude Chabrol in 1990. Miller's affair with Anaïs Nin was also made the subject of 1990 film called *Henry & June*, directed by Philip Kaufman. The film was loosely based on Nin's book of the same name. In addition, Miller has made appearances in a number of documentaries that have been based on his life, including *The Henry Miller Odyssey* (1969), *Anais Nin Observed* (1974), and *Henry Miller Asleep & Awake* (1975). He was also credited as a 'witness' for Warren Beatty's 1981 film *Reds*, having been interviewed about socialist activists John Reed and Louise Bryant. Featured alongside other public figures such as Andrew Dasburg and Rebecca West, these 'witnesses' served to provide context for the film's late-1910's setting. 'These are the Witnesses […] The members of which appear from time to time throughout *Reds* to set the film in historical perspective, as much by what they remember accurately as by their gossip and by what they no longer recall', wrote Vincent Canby of their function in his review of the film.[36] The assessment resonates with Miller's standing as a novelist who sought to channel all aspects of personal experiences—including the fallibility of memory and the subjectivity of interpretation—through his works.

The influences of William Faulkner and Philip K. Dick on Erickson are also inescapable. Both writers' respective treatment of memory in their works has arguably shaped Erickson's conceptions of narrative and form than any other influence. The occurrences and interactions detailed in the works of both Faulkner and Dick are typically presented through the prism of a particular character's consciousness. This necessitates the textual fluidity evident in Faulkner's works, where perspectives change frequently and the past and present are often fused as a singular entity on the page. In the case of Dick, the emphasis he places on individual faculties invariably leads to portrayals of paranoia and existential uncertainty. A sense of ambiguity is perpetuated via such depictions, as to whether a character's fear of reality is internally or externally shaped.

Both of these elements can be identified as features of Erickson's fiction. The anxieties detailed in novels such as *Rubicon Beach*, *Arc d'X*, and *Amnesiascope* are the product of a similar emphasis placed upon the perceptual faculties of character in interpreting shifting and inherently treacherous environments. The sudden environmental and temporal changes themselves inevitably impact on the perceptions of the protagonist in question, leading to characterisations marked by a lingering sense of unease. 'I am thirty-eight, thirty-nine. I look in a mirror and it tells me I'm fifty, fifty-five,' notes Cale, the protagonist of the first section of *Rubicon Beach*, as a brief example of this.[37] The first-person narrative mode highlights the prominence of these very same faculties in the text. The integrity of these faculties is subsequently open to scrutiny, rendering them as mutable as Erickson's environmental or temporal depictions. A pervading sense of uncertainty arises from this intertwinement. These very points are affirmed by Paul Kincaid in his analysis of Erickson's fascination with

[36] Vincent Canby, 'Beatty's *Reds*, with Diane Keaton', *New York Times* (4th December, 1981). <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/04/movies/beatty-s-reds-with-diane-keaton.html>. [Accessed 14th December 2018].
[37] Steve Erickson, *Rubicon Beach* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), p. 20. Henceforth cited in-text as (*RB*, page number).

'breaking down the normal structure of space and time to isolate his characters.'[38] This is identified as a constant process of 'deconstruction and reconstruction', whereby the disintegration of time is explicitly linked to the disintegration of identity, and vice versa.[39]

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) has been referenced by Erickson on a number of occasions as having a profound impact on his own long-held notions of form and style.[40] In particular, he observes how 'the idiot Benjy begins a sentence in the present, and by the time the sentence is halfway finished we're thrust into the past, or maybe we've gone somewhere else […]'; going on to describe this affect has having occurred within 'the continuum of consciousness.'[41] Although a precise definition of this term isn't offered by Erickson, it appears reasonable to suggest that it is in reference to the manner which Faulkner portrays past and present states concurrently within Benjy's consciousness. The result is an eschewing of literal depictions in favour of a disjointed recounting of multiple disparate events. These are conveyed in a fluid manner, comparable to the synesthetic way in which memory operates.

With each section of Faulkner's text presenting the experiences of a particular character over the course of one day, the invoking of memory allows for a fuller historical context to manifest. The filtering of events through the perceptual faculties of different characters not only highlights the uniqueness of their processing of events and surroundings, but also reveals a familial decline that allegorises the crippling legacy of the U.S. Civil War on the Deep South. Indeed, Erickson has remarked how the chronology of Faulkner's novels would 'tick more to the clock of people's memories than to the clock of literal time.'[42] Relating to Erickson's texts, this effect is perhaps most apparent in *Tours of the Black Clock* in the co-existence of separate twentieth century timelines; one of which sees the thoughts and actions of Banning Jainlight change the course of the Second World War. Memory and consciousness are integral in the perceiving and shaping of history in Erickson's fiction, comparable to the manner in which environmental facets and interpersonal relationships are processed by a character. The interplay between memory and consciousness throughout Erickson's oeuvre creates an impression of constant change that underpins his stylistic fluidity.

Faulkner and Erickson's respective relationships with film differ significantly. In contrast to Erickson's secondary career as a critic, Faulkner had first-hand experience of the business of Hollywood, having worked as a screenwriter on a number of films; a career move that was financially motivated. Despite achieving critical success—particularly for his work on Howard Hawks' 1946 film adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*—Faulkner quickly grew disenchanted with Los Angeles. 'I don't like this damn place any better than I ever did. That is one comfort: at least I can't be any sicker tomorrow for Mississippi than I

[38] Paul Kincaid, 'Defying Rational Chronology: Time and Identity in the Work of Steve Erickson', *Foundation,* 58 (1993), 27-42 (p. 27).
[39] ibid, p. 28.
[40] See Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson.'
[41] ibid.
[42] ibid.

was yesterday,' he wrote in a 1945 letter.[43] Los Angeles was satirised in his 1935 short story 'Golden Land' as being ensnared by a 'nebulous California haze' typified by a 'treacherous unbrightness.'[44] Faulkner's only work set in Los Angeles, the story tells of a self-loathing alcoholic Hollywood kingpin and the actions of his amoral family. The presence of a dysfunctional family unit stands as a typical convention of Faulkner's texts, with the writer's own dissatisfaction channelled in the characterisation of the family patriarch, Ira Ewing.

Whilst Faulkner's portrayal of Los Angeles would no doubt be anathema to Erickson, based on his criticism of works that fuel misconceptions about the city–as will be discussed in Chapter 2—it does at least represent an area of notable comparison. A further connection has emerged in recent years relating to film adaptations of each's respective works. The actor and director James Franco adapted *The Sound and the Fury* for the screen in 2014 and played the part of Benjy Compson. Franco subsequently performed similar duties, directing the film adaptation of *Zeroville*—the first Erickson novel to be adapted for the screen—in addition to playing the lead role of Vikar. The film is still to be released at the time of writing, however, after its distribution company filed for bankruptcy in 2015.

Philip K. Dick's various portrayals of memory have also served to inform Erickson's presentations of the same faculty. Whilst Faulkner's protagonists and the workings of their perceptual faculties have influenced characterisation and construction of setting in Erickson's fiction, the recurrent focus on collective or interpersonal anxieties appears reminiscent of Dick. It is also worth noting the similarities between *Tours* and Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) as pieces of speculative fiction concerning alternate histories based on the Axis Powers triumphing in the Second World War. As well as the subject matter itself being comparable, this can additionally be regarded as a vehicle for the development of collective and personal anxieties. The Dick novels, however, that have left the greatest impression on Erickson are *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982), and *In Milton Lunky Territory* (1985).[45] Paranoia is a common theme of each of these texts, as a result of reality being altered by forces beyond the protagonist's influence. Similar effects can be found in Erickson's *Rubicon Beach* and *Arc d'X* that suggest of Dick's influence.

In Milton Lunky Territory was appraised by Erickson in *American Nomad* between reflections on Bruce Spingsteen and Frank Sinatra, detailing the novel's themes of forgotten memories and envisioned futures born from unconscious yearning. Erickson describes the novel as 'an American reverie', paralleling the novel's thematic content with the paradoxical nature of the national consciousness in terms of its representing of an 'America who has forgotten who he is, in a country that has forgotten what it is […]' (*AN*, 49). The collective amnesia that Erickson speaks of in relation to the various contradictions evident throughout America's history features as a prominent theme in texts such as *Amnesiascope* and in his most recent novel *Shadowbahn*. Both of these texts explore these very paradoxes and

[43] David L. Ulin, 'Introduction: 'Golden Land'', in *Writing Los Angeles*, ed. by David L. Ulin (New York: Literacy Classics of the United States, 2002), p. 131.
[44] William Faulkner, 'Golden Land', in *Writing Los Angeles*, pp. 131-151 (p. 136).
[45] Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson'.

contradictions as being implicit within the American psyche, contributing to depictions of a prevailing sense of uncertainty.

Similar concerns recur throughout Dick's oeuvre. Contemporary political anxieties—such as Cold War paranoia—are typically taken to imagined ends and used as a backdrop against which the narrative content of his speculative works and science fiction can develop. A social climate marked by feelings of existential uncertainty and interpersonal mistrust is perpetuated as a result. *Eye in the Sky* (1957), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and *Ubik* (1969) serve as notable examples of this. Indeed, Judith Barad's comments on Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982)—an adaptation of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—are intriguing, concerning how an existentialist uncertainty consistent with Jean-Paul Sartre's thinking is expressed in the film via the use of external features of the Los Angeles of 2019 as supposed validators of one's sense of self.[46] A comparable effect can be found in *Amnesiascope*, in which the narrator's intrapersonal crisis is exacerbated by the collapse of similar external signifiers. As an interesting aside, it is worth noting that Erickson has himself professed admiration for *Blade Runner*, having listed the film at number twenty-one in his 'Essential Movie Library'; the true indicator of humanity described in this appraisal as being less 'blood and sinew but memory and pathos'.[47]

This sentiment is further explored in an article written by Erickson for *Nautilus*, in which he references the death of the Nexus-6 replicant Roy Batty prior to the character's rhapsodising of memories that may not be his own. Humanity, though, Erickson deduces, is signified by the character being affected by these.[48] This leads Erickson to speculate on the beginnings of memory. 'Home is another name for the most profound of memories', he concludes.[49] This particular assertion follows on from consideration of the role of memory in Dick's fiction, with Erickson observing that his earlier works can be viewed as 'surveys of the newly surreal suburbs that were a phenomenon of the post-War years.'[50] With the suburbs serving as emblems of capitalist aspiration—juxtaposing ideologically with the Soviet Union—Erickson views how the concept of 'home' becomes subverted in Dick's fiction. In turn, this is reflected in the memories and recollections of various protagonists: '[…] Suburbia fetishized the idea of home as it had lodged itself in the American dream—the manifestation of refuge and order and success where everyone went quietly nuts […].'[51] Erickson explicitly describes this sentiment as a 'subversive evocation' of all that home is perceived to represent: '[…] As an ideal that enthrals us in defiance of its reality, that continues to lure us even when every impression of home has been betrayed [….].[52]

---

[46] See Judith Barad, '*Blade Runner* and Sartre: The Boundaries of Humanity', in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington, KA: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), pp. 21-34 (p. 29).
[47] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #21: *Blade Runner* (1982)', *Los Angeles* (26th March, 2013). <http://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/the-essential-movie-library-21-blade-runner-1982/>. [Accessed 21st August 2018].
[48] Steve Erickson, 'In Science Fiction, We Are Never Home', *Nautilus* (26th December, 2013). <http://nautil.us/issue/8/home/in-science-fiction-we-are-never-home>. [Accessed 21st August 2018].
[49] ibid.
[50] ibid.
[51] ibid.
[52] ibid.

The same collective amnesia that impairs individual perceptions in Dick's novels is a fundamental component of Erickson's fiction. In addition to being implicit in a number of characterisations, the sentiment itself underpins depictions of settings within his work. The subversion of 'home' as a concept enabled by a prevailing amnesia within Dick's literature brings to mind a number of Erickson's settings: the sunken police state of America One in *Rubicon Beach* and the theocratic rule of Aeonopolis in *Arc d'X* are examples of a prevailing oppressive ideology dually shaping an environment's topography and populace's thinking. Not only can the reconstructing of environment be traced from the post-war political climate of the author's youth, but also represents a development of certain notions posed by Dick.

Classifying Erickson: Issues and Problems

Many of the problems relating to the classification of contemporary writers that have been discussed in the introduction relate to Erickson. It is difficult to locate his novels within the confines of a specific genre or form. His texts usually exhibit facets and tropes associated with a number of different genres, including science fiction, disaster fiction, and historical fiction. Additionally, his work can be seen to intersect across certain subgenres of these fields. *Tours*, for instance, stands as an example of speculative history. The narrative and stylistic fluidity of a novel such as *Amnesiascope* evokes the realist disrupting principles of slipstream fiction.[53] The influence of film and television on works such as *Zeroville* and *These Dreams* also bring to mind the workings of avant-pop postmodernism; a concept detailed in playfully provocative fashion by Larry McCaffery as literature created by 'pop-cultural demolition artists.'[54] Though the term itself can be seen as nebulous, consideration of the short works from innovative writers such as Kathy Acker and Samuel R. Delany compiled by McCaffery in *Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation* (1993) gives the impression that it refers to the liberal intertextual adoption of facets of popular culture. Erickson's novels often shift in narrative and thematic focus, drawing upon associative features of different genres and their respective subgenres in order to convey a range of interests and preoccupations. Much of Erickson's intrigue as a writer stems from his ability to operate seamlessly between these different forms. As such, it can be difficult associating him with any one single movement or genre.

Two main issues arise attempting to classify Erickson's work. The first of these relates to the paucity of existing critical material relating to the writer himself. As discussed earlier in the introduction, much of the available criticism either represents a fundamental misreading of Erickson's work, or is simply too brief to be considered valuable. The basic reality of this situation means that many subsequent attempts at classification have appeared cursory, ill-thought, or based simply on assumption. It could therefore be argued a serious attempt at

[53] See Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), p. 64.
[54] Larry McCaffery, '"Tsunami…": Introduction', in *Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation*, ed. by Larry McCaffery (Normal, IL: Fiction Collective Two, 1995), pp. 15-32 (p. 16).

classifying Erickson would assist in the creation of a new, more comprehensive form of criticism drawn from careful consideration of existing contexts.

An additional and more pertinent issue relating to classification of Erickson lies in the author's own reticence at being classified. Despite the wide-ranging nature of his literary influences, Erickson has repeatedly rejected efforts at establishing areas of comparison. Similarly, in spite of his texts exhibiting features of experimental genre forms like science fiction, surrealism and fantasy, he has resisted being categorised in such terms:

> Surrealism was born out of a preoccupation with the irrationality and illogic of the subconscious, and a view that human relationships are fundamentally absurd. Whatever else my books may be about, they don't express an absurd view of existence. The form of the books, and the strange juxtapositions of their narratives, may strike people as surreal, but the central concerns that drive the stories are traditional ones. I don't think any true surrealist would consider me a surrealist, in the same way no hard-core science-fiction fan would consider me a science-fiction writer, since the basic concern of most classic science fiction is the relationship between man and technology […] And my books aren't 'experimental' because my priorities don't involve reinventing literary forms, and they're not fantastic because they're not characterized by the sense of wonder that fantasy evokes.[55]

Although his mentioning of the 'traditional concerns' his novels convey appears vague, it seems reasonable to suggest that he is referring to matters of interpersonal relationships and self-reflection, given analysis of the themes of Erickson's texts. The manner in which these are framed is what is perceived to be odd or surreal, in contrast to the issues or themes themselves. It is interesting to note here how Erickson explicitly makes reference to various labels before outright rejecting them. Assertions of surrealism, science fiction, experimentalism or fantasy are engaged with and swiftly rebuked. It could reasonably be claimed in this respect that the form Erickson's texts adopt is influenced by the themes and issues arising from the narrative itself. This would explain how Erickson is able to evade classification with regard to a specific genre in a convincing fashion. Rather than rely solely on tropes and conventions strongly associated with a specific genre, he instead adopts a more selective approach, employing these in order to enhance the themes of a specific novel. The disaster fiction-evoking cataclysms in *Days* that signify a fractured marriage, and the post-apocalyptic setting of 'post-Los Angeles' in *Amnesiascope* reminiscent of science fiction that exacerbates a protagonist's mental deterioration appear as notable examples of this effect.[56] Though these individual concerns can be considered 'traditional' at a base level, it is Erickson's manipulating of certain genre conventions that allows for his work to be considered in a multitude of ways.

Whilst to associate Erickson exclusively with one genre form or another is something of a reductive exercise, it is conversely understandable to some extent on account of the presence of a diverse range of facets and tropes conveyed via disorienting plots and structures. The same problem extends even to literary trends and traditions. Classification as a postmodernist has also been rejected by Erickson, claiming ignorance as to definition of the term:

[55] McCaffery and Tatsumi,, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 399.
[56] ibid, p. 398. The term 'post-Los Angeles' is used here by Erickson to describe the setting of *Amnesiascope*.

> […] I've never been entirely clear what 'postmodern' means. But to at least some extent postmodernism seems to involve a cultural or aesthetic self-awareness, and an insistence on art recognizing and tweaking its own artifice. My aim isn't to call attention to the artifice of my books but to make readers forget the artifice, to persuade them to exchange their reality for the one I've created.[57]

It is debatable as to whether Erickson may or may not be being deliberately evasive here, as he can sometimes appear during interviews when asked to explain aspects of his work. Again, explicit reference to a specific genre is made before rejecting the assertion completely. It is inarguable, however, that a number of postmodern tropes recur throughout Erickson's literature. The accuracy of his intention not to 'call attention to the artifice' of his texts is also disputable, upon consideration of the employment of the stream of conscious in *Ecstatic* to intersperse the central narrative with the conceptions of a disembodied protagonist. It is worth stressing, though, that the above interview took place in 1997, eight years before the publication of *Ecstatic*. In itself, this highlights the main problem with classifying contemporary writers in that their own style and areas of interest are always subject to change.

It is perfectly reasonable to suggest that in the intervening years, Erickson's position on this may have altered. Though uncertain of the label during this period, conventions associated with postmodernism such as parody and pastiche are evident in a number of his works. The nature of these will be elaborated on in order to fulfil one of this chapter's main intentions. A number of Erickson's areas of interest can also be viewed as being reflective of postmodernism, including his fascination with film and cross-media references. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the most notable period of postmodern literature dovetails with the author's own novelistic career.

Classifying Erickson: Postmodern Contexts

Despite Erickson's aversion to be classified as a postmodernist, claiming a lack of understanding as to what the term actually constitutes, an examination of his novels reveals the presence of a large number of a number of theme and techniques associated with postmodernism. It is debatable as to whether Erickson's assertion in this respect can simply be viewed as an example of the evasiveness that characterises a number of his interviews. A common theme of these has been a reticence to discuss his work in esoteric detail. Interviewers have freely been allowed to speculate meanings and intention without correction. Whilst Erickson has been happy to indulge interviewers with recollections from his past, as well as disclose various influences from different media forms and give insight into personal concerns and preoccupations, there is actually scant content concerning textual approach. The incorporation of typically unconventional literary techniques or structures into his works perhaps suggest of an unconscious postmodern influence.

[57] ibid, pp. 399-400.

Even on the occasions in which Erickson mentions the form or structure of a particular text, there is usually little to no additional elaboration on its function. For instance, *Zeroville*'s structure comprising of short numbered passages ascending to number 227, before counting down to 0 is described by Erickson as 'a kind of Godardian conceit' that he says 'just came to me'.[58] An evocation of Jean-Luc Godard and his 1965 film *Alphaville* is contained within the title of Erickson's novel. '*Zeroville*' represents an obvious inversion of *Alphaville*, first indicating of this 'Godardian conceit'. The structure of the novel is far more sophisticated than Erickson suggests. The manner in which the referenced short numbered passages switch focus can be compared to the function of a camera. Perspectives often shift freely, certain points of interest are zeroed in on in the style of a close-up, and the narrative focus switches abruptly in the style of a jump cut to further the plot. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define the jump cut as 'An elliptical cut that appears to be an interruption of a single shot. Either the figures seem to change instantly against a constant background, or the background changes instantly while the figures remain constant.'[59] This indicates the extent of the medium's influence on Erickson's literature. An impression of filmic continuity is perpetuated as a result, shaping the manner in which the narrative is conveyed.

Understanding Godard's employment of the jump cut allows for a sense of the intended effect on Erickson's novel to be gained. Bordwell observes of the disorienting effect of jump cuts in Godard's work, describing how 'Throughout the narration will be scattered images and sounds which, by their similarity and their relative independence of immediate context, belong to the same paradigmatic set.'[60] Bordwell expands on this point in relation to *Alphaville*, identifying how 'we have the set of "city landscape at night" shots, the set of "traffic sign" shots, the set of "neon formulas" shots, and so forth."[61] James Monaco makes reference to Godard's use of jump cuts mid-scene in *Breathless* (1959) having a disconcerting effect on the viewer. Though Godard seldom used the technique in later films, the device is somewhat ubiquitous in contemporary film having become 'absorbed into general montage stylistics' and further aiding a 'rhythmic effect.'[62] The ultimate effect in relation to *Zeroville* is of a slightly disjointed form of continuity that subsequently engenders the protagonist's feelings of dislocation. Further, the presence of flashbacks and dream sequences in the novel, conveyed via these same short passages, also evokes certain stylistic elements of New Hollywood films that will be discussed in Chapter 4. In essence, consideration of such points brings into question the legitimacy of Erickson's claim that this conceit 'just came' to him. The incorporation of such a narrative structure appears a conscious, calculated decision in order to foster a distinctly filmic effect.

Erickson makes reference to the form and structure of *Ecstatic* in the same interview as a similar example of a particular conceit occurring to him seemingly by good fortune.

---

[58] Angela Stubbs, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', *Bookslut* (December, 2007). <http://www.bookslut.com/features/2007_12_012067.php>. [Accessed 17th October 2018].
[59] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), p. 492.
[60] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 317.
[61] ibid, p. 317.
[62] James Monaco, *How To Read A Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 184.

Erickson's serendipitous conception of 'Kristin '[…] "swimming" through *Our Ecstatic Days* came to me at the moment she goes down through the hole at the bottom of the lake that's flooded L.A.' again appears to downplay the sophistication of the text's structure.[63] As Erickson suggests, Kristin's willing submergence into the mysterious lake that has flooded Los Angeles represents a crucial turning point in the novel. In a fashion typical of his fiction, the novel diverges from this point, telling of Kristin's re-emergence on the other side of the lake as the dominatrix 'Mistress Lulu'. Intersecting this plot strand is a stream of consciousness monologue spoken by the protagonist's previous form that runs as a single unbroken sentence until the novel reaches its conclusion. The two separate sides of Kristin's character are contrasted with each other in the final half of the novel; that of her as a mother deeply anxious that the lake will seize her son, and as an object of dark sexual desire described as the lake's oracle. The novel's structure aids its surreal dream-like atmosphere. Both prose and plot are fluid; the latter quality embodied by various tangential digressions and recollections. The textual fluidity itself can be viewed as a mirroring of the lake's own properties, necessitated further by the fact that time is presented as being 'unmoored' with events unfolding amid 'shifting identities', as noted by one reviewer.[64] The text is characterised by its arresting structure and typography, with paragraphs often streamlined, indented or tapered in order to convey a ripple effect influenced by surreal external events, dreams and introspective interludes. This is all despite Erickson claiming, 'I don't think of myself as an experimental writer. Experimental writing is about the experiment, and experiments per se usually are for their own sake.'[65]

These structural features are undoubted symptoms of literary postmodernism. Despite Erickson refuting claims that he is a postmodernist and an experimental writer, there is much evidence to the contrary. Taking Erickson's words in past interviews as legitimate denials as opposed to attempts at evasiveness, the most plausible explanation for the presence of postmodern tropes is that the form itself is pervasive and reflective of the writer's milieu. Fredric Jameson's famed assertion that postmodernism is 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'—the secondary title of his 1991 monograph *Postmodernism*—would appear to validate such an assertion.

In the opening chapter of *Postmodernism,* Jameson outlines the cultural climate from which postmodernism emerged, arguing that consideration of the form's existence is dependent upon 'the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*; generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s.'[66] The period specified by Jameson here directly corresponds with Erickson's formative years, during which he became increasingly interested in literature, film, and music. Rather than consciously adopt postmodern tropes in his work, it stands to reason that facets associated with these changes have simply been processed unconsciously by Erickson. Jameson notes that this 'radical break' denotes 'the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement', rendering 'the final form of representation of the

[63] Stubbs, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson'.
[64] Joseph McElroy, 'A Review of *Our Ecstatic Days* by Steve Erickson', *The Believer* (1st February, 2005). <https://believermag.com/steve-ericksons-our-ecstatic-days/>. [Accessed 17th October 2018].
[65] Stubbs, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson'.
[66] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 1.

novel' and 'the films of the great *auteurs*' as 'the final, extraordinary flowering of a high-modernist impulse which is spent and exhausted'.[67] The result is the twin emergence of a social and cultural climate that can be identified as being 'empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous.'[68] Indeed, the cultural scene that embodies these properties bears striking resemblance to the various influences that Erickson has discussed previously and draws upon throughout his literature:

> […] And also punk and new wave rock (the Beatles and the Stones now standing as the high-modernist moment of that more recent and rapidly evolving tradition); in film, Godard, post-Godard, and experimental cinema and video, but also a whole new type of commercial film […]; Burroughs, Pynchon, or Ishmael Reed […].[69]

Comparisons can be made with Erickson's own points of reference. As such, these influences manifest intertextually. Erickson's interest in punk and new-wave rock has often featured in his works. Notable examples of this can be found in *Zeroville* and *These Dreams*. The former captures punk's growing prominence as a countercultural force in 1970's Los Angeles (described as 'the Sound' in the novel'), whilst the latter sees depictions of David Bowie and Iggy Pop feature as characters during a temporal digression imagining their residency in Berlin during the mid-to-late 1970s. Films represent arguably Erickson's most notable intertextual feature; examples of which are too numerous to mention in their entirety. Similarly, the writer's interest in other media forms such as television and video have featured on occasion in his work, with several incidents serving to highlight the effect that viewing via these forms has on the spectator. This is alluded to in the cases of Vikar and an apprehended burglar critiquing the merits of films in *Zeroville* and description emotion of watching Obama's election victory on television in *These Dreams*.

Intertextuality in Erickson's fiction manifests in relation to two specific areas. The first of these concerns Erickson's own body of work. Familiarity with even a small selection of Erickson's fiction will reveal the recurrence of numerous characters and settings. Often, though, these recurrences are presented in a disconnected or fragmentary manner. Continuity is usually disregarded. Little to no reference is given to the actions or interactions of recurring characters from previous texts. In essence, they appear to exist in isolation. They are used in representative terms, intended to embody recurring authorial preoccupations, or employed as a means of diverging the narrative towards a further thematic interest. These repetitions affirm the notion that Erickson's worlds are subject to inconsistent, seemingly arbitrary fluctuations that signify changing thematic focuses, in addition to reminding that the settings themselves are not intended to serve as realist depictions. The setting's representation as an altered or distorted version of itself is affirmed. Erickson's employment of this particular device assists in the perpetuation of a free-flowing effect that largely typifies his oeuvre.

Examples of this characteristic intertextuality are too numerable to list in their entirety. There are, however, several notable instances. Cale, the released prisoner at the outset of *Rubicon Beach*, is one of the most prominent of these. Navigating the sunken Los Angeles of America

[67] ibid, p. 1.
[68] ibid, p. 1.
[69] ibid, pp. 1-2.

One, the character drifts aimlessly amid the post-apocalyptic wasteland, working in a library whilst being harangued by an African-American police officer named Wade, who suspects him of having murdered a sailor named Ben Jarry. His existence is an empty one, searching desperately for redemption for his past unspecified transgressions against a desolate backdrop: 'After I'd been in Los Angeles a month it seemed like a long time […] Forever in Los Angeles would have precluded the experience of my conscience, the life of which stayed with me like the flashes of previous incarnations' (*RB*, 18-19). Cale reappears in the Los Angeles *Ecstatic*, albeit with his name spelled as 'Kale'; an anagram of 'lake' in reference to the lake that spreads throughout Los Angeles. The aquatic cityscape comparable to America One in *Rubicon Beach*, the character is similarly forlorn, spending much of his time in the Chateau X nightclub at which Mistress Lulu works. In this instance, he is one of a number of empty male characters seeking for some form of personal validation amid the ravaged landscape in the presence of Lulu, the self-described 'Dominatrix-Oracle of the Lake, Queen of the Zed Night' (*OED*, 172). This particular feature indicates a self-consciousness with regard to Erickson's own works. Familiar themes, concepts and preoccupations are able to be channelled through the recurrence of certain characters in settings that bear slight resemblance to those depicted in prior texts. In reintroducing past characters in such a manner with little regard for continuity or consistency, Erickson is able to draw attention to his oeuvre as a whole acting as a conduit for a range of personal interests and concerns.

Other examples of this characteristic intertextuality are found in Lauren from *Days* being mentioned as a former lover of the narrator from *Amnesiascope*, Wade from *Rubicon Beach* featuring as a character in *Arc d'X*, and Banning Jainlight from *Tours* appearing in an altered form in *Ecstatic*. Similarly, examples of environmental intertextuality are evident in the submerged Los Angeles depicted in *Rubicon Beach* and *Ecstatic*, in the allusion to a local landmark called 'Black Clock Park' in the 'post-Los Angeles' of *Amnesiascope*, and the fictional French village of Wyndeaux featuring as a setting in both *Days* and *Tours*. The extent of Erickson's geographical distortions is revealed through the actions of his characters. His texts usually depict a character navigating a particular environment at some point or other, showing that the setting itself is merely a distorted version of its true-life counterpart; a representation that embodies authorial concerns or preoccupations. Each referenced intertextual facet carries a particular significance to act as specific signifier through a form of evocation. Again, this suggests a degree of literary self-consciousness on Erickson's part.

Variations of an author surrogate are also present in a number of texts. A plot strand of *Arc d'X* details a character named 'Erickson' travelling to a reimagined Berlin at the close of the twentieth century. *Amnesiascope* features an unnamed narrator as its protagonist. Zan Nordhoc of *These Dreams*, a novelist and music aficionado, can be considered in a comparable vein due to a sharing of political beliefs shaped by the same events that Erickson has discussed previously in past interviews. As a further point of interest, reference is made in *These Dreams* to the character having written about the death of an author surrogate character in Berlin at the hands of far-right thugs in one his past novels; a fate shared by the author surrogate 'Erickson' in *Arc d'X*. Again, a literary self-consciousness is implied here via a metafictional trope so commonly found in postmodern texts.

The secondary and more conventional means via which intertextuality manifests in Erickson's literature is in a much more orthodox fashion with regard to the referencing of external forms of work. In contrast, for example, to Paul Auster's referencing of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in his postmodern detective story 'City of Glass' (1985), or Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991) combining elements of *Pinocchio* with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), instances of intertextuality in Erickson's fiction are representative more of his interest in pop culture than in literature. There are exceptions, however. Most notably is how Philip K. Dick's interest in alternate histories and nightmarish timelines are channelled by Erickson in *Tours* and *Arc d'X*. A pervading sense of paranoia and uncertainty is evident in both of these works as a result of these reimagined histories. Comparable to Dick, each sees the presentation a character struggling with the notion that the reality they perceive is one that they are found to have no autonomy in.

Erickson's love of pop music features heavily in later works such as *These Dreams* and *Shadowbahn*. The title of *These Dreams* comes from a Van Morrison song of the same name in which the singer describes having dreamt of Ray Charles being assassinated. This suggests the thematic prominence of reimagined depictions and internal digressions in the text. The novel's depictions of David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Reg Presley of the Troggs that each stem from temporal digressions in the narrative serve as evidence to validate such an assertion. Similar temporal digressions are depicted in *Shadowbahn*, which imagines the life of Jesse Presley—the stillborn twin brother of Elvis—as a music journalist in 1960's New York. The novel also features a musically-ignorant truck driver character named Aaron, who stands as an obvious reimagining of Elvis Presley's life history and all that he is perceived to represent. The main narrative of the text centres around Parker and Zema—the Nordhoc family children from *These Dreams*—and their engagement with a playlist compiled by their late father. Exact details and specificities of this will be given in Chapter 3, but each song is deemed to channel the American national experience in some form or other, from the country's origins through to its twenty-first century incarnation. This provides a clear sense of how pop culture is often used analogically by Erickson in his novels to convey a particular theme.

Film, as already established, represents Erickson's most referenced media form. Allusions to the medium are recurrent throughout his fiction, alongside more explicit narrative and structural incorporations. *Zeroville* stands as the most obvious example in this respect in its primary setting of 1970's Los Angeles during the New Hollywood style of filmmaking. Details of the novel's structure resembling the manner in which a film is shot have already been discussed earlier in this chapter. References to film, however, are often interwoven into a number of texts in a much subtler manner. In *Amnesiascope*, Erickson's appreciation for the film *Barton Fink* (1991)—'the Coens' masterpiece'—is drawn upon to shape the properties of a particular setting.[70] The narrator's residency at the Hotel Hamblin in Los Angeles, characterised by 'Caligari dilapidation', owes its conceit to *Barton Fink* (*A*, 4). Erickson has

[70] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #76: *Barton Fink* (1991)', *Los Angeles* (29th April, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-76-barton-fink-1991/>. [Accessed 18th October 2018].

made this explicit in a past interview, describing how the film's primary setting of the Hotel Earle served to influence the Hamblin's conception:

> Barton Fink is the name of the main character in the film. He's a playwright from New York who has been brought into Hollywood to write for the movies, and they put him up in this old strange hotel, which always reminds people of the apartment building that you saw and I lived in. And that became the model of the Hotel Hamblin.[71]

The use of 'Caligari' as an adjective to frame the hotel's dilapidation signifies another example of intertextuality, evoking *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). An impression is created here of structural instability that facilitates a state of disorientation. The film externalises internal emotions through its strange, asymmetrical sets. A similar effect is found in *Amnesiascope*, whereby the landscape changes in accordance with the protagonist's moods and emotions. Such a reference serves to strengthen the intrinsic connection between character and setting in the text. Granted, each of these instances has been described in brief detail, but they at least serve to highlight the prominence of intertextuality across Erickson's oeuvre. Additional instances will be discussed as and where relevant throughout the course of this thesis.

Examples of pastiche in Erickson's fiction represent a different strand of intertextuality. Most commonly, pastiche can be seen to be structurally implicit in a selection of Erickson's texts. Comparable to the way facets of science fiction and fairy tales are detectable in Margaret Atwood's novels or the manner with which Umberto Eco has fused these elements with tropes from detective fiction, for instance, Erickson has been known to draw influence from a diverse range of genre forms and other narrative traditions to shape his fiction. Of structural pastiche, Jameson has noted how it is ostensibly 'blank parody'.[72] Instead of seeking to skew, the device is instead reflective of the proliferation and diversifying of style and structure across disparate media forms. Jameson identifies the device's prevalence across postmodern literature as the result of an absence of a single definitive literary form in the post-war age. 'The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche', Jameson writes.[73] Whilst parody has been used to make light of stylistic idiosyncrasies previously—'the breathless gerundives' of Faulkner's long sentences, D.H. Lawrence's interspersing of pastoral imagery with 'testy colloquialism', for instance—pastiche instead conveys contemporary preoccupations through outdated modes as a symptom of this 'disappearance of individual subject'.[74]

Arguably the first of such instances is detectable upon analysis of the second plot strand of *Rubicon Beach*. This tells of a beautiful young South American woman named Catherine and her journeying through vast swathes of treacherous Amazonian jungle as she attempts to reach America. The journey represents the novel's most obvious form of pastiche. Filled with

[71] Yoshiaki Koshikawa, 'LA as Free-Associative City', *The Rising* Generation (September 1997). <http://www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~yoshiaki/LA_as_Free_Associative_City.htm>. [accessed: 6th January 2017].
[72] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 17.
[73] ibid, p. 16.
[74] ibid, p. 16.

description of shipwrecks, cataclysmic storms, wild maze-like rivers, jungle thickets and exotic Latin American scenery, this episode reads like a picaresque narrative, evoking Angela Carter's *The Infernal Dream Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). Though Erickson claimed in 1993 to have never read Carter—as referenced earlier—parallels between the two in this respect are inescapable.[75] Specific details of the plot of *Rubicon Beach* will be discussed in Chapter 3, but both presentations feature beguiling female characters, both utilise facets of a Latin American landscape to engender a sense of jeopardy, exoticism, and impart a sense of disorientation. This is not to suggest that Erickson is being disingenuous or deceitful in his claim, but it does at least serve demonstrate the pervasiveness of pastiche as a postmodern device, particularly in its role as a conduit for the presentation of wider concerns. It also displays consciousness of an old-fashioned form. In the case of Carter, the employment of the picaresque form is designed to channel authorial preoccupations relating to feminist thought, mass media engagement, and countercultural developments. The form's anachronism is deliberately invoked in order to convey contemporary concerns in a paradoxically innovative way. Similarly, Erickson's use of the same form in this particular plot strand is intended to present the novel's major themes of personal displacement and America's inherent conflicts from a different perspective.

Zeroville is another novel in which pastiche is evident. This only becomes obvious towards the concluding stages of the novel to signal a fresh narrative direction, however. The implicit relationship between dreams, memory and the medium of film is posed throughout the text, but becomes more pronounced through narrative pastiche prior to the conclusion. The narrative frramed in a conventional and consciously clichéd 'rags to riches' manner, the novel depicts Vikar's rise from 'cineautistic' outsider to becoming an acclaimed film editor. Allusion to a recurring dream of Vikar's is interspersed throughout the text, alongside depictions of him viewing films. These presentations intertwine more explicitly after his ward, Zazi, dreams about Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* despite having not seen the film. "'When I dreamed it, I didn't even know the woman was Joan of Arc… But I dreamed it, just like I saw it tonight, you know. I mean… is that like the weirdest thing?"' she tells Vikar, the two of them having watched a showing at UCLA (*Z*, 275). This leads to the discovery of a clandestine film consisting of hidden stills concealed within every movie ever made. Vikar's search for this clandestine film takes him to Europe, travelling to Paris and Oslo. The true-life discovery of a lost copy of Dreyer's film in an Oslo mental hospital in 1981 is referenced here.

These concluding sections of the text evoke Arthurian legend, notably Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail. A juxtaposition emerges in this respect it is consciously used convey a narrative centred on a distinctly twentieth-century art form. The hidden film itself is presented in transcendental terms, seemingly offering an insight into the true nature of reality. An apparition of Montgomery Clift suggests as much to Vikar: '"That Secret Movie? The one that's hidden frame by frame in all the other movies?" […] "Maybe we're not dreaming it. Maybe it's dreaming us"' (*Z*, 321). That the film is never fully discovered is of further significance, mirroring Perceval's unfinished Grail quest. Of additional significance is the

[75] Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*'.

fact that this plot strand becomes all the more pronounced following the untimely death of Soledad Palladin, a tragic actress and the mother of Zazi. The paladins being the most distinguished warrior of Charlemagne's court, the title has since come to encompass any chivalrous hero from Arthurian legend. Reflective of Erickson's personal fascinations with endings and their cyclical effect that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, Soledad's death serves to signal the beginning of this transposing of Arthurian form onto the text that reveals an additional preoccupation.

The novel also alludes to the notion of Abrahamic sacrifice. Although this theme doesn't shape the narrative direction in the same manner as Erickson's adopting of Arthurian quest archetypes, its presence in the text nonetheless informs a crucial aspect of Vikar's characterisation. The protagonist's troubled relationship with his father is the subject of a number of flashbacks during the early stages of the book. The tumultuous nature of this relationship ultimately provides Vikar with the motivation to travel to Los Angeles. A puritanical picture of the protagonist's early life is offered, telling of a household that 'allowed no books except the Bible, no magazines, newspapers, radio or the then new invention of the television' (*Z*, 35). The frequency of child sacrifice in the Bible is then invoked by Vikar's father as a form of deterrence: '[…] Had He not stopped Abraham in a moment of heedless mercy then perhaps our God the Father would not have had to kill His own child later' (*Z*, 35). A sense of this lingers with Vikar during his time in Los Angeles, often speculating internally as to why Hollywood—referred to as a sentient entity on occasion—seemingly derives perverse delight from the deaths of its sons and daughters. The deaths of Jayne Mansfield and James Dean, among others, are referenced sporadically in the text as a means of illustrating this connection. In part, the burdensome thought compels Vikar to protect Zazi following Soldead's death.

Religious symbolism is also prominent throughout the text. Partly employed metaphorically to represent the medium's hold over twentieth century audiences, such allusions additionally imply the connection that a number of prominent filmmakers of the period share with religion. Erickson explicitly references this feature of the text here:

> I've always been struck by how the new directors of the Seventies, the most film-conscious generation of filmmakers, started out aspiring to be priests or theologians or moralists, or came out of seriously repressed families. Schrader, Scorsese, Malick. A young architecture student in divinity school, Vikar designs a model of a church with a small movie-screen inside, in place of an altar, and along with *A Place in the Sun*, for him *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the ultimate example of the movie as epiphany, a kind of hinge between the cinematic and the religious.[76]

Vikar's name—an obvious homophonic substitute for 'vicar'—hints at the textual prominence of religion. The character's own career trajectory in becoming a darling of the New Hollywood period of cinema follows in the same quasi-tradition that Erickson has observed here. The links between film and religion become even more pronounced through Vikar's characterisation, having absconded from a Pennsylvanian seminary and shaved his

[76] Miller, 'Steve Erickson'.

head following his first ever viewing of a film to symbolise a form of rebirth. His arrival in Los Angeles represents the culmination of this process.

Despite his discomfort with being labelled a postmodernist, it is clear that a number of features of Erickson's fiction are compatible with that of such a style. It is plausible to suggest that his status as a postmodernist could indeed be unwitting; simply born from a particular cultural climate and influenced accordingly. His noted interests in film, television and pop music appear central to the various cross-media references and depictions throughout his oeuvre. Devices such as intertextuality and pastiche act as particular means of channelling these particular interests. In borrowing certain images, facets and tropes from a diverse range of media forms and modes of storytelling, Erickson is able to refine his own authorial interests and preoccupations in an evocative fashion. The concerns Erickson has as a writer may be 'traditional ones'—as mentioned previously—but the manner in which these relating to interpersonal relationships and personal conceptions are conveyed is distinctly postmodern.

Summary: Interests, Influences and Classification

Any attempt at gaining an appreciation of the significance of a number of recurring themes across Erickson's oeuvre is sure to fail without examining his early years and influences. Exploration of his early years reveals a child with an insatiable curiosity for the media forms that came to define post-war America. As Jameson points out, it is during the 1950s and 1960s that a cultural assault enabled by increasingly accessible media forms occurs. Erickson's engagements during this period with pop music, television and—in particular—film have undoubtedly affected his literary conceptions. Additionally, as much fascination is reserved for the specific mode of engagement with the respective medium, suggesting that this in itself is fundamental to the nature of the experience. Each of these features can be seen to manifest in Erickson's fiction, be it in the form of intertextual allusion to a specific work, or direct reference to cultural engagement in depictions of cinema-going or television viewing, for example.

The employment of tropes commonly found in postmodern works represents arguably Erickson's most effective means of channelling his intentions. Again, despite rebuffing assertions that he is a postmodernist due to an apparent ignorance as to what the term constitutes, it is clear that certain stylistic and narrative conventions associated with literature of such nature. Examples of intertextuality are common throughout Erickson's oeuvre. Most notably, these relate to film. Technical aspects of production are structurally integrated into novels such as *Days* and *Zeroville*—as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4. It is through allusion to plot points, dialogue or iconic images, however, that his interest is most frequently demonstrated. This, in itself, highlights how Erickson's fascination with film extends to both its creative process and its completed output. Pastiche is also evident on occasion, although by no means as prominent as intertextuality. Picaresque tropes are present in the second plot strand of *Rubicon Beach*, as one such example. Comparably, the narrative form of *Zeroville*

exhibits conventions associated with the clichéd ‘rags to rich’ tale and Arthurian legend, alongside allegorical allusion to Abrahamic sacrifice. Given that film is a subject of both novels, it seems reasonable to suggest that these instances constitute Erickson ironically using anachronistic forms to convey his interests in a contemporary media form.

In directing attention to these aspects of Erickson’s life and career, a foundation allowing for serious critical engagement is established. Attempts at classifying a writer who has previously displayed reticence at being associated with any one single genre further aids this cause. The intention here has been to familiarise the reader with Erickson’s influences and interests, as well as to provide a form of context that will inform analysis of Erickson’s recurring themes and preoccupations in proceeding chapters.

Chapter 2: Endings and Temporal Distortion

Erickson's Los Angeles: Literary and Social Contexts

Depictions of endings represent a recurring feature of Los Angeles fiction, regardless of form or genre. Literal apocalypses and incidents of destruction frequently occur in works of disaster, speculative and science fiction, as noted by Mike Davis in *Ecology of Fear* (1998). The number of instances where this thematic and narrative trope is employed is strikingly high, and Davis hypothesises as to why this may be the case, identifying a perverse joy many get from seeing the city obliterated in literary or film form. 'No other city seems to excite such dark rapture', he writes, contrasting this with the 'enjoyment edged with horror and awe' that the sporadically depicted destructions of Seattle, Houston, Chicago and San Francisco seem to elicit.[1] Indeed, Davis compares the response to Los Angeles' portrayed destruction with that of London; a city that was subject to a high number of literary obliterations between 1885 and 1940. Whereas the destruction of London was 'imagined as a horrifying spectacle, equivalent to the death of Western civilization', Los Angeles' obliteration is instead depicted as 'or at least secretly experienced as, a victory *for* civilization.'[2] Davis has estimated that the destruction of Los Angeles has constituted a central theme or image of 138 novels and films since 1909.[3] Given that twenty years have passed at the time of writing since the publication of *Ecology of Fear*, it would be fair to surmise that the number has increased even further in the years since 1998.

Erickson's work represents a continuation of this tradition that has been perpetuated by a number of Los Angeles writers and novels set in the city. As well as depicting literal cataclysms, Erickson's texts often convey endings metaphorically, usual to signal a form of reinvention. These presentations are underpinned either by temporal experimentation or through allusion to the significance of a particular time period. Whilst Erickson has previously expressed discomfort with being associated with a particular genre, there can be little doubt that he can be viewed in the context of a distinctive literary tradition relating to his home city. Erickson's fascination with metaphorical endings and what they symbolise will be the subject of this chapter, alongside detail of how he fits into this distinct literary tradition. His portrayals of devastating cataclysms are filled with numerous intricacies and complexities relating to characterisations and as a result, will be discussed in their own right in Chapter 5.

The term 'Los Angeles novel' can be considered a fairly nebulous one, encompassing genres such as detective fiction and Hollywood fiction. It is by no means the aim of this chapter to identify in precise detail what constitutes the 'Los Angeles novel' exactly, more highlight that disaster, destruction and endings in different forms are prominent themes that recur throughout a range of genres. Firstly, it is worth repeating a point made in the introduction that the 'Hollywood novel' and the 'Los Angeles novel' are not to be considered interchangeable as forms. Given the prominence of self-destruction as a theme of Hollywood

[1] Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 277.
[2] ibid, p. 277.
[3] ibid, p. 276.

fiction, it is perfectly reasonable to consider the form a subgenre of the 'Los Angeles novel'. Further, it should also be stressed that reference to film or the industry itself does not immediately mean that a text should be considered a work of Hollywood fiction. Such a misconception has been identified in the introduction concerning Scope's flawed classification of *Days Between Stations*. Erickson's concern with film lies in focusing on the medium with its own formal conventions as opposed to it as a business. This represents a notable point of contrast with contemporary Hollywood novelists such as Bruce Wagner and Matthew Specktor.

A number of writers that Erickson has been influenced by have channelled impressions of endings and finality in their portrayals of Los Angeles. This literary fascination can first be seen to develop during the Depression of the 1930s, allowing for the presentation of self-destructive acts. Raymond Chandler gives a sense of this in *The Big Sleep* (1939). Sordid and sinister activities lurking beneath the surface of a series of attractive veneers are revealed through the discoveries made by protagonist Philip Marlowe. Decay, death and corruption as concepts become inextricably linked with the Los Angeles landscape. Marlowe's employment by the patriarch of the wealthy Sternwood family allows this theme to be conveyed. The intrinsic connection between decay and glamorous aesthetics is suggested through twin description of the Sternwood family residence and history: 'The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and see what had made them rich.'[4] The city's make-up and history is suggested as being shaped by nefarious forces. The landscape having been corrupted for personal gain, Chandler depicts the Sternwoods and their ilk as largely being insulated from the consequences of their actions; able to view what has made them rich from atop the hill but free of the effects of their actions.

A notable convention of Chandler's detective fiction is the discovery of hidden truths. These are often revealed through Marlowe's interactions as he navigates his surroundings. A similar effect can be found in Erickson's texts, whereby a character's exploration of their surroundings often reveals a number of personal truths or discoveries. The nature of this can vary. *Days* depicts its protagonist, Lauren, falling for another man as both characters navigate a sandstorm-plagued Los Angeles. The author surrogate of *Amnesiascope* eventually finds self-acceptance which comes in conjunction with his exploration of a post-apocalyptic version of the same city. It appears reasonable to suggest that the relationship between setting and character is something of a familiar Los Angeles trope. The thoughts and perceptions of the character in question are often relayed through observations of their surroundings. Chandler's detective fiction is underpinned by such a feature to the extent that Erickson has described him as 'a novelist of Los Angeles.'[5] Indeed, Erickson has previously commented on Chandler explicitly. In an appraisal of the television adaptation of Michael Connelly's series of Harry Bosch novels, the characterisation of Philip Marlowe has been referenced as having influenced both the form of the detective novel and its presentation of setting:

[4] Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 37.
[5] Lane, 'Steve Erickson'.

> The most famous L.A. detective, Philip Marlowe, starred in a string of stories and novels (and a dozen or so movies and television shows based on them) in which each subsequent mystery became less interesting than the city; by 1949's *The Little Sister* and 1953's *The Long Goodbye*, L.A. swallowed up the stories altogether, leaving the only other thing their author, Raymond Chandler, cared about, which was Marlowe himself. Marlowe has been the template for almost every fictional detective who's followed, a onetime renegade member of some institutionalized form of civic authority—it might be the police force or, in Marlowe's case, the D.A.'s office—surrounded by too much corruption and too little competence until finally he's driven to go it alone.[6]

The above excerpt references how Marlowe serves as an archetype for countless other literary detectives, alongside the manner in which hidden truths are discovered through direct engagement with the surrounding environment. The relationship between character and setting in Erickson's novels achieves a similar effect. Whilst Chandler's presentations of the city conceal sinister activity that suggests of an underlying social decay, however, Erickson's rely on destructive tropes to catalyse revelations and discoveries, as a key point of contrast. It is worth reminding that the tone of Erickson and Chandler's respective works is markedly different. Erickson's free-flowing style noticeably contrasts with Chandler's hard-boiled prose. This explains the different manner in which these distinctly Los Angeles tropes of imminent endings and ominous forebodings manifest.

Nathanael West can also be viewed as a stylistically different writer who channelled similar conceptions in his work. West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) can undoubtedly be viewed as a novel that satirises the business of the Hollywood film industry. Additionally, it can also be contextualised in relation to portrayals of Los Angeles' sinister underbelly. The novel's satirical mode allows for these concepts to be conveyed through a number of consciously nihilistic motifs that suggest of an impending final destruction. The novel depicts the actions and interactions of Tod Hackett, a recent Yale graduate working in Los Angeles as a set designer for a film studio. It is through his infatuation with vacuous actress Faye Greener that Los Angeles' inherent darkness comes to be exposed. The narrative is interspersed with a haunting refrain of characters 'coming to California to die'. West's evocative descriptions of a communal viewing of a pornographic film and a clandestine cock fight stand as notable plot features that convey a sense of the city's underlying darkness to the reader. The novel's denouement fuses together these deeply unsettling episodes in the form of a frenzied riot at a film premiere. That the riot comes to resemble a painting that Tod works on in his spare time called 'The Burning of Los Angeles' highlights the convergence between art and reality that underpins the novel's nihilistic themes. The notion that actions are essentially worthless or inconsequential on account of being removed from a grounding context allows for repressed desires to gradually come to the forefront of a character's being.

Although not depicted in the same manner by Erickson, the concept of film acting as a conduit for the realisation of previously repressed emotions is present in *Zeroville*. His concern here is to highlight film's affecting properties. Erickson's priority fundamentally lies in depicting film's numerous properties, as opposed to skewering the business of film. This

[6] Steve Erickson, 'Amazon's *Bosch* Channels Classic Detective Noir', *Los Angeles* (10th March, 2016). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/amazons-bosch-channels-classic-detective-noir/>. [Accessed 8th October 2018].

theme's presentation in *Zeroville* will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 4. Reference to it here is merely to highlight how Erickson's preoccupations and concerns evoke the city's literary traditions. Of further interest, *Days* features a destructive riot occurring at a film premiere. Despite the riot in Erickson's novel taking place in Paris and not Los Angeles, the allusion to such a striking image from West's oeuvre cannot be viewed coincidentally. The fact that Erickson has previously commented directly on the destructive climax of *The Day of the Locust* immediately negates such a possibility. Describing West's riot as 'an act of literary arson meant to torch the whole damn town', Erickson goes on to discuss how the image 'provided apocalyptic inspiration for Hollywood scenarios that followed', including the 'flaming hotel hallways' from *Barton Fink*.[7]

Whilst not always as graphically described by West, the intertwined tropes of self-destruction and superficiality can be identified as common features of Hollywood satires. This remains a common thread, linking works from Hollywood's Golden Age to more contemporary satires. The premise of disenchantment within the film industry is a familiar one. Faulkner's 'Golden Land', for instance, undoubtedly adopts the premise. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Pat Hobby Stories* stand as another example. Published in *Esquire* between January 1940 and May 1941 before being collated into a single volume in 1962, Fitzgerald's short stories chronicle the activities of the eponymous amoral screenwriting hack. Each story typically centres on a different scheme concocted by Hobby; characterised as a shameless opportunist always looking to 'get ahead' in the film industry. The stories are generally light in tone and self-deprecating as the formulaic workings of the industry are satirised. However, a sense of Fitzgerald's own melancholy can be discerned from the stories, such was the extent of his dissatisfaction with studio employment. Hobby can be viewed as a template for the character of Llewelyn Edgar in *Rubicon Beach*. The character is present in different forms across the novel's three plot strands, but it is the second where he is most developed. A former New York poet and playwright known as 'Lee', Edgar absconds to Los Angeles, changes his name and finds financially-rewarding, yet creatively-unsatisfying work as a screenwriter. The theme of ever-changing and fluid identities recurs throughout Erickson's works, and is also evident Fitzgerald's most renowned novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Erickson has referred to *The Great Gatsby* as 'a big book looming inside a small one.'[8] The aforementioned theme of permanently changing identities and self-reinvention no doubt influence such an assertion.

The notion of reinvention is at the core of a great number of Hollywood novels. The character arc of an anonymous individual finding fame before an inevitable fall from grace is familiar to the point of cliché. As such, contemporary Hollywood satirists such as Bruce Wagner have taken to satirising this very form of character development. An author surrogate named Bud Wiggins—note the shared initials—is present in a number of Wagner's novels, including his debut novel *Force Majeure* (1991). The character's biography bears close resemblance to

[7] Steve Erickson, '*Maps to the Stars* Grapples with the Movie Business's Most Complicated Character: Hollywood Itself', *Los Angeles* (1st October, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/maps-to-the-stars-grapples-with-the-movie-businesss-most-complicated-character-hollywood-itself/>. [Accessed 29th December 2018].

[8] Steve Erickson, 'The Good Book', *Los Angeles* (8th May, 2013). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-good-book/>. [Accessed 29th December 2018].

Wagner's own, including both having father's involved in the entertainment industry and having both worked a range of different jobs, such as private chauffeur and ambulance driver. Like Wagner, Bud is a screenwriter, albeit one of limited success. The main irony in Wagner's portrayals of Bud is that the character is locked in a career stasis. The idea of being a screenwriter appeals to him more so than the work being a success would entail. He is often found day-dreaming, easily discarding ideas and tangentially drifting towards others that remain half-formed. On occasions where Bud actually does get a lucky break, fate typically conspires against him in a humiliating manner.

Comparable to *The Day of the Locust*, Bud's numerous internal digressions typically centred on script ideas perpetuate a blurring of sensory points of distinction. Art and reality are seen to be interchangeable as performance and role-playing are presented as implicit features of Los Angeles. The result of this state is found to be a complete disregard for the consequences of any particular action. As such, the tone often veers between Fitzgerald's light-hearted Pat Hobby short stories and the destructive tensions present in *The Day of the Locust*. Erickson himself has observed this aspect of Wagner's work, describing him in relation to West and Fitzgerald as a writer who is 'preoccupied with Hollywood's depravities.'[9] The depraved activity to which Erickson refers is the result of the industry's dehumanising capabilities and the perpetuation of a pervasive unreal state. The various depravities depicted in works from each of these writers are actions that have been enabled by industry culture. This very feature encapsulates the difference between Erickson and Hollywood novelists regarding where their fascination lies. Erickson's interest is in the medium itself rather than the business; a point that is reiterated by the absence of depictions of the depraved activity that the industry is seen to facilitate in the works of these previously referenced writers.

The absence of resolution can be identified as a further trope of the Los Angeles novel. This has a clear connection with endings as a concept, suggesting of an ultimate dissatisfaction or a lack of fulfilment. The notion of the ending representing catharsis or a form of realisation is subverted to show a character stuck in a self-defeating stasis. Thomas Pynchon parodies conventions of detective fiction in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) in order to convey an absence of ultimate resolution despite the text's repeated suggestions of an underground conspiracy concerning mail delivery. The more the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, explores her environment and interacts with others, the further she becomes from solving the implied mystery. The same effect was employed by Pynchon in *Inherent Vice* (2009), a novel set in Los Angeles in 1970 against the backdrop of the arrest and subsequent trial of the Manson Family. Here, the novel's protagonist, the stoner private eye Doc Sportello, is tasked by an ex-girlfriend to help foil a plot she has discovered that involves having her current lover—a married real estate mogul she is having an affair with—committed to a mental institution by his current wife. The plot becomes more convoluted as the narrative progresses. A host of characters and strange occurrences serve to obfuscate events. Oedipa's journeying through the fictional Los Angeles satellite town of San Narciso and Sportello's navigating of a hyperreal Los Angeles perform similar functions in this respect. Oedipa's travels ultimately bring an ambiguous ending whereas Sportello's serve to confuse and displace. The influence of detective fiction

[9] Erickson, '*Maps to the Stars*…'.

on *Inherent Vice* has not been lost on Erickson who—when appraising both the 2014 film adaptation and the works of its director Paul Thomas Anderson—noted of the presence of 'familiar hard-boiled motifs.'[10] Here, Erickson identifies how such conventions are modified in order to fit the time period of the novel:

> Though by the end of the '60s the sun would seem to have bleached all the dark out of whatever L.A. noir was left, *Inherent Vice* the movie, like the novel, opens with that most noir of setups: the entrance of the femme fatale, albeit in cutoffs and with no trace of lipstick, a sun-dappled flower goddess who frolicked through the reverie of just about any male in 1970 old enough to know what a libido was.[11]

The result, as can be seen, is two interesting retrospective effects working in tandem with one another. The tropes of Chandler-esque detective fiction are applied to a markedly different context, albeit in the city with which the form was closely associated. The process itself can be viewed comparable to pastiche in its highlighting of how discovery and engagement does not necessarily lead to a satisfactory end.

Erickson employs a similar effect in his works, illustrating how exploration or journeying do not always result in feelings of familiarity or fulfilment. As will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 5, the displacement this engenders usually leads to stark environmental changes on account of the implicit relationship between character and setting in Erickson's texts. The changes are invariably destructive in their conception. A comparison can be made with Rudy Wurlitzer's 1974 novel *Quake*, which describes the collapse of civil order in Los Angeles in the twenty-four hours following a major earthquake. Given that Erickson has referenced Wurlitzer's screenplay for *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) in his 'Essential Movie Library' series, it suggests he is familiar with his work.[12] The fact that the disaster that has radically altered the Los Angeles topography in *Amnesiascope* is colloquially referred to as 'the Quake'—evoking the title of Wurlitzer's novel—furthers such an impression.

One of the few native Angeleno writers to whom Erickson has directly referred is Bret Easton Ellis. Erickson's comments here concern the public's reaction to Ellis' first novel *Less Than Zero* (1985). Far from criticising Ellis explicitly, much of Erickson's frustration lies in how he perceives the novel's graphic content to have reinforced a number of outside prejudices and misconceptions surrounding the city. Published when Ellis was twenty-one to much acclaim, the novel depicts the activities of an eighteen year old student named Clay returning home to Los Angeles for Christmas vacation. Clay's attempts to reconnect with his ex-girlfriend, Blair, and childhood best friend, Julian, see the protagonist trapped in a vicious cycle of hedonistic parties and seedy nightclubs. His relationships with friends and family members become increasingly strained as he witnesses behaviour of an increasingly destructive nature. Alienated within a nihilistic society, Clay returns to his east-coast college uneasily reflecting on his vacation.

---

[10] Steve Erickson, 'Paul Thomas Anderson & the Cinema of Outcasts', *Los Angeles* (26th January, 2015). <https://www.lamag.com/longform/paul-thomas-anderson-cinema-outcasts/>. [Accessed 29th December 2018].
[11] ibid.
[12] See Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #15: *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, *Los Angeles* (3rd December, 2013). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-57-pat-garrett-and-billy-the-kid-1973/>. [Accessed 29th December 2018].

A further point of interest emerges here, given the fact that both Erickson and Ellis' debut novels were published in the same year. Erickson precedes his remarks on Ellis and *Less Than Zero* by saying that his intention in his fiction is to 'get at a sense of Los Angeles being an existential blank, a psychological white wall, a geographical neuter.'[13] Again, this ties in with the notion of Los Angeles being a city that—to borrow a phrase from Mike Davis—is 'infinitely envisioned', with regard to the multi-faceted nature of its literary portrayals.[14] Individual conceptions can be considered critical in influencing the presentations of the city. Though it would be an overstatement to suggest that *Less Than Zero* is wholly a fabrication, Ellis' novel does portray the city in a manner consistent with what Erickson describes as a 'little port of weirdness in America, not connected with the rest.'[15] Rather than wishing to emphasise the city's perceived cultural separateness from America, Erickson's intention lies in conveying Los Angeles as a fluid microcosm of a prevailing national condition and consciousness. He makes this clear in stating his wish to present '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.'[16] This particular conception is at the core of Erickson's fluid and shifting presentations of his home city. The reconstructions and transmutations that express these formless 'free-floating' conceptions are often necessitated through cataclysms.[17] Whilst a similar fascination with endings and dstructive conventions is apparent in Ellis' fiction, Erickson instead implies a distinction between his texts that present Los Angeles as a microcosm of American culture and experience, and Ellis' that merely depict the city as an aberration or national source of shame. 'That's why they loved Bret Ellis' book [*Less Than Zero*], because it confirmed everything they just know Los Angeles is about', Erickson has remarked of this matter, referring to East Coast preconceptions of what the city is viewed to represent.[18]

Erickson's past comments on a number of writers either born in Los Angeles or whose works are closely associated with the city reveal intriguing sources of influence. Similarly, the content of Erickson's texts appear drawn from Los Angeles' historic and social contexts. The tropes of disaster and destruction so commonly found in Los Angeles novels are both symptoms of the frequency with which natural disasters have plagued the city. Earthquakes have been a particularly regular occurrence, as detailed by Mike Davis in subsection of the first chapter of *Ecology of Fear* entitled 'Killer Pulses and Burning Skylines'.[19] The city's administrative failure to adequately prepare for earthquakes is detailed here extensively by Davis, having previously attributed to the city's avoidance of death and damage on a massive scale as 'sheer gambler's luck'.[20] It could feasibly be claimed that Erickson is tapping into these very real anxieties in his textual depiction of post-Quake Los Angeles in *Amnesiascope*.

[13] Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.
[14] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 23.
[15] Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.
[16] ibid.
[17] ibid.
[18] ibid.
[19] Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, pp. 39-47.
[20] ibid, p. 38.

Erickson also taps into these same anxieties in more surreal terms. *Our Ecstatic Days* perhaps exemplifies this effect more so than any other text. The sudden appearance of a lake in the centre of Los Angeles that becomes known as 'Lake Zed'—an obvious titular allusion to endings—causes much consternation for the city's residents. Soon, it becomes apparent that the lake is expanding outwards at an exponential rate, causing the city's topography to alter irrevocably. The anxieties that come to the fore in *Amnesiascope* are evident at the opening of *Ecstatic*, as conveyed through the fears of protagonist Kristin that the lake will seize her young son, Kirk. The relationship between character and landscape becomes all the more pronounced through overt description of these fears. The lake is comparable to a character, according to R.L. Litchfield, in the manner with which it stokes personal anxieties, explicitly influencing 'the actions and reactions of individuals throughout the plot in the same way that characters do in other novels', identifying its relationship with Kristen as a 'changeable intimate one.'[21]

Lake Zed can be seen to represent a channelling of real concerns. Again, this is highlighted by Davis in *Ecology of Fear*, in which reference is made to the 1938 flooding of the San Fernando Valley, Erickson's current place of residence. Here, Davis outlines how the urbanisation of rural areas carried with it great jeopardy. Mass fatalities inherent due to a population explosion a notable inherent risk, the process of urbanisation is revealed to have destabilised the landscape and consequently increased the risk of flooding: '[…] The urban-riparian interface had to be reconstructed to take account of the huge population explosion of the 1920s. Urbanization, of course, had inexorably increased the menace of such floods by reducing the porous surface area available to absorb runoff.'[22] The adverse connection between a remodified landscape and a subsequent increased capacity for disaster to occur bears resemblance to a number of similar depictions in Erickson's texts, most obviously in *Ecstatic*. The various cataclysms evident in a number of his novels function as a means of drastically altering environmental properties. Erickson's correlating of strange and cataclysmic events and their lasting effects with a protagonist's perceptual faculties can be viewed as a means of channelling historic social anxieties concerning disasters.

The historian Kevin Starr makes this point further explicit in his 1996 book *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California*. Developing the hypothesis that the Californian topography is wholly unsuitable for the influx of peoples that it has been subjected to throughout the twentieth century, he points out that the mass public works programme undertaken during the 1930's Depression had the dual purpose of alleviating this ecological issue whilst simultaneously providing migrant workers with a source of employment. The end result of these aforementioned public works programmes was an exacerbation existing ecological issues through intense geographic reconfiguration. Such was the extent of the fear of flooding in Los Angeles that the administrative decision to cover the river that ran through the city with thousands of cubic yards of concrete was undertaken in 1939. The decision had a profound impact on the city's geography, according to Starr, effectively ridding it of a

[21] R.L. Litchfield, '(Re)Imagining Los Angeles: Five Psychotopographies in the Fiction of Steve Erickson' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2010), p. 200.
[22] Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, p. 70.

tangible centre point: 'So many great cities, after all, are organized around their rivers. Can Los Angeles ever be most completely at its best urban self after destroying its river, needlessly, many believe, in the effort to achieve flood control?'[23] The effect of this has left an indelible mark on Los Angeles, decentralising the city and at the same time furthering impressions of its topographic malleability. Returning briefly to Erickson's *Ecstatic*, it is possible to consider the appearance of 'Lake Zed' in the text as a naturalistic manifestation of vengeance in light of these observations. The apparent sentient qualities of the lake—expressed via the haunting music emanating from its centre—can be seen as a reaction against Los Angeles' ongoing urban transformation.

There is little doubt that a history of social disorder has contributed to conceptions of endings in Los Angeles literature. Social division has been a lingering concern of Erickson's, and represents the primary subject of both *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*. Similarly, his 1995 essay 'American Weimar' discusses division in national and political contexts, claiming that 'America wearies of democracy.'[24] Erickson elaborates on this assertion, noting of a collective anger with the American political system that permeates all aspects of society:

> Untempered by rationale and open-mindedness, fury eventually consumes democracy rather than nourishes it, because it overwhelms our tolerance, our willingness to be reasonably informed, our determination to hold ourselves accountable for what we decide… We display less and less patience with what we previously held to be inalienable, less and less patience with democracy's inherent messiness and inefficiency and the morass of conflicting interests that are read in democracy's results. We display less patience, in other words, with other Americans.[25]

The mistrust of other Americans that Erickson suggests can be identified as being at the core of two infamous historic instances of social disorder in Los Angeles. This represents an obvious simplification of systemic and institutional racism, but a fear and general mistrust of any form of 'other' is at the core of the causes of the Watts Riots of 1965 and the Rodney King riots of 1992. In his essay 'A Journey Into The Mind of Watts', Thomas Pynchon paints an evocative portrait of urban deprivation explicitly linked to racial segregation and a social disparateness that has fostered ignorance and misconception:

> While the white culture is concerned with various forms of systematized folly—the economy of the area in fact depending on it—the black culture is stuck pretty much with basic realities like disease, like failure, violence and death, which the whites have mostly chosen—and can afford—to ignore. The two cultures do not understand each other […].[26]

The entrenched poverty to which Pynchon refers provides the conditions for social unrest. Pynchon goes on to describe Watts as a 'country' implying of a separation from its wider surroundings.[27] The notion of Los Angeles being comprised of a disparate series of districts,

---

[23] Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 321.
[24] Erickson, 'American Weimar'.
[25] ibid.
[26] Thomas Pynchon, 'A Journey Into The Mind of Watts', *New York Times* (12th June 1966). <http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/uncollected/watts.html>. [accessed: 4th October 2018].
[27] ibid.

some culturally and economically distant from prosperous impressions of the city is encapsulated in such a reference.

The brutalising of Rodney King has even been mentioned directly by Erickson. In his list of 'L.A.'s 100 Most Iconic Songs', 'Fuck tha Police' by the Compton-based rap group N.W.A ('Niggaz Wit Attitude') is listed at number seventy-four.[28] His succinct appraisal reads: 'This rap landmark may have had more rage than reason, but just off the top of your head: How many cops was it again who beat the crap out of Rodney King three years later?'[29] With the lyrics of 'Fuck tha Police' dealing with racial profiling and police brutality, the song appears prescient in light of the fact that the Rodney King riots that later engulfed Los Angeles.

The noted contrast between social classes and their respective preoccupations is perhaps best reflected in the city's diverse architectural styles. Reyner Banham's comprehensive study *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) touches on this notion, categorising the city into four distinct sectors: the ecologies of 'Surfurbia', 'Foothills', 'The Plains of Id' and 'Autopia'. These convey a sense of the city's unique haphazardness in which no one single architectural style dominates or prevail. 'Surfurbia' details the Hispanic 'rancho' motif, 'The Plains of Id' notes the prominence of stucco box blocks, whilst 'Autopia' discusses the interweaving of steel and glass elements. The Watts Tower represents a notable example of the latter.[30] 'Foothills', however, represents the most intriguing in relation to exploration of Los Angeles literature. The term itself refers to the fantastical image perpetuated by the Hollywood film industry with significant emphasis placed upon veneers and artifices. Graumann's Chinese Theatre is offered as a notable example, standing as 'the ultimate shrine of all the fantasy that was Hollywood'; a 'garnish for the façade […].'[31] Interestingly, Erickson's *Zeroville* captures the diverseness of Los Angeles as the setting shifts between Hollywood's 'Dream Factory' façades, to the city's beaches and canyons. It is in Banham's observations of Los Angeles being devoid of a definable centre, of a universally acknowledged landmark that symbolises the city itself that is of most intrigue in relation to Erickson. Banham asserts that the city's freeways ostensibly function as a surrogate landmark in the absence of such: '[…] The freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno.'[32]

Physical movement and states of transit recur as motifs throughout Erickson's fiction, indicating that a major feature of the city's identity is channelled in his texts. These twin motifs serve to heighten a prevailing sense of dislocation and impermanence that consequently influences the internal faculties of a character. Given the implicit relationship between character and setting in Erickson's novels, the dislocation felt by the protagonist can be seen to bring about cataclysms and disasters that alter the landscape. Similarly, reference is continually made to the diverse nature of Los Angeles architecture. Again, this is intended

[28] See Appendix 3.
[29] Steve Erickson, 'L.A.'s 100 Most Iconic Songs', *Los Angeles* (17th March, 2017). <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/l-s-100-iconic-songs/>. [Accessed 4th October 2018].
[30] See Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, p. 205.
[31] ibid, p. 95.
[32] ibid, p. 195.

to foster a sense of dislocation. *Days*, for instance, sees Los Angeles residents begin constructing moonbridges—a traditional Southeast Asian architectural feature—across buildings in order to aid movement around the sandstorm-plagued city. *Amnesiascope* depicts the construction of a sculpture called 'the Memory Scope', designed to show the spectator 'the memory he or she has most forgotten' as a possible representation of the personal and collective dislocation that the city seems to engender (*A*, 142).

Erickson's fascination with endings can be seen as being part of a wider literary tradition that itself appears influenced by Los Angeles' social and cultural histories. The theme constitutes a channelling of the disaster and disorder that appears to be enshrined in the city's make-up.

Permutations of Time and Forms of Endings

Erickson's fascination with endings is by no means solely linked to his depictions of Los Angeles, however. Rather, the intention here is to suggest how this associative trait of the Los Angeles novel is identifiable in Erickson's works. A critical distinction, however, can be observed in relation to how this preoccupation with endings intends to convey and what each form specifically signifies. The cataclysms that recur throughout Erickson's fiction, for instance, can be considered representations of literal endings through evocation of destruction and disaster. Naturally, these cataclysms—such is their seismicity and scale—lend themselves to apocalyptic conceptions. In Erickson's fiction, these are linked intrinsically to fluctuations in topographic content and characterisation.

A connection exists between a great number of Erickson's protagonists and their respective landscapes, whereby thoughts, moods and emotions alter the surrounding topography. Invariably, these changes are facilitated by cataclysms, either as a general occurrence or presented as a literalising of emotional turbulence. The lasting effect of this interrelation is that, as Alexandru Budac notes in relation to *Days*, 'the state of things'—from the physical to the intangible—all 'verge toward the abstract.'[33] The nature of this abstract state allows all facets of Erickson's fiction to be reconstructed, extending even to presentations of time. These temporal reconstructions are themselves directly linked to Erickson's interests in endings as they are correlated with an impending impression of doom. Often these depictions signal a form of reinvention, as will be discovered.

Tours of the Black Clock constitutes an early example from Erickson's oeuvre of the interconnection between endings and reinvention in a historical context. The novel's title alludes to this very interest in temporal manipulation and its causal relationship with endings and new forms of beginnings. The term 'black clock' suggests a dark conception of history. 'Tours', meanwhile, implies a spatializing of this form of time, as though it is an entity that can be physically navigated or explored. Consideration of this can lead to the view that the notion of endings is being channelled here, directing time towards some horrifying, inexorable conclusion. The posing of concurrent twentieth century timelines in the narrative

[33] Budac, 'The Blue and White Visual Narrative…', p. 68.

is an ambitious backdrop against which this theme can develop. Of the book, Paul Kincaid has commented that 'it tells of people who recreate themselves, and in so doing recreate the century.'[34] The notion of ongoing processes of reinvention is suggested in Kincaid's assertion here. As will become apparent, these are themselves linked irrevocably to endings.

The novel begins in a relativistic fashion describing a boatman named Marc who ferries tourists to the island of Davenhall. Echoes of Charon, the ferryman of Hades from Greek mythology, are suggested here. Marc becomes infatuated with a female passenger wearing a blue dress. Her failure to return to the boat prompts him to step foot on the island for the first time in fifteen years since seeing a man die at the feet of his mother, Dania. Whilst searching for the passenger in the blue dress, Marc encounters his estranged mother. Their meeting summons the ghost of a man named Banning Jainlight who has been dead for the past fifteen years.

From this point, the focus of the text shifts abruptly as Banning recounts his life story as the novel switches from the third-person to the first-person narrative form. The sudden ending of both the original plot thread and narrative mode can be considered indicative of the manner in which an ending instigates some form of change or a new beginning entirely. Growing up on a Pennsylvanian farm during the early part of the twentieth century, Banning describes being able to sight an alternate twentieth century by looking through windows. Windows feature as a recurring motif throughout Erickson's fiction, becoming fundamentally linked with character perspective to offer a unique, distorted view of the world that comes to influence their very being. Subject to mental torture at the hands of his step-brothers, he is almost tricked into raping his natural mother as an adolescent. His angered response is to murder one of his half-brothers, injure his father and stepmother, and torch the family farm. Banning flees to New York and finds employment with a gangster and takes to writing pieces of pulp pornography in his spare time. The full symbolism of the protagonist's name—'Banning'—can be seen here, as a conscious process leading to the prohibition of a particular action in order to affect change. His occupation as a writer of pulp pornography alludes to this process of 'banning' what is considered to be immoral or unsuitable. The stories Banning writes come to the attention of an individual from Germany known only as 'Client X'; a portrayal of Josef Goebbels. This in itself can be considered a significant feature of the text, indicating of Erickson's intention to reimagine history for the purpose of thematic exploration of endings, as opposed to using historical actualities as a narrative framework.

Banning introduces a fantasy version of Dania into his stories that soon attract the interest of another mysterious figure, 'Client Z'; a portrayal of Adolf Hitler. In the text, 'Hitler' is presented in indirect terms, usually through reference to his distinctive physical appearance—i.e. his toothbrush moustache—or simply as 'Client Z'. This shows the text as a representation of both history and temporal workings. The absence of direct reference or address renders the figure more of a character than a literal depiction of Hitler. The character's presentation as a lovelorn melancholic, coupled with his eventual descent into senility, is intended to instil the reader with feelings of sympathy. As such, Erickson's

[34] Kincaid, 'Defying Rational Chronology', p. 36.

reimagining of history can be seen to extend to figures as well as events. Endings are again indicated in the reference to Hitler as 'Client Z'. The letter's association with endings is obvious, continuing a fascination with the symbolic value of letters in Erickson's novels. 'Z' and 'X' are undoubtedly the most prominent of these, with the latter used to express a form of the unknown. It is through features such as these that Erickson pushes the narrative towards an ominous and inescapable conclusion.

Banning accepts a private position supplying 'Z' with pornographic stories featuring Dania and moves to Nazi Germany, where he marries and has a daughter. Running parallel to these events, 'Z' becomes obsessed with Banning's version of Dania and projects his own feelings of lost love for his niece Geli Raubaul onto the character. These feelings prompt a change in 'Z''s thinking in how to conduct the war effort. Operation Barbarossa is cancelled and Germany goes on to take Britain, concluding the Second World War in Europe. The course of history obviously deviates from this point. The effect of Erickson's alternate depiction of history comes to be sighted from Banning's perspective. Having been seen to have served his purpose, Nazi officials cause the deaths of Banning's wife and daughter. As a continuation of the novel's motif of windows representing an implicit link between an individual's perception of time, experience and the self, Banning's daughter is pushed through one at their home, before his wife jumps to her death. This act, according to Kincaid, signifies 'the brutal moment which rips Banning from our century into his own.'[35]

From here, it can be seen how various endings—an imagined to the Second World War, the death of Banning's family—initiate further change to both history and the narrative. Imprisoned for dissent, Banning overhears his stories broadcast on the radio as Nazi propaganda. A fellow inmate of Banning's is an elderly 'Z', now frail and senile. The two escape to America in search of Dania. 'Z' dies in a hotel room in New York at the same moment Banning discovers a faded blueprint. 'If time comes together in this blueprint, if it is a plan of the true shape of the century, then Hitler who belongs only in the world shaped by Banning's imagination cannot exist here', Kincaid hypothesises of this intrinsic connection.[36] Again, Erickson's fascination with endings is evident here, with 'Z''s death symbolising the end of one version of the twentieth century.

Arriving in Davenhall, Banning lives unseen in a hotel for seventeen years, trying to summon the courage for appropriating Dania's image in his pornography, for violating her in a dream state and causing the twentieth century to diverge from its original and intended course. The New York hotel room in which Hitler dies, it transpires, was the scene of one of their dreamed sexual encounters: 'She told herself that if there indeed was a floorplan to the Twentieth Century with a secret room… where she fucked history and owned him.'[37] Dania is impregnated with Marc as a result of the experience.

[35] ibid, p. 37.
[36] ibid, p. 39.
[37] Steve Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock* (London: Futura, 1990), p. 210-211. Henceforth cited in-text as (*TBC*, page number).

When Banning finally musters the strength to apologise to Dania, he drops dead at her feet. His physical death, however, merely signals a passage into a purgatorial state, overseeing events in Davenhall from another realm of consciousness as his body is suspended from a tree. His disembodied voice comments on this in-between state: 'I keep waiting for damnation. As though it'll arrive in the form of a black bird, and begin with the eating of my eye. But the birds don't eat me […] They seem content to watch the river perched from me' (*TBC*, 312). After Banning is identified by Dania, his body is buried and the novel returns to the third person narrative form for its concluding moments. Signalled by Banning's death, the two twentieth century timelines reconnect into a singular entity, of which Marc travels back to the beginning of in search of the passenger in the blue dress.

Tours represents a development of the fusing of seemingly disparate time frames, characters and environments first conveyed in *Days* and *Rubicon Beach*. Alluded to in Dania's recollection of her dream sexual encounter with Banning, characters and temporality are inextricably aligned. Paul Kincaid suggests this in his analysis of the text's implicit correlating of character and time, identifying that '[…] Remaking history and remaking our own identity are one and the same.'[38] Indeed, the conclusion of the previously posed relativist style and third person mode of storytelling signals a radical switch in focus, before Banning's death reintroduces the novel's earlier form at its denouement. The textual presence of endings inevitably brings about numerous literal and metaphorical presentations. 'The year was 1938, when we held the body of the long dead Twentieth Century in common', the disembodied Banning announces to Dania, signalling his introduction in the text (*TBC*, 42). Additionally, a primary theme of endings is suggested in Banning's declaration, given that the Second World War broke out in Europe the following year to bring an end to a tense peace across the continent.

Erickson's fascination with temporal endings is apparent even in his two journalistic books, *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*. Both works see this preoccupation contorted somewhat as Erickson seeks to document a changing American consciousness at the close of the twentieth century. One novel in particular, *Arc d'X*, explores the nature of this changing consciousness, channelling notions of national paradoxes that create impressions of instability and inescapable disaster. *Arc d'X* begins conventionally in the manner of a work of historic fiction. The focus of this presentation shifts suddenly to an alternate present in which America was never conceived as a nation. The manner in which the narrative flits between characters, plot strands and settings has been observed by Lee Spinks as a product of Erickson's 'commitment to describe an incident simultaneously from the perspectives of history and memory, which no longer necessarily occupy the same imaginative space, and which often project antagonistic versions of a common future.'[39] Comparable to *Tours*, in *Arc d'X* Erickson affords perceptual faculties a degree of prominence in the interpretation of historic events.

[38] Kincaid, 'Defying Rational Chronology', p. 38.
[39] Lee Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and the Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson', *Contemporary Literature*, 40 (1999), 214-239 (pp. 222-223).

The novel opens with an account of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Sally's race is at the forefront of this presentation as she is described in 'in-between' terms as having 'skin that was too white to be quite black and too black to be quite white' (*AX*, 14). The dynamics of the relationship between Sally and 'Thomas' are quickly established during this section of the text: lovers, and slave and master. After returning to America after a period in pre-revolutionary France, Sally's children are granted their freedom, whilst she opts to remain in Jefferson's captivity, both as a slave and a lover. A notable paradox emerges here regarding the Jeffersonian ideal of all men being created equal and the reality of slave ownership. The nature of this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, given that observations concerning the prominence of paradoxes in the American national consciousness constitute a major feature of Erickson's journalistic works.

It is at this point the narrative significantly deviates from historical events. Jefferson's election as president prompts Sally to leave him. Whilst travelling west through Native American territory, Sally falls asleep in a room in which a man was murdered. She awakens in an alternate present in which America does not exist. Instead, Sally finds herself in the futuristic, eternal city of Aeonopolis; a totalitarian theocracy located on the west coast of the former America. Sally is suspected of murder by an African-American policeman named Wade—a character from *Rubicon Beach*—having woken up in a bed beside a butchered body. After some persuasion, Wade eventually believes Sally to be innocent, despite the ruling council of priests pressing for her prosecution. Conflict between religious and secular government is suggested here. Parallels can be noted in this respect with America as a nation. Similar conflicts—race relations, clashes between conservative and liberal ideologies, for instance—constitute major concerns for Erickson in his writings on the state of America.

This incident signifies a further tonal and narrative shift in the text. The atmosphere becomes dream-like as the focus of the novel switches between two different relationships. Having absconded from the police force, Wade takes refuge in the Arboretum, a subterranean enclave beyond the jurisdiction of both police and church. Spending a large portion of his time in a nightclub called Fleurs d'X—again, note the presence of the letter 'X'—causes Wade to develop a fascination with a dancer named Mona. Concurrent to this is the story of Sally's burgeoning relationship with a church archivist named Etcher. Etcher's name carries symbolic significance in this regard. A process of 'etching' is suggested that connects with his occupation as an archivist. The recording of history is thus implied as a primary concern for the character. As such, the alternative or reimagined history presented of America having never been conceived as a nation is enshrined into legitimate, historical record

Sally and Etcher eventually take the decision to flee Aeonopolis. Their story, however, concludes in unfortunate circumstances with Sally meeting her end in an icy region to the north of the city. Sally's death instigates a further dramatic shift in the narrative, transferring its focus to present day Paris. This portion of the novel describes a mathematician named Seuroq, grief-stricken at the death of his wife, who discovers the existence of an extra day called 'Jour d'X' (X-Day) between 31st December 1999 and 1st January 2000. Comparable to Banning's declaration to Dania in *Tours* that 1938 was the year they 'held the body of the long dead Twentieth Century', a fascination with humankind being on the verge of a

significant—even cataclysmic—event is displayed. The appearance of 'X-Day' as being representative of an unknown day naturally lends itself to speculation as to what the new millennium will bring. Viewed in the context of the numerous struggles, conflicts and paradoxes posed referenced Erickson's literature, a suggestion could be made that the notion of the twentieth century inexorably heading towards some uncertain and potentially apocalyptic conclusion is posed.

A sense of this is implied in the metafictional plot strand that follows this short interlude. A character named 'Erickson' travels to Berlin in an imagined 1998. The city he reaches is an alternate version of the German capital that a number of its inhabitants have abandoned due to an unspecified cataclysm. It is heavily implied in the text that it is the same event that obliterated the character's home city of Los Angeles. The central premise of *Amnesiascope* is touched upon here. Whilst in Berlin, Erickson is murdered by a fascist skinhead named Georgie Valis. Georgie then uses Erickson's passport to travel to America, intending to reach the ruins of Los Angeles as Jour d'X approaches. After murdering an old man sleeping in an Indian mesa revealed to be Jefferson, Georgie reaches Aeonopolis and makes his way to the Fleurs d'X nightclub. The novel comes full circle at its conclusion, following the discovery of a body that has been brutally murdered in bed. Death representing a literal ending is an an inescapable component fundamental to the reimagining of characters, settings and time periods in the novel. Further to this, a point of intrigue emerges at the realisation that Georgie shares a surname with Philip K. Dick's 1981 novel *VALIS*. Given Erickson's stated admiration for Dick, it is difficult to dismiss this as mere coincidence. This particular connection becomes strengthened upon consideration of Dick's novel featuring the presence of alternate and overlapping universes relatable to the American national consciousness. Erickson's suggesting of race and religion as being implicit components of this national consciousness in *Arc d'X* can be compared with Dick's referencing of the Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon's subsequent resignation as president in 1974 in order to convey a prevailing national mood.

The prominence of death as a motif in the text, coupled with the frequency with which settings and time periods shift, further suggests this connection between endings and reinvention. This extends even to matters relating to stark tonal shifts and sudden changes in narrative form, often fluctuating between the third and first person mode of storytelling. The paralleling of death with the abrupt switching to a different narrative focus, style or form is noted by Lee Spinks in his analysis of the novel. Referring in particular to Georgie's murdering of Jefferson, Spinks describes it as an incident that 'conflates the death of an avatar of apocalyptic time with the death of a particular historical epoch.'[40] Spinks continues by saying that the episode 'brings all the main themes of the novel into focus while simultaneously redoubling each narrative level.'[41] Spinks' assertion of Jefferson's death serving as both 'the death of an avatar of apocalyptic time' and of a 'particular historical epoch' can be construed as a comment on American paradoxes. The Jeffersonian ideal of America has died with Jefferson's murder, yet the figure can simultaneously be viewed as

[40] Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates', p. 227.
[41] ibid, p. 227.

embodying the very notion of American paradoxes. The presentation is complicated in this respect. Reference to the country's Jeffersonian origins is obviously paramount in establishing a framework for the novel's historical and national observations. It is, however, through Sally's characterisation and the portrayal of Aeonopolis that these paradoxical conceptions come to be realised in vivid terms. The two disparate landscapes that Sally inhabits express what Nikolai Duffy describes as Erickson's fascination with 'the abyssal rift between the late eighteenth century idea of America and its late twentieth century reality.'[42]

Suggested through description of her skin colour, Sally embodies the permanence of American paradoxes in the national construct. Too light-skinned to be black, too dark-skinned to be considered white, her relationship with Jefferson is similarly complex; simultaneously a lover, a servant, and the mother of his children. As a character, paradoxes are implicit in her very being. This form of characterisation indicates the contradictions upon which American national identity was established, fostered by the unrealised ideals and aspirations of the Jeffersonian era represented by the conflict between democratic rights and slavery. These various conflicts that co-exist innately are represented in the formation of Aeonopolis, as well as in the fact that she finds herself immediately in the strange city having come from America.

Essentially, Sally has fallen asleep in Jeffersonian America and awoken in a horrifying travesty of its noble aims. The ending of one conception of a country has signalled the formation of another. The representative properties of this incident in the novel have previously been affirmed by scholars. Spinks has claimed that *Arc d'X*'s narrative trajectory conveys the 'apocalyptic and futuristic origins of American history […] That this future must continually be experienced by each generation, as death or annihilation, in the guise of radical repetition.'[43] Duffy, comparably, asserts that the textual structure serves to convey such a sentiment, discussing how the abrupt shifting between disparate landscapes encapsulates the development or distortion of original American ideals: '…its contradictory structure obtains that the realization of the one must inevitably entail the corruption of the other.[44] Both of these sentiments serve to capture how the implicitness of paradoxes in a national consciousness invariably lead to forms of destruction. That they have never been adequately addressed can be regarded as symptomatic of the ongoing national process of reinvention; that these same issues merely change and develop in form, as opposed to being addressed fundamentally.

Description of Sally's awakening in Aeonopolis is rich with evocative symbolism, particularly when it eventually becomes apparent that the body beside her is that of Thomas Jefferson: '"America," she said. She woke and there was blood on her pillow. There was blood on the sheets of the bed beneath her' (*AX*, 52). The conceptual distortion of Jefferson's America a recurring preoccupation of Erickson's, highlighted via this episode is how even these original Jeffersonian ideals were inherently paradoxical. America's violent history—

[42] Nikolai Duffy, 'American Inheritance: Steve Erickson and the Pursuit of Happiness', *European Journal of American Culture*, 31 (2012), 41-53 (p. 46).
[43] Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates', p. 230.
[44] Duffy, 'American Inheritance', p. 49.

suggested through the image of a blood-stained bed—stands as an affirmation of this assertion. The Declaration of Independence's espoused 'pursuit of happiness' is similarly subject to such scrutiny with Duffy describing its relation to the text as 'indelible and illegible', given how Sally is frequently denied this fundamental right.[45] A sense of her 'otherness' is continued in Aeonopolis as she intense suspicion from both the country's theocratic rulers and from the police on account of apparently being married to a man named Gann Hurley, despite obviously being unable to recall this detail. Erickson's depiction of Aeonopolis, along with the manner in which Sally enters this alternate present, is indicative of the permanence of conflict at the core of the American national consciousness.

Further to the function of Aeonopolis in allegorising these conflicting sentiments, the city is interestingly directly correlated with a clear sense of the self. This integrating of the self and the national consciousness into environmental facets serves to highlight the reactive nature of change in Erickson's literature; how the character's emotions come to be sighted in the changing or changed properties of a particular environment. An impact on one entity typically has ramifications for the other. The influence of America in the formation of Aeonopolis becomes all the more noticeable through historical reference. An early depiction of the city features reference to graffiti bearing the messages 'ICH BIN EIN BERLINER' and 'THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS' (*AX*, 64). The contrasting impression of hopeful or idealistic messages being sloppily daubed on a wall in a dark alley perfectly emblematises this subversion of what America was originally perceived to represent.

The connection between setting and self in a personal sense becomes more pronounced upon the realisation that different districts of Aenopolis are named after emotions and other forms associated with perceptual faculties. Description of the city's geography and theocratic structure reveals a dispute concerning the church's jurisdiction 'over the zone that it called Redemption but everyone else called Desire' (*AX*, 64). Whilst journeying around the city, Wade and his colleague Mallory pass 'Desolate Street; at the corner of Unrequited […]' (*AX*, 92). This explicit synching of facets of the self with the surrounding landscape is typical of Erickson's fiction, expressing an implicit interconnectivity between seemingly disparate entities that necessitates thematic content. In this instance, it is to highlight the implicitness of Jeffersonian ideals and paradoxes in the formation of America. The make-up of Aeonopolis represents this particular notion in microcosmic form. The deaths of Jefferson and Sally in the text represent the end of Jeffersonian possibilities, whilst also drawing attention to the continued perpetuation of conflicts and paradoxes.

Historic, Social and Cultural Endings

The Sea Came in at Midnight is a novel in which Erickson explicitly explores the symbolism of the approaching twenty-first century. As expressed in *Arc d'X* through the portrayals of Aeonopolis and Jour d'X, a sense of the unknown is counterbalanced with impressions of an impending apocalypse in the text. The novel continually shifts between different characters

[45] Duffy, 'American Inheritance', p. 49.

and settings. For the purposes of this subsection examining the recurrence of endings in Erickson's fiction, the most interesting of these episodes features Kristin, the protagonist of *Ecstatic*. The book begins with her working in Tokyo's red light district during the early months of the year 2000. She trades in memories, helping her clientele recall events from their past they had previously thought forgotten. Kristin's suitability for this line of work centres on the novelty of her being American:

> Besides her intelligence and empathy, being American also makes Kristin more valuable to the hotel's clients. As an American, she's considered by Japanese men a natural conduit of modern memory. As a daughter of America, Kristin represents the Western annihilation of ancient Japanese memory and therefore its master and possessor, a red bomb in one hand, a red bottle of soda pop in the other.[46]

The above passage makes clear the significant role that historical and individual memory plays in Erickson's fiction. This is presented in both personal and collective senses. On a personal level, the reader is able to see the effect of memory in shaping or conceiving the properties of an environment. In a collective context, it is conversely associated more with the ability to forget or reshape existing cultural ideals. In the above excerpt, Erickson demonstrates how the modernity of both America and its cultural memory has served to reshape and reinvent existing cultures. The counterbalanced imagery of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War Two alongside the bottle of Coca-Cola successfully captures this particular sentiment. An evocation of destruction is seen to facilitate change on a national scale here, alongside suggestion of a more insidious form of cultural imperialism. Essentially, Kristin's individual memory is seen to represent such sentiments.

Following the workings of her memory, the focus of the novel reverts to several months previously in Los Angeles during the advent of the twenty-first century. This particular detail indicates Erickson's fascination with endings, with two radically different stories relating to a person demarked by a millennial divide. Here, Kristin answers an advertised position for what is ostensibly a live-in sex slave. Her employer is a mysterious man known as the Occupant. Following Kristin's discovery of a room in which the walls, floor and ceiling are covered in a series of seemingly random dates, the Occupant reveals that he is an 'apocalyptologist'. He proceeds to explain that the room functions as a calendar, its purpose being to track what he has termed 'the Age of the Apocalypse' (*TSM*, 46). The apparent disorder of the calendar is suggested in its chaotic description:

> The calendar entirely circled the room. It covered all the walls except the door, a sky-blue mural blotting out the windows and overflowing the walls onto the floor and ceiling. The dates on the calendar were not sequential like on an ordinary calendar but free-floating according to some inexplicable order, in some cases far-removed dates overlapping, in other cases consecutive dates separated by the length of the room. In varying shades of red and black, apparently senseless timelines ran from the top of the calendar to the bottom, from one end to the other (*TSM*, 46).

[46] Steve Erickson, *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (London: Quartet, 1999), p. 6. Henceforth cited in-text as (*TSM*, page number).

The layout of the calendar is reflective of the apparent randomness that typifies the Age of the Apocalypse. Beginning 'well before 31 December 1999, at exactly 3:02 in the morning on the seventh of May in the year 1968', the calendar lists a series of seminal or cataclysmic events that are themselves symptomatic of the Age of the Apocalypse; an additional prerequisite being that these occurrences of an arbitrary nature completely devoid of rationale (*TSM*, 47). The incident referred to as ushering in the Age of the Apocalypse is the volatile period of civil unrest that engulfed France during May 1968. Further details as to what exactly qualifies an apocalyptic event are offered by the Occupant:

> […] By the modern definition of faithless apocalypse, the assassination of America's greatest civil rights leader in April 1968 was not a modern apocalyptic event, because it had a rationale, however villainous the rationale was. The assassination of the civil rights leader's *mother*, on the other hand on the thirtieth of June 1974 […] *That* was a modern apocalyptic event because it had no rationale at all: the woman had simply been playing the organ in church, when a maniac started randomly firing a gun (*TSM*, 47).

The randomness underpinning these chaotic events expressed through reference to the murder of Alberta Williams King, the mother of Martin Luther King Jr., is further evident in the detailing of other events. With the May 1968 events in France signifying 'Year One' of the Age of the Apocalypse, other exampled incidents include the Manson Family killings of August in the following year ('Year Two'), the murders of American missionaries in El Salvador in 1980 ('Year Thirteen'), and the unsolved assassination of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 ('Year Eighteen'). Death and violence implicitly aligned with the notion of an apocalypse via the detailing of these events, the recurring theme of endings representing further developments and progression of an apocalyptic era is stressed here.

Consideration of these details creates an impression of the Occupant resembling an archivist of kinds. Comparable to Etcher from *Arc d'X* in this respect, the Occupant is seen to record history, albeit a subjective interpretation of it. This in itself reflects Erickson's own intentions in his works to an extent. History is often personalised in contrast to being chronicled literally, as impressions of historical figures and pop cultural icons are used analogically. The Occupant's calendar performs a similar function, perpetuating a chaotic view of history signified by seemingly random, anarchic events. The concept of a 'faithless apocalypse' is affirmed as a result. Traditional Christian conceptions of the apocalypse leading to a form of revelation or judgement are implied as being absent. Emphasis is instead placed on a prevailing sense of chaos or disorder connecting historical events. In the 'Age of Apocalypse', this stressing of randomness leads only to uncertainty and speculation as to what its inevitable end will bring.

The incidents detailed on the Occupant's calendar are all enshrined in the collective consciousness. Memory is used here as a vehicle to channel different forms of endings as part of a wider apocalyptic narrative. The calendar itself—'crisscrossing lines and floating anarchic events'—is reflective of memory's working in its chaotic and free-flowing construction (*TSM*, 48). Indeed, memory itself is explicitly linked to endings as the Occupant's utterance of 'Angie' at the moment of climax during sex with Kristin signals the conclusion of this particular plot strand. The Occupant's background and how he met his

former partner Angie is described in the text from this point onwards. Angie's life is subsequently recounted—her involvement in snuff films an obvious media appropriation of death and endings—before delving further back to document the lives and experiences of other people she meets. That these digressions are sparked through synaesthesia reflects memory's working. Endings are inherent to the structure of the text, given the abrupt manner in which plot threads are introduced. Erickson's stylistic fluidity is perpetuated via this very effect. Interestingly, the novel ends with the implied birth of Kristin's son, Kirk, having been awoken 'by the bubble breaking the surface of her dream and reclaiming its place in her womb' (*TSM,* 248). The dream-like atmosphere that largely typifies Erickson's oeuvre is perpetuated by this description. Points of distinction between dreams and reality are blurred. Physicality is attached to dreams in reference to the form having a surface. Reference to this surface breaking is what signifies this blurring of different points of distinction. The final image itself is unusually positive in light of the text's earlier apocalyptic content, highlighting the close association in Erickson's works between endings giving way to new beginnings.

The theme of endings is channelled in a socio-cultural context in *Zeroville*. The novel begins with endings of different kinds implied. As well as being referenced in titular form—the symbolic association of 'zero' with finality and ending—this theme becomes pronounced through description of Vikar's initial experiences in Los Angeles. The novel's opening during the summer of 1969 is in itself of great significance. One of the signifiers of the 'Age of the Apocalypse' in *The Sea*, the shadow of the Manson Family killings hangs over proceedings. Vikar's shaved head tattooed with a still of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor from *A Place in the Sun* attracts attention and prompts speculation that he is himself a member of Charles Manson's cult. 'The image tattooed on his head is portentous, ominous—Vikar is a punk angel bearing the sign of the apocalypse, so obsessed with movies it just seems natural he would engrave the sign of that obsession on his skull,' Erickson has said of this physical facet.[47] Typical of the manner in which Erickson implicitly aligns description of events are influenced by the internal faculties of a particular character, details of this speculation are presented in an indirect and vague manner.

This subplot outlines Vikar's general ignorance of the Manson Family generally, or indeed his obliviousness as to any other newsworthy event outside of a filmic context. Exploring the grounds of Harry Houdini's house on Laurel Canyon Boulevard, Vikar's train of thought encompassing Houdini's starring role in the silent film *The Grim Game* (1919) and the escapologist's familial connection to Groucho Marx is momentarily interrupted by the fleeting realisation that the canyons are now 'occupied by an extended family of hippies led by a musician with a Groucho Marx mustache' (*Z,* 25). A secondary issue arises here to highlight the prominence of interconnections and the counterbalancing of conflicting or contradictory elements in Erickson's work, given that Manson sought to present himself as a messianic figure and Houdini was famous for exposing bogus spiritualists.[48] Vikar's

[47] Miller, 'Steve Erickson'.

[48] Houdini co-authored *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924) with C. M. Eddy, Jr. (uncredited) that chronicled his debunking of spiritualists. In 1926, Houdini hired Eddy and H. P. Lovecraft to write a book about debunking religious miracles intending to be called *The Cancer of Superstition*. Houdini's death that same year, however, ended the project.

expression of frustration—'Hippies and musicians everywhere'—concerning what he finds indicates of what he perceives as a cultural insurrection within the city (*Z*, 25). Following police interrogation for alleged suspicious behaviour on the grounds, Vikar is released with a warning from a police officer: '"I'd stay out of those canyons if I were you… There's something going on up there"' (*Z*, 33). Later at a party with some film industry employees who have taken an interest in him, speculation that he is an acolyte of Manson's persists. The following is taken from an exchange between Viking Man—implied to be the screenwriter John Milius—and other guests at the party mistakenly assuming Vikar to be asleep:

> "I'm telling you," comes a woman's soft voice.
>
> "One of the Manson Family?" says one of the other male voices.
>
> "He's not one of the fucking Manson Family," answers Viking Man… The woman downstairs says, with what Vikar now recognizes as a slight accent. "He was there in Laurel Canyon. I saw him." (*Z*, 74)

The novel perpetuated an atmospheric uncertainty by subtly alluding to the spectre of death. Anxieties are evident here. The high-profile nature of the murders has undoubtedly contributed to this all-pervading paranoia; the most renowned victim being the actress Sharon Tate, pregnant wife of director Roman Polanski. That Vikar should first arrive in Los Angeles standing in stark physical and aesthetic contrast to the large majority of the city's inhabitants serves to distil these rampant suspicions.

The history of the Hollywood film industry is also used to contextualise events in the novel. This can be seen as a direct reflection in Erickson's interest in the medium, having described *Zeroville* as fundamentally being about 'loving movies.'[49] Still, reference and allusion to forms of ending are apparent in the novel's opening during the summer of 1969. A period of imminent change within the film industry is brought to mind. Impressions of endings are evoked via indirect reference to the Manson Family running parallel to the documentation of the rise of the 'New Hollywood' style of cinema. Allusion to figures associated with New Hollywood filmmaking such as Robert De Niro, John Milius, Margot Kidder, and Brian De Palma throughout the text signpost this industrial development. Erickson himself has commented on industry trends and developments of the period:

> A film like *The Godfather* was a synthesis of the Old Hollywood and the New, and then with the advent of the summer blockbuster, courtesy of *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, the studios reclaimed their preeminence. To a certain extent the studios reinvented themselves as less movie factories and more distribution houses, largely because the movie business became highly corporatized like other businesses […].[50]

The nature of this industrial change between 'Old' and 'New' relates to both style and operating methods. Hollywood's 'Golden Age' is generally perceived to have begun with the rise of the 'talkies' in the 1920s and declined during the 1960s. The era itself can be characterised through the increased prominence of the studio system. By 1930, a series of

[49] Miller, 'Steve Erickson'.
[50] Daniel Olivas, 'TEV Interview: Steve Erickson', *The Elegant Variation* (3rd January, 2008). <http://marksarvas.blogs.com/elegvar/2008/01/tev-interview-s.html>. [Accessed 16th October 2018].

mergers and realignments saw that ninety-five per cent of all American film production was in the hands of eight studios; three of whom could be considered 'major' and five 'minor'.[51] Their influence over proceedings was evidently sizable. David A. Cook details the extent of this, writing in his 1981 book *A History of Narrative Film*: 'The major studios were organized as vertically integrated corporations, controlling the means not only of production but of distribution and exhibition (or consumption) as well, through their ownership of film exchanges and theater chains.'[52]

In contrast, 'New Hollywood' can be identified as a new generation of young filmmakers being granted increased autonomy over narrative, thematic and stylistic content. Authorial control switched from studio executives to the filmmakers themselves. Peter Biskind identifies the transition towards New Hollywood cinema as being catalysed by *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), before beginning in earnest with *Easy Rider* (1969); released in the same year as Vikar's arrival in Los Angeles.[53] Numerous social factors of the period influenced a dramatic shift in artistic focus. Writing in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (1998), Biskind attributed this changed focus to Red Scare paranoia 'freeing a new generation of filmmakers frozen in the ice of '50's conformity' whilst also referencing the cultural influence of 'premonitory shocks' such as the civil rights movement, the Beatles, birth control, the Vietnam War, and the increased availability of illegal narcotics.[54]

With Vikar's arrival in Los Angeles coinciding with the rise of New Hollywood, his distinct physical appearance can be viewed as a means of channelling the unconventionality that typified the style of filmmaking. The character's career progression as an acclaimed editor furthers notions of him personifying this emerging filmmaking style. Vikar's time spent in Los Angeles spans over a decade, coinciding entirely with the New Hollywood period. The protagonist's eventual death at the novel's conclusion correlates with the end of the period and the emergence of the studio blockbuster during the early 1980's. Indeed, Erickson himself has demonstrated an awareness of this industrial circularity in how New Hollywood represented a brief interlude during which the studios were able to reinvent and consequently re-establish their dominance over proceedings.

Originally, however, Vikar is presented as something of an anachronism upon his arrival in Los Angeles; a feature that reflects the hippy zeitgeist, of which he is ignorant. The tattoo of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor on his scalp represents a film memory that has largely been forgotten. The posed cultural juxtaposition displaces Vikar at first. The emergence of hippy counterculture along with its close association with the folk rock musical genre already discussed in relation to this displacement, the contrast between Vikar's conceptions and the developing trend in the industry constitutes a more subtle manifestation of this motif.

[51] See David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 284.
[52] ibid, p. 284.
[53] See Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 15.
[54] ibid, p. 14.

The first of these instances occurs when a hippy mistakes Vikar's tattoo of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor from *A Place in the Sun* for James Dean and Natalie Wood from *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), much to the protagonist's consternation. 'Is it possible he's traveled three thousand miles […] To find people who don't know the difference between Montgomery Clift and James Dean, and don't know the difference between Elizabeth Taylor and Natalie Wood?', Vikar muses in response (*Z*, 16). This confusion becomes the subject of much amusement for the reader, especially when Vikar goes to check into the Roosevelt Hotel, where Montgomery Clift was once a guest. A puzzled discussion between Vikar and the clerk ensues, with Vikar speculating that Montgomery Clift's ghost haunts the hotel, whilst the clerk assumes he is mistaking him for D.W. Griffith, who actually died in the Knickerbocker Hotel. In the midst of this, following the clerk making the familiar error of mistaking Dean and Wood for Clift and Taylor, Vikar's imagined response is described in the text:

> Vikar restrains the urge to pick up the small bell from the desk and lodge it in the philistine's forehead. For a moment he considers the image of the clerk having a bell for a third eye, like a cyclops. People could walk up and ring it, and every time they did, this infidel would remember Montgomery Clift (*Z*, 19).

As an interesting aside, the nature of this brief internal digression invites comparison with the experimental techniques associated with New Hollywood. The use of flashbacks and dream sequences constituting two notable techniques of New Hollywood filmmaking, it is possible to view the above extract as a representation of the style. Narrative continuity is momentarily interrupted for the purpose of vividly portraying a fleeting thought internalised by the protagonist. Further parallels can be established in this respect, given that these referenced techniques seek to offer insight into a protagonist's subconscious.

The decline of the Hollywood's Golden Age exacerbates Vikar's anxieties in the text. Fears of *A Place in the Sun* being forgotten can be explained in such a context. Firstly, it is worth mentioning that although the release of *Rebel Without a Cause* also predates the beginning of the New Hollywood movement, the common mistaking of Clift for Dean functions as a comment on their respective fates, both having been involved in car crashes. Whereas Dean died as a twenty-four year old, coming to symbolise youthful abandonment, Clift, by contrast, survived his accident and was left with facial lacerations that severely damaged his acting career. The juxtaposing of Clift and Dean via these confused exchanges emblematises a subtheme of the novel in the form of death and legacy. The main irony here is that Dean's literal death only served to enhance his cultural standing.

Jayne Mansfield's death in a car crash at the age of thirty-four is frequently alluded to throughout the text, alongside allusions to Jean Harlow and Marilyn Monroe. Such references symbolise the notion of premature death cementing one's legacy. The logic of this is muddled, with the novel noting '[…] In Hollywood there are no right or wrong reasons for being famous. A small cult is born, flourishes, dies out' (*Z*, 245). This sentiment is made in relation to the death of the troubled actress Soledad Palladin in a car crash. The character—a version of the Spanish actress Soledad Miranda, who died in a car crash at the age of twenty-seven—in turn 'becomes more famous dead than she was alive […]' (*Z*, 245). The confusion

surrounding the identities of Clift and Dean on Vikar's scalp represents this preoccupation in its earliest incarnation, with Erickson himself assessing both men's legacy following the respective car crashes:

> At several points in *Zeroville* one character or another makes mention that Clift surviving his car crash wasn't the best career move, particularly given the price he paid. The next ten years until his death were extraordinarily difficult ones of pain, disfigurement, psychic torment. Because Clift was a better actor than Dean and his range was greater, his persona isn't as defined—in Dean's three movies, he more or less played three incarnations of the same anguished adolescence, with which anguished adolescents across the country identified.[55]

With the Manson Family murders acting as a backdrop to Vikar's arrival in Los Angeles, endings and death are apparent in the text even from the outset. This is even expressed even in temporal terms with the 1960s drawing to a close. The transition within the film industry towards New Hollywood conveys this fascination in a cultural sphere. Though a lover of film and cinema as a whole, it soon becomes clear that many of Vikar's references and touchstones are derived from the Golden Age's output. His *A Place in the Sun* tattoo emblematises this.

Much of Vikar's initial fascination with Los Angeles centres on the city's filmic history, as though a tangible extension of the medium itself. Vikar's early conceptions of the city resonate with Baudrillard's observations relating to film's intrinsic relationship with Los Angeles: 'It is there that cinema does not assume an exceptional form, but simply invests the streets and the entire town with a mythical atmosphere.'[56] The suggestion here is that film echoes throughout the city. Through his navigation of Los Angeles, it becomes clear that Vikar's primary wish is to experience the 'mythical atmosphere' generated through its association with film. His knowledge of the city's landmarks is shaped by his fascination with the medium. The decision to stay at the Roosevelt Hotel is one such example of his processing the city through the lens of this obsession. This is detailed further in a passage that describes his meandering around Los Angeles. Here, his exploration is presented as being linked to a form of cultural memory that assigns significance to certain landmarks based on association:

> Along Hollywood Boulevard are shabby old jewelry shops, used bookstores, souvenir stands, porn theaters. He's startled there are no movie stars walking down the street. Still hungry from having sacrificed his French dip sandwich at Philippe's, he orders a chicken pot pie at Musso & Frank, where Billy Wilder used to lunch with Raymond Chandler while they were writing *Double Indemnity*, both drinking heavily because they couldn't stand each other (*Z*, 18).

Vikar being 'startled' at not seeing stars is indicative of the extent to which film shapes his conceptions of the city. A momentary form of sensory distortion—i.e. feeling 'star struck'—is inverted here to express his disbelief at the absence of movie stars casually walking the streets. Again, this preconception is rooted in the 'mythical atmosphere' Los Angeles is believed to exude due to being synonymous with the Hollywood film industry. This notion of

[55] Miller, 'Steve Erickson'.
[56] Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 59.

interchangeability between the physical city and the medium's intangible projections is apparent within Vikar's consciousness.

A notable result of this is his interpretation of surroundings being shaped irrevocably by film; a form 'marked condensation' or 'crystallization' according to Baudrillard, whereby film and its stars are 'a system of luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love.'[57] The medium's resonance runs deep due to its potent representative qualities; its ability to distil complex human emotions into a singular form. As is implied in the novel through descriptions of Vikar's viewing of films, this explains his fascination with film to a large degree. The psychology behind his viewing will be explored later in Chapter 4. During these early scenes in the novel, however, the city is presented as a structure that further embodies this same crystallizing effect. Essentially, every landmark is imbued with some form of cinematic significance or other, be it in regard to an emotional attachment, or as a part of Hollywood's perpetuated 'mythology'.

This is further evident upon passing Schwab's Drugstore, where 'he knows the story about Lana Turner being discovered there isn't true, but he also knows that Harold Arlen wrote "Over the Rainbow" there and that F. Scott Fitzgerald had a heart attack there' (*Z*, 22). Similarly, an hour later and prior to his exploration of the grounds of the Houdini House, Vikar finds himself 'halfway up Laurel Canyon Boulevard' where 'grand stone steps swirl into the trees, to a ruin a little like Gloria Swanson's mansion in *Sunset Boulevard*' (*Z*, 23). Extracts such as these serve to illustrate the depth of Vikar's inextricable associating of the city with film.

These examples also make his feelings of displacement all the more pronounced. Tellingly, each of the character's reference points comes from Hollywood's Golden Age. Though, granted, that the New Hollywood movement is still in its infancy at this point, the strength of feeling Vikar has for these films is such that it has shaped entirely his impressions of the city. Each of the figures and films referenced previously are representative of a period of film history which has passed; its close association with external landmarks and facets emphasising this passage into a wider cultural history. This partly explains the forgotten nature of *A Place in the Sun,* but also how Vikar later comes to lament that he is in 'the Movie Capital of the World' yet 'nobody knows anything about the movies' (*Z*, 39). In itself, this can be seen to reflect the demise of the Golden Age. The cultural transitions present in Los Angeles at the time in the form of New Hollywood film and facets of the hippy counterculture contribute to the protagonist's displacement. The end of the Golden Age is signified by the emergence of these new cultural forms. As such, Vikar is presented as something of an anachronism in the early stages of the novel; his sense of displacement acute within the social and cultural climate enveloping the city.

Examination of characterisation and social context provides the reader with a clear sense of how Erickson's fascination with endings permeates virtually all aspects of the text. Implicit at the outset, the theme gradually grows in prominence as the novel progresses. Literal endings eventually manifest from persistent metaphorical allusions. Erickson's correlating of Vikar's

[57] ibid, p. 59.

lifespan in the text with that of the brief New Hollywood period can be considered one such example in this respect. His initial displacement partly the result of the Golden Age's decline, his rise to prominence as an acclaimed editor during the New Hollywood period before his eventual death coinciding with the re-emergence of the studio system represents how endings are an ever-present feature of *Zeroville*.

Summary: Endings in Erickson's Fiction

The theme of endings is a prominent feature of Erickson's texts. As has been explored, these can manifest both in literal and metaphorical terms. This particular fascination can be regarded as a commonality of Los Angeles fiction. The Hollywood novel, for instance, can be seen to exhibit such tropes. Though typically satiric as a form, portrayals of destruction are a notable recurrence. *The Day of the Locust*, for instance, suggests an interconnection between self-loathing and destructive acts that culminates in the depiction of a massive riot at the text's conclusion. Fitzgerald's *The Pat Hobby Stories* and Faulkner's 'Golden Land', meanwhile, are seen to focus more on the manner in which self-loathing can lead to acts of self-sabotage or self-destruction. Whilst Erickson conveys destructive acts and notions of endings in a markedly different manner to these writers, even so much as cursory examination of the commonality of these themes reveals it to be a recurring preoccupation of Los Angeles literature.

This, of course, is intrinsically linked to social contexts. The frequency of natural disasters has fostered impressions of Los Angeles constantly being on the verge of collapse. Similarly, the destruction of natural topographic features—such as the city's river—has aided conceptions of chaos. Incidents of civil disorder can also be viewed in comparably as actualisations of social grievances and economic disparity. These very factors have all directly had an influence both on Los Angeles' cultural output and portrayals of the city.

As discussed, Erickson channels this association with disaster and destruction in a wholly unique way in his fiction. Rejecting, for instance, Ellis' stereotypical depictions of the city that fulfil outsider prejudices, or through demonstration that the textual presence of film does not automatically equate to satire, impressions of endings are seen to manifest via Erickson's presentations of his own personal interests. His fascination with temporal distortion and alternate histories are reflective of this same function. *Tours* and *Arc d'X* are two novels in which history is reimagined in order to convey a sense of looming disaster.

The Sea conveys these interests in a very literal sense, again tapping into pre-millennial anxieties to depict the concept of an 'Age of the Apocalypse' typified by chaos. The events that constitute the Occupant's calendar debunk the notion of some form of divine order that furthering the idea of inexorable disaster. The notoriety of the events marking the calendar causes its portrayal to resonate. Similarly, the notion of impending disaster is implied in *Zeroville* in the novel's opening during the summer of 1969. Allusions to the Manson Family create an ominous atmosphere in the text that rationalises the suspicion that greets Vikar on account of his unconventional physical appearance. The cultural climate of the period can be

considered a further means through which a thematic fascination with endings manifests. The emergence of the New Hollywood style of filmmaking at the close of the 1960s further demonstrates how the ending of a particular form or style inevitably signals the beginning of another.

Each of these referenced works conveys the multi-faceted nature of Erickson's authorial interest in endings and impending disasters. As discussed in the previous chapter, classification of Erickson as a writer is difficult and even problematic, yet the presence of these themes in his works allows him to be considered in the context of a wider Los Angeles literary oeuvre.

Chapter 3: Documenting America

Deconstructing American National Identity and *Rubicon Beach*

Although writings on film and popular culture have constituted a large quantity of Erickson's journalistic output, reflections and observations concerning American politics have also featured as part of his work in this field. These comments are by no means exclusive to his journalism either, with a significant number of past interviews with Erickson including reference to American political history or the constantly evolving nature of American national identity. For Erickson, the national experience can be defined by conflict and contradiction. Often he has made observations relating to the existence of numerous paradoxes in the American national consciousness. The ideals upon which America was established can be regarded as emblematic of these paradoxes, leaving a country unsure of its own sense of identity. 'Americans have come to feel more burdened by freedom than invigorated by it,' Erickson has commented, declaring a media preoccupation with documenting 'the end of American innocence' something of an inherent falsehood due to the country being 'born out of the twin experiences of wiping out all the people who were originally here and bringing over people in chains in the hulls of boats.'[1]

Indeed, America's relationship with race is a repeated concern for Erickson. Reference is often made throughout his writings to certain figures from history as though their very being is in some way indicative of an ever-present national issue. Whilst this is hardly unusual in journalistic pieces or essays, the recurring presence of these same figures in a number of the writer's fiction suggests that they are employed in symbolic terms, encapsulating matters of national identity, experience, or consciousness. Sally Hemings is one such figure used to personify America's troubled history with race. The slave lover of Thomas Jefferson—a signatory of the Declaration of Independence that famously declared equality among all people despite he himself owning a number of other slaves—her experience in American history can be deemed to represent these lingering paradoxes.

As well as featuring as a motif in a number of Erickson's texts, his impressions of the nation's relationship with race are often discussed in interviews. Erickson has professed to identifying as a social conservative as a teenager, even going as far as to attend a Barry Goldwater presidential campaign rally in Los Angeles in 1964.[2] The U.S. Senate's passing of the Civil Rights Act in the same year proved a watershed moment for Erickson, signalling a gradual reassessment of his political views. Here, he reflects on further developments during the decade that served to change his thinking:

> By the end of the '60s, it was clear that the conservatism I so ardently adopted was wrong about the two great issues of the day, civil rights being the first. The other was a war in Southeast Asia that no military or political figure was capable of explaining, a war for which every guy I knew was fodder.[3]

[1] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 406.
[2] Erickson, 'I Was a Teenage Conservative'.
[3] ibid.

The issue of race in America, however, has since proven an enduring issue of interest for Erickson. Of his eventual adoption of a much more socially liberal disposition, he asserted that 'None of this examination took place inside the hermetic seal of my own thinking and feeling; a cultural explosion rocked the decade around me.'[4] This is in addition to placing the struggle of the civil rights movement in a similar context to those concerning Cold War anxieties of the time period, claiming that 'The facts of the civil-rights movement became as inexorable to me as worries about democracy and totalitarianism.'[5] Erickson's bracketing of the aims of the civil rights movement alongside democracy can be considered significant here. With the democratic process perceived to be inextricable from America's founding values, the civil rights movement's pursuit of basic equality is implied to be similarly revolutionary.

The relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson depicted at the outset of *Arc d'X* becomes a means of conveying this very contradiction. Sally functions as the embodiment of this ingrained conflict as Jefferson struggles to balance his 'theoretical beliefs and private practices', according to Jim Murphy.[6] The novel's subsequent divergence into the alternate present dominated by theocratic rule following Hemings' awakening from a deep slumber can comparatively be construed in metaphorical terms when considered in conjunction with the fledgling status of America as a nation. Erickson's portrayal of Aeonopolis is therefore viewed by Murphy as a literalising of these aforementioned paradoxes; of 'extremes of beauty and terror, both of which arise from Jefferson's incipient declaration, subsequently grown wild beyond the control of reason.'[7] The city's implied eternal properties reflect the unending nature of American conflicts and paradoxes. The motivation behind Erickson's employment of figures like Sally Hemings becomes further obvious upon consideration of this narrative device, whereby the very essence of American contradictions is captured and conveyed to the reader.

Robert Kennedy is another figure who receives similar treatment from Erickson throughout his works. Whereas the presence of Hemings is used as an analogue for America's turbulent relationship with race, Kennedy is often evoked as a symbol of lost potential following his assassination in 1968. Commenting on political events in the years after Kennedy's death, Erickson notes how the abstract concept of the 'American Dream'—so implicitly entwined with the national identity—has been distorted to an even greater degree in the years since. Clarifying this further, Erickson commented 'I think what has happened is one kind of dream got displaced with another. The hard dream got displaced with the easier dream.'[8] Ronald Reagan's insidiousness is referenced in managing to conflate free-market venture and materialist culture with America's embryonic radicalness based on the notion of individual autonomy enshrined as a basic human right:

[4] ibid.
[5] ibid.
[6] Jim Murphy, 'Pursuits and Revolutions: History's Figures in Steve Erickson's *Arc d'X*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46 (2000), 451-479 (p. 452).
[7] ibid, p. 452.
[8] Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.

> The idea, especially, is that that right—the right of individual free speech, for instance—is not a right given to the citizen by the state; it's a right that a citizen has by virtue of being a person. That is what the second sentence of the Declaration says: God gave you certain inalienable rights; the state cannot take them away. The state doesn't give you the right to free speech, you've got that right, you were born with that right. The only thing the state can do is not take it away.[9]

The omnipresence of paradoxes within the national consciousness and the implied wilful ignorance of their existence are referenced by Erickson in his deconstructing of Reagan's words during a debate with then-president Jimmy Carter. Noted here by Erickson is the replacement of these original American intentions founded on esoteric philosophical and political cogitation with a new national identity moulded by consumerism. This particular sentiment ties in with Erickson's earlier assertion of Americans having come to feel more 'burdened' by freedom than 'invigorated' by it.[10] Such impressions are inescapable, based on Erickson's assertion of a prevailing attitude that being American should somehow be easy by self-definition:

> When Reagan had his debate with Carter he said, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?", which is the sentence people latch onto; but the follow-up sentence was to the effect of, "Can you still go into the stores and buy what you used to buy?" There it was, the essence of being an American as summed up by Reagan: Can you still buy what you used to buy? The real insidious thing is that the current conviction seems to be that being an American should be easy. It shouldn't involve risks. It should be a society, a place, an experience in which success is somehow guaranteed to you and you don't have to make the hard choices that I think were meant to be made on an almost daily basis. I think the guys who invented this country saw it as a long and hard road, and one that was never going to be easy if, as was the ideal of this country, you were going to keep a lot of different interests free and in balance.[11]

The suggestion of the gradual redefinition of a 'dream' or a particular ideal over time—particularly during the late-twentieth century—is an arresting one, especially given that this focus has shifted towards commerce and materialism.

This is where allusion or reference to Robert Kennedy performs such a critical function in both Erickson's fiction and in his political reflections. The date of Kennedy's death—6th June 1968—is offered by Erickson as a turning point in the country's history at which it 'turned away from the possibilities of redemption' regarding these national indiscretions and paradoxes.[12] The notion of the country drifting is suggested in his comments on national identity having been distorted. It stands to reason that Erickson's fascination with alternate timelines and overlapping realities stems from his own symbolic interpretation of Kennedy's death. The assassination having taken place in a Los Angeles hotel carries with it a further layer of interest for Erickson, contrasting Robert Kennedy's death with that of John F. Kennedy in Dallas five years earlier. In comparison with the location of John F. Kennedy's assassination—allied with his status as the incumbent president and the existence of the

[9] ibid.
[10] Erickson, 'American Weimar'.
[11] Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.
[12] ibid.

Zapruder film showing the shooting—Erickson appears to suggest of a collective amnesia regarding Robert Kennedy's death:

> I think the sense of civic identity and the sense of civic responsibility is so non-existent, and moreover that's so much a part of the attraction of Los Angeles, that there was never that sense about Robert Kennedy's death that Dallas, I assume, has about John Kennedy's.[13]

The collective amnesia that permeates Erickson's portrayals of Los Angeles in a great number of his literary works is implied in this comment. Erickson's frequent positing as the city as a malleable construct, constantly engaged in a process of transformation ties in with this notion of a prevailing sense of 'forgotten-ness'. Furthermore, the absence of a defining cultural identity within the city—or at least its fragmented and disparate existences—as suggested by Erickson in the above excerpt can be considered reflective of America itself, as posed in the distinctions made between Los Angeles and Dallas.

Erickson's suggesting of America undergoing something akin to a directionless period in the years between Robert Kennedy's death and Reagan's election appear to add credence to this interpretation. This follows the squandered chance of absolution between the respective assassinations of the Kennedy brothers, during which he believes 'America looked for redemption, or it looked for the means by which it could redeem itself' for its perpetuation of violence throughout the nation's history.[14] With Robert Kennedy's death definitively ending the possibility of redemption in Erickson's mind, this—he claims—has led to a schism in the national consciousness. Reagan himself is seen to personify this split: 'I'm still not clear whether Ronald Reagan is the end of an old America or the beginning of a new America.'[15]

This notion of two radically different conceptions of America existing as a consequence of a failure to be absolved from past transgressions represents the central premise of Erickson's *Rubicon Beach*. The title appears interesting in this respect, with 'crossing the Rubicon' a colloquialism suggesting that a point of no return has been crossed. The titular presence of 'beach' implies the literalising of this sentiment as a natural barrier. With many of Erickson's texts structured in a diverged narrative form, this fascination with inherent American conflicts can be viewed as manifesting structurally. Such an interest is also implicit in the characterisation of a number of his protagonists with national and personal concerns often intertwined within their consciousness. It is also often evident in portrayals of setting, with *Rubicon Beach* depicting two distinctly different and seemingly disparate conceptions of America—or, more specifically, Los Angeles—that constitute America One and America Two.

The first of these settings—America One—is initially more fascinating on a superficial level. The novel opens in what is ostensibly a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles. The city is a submerged police state reminiscent of the flooded, post-apocalyptic London setting of J.G.

[13] Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson'.
[14] ibid.
[15] ibid.

Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962).[16] Separate islands have formed in the lagoon-like environment. Haunting music drifts from the skeletal structures of abandoned buildings. This portion of the text follows Cale, a recently released former prisoner now working in a library. He finds himself plagued by disturbing visions of a man's beheading whilst being stalked by Wade, a police officer investigating the decapitation of a sailor named Ben Jarry.

This portion of the narrative is rich in symbolism, conveying Erickson's observations of a split in the American national consciousness stemming from Robert Kennedy's death. Additionally, ignorance of the possible existence of an alternate America—America Two—is exhibited in Cale's section of the text. Paul Kincaid observes a number of parallels with the political climate in which Erickson was writing:

> […] The islands in the lagoon represent an America which is no longer whole. There is unsettling talk of an undefined America 1 and America 2, denying any notion of a unified national identity. Cale alone, the American Everyman, insists repeatedly that he was born in America.[17]

Cale's obliviousness as to the presence of literal or figurative splits in America can be deemed reflective of a collective ignorance of the paradoxes or distortion of values ingrained in the national consciousness. Kincaid's assessment of Cale viewing himself as an 'apolitical creature' appears to validate this particular reading.[18] As the narrative progresses, the influence of Robert Kennedy's death becomes more pronounced. Cale's aimless meanderings around his submerged surroundings eventually bring him into direct contact with the guilt he has spent his time desperately trying to extricate himself from. Consistent with Erickson's fiction, the nature of this personal guilt is shown to be much deeper and more complex than the protagonist is even aware. In this instance, these are revealed to encompass transgressions and anxieties on a national scale. The full extent of the protagonist's ignorance is exposed at the revelation of unconsciously being complicit in America's split. Kincaid makes this sentiment explicit here:

> But if he bears the nation's guilt for the century, we soon learn one representation of that guilt. When Cale visits a mysterious near-deserted hotel we discover, in a roundabout way relating to his collection of legends of murders, that it was the scene of Robert Kennedy's assassination. This event takes on, for the purposes of this novel, a pivotal role within the American moral psyche, and Erickson recapitulates it here. In the kitchen where Kennedy died, Cale discovers a headless body, his vision of execution made flesh. He is arrested and placed in a prison cell, he has come full circle.[19]

In this excerpt, Kincaid references a familiar motif of Erickson's fiction in the presence of a hotel. A dual sense of dislocation and constant movement associated with the recurrent theme of permanent transience in Erickson's literature is suggested. Dislocation and movement represent intrinsic aspects of Erickson's portrayals of the co-existence of separate Americas,

[16] Comparisons between Erickson and Ballard will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5 in relation to depictions of setting. The observation in this respect relates simply to superficial detail.
[17] Paul Kincaid, 'Secret Maps: The Topography of Fantasy and Morality in the Work of Steve Erickson', *Foundation*, 57 (1993), 26-48 (p. 35).
[18] ibid, p. 34.
[19] ibid, p. 35.

as channelled through Cale's being. The posed notion of circularity in relation to character development appears further intriguing upon consideration of the manner in which Erickson's diverged narratives invariably fuse together.

The start of this process occurs in the novel's second section in America Two, which features the depiction of a more conventional version of Los Angeles. From documenting the picaresque journey of the beguilingly beautiful Catherine from South America to America, the tone of this section abruptly changes following her employment as a maid by the Hollywood screenwriter Llewellyn Edgar after being found by man named Richard, an actor and an Edgar family friend. Crucially, it is these details that begin to connect America One and America Two. Whilst in the hotel in which Robert Kennedy died, Cale briefly converses with Richard, who reveals that he is waiting for a man named Lee. 'The assassination again figures as a symptom of the moral and political dislocation of America', Kincaid asserts of this particular incident.[20] A digression into Llewellyn Edgar's background in the novel also reveals a further critical link in this respect, having originally travelled to California from his home in New York to support Kennedy and been known as 'Lee Edwards'. This serves as a further example of the personal and the political being 'intimately connected', as Kincaid notes.[21] As presented through the lens of the unaware, the co-existing and overlapping natures of America One and America Two assists in emblematising Erickson's conceptions of a divided and irredeemable nation.

The novel's recurring motif of movement in both characteristic and environmental contexts is offered as a means of expressing the theme of conflict. The overlap existent between America One and America Two implies a form of movement with both settings presented as figuratively moving—or at least having already moved—in radically different directions. Both America One and America Two appear as fully-formed entities. This indicates of the entrenched, pervasive nature of these internal conflicts and paradoxes. That they can be conveyed as seemingly dichotomous environments whilst simultaneously representing a form of double consciousness highlights how fixed these conflicting sentiments are in the American psyche. Cale and Catherine's exploration of their respective environments symbolises a direct engagement with these issues. That the novel concludes with the bloody realisation of America One and America Two as different manifestations of the same country represents an ultimate acceptance of the country's divisions, alongside comment on how these very divisions have repeatedly led to acts of violence.

The 'bloody realisation' mentioned above refers to Cale's decapitation at the hands of Catherine. The visions he experiences are revealed to be premonitions of his own death. That the act is committed by a character from a plot strand that originally appears separate from that posed at the outset of the novel demonstrates the interconnected nature of Erickson's texts. Destruction is shown to be a major feature in the text prior to this conclusion. Llewellyn Edgar develops an obsession with Catherine to the extent that he neglects his marriage and his work. He hires a photographer named Crow take pictures of Catherine.

[20] ibid, p. 36.
[21] ibid, p. 36.

Llewellyn eventually signs a model release contract with Crow, intending that Catherine's new career will secure his fortune. Catherine, however, flees the Edgar family home in a state of distress and begins to terrorise the neighbourhood by gazing through the windows of the homes in the area. A notable feature of Erickson's literature is present here in the form of characters looking through windows as representations of the uniqueness of an individual's perception. The anxiety felt by Catherine develops from her consternation at becoming aware of her reflection following her arrival in Los Angeles:

> She had never known her face. She was as unconscious of its existence as she was of her heart, of which one is aware only when one stops to listen to it. She'd never looked for the image of her face by which she blended into jungles and houses, by which she signaled ships and persuaded men to wager all they had (*RB*, 158).

Beauty's representation as a form of currency is alluded to in the above excerpt, underscoring Llewellyn's decision to tender her to Crow. Whereas Catherine's beauty—of which she is oblivious—is originally implied as a picaresque plot device that allows her to travel to America, in Los Angeles it is presented as an asset that can be exploited for purposes of commodification. That Catherine is denied agency during this plot point can be interpreted as a comment on how the forms of reinvention that Los Angeles perpetuates can often be of an unconscious or involuntary nature. Catherine's escape and subsequent terrorising of the neighbourhood can therefore be viewed as a means of the character reclaiming her own sense of self. Llewellyn's search for Catherine leads him to the Ambassador Hotel, the site of Robert Kennedy's assassination. The struggle between Llewellyn and Catherine causes a fire at the hotel. All of the survivors aside from Catherine are blinded; a plot point that through its vengeful insinuations expresses the notion of unending violent retribution in America. Whilst hospitalised with shock, Catherine once again experiences a recurring dream in which she decapitates Llewellyn on a mysterious beach. Llewellyn and Cale are identified as being the same person, albeit existing in different temporal and spatial contexts.

The third plot strand features a mathematician named Jack Mick Lake who comes to regard numbers and equations as being comparable to order and justice. Like Cale in the first plot strand, he hears music coming from strange and unknown sources. Whilst at college, Jack discovers a new integer located between nine and ten. This is referred to as 'the last number in the world, The Number of No Return' (*RB*, 284). Similarities with the discovery of Jour d'X in *Arc d'X* can be noted here, particularly in relation to unknown or uncertain conceptions. The concept of a 'Number of No Return' suggests of some form of approaching inexorable conclusion that Erickson frequently hints at in his work that deal with national concerns.

The three overlapping stories in the text are noticeably different from the perspectives of both style and content. The italicised first-person passage that opens the third story indicates the interconnected nature of America One and America Two before Jack's life is detailed in the third-person narrative form. '*I was born in the first land and returned to the second: they were one and the same. You know its name*', this brief passage concludes to affirm the intrinsic nature of both environments' existence (*RB*, 227). Ultimately, the overlapping states of America One and America Two are, according to Kincaid, a means of seeking 'to

reconcile how America has been imagined to be since the founding fathers first gave it birth with the way it is in fact.'[22] That the novel's characters exist and interact with one another across these topographically contrasting and oscillating landscapes indicates America's historical paradoxes and conflicts on a national scale that should lend itself to introspection and moral scrutiny. Of course, as Erickson's political reflections have shown that these are often an ignored aspect of contemporary discourse. As such, America cannot begin to address its problems and move forwards as a nation.

Symbols of American Paradoxes and Presidential Personas: *Leap Year*

National issues are, however, by no means an exclusive feature of Erickson's novels. *Leap Year* and *American Nomad* are two books that combine his political and pop cultural journalism with fictional undercurrents. The focus of both works is broadly similar, as Erickson gauges the country's political climate through his covering of the Republican and Democratic presidential primaries prior to the 1988 election (*Leap Year*), and the 1996 contest between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole (*American Nomad*) for *Rolling Stone*. Similarly, both texts demand an intertextual knowledge of contemporary pop culture in order for Erickson's posed comparisons between the career trajectories of various famous figures and politicians for his considerations of a particular national experience to register.

The approach undertaken by Erickson bears resemblance to the gonzo style of journalism most associated with Hunter S. Thompson; a comparison furthered by the employment of the first person narrative mode in the text. Interestingly, there are two notable points of connection between Erickson and Thompson in that both have worked extensively for *Rolling Stone* and both have written books recounting and analysing presidential campaigns. Erickson's *Leap Year* and *American Nomad* can be viewed similarly to Thompson's documenting of the 1972 presidential contest between Richard Nixon and George McGovern in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (1973). Thus Erickson's processing of political figures and events through his own interests and preoccupations can be seen as comparable to the manner in which Thompson conveys his thoughts on politicians and mainstream media coverage through the prism of his own literary style. Indeed, *Leap Year* and *American Nomad* have been compared to Thompson's works by reviewers in a conceptual sense, if not a stylistic one. *Kirkus*, for example, referred to *Leap Year* as 'a sort of drug-free version of Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail*'; a book that is a 'slim, gonzo journalistic opinion piece with the contention that America has lost its special place in the world.'[23] Of *American Nomad*, Barbara Ehrenreich commented that 'Even the immortal Hunter Thompson would have had trouble with '96, at least if he still believes you need drugs to induce a state of radical alienation from the content of our

[22] Kincaid, 'Secret Maps', p. 37.
[23] Anon., 'Kirkus Review: *Leap Year*', *Kirkus* (12th October 1989). <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/steve-erickson-3/leap-year-2/>. [accessed: 14th January 2019].

communal life', identifying the need for a writer of 'surreal fiction' to ask the 'question about the meaning of America'.[24]

Though comparisons with Thompson's works have been noted, the assertions that follow, however, appear highly contentious. The premise that *Kirkus* observes can be deemed as flawed upon consideration of Erickson's comments in past interviews. The assertion is not that 'America has lost its special place in the world', rather that it was never the country many considered it to be, due to the presence of paradoxes throughout its history. Similarly, Ehrenreich's observation can be disputed. The notion of questioning 'the meaning of America' seems a fairly nebulous exercise. Erickson's primary concern in these texts instead is to draw attention to America's innate conflicts and historic paradoxes and identify how these are manifest in contemporary contexts.

From a stylistic perspective, *Leap Year* is the more interesting of the two texts. The primary reason for this lies in the recurring presence of Sally Hemings in the book, frequently interrupting Erickson's travels across the country whilst covering the presidential primaries. The author, on occasion, engages directly with her, as he does at the outset of the book: 'Sally speaks to me. *I can't live with the things you feel* she says *it's enough to live with the things I feel. It's enough to live with the feeling of the country flowing through me.*'[25] The italicising of Sally's dialogue throughout the text is an intriguing formal change, indicating the abruptness of these deviations from contemporary observations. These brief interludes counterbalance the book's numerous considerations on the direction in which America is heading whilst simultaneously conveying a sense of the ever-present legacy of the country's racial transgressions.

Consideration of this leads to the assertion that *Arc d'X* signifies an inventive and interestingly conceived development of this concern. *Leap Year* represents Erickson's first depiction of Sally Hemings; an individual whose potent symbolism he has often utilised in a number of his works. The most notable among these is *Arc d'X*. Indeed, an interesting connection between the two texts can be observed via discovery of the existence of Jour d'X between 31st December 1999 and 1st January 2000. The very notion of a 'leap year' implies the quadrennial existence of an extra day; a feature of 1988 that prompts Erickson to consider the nation's future. With America often presented in Erickson's texts as a medley of conflicting ideologies and historical paradoxes, the twin concepts of utopia and imminent disaster are conveyed as co-existing adjacent to one another as the twentieth century draws to a close. February 29th is effectively portrayed as a temporal stasis in this regard; a vehicle allowing for the development of these considerations:

> America, for which against every denial it might muster both longs for and despises the future that Los Angeles means, will sort through that future's rubble like a seer through leaves of tea […] Because America and whatever function it's determined to perform in the evolution of moral time will insist on reducing its future to a physical rubble if only to be free of it once and for all. It's a future still waiting to understand the past is dead: an America that waits to

[24] Barbara Ehrenreich, 'Into the Void', *The New York Times* (8th June 1997). <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/08/books/into-the-void.html>. [accessed: 14th January 2019].
[25] Steve Erickson, *Leap Year* (London: Futura, 1989), p. 9. Henceforth cited in-text as (*LY*, page number).

> understand it's now only the United States. Sometimes next year, close to the two hundredth anniversary of the first inauguration of America's first president, someone will become the leader of a country that no longer is (*LY*, 11).

A complex presentation of time is offered in the above excerpt. Further, it is placed in a context of literal destruction. Reference to 'moral time' is correlated with future insinuation of 'physical rubble'. In itself, 'moral time' can be viewed as a vague and unspecified term with regard to temporality. The implication here is that suggestions of moral deterioration on a national scale are something of a continuous and ultimately false concern. As such, conservative anxieties concerning America's moral decline are debunked simply through concerns surrounding an illusory reckoning. Such a sentiment appears consistent with Erickson's previous assertions of the country's supposed innocence being nothing more than a fallacy. The irony posed by Erickson in the above excerpt is that the only way for an American utopia to be made possible is through the awareness of these paradoxes enshrined in the history of the United States that debunk notions of innocence. A crucial distinction is established between America and the United States in this excerpt. Erickson's suggestion appears to be that 'America' is representative of a radical founding ideology, whereas the 'United States' represents its perversion that ultimately has perpetuated historical paradoxes. This notion can be considered a precursor to the concepts explored in *Rubicon Beach*, symbolised in the form of America One and America Two.

As Lee Spinks notes, however, these distinctions aren't conveyed with a falsified yearning as Erickson points to Thomas Jefferson largely as an embodiment of contradiction and therefore a figure who has come to 'define our cultural modernity.'[26] Essentially for Erickson, the idealism of America was compromised from its inception, leading to a paradoxical co-existence between utopia and disorder that contributes to an enduring narrative of constant reinvention. Spinks claims that '[…] The idea that the reconfiguration of the self is always also dependent upon the death of the self—is predicated upon the apocalyptic and utopian impulse operative in Jefferson's vision of history.'[27] With the formation of America One and America Two in *Rubicon Beach* catalysed by Robert Kennedy's death, the implication appears that distinctions between 'America' and 'the United States' have been apparent since the country's founding. Consequently, these conflicting elements appear implicit in the national consciousness. Spinks observes that in Erickson's texts, 'American identity is always involved in a reciprocal relationship with apocalypse, death, or an experience of the limit […].'[28] The original American utopia was ultimately betrayed by the founding fathers themselves due to their own characteristic flaws, as Erickson suggest, highlighting the contradictions that are a part of the identities of Jefferson, George Washington, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Paine (*LY*, 33).

Erickson's referencing of figures from popular culture appears to not only embody the American national experience, but also capture a sense of this national process of reinvention. The process itself is arguably rooted in a desire to escape one's self, to convey a radically

[26] Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates', p. 220.
[27] ibid, p. 220.
[28] ibid, p. 220.

different image. Erickson's interest in this particular aspect of celebrity identity appears reflective of the nation's own conscious and calculated transformation over the years. The rock and roll genre of popular music is offered as the greatest example of this process. Described by Erickson as 'the music of Jefferson's damnation and desire'—indicative of the contradictions at the core of American being—the author goes on to reference Elvis Presley as the most notable figure representing this conscious process of transformation (*LY*, 33). The author asks a rhetorical question intending to affirm this particular assertion: 'What in Elvis Presley so embodies the meaning of rock and roll if not his creation of his own fame, his greatest act as an artist? For most of his career Elvis Presley didn't even *like* rock and roll' (*LY*, 33-34).

For Erickson, John Lennon represents the only other figure worthy of comparison in relation to the acquirement of fame through conscious reinvention. Despite not being an American, Lennon is nonetheless regarded by Erickson as being enshrined in the nation's history on account of being the victim of 'an American act of violence, hot metal splashing Lennonmemory on the walls of New York […]' (*LY*, 34). Again, direct reference to Lennon's death in 1981 can be viewed as an additional example of violence being at the core of the national condition. An enduring form of cultural memory is implied in the term 'Lennonmemory', as though the act of his assassination somehow defines the singer in an American context. Further, it is possible to construe the act as locatable in a wider American tradition of the country's being interspersed with acts of unfathomable violence despite its frequent protestations of innocence and moral superiority.

The most striking of these celebrity appraisals, however, relate to the author's considerations of Ronald Reagan's presidency. His previous career as a Hollywood actor well-known, Erickson contests that stage craft and performance represent implicit aspects of his political career. Erickson calls this 'the choreography of personality'; a construct imbued by the television viewer's equating of 'fraudulence and authenticity' as a singular aestheticized entity (*LY*, 35). 'We elected a man to play Ronald Reagan', Erickson concludes by suggesting that Reagan himself is merely performing the role of an idealised president the public wishes to see (*LY*, 36). Preceding these are reflections on the rock singer John Cougar Mellencamp, whom Erickson recalls watching perform in Los Angeles some ten years previously under the alias of 'Johnny Cougar'. Erickson describes something of an underwhelming experience in the text, with Cougar's stage persona very much a pastiche of other pop music signifiers that jarred with the countercultural zeitgeist of the late 1970s:

> He wasn't so impressive as Johnny Cougar. His identity, not to mention his music was entirely constructed from the identities and music of other artists; this was during the punk era, the most significant contention of which was that you could be what you chose to be as long as the choice was authentic, a contradiction that some found a way to make work (*LY*, 30).

It is following the release of his 1982 hit single 'Jack & Diane' under the guise of 'John Cougar' that Erickson notes a change in the singer. Mellencamp's decision to adopt his real name when performing signals a rejection of previous contrivances, consciously making the decision to become 'himself'—or at least a version of it—on stage. His becoming 'John

Mellencamp' is described by Erickson as a 'transformation', alluding to this decision as an additional signifier of the conscious crafting of a public persona (*LY*, 30). Erickson elaborates further on this: '[…] The man who was in the throes of success as Johnny Cougar made his best and bravest decision when he decided to become uncool—which suggests that the basic equation was there all along' (*LY*, 30). A new persona is projected; one that is rooted in conscious reinvention.

The suggestion here is that the individuals in question have managed to project a version of themselves that the public are receptive to. The media form that each is associated also plays a significant role in this projection. Television's function in allowing Reagan to convey his image directly to the viewer having already been established, Erickson identifies the rock and roll genre form as a forum that allows for the possibility of reinvention: '[…] Once in a while the most specious promise of American rock and roll comes true, the promise that it can release you from what you are and reveal some way toward what you want to be' (*LY*, 30-31). That both television and rock and roll became forms of popular culture synonymous with America during the second half of the twentieth century can be regarded as being of additional significance in this respect. It is possible to view both forms acting as vehicles for the endless reinvention that is perceived at being at the core of the American national consciousness.

The comparison between Reagan and Mellencamp become more explicit later in the text. Connecting both figures is the extent to which performance informs their respective personas. Erickson disregards the classic left-wing criticism of Reagan as an actor who became president as a 'facile conceit', instead arguing that 'he's a political genius who happened to once be an actor' (*LY*, 37). Performance, though, is suggested as being at the centre of his reinvention. Blurring distinctions between Reagan's different professional lives, Erickson goes on to say that he 'rehearsed himself into the role written by others' before noting of two instances of his presidency where 'the actor and the role became one' (*LY*, 37). The first of these is given as his recovery from the attempted assassination on his life by John Hinckley. This is recalled by Erickson as follows:

> In such a moment, Ronald Reagan played the Ronald Reagan he'd rehearsed for all his life, and the result was a small movie unto itself, in which he played at courage and grace and humor with all the courage and grace and humor of a good actor playing himself… This was a man shot and in peril, inventing himself with a genius in order to survive and, in the process, creating a piece of fame (*LY*, 37).

Erickson details the second of these occurrences as the *Challenger* Space Shuttle disaster of 1986. Reagan's subsequent address to the nation is described by Erickson as 'the most eloquent of his presidency' before observing it as the 'moment for which no presidency other than Ronald Reagan was made' (*LY*, 38). Reagan's charisma and refined oratory skills are juxtaposed with the demeanour of his predecessor Jimmy Carter in the manner in which 'Jimmy Carter could have made the same speech, but Carter's presence would have rendered the Challenger explosion not American tragedy but American failure, in the same way Carter's presence rendered so many things failures, rightly or wrongly […]' (*LY*, 38). A consciousness of performance is presented as being critical to the successful projection of a

persona. This constitutes the most pronounced comparison between Reagan and Mellencamp made by Erickson. Whilst he deduces that both Reagan and Mellencamp had each spent considerable time 'rehearsing to be themselves', the fundamental difference he determines is that 'John Cougar was always John Mellencamp in the first place', in contrast to Reagan's presidential role-playing that was—as previously stated—'written by others' (*LY*, 37). In essence, Reagan's presidential persona is a projection that is suggested as being compatible with public expectations of what a president should represent, as Mellencamp's persona appeals to expectations of what the label of 'rock star' should embody.

This suggests a conflating of different public spheres in the period that Erickson apostrophises as both 'the nuclear age' and 'the television age' (*LY*, 168). In directly comparing a rock and roll singer with the president through their projected persona is not only indicative of the flippancy with which modern politics is treated by television viewers, but also demonstrates the significance of the medium in influencing perception. The medium's ability to channel a form of national identity is often noted in the text. Central to this is its role in the imparting of a fractured, yet potent cultural memory. The era Erickson speaks of has seen the creation of a media landscape that has transformed human memory, 'where all experience is rendered by television technologically communal', first becoming literalised and then 'reduced to vivid moments not necessarily threaded to anything else' (*LY*, 168-169).

Erickson speculates in the text what the ultimate effect of this may be, firstly speaking of the politicising of human memory as informed by television: 'Memories may be called up to our consciousness now like little bits of information called up on a computer, when memories are this easily shuffled in time, they're subject to change and control […] They're politicized as never before' (*LY*, 169). This assertion brings to mind his prior reflections on the noted differences between Carter and Reagan, whereby success and failure is determined ultimately by delivery style. Secondly, Erickson talks of television crystallizing certain conceptions within the individual's consciousness, regardless of whether these conceptions are themselves accurately informed or even correctly remembered: 'But memory, in conjunction with people's myths, has been altered to something different; and television literalizes the remembered reality and the mythic reality as it has come to literalize a thousand more trivial realities' (*LY*, 169). The implication here is that the very concept cultural memory is not only strengthened by television, but allows for the projected image or persona to be manipulated, subsequently becoming ingrained in the viewer's consciousness.

This assertion directly references the conflating of different public spheres, whereby the roles of the numerous figures projected to the viewer become interchangeable. Essentially, television reduces the roles of politicians, actors, singers and any other individual with a public profile into a singular construct. 'Celebrity' is observed by Daniel J. Boorstin as an umbrella term used to describe a 'well-knownness.'[29] The definition is offered in response to a post-war media documentation of entertainment figures that has gradually become

[29] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1964), p. 60.

conflated with those in high-profile public positions. 'Their chief claim to fame is their fame itself. They are notorious for their notoriety', Boorstin noted of celebrities.[30] This in itself can be regarded as a symptom of the television age, in which the profile of such figures has been increased dramatically and subsequently conflated with those occupying political positions. The conflating of these different spheres into the singular construct of 'celebrity' is regarded by Neil Postman as being the modus operandi of television; a medium that dictates that 'entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure.'[31] For Postman, televised news coverage can be seen to encapsulate this very conflation:

> That is why even on news shows which provide us daily with fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged by the newscasters to "join them tomorrow." What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept the newscasters' invitation because we know that the "news" is not to be taken seriously […] Everything about a news show tells us this—the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show, the vivid film footage, the attractive commercials—all these and more suggest that what we have seen is no cause for weeping. A news show, to put it plainly, is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis […] They are televising news to be seen.[32]

The above excerpt serves to illustrate Postman's points about television not being a carefully developed extension to existing media forms such as literature and film, but an altogether different one with its own separate demands and conventions. The spectacle itself is implied as taking precedent over the content of the message conveyed. As such, the newscaster's invitation to 'join them tomorrow' represents a conscious continuation of this effect, similar to that of a television serial. In this regard, Postman references Marshall McLuhan's mistaken assumption of this to be the case in technological advancements—a theoretical notion known as 'rear-view mirror' thinking—'that an automobile, for example, is only a fast horse, or an electric light a powerful candle.'[33] 'To make such a mistake in the matter at hand is to misconstrue entirely how television redefines the meaning of public discourse', Postman argues, 'Television dos not extend or amplify literate culture. It attacks it.'[34] The result of this—as Erickson notes through his observations in *Leap Year*—is the perpetuation of an entirely new form of cultural memory irrevocably shaped by television.

One of these comes in the form of perceiving contemporary events as part of some wider, continuous narrative, as is implied in Postman's deconstruction on what a news show represents. The spectator's interpretation of the news is influenced by the properties of the medium through which it is consumed. Tropes and archetypes commonly associated with narrative form can be viewed as being implicit in such coverage. A number of aspects fundamental to television news coverage—a gross simplifying of complex interpersonal

[30] ibid, p. 60.
[31] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (York: Methuen, 1987), p. 89.
[32] ibid, pp. 89-90.
[33] ibid, p. 86.
[34] ibid, p. 86.

relationships, an emphasising of moral contrasts, the assigning of 'roles' to individuals for purposes of maintaining interest—can be considered symptomatic of this narrative-based distortion of current events.

Erickson's bemused sense of a media obsession with chronicling the end of 'American innocence' towards the end of twentieth century ties in with these assertions. Having previously spoken of how this view of the national consciousness is a fallacy on account of its historic mistreatment of African-Americans and Native Americans, Erickson has demonstrated an awareness of how the media casts certain individuals as primary antagonists in order to perpetuate this very idea of 'American innocence' being under threat. 'Whether it's assassinations or political scandals or O.J. driving down the freeway, it seems like nothing happens in this country that isn't interpreted by the media or the culture as the end of American innocence […]', Erickson has stated concerning this position.[35]

The obsession itself is something of a cliché for Erickson. His direct referencing of O.J. Simpson in order to affirm his point is especially significant, given the saturated news coverage and live reporting as an immediate response to the actor and former American football player's fleeing from police custody. Through this particular mode, Simpson becomes cast as a primary antagonist in the media perpetuated narrative concerning America's perceived moral decline. The issue of Simpson seeking to escape arrest for the suspected murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman is almost presented of being of secondary concern. The live reporting of the ensuing car chase creates the impression of a story unfolding in real time that is itself a part of a much grander narrative concerning the seeming demise of 'American innocence'. Simpson, therefore, is depicted via television as the embodiment of this supposed threat to the nation's ideals; a media portrayal that arguably superseded that of double murder suspect.

Leap Year sees Erickson explore this affixing of roles and traits to public figures in order to convey a sense of a collective fascination with interpreting history and events as part of a continuing narrative. Although the focus of the text predates the televised coverage of the L.A.P.D's pursuit of Simpson by several years, similarities can be detected in how various politicians are viewed as being representative of certain national concerns or ideals. Dual notions of American national identity and experience are mapped via these representations. Progressive Democratic candidate Gary Hart is described as being 'a major fullblown candidate of the nuclear imagination', bringing to mind Erickson's classifying of the postmodern era as both the 'television' and the 'nuclear' age, as previously discussed (*LY*, 45). Pat Robertson, a conservative Christian, is presented in contrasting terms to Hart. The issue of American paradoxes is evident in Erickson's analysis of both Robertson and his espoused fundamentalist dogma, stating that "If Robertson actually believed in a god he wouldn't exploit God so recklessly. His are the motions of a man sure of the void, and therefore free to fill the void with his own image […]' (*LY*, 63). Jesse Jackson, meanwhile, is offered as a possible symbol of American redemption for historic racial transgressions. Jackson's charisma already detailed in the text, Erickson discusses how his presence has

[35] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 406.

successfully unified white and black audiences in urban environments. Levity appears integral to Jackson's approach, treating the potentially problematic issue of race with good humour:

> […] He talks about the next day's rally to be held in Harlem. "Five-thirty tomorrow afternoon," he smiles to the white audience, "it'll still be light, you'll be OK," and then he adds, "when it gets dark it won't matter anyway, because we all look the same in the dark." He's taunting our fears but it's not mean, he's getting us to laugh at them, we almost believe we could all go up to Harlem tomorrow and hang out and it would all be all right (*LY*, 82).

Whilst America's tumultuous relationship with race has hardly been solved by a light-hearted quip, the possibility of resolution is tentatively posed in Jackson's simultaneous addressing of both black aspiration and white anxieties. The idea of the audience going out to Harlem and 'hanging out' still expressed as somewhat fanciful, the potential for a 'post-racial' society is at least implied in Jackson's easing of both communities' concerns. Erickson's enduring preoccupation with American race relations well established, the means through which this historic disconnect can possibly be resolved is suggested here to a degree. Erickson's speculating here can be viewed similarly to his depiction of Barack Obama's election victory in *These Dreams of You*, in which this resolution is realised, if only briefly.

Of all the portrayals found in *Leap Year*, Paul Kincaid asserts that Erickson's presentation of Jackson is the most powerful precisely because of the symbolic weight the depiction carries. The sense of hopefulness that Erickson discusses in relation to Jackson is tempered by how unlikely the prospect of his presidency seems, with Kincaid describing him as a 'break with a past that Sally initiated and which the modern American imagination is still unable to let go.'[36] A form of progression is implied in Erickson's portrayal that ultimately culminates with his presentation of Obama's ascent to the presidency in *These Dreams*. However, the notion of this eventually coming to be regarded as a symbol of a squandered opportunity is explored in *Shadowbahn*, which takes place around thirteen years after Obama's election and depicts the United States as a fractured, directionless country. This portrayal will be discussed in the final section of this chapter following exploration of how a number of these observations are developed further in *American Nomad*.

Politics and Popular Culture Intertwining: Mapping America in *American Nomad*

Two years prior to the release of *American Nomad*, Erickson published an article for the *Los Angeles Times*' Sunday magazine entitled 'American Weimar'. The focus of the piece is familiar, given Erickson's past political writings. The unquestioned prominence of paradoxes in the nation's consciousness, the media perpetuation of an American narrative, and the political direction of the country at the close of the twentieth century are all discussed. His previous insinuation that Reagan bears responsibility for altering expectations in relation to national identity—that materialist gain has replaced the pursuit of liberty in the American consciousness—is repeated in the piece: 'We display less and less patience with what we

[36] Kincaid, 'Defying Rational Chronology', p. 41.

previously held to be inalienable, less and less patience with democracy's inherent messiness and inefficiency and the morass of conflicting interests that are read in democracy's results.'[37] Similarly evident is his debunking of the notion of lost 'American innocence' through a cataloguing of events that the mainstream media has frequently spoken of in such terms:

> A virtual cottage industry of social and cultural psychoanalysis has been built on this delusion, as one historical phenomenon after another—from the assassination of John F. Kennedy to the Vietnam War to Watergate to American hostages in Iran to O.J. Simpson hurtling down the L.A. freeways—is offered as the moment when the country "lost" its innocence.[38]

The fallacy of lost America innocence is established here simply through repeated reference to the multitude of events that have been perceived to signify the country's decline. Through Erickson's threading of seminal post-war events, the suggestion of recurrent chaos being at the core of the American national consciousness is raised. The titular suffix 'Weimar' alludes to this. Explicitly referencing Germany's chaotic interwar government based in the city, a form of national and political precariousness is implied. Although the comparison could be judged a touch hyperbolic considering the economic and political instability that plagued Germany during this period of its history, it is interesting to note that a cultural renaissance occurred in the country at the time that was chronicled, most notably, by Christopher Isherwood. An aping of American trends and fashion among the country's youth was also noted. Weimar Germany is therefore evoked by Erickson as a signifier denoting the relationship between various crises and American popular culture and countercultural movements.

As is evident from Erickson's political writings, figures from the entertainment industry are repeatedly employed as signifiers of a prevailing national identity or experience. Erickson's referencing of Weimar in this respect appears to indicate this approach, simultaneously highlighting how cultural figures and movements are born from national crises. Often these movements and individuals react directly in response to these periods of chaos, either to decry, lament or simply chart what these episodes are perceived to say about the state of the nation. A clear sense of popular culture's role and function within a particular social structure is offered by Erickson.

Erickson's appraisal of Bruce Springsteen's career in *American Nomad* can be considered a perfect demonstration of this particular mode of social criticism. Whilst at a Republican campaign rally in Orlando, Erickson hears Springsteen's song 'Youngstown' play over the sound system. Described as 'a history of the United States in less than four minutes', Erickson goes on to parallel Springsteen's career with post-industrial America (*AN*, 61). 'The fissure in the country, from which the song had come in the first place, would not heal as quickly,' Erickson says. The song documents the discovery of iron ore in Youngstown, Ohio, in the early nineteenth century, exploring the town's economic history over the next two centuries from the perspective of different generations of the same family. 'Youngstown'

[37] Erickson, 'American Weimar'.
[38] ibid.

concludes in the post-industrial climate of Reagan's presidency, expanding its focus to include other economically decimated areas of the country such as the Monongahela Valley, Appalachia, and the Mesabi iron range in Minnesota.

For Erickson, Springsteen seems to represent a specifically American mode of storytelling that is associated with the act of drifting and empirical engagement. His songs are seen to chronicle different aspects of the American national experience, explicitly commenting on economic hardships and political developments. 'Youngstown' exemplifies this notion. The song is utilised by Erickson as a seamless segue into a comment of Springsteen's career intertwining with the song's description of contemporary America's economic reality. Erickson tells of hearing the song performed live a week later at a Springsteen concert in Los Angeles. Referring to Springsteen's late-seventies output—his burgeoning career in the ascendency at the time—Erickson describes him as a 'young man of destiny' who 'lived in the past and the future at once' (A*N*, 62). This assertion is made specifically in relation to the socio-economic focus of a significant number of Springsteen's songs. Springsteen's preoccupation with this aspect of the American experience during the 1980s becomes even more pointed and pronounced against a backdrop of declining industry. 'Youngstown' demonstrates this concern microcosmically: 'The story's always the same/ Seven hundred tons of metal a day/ Now sir you tell me the world's changed/ Once I made you rich enough/ Rich enough to forget my name.'[39]

Springsteen is a figure through whom Erickson's own concerns can be articulated to the reader, identifying the singer as a prime example of pop culture's response to national developments. The changeable nature of American experience itself is alluded to in *American Nomad* through Erickson's consideration of Springsteen's oeuvre:

> The new songs, about tramps and hobos and immigrants and rail road ghosts wandering the tracks of history and memory that ran from the Thirties to the Nineties, from the America that one heard the prairie songs of its promise to an America that now heard only the asphalt hiss of its secrets […]. (*AN*, 66).

Again, there is evidence here of Erickson using 'America' as a malleable, synonymous term in order to convey a sense of the nation existing as an interconnected series of disparate abstract conceptions. Manifesting social change is implied in the excerpt, encompassing the country's journey from the pastoral to the urbanised and industrial. A sense of loss is suggested in this portrayal. 'America' as a concept or ideal can be regarded as having been subverted via this engineered change, as Erickson has repeatedly suggested in past interviews. The 'new songs' mentioned in the excerpt refers to Springsteen's album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995); the title of which directly evokes the 1930's Depression via reference to Tom Joad, protagonist of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In this respect, Erickson's and Springsteen's conceptions of 'America' as a flawed ideal that can be expressed over time through reference to different figures can be deemed comparable. Indeed, Erickson treats the singer and his career in similar terms as being representative of a particular national experience.

[39] Bruce Springsteen, 'Youngstown', *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (Los Angeles: Columbia, 1995) [on CD].

Erickson's discussion of Frank Sinatra's life and career in the text performs a similar function, albeit in relation to an earlier time period. The author's reflections on Philip K. Dick's *In Milton Lunky Territory*—his 'great lost novel'—leads to analysis of Sinatra (*AN*, 48). Though the connection between the two entities could be considered tenuous, its posing comes about because of Sinatra's 1957 song 'There's No You' being released around the same time Dick started writing *In Milton Lunky Territory*. Commenting on both works, Erickson detects a shared espousal of an intersection of 'dream, memory and a sorrow so profound it is beyond bitterness […]' (*AN*, 49). The song—written by Hal Hopper in 1944 and re-recorded by Sinatra for his 1957 album *Where Are You?*—recalls a time when 'American dreams were so ephemeral as to be unforgettable, and so unabashedly foolish as to be heroic', according to Erickson (*AN*, 49).

Already a contrast can be detected with regard to the subject matter of Springsteen's songs. Whereas Springsteen charts the journey towards the post-industrial era—in addition to detailing its contemporary reality—Sinatra's musical output of the 1950s can be characterised by frequent allusions to dreams, aspiration and a sense of hope. This is interpreted by Erickson as a manipulating of what America is perceived to represent, suggesting that for Sinatra, 'part of the American Dream's appeal was its very tawdriness' (*AN*, 65). With regard to Springsteen, Erickson contests that he 'deeply believed in the Dream, and therefore the betrayal implicit in its promise was more poignant' (*AN*, 65). Both of these separate conceptions of America as a nation appear to underpin their respective modus operandi as artists, resulting in the creation of a body of work of a deeply impressionistic nature.

'There's No You' can be viewed as an interesting song to reference on account of its spinning of familiar subject matter, albeit infused with a degree of fatalism shaped by Sinatra's personal difficulties of the time. Erickson refers to this directly whilst also placing the song in a wider national context of the long-held notion of the 'American Dream' gradually and almost seamlessly being distorted during the twentieth century:

> In the sigh of the trees he watches the dream blow away, and in Sinatra's post-nuclear interpretation of the pre-nuclear romanticism America hurtles into the intersection of dream, memory and sorrow, and crashes into itself, lured by whatever the dream was: money, power, Ava Gardner (*AN*, 50).

Interestingly, Erickson can again be observed to attach forms of physicality to the illusory or ill-defined in order to expose its ultimate absence of tangible meaning. A dream 'blows away', notions of America 'hurtling' into another dream intertwined with memory and sorrow before it 'crashes into itself'. The implication here is that the dream's ultimate lack of definition ensures that it can represent whatever the individual in question wishes it to. Its absence of explicit content and coherent meaning ensures that its pursuit becomes something of a self-defeating venture as its subject can inevitably change. This resonates with the song's content as the ineffability of emotion is correlated with physical action for purposes of

accentuating emotion: 'I feel the autumn breeze/ It steals cross my pillow/ As soft as a will-o' the-wisp/ And in its song there is sadness because/ There's no you.'[40]

The essence of America is synched with the public profile of one of its most popular entertainers. Erickson's retrospective examination of 'There's No You' leads to the consideration that it can be seen as being reflective of the nation's transition from a propagated veneer of a post-war utopia into the postmodern 'nuclear' era. Sinatra's interpretation of the 'pre-nuclear' dream during this transitional period reference appears anachronistic. In correlating the subject matter of the song with Sinatra's private struggles of the time—burdened by his love for Ava Gardner, his divorce from Nancy Barbato, the death of publicist and close friend George Evans—Erickson provides the reader with a vehicle through which this period of national transition can be conveyed.

The parallels made by Erickson in this respect are strengthened by the author's identifying of an intersection between the entities of 'dream, memory and sorrow'; suggested as being implicit in both the song and the national consciousness. Erickson's recurrent referencing of the ineffability at the core of 'Americanness' is what has enabled national identity to be subverted and historic paradoxes to remain unchallenged. For Erickson, the concept of the 'American Dream' is intrinsically linked to notions of dreams and memory due to its contradictory nature and the fact that it is ultimately without substance. As a result, Erickson appears to suggest of a malleability enshrined in the American consciousness that naturally allows for the perpetuation of historic paradoxes and contradictions.

The possibility of redemption inevitably features as part of this concern. With Erickson having previously referred to American identity having come to be centred on ease and convenience, the achievement of some form of redemption is presented in similar terms. This is conveyed through further textual examination of Sinatra's life and career. The singer's career decline and Las Vegas residency, his turbulent relationship with Ava Gardner are each detailed. Erickson uses a literary analogy in order to convey the complex dynamics of Sinatra and Gardner's relationship, referring directly to F. Scott's Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: '[…] Sinatra's Gatsby nonetheless pursued and eventually wed Gardner's irresistibly sluttish Daisy with an obsession that exceeded even his own merciless pursuit of fame and success' (A*N*, 226). The comparison itself is an interesting one, given that Sinatra reinvented his identity on a number of occasions having had connections with organised crime, as well as having enjoyed career success as both a singer and an actor. These successes, however, came after a slump. He was 'reduced to recording novelty songs with barking dogs when he wasn't trailing after Ava to one film location or another, carrying her bags and fighting off smitten matadors', as Erickson notes (*AN*, 226). The nadir of Sinatra's career is referred to having occurred in April 1950 at New York's Copacabana; the singer losing his voice prior to his performance, opening his mouth to hear only 'the death rattle of his artistic demise' (*AN*, 227).

[40] Hal Hopper and Tom Adair, 'There's No You', *Where Are You?*, sang by Frank Sinatra (Los Angeles: Capitol, 1957) [on LP].

Redemption, however, is ultimately presented as coming in the form of his Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *From Here to Eternity* (1953), having originally pleaded for the role and accepted it for an 'embarrassing pittance' (*AN*, 227). That Sinatra's career renaissance should manifest through acting as opposed to singing can perhaps be seen as demonstrative of the reinvention that Erickson suggests is an intrinsic feature of the American national identity. Redemption and reinvention are portrayed here as having aligned, yet the episode itself can be considered indicative of the nation's aversion to rigorous self-evaluation, instead preferring to concern itself with superficial forms of change such as those denoted by hollow signifiers compatible with narrative archetypes. Sinatra's symbolic redemption in the film industry occurring in conjunction with the breakdown of his marriage to Ava Gardner appears consistent with such a notion.[41] Of America's collective fascination with similar signifiers, Erickson notes: 'A revolutionary and romantic country like America appreciates the spectacle of neither its revolutions nor its romanticism, which is to say it would rather ignore its true meaning by entertaining a more diversionary one' (*AN*, 227). Suggested here is the presence of something of a vicarious existence within American society.

The vicarious investment that Erickson implies in his respective appraisals of the lives and careers of Springsteen and Sinatra extends even to politics in the postmodern age. His comments on Reagan reflect this, often focusing on how his amiable, yet assertive television persona is achieved through a process of refinement. With Erickson charting 1990's politics in *American Nomad*, it should come as little surprise to find that personality and relatability has come to transcend coherent political ideology. Performance is insinuated as being an inextricable feature of contemporary politics in the mass media age. Bill Clinton is described as being his 'own contradiction' on account of his politics consisting of an uneasy and inconsistent amalgamation of traditional left ('job training, student loans, tax credits for the poor, health care reform') and right wing ('crime, free trade, line-item veto, welfare reform') beliefs (*AN*, 33). Clinton's real strength, as Erickson notes, comes in the projection of an everyman image:

> We elected ourselves a President of nuclear memory, having bypassed altogether a President of nuclear imagination… In Clinton we had the embodiment of an America that could now acknowledge remembering an abyss it never before quite admitted was there, and those of us in Clinton's generation dreaded from the first the ways he was bound to confirm what our parents always said about is in the decade we came of age—the Sixties, which we romanticized as soon as we stomped them into their grave: that we're a narcissistic generation indulged too much by the country that began inventing us back when we were through inventing it (*AN*, 206).

Erickson notes that Clinton's embodiment as the 1960's generation is the source of much of his general popularity despite his inconsistent politics. Clinton is considered a mirror image of the 'narcissistic generation' that Erickson notes, with even his character flaws directly related to hedonistic pursuits (i.e. 'allegations of womanizing') (*AN*, 33). This particular

[41] A number of Sinatra's most famous and critically acclaimed film performances occurred between his Academy Award win in 1953 and his divorce from Gardner in 1957, including *Guys and Dolls* (1955), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), *High Society* (1956) and *Pal Joey* (1957). His performance in *The Man with the Golden Arm* earned him an Academy Award for Best Actor nomination.

notion referenced in the above excerpt is alluded to earlier in the text in Erickson's discussion of Clinton's opposition to the Vietnam War as a college student: 'For those who have hated Clinton, nothing so characterizes him as his conduct as a student during the Vietnam War, and how that conduct was emblematic of the counterculture' (*AN*, 33). Clinton himself is viewed to encapsulate such a sentiment in a microcosm. A rather gloomy interpretation of history is offered in the above excerpt that Erickson expands outwards to encompass his and Clinton's generation. This is due to the presence of a number of contradictions. Whilst political awakenings and activism are alluded to, notions of self-centredness are also stressed. A contradiction emerges in this respect. The suggestion of historical possibility and potential for change is countered by insinuation of its extinguishment before such feelings can be adequately articulated. For Erickson, the realisation that a member of his generation has ascended to the presidency serves as a signifier of their descent into irrelevance, having ultimately failed to affect much in the way of tangible political change.

Personality is the most pronounced area of contrast between Clinton and his electoral opponent Bob Dole in the text. With Clinton's personifying of 1960's anti-Vietnam War counterculture the source of much consternation among Republicans and a social demographic who consider him to represent America's fallibility, Dole, in contrast, is generally perceived as an anachronistic, out of touch figure. His candidacy is presented as a direct reaction against all that Clinton is perceived to represent. Whist Dole—a self-identified 'mainstream conservative'—is often presented in *American Nomad* as a considered political thinker, the sense that his campaign is born from a wish to return to the same 'American Dream' traceable in Sinatra's songs is inescapable (*AN*, 109). The result is that his campaign is made to feel jarringly out of step with the period.

A notable instance of Dole's inability to respond to the demands of modern-day America is evident during an address to students at St. Anselm College, New Hampshire. An intersection is apparent here between stage management and political rhetoric; one which appears to cause Dole some discomfort. Erickson notes that the candidate 'hits his stride' whilst 'telling the students that balancing the budget would mean lower interest on their loans for new houses, or for paying off the loans that were putting them through college', framing the budget argument 'very much in terms of their future' (*AN*, 108). However, a capacity crowd and a large number of signs adorning the auditorium bearing messages such as 'BALANCE THE BUDGET NOW' and 'WE WANT SOCIAL SECURITY WHEN WE GET OLD' appears to disarm Dole as he expresses an uncertainty as to 'which were "real" signs and which the Dole for President campaign had cooked up' (*AN*, 108). This adds to impressions of the campaign's theatricality, which is itself a reflection of the contemporary politics. A disconnect can also be observed as having emerged here upon consideration as to the plausibility of such didacticisms appearing at a youthful campaign rally, especially during a period of plentiful distractions during which Erickson notes 'the school basketball team was winning, finals were looming' (*AN*, 108).

Clinton's well-crafted sense of showmanship and political persona appears in stark contrast to Dole's dry public delivery and arduous theatrical mimicking. The difference in characters and political styles is channelled metaphorically by Erickson in his accompanying of Dole to New

Hampshire by Budget Express train: 'The train's leisurely pace seemed to sum up Dole's candidacy, as did its quaintness' (*AN, 109).* The stark differences between Dole and Clinton both as candidates and as individuals stems from the polarised nature of what each is purported to represent. The postmodern aspects of Clinton's presidency and campaigning discussed, Dole's studious and meticulous character appears outdated by contrast. The juxtaposition is further expressed by Erickson in his abstract crystallizing of the differences in campaigns: '[…] As a one-whistle-stop-tour the Budget Express was as close to an old-fashioned campaign event as the crash of the Secret Millennium and the nova of cyberspace would ever again allow […]' (*AN*, 109). As the twenty-first century draws closer, Erickson is keen to demonstrate how politics have been irrevocably reshaped by the postmodern television era.

Shadowbahn and Twenty-First Century America

Although Erickson is yet to publish another political book since *American Nomad*, charting America in the postmodern age has remained a concern. In many ways, his most recent novel *Shadowbahn* can be interpreted as a spiritual sequel to *American Nomad*. Despite being written prior to Donald Trump's presidential victory in November 2016, the text seems prescient in its depiction of an America in the year 2021 struggling to find identity and meaning. Paul Kincaid alludes to this in his review of the text: 'The novel was presumably written before the election of Donald Trump, but it is written with a startling awareness of the divisions he embodies.'[42] Kincaid correctly identifies in his reviews that the subject of these divisions—racism, for instance—are ones that 'have haunted Erickson's work throughout his career', yet these appear to have exacerbated in the novel's presentation of America.[43] Indeed, Erickson has commented on how the America of *Shadowbahn* represents the continuation of the conflicts and paradoxes that he has repeatedly made reference to in his journalistic writings. Trump's presidency, for instance, is implied as being the logical, yet horrifying outcome of the intertwinement of politics and performance that Reagan and Clinton benefited from and were keen to exploit:

> This current president is only an end result of something that's been going on thirty years, or maybe 230. He's Forbidden Planet's id monster born of our collective unconsciousness, rampaging the country at night killing democracy. It's always been part of America's mission statement to cut itself loose from history, but that means a century and a half after the fact, millions of white Americans still won't admit the Civil War was about slavery.[44]

Parallels between *Shadowbahn* and *Leap Year* and *American Nomad* emerge here. Erickson's recurring preoccupation with the issue of race represents one notable transgression from which the country is unable—or seemingly unwilling—to extricate itself; Erickson, for instance, claiming that a refusal to acknowledge slavery's role as a cause of the U.S. Civil

[42] Paul Kincaid, '*Shadowbahn* by Steve Erickson', *Strange Horizons* (17th July, 2017). <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/shadowbahn-by-steve-erickson/>. [Accessed 21st September 2018].
[43] ibid.
[44] Knipfel, 'This Binary Moment'.

War is tantamount to Holocaust denial.[45] This conforms to the notion of America wishing to 'cut itself loose from history.' Historical paradoxes are perpetuated through this very reluctance to engage with the past, according to Erickson.

The connection between *American Nomad* and *Shadowbahn* becomes even more pronounced upon consideration of the novel's extrapolation of a major premise of the earlier work. That *American Nomad* was originally conceived as a 'work of fiction written as a history of the Eighties and Nineties, though a very different history than the one we actually lived' is additionally significant, given the novel's foray into alternate and imagined histories (*AN*, 187). Concurrent to Erickson's political reflections and speculations, *American Nomad* also documents his deteriorating relationship with his *Rolling Stone* employers. Their dissatisfaction with his work eventually leads a parting of ways that prompts Erickson to take the decision to continue covering the election campaign of his own accord. Channelling Hunter S. Thompson and the basic principles of gonzo journalism, Erickson writes that 'I would write the story of the campaign the way I had wanted to in the beginning, and the way I had foolishly supposed in the beginning that I was being hired to do […]' (*AN*, 176). Relying on a fake press pass and fake business cards, Erickson takes to the road with cassette tapes of his favourite musical artists and recordings. Another of the author's main intentions is to capture a sense of the nation through the imposition of what Erickson calls 'the American soundtrack' playing against a passing scenic backdrop (*AN*, 180). Sinatra, Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Nirvana, and Billie Holiday are among the artists included in this grouping, as well as tapes of what is referred to as 'American Indian tribal music' (*AN*, 180). When factored alongside Erickson's wish to 'write the story of the campaign' in the manner in which he originally saw fit, it is possible to gain an impression of events and observations being soundtracked in the style of a film. This interpretation of proceedings furthers the notion of history and current events increasingly being depicted as an ongoing narrative in the media-saturated 'television age' documented in Erickson's work.

From this point in the text, Erickson's recurring fascination with splits and conflicts runs even deeper. Whilst this is implied in the covering of an election contest, as well as in constant reference to the impending new millennium, America's societal divisions and historic acts of interpersonal violence become discussed in more overt terms. Erickson's considerations in this field are triggered by his surroundings. Whilst in Las Vegas, the gangland killing of rapper Tupac Shakur is mentioned as having occurred in a '"a hail of bullets"' (*AN*, 178). The Black Hills of South Dakota, the scene of the Great Sioux War of 1876, is described as being where 'Nineteenth-Century America met the consequences of its hubris, as American hubris seems destined to do in some cataclysmic fashion at least once a century; Vietnam was only the Twentieth-Century update of Custer's Last Stand' (*AN*, 181). The image of Native American bloodshed encapsulates this notion of violence being a fundamental part of the national 'reinvention' that Erickson has spoken of. Passing a number of reservations in Montana, he is compelled to identify such locations as 'where memory of the past and the dream of the future collapses into the anarchic American moment' (*AN*, 179). These reservations serve as potent reminders of the country's perpetuation of violence among

[45] ibid.

its own people. Whilst 'reinvention' can undoubtedly be considered as a crude means of referring to what is tantamount to a systemic ethnic genocide, reference to the plight of the Native American people at least demonstrates the country's clinical predisposition towards wide-ranging changes, even if these are of a violent nature.

Erickson's highlighting of American history's circularity in this respect can be emblematised in the motif of the road trip. Indeed, the very notion of travel is paralleled alongside the passage of time. This is apparent in Erickson's outlining of what he wishes to achieve with his road trip:

> And I would keep on driving out past L.A. and back into America and into the last years of the Twentieth Century, on one last rampage through the national asylum just to make one last observation, one last comment, or even to tell just one last lie, just as long as no one expected from me one last answer (*AN*, 176).

With an eventual return of kinds implied in the act of travelling—especially given that Los Angeles is Erickson's home city—the motif successfully captures a sense of temporal circularity. The notion of 'driving past L.A.' and 'back into America' suggests both a spatial and temporal disconnect. Erickson's use of the word 'past' here can similarly be interpreted in both a spatial and temporal sense that abstracts Los Angeles and America from real world contexts. As a result, both are affirmed as unphysical concepts in Erickson's works, often referenced for the capacity to convey a range of conflicting ideologies and historical paradoxes.

Shadowbahn is a text in which this device is evident. In comparison to *American Nomad*, the open road is presented as a key motif in the channelling of themes and interests. The novel's title appears interesting in this respect. With 'bahn' the German word for 'road' and 'shadow' implying both malevolence and an alternate representation, it is possible to construe the novel as a meditation on America journeying down a metaphorical dark road. Whilst travel in various forms recurs as a motif in Erickson's fiction, a road trip undertaken by a brother and sister is central to *Shadowbahn*'s narrative. Set in 2021, the novel describes the sudden and mysterious reappearance of the Twin Towers in the Badlands of South Dakota. First sighted by the musically-ignorant truck driver Aaron—a subverted representation of Elvis Presley—the skyscrapers soon attract the attention of the American public, many of whom travel to the 'American Stonehenge' in pilgrimage. Inevitably, the site becomes something of a crass tourist attraction. It is soon discovered that each visitor to the site hears different music emanating from the skyscrapers. Occurring in conjunction with these developments, Elvis Presley's stillborn twin Jesse awakens in adult form on the ninety-third floor of the South Tower, leading to numerous interludes in the text that recount an imagined life existing within the confines of an alternate history.

Parker and Zema, the Nordhoc siblings from *These Dreams*, are among those travelling to see the 'American Stonehenge', detouring from their intended destination of Michigan to visit their mother. For musical accompaniment, the siblings listen to a playlist compiled by their

late father that sought to soundtrack America itself as a form of 'national discography.'[46] Reviews of a number of the songs featured on the playlist are incorporated into the text alongside the central plot. The writer of these reviews differs at various points in the novel, fluctuating between an independent third person narrative voice that stylistically resembles Erickson's pop culture observations in *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*, and the character of Jesse Presley in his guise as a music journalist. One of the songs featured on the playlist and referred to throughout the novel is the nineteenth century folk song 'Oh Shenandoah' that lyricises a French Canadian voyageur falling in love with the daughter of Shenandoah, the elected chief of the Oneida people. This feature of the text can be seen as a continuation of Erickson's emblemising of the Native American people in *American Nomad* to symbolise an impending cataclysm.

The playlist in *Shadowbahn* performs a similar role to Erickson's referencing of songs by Springsteen and Sinatra in *American Nomad*, capturing a sense of the country's cultural and political climate. The playlist contains many songs that explicitly invoke the country's history—as in the case of 'Oh Shenandoah'—as well speculate of its potential during bleak times. The American national experience is essentially signposted through these songs. The song 'Pilots' by the band Goldfrapp is correlated with the events of 9/11, for instance, noted for its coincidental release exactly one year previously on 11th September 2000 as a track on the album *Felt Mountain*. 9/11 is referred to by Erickson during this reflection as an 'incendiary millennial moment' (*S*, 153). The atrocity is affirmed here as the twenty-first century's defining moment, indelibly shaping the direction of America's future. The second song the text refers to during this interlude—'Seven Nation Army' by The White Stripes—is discussed in a similar manner. Released as a single in 2003, the song is used to evoke the Iraq War that began in the same year. 'The song's opening guitar riff turns into a stadium chant sung together, in unison and full-throatedly. Soldiers drive their tanks across Middle Eastern borders humming the riff, pushing themselves onward to the song's insistent, opening seven notes', the text reads (*S*, 153). This constitutes yet another of example of Erickson using some form of pop culture to directly refer to a seminal period of event in the country's history. An interconnection is suggested between the spheres of popular entertainment, politics and history. Invocation of a specific cultural memory, for instance, is often shown to evoke notable moments in a wider consciousness.

The bleak, socially-divided America of the 2020s that Parker and Zema inhabit is markedly different to the characters' introduction in *These Dreams*. Erickson's first presentation of the characters comes amid the euphoria of Barack Obama's 2008 election victory—'"He won!" Parker explodes […] "He won! He won! He won!" he keeps shouting […]'—acts as a pointed contrast to their depiction in *Shadowbahn* (*TDY*, 11-12). The starting point of their road trip is referenced as having been the 'now-desolate Santa Monica Pier' (*S*, 37). Tersely-described, the reason as to why Santa Monica Pier is desolate is never explained, nor returned to in the text. The spectre of cataclysm or impending apocalypse hangs over proceedings. Impressions of this are furthered upon reference to the death of dreams and with it the

[46] Steve Erickson, *Shadowbahn* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2018), p. 285. Henceforth cited in-text as (*S*, page number).

disintegration of the traditional family unit: 'Driving Route 66 together as a family was once their mother's dream, because she always loved the story of Route 66' (*S*, 38). Accordingly, 'Route 66' by the King Cole Trio is included in the playlist to highlight how certain conceptions and impressions of the national experience can be crystallized through popular culture. Additionally implied in this presentation is the end of the American mystique that has consistently informed both coverage and conceptions of history and current events. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are presented almost as separate and distinctive entities on account of these allusions to endings. The notion of this is affirmed in Parker's surmising of a motel owner's refusal to grant him and his sister a single room as 'A little fucking twentieth-century […]', as a result of confusion over their relationship status on the grounds of age and race (*S*, 39). That the two also have different surnames can be seen as a further indicator of the erosion of the archetypal family unit. Again, this portrayal can be considered in keeping with Erickson's penchant for documenting various American 'reinventions' throughout his work; the end of traditional conceptions concerning the familial unit inevitably signalling the emergence of new ones.

The theme of recurring forms of American endings is never far from the surface of *Shadowbahn*. Whilst the presence of the reappeared Twin Towers overtly channels this theme, the novel's subtext can be read as a political commentary and specifically how this desolate depiction of America came to be. Connections with *American Nomad* can be made in this respect, relating specifically to frequent allusions to endings through political coverage. Unconfirmed rumours that *Shadowbahn* could be Erickson's last novel brings to mind the author's meditation on journalistic finality at the outset of the road trip in *American Nomad*, notably in his expressed desire for 'one last rampage through the national asylum just to make one last observation, one last comment, or even to tell just one last lie.' Considering the shared narrative, thematic and political content of both works, it can be suggested that *Shadowbahn* represents a creative development of the preoccupations outlined in *American Nomad*, conveying them from the position of a novelist instead of as a journalist.

Documenting contemporary American politics as a novelist allows Erickson to subvert and parody existing political tropes—slogans, populism, alienation, and polemic discourse, for instance—as opposed to analogising true life figures to channel a particular form of national experience or identity. The novel's political undertones are inescapable as Charles Taylor notes in his review of the text, commenting that 'It's impossible not to feel, in your marrow, that its most fantastical moments presage some perilous as-yet-unrevealed destiny we are driving toward.'[47] The speculative properties of the novel are made possible by Erickson's manipulation of these aforementioned political tropes. An early instance of this can be found in Aaron's truck bearing a bumper sticker that reads 'SAVE AMERICA FROM ITSELF' (*S*, 4). Evoking Donald Trump's election slogan 'Make America Great Again', the parallel becomes even more pronounced upon description of Aaron's thought process when purchasing the bumper sticker: 'When he first put on the sticker, he thought he knew what it

[47] Charles Taylor, 'It Takes Two: *Shadowbahn* by Steve Erickson', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (20th February, 2017). <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/it-takes-two-shadowbahn-by-steve-erickson/#!>. [Accessed 24th September 2018].

meant. The more he's thought about it since, the less sure he is' (*S*, 4). The novel's Trumpian subtext has been considered by Erickson, particularly in relation to this specific incident:

> When I wrote the second page of *Shadowbahn*—where a truck driver has on his rear fender a bumper sticker that reads "Save America From Itself"—it was the first week of 2014, and less a matter of prophecy than paying attention, because what happened this last November has been coming awhile. Let's not let ourselves off the hook by supposing Donald Trump is something that happened to America. Rather, America happened to America, and Trump is the result.[48]

Far from predicting a Trump presidency during Erickson's work on *Shadowbahn*, the political climate in which he is writing is instead insinuated as something of a natural and inevitable escalation of the postmodern milieus described in *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*. Each of these respective climates is identified by Erickson as being typified by the public persona of each president. Reagan's telegenic vacuity is a key feature of *Leap Year*. The same can be said of Clinton's chameleonic qualities in *American Nomad*. Properties of the speculated future detailed in *Shadowbahn* can be regarded as an exacerbation of certain facets of the contemporary political climate that consequently represents a development of past media conventions. Erickson appears to affirm this in a brief outlining of his own personal view of historical trends and patterns: 'The Marxist view is that everything's a product of history, everything's a result of historical forces as surely as two chemical compounds produce a third. My view is the other way around: that history is a product of everything else.'[49] Effectively, the social, cultural and political are all bound together as informers of the zeitgeist. Not only does this serve to rationalise the structure and style of *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*, but also influences the thematic and narrative content of *Shadowbahn*.

As is typical of Erickson's fiction, these national and political conceptions are literalised in the landscape. Bearing comparison with America One and America Two from *Rubicon Beach*, *Shadowbahn* see the depiction of something of a disunited nation. Reflecting the polarities existent in contemporary American discourse, the country has become fragmented. Different regions are seeking their own autonomy through secession. As Parker and Zema discover, the result is a pathological distrust of 'outsiders' that creates an inhospitable atmosphere. The country's polarised state is reflected in the modified American flags that the pair encounter on the border between Kansas and Nebraska:

> […] Parker and Zema penetrate deeper the continental centre as more flags displaying the traditional thirteen red and white stripes with a black field where stars would ordinarily be. Some feature an incensed and glaring Jesus, sandy hair pushed back behind his ears like a biker's. Others depict a former president X'd out in red, the way newsmagazine covers used to X out deposed tyrants and wartime enemies (*S*, 130).

The crudely altered flags—bringing to mind the 'x' motif of *Arc d'X*—symbolise the divisions in the country that Erickson has consistently spoken of in both contemporary and

[48] Joe Milazzo, '"America Happened to America": A Conversation with Steve Erickson', *Entropy* (10th August, 2017). <https://entropymag.org/conversation-steve-erickson/>. [Accessed 24th September 2018].
[49] ibid.

historical contexts. The defaced image of the president is a powerful signifier here. Given the presence of Parker and Zema in the text, it stands to reason that the defaced president in question is Barack Obama. Their introduction to Erickson's readers coming at the opening of *These Dreams* offers credence to this interpretation. The Nordhoc family's elation at Obama's victory contrasts significantly with the image posed in the referenced excerpt. Although Erickson has previously professed respect for Obama—as well as expressing sympathy for the former president on account of the entrenched nature of political opposition in modern politics—the divisions depicted in *Shadowbahn* appears as a representation of false dawns and collapsed hope. A clear sense of this is affirmed by Erickson in an article written several months before Obama's re-election in 2012:

> The current president is beset by things largely beyond his control, which conspire to render him as ineffectual as fate and circumstance can, not to mention a monolithic opposition party and a seething Wall Street that Obama should have nationalized at the outset, given how far moderation got him. This president was elected as an idealist and represented people's most exalted aspirations for America as much as any candidate since Ronald Reagan or Robert Kennedy, depending on which side of the ideological divide one stands; it may be inevitable in an increasingly Either/Or political world that Obama seems for so many to be the Either/Or president, with the caveat that my Either is your Or.[50]

Erickson's emphasising of 'Either/Or' with little room for concession as an inescapable feature of contemporary political discourse seems to underpin *Shadowbahin*'s conceived landscape. Polarisation is evident in depictions of both environment and interpersonal behaviour in the text. This novel's title expresses this polarisation in discussion of America being 'crisscrossed by so-called shadow highways that remain the only geography recognized as federal land still subject to national sovereignty' (*S*, 248). Again, this connects with Erickson's recurring depiction of America in conceptual terms as opposed to as a tangible, coherent state, which in itself would imply some form of prevailing unity. With conflict and paradoxes at the centre of American identity, portrayals of the nation as a euphemism for compromised values and fallen ideals seem consistent with such an assertion. The various political and cultural tensions that infect the landscape in *Shadowbahn* further this particular impression.

Despite its gloomy prognostications, *Shadowbahn* ends on a sanguine note. The revolutionary qualities that Erickson has frequently asserted of America are referenced via the playlist prior to Zema conversing with Jesse Presley inside one of the towers whilst Parker waits outside listening to the radio 'certain that, sooner or later, he'll find one of his father's favourite songs' (*S*, 300). Sam Cooke's 'A Change Is Gonna Come' is justified as a selection because 'any national discography that excludes it invalidates itself' (*S*, 285). The song's optimistic tone in the face of adversity resonates with Zan Nordhoc's assessment of America whilst watching Obama's election in 2008 on television as: '[…] A country that does things in lurches. Born in radicalism, then reluctant for years, decades, the better part of centuries, to do anything crazy, until it does the craziest thing of all' (*TDY*, 12). In *Shadowbahn*, the hope endures that the country will shake itself from its malaise. This reflects something of a

[50] Steve Erickson, 'Obama, Post-Post-Partisanship', *The American Prospect* (6th June, 2012). <http://prospect.org/article/obama-post-post-partisanship>. [Accessed 25th September 2018].

notable preoccupation for Erickson in his works that are focused on America. In identifying America's inability for self-examination in *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*, the true essence of the country's radicalism is captured in *These Dreams* as Obama's election is processed by the Nordhocs as the 'country questioned all its possibilities' (*TDY*, 11). The next day, Zan plays 'A Change Is Gonna Come' on his radio show and follows the song by declaring, '"The Sam Cooke record—the greatest ever made—was for what happened last night. Forty-five years after the song was recorded… but then all the song says is that a change *will* come, not how fast, right?"' (*TDY*, 11-12). The true nature of American radicalism is suggested as being connected to the potential for questioning and introspection. America's questioning of its possibilities in this regard is insinuated as resulting in the election of its first African-American president.

Whilst notions and aspirations of America as a post-racial society are ultimately shown to have been something of a fallacy in *Shadowbahn*, a sense nevertheless lingers that the country retains the potential for radical thought and discourse. The novel reads as a rebuke to the complacent thought that even Erickson himself may have been guilty of. The initial euphoria of what Obama's election is perceived to embody in *These Dreams* is tempered somewhat by a piece written by Erickson in the same year as the novel's publication. The piece responds to Obama's 2012 victory over Republican challenger Mitt Romney with the assessment that the president's status as a revolutionary figure has been somewhat overplayed:

> There are people who think he's the most radical president of all time—say, have you noticed he's black?— because they haven't lived long enough or aren't informed enough to know that he's not even the most radical president of the last 100 years, or 70 or 50, or that the centerpiece of Obama's socialist manifesto is a health-care plan that's to the right of one proposed 40 years ago by a president who, at that time, was farther to the right than any president in the 40 years preceding him.[51]

Notions of the complacency signposted in *Shadowbahn* are suggested in the above excerpt. Whilst the symbolic potency of an African-American presidency is undeniable, Erickson instead contextualises Obama's presidency within the confines of a political system and economic model shifting ever-rightwards. This is not to insinuate Erickson's novels are to be read in a socialist context, more to highlight how the revolutionary qualities of America are suggested as coming from rigorous debate and political engagement over a preoccupation simply with visual or aesthetic change. *These Dreams* captures a sense of this as the initial euphoria that greets Obama's victory subsides as the Nordhoc family home is repossessed at the novel's conclusion as a result of the 2008 financial crisis.

Shadowbahn conveys many of the anxieties existent in contemporary America. Impressions of a directionless nation—itself presented ironically in what is essentially a road novel—stem from the vacuum created by an ultimately empty signifier of change despite initial promise. Reflections on 'A Change Is Gonna Come' as the novel draws to a close, however, serve as

[51] Steve Erickson, News Flash: This Was Always A Close Election', *The American Prospect* (25th October, 2012). <https://prospect.org/article/news-flash-was-always-close-election>. [Accessed 15th January 2019].

both a warning against complacency and remind of the need for a resolution to the inherent paradoxes impeding the country from real progress. Indeed, Erickson's conflicting and complex conceptions of America can be expressed by the text's comment on Jimmy Ruffin's 'What Becomes of the Brokenhearted': '[…] It becomes clear that the thing breaking is heart is the very land itself that he walks' (*S*, 285). This observation encapsulates much of the focus of Erickson's observations and writings concerning America. The capacity for revolutionary thought and actions consistently endures, yet there remains an acknowledgement that there is much to do in a nation typified by paradoxes and conflicts.

Summary: Erickson on America

Erickson's reflections on America are a recurrent feature of a number of past interviews. The notion of division and contrasting ideals being at the root of the national consciousness are a central feature of these. Erickson often makes reference to America having moved beyond its Jeffersonian origins as a nation that was intended to practice rigorous democratic procedure and demonstrate sophisticated political discourse as part of its governance. As he has often alluded to, however, the concept of the 'American Dream' has corrupted such noble aspirations, implying that to be American is somehow easy. Ronald Reagan's televised debate with Jimmy Carter prior to the 1980 presidential election has been discussed by Erickson as an example of this particular distortion, whereby national identity is explicitly linked to commerce and materialism. It is even debatable, however, as to whether the Jeffersonian ideals that Erickson frequently refers to ever even represented a practical template for America as a nation to begin with. Jefferson's great paradox—a slave owner who extolled equality for all men—is similarly referenced by Erickson in interviews and through his literature. As such, Erickson seems to regard paradoxes and contradictions at the core of the American consciousness. The ideals upon which America was founded are negated by the presence of these very paradoxes. The result of this is Erickson's positing of America as an inherently flawed nation striving for an idealism that has remained illusory.

The issue of race emblematises the notion of ever-present paradoxes for Erickson, perhaps more so than any other. Such is the extent of the issue that it even seems to cloud debate. Erickson has noted of a split with regard to what America is perceived to represent; a discussion that is itself wholly flawed on account of an inability to acknowledge the presence of such paradoxes. A wish to return to a state of American innocence has been identified as misguided by Erickson due to the fact that the slave trade and its legacy undermine the very notion of early American innocence. Similarly, America's representation as a 'post-racial' society is equally proven to be fanciful after Barack Obama's presidency is ultimately framed as a hollow signifier of progress. Divisions appear entrenched as a result. The possibility of an American redemption or some form of social resolution has often been posed by Erickson. It should be clarified that this is often done so in speculative terms that is reflected in the properties of his fiction. The assassination of Robert Kennedy—a political figure for whom Erickson has expressed admiration—hangs over *Rubicon Beach*. The date of Kennedy's death—6th June 1968—is offered as the point at which America moved beyond the possibility

of redemption for its past transgressions. Such a sentiment is channelled through the presentation of America One and America Two as two radically different settings in terms of both topography and temporality. That both are environments are shown to be overlapping entities that fuse by the novel's conclusion starkly conveys the extent of the societal splits that Erickson has observed in contemporary America.

Erickson's preoccupation with America is directed at the paradoxes and conflicts that have typified the country's existence. America's Jeffersonian origins embody these paradoxes, yet also suggest what it could have represented. Erickson's work centred on America often show how this dream of extensive political participation has been corrupted in favour of simplistic answers and discourse. The country's repeated inability to acknowledge its past transgressions and address implicit paradoxes, however, renders the twin prospects of resolution and redemption unlikely despite numerous empty signifiers suggesting otherwise. As such, Erickson's work on America capture both a sense of illusory forms of redemption and speculative futures through his assessing of the country's developing consciousness.

Chapter 4: Memory, Dreams, and Desire: Film and The Act of Viewing in Erickson's Fiction

The Psychology of Viewing: An Overview

The narrative and psychological importance of film is often stressed throughout Erickson's fiction, reflecting his belief that 'movies are part of the modern consciousness or unconsciousness.'[1] Such an impression stems from reference to a range of different factors implicit in the viewing experience itself. The most notable relate to certain facets associated with cinema viewing. The disorienting effect that the cinema environment can have on the viewer is emphasised. The size of the screen, the scale of the sound, the blackness of the environment, the hushed and captivated audience are each given equal prominence during descriptive passages alongside detail of the projected images themselves. The overall effect conveyed is the result of each of these elements combining in concordance with one another so as to directly affect the viewer's sense of perception. The experience of cinema-going is therefore presented as being wholly immersive in Erickson's texts. Through explicit reference to such environmental features, the notion of sensory displacement is posed. An experience is facilitated that David Thomson describes as simultaneously being both 'real and unreal' marked by the 'helpless condition of voyeurism.'[2] The spectator's state of willing passivity is engendered by these very displacing facets, contributing to an acceptance of the projected images.

The alluring 'otherness' of the cinema—its escapist qualities often hinted at across Erickson's oeuvre—is further discussed by Thomson in his monograph *How to Watch a Movie* (2015). Here, Thomson draws on his own recollections of growing up in post-war London in order to convey a sense of the fascination that cinema held for him as a boy. The exoticism of the cinema juxtaposes starkly with the bleak picture Thomson offers of late-1940's London. Described as 'the most gaudy and enticing premises on the high street', Thomson goes on to recall their fragrant atmosphere—'Perfume […] Though that was maybe meant to kill the germs'—as well as their 'Egyptian, Aztec, Moroccan, Oriental, Spanish moods' that were as 'inaccurate historically as the costume romances and adventure pictures that were playing.'[3] Nevertheless, an impression of the cinema environment representing a surreal space completely divorced from its wider surroundings is created. This very concept forms the basis of a number of Erickson's depiction of cinema-viewing, whereby a sense of this external separation is amplified as a means of signalling a gradual change in the viewer's psychological make-up.

The nature of this change is evident in Erickson's descriptions of the viewer processing the film itself. The properties and features of the film itself are presented as having a profound and deep-rooted effect on the spectator. The viewer's passivity whilst in the cinema is often

[1] Olivas, 'TEV Interview: Steve Erickson'.
[2] David Thomson, *How to Watch a Movie* (London: Profile, 2016), p. 4.
[3] ibid, p. 14.

alluded to in such passages, framing the spectator as being made subject to potential psychological changes. Erickson's presentations in this context are often reactive. The projected images are relayed to the reader in vague or abstract terms, with more emphasis given to their subsequent affecting of the character in question. The finer plot points of the described film are often irrelevant as Erickson instead seeks to portray complex psychological responses occurring, often subconsciously. Through a character's processing of a film, a more comprehensive depiction of their psychology is enabled.

The wide-ranging nature of these responses conforms to a number of conventions associated with Freudian psychoanalysis. Erickson's various presentations of the act of viewing include implicit reference to Freud's observations on fetishism, hysteria, and the death drive. Underpinning each of these portrayals is a frequent and explicit paralleling of dreams with memory. Both are often presented as enjoying a close, almost inseparable relationship within the character's consciousness. Dreams are, as Freud has asserted, 'a case of the unconscious dealing with preconscious thought processes.'[4] Similarly, memories occupy a position of great significance within Freudian psychoanalysis, with the recollection of childhood events being of 'great pathogenic importance.'[5] Freud further elaborates on this assertion by observing how memory subsequently serves to provide us with a 'coherent chain of events', as a 'constant relation is established between the psychical significance of an experience and its persistence in the memory.'[6] Often the two forms intertwine in Erickson's fiction, usually distorting a character's sense of perception. As an outcome, dreams and memory are integral components in Erickson's characterisations on account of their representing of unconscious or repressed conceptions.

Film as a medium—particularly when viewed at a cinema—is consequently depicted as a vehicle prompting the invocation of such repressed emotions. The intangibility of dreams and memory as forms is reflected in the ultimate intangibility of the projected image. The result of this triangulation is that a range of subconscious desires and feelings are able to come to the forefront of the character's being. In these presentations, the darkened confines of the movie theatre functions as a surrogate for sleep in order to accentuate the filmic medium's illusory and surreal properties. In this respect, Erickson's depictions bear close resemblance to Freud's observations on dreams being the product of the id being 'cut off from the external world', where it gains 'its own world of perception.'[7] In Erickson's fiction, the conscious and the unconscious become blurred within the cinema environment, allowing for the projected images to stir previously repressed feelings.

The other form in which Erickson's interest in viewing as an act manifests textually relates to retrospective analysis. The impression one gains from a film is allowed to operate within the viewer's consciousness, leading to consideration—or even reconsideration—of its merits. This very process is akin to film criticism; a field in which Erickson is vastly experienced.

[4] Freud, 'An Outline of Psychoanalysis', p. 22.
[5] Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories', in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 541-560 (p. 541).
[6] ibid, p. 541.
[7] Freud, 'An Outline of Psychoanalysis', p. 52.

The ability to re-watch a film multiple times has subsequently had a notable impact on the field of film criticism. One noticeable result is that a host of social theories, personal conceptions or wider points of connection are able to be attached to various films. The medium itself has essentially become analogous to both experience and the human condition itself as a consequence. This retrospective engagement with film represents a crucial aspect of Erickson's fiction, with the fluid and permanently changing conceptions certain characters hold towards a selection of film reflective of the medium's very workings.

Reference to the working fluidity of the medium in Erickson's texts also encapsulates a further area of interest relating to film, and one that could be considered a logical development of critical thinking. This concerns an interest in the process of film itself. Interestingly, an inordinate number of Erickson's characters across his oeuvre are involved in the creative process of film. Such a recurring feature highlights Erickson's interest in the various technical processes associated with film nonetheless. Concern with the creative process, or an inclination to appraise in the case of critics (the occupation of the author surrogate in *Amnesiascope*) suggests a more careful and considered engagement with the medium that has been developed through rigorous and repeated viewings. Film comes to be an integral aspect of numerous characterisations, offering characters both a point of definition and a viable means of expression. It is through viewing that the analogous and metaphorical qualities of the medium become more pronounced in Erickson's texts.

This is not to suggest that these facets of the viewing process identifiable in Erickson's works are somehow independent of each other. Invariably, each is presented in seamless terms as a natural outcome of viewing as a conscious act. Accordingly, the effects and subsequent responses are often depicted in progressive terms. As a basic starting point, Erickson's characters exhibit a fundamental love or appreciation—occasionally even a curiosity—of film. Facets of the cinema environment are often described in order to emphasise a separation from a character's external surroundings. The viewer in question is primed for a sensory experience that proceeds to have a profound psychological effect on their character. With the film itself often resonating with the viewer, the end result is usually a deeper consideration of its meaning. Often it is paralleled with the character's own experiences. The experience comes to shape either their own conceptions of themselves or their surroundings, acting as a crucial reference point for their very being.

This chapter will examine Erickson's respective portrayals of viewing in *Days Between Stations*, *Amnesiascope,* and *Zeroville*. Depictions of viewing films occupy a position of great significance in each of these texts, offering insight into both the character and their own unique perceptual faculties. A lasting psychological effect is not uncommon, nor is a permanent change in how the character comes to interpret their surroundings. Interestingly, this results in a mirroring of the filmic mechanism. Resembling the manner in which a camera is used to capture events from a particular perspective, the character's perceptions are often altered irrevocably by the viewing experience. Their perspective is portrayed comparable to that of a camera's lens. Their subsequent processing of external events and experiences comes to be tinged with a wholly unique psychology.

Diverged narratives which include multiple perspectives are commonplace across Erickson's oeuvre, as are internalised digressions pertaining to past events and explicit reference to dreams. The stylistic fluidity evident in Erickson's novels is produced by an interchangeable convergence between these different textual elements. Not only does film function as an analogue for this strange and fluid effect, but the nature of the viewing process itself assists in affecting character psychology. The result is the depiction of what Erickson has stressed as 'traditional concerns' in free-flowing and disorienting terms. This very notion resonates with David Bordwell's assertion of art-cinema seeking to convey 'real' subject manner—'current psychological problems such as contemporary "alienation" and "lack of communication"'—in abstract terns.[8] Analysis of the narrative and thematic content of the three Erickson novels that will be analysed in this chapter will reveal that these parallels become even more pronounced as each respective story develops. As such, descriptions of the act of viewing—along with reference to the spectator's responses in both immediate and retrospective capacities—represent a powerful means of crystallizing this same fluid effect. A critical insight into character psychology is offered, whilst also drawing attention as to how these internal workings come to shape the narrative itself.

Adolphe Sarre and Ways of Seeing: *Days Between Stations*

A number of tropes that many could consider typical of Erickson are first exhibited in *Days*. Structurally, the novel follows a divergent strategy depicting seemingly disparate characters. In this instance, this divide takes place at opposite ends of the twentieth century and spans continents. Later novels see experimentation with temporal and spatial divides, and alternate timelines in order to express this disparateness prior to an eventual reconnection of kinds. *Days* also represents the first occurrence of Erickson's concept of psychotopography as a protagonist's emotions become implicitly linked to the properties of their surroundings. Complex moods and thought processes become reflected through a changing surrounding topography, usually as a result of cataclysms. Certain aspects related to the concept itself will be discussed extensively in Chapter 5. It can first be detected in the opening and primary plot strand of *Days* that describes the tumultuous relationship between Lauren, Jason, and Michel.

It is the novel's second plot strand—introduced roughly one third of the way through the text—that will be discussed in this chapter. From documenting the love triangle between the three characters detailed in the preceding paragraph in a sandstorm-plagued Los Angeles, the novel's focus reverts suddenly to Paris during the final few months of the nineteenth century. Here, the early career of mercurial film director Adolphe Sarre is explored, along with detail of the creation of his inaugural project, the French Revolutionary epic *The Death of Marat*. The film seemingly unfinished by the conclusion of this plot, Alexandru Budac observes parallels with other ultimately unrealised epics such as Orson Welles' *Don Quixote* and Stanley Kubrick's *Napoleon*.[9] Erickson's allusion to what Budac calls 'the-greatest-movie-

[8] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 206.
[9] Budac, 'The Blue and White Visual Narrative…', p. 67.

never-made myths', a dual impression of romantic failure and tragic genius is fostered around Adolphe Sarre's character.[10]

Adolphe's story begins on 'the last June night of the nineteenth century', as he and his twin brother are abandoned at the Pont Neuf, Paris as babies just several months old (*DBS*, 80). A prostitute named Marthe witnesses a delirious vagrant throw one of the twins into the River Seine and manages to save the remaining child before a further catastrophe occurs. She takes the child back to her brothel, where the decision is made by the prostitutes to raise him in secret from the proprietor—the sexually avaricious Monsieur Monsieur; whose name can be considered an additional comment on the novel's theme of duality. A note wrapped in the baby's shawl informs that the twins are named Adolphe and Maurice, hailing from the village of Sarre. Lulu, a Tunisian prostitute and the favourite of Monsieur Monsieur, takes to mothering the boy, who is referred to both as Adolphe and Maurice. Years later, following the birth of Lulu's daughter Janine, the infant is solely called 'Adolphe', after Janine's garbled attempt at pronouncing the name. He is later given the surname 'Sarre' to reflect his and his twin brother's place of birth. The Saarland is a present day German state located on the French border which has been incorporated into both countries throughout its history; a plot point that can be considered a comment on Adolphe's existence 'in-between' various states. Similarly, it is difficult for his first name not to evoke Adolf Hitler. Although the comparison risks being considered crass, the Nazi concept of *lebensraum* that saw a fundamental reimagining of land borders can be viewed as being reflected in the novel's strange geographical manipulations. This is not to suggest that Adolphe is anyway intended to resemble Hitler in any way, more an observation as to how the character's name can be interpreted as a means of channelling forms of geographic and topographic malleability that constitute key textual themes.

Lulu effectively raises Adolphe in the brothel as her own son. He and Janine enjoy what is effectively a sibling relationship, albeit one that is marked with undertones of a sexual curiosity. It is during these childhood years growing into adolescence that Adolphe's sense of perspective develops. Stowed away in a secret room for large portions of each day, Adolphe observes his surroundings through peepholes and from around corners. The influence of a confined perspective on his interpretative faculties becomes apparent later in his filmmaking methodology. Here, the effect is one that is presented in more curious terms, as though observing a world typified by disconnects and abstractions. These are internalised as such. His senses are described as being refined by the experience:

> Growing up in this room he was left to perceptions and insights that developed in isolation from the rest of the world; in this way some of his understanding was stunted, undeveloped. In other ways his understanding became keener, even extraordinary; in this room he learned to peer past everything that was immediate to and readily grasped by others. While other people's comprehension of things developed in a manner that was linear, his own comprehension became circuitous, spiraling, lifted and carried in patterns of its own by hidden currents, like the light in this room (*DBS*, 86).

[10] ibid, p. 67.

It is difficult for Bordwell's observations relating to art-cinema narration not to be brought to mind upon consideration of this excerpt. The relationship between space and narration is a notable feature here. Bordwell himself has noted of this connection in relation to film, claiming that visual and auditory clues are essential for the viewer to 'construct a space of figures, objects and fields—a space of greater or lesser depth, scope, coherence and solidity.'[11] The depth of the 'world' depicted is reliant on a keen manipulation of space, essentially. Adolphe's cramped surroundings and limited perspective have contributed here to a clear understanding of the relationship between space and interpretation that is often tacitly acknowledged. An awareness of the importance and effect of different spatial dimensions is evident.

From this understanding, a contrast between linear and 'circuitous' conceptions emerges to imply a distinction between the manner in which events are processed, and later relayed via the medium of film. Comparable to Bordwell's assertions on narration in art-cinema, Adolphe's innate perceptual and interpretative faculties appear dislocated, loosely-formed, and unconventional in their working. As such, his viewing and processing of events from within the secret room bears resemblance to the non-linear fluidity associated with art-cinema. This is not to suggest that Adolphe's story is anyway intended to parallel art-cinema as a form or movement, given that the time period discussed significantly predates a number of examples offered by Bordwell, such as *Wild Strawberries* (1957), *The World of Apu* (1959), and *Pigsty* (1969).[12] Instead, such description appears to highlight how these altered conceptions serve to influence interpretation of narrative and events.

The 'circuitous' non-linear manner of Adolphe's perceptual faculties is reflected in the textual structure and its flitting between time periods and thematic points of interest. The influence of film and methods of shooting are presented as being intrinsic aspects of Adolphe's characterisation in this regard; a facet of his being that is fundamentally tied to a particular way of seeing or means of viewing. The peculiarities evident in the excerpt—learning to 'peer past everything that was immediate'—create the impression of Adolphe looking beyond exteriors as a consequence of his voyeuristic view of his environment. A different way of seeing is implied here; one that sees a different world or reality behind various facades and surfaces.

The notion of this is further strengthened upon consideration of 'camera' literally meaning room in Italian. Description of the secret room often contains fleeting reference to sources of light. 'Absolutely blocked off from any access to the outside, the room nevertheless had a light that was from no lamp or candle […] The light was the same Adolphe had seen in the street […] Moments after the sun set beyond the river', Erickson writes (*DBS,* 80). Consideration of these facets—of the interconnection between 'camera' and light—evokes the workings of Athanasius Kircher's camera obscura. Translated as 'dark room' in Latin, the term refers to any device—a box, a tent, or a room—which facilitates the natural optical phenomenon of an image that is projected externally, typically through a small hole. Though

[11] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 113.
[12] ibid, p. 207.

not obviously a literal example of a camera obscura's workings, the effect is nonetheless alluded to in this instance. According to Laura Mulvey, the camera obscura represented a desire to 'preserve the fleeting instability of reality and the passing of time' in conjunction with a wish to inscribe reality 'indexically and mechanically.'[13] Adolphe's perceptual faculties seem to work in a similar manner as her perceives his external surroundings in a fleeting, abstract manner. His processing of these surroundings is indexical in nature, as his faculties are shown to perceive and subsequently register these environmental facets in a wholly personalised manner.

A close interconnection is evident between Adolphe's faculties, the external surroundings sighted through the keyhole, and the mysterious light filtering in from outside. These entities themselves can be considered to constitute a deconstruction of the device's facets. Considering this, the cognitive process described in the discussed excerpt can be viewed as an inversion of the camera obscura device, whereby the internal faculties are instead the product of external images illuminated by light. Allusion to the nature of this process within Adolphe's characterisation highlights both the uniqueness of his burgeoning faculties, as well as how these are influenced by a particular means of seeing. Such comparisons are strengthened as the years pass and Adolphe gradually becomes more aware of certain distinct features of his surroundings:

> When he placed a candle on the shelf across the room from him and lit its wick, he came to realize that in fact everything he saw was a flat surface, like a screen—that in fact dimension was an illusion. Everything was a flat surface and the pinpoints of light, whether from a candle on the shelf or a gaslamp above the street, were punctures in that surface—gashes made by somebody behind the screen. He realized then that beyond everything he saw there was an entire realm of blazing sunfire, and that colors were only the silhouettes of people in that realm—walking, eating, dancing, doing whatever they were doing behind the screen. It astonished Adolphe that everyone failed to realized they were just figures on a tapestry, the shadows of something else (*DBS*, 87).

The working of the camera obscura is evoked in this passage. The sensory effect also detailed, a developing appreciation of the basic mechanics of film is suggested here. This can be considered to signify a form of character development as it is implied that Adolphe is gradually becoming aware of exactly the manner in which his conceptions of the world are being shaped. Presented in abstract and half-formed terms during Adolphe's early years, these loose conceptions ultimately come to be fully realised via his introduction to film.

Adolphe's expulsion from the brothel as an adolescent occurs prior to his obsession with film. Considering his voyeuristic manner of seeing, the character's banishment can be viewed as symbolising his entrance into external life; a realisation of a different reality beyond the surfaces he has sighted from inside the secret room. Adolphe's expulsion comes about after pushes the proprietor's son, Jean-Thomas, through a window—a familiar motif of Erickson's fiction—after overhearing him engage in intercourse with Janine. 'Nothing, he thought, could have moved him from the room, until he heard the one sound he never expected. He heard her laugh. Breathless and expectant. The slightest betrayal, and the sound of conquest', it is

[13] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2007), p. 18.

noted in the text; Adolphe's frustrations and dismay outlined here in psychologically tortured terms (*DBS*, 89).

Bereft of options following his banishment, Adolphe enlists in the French army to fight in the First World War. Injured in battle, Adolphe's eventual awakening from a coma coincides from the signing of the Armistice in 1918 to bring the war to a close: 'It wasn't until the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of that year, at the very moment the Armistice was being signed, that he opened his eyes and could see again' (*DBS*, 92). Connotations of rebirth are identifiable in this description, the centrality of sight and the character's perceptual faculties are emphasised and correlated with a historical event. Indeed, this episode can be viewed as an early indicator of Erickson's fascination with endings and entailing forms of reinvention. In essence, the war's ending has served to signal his progression into filmmaking.

Adolphe views his first film in Paris after the French army's triumphant march through the capital. Intriguingly, Adolphe's 'first real vision of Paris' contains reference to a number of cinematic tropes comparable with his observations from inside the secret room (*DBS*, 94). Great emphasis is placed upon the influence of light in shaping the character's perceptions of the city, creating the impression of an artificial façade. The city's buildings are described in this very manner as literal, superficial frontages: 'facades of buildings' (*DBS*, 94). The effect bears comparison to the illusory forms visible through the secret room's peephole: 'The citadels of Paris rose like chiselled cliffs and the windows glittered like caves in which fires had been set and stoked—small gouges in the screen, their distance an illusion' (*DBS*, 94).

Of additional interest, the novel's description of Paris bears resemblance to Erickson's own conceptions of the city when starkly juxtaposed with his own impressions of Los Angeles.[14] The contrast becomes clearer upon careful consideration of the imagery used to emphasise Paris' centuries' old features: '[…] Rather he assumed the city had been formed like a canyon, centuries of rain and fire carving it out of the ground' (*DBS*, 94). Canyons constituting a distinct and notable aspect of the wider Los Angeles topography, the employment of the image can hardly be deemed coincidental. It is possible to view this particular detail as foreshadowing film's emergence as the twentieth century's most dominant art form, along with its eventual entwinement with the Los Angeles landscape and culture.

The first ever film Adolphe sees is D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. The experience signals the 'birth' of Adolphe's obsession. Adolphe's ignorance of film as a form is mentioned prior as he uses his recollections of sighting the brothel through the secret room as a viable means of comparison: 'He had no idea what a motion picture was. Of course the idea intrigued him: paintings he remembered from Number Seventeen skipped in animation across his mind' (*DBS*, 94). As with descriptions of events inside the brothel from within the secret room resembling film in their sequential development, these conceptions come to be fully realised and appreciated as the film begins. Similar to the way in which recollections 'skip' through his mind, significant emphasis is placed on the medium's fluid movement: 'But the figures in this motion picture were exact images, not replicas or characterizations, and the

[14] See Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*'.

action flickered at him rather than flowing past' (*DBS*, 94). The passivity of spectatorship is implied in the passage, whereby the character is being subjected to the phenomena. The notion of these images flickering 'at him', rather than 'flowing past' appears to convey a sense of this. Impressions of a sensory bombardment are furthered through detailing of both the film's properties and the cinema environment itself. Here, it can be seen how the facets of both entities combine to induce the viewer into a transfixed, enraptured state:

> Rather what stunned him was the sweep of it, the huge scope of General Sherman's march […] And how closely it approximated in logistics, if not horror, the war he had just seen. And when the Klan rode, and the Opera itself seemed to shake from the hooves in the dirt, he was also stunned by the force of it. He walked out of the theater feeling he intuitively understood the language of what he had seen, as though the magic that had brought the entire audience to its feet at the end of it, that had shocked them into a frenzied abandon which equalled the same response the troops marching back from war had elicited (*DBS*, 94-95).

Expressed in this excerpt is the convergence of external facets that ultimately engages the viewer. An implied reason for the film resonating with Adolphe is its correlating with his own experience. Not only does his viewing of Griffith's depiction of the U.S. Civil War come following the end of the First World War, but the film manages to crystallize the workings of his own faculties honed from inside the secret room and his circuitous interpretation of events. The film's apparent magical properties disputed, the text instead offers that: 'It was only the sight of something he had been looking for all along, peering behind the surface of things as he had, trying to see the blinding light' (*DBS*, 95). The text's description once again evokes Adolphe's experience inside the secret room through dual reference to his ability to see beyond surfaces and veneers, and in the presence of a fantastic, mysterious light.

This episode can be considered the first instance of film functioning as an analogue for a character's own condition in an Erickson text. Facets of the cinema environment compound this personal significance by accentuating the film's qualities in similar manners observed by Thomson. Description of the cinema 'shaking' as the Ku Klux Klan ride their horses, the sheer scale of the film's battle scenes is amplified by the enormity of the screen to present the experience as a wholly immersive one. This resonates with Thomson's comments on the cinema representing a form of escape; an environment that he has described as 'a privileged domain of fantasy experience.'[15] The outcomes of the cinema experience are multi-faceted, as demonstrated through Adolphe's reactions. An indelible mark is left on his consciousness that signals the beginning of an interest in the medium.

A conversation with a Pathé Studios employee in Paris leads to Adolphe gaining employment with the company. First demonstrating his skills as an editor, his prodigious talents eventually attract the attention of film producer Claude Avril, who entrusts Adolphe with directorship of his epic motion picture *The Death of Marat*. Ignorant of French Revolutionary history, Adolphe instead says that it is 'the shadows' of the events themselves that has piqued his interest. (*DBS*, 102). Again, this hints at the centrality of light in Adolphe's conceptions. The strange light that offered visibility to the world outside the secret room can be paralleled with

[15] Thomson, *How to Watch a Movie*, p. 35.

the cinema's light that illuminated Griffith's depiction of the U.S. Civil War. Similarly, the light of cinema will create 'shadows' of events from the French Revolution in this instance. The importance of light in shaping Adolphe's unique conceptions of events and collective experience is implied here, creating alternate or skewed versions of the actual. This can be deemed consistent with Mulvey's assertions of the medium of film representing a convergence between old and new aesthetics, alongside her observations on the camera obscura's representing a natural touchstone in its eventual formation.

The fictional village of Wyndeaux is chosen as the film shoot's location. Resembling the word 'window', Erickson's fascination with different modes of seeing is again suggested. The village is chosen primarily because of its apparent seclusion from wider French society, giving the impression of it being locked in a state of temporal stasis. Untouched by the atrocities of the First World, the Hundred Years War and the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte are other historical events described as failing to have affected the village. The village itself is presented in quaint terms, as though a literal film set. Such a comparison is furthered by the arrival of Avril Productions to 'wreak a bedazzled and virgin havoc' upon Wyndeaux (*DBS*, 112). The village's transformation is presented in stark terms, 'its own facades mingling with newer, more disposable ones, its own scenes clashing with ones shot through with looking-glass light' (*DBS*, 112). The blurring of different states—of artifice and apparent actuality—are suggested here, comparable to the novel's earlier depiction of Paris. The nature of these presentations underlines exactly how Adolphe's interpreting of external features is imbued with artificial characteristics associated with film. Reference to facades and scenes carries an obvious dual meaning in such contexts, illustrating exactly how certain environmental properties are refracted through the lens of film. This in itself can be considered representative of a particular mode of seeing, in which film's influence on one's perceptions of an environment is inescapable and deeply pronounced.

Description of the film's production is paralleled with a detailing of events from Adolphe's personal life. Under his influence, Janine is encouraged to flee from the clutches of Jean-Thomas and make the journey to Wyndeaux. Janine's arrival in the village sees her become conscious of a mysterious blue light following her:

> Within four days of her arrival, even as the company was still preparing for production forty-eight hours away, she sat in the middle of the night staring at the blue; it awakened her. It had been on the backs of her eyelids and on the film of her pupils, and when she rolled over and put her mouth to the pillow, she tasted it. The texture of it was thick like cognac, but the taste was of metal. She sat up and put her head in her hands, clutched the blanket to her chest, and looked through the shutters of the window to the sea and the lights of the boats (*DBS*, 107).

A number of motifs and effects are evident here that are continually evoked in this plot strand. Sight is explicitly correlated with film in reference to the 'film' of Janine's pupils, as though it is a biological medium. The strangeness of the light is referenced in shaping perceptions; its all-encompassing presentation and unseen point of origin bringing to mind cinema projection. Similarly, the light's distinct properties are elevated even further at insinuation of its seeming solidity in a synesthetic presentation. The light's imparting of a metallic taste, its consistency resembling that of cognac, can be viewed as symptoms of

tangibility. Implied, however, in the comparison to cognac is the notion of intoxication. Effectively, the light's strangeness signals the spread of a similar sensation throughout other aspects relating to perceptions of environment. This very effect is noticeable in description of Adolphe and Janine enjoying a drink in one of Wyndeaux's cafes; its interior resembling 'a huge lantern' (*DBS*, 108). The mysterious light sighted from the secret room is evoked once more.

As Janine surveys her surroundings, an old sailor strongly implied to be Adolphe's twin brother seemingly and inexplicably regresses in age before handing her a cognac bottle that contains a pair of blinking eyes. The incident itself is indicative of the novel's frequent shifts in tone, constantly delving into dream-like surreal states. The atmosphere as a result is often illusory and unreal, again evoking the unreality of film as a medium and as a literal form of escape. The centrality of perceptual faculties in Erickson's works—alongside an implicit suggestion at their inherent unreliability—in interpreting both events and environment assists in the creation of this atmosphere. In essence, the twin senses of wonder and the fantastical that film engenders are comparably discernible in Erickson's environmental depictions. The abstracted image of the blinking eyes, in particular, emblematises the subjective nature of and multi-faceted approach to portraying a host of different perspectives. The free-flowing surrealist content of the landscape affirms the important role that such perceptual faculties have in shaping both the style and tone of the text itself.

The recurrence of mysterious lights in various forms also signals stark tonal shifts. In the same café, Janine witnesses the same sailor demonstrating a trick involving blue light and glass cognac bottles: 'This bottle had no blue whatsoever, until the old sailor seemed to pour into it the blue of the other bottles' (*DBS*, 109). The light's colour is significant in this respect. From illuminating environmental properties beyond Adolphe's secret room and conveying the scope of Griffith's presentation of the U.S. Civil War, its presence now appears emblematic of the melancholia that comes to shroud this plot strand. With Erickson's disparate narratives also typically reconnecting at each novel's denouement, the colour blue acts as an evocative motif that ties the novel's two main stories. Alexandru Budac notes this effect in his critique of *Days*, noting on its multi-faceted employment in order to represent different conceptions for different characters: 'The "blue" in *Days* is not always the same. It is Adolphe's blue, Michel's blue, and Lauren's blue. No picture or movie could render them rightly. It is the reader's task to correlate chromatic hues with emotional tones.'[16] Again, the subjectivity of perceptions and subsequent emotional response is referenced here, additionally informing of the unifying effect of certain motifs.

The light's darkening colour is, as established, reflective of the story's tonal shifts. The film's shooting proves problematic. Avril Productions experiences financial difficulties. The titular role of Marat is recast. Janine's pregnancy causes the shoot to be delayed, on account of her playing the female lead of Marat's tormented lover, Charlotte Corday. Adolphe also experiences a number of personal difficulties alongside these events that further impacts on the film's production. A creative crisis of confidence is only resolved upon his reading of an

[16] Budac, 'The Blue and White Visual Narrative…', p. 69.

interview in which D.W. Griffith praises his skills as a director; an incident that represents an early examples of Erickson's intertextual incorporation directly influencing narrative direction. Adolphe and Janine's relationship also continues to decline after she again falls pregnant almost immediately after giving birth to their son, Jacques. The birth of Adolphe's son coincides with the arrival of a man named Varnette in Wyndeaux. Varnette approaches Adolphe and claims ownership of Janine. It soon transpires that Varnette is actually Jean-Thomas, going by a new name with a markedly different gait on account of being pushed from the brothel by Adolphe. Tellingly, Varnette arrives in Wyndeaux on a 'still blue night', simultaneously affirming the significance of light as a motif in addition to outlining how the device is used to establish an all-encompassing mood (*DBS*, 122). The proposition to which Adolphe reluctantly agrees is to return Janine following the film's conclusion, with Varnette funding the rest of the project. This gives Adolphe the idea to stall production of the film in order for Janine to remain with him in Wyndeaux for as long as possible.

The dynamic of Adolphe and Janine's relationship alters significantly as a consequence. Pressured by a combination of the shoot, Janine's pregnancy, and Varnette's proposition, Adolphe's behaviour becomes more erratic. He becomes more possessive of Janine to the extent that more scenes involving her character are extemporaneously added to the script, causing the production crew to joke that the film should be retitled '*La Mort de Charlotte*' (*DBS*, 127). It is possible to view this behavioural change as an example of the blurring of apparently real and artificial forms that recurs throughout Erickson's fiction. This very development is in itself rooted in a posed fascination with differences in modes of seeing, whereby apparent distinctions between states ultimately come to erode within the viewer's consciousness. This effect can be seen during description of Adolphe making love to Janine in an aggressive fashion as a camera rolls in the background:

> Meanwhile, her pregnancy notwithstanding, he took to making love to Janine more violently, and one night she realized a camera was running just inches from her face as they did it. I trust you, Adolphe, she kept saying, clinging to him, and he said to her, looking at the ecstasy of her expression, That is the look I want, for the moment when you murder Marat (*DBS*, 127).

As well as functioning as an external representation of this internal assimilation of apparently distinct and separate entities, the described actions in the above excerpt bring to mind Mulvey's 'male gaze' theory. Although presentations of male scopophilia become more pronounced in later Erickson works—and will, in turn, be examined during this chapter—this incident constitutes one of its earliest incarnations. Janine is clearly depicted as a passive artistic subject here; a presentation aided by the presence of the camera and Adolphe's instructions as a director. The relationship between Adolphe and Janine both a working and personal one, it is clear from the referenced passage that ultimate power lies with the male figure. Janine's 'performance'—in both an acting and sexual sense—is being critiqued by Adolphe in his demand of a certain look from her. The portrayal is consistent with Mulvey's observations on the nature of sexual imbalance between the 'active/male' and 'passive/female' forms that enables the male figure to 'project its phantasy on to the female

figure, which is styled accordingly.'[17] Janine's role here is a dual one, representing both her own self as Adolphe's lover, and the part of Charlotte Corday under Adolphe's influence as director of the film. Both identities are presented as having converged in this instance.

It should, though, be stressed that Adolphe's hold over Janine is very much a temporary one on account of Varnette's proposition. Adolphe's subsequent desire to keep Janine in his company by prolonging production could be considered in a similar vein with Mulvey's assertion of female sexuality often impinging a film's narrative flow. This is attributed to the female figure's obvious scopophilic qualities: '[…] Her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative.'[18] Mulvey's observation can be seen in the text to be represented in metafictional terms, given mention of Adolphe and Janine's respective double roles. The notion of female sexuality serving to 'freeze' narrative flow can be seen as being transposed onto this specific plot feature upon consideration of Adolphe's desire to remain with Janine. The prolonged shoot, coupled with Wyndeaux's apparent stasis as an environment are facets can be considered additional facets that strengthen this interpretation.

Following completion of the film, Adolphe escorts Janine to Wyndeaux's train station, where she is forcibly seized against her wishes by Varnette and his henchmen. As the train to Paris departs, she forlornly calls for Adolphe. The experience leaves Adolphe suicidal as he is left to aimlessly wander through Wyndeaux. The notion of apparent actuality and artifice blurring within the character's consciousness is again alluded to in this instance. Here, Adolphe appears in a bereft contemplative state, waiting 'for one splash of blinding light on the surface' before submerging himself, asking himself if 'what was behind the screen was no different from what was there before it […]' (*DBS*, 130).

Erickson's description here references the interconnection between light and film in influencing perceptual faculties that helps to blur distinctions between appearance and reality. The apparent artifice of film and screen projections is questioned implicitly, given the various intertwinements between the personal and professional in Adolphe's character. His experiences in the French army can be correlated with his viewing of *The Birth of a Nation*. Comparatively, Adolphe's troubles shooting *The Death of Marat* seeped into his personal life. Distinctions between these respective forms are presented as having blurred within the character's consciousness as a result. Not only do frequent textual allusions to light represent the critical role of innate faculties in perceiving these external properties in such a manner, but also create the impression of a continuous filmic effect in place.

'The Cinema of Hysteria': *Amnesiascope*

[17] See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 833-844 (p. 837).
[18] ibid, p. 837.

Erickson's fifth novel—the disjointed episodic narrative *Amnesiascope*—is the next in which film features as a central premise, specifically in relation to critical interpretation. The text constitutes a development of Erickson's interest in depicting spectatorship of the medium. Whereas *Days* conveys a sense of the medium's fantastical qualities that influences textual structure and atmospheric effect, *Amnesiascope* instead portrays a much more comprehensive critical engagement with the medium. A notable by-product of this form of engagement is in its analogous employment, used by the novel's protagonist as a means of affirming certainty in his own perceptual faculties. Theories concerning cinematic trends and their subsequent influencing of these same faculties are discussed. The creative process, along with its validating effect, is explored. Critical conceptions are referenced as signifiers of cogency. The underlying fragility of the protagonist's mental capacity is often alluded to within the free-flowing landscape of the novel's 'post-Los Angeles' setting. Both entities implicitly react in accordance with each other's workings, with both being equally subject to change. The novel's various presentations of character engagement with the medium of film, therefore, become an external mechanism charting the narrator's personal decline. Certain incidents and conceptions relating to the medium of film are also shown to come to the forefront of the narrative before receding again without ever being fully resolved. This demonstrates how the novel's episodic structure creates an impression of the narrator's internal crisis.

Before beginning a textual analysis of *Amnesiascope*, the novel's arresting title is worthy of brief discussion. Evidently, the title is a portmanteau of the words 'amnesia' and 'scope'. Both represent contrasts, especially upon consideration of 'scope' having associations with a clear means of seeing or perceiving. The uneasy alliance of these two words is in many ways indicative of the novel's conscious inconsistencies pertaining to plot, perceptions, and the portrayed environment. The word 'scope' also possesses connotations with 'cinemascope', suggesting of one of the novel's primary motifs. Again, a sense of visual clarity is implied in such an interpretation; one that further appears at odds with the forgetfulness or internalised obfuscation that 'amnesia' evokes. Whilst the word can be used in reference to a collective condition or phenomenon, the novel's first person, present tense narrative form—a rare occurrence in Erickson's fiction—affirms a sense of the personal enshrined in the text. A reading of the novel's title in this respect also suggests an aligning of facets of a particular medium with individual perceptual faculties. Essentially, one's unique mode of seeing can be regarded as being marked by similarly implied innate inconsistences. Aiding such a viewpoint is an incident in the novel's episodic plot that sees the narrator's love interest construct a sculpture known as the 'Memoryscope'; the primary function of which is to show the holder 'the memory he or she has most forgotten' (*A*, 142). Specific detail of this will be discussed in greater depth at a more relevant juncture of this section, but it at least highlights a marrying of internal faculties with external media forms.

Numerous examples of intertextuality in the text strengthen such an interpretation. As discussed in Chapter 1, the narrator's place of residency—the Hotel Hamblin—is stylistically influenced by features of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Barton Fink*. Further examples relate, most notably, to literature. The narrator demonstrates a fascination with a woman

named Justine emblazoned across a billboard that doesn't actually appear to be advertising anything. Description of her physique as 'slightly less pneumatic' evokes Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) (*A*, 16). The term itself is used similarly in Huxley's novel as a means of dehumanising the female form through allusion to sexuality: '"Everyone says I'm awfully pneumatic," said Lenina reflectively, patting her own legs.'[19] Tropes associated with Mulvey's 'male gaze' theory are brought to mind in this respect, becoming more pronounced as the novel examines the narrator's relationship with film. *Amnesiascope* also features a character named 'Ventura' based on the writer Michael Ventura, who is a close friend of Erickson's. Functioning as a colleague and confidante of the narrator in the text, this relationship closely resembles their own true-life equivalent. Of further interest, Erickson appears as a character towards the conclusion of Ventura's novel *The Death of Frank Sinatra* (1996), published in the same year as *Amnesiascope*. This can hardly be dismissed as mere coincidence. Such facets, rather, serve to underline the extent of personal influences, interests, and associations shape the text.

Typical of a number of Erickson's novels, *Amnesiascope* includes intertextual reference to characters, plots, and facets from across the writer's oeuvre. The general effect of this detailed in Chapter 1, these intertextual references signify a sense of the personal in the text. Reference is made to a local landmark called 'Black Clock Park' where time capsules are buried; evoking *Tours* in titular form, as well as a plot point of *The Sea*. The narrator also recalls past love affairs during lengthy periods of introspection with a number of characters from previous Erickson novels. A relationship with a woman called Lauren—previously married to a cyclist named Jason—is discussed, alluding to *Days*. Recollections of Lauren and offset by memories of a woman called Sally in characteristic terms ('Sally dark, Lauren light') (*A*, 63). Such description, however, can also be considered in a physical context as a further signifier of Erickson's recurring preoccupation with Sally Hemings, having depicted the figure previously in *Leap Year* and *Arc d'X*.

Given the novel's episodic structure, it is worth stressing that the events described occur in a fragmentary fashion, often interspersed with periods of introspection or the introduction of an additional plot development, before being returned to at a later point in the narrative. The various plot points examined in this chapter will therefore be discussed in their entirety, devoid of reference to any internal digressions or intersecting events. Following establishment of the novel's 'post-Los Angeles' setting in the aftermath of the Wurlitzer-evoking cataclysmic incident known as 'the Quake', the narrator's respective personal and professional situations are outlined. His relationship with a woman called Viv in many ways mirrors both the fluctuating nature of the landscape and his own perceptual faculties. Occasional lovers, sometime creative partners, the pair's relationship is presented in tumultuous terms, typified by lengthy absences and mutual suspicion. The nature of these conceptions cause the narrator to speculate on past romantic dalliances as he is often found questioning his own behaviour. Concurrent with these interactions and periods of introspection, details of his occupation as a film critic for a weekly newspaper are offered. His eclectic and eccentric co-workers are profiled. These include Ventura, a dispenser of trite

[19] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 80.

and unscientific social theories, the psychotic Shale Marquette, and crude humourist Dr. Billy O'Forte; who are known collectively as 'the Cabal'. Their publisher is a closet homosexual named Freud N. Johnson. His first name contains an obvious reference to Freudian psychoanalysis, indicating of its thematic prominence as the narrative progresses and specific details of the narrator's engagement with film become further pronounced.

The newspaper itself is based 'out of the hollowed-out cavern of the old Egyptian Theater, not far from the mouth of the sunken L.A. subway' (*A*, 63). Simultaneously conveyed via this presentation is a sense of the destruction that typifies Erickson's 'post-Los' Angeles, whilst making known film's implicitness in the landscape. Indeed, the various environmental fluctuations and inconsistencies that signify the 'post-Los Angeles' of *Amnesiascope* are themselves influenced by film, as Erickson has previously suggested:

> Sometimes I think it's more a case of what the reader is better off not knowing, so I can create a Los Angeles of my imagination that may come closer to the true spirit of Los Angeles. If you've ever seen movies that are set in Los Angeles, though it's true of anywhere, New York or San Francisco, and you know anything about the setting, you can always tell how the continuity of the movie never adds up. They're driving down one street and then the next second they're driving down another street that you know is on the other side of the city and it works if you don't know that much about the city.[20]

Erickson's settings—especially his versions of Los Angeles—usually conceptualised as opposed to standing as literal depictions, the influence of film in their formation is apparent here. The disconnect that Erickson speaks of in relation to screen portrayals of different cities is represented in the inconsistencies of 'post-Los Angeles'. Both constitute a fundamental reimagining of the city's properties for purposes of narrative or thematic progression, regardless of genre, form, or tone. Whereas film enables this form of reconstruction through editing techniques, a comparable textual portrayal is dependent on a conceptualising of the city's distinct features and facets. Although specific details of the 'post-Los Angeles' and its representation as an example of psychotopography in Erickson's fiction will be analysed in greater detail in the next chapter, it is worth noting in this respect the extent to which film intrinsically shapes the protagonist's milieu in *Amnesiascope*. Interestingly, the lack of continuity that Erickson speaks of in the above excerpt is evident in the novel. The disjointed episodic form is reflective of this. As previously discussed, certain plots relating to film are suddenly discontinued without ever being adequately addressed and then seemingly forgotten as the focus of the novel shifts.

The presence of the Egyptian Theater stands as a fixed representation of displacement within a fluctuating post-apocalyptic landscape, when one considers David Thomson's observations on the cinema environment perpetuating a sense of the exotic in order to accentuate the spectator's experience. In alluding to such intrinsic aspects of cinema spectatorship and their subsequent affecting of the viewer in his portrayal of 'post-Los Angeles', an impression of a free-flowing, surrealist landscape is able to be engendered. Eventually, the external fluctuations that characterise the environment come to be reflected in the narrator's

[20] Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson'.

conceptions. His critical engagement with film acts as the vehicle for this presentation of internal uncertainty. A personal point of fascination comes in the narrator's outlining of his own theory of 'the Cinema of Hysteria'. A notion returned to through a plot thread introduced towards the conclusion of *Zeroville*, the protagonist outlines the crux of his theory to the reader here:

> I hoped that in the city of no politics, no identity, no moment and no rationale, a new cinema would present itself, which I called the Cinema of Hysteria. I was convinced that throughout the Twentieth Century this clandestine cinema was already forming though no one noticed, since by its very nature it was scattered and entropic and found only in outposts represented by such movies as *In a Lonely Place*, *The Shanghai Gesture*, *Bride of Frankenstein*, *A Place in the Sun*, *Gilda*, *Gun Crazy*, *Vertigo*, *One-Eyed Jacks*, *Splendor in the Grass*, *The Fountainhead*, *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Pinocchio* (*A*, 51).

These films are offered as examples in relation to the narrator's opinion that 'they make no sense at all—and we understand them completely' (*A*, 51). Interestingly, half of these films were listed by Erickson as part of his 'Essential Movie Library' series: *Vertigo* (#2), *In a Lonely Place* (#53), *A Place in the Sun* (#80), *Bride of Frankenstein* (#89), *The Manchurian Candidate* (#91), and *Pinocchio* (#93). Further parallels between Erickson and the narrator can be established as a result. The narrator's paradoxical assertion of these films making no sense, yet being understood implicitly is reflected in a number of Erickson's appraisals from the series. *Vertigo* is described as 'psychedelic noir' complete with a 'dreamlike shimmer.'[21] James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* is explained as being 'lyrical and deeply strange', and Erickson notes of an 'unsettling eroticism' existent between the Monster and the Bride throughout the film.[22] *The Manchurian Candidate*, meanwhile, is assessed as being 'at the cross coordinates of surrealist thriller and paranoid satire' that is 'pitched at the level of a barely repressed frenzy that knows no ideology.'[23] The strangeness of each respective film becomes apparent through such examples. Indeed, a sense of this is furthered in the text as the narrator elaborates upon his theory, establishing it within a national context:

> These are the movies that would be left when the bottom fell out of America altogether, the cinema that would rip itself loose of its moorings and stutter across an American screen that remembers nothing. In an age riddled with uncertainty by technological acceleration, financial upheaval and the plague of exchanged bodily fluids, when we're panicked enough to root ourselves in anything we can still pretend to recognize […] The undercurrent of the age pulls us to an irrational truth, for which only an irrational cinema is sufficient (*A*, 51).

The above excerpt reveals that the novel's 'post-Los Angeles' setting is derived from the national conceptions that Erickson has explored in texts such as *Rubicon Beach* and *Leap Year*. Ostensibly, the portrayed environment is the culmination of the various dichotomies,

---

[21] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #2: *Vertigo* (1958)', *Los Angeles* (23rd October, 2012). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-2-vertigo-1958/>. [Accessed 8th November 2018].

[22] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #89: *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)', *Los Angeles* (29th July, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-89-bride-of-frankenstein-1935/>. [Accessed 8th November 2018].

[23] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #91: *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)', *Los Angeles* (12th August, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-91-the-manchurian-candidate-1962/>. [Accessed 8th November 2018].

contrasts and paradoxes that Erickson has observed as being enshrined in the country's cultural and historical fabric. This, in turn, partly rationalises the environment's fluctuations and inconsistencies, wherein it can be seen as a literalising of these various contradictions. Notions of the bottom 'falling' out of America suggest upheaval and disorder. The nuclear age that Erickson has made repeated reference to throughout his oeuvre is typified by these same conflicts that serve to heighten collective anxieties. The excerpt above appears suggestive of the respective legacies of anxieties fostered by Ronald Reagan's economic policies ('financial upheaval') and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s ('exchanged bodily fluids') as being complicit in the formation of 'post-Los Angeles'. Considering this, 'the Cinema of Hysteria' and the shared strangeness that connects its films functions as an analogue, dually emblemising and mapping the weird contradictions inherent within the American national experience. The 'technological acceleration' spoken of in the referenced excerpt can comparably be seen in paradoxical terms, as a means of mapping this national experience through the medium of film, whilst additionally representing a source of further anxieties. Erickson himself has suggested this very argument, simultaneously identifying how technology's entailing facets have effectively come to analogise personal and collective experiences:

> The paradox of technology is that even as it has made apocalypse not only possible but easy, it's also so literalized the imagining of apocalypse as to reduce it to the icon of a gas mask. It is the business of culture to turn the events of our lives into metaphors, and if they're large and resonant enough, to turn the metaphors eventually into myth.[24]

Erickson's words here can be considered similar to the narrator's closing remarks on his 'Cinema of Hysteria' theory. The capacity for culture—especially film—to provide metaphors for personal and collective events is alluded to here, as the 'Cinema of Hysteria' is discussed in these same contexts:

> In the end this cinema resides at either the bottom of the psyche or the very top, the final shrill expression of a truth beyond words and thought, addressing the concerns of obsession and redemption that are beyond the rational calculations of technology or the rational price of finance or even the rational ravishment of plague (*A*, 51).

Essentially, the medium's contextualising in these personal and collective spheres is what allows for its various facets to pass into myth. Its ability to resonate on some profound level—often beyond rationale or coherent explanation—is in itself indicative of 'the Cinema of Hysteria' serving as a metaphor for the paradoxical strangeness of America that Erickson has consistently spoken of.

The narrator's belief in his own theory is often the subject of self-examination, however. These periods typically occur in conjunction with doubts concerning the validity of his occupation as a critic. The profound and instantaneous resonance implied by the narrator in his 'Cinema of Hysteria' theory is juxtaposed with a considered, critical engagement with the medium to establish clear distinctions between modes of viewing: '[…] The audience has

[24] Steve Erickson, 'The Apocalypse—Stay Tuned', *New York Times* (1st February, 1991). <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/01/opinion/the-apocalypse-stay-tuned.html>. [Accessed 8th November 2018].

come to understand that it no longer need subject itself to the actual experience of art but can subsume and synthesize faster and more efficiently art that is already processed by critical interpretation' (*A*, 52).

Such uncertainties permeate even his personal life as he obsessively examines past relationships to the extent that they bring forth repressed traits, such as a childhood stutter. The narrator declares 'My Cinema of Hysteria grows' prior to listing the following films: *The Big Combo*, *Phantom Lady*, *Humoresque*, *Leave Her to Heaven*, *Autumn Leaves*, *Duel in the Sun*, *The Curse of the Cat People*, *Land of the Pharaohs*, *Some Come Running*, *Written on the Wind*, *Kitten With a Whip*, *When Worlds Collide* (*A*, 134).

Later, whilst Viv is abroad, the narrator falls into a depression. The 'Cinema of Hysteria' is conveyed during this period as an almost sentient entity, as though forcibly imposing their strange, disorienting properties upon his consciousness: '[…] The movies come at me one after another on mysterious airwaves, never stopping until I'm the one who's hysterical' (*A*, 203). Their affecting of his mood is explicitly described as notions of an intrinsic link between character and medium are further established. The films listed during this period are as follows: *Touch of Evil*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, *Point Blank*, *Pretty Poison*, *Mondo Topless*, *Cutter's Way*, *Lifeforce*, *Nightdreams*, *Wax*, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (*A*, 203). The positioning of an ellipsis at the end of this list suggests of the possibility of more films being classified in a hysterical context. The sudden break can also be construed as being reflective of the working of perceptual faculties, in the potential for involuntary digression or shifts in focus.

Of those films listed above, a further three have featured as part of Erickson's 'Essential Movie Library': *Nightdreams* (#101), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (#100), *Sweet Smell of Success* (#60), and *Touch of Evil* (#44). A clear sense of the personal's inherence in the text can be gained from this, particularly when *Touch of Evil* (1958) is described as being set in the 'nameless bordertown of your nightmares.'[25] In a similar vein, Alexander Mackendrick's *Sweet Smell of Success* (1958) is referenced for its externalising of lurid vices, embittered resentment, and unchecked desires; a film that is shaped 'by the atmosphere of clubs and curbsides, penthouses where professional character-assassins lust after their baby sisters, and men in rooms pimping out women to other men in other rooms, when they're not destroying other men.'[26]

Again, the link between film and the self becomes more pronounced in light of such assertions. The reference to 'hysteria' in such a context brings to mind Freud's work in the field, particularly his analysis of Dora. The eighteen-year-old patient serving as a case study for the condition of hysteria, common physical ailments of coughing fits and migraines were detectable alongside mental afflictions such as depression and antisocial behaviour.

[25] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #44: *Touch of Evil* (1958)', *Los Angeles* (3rd September, 2013). <http://www.lamag.com/laculture/the-essential-movie-library-44-touch-of-evil-1958/>, [Accessed 8th November 2018].
[26] Steve Erickson, 'The Essential Movie Library #60: *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957)', *Los Angeles* (7th January, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-60-sweet-smell-of-success-1957/>. [Accessed 8th November 2018].

Theorising that her hysterical symptoms stemmed from either past psychological trauma or lingering issues relating to sex ('Theory requires us to see the state of memories relating to the case history as the necessary correlative of the hysterical symptoms.'), psychotherapy sessions consisted of Freud listening to Dora relay stories of her past familial interactions.[27]

Amnesiascope performs a similar function, in effect, both structurally and formally. Frequent digressions into the narrator's past enabled by the confessional tone of the pseudo-memoir form indicate the root of the character's anxieties. Parallels between the narrator and Dora continue upon further examination. Freud's case study refers to a traumatic sexual event from Dora's past, where she was kissed by a family friend referred to as 'Herr K'. Comparably, the narrator of *Amnesiascope* recounts a former love interest known only as 'K' With Dora's suspicions that her father and Herr K were secretly lovers representing a further source of anguish, interpretation of her dreams as manifestations of repressed thoughts and emotions were considered critical to her being cured. According to Freud, their symbolism revealed a repressed sexual attraction to Herr K that had since been redirected towards the therapist. 'The dream is the reaction to a fresh and stimulating experience, which necessarily awakens the memory of the only analogous experience from earlier years,' Freud wrote regarding this.[28]

In *Amnesiascope*, the dream-like atmosphere and the textual prominence of memory are essentially crystallized via reference to film; the medium acting as a tissue between the two. The strange elements of the narrator's 'Cinema of Hysteria' appear analogous to the odd nature of his own experience. Part of a film's ability to resonate with a particular audience is its ability to appeal on an unconscious level, as is suggested through the narrator's assertion of the viewer innately and instinctively understanding its seemingly nonsensical properties. Intriguingly, a measure of similarity between dreams and films can be ascertained from Freud's notes—even if involuntarily—on account of his deconstruction of Dora's dreams featuring reference to 'scenes': 'That is the scene with the kiss in the shop, during which Dora felt disgust.'[29] *Amnesiascope* forges a connection between dreams and memory through its treatment of film, in a manner reflective of what Erickson has observed of the medium's ability to capture a form of 'dream logic.'[30] In essence, the medium becomes a literalising of these intangible elements, offering the narrator a visual mapping of his own internal deterioration.

The very notion of this appears closely compatible with Freud's identifying of screen memories; a memory of which the 'value consists in the fact that it represents thoughts and impressions from a later period and that its content is connected with these by links of a symbolic of similar nature.'[31] In Erickson's novel, the thread of the narrator's memories is connected by film. With the medium's analogical facets consistently alluded to throughout *Amnesiascope*, the narrator's recollections and interpretation of it serve to conceal deeper

[27] Sigmund Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of Hysteria (Dora)', in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 435-540 (p. 444).
[28] ibid, p. 509.
[29] ibid, p. 509.
[30] Yoshiaki Koshikawa, 'Steve Erickson Meets Ryu Murakami.'
[31] Freud, 'Screen Memories', p. 553.

traumas. His romantic issues frequently explored, certain childhood anxieties additionally manifest at various points in the text. The recurrence of his childhood stutter represents an obvious indicator of such concerns announcing themselves at the forefront of his consciousness. Similar to most of the novel, recollections of his stutter are presented in a dream-like conception:

> In the Stutter was born the Dream. 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 memory of my earliest communication, back before the beginning of memory (*A*, 147).

Reference to an interconnection between dreams and memory gives an illusory feel to such recollections. The inability to accurately locate both his first stuttered and properly enunciated words—'before the beginning of memory'—suggests the depth of his anxieties, as though an innate part of his being. Later in the text, a meeting with his mother is presented as a form of catharsis. The realisation comes at this point that Viv is the woman with whom he should settle, inspired by his mother's mock-threat to kill him should he let her go: 'She was only half kidding when she said it. She had drunk only enough wine to inspire her to say the truth, rather than so much as to say what she didn't really mean' (*A*, 195).

Certain aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis are implicit in this meeting. A form of transference is suggested in the narrator's flitting between unhappy relationships, stemming from a strained relationship since adolescence. The narrator's father is described as having passed away, their reconnection and the subsequent peacefulness he ascertains from the meeting engenders oedipal connotations. 'My mother cooks dinner and we discuss movies, the empty theater beneath our feet and the days when it wasn't empty, and politics and the country,' the narrator says (*A*, 195). Recollections of film and cinema-going as a leisure pursuit are depicted here as a point of connection between the two to suggest a shared interest in this respect. Film, therefore, can be asserted as being a constant presence in his life, crystallizing a number of conceptions on account of is its prominence within his consciousness. Memories of the medium are essentially presented here as concealing much deeper issues and concerns of a personal and societal nature, in accordance with Freud's thinking.

The close relationship between dreams, memory and film is made prominent in a particular plot strand centred on Viv's construction of the Memoryscope. Its purpose to show 'the memory he or she has most forgotten' already established, the concept of literally 'seeing' a memory prompts comparison with film. Further, the notion of a 'forgotten' memory hints at a form of unconscious repression. The aligning of film with facets of the self is identifiable here, alongside the considerable emphasis placed on the process of engaging with the medium. Its working evokes light as a motif in its ability to shape and influence perceptions, bringing to mind its employment in *Days*. Inside the sculpture is a 'mirrored strip that runs from one end to the other, so that when the sun rises to a certain point, the telescope will flash a blinding light' (*A*, 142). The light triggers the invocation of the user's forgotten memory. Given the sculpture's association with cinema, light's integral presence in the medium is implied, as it so often is in *Days*. In contrast to *Days*, however, where light is used to

illuminate surroundings and create an impression of filming being in effect even away from production, here it is used to recall memories in a visual and vivid manner.

This particular episode represents the conclusion of two intersecting plot threads that portrays the inherent fallibility of memory. Both centre on the narrator's engagement with film. The first of these directly references *Days*. Sceptical of his own 'Cinema of Hysteria' theory and suffering from ennui at work, the narrator concocts a hoax review of a 'lost hysterical silent masterpiece' (*A*, 52). The film he fabricates is *The Death of Marat*, directed by Adolphe Sarre. Description of the film's make-up reads like a pastiche of historical periods and filmic techniques of the period. 'The only thing in my review that was real was that there was indeed a filmmaker named D.W. Griffith, though the interview referred to was made up as well,' the narrator concedes, mirroring Griffith's praise of Sarre in *Days* (*A*, 53). The review is published with no real objection, aside from Shale informing the narrator that Sarre's listed age at the time he made *The Death of Marat* is incorrect. Later, following further lengthy digressions and periods of soul-searching, the narrator overhears a conversation between two patrons in a bar concerning *The Death of Marat*:

> The more they talked and 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… well, 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, let alone on a screen (*A*, 94).

The notion of film representing some part of the unconscious self is signified here. Rather than be expressed as some conscious faculty, however, this plot arguably locates the medium as a part of the repressed subconscious. With film often conveyed to the reader as a dream-like projection, the narrator's fabrication of the film along with the subsequent ambiguity concerning its legitimacy can be viewed as metaphors conveying the contrast between repressed and realised states.

The episode could also be construed as a failure of memory. The second plot strand, as discussed earlier, appears to convey this very inconsistency. Such a presentation manifests through the narrator and Viv's dual wish to produce an erotic film. The chosen title is *White Whisper*, precisely because 'it doesn't mean anything at all, at least as far as we can tell' (*A*, 88). The part of the female lead is influenced by a prior encounter the narrator had in a bar with a sexually abrasive woman named Jasper. Similar to the lack of meaning for the film's title, there is no apparent reason for Jasper's unusual name. The character herself relays this fact to the narrator: '"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). The seeming arbitrariness of the film's title and Jasper's name reflects the novel's abrupt shifts in tone and perspective, often sighted through the narrative's recollections. The encounter itself leaves an indelible impression on the narrator as he incorporates features of their encounter into both the script and the female lead's characterisation:

> I replayed in my mind my conversation with Jasper: did she say breasts or tits? So over the next several days I revised the script, making the second draft more explicit, to which Viv

> objected that now it was *too e*xplicit. "I mean, think about it. Would a woman say *that*?" So I revised the script again, taking things out, to which Viv complained it now needed something more, something else (*A*, 89).

An intriguing contrast emerges from this incident concerning filmic adaptation of an event. The encounter itself is seemingly too strange to be deemed translatable to the screen. In itself, this can be considered a comment on the inherent strangeness of the 'post-Los Angeles' setting. A further entailment of this is the narrator's questioning of his own memory; whether the events in question have been adequately remembered. The inconsistent workings of memory are reflected both in the properties of setting, that are sought to be captured by the filmic medium in the context of the narrator personally revising scripts and internally replaying incidents. This presentation is a further strengthened upon Jasper's casting in the role. Not only does she fail to recall having previously met the narrator, but she also struggles to identify with a role that has been based on her character.

Memory and film are posed as converging entities in this respect. A notable outcome of this is the blurring of tangible points of distinction that serves to create a prevailing weirdness. The textual overlap between dreams and memories, and film functions as a conduit channelling this effect. The novel makes numerous suggestions of the self being linked intrinsically to the filmic medium. The wrap party following the film's production captures this notion aesthetically. Here, film is used decoratively with a monitor displaying an intercut montage consisting of images from *Metropolis* (1927), *Vampyr* (1932), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), the 'Cinema of Hysteria', and *White Whisper*. Further, Jasper is described as entering the party as one of her thighs was 'blurting across the monitor' (*A*, 108). Although such a detail can be deemed relatively minor, it nonetheless encapsulates the blurring of distinctions necessitated through engagement with film. Often employed as a crucial point of connection between dreams and memory, various psychoanalytical readings of the narrator's character are consequently enabled.

Personal Viewings: *Zeroville*

A number of depictions of cinema spectatorship in *Zeroville* can similarly be examined in a psychoanalytical context. Of further interest, correlating with the emergence of television during the novel's time period, brief comment is also afforded to the effect of engaging with the filmic platform via this medium.

The notion of film being ingrained is Vikar's consciousness at the outset of the text following his arrival in Los Angeles. The novel immediately focuses on the tattoo of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor from *A Place in the Sun*: '[…] The two most beautiful people in the history of the movies, she the female version of him, and he the male version of her' (*Z*, 15). Film is literally a part of Vikar's being. The tattoo's position over his brain is further significant, demonstrating the depth of film's effect on his consciousness. Erickson has

described Vikar's tattoo as 'a good visual metaphor for the rest of the book'; an assertion that illustrates the extent to which film informs Vikar's character.[32]

Vikar's memories are fundamentally associated with film. *Goldfinger* (1964), the third movie of the James Bond franchise, is the first film Vikar sees. His conceptions of the film are presented in the form of a flashback that contains reference to a dream. Although specific detail of where this viewing took place is absent, the film's paralleling with a dream can be seen as an early indicator of the medium's synching with the self. The dream itself—featuring a 'horizontal rock, open and gaping' upon which an unknown figure lies 'awaiting a judgement', barely concealing a message 'carved in a glowing white, ancient language'—becomes more prominent as the novel progresses as Vikar becomes professionally involved in film (*Z*, 50). This strand of the novel's episodic plot explicitly links the medium with the self, given that this dream is later revealed as the clandestine film concealed within every film ever made.

Interestingly, details of films—regardless of their genre or style—are often presented in a dream-like manner. An apparent surrealism associated with the form is often implied that imbues Vikar's conceptions. Memory of a 'beautiful nude woman painted entirely gold' can be deemed indicative of such an assertion. A decontextualized description of the image appears wholly surreal; a presentation accentuated by the form, despite *Goldfinger* not being a surrealist film. Film's function as a connective tissue between dream and memory is further posed in this presentation, moving on to recollections of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. A constituent of both the 'Cinema of Hysteria' and Erickson's 'Essential Movie Library', the seamlessness with which reference to the film occurs, stemming from conceptions of *Goldfinger*, highlights the implicitness of the medium in Erickson's characterisation.

By comparison, the connective aspect of viewing is suggested at the outset of the novel. In this instance, this occurs in a temporal context, signifying the dislocating effect of cinema spectatorship. The first two films that Vikar sees upon his arrival in Los Angeles convey an impression of a temporal dichotomy. The detached temporal stasis of cinema emphasises both this very dichotomy. The films in question are Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and Kubrick's *2001: A Space* Odyssey. The nature of the stasis is predicated further by the ultimate passivity of cinema-viewing, expressed in what David Thomson describes as 'the poetic or fearsome expressiveness of the screen' that reduces the spectator to that of a 'voyeur fantasist.'[33]

Vikar's passivity as a spectator is implied in description of the closeness of the experience, as though being subjected to Dreyer's film: 'Vikar has never seen acting that seemed less to be acting. It's more an inhabitation. The movie is shot completely in close-ups, including the unbearable ending, when the young woman is burned at the stake' (*Z*, 17). The cinema-going experience is presented here as an immersive one. The erosion of tangible points of distinction between artifice and apparent reality are further posed via reference to the experience itself. Features of the cinema environment are subtly posed in conjunction with

[32] Stubbs, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson'.
[33] David Thomson, *The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), p. 363.

description of the film to subtly highlight how such elements combine to initiate the spectator into a willing state of surrender. The end result of this process is the viewer's representing of Thomson's 'voyeur fantasist' construct.

Further, Thomson's assertions of the aesthetics of cinema functioning as an additional means of displacement are implicit in reference to Vikar seeing *2001: A Space Odyssey* at Mann's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. This notion of a sensory displacement being in effect is additionally transposed to conceptions of Kubrick's film: 'As Vikar traveled on what seemed an endless bus to Hollywood, the Traveler hurtles through space toward infinity' (*Z,* 18). Vikar's own experience is paralleled with the film itself, indicating the medium's metaphorical qualities.

A sense of the displacement associated with cinema-viewing is again presented in details of the film's specifics: 'Dimensions fall away from the Traveler faster and faster until, by the end of the movie, he's an old man in a white room where a black monolith appears to him at the moment of death' (*Z,* 18). Considering Vikar's conscious correlating of his own experience with features of the film, it is possible to view this as foreshadowing his death at the text's conclusion. The relationship between viewer and film becomes even more pronounced in this respect upon Vikar's explicit likening himself to the film's 'embryonic, perhaps divine Starchild' having recently arrived in Los Angeles estranged from his father with 'vestiges of an earlier childhood falling away from his like dimensions' (*Z,* 18). A form of rebirth is suggested in this presentation through reference to Vikar as a 'child', with the preceding word 'star' containing obvious Hollywood connotations to signify Vikar's arrival in Los Angeles. The implied sense of displacement is further perpetuated in a temporal capacity following Vikar's exit from the cinema: 'He's now seen two movies, one of the Middle Ages and one of the future, in his first seven hours in Los Angeles' (*Z,* 18). The temporal dichotomy expressed via reference to both films—coupled with acknowledgement of the industrial change occurring in the city at the time—represents another form of displacement. The sensory displacement that typifies cinema-viewing is shown to manifest externally here in Erickson's portrayal of late-sixties Los Angeles.

Vikar's disillusionment with Los Angeles grows soon after. The city fails to live up to his expectations as 'the Movie Capital of the World' on account of the perceived encroachment of other art and media forms on its collective consciousness. Television stands as a notable example in this respect, altering the manner in which viewers engage with film. Such developments are conveyed during an encounter that Vikar has with an African-American burglar at his apartment. Vikar successfully apprehends the burglar and whilst waiting for the police to arrive, switches on the television to find Irving Rapper's *Now, Voyager* (1942) playing. The burglar reveals himself to be an avid film fan as the two begin conversing about a number of different films. Many of the burglar's comments on film relate to racial politics, reflective of how media forms have been employed as social or cultural cyphers. An early indicator of this preoccupation can be found in the burglar's flippant assessment of folk rock as '"White hippie bullshit"' (*Z,* 39). Similar conceptions eventually come to manifest in his analysis of a number of films. Elaborating on his assertion of John Wayne being an 'evil white racist honky pigfucker', the burglar views him to have given 'a performance of

terrifying intensity and sublime psychological complexity' in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) (*Z*, 47). This leads the burglar to a critique of Ford's oeuvre, the Western genre, and consequently American national identity, from a racial standpoint:

> […] *My Darling Clementine*, it's got the inherent mythic resonance of the Western form but in terms post-War white folks understood, figuring they were all worldlier and more sophisticated than before the War. Ford's creation of the archetypal West, laying out codes of conduct that folks either honored or betrayed—and I'm just trying to give the motherfucker due credit, not even holding against him, not too much anyway, the fact that he played a Klansman in that jive *Birth of a Nation* bullshit—anyway Ford's view of the West was so complete at this point that Hawks, Budd Boetticher, Anthony Mann, they could only add to it, you hear what I'm saying? But of course the Western changed along with America's view of itself, from some sort of heroic country, where everybody's free, to the spiritually fucked-up defiled place it really is, and now you got jive Italians, if you can feature that, making the only Westerns worth seeing anymore because white America's too fucking *confused*, can't figure out whether to embrace the myth or the anti-myth […]. (*Z*, 48)

Though something of a rambling diatribe conveyed in a manner reminiscent of the stream of consciousness device, the burglar's words here at least indicate how the medium can be used to either affirm, or assist in shaping the viewer's world view. A potted history of the Western genre is offered by the burglar, who ironically claims it is founded on theft and deception. The potential for repeated viewings can be considered a fundamental component in the formation of such opinions. Posed, as a result, is something of a contrast between the heady immediacy associated with a single viewing and the critical viewpoints that can develop over multiple viewings.

Thomson makes this distinction in his observation as to how 'movies can shift', noting how the potential for repeated viewings on an easy and widely-accessible scale was never envisaged by studios during Hollywood's Golden Age: 'They took their money in their now, the thing we regard as then.'[34] Such a notion is discussed by Thomson in further detail, drawing attention to how, for example, the 'emotional wisdom' of Ernst Lubitsch films such as *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) has become more pronounced through media advancement. Additionally, Thomson goes on to observe how the ability to engage with the medium on a more regular basis has enabled a fragmentary relationship. In essence, the film itself can be abstracted into a series of set pieces or significant plot points that resonate with the viewer. Thomson conveys the effect of this particular development anecdotally:

> My love of film says, Again, please; and DVD lets me look at some highlight instead of the full tedious ninety minutes: Fred Astaire and Eleanor Powell dancing "Begin the Beguine" over and over so I don't have to bother with the rest of *Broadway Melody of 1940*—I can now no longer remember what happens in that story.[35]

Although the initial time period of *Zeroville* predates video technology by around a decade, this abstraction can be considered an inevitability of repeated viewings. The detail with which one is able to zero in on specific incidents—and subsequently be used to validate a particular

[34] Thomson, *How to Watch a Movie*, p. 57.
[35] ibid, p. 58.

world view—appears as one outcome of the increased media accessibility of the time. Intriguingly, this facet appears consistent with Jameson's observation on video and television's inherent capacity to reduce the filmic medium to its own form, whereby specific elements or 'new cultural signs or logos' or conveyed as occurring within an abstracted isolation away from the cinema context that facilitates spectator engagement.[36] The mode of viewing is undoubtedly different, therefore influencing conceptions. Jameson notes of persistent intersections between these abstracted 'cultural signs or logos' that creates demand for 'description and analysis', but that this 'is a relationship between signs for which we have only the most approximate theoretical models.'[37] Repeated viewings undoubtedly prompt critical engagement, yet reduce a film to a series of decontextualized 'moments' can consequently bring about abstract or nebulous thought. This appears evident in the burglar's diatribe, in which—whilst his observations do indeed carry merit—his mode of seeing is fundamentally shaped by an existing world view that assists in influencing his conceptions of a particular film.

This deconstructing of film into a series of abstractions naturally lends itself to intertextual integration. Iconic and identifiable moments from a range of films are referenced in the text, usually via details of Vikar's various cinema-going experiences. Although these films are often not described explicitly—instead relying on oblique reference to certain scenes or the narrative itself—that the reader is able to identify through this form is a testament to how such elements have become abstracted from a wider context; even enshrined into popular culture. Erickson's descriptions of Vikar's numerous film viewings can therefore be asserted as being a notable feature of postmodern literary convention.

Robert Altman's adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), for instance, is identifiable via observation that 'the most famous and romantic of L.A. private eyes finds himself at the beach, amid the lazy decadence of the seventies' (*Z*, 115). The beach setting is correlated with personal experience here, as 'Vikar can almost recognize the beach house where he was seduced by Margie Ruth', alongside sighting Robert De Niro and becoming acquainted with a number of other industry figures at a party (*Z*, 115). Such personal realisations form the basis of Vikar's viewings, in which they are often directly relatable to experience. Allusion to the L.A. private eye genre recurs at a later point in the novel, albeit transposed to a futuristic setting. The film in question is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. In effect, this temporal juxtaposition mirrors his consecutive viewing of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* as similar past and future representations.

The resonance that often strikes Vikar following a cinema viewing is also evident in description of having watched David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980). Again, plot details of the film are not explicit, yet it remains identifiable via a postmodern abstracting of its subject and scenes: 'In another movie a man is born completely deformed, with an enormous deformed head, at the beginning of the Age of Machines. It's as if the man's skull and flesh have been ground out by the epoch's new gears' (*Z*, 242-243). The paralleling of personal

[36] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 86.
[37] ibid, p. 86.

condition with wider societal shifts in this regard can be considered analogous with Vikar's arrival in Los Angeles at the emergence of the New Hollywood style of filmmaking. Further obvious comparisons come in both protagonists representing outsiders in their respective societies. Description of the film's ending also acts as a foreshadowing device suggesting of Vikar's eventual death:

> At the end of the movie, when he literally collapses beneath the weight of his deformity, the soul takes flight from the body, and in the final moments, whispering to the dying man out of a fantastic Cocteau-ether, is the memory of his mother, beckoning him with the words, "Nobody ever dies." (*Z*, 243)

An impression of the film functioning metaphorical representation of Vikar's experience in Los Angeles becomes further pronounced in reference to its final scene. John Merrick's construction of a model of the cathedral visible from his bedroom window reflects Vikar's own work on a model of the church from *Vertigo*. A continuation of Erickson's fascination with windows as a motif can be detected here. Merrick's window can be correlated with Vikar's relationship with the screen in their respect, as each offers the character a sighting—albeit one that is framed and compromised—of a world in which they are made to feel marginalised. A shared fondness for their respective mothers is also apparent. Vikar's love for his mother—emboldened by his tempestuous relationship with his father—is frequently expressed in the novel. The character's recollections of his mother often see her portrayed as a figure of mercy, in contrast to his father's standing as an overbearing religious zealot. Vikar's enduring fascination with Elizabeth Taylor's 'Tell Mama' line of dialogue from *A Place in the Sun* can be viewed as a means of channelling this fondness, comparable to John Merrick envisioning his mother at the moment of his death reciting stanzas from Alfred Tennyson's 'Nothing Will Die.'[38]

The analogous qualities of film are consistently stressed throughout the novel. Staying for a moment with the phrase 'Tell Mama' acting as an occasional chorus, an oedipal reading of Vikar's relationship with his mother can be suggested. The character's fascination with Elizabeth Taylor can therefore be considered an example of transference. Indeed, many of Vikar's viewings can be interpreted in a psychoanalytical context. Following his viewing of *The Elephant Man*, for instance, Vikar's attempts at concealing his tears is likened to 'an erection he hides by riding the bus into the night' (*Z*, 243). Remaining seated as the end credits roll, the protagonist 'wants to hide his crying under the cover of darkness' (*Z*, 243). Repressed or frustrated sexual desires are revealed in this particular portrayal; the darkness of the cinema and the night-time bus journeys correlated as vehicles for the release of such feelings. Darkness is essentially conveyed as something of a psychological safe-space here, representing a sleep surrogate. Erickson's recurring presentation of film's evocative qualities—the medium acting as a tissue between dream and memory—naturally fit with such a portrayal. In the cinema environment, the character's repressed sexuality is able to involuntarily manifest.

[38] *A Place in the Sun*, dir. by George Stevens (Paramount Pictures, 1951).

An early signifier of this effect comes in Vikar receiving fellatio from the character Margie Ruth as he sleeps whilst at the same beach party as mentioned earlier. One of Erickson's thematic intentions being to blur tangible points of distinction, the incident can be seen as stemming from such an interest. The presence of certain hints and allusions throughout the text reveal Margie Ruth to be a depiction of the actress Margot Kidder. Factored alongside the darkened bedroom in which the act takes place evoking the cinema, it is possible to draw comparison with film's ability to stoke internal desires. As Vikar stirs receiving oral sex 'channeled from the netherworld, Margie Ruth seeks to reassure him by responding, '"O.K., superman […] Just wanted to see what you're made of"' (*Z*, 77). Given that arguably Kidder's most renowned film role was that of Lois Lane in the *Superman* franchise of the late-1970s and 1980s, her comment can be taken as an indicator of this blurred psychological state comparable to some 'netherworld'. An interconnection between film and dreams is again emphasised.

The posing of this blurred psychological state inevitably affects Vikar's repressed sexual feelings. Elizabeth Taylor representing an oedipal transference, the protagonist's sexuality becomes more complex, leading to instances of conflict. Firstly, this arises in his confused lust for Soledad Palladin. The character's personification of the 'screen siren' trope—a 'kind of fantasy figure who exists for anyone who loves movies', according to Erickson—ensures that Vikar's relationship with her is decidedly complex.[39] A lustful fascination with Soledad develops from a processing of her screen persona. Their friendship, however, stems from apparent vulnerability, and Vikar's wish to protect her young daughter, Zazi, from potential harm. Consideration of these two polarised conceptions leads to the impression that their friendship encapsulates these blurred external points of distinctions. The erotic dreams that Vikar has of Soledad appearing to him 'as Siamese twins, naked and joined not at the breasts but sometimes at the hip, sometimes at the shoulder, sometimes at the place between her legs' appears symbolic of these conflicting feelings (*Z*, 73).

Vikar's dreams featuring Soledad can be seen in similar terms to his changing sexual preferences. Screen projections involuntarily trigger different erotic fantasies. The unease Vikar feels after having erotic dreams is comparable to the guilt he feels for having 'cheated' on Elizabeth Taylor with Kim Novak: 'Her golden hair in his grip as she lies between his legs, Vikar feels he's cheating no only on Elizabeth Taylor but Soledad Palladin' (*Z*, 94). Later, similar feelings are projected on to Natalie Wood and Tuesday Weld. The films that trigger these feelings are *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and *Pretty Poison* (1968) respectively. Again, the content and themes of such films can be viewed analogically, resonating with certain aspects of Vikar's psychology. Wood's role in *Splendor in the Grass* sees her play the part of a sexually repressed teenager, suffering at the hands of an overbearing mother. Weld, in contrast, plays an amoral teenager who kills her own mother without remorse in *Pretty Poison*. Parallels can be established with Vikar's own personal history here, in respect of a strained parental relationship that underpins his sexually repressed state.

[39] Miller, 'Steve Erickson'.

The films in question can be seen as projections of a form of unconscious wish fulfilment. His guilt at having 'cheated' on Elizabeth Taylor are rationalised to an extent by his conflicting feelings for Soledad and a distant fascination with Kim Novak. The development of these lustful conceptions and their subsequent release in a dream-state facilitated by properties of the cinema appears indicative of this repressed sexuality, and its eventual unconscious manifestation. Reference to the Natalie Wood of *Splendor in the Grass* and the Tuesday Weld of *Pretty Poison*, however, raises the possibility of a change in the symbolism his unconscious projections carry. Given Taylor's representation as a form of sexual transference in Vikar's consciousness, the issues that Wood's repressed character has with her mother in the film can be deemed analogous of Vikar's unconscious wrestling with this psyche. The murder of the mother character in *Pretty Poison*, therefore, can be viewed in emblematic terms as a literalising of an unconscious wish to unburden himself from this deep-rooted impediment.

Freud's notion of dreams serving as a form of wish fulfilment is implicit in Vikar's various sexual fantasies. With films often presented by Erickson as a tissue connecting dreams and memory and their viewing environment linked to a quasi-sleep state, a clear sense of their evocativeness and ability to resonate internally is established. For instance, Vikar's dreaming of Tuesday Weld performing fellatio as 'her mouth curls into that smile of murder' reflects this notion, whilst also highlighting the ultimate psychological erosion of discernible points of distinction (*Z*, 113). This portrayal in particular can be seen to encapsulate Freud's idea of dreams consisting of 'the day's undealt-with residua that have simply undergone an unconscious reinforcement in the sleeping state.'[40] Essentially, the posed interconnection between dreams, memory and films inevitably leads to a flitting across these same forms that precipitates the blurring of tangible points of distinction.

A further point of interest arises in this respect relating to textual structure. The numbered passages that describe events in the novel having already been established as bearing comparison to a camera's function, sudden switches in focus can therefore be regarded as being linked intrinsically to changes in perspective. Consideration of this feature—of the aligning of the self with filmic techniques—allows these lustful conceptions to be viewed as being compatible with Mulvey's notions of the male gaze. The first obvious parallel in this regard is in Vikar's versatile functioning. Presented as a literal spectator on occasion, taking the novel's structure into account alongside consideration of the centrality of the character's perceptions enables Vikar to be viewed in the context of a surrogate filmmaker. Vikar's watching and deriving pleasure from these films adheres to Mulvey's posed notion of scopophilia being an irrevocable component of both film spectatorship and sexuality.[41]

The nature of this pleasure, it should be stated, is ascertained from female portrayals in films exclusively directed by men: George Stevens (*A Place in the Sun*), Alfred Hitchcock (*Vertigo*), Elia Kazan (*Splendor in the Grass*), and Noel Black (*Pretty Poison*). As such, the

[40] Freud, 'An Outline of Psychonalysis', p. 25.
[41] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 835.

female form is conveyed to the viewer through the lens of male heterosexuality. Mulvey explains this particular notion in significant detail:

> The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.[42]

The female subject is effectively refined by male perceptions in such a context, extending from filmmaker to spectator and functioning as a foil for the male lead. From the perspective of the spectator, scopophilic fantasies appear inevitable, given the implicitness (occasionally even explicitness) of male heterosexuality in the film's production. Hitchock's *Vertigo* is a specific example cited by Mulvey as evidence of this effect. Vikar's fascination with the film, along with his burgeoning obsessions with Kim Novak, can be brought to mind upon consideration of this. As Mulvey analyses the film's properties, a comparison between Vikar's conceptions and the actions of Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) can be posed. The latter's voyeurism in the film is described by Mulvey as 'blatant', in the manner in which he asserts his obsession for 'Madeleine' onto the seemingly separate character of 'Judy' (Kim Novak).[43] Vikar's affixing of his own sexualised fantasies can be viewed similarly, in which his own desires reconstruct the image of the female form as a fetishized object. Further, Mulvey observes of the dominance of 'subjective camera' in Hitchcock's film as 'the narrative is woven around what Scotties sees or fails to see.'[44] Again, comparisons with Vikar and *Zeroville*'s textual structure are inescapable in this regard. Not only does the form and structure of the narrative accentuate Vikar's centrality, but it additionally allows for such sexualised reconstructions of these figures to manifest as unconscious desires that resemble literal films. Scopophilic viewings act as the catalyst for these internalised projections.

Essentially, the novel's content is reflective of spectator engagement with a medium irrevocably shaped by the male gaze. In turn, Vikar's fantasies can be observed in a similar vein, such is the close connection between films, dreams and memories. His various fantasies can be seen as 'movies' in themselves, functioning as brief examples of surreal visualisations shaped implicitly by male heterosexuality.

Summary: Viewing in Erickson's Fiction

Examination of Erickson's various depictions of the conscious act of viewing throughout his works leads to the conclusion that the external media form—film, most prominently—is typically linked intrinsically with the central protagonist. The primary result of this fusing is to highlight the manner in which individual perceptual faculties are subject to sudden changes

[42] ibid, p. 838.
[43] ibid, p. 842.
[44] ibid, p. 842.

in terms of focus or fixation, alongside emphasis on unreliable interpretation. Such textual facets appear in accordance with the medium's workings. This has also been shown to manifest structurally in a multitude of ways.

Reference to film spectatorship allows Erickson's characterisations to appear psychologically complex. The medium's illusory and 'unreal' qualities are frequently emphasised in order to establish it in a similar context to dreams and memory. As such, film's ability to invoke certain recollections and deep-rooted conceptions in a dream-like manner is consistently stressed. A large number of these projections can be read in Freudian psychoanalytical terms. The centrality of the protagonist's perceptual faculties enables a number of unconscious desires to come to the fore, typically those of a repressed sexual nature. The issue of transference is explored, alongside allusion to oedipal complexes. Such depictions of male psychosexuality are typically triggered by the on-screen images, which are themselves often honed and refined from a male perspective of a director. The resultant internal digressions and stark emotional responses are testament to the medium's ability to resonate. The notion of film representing a conduit that enables dream-like conceptions and recollections is strengthened via reference to such a close interconnection in Erickson's novels.

Significance is also bestowed to the particular mode of viewing. Usually expressed implicitly, the cinema environment or specific mode itself is presented as being a critical factor of the viewing experience. Cinematic scale is often stressed not only in relation to the medium's evocative capabilities, but in description of the cinema environment itself. Its disorienting and dislocating facets are noticeably present in Erickson's various descriptions in order to emphasise certain unreal or escapist qualities. The prevailing atmosphere is fantastical in nature. Allied with the paying spectator's willing embrace of the experience, a state of sensory displacement is able to be induced. The various psychological and emotional responses that Erickson frequently depicts through reference to viewing, are equal parts the product of both environment and film. Psychoanalytical readings of these conceptions are ultimately made possible through Erickson's portrayals of film spectatorship, especially with the cinema's darkness functioning as a metaphor for sleep.

In essence, film's influence in Erickson's fiction is far-reaching. The wonder engendered from cinema viewing is keenly stressed, in addition to how a different engagement with the medium can lead to critical scrutiny. The making of film is implied as being of a greater concern than industry business or the mystique of stardom. At the core of each of these distinct portrayals, however, is reference to the perceptual faculties of the viewer in question, and how these are affected by the mode of viewing itself. The centrality of such faculties is apparent throughout Erickson's oeuvre with regard to the shaping of narrative and thematic content. As such, reference to film in a number of forms becomes an effective external analogue for the articulation of a host of conflicting, and deeply profound conceptions. Film, therefore, is often shown to be an intrinsic feature of the respective character's being in the works analysed in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Strange Geographies and the Displaced Self: Erickson's Pyschotopographies

Establishing Psychotopography: Interpretation of Changing Landscapes

A recurring feature of a significant number of past Erickson interviews is the writer's recollections of his time spent growing up in the San Fernando Valley. These appear as influential as his interests in media forms such as film, music and literature. Indeed, Erickson's various settings are arguably the most intriguing aspect of his novels. Informed by the writer's perceptions of the landscape constantly transforming around him, Erickson's depicted settings act accordingly: environmental cataclysms are common, bouts of inclement weather occur, the terrain changes rapidly and often without warning. The effect has been termed by Erickson in his oeuvre as 'psychotopography'; whereby the landscape itself is distorted in response to the protagonist's changing moods and emotions. One seems inseparable from the other. In essence, the character's psychology serves to alter their surrounding topography.

Erickson witnessed rapid transformations as a child. In one of his earliest interviews, he recalls the environment around him changing from an idyllic pastoral scene into an urban metropolis around the beginning of the 1960s:

> I grew up in the San Fernando Valley basically before it was the San Fernando Valley, when it was virtually rural. We were in Encino and we were moving north across the Valley just about three steps ahead of the telephone lines. 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, theaters, McDonalds. And when I was 10 years old I thought, "Well, this is the way reality is. Things change just like that."[1]

Examining this excerpt, certain similarities with Erickson's fiction becomes noticeable regarding the manner in which environment is perceived. Great emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of perceptual faculties in interpreting the landscape, the subsequent extent of change, and the speed with which it has occurred. A fundamental linking with the self is implied here, via the way in which change itself is correlated with physical movement. The prominence of continuous verb forms in the extract suggests a process of sorts in effect. The apparent seamlessness of these changes is shown occurring in conjunction with these actions. The very nature of this relationship forms the basis of psychotopography in Erickson's works. Essentially, the lingering effects of traumatic incidents or the deteriorating nature of interpersonal relationships are channelled in the setting's mutability.

Erickson further references this same environmental change in an article published several years later that explores both his various influences and his preoccupations as a writer. Interestingly, this particular recollection introduces the piece to highlight its personal significance. Arguably Erickson's witnessing of the San Fernando Valley's transformation has proven the greatest influence on his creative conceptions in this respect. Indeed, the opening of this article written for *Science Fiction Eye* reads like an excerpt from his fiction,

[1] Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.

filled with elegiac description and suggestive metaphor. The scale and scope of these very changes are portrayed as happening in a way that present the environment in quasi-sentient terms. The presence of the first-person form here—whilst an obvious feature of such reflective pieces—also imparts a sense of the significance of perceptual faculties in Erickson's writings. Here, Erickson projects a sense of America's development onto recollections of his surroundings as a child:

> I grew up in the San Fernando Valley before it became a metaphor for modern American suburbia. At this time in the Fifties, the valley was very rural, with ranches and orchards and horses and strange white mansions that stood alone on open plains. When I was five years old we moved into a tract house that was part of a new tract neighborhood in the northern part of the valley, which was exploding into a hundred similar neighborhoods.[2]

Although reference is made to these having occurred within a period of ten years, little thought or consideration is given to the actual process of construction. Instead, both states—from rural to urban—are presented as wholly complete entities, as though both states have been realised in their entirety. An impression of environmental sentience is furthered as a consequence. The process of growth occurs separate from any consideration of its causes or agencies:

> Ten years later the neighborhood was gone. Ten years after the dirt and dust of the valley had given way to lawns and pools, a freeway was built and the lawns and pools gave way back to dirt and dust. The neighborhood of my childhood lived its entire life within the time of that childhood. Later when I went back to see the house where I grew up, the house was gone but our swimming pool was still there, having missed the boundary line of the freeway and been given by the county to our former next-door neighbors whose house also remained. Beneath the beams of the still-unfinished freeway all that was left of my childhood was this patch of blue shimmering in the twilight, claimed by the chain link fence that jutted hungrily into the wasteland from our neighbors' yard. It was common in my childhood to see the landscape change, not just month to month or week to week but day to day, to walk the same route to school year after year only for it to radically metamorphose from a row of eucalyptus trees to a block of new houses to a shopping center.[3]

Erickson uses the phrase 'acceleration of time' to describe the scale of the environmental change surrounding him.[4] The phrase suggests a form of temporal detachment that underpins the processing of these changes. The environment is presented as existing outside of conventional time and instead located in Erickson's memory. Description of the environment furthers impressions of sentience in the manner in which the chain link fence juts 'hungrily into the wasteland. An elusive, surreal image is also portrayed in reference to a 'patch of blue shimmering in the twilight'. Erickson's recollection implies an interconnection between the literal and the imagined; both of which are the subject of poetic description that emphasises a strange contrast. A strong sense of the self is evoked through Erickson's recollections of setting. His growth is paralleled with such recollections of change.

The relationship between character and environment in Erickson's novels is symbiotic. Sudden—or at least seemingly sudden—environmental changes are seen to cause distress.

[2] Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*'.
[3] ibid.
[4] ibid.

These immediate reactions come to be literalised via the character's external surroundings. In response, the character is typically presented as feeling displaced or alienated within their changed surroundings as these feelings subsequently trigger even greater topographic change. Despite the term 'psychotopography' first being used in *Our Ecstatic Days*, this chapter will seek to argue that the most intriguing depictions of the effect occur in *Days Between Stations* and *Amnesiascope*. The reasons for this are multiple. R.L. Litchfield has identified five core emotions at the heart of topographic change in Erickson's fiction: loss, guilt, betrayal, desire and desperation.[5] Consistent with the close associations between apparently disparate entities and characters in Erickson's works, these emotional states often overlap or develop from certain traumas or encounters. The various interconnections between characters and plot threads in Erickson's novels ensure that such examples never exist in isolation or appear divorced from a location. The manifestation of these emotions typically results in striking motifs that underline the novel's thematic content. The stark reimagining of a setting's properties is perhaps the most evocative of these motifs, serving to displace the protagonist and signal further introspection. As Litchfield correctly observes, the effects of such periods are far-reaching, reshaping 'time, memory, history, travel, chaos and boundaries within the narratives, and the inherent shifts of landscape and identity brought about.'[6]

The full extent of the various effects of such emotional traumas or rigorous internal digressions is best witnessed in *Days* and *Amnesiascope*. Whilst *Ecstatic* undoubtedly sees a stark shift in identity—Kristen's transformation into Mistress Lulu catalysed by the strange appearance of Lake Zed—much of the novel's intrigue lies in its structure. The novel's free-form structure belies Erickson's assertions on postmodernism to an extent, particularly given his past claim that it is not his intention to draw attention to the artifice of his own books.[7] In many ways, the text's unorthodox form is its most striking feature. The lake itself can be seen as correlating with the various contained structural shifts and features, most notably in the employment of the stream of consciousness device. Consideration of this can lead to the impression that the most prominent relationship in the book is that between textual structure and central motif. Though the concept is articulated for the first time in *Ecstatic* its effects are perhaps not best demonstrated here in comparison to other works.

Both *Days* and *Amnesiascope* convey the implicit relationship between character and environment in central terms. The five core emotions identified by Litchfield as being key components of psychotopography are represented to varying degrees in both texts, despite not being explicitly referred to as such in either novel. The episodic and retrospective form of *Amnesiascope* induces its protagonist with feelings of melancholia and longing. Similar emotions are identifiable in both the characterisation and narrative of *Days*, examples of which will be analysed shortly. The various settings of *Days* seemingly engaged in a perpetual state of transmutation beyond conventional temporal and spatial limits serve as the most vivid external representation of these different individual states of being. In turn, the posed interconnection between these separate elements is ultimately what underpins the

[5] Litchfield, '(Re)Imagining Los Angeles', p. 123.
[6] ibid, p. 123.
[7] See Chapter 1.

entire concept of psychotopography, along with its influence on narrative and thematic content.

With both novels relatively early texts from Erickson's oeuvre (the earliest in the case of *Days*), it is interesting to observe the ways in which his interests and preoccupations manifest during these years. The relationship between character and setting is an obvious point of interest, as complex psychologies are able to be conveyed in an evocative manner reflective of the way in which he himself perceived the significant changes occurring around him whilst growing up. As such, the 'traditional concerns' that Erickson has previously spoken of as driving his work are able to be presented via strange and arresting means.[8] That these 'traditional concerns' affect the environment in which they are incubated highlights how Erickson's settings are conceived entities as opposed to literal depictions. The psychology of Erickson's characters, the properties of the settings themselves, and the close relationship between the two will be examined during this chapter.

Exploring Psychotopography: Development and Theory

Before analysing individual examples of psychotopography in Erickson's works, it is worth exploring its most common features. In doing so, it becomes possible to gain a sense of the concept's development. As already detailed, the first explicit use of the term comes in *Ecstatic*. Here, the inexplicable expansion of Lake Zed across Los Angeles causes the novel's characters much consternation. In particular, Kristin—a character first encountered in *The Sea Came in at Midnight*—is fearful that the lake will seize her son, Kirk. That she hears strange music emanating from the lake that drifts across the city aids impressions of urban sentience. Kristin sails in a gondola to the centre of Lake Zed and submerges herself, seemingly entranced by the lake: 'She looks back down into the lake and now deep in the black water she sees something else, slowly floating up to her, another answer; and she reaches into the water and takes it as it breaks the surface (*OED*, 82). Interestingly, the terminology used here resembles the reference to 'breaking the surface of a dream' at the conclusion of *The Sea* with regard to Kristin becoming pregnant with Kirk.[9] A strange and inconsistent form of continuity is implied in this respect. Further, consideration of this gives the impression of further points of distinction eroding to convey the peculiar relationship between character and setting in Erickson's texts.

Character and topography become intrinsically linked from this point as Kristin's identity fragments. She emerges on the other side of the lake as a stripper named Mistress Lulu, who describes herself as 'Dominatrix-Oracle of the Lake, Queen of the Zed Night'.[10] A connection with the lake is obvious, given both her name and the effect that the lake has had on her character. Concurrent to this development, a character's voice that closely resembles Kristin from earlier in the text cuts across the text in a stream of consciousness to offer

[8] See Chapter 1.
[9] See Chapter 2.
[10] ibid. Cited here.

comment on proceedings and her own thoughts and emotions. Conveyed as an unbroken sentence from Kristin's submergence to the novel's conclusion, the flow of this commentary invites comparison to water. Subsequent changes in the lake's behaviour are observed in the sixteen years following Kristin's submergence by Wang, a commander of an unspecified insurgent group and a survivor of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests: '[…] The currents have gotten stranger and the dark zones darker: the lake is draining' (*OED*, 109). His obsession from afar with Kristin—who he had been sending bizarre, cryptic letters and e-mails to prior to her submergence—causes him to debate the seemingly sentient properties of the lake with a fellow insurgent:

> He thinks about the woman who drowned herself and wonders what she did it to be free of, what she did it to be bound to. […] For sixteen years you've ignored how the lake had a life of its own, how from the beginning the lake has manifested its own psyche, altering the surrounding psychotopography (*OED*, 110).

The discussion explicitly refers to the lake as a conscious entity. The shifting properties of Lake Zed are suggested as having occurred in the manner which moods and emotions change. As a result, the lake is described as having developed its own psyche. Kristin's submergence seems to have proven a factor in these developments, contributing to impressions of psychotopography. This very portrayal suggests an intrinsic connection between character and setting. Whilst this same relationship is implied in *Days* and *Amnesiascope* rather than discussed in explicit terms as in *Ecstatic*, psychotopography is nonetheless evident in Erickson's earlier works.

Mention of 'psychotopography' immediately brings to mind the term 'psychogeography'. Certain comparisons between both concepts at a base level are obvious. A fundamental prerequisite of psychogeography is that the portrayal itself makes the relationship between individual and setting a central concern; as is implied in the term's construct. Primarily, urban exploration is emphasised through the notion of drifting. This, in turn, implies a degree of dislocation or disengagement with the urban environment itself that serves to disorient the geographer in question. Joseph Hart has noted of how the meandering that underpins psychogeography is responsible for changing the nature of experience within the urban environment, jolting 'a new awareness of the urban landscape.'[11] Hart elaborates further on this observation by stating the importance of aimless meandering in order to 'follow some new logic that lets us experience our landscape anew, that forces us to truly see what we'd otherwise ignore', considering that so much urban movement is unconsciously pre-programmed, or subject to familiar routine.[12] The ultimate result is to foster 'a new relationship with geography' within the individual's consciousness.[13] A point of contrast with psychotopography emerges, however, in relation to the non-threatening relationship with urban geography that psychogeographers seem keen to promote. The notion of 'drifting'—effectively a surrogate term for 'getting lost'—in unfamiliar environments represents an obvious cause for concern. The experience can often be distressing, even traumatic. In

[11] Joseph Hart, 'A New Way of Walking', *Utne Reader* (July-August 2004). <https://www.utne.com/community/a-new-way-of-walking>. [accessed: 23rd November 2018].
[12] ibid.
[13] ibid.

contrast to literary depictions of psychogeography, Erickson's psychotopography emphasises such feelings of anxiety. The purpose of this is to make explicit a particular character's relationship with a particular setting. The feelings that this relationship elicits are then subsequently actualised through stark topographic change.

Erickson's previous recollections of witnessing environmental change on an incredible scale offer an additional interesting counterpoint to such assertions. Whilst the movement that Erickson references in prior excerpts is undoubtedly of an unconsciously pre-programmed and routine nature (i.e. going to school), the real contrast here comes in the environment changing around him regardless. A 'new relationship with geography' here is achieved not through aimless drifting, but through a familiar routine that offers a glimpse of massive environmental change. In itself, this interesting point of contrast represents one such notable difference between psychogeography and psychotopography. A degree of agency is implied in psychogeography, whereby the geographer as an individual is ultimately responsible for perceiving their surroundings in a new and intriguing light. Psychotopography, however, indicates of familiar landscapes changing around the individual beyond their own levels of comprehension.

This very facet of Erickson's psychotopographies implies disorientation. In a literary context, the concept of psychogeography has been similarly employed to for much the same purpose. Often, however, the landscape is presented as having already changed at the outset of the text, rather than engaged in a perpetual state of flux. The result of this in literary psychogeography is that the reader is offered perspective of a drastically reimagined or modified city with which they could ordinarily be reasonably well acquainted.

J.G. Ballard stands as arguably the most prominent exponent of literary psychogeography. His futuristic and dystopic visions of London in novels such as *The Drowned World* and *High-Rise* (1975) resonate with Erickson's numerous conceptions of urban environments. Erickson's depiction of the submerged America One in *Rubicon Beach* resembles Ballard's presentation of a flooded, post-apocalyptic London in *The Drowned World*, for instance. The chaotic hotel residency of the protagonist in *Amnesiascope* and his reflections on the disintegration of society in Los Angeles brings *High-Rise* to mind in the manner in which Ballard conveys the erosion of social structures through depiction of the different floors of a luxury London tower block. The different urban portrayals in *Days* of 'futuristic L.A. with a retro touch' and 'vintage Paris' are imbued with comparable tropes.[14] Most commonly, these relate to the reader sighting these reimagined or reconstructed environments through the protagonist's engagement with their surroundings. The reader often finds that the protagonist's perceptions are either impaired or influenced by the act of viewing. The disorientation subsequently felt by the reader is a reflection of the character's psychology in Erickson's fiction. The inherent mutability of his depicted environments, shifting in accordance with the protagonist's moods and emotions, is what engenders a prevailing sense of displacement. As previously detailed, it is the very nature of this relationship that causes further distress in Erickson's characters. In this respect, it is possible to view

[14] Budac, 'The Blue and White Visual Narrative…', p. 66.

psychotopography as a development of psychogeography, whereby the reconfigured landscape is subject to additional unpredictable changes due to being implicitly synched with the character in question.

Despite being compared with Ballard in a stylistic and thematic sense, Erickson has in the past claimed to be unfamiliar with the writer's oeuvre.[15] Given, however, that the article in which Erickson made this claim is twenty-five years old at the time of writing, it stands to reason that he has since become familiar with Ballard's works. A 2016 appraisal of Ben Wheatley's film adaptation of *High-Rise* (2015) written by Erickson suggests as much. In this piece, Erickson notes how 'Ballard's narratives aren't so much structurally fractured and emotionally abstract—although they can be both—as driven by ideas, with whatever human drama the story holds becoming a function of those ideas rather than the other way around.'[16] The same piece sees Erickson assert that Philip K. Dick represents Ballard's 'closest American corollary', further suggesting of a familiarity in the intervening years between both articles.[17] Consideration of this comparison brings to mind the narrative and thematic content of *Ecstatic*. The concept of the city in a varying state of submergence evokes *The Drowned World*, as does *Rubicon Beach*. Further, the trope of the paranoid protagonist ill at ease in their own surroundings is common feature of Dick's literature. The combined nature of these two facets in *Ecstatic* can be considered an example as to how Erickson's psychotopography has developed since his earlier depictions.

Political and national allegory has been a recurrent feature of Erickson's literature. As discussed in Chapter 2, *Ecstatic* can be viewed in a political context concerning the commodification of land. Again, as referenced earlier, Lake Zed's sudden and unexplained appearance in the text can be seen as a metaphor for a vengeful eco-system, on account of Los Angeles' various administrative departments systemically destroying the city's river. In itself, this reflects how interests and preoccupations can change over time, even with regard to the presentation of a familiar trope. However, Erickson's earliest psychotopographic depictions appear largely free of political metaphor. Instead, they seem to resonate on a cultural level. Certain identifiable features or common conceptions are evident in these portrayals. Los Angeles' confusing geography and inextricable association with film are often referenced in these early depictions, as apparent points of familiarity are subverted. The very nature of such portrayals chimes with Merlin Coverley's assertion of contemporary literary manifestations of psychogeography moving away from the political or ideological concerns found in Ballard's texts.[18] In emphasising and subsequently subverting such commonalities and familiar reference points of the urban environment, the centrality and ultimate unreliability of perceptual faculties of a character is able to be emphasised. The implicit connection between character and setting—and its mutually reactive nature—forms the basis

[15] See Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*'.
[16] Steve Erickson, 'The Adaptation of J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* Challenges the Notion of What's "Unfilmable"', *Los Angeles* (28th April, 2016). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/adaptation-j-g-ballards-high-rise-challenges-notion-whats-unfilmable/>. [Accessed 23rd November 2018].
[17] ibid.
[18] See Merlin Coverley, *Pyschogeography* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p. 130.

of wholly personalised portrayals of complex character psychologies within a displacing environment that was once considered familiar.

Deconstruction of the portmanteau term ‘psychotopography’ naturally leads to consideration of ‘topography’ itself. Whilst the ‘psycho’ aspect of the concept has been discussed with regard to the existence of an implicit relationship between character and setting, the term insinuates radical and long-standing ramifications for the arrangement of the environment itself. As already suggested, Erickson’s subversion of certain cultural or geographical familiarities is a notable outcome of the concept. The character feels displaced within their milieu. Their perceptual faculties come to represent a source of frustration as the character in question is effectively processing properties of a setting that has been defamiliarized. The city they inhabit is ostensibly still Los Angeles, but it is presented as not the Los Angeles they are able to sufficiently recall, for instance.

The cataclysms and prolonged periods of inclement weather so commonplace in Erickson’s fiction function as modifiers that instigate these environmental changes. A process of defamiliarization is subsequently presented. A notable intention here is to use the environment itself as a means of externally mapping the protagonist’s changing or declining faculties. The manner of this is not completely dissimilar to how Erickson uses film and reference to modes of viewing as conduits enabling exploration of this particular process. The character’s navigating of their surroundings bears resemblance to literary depictions of psychogeography in this respect. Erickson’s portrayals of this form of drifting typically focus more on the character’s various thought processes, however, leading to musings on the nature of identity. The external form reflects the changes occurring in the character’s consciousness. *Rubicon Beach* and *Ecstatic* stand as obvious examples of this connection, whereby the respective protagonist’s conceptions of their strange environment leads to paranoid or uncertain periods of introspection.

Days and *Amnesiascope* are two novels that convey the full effect of the numerous ways in which psychotopography as an effect manifests. In analysing the mechanics of this ever-changing relationship between character and setting, a number of contrasts and parallels with the works of renowned spatial theorists can be noted. Interesting contrasts emerge upon examination of Kevin Lynch’s work. Connections can be noted, though, with the works of Edward Soja. Although it would be disingenuous to suggest that Erickson’s psychotopographies are explicitly and unquestionable influenced by the works of these theorists, it is interesting to note of how the effect relates to the conceptions of these two eminent theorists, in particular in relation to their observations on Los Angeles.

A number of Kevin Lynch’s observations on the urban environment are seen to be reimagined or remodelled by Erickson in his works to displace his characters. Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960) stands as one of the most seminal texts on urban theory in the twentieth century. The result of a five year study of New York, Jersey City and Los Angeles, the book sees Lynch observe of five key elements associated with the city that enable the individual to mentally map their surroundings. These comprise of paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. ‘Paths’ refer to channels of travel that arrange movement between

space (streets, pavements, canals, etc). 'Boundaries' can be both of a real or perceived nature, typically consisting of walls and buildings. 'Districts' are identifiable via prevailing characteristics or architectural styles. 'Nodes' represent areas of the city that can be entered—such as districts and neighbourhoods—and that offer multiple perspectives of the same environment. 'Landmarks' constitute immovable reference points, like buildings, signs or stores. Here, Lynch asserts that the formation of these 'mental maps' is due to the 'imageability' of particular feature. The term refers to a 'quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer.'[19] The evocativeness of any single feature of the city allows for the individual to unconsciously begin internalising the city, as its various elements gradually become contextualised.

Lynch notes that 'all of these elements operate together, in a context.'[20] An impression is created of the city resembling a jigsaw. These observations made by Lynch are distorted by Erickson in his psychotopographies. *Days* and *Amnesiascope* both see Erickson defamiliarize Los Angeles. In essence, the processes that Lynch identifies as to how an individual comes to interpret their surroundings is largely absent from Erickson's novels as certain urban features noted by characters are presented as having inexplicably moved from their location. The perceptual faculties of characters are also invariably shown to be unreliable. The manner in which this distortion occurs is markedly different in both texts, as will be examined in the coming sections. The outcome is largely similar though. Familiar Los Angeles reference points are refracted through two notably contrasting lenses. The first depicted in *Days* is predominantly sighted from the perspective of the traumatised Lauren; a woman who slips into a fugue state brought on by her husband's infidelities and the death of her infant son. The city is presented as shifting around her, as landmarks and other points of familiarity are seemingly stripped of their identifiability. Her internal discord is depicted as occurring in conjunction with these external distortions. By contrast, the 'post-Los Angeles' portrayed in *Amnesiascope* is typified by a reimagining of culture and landmarks. This aspect of the city's construct naturally allows for further topographic alterations. Impressions of urban sentience are posed as a result to further impact on the narrator's faculties.

An intriguing parallel between Erickson's psychotopographies and Edward Soja's work comes in the form of the spatial theorist's 'exopolis' vision of Los Angeles. One of Soja's six interconnected visions that 'represent' the city (alongside 'flexicity', 'cosmopolis', 'metropolarities', 'carcereal archipelagos', and 'simcity') as 'a synekistic milieu for the development and expression of the new urbanization processes.'[21] The term 'exopolis' can in essence be characterised as an absence of 'cityness' within the urban environment. Traditional qualities of the city construct are eschewed at the expense of further and seemingly unending urban development. As a consequence, traditional 'centres' of the city are displaced through the growth and expansion of its outer edges.

A sense of this absence of a discernible centre regarding Los Angeles is even noted by Lynch. Plaza-Olvera Street, across the Hollywood Freeway, is described as one of the city's

[19] Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 9.
[20] ibid, p. 84.
[21] Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 154.

few nodal centres, comprised of odd geometric shapes, trees, tiles, brick-paved streets, and artisan businesses. 'Not only is this small spot visually distinct, but it is the only true historical anchor-point in the city and seems to generate a fierce attachment', Lynch writes.[22] The notion of the city being devoid of traditional centres is further affirmed via the case studies found in Lynch's text that survey impressions of the city:

> When asked to describe or symbolize the city as a whole, the subjects used certain standard words: "spread-out," "spacious," "formless," "without centers." Los Angeles seemed to be hard to envision or conceptualize as a whole. An endless spread which may carry pleasant connotations of space around the dwellings, or overtones of weariness and disorientation, was the common image.[23]

In the years since the publication of Lynch's monograph, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that such sentiments have only increased. Soja's 'exopolis' vision is founded on a similar premise, accentuated further by factors such as a systemic deindustrialisation dovetailing with a new emphasis placed on high technology and globalisation, along with the exacerbating social disparities that the construct perpetuates. The city's geography is constantly in flux, as a consequence.[24] The 'exopolis' vision inspires impressions of urban sentience; such is the scale of development and expansion.

Amnesiascope arguably represents the most notable example of this quasi-sentient effect across Erickson's oeuvre. As is typical of his psychotopographies, character and setting are symbiotically linked to ensure that the impressions of urban sentience stem from the protagonist's own changing conceptions. Erickson has previously stated that the very nature of this relationship acted as a starting point for the novel itself, remarking that 'the landscape of Los Angeles really came to approximate that ground zero of the main character that I was talking about. It was a good landscape to put that particular character on.'[25] As such, the narrator's changing conceptions can be considered a reflection of the city's own strange, mutable geography that can displace characters. The cataclysms that reshape Erickson's settings are also alluded to in the interview referenced above in his phrasing of 'ground zero'; a term that carries with it connotations of a disaster's epicentre. Erickson's 'post-Los Angeles' landscape represents a reimaging of the city, tying in with his admission of creating an elemental, abstracted version of the environment that is close to 'the true spirit of Los Angeles.'[26] In the novel, Los Angeles is irrevocably altered as a consequence of the 'the Quake's lasting legacy. Consistent with Erickson's psychotopographies, the cataclysm in question allows for the city's different facets and features to be abstracted from a cohesive whole. These properties are subsequently made malleable and ripe for subversion.

Complex psychological portrayals marked by trauma, loss, and anguish are typically at the core of Erickson's psychotopographies that catalyse either a literal or imagined reconstruction of the landscape and its properties. Incidents of this nature, as Litchfield notes, are often 'signifiers of the characters and Erickson's conscious and subconscious interaction

[22] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 39.
[23] ibid, p. 40.
[24] Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p. 154.
[25] Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson'.
[26] ibid.

with their surroundings; how they construct, understand and relate to their psychic, emotional and literal landscape.'[27] The relationship itself is indicative of the interconnectedness of Erickson's work. Comparable to how Soja notes that Los Angeles can appear 'fragmentary' and 'incomplete' yet can conversely be seen as a representation of 'simultaneity and interconnection', Erickson draws upon such sentiment in his urban portrayals, whilst simultaneously deconstructing Lynch's notions concerning innate processes of identifiability. The fusing of emotions with topography enables the full effect of internal discord to be seen, causing further feelings of angst through an acute sense of dislocation.

Love, Trauma and Strange Conditions: *Days Between Stations*

Although the term 'psychotopography' is not used in *Days*, the effect is very much evident in the text. Aided by the stylistic fluidity that has since come to define Erickson's writing, the posed relationship between character and setting that underpins many of the novel's themes is conveyed in a seamless fashion. The implicit nature of the relationship itself is additionally affirmed through such subtle treatment. Similarly, the focus afforded to Lauren—essentially the protagonist of the plot strand that will be discussed in this section—highlights the centrality of individual faculties in interpreting and subsequently unconsciously influencing the landscape itself. Her conceptions of events and interpersonal relationships are what initiate external changes. The basic working of what constitutes Erickson's first depiction of psychotopography is established here.

The novel begins with description of Lauren's time spent growing up in her native Kansas. Immediately, a sense of displacement is established upon consideration of Kansas' role as a point of familiarity, as a representation of normality in *The Wizard of Oz* ('Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore.').[28] These connotations become even more pronounced in retrospect, as the narrative sees Lauren engaged in an almost permanent state of transit, journeying to Paris and Venice as well as taken up residence in San Francisco and Los Angeles at different points in the text. Erickson's interest in Baum's *Oz* books have been detailed in Chapter 1, meaning that it is difficult to view the novel's opening setting as mere coincidence. Indicating of the strange events to come, the text's opening image is a surreal one as a young Lauren is described standing in fields calling cats: 'One by one they would come to her through the grass, across which lay the ice of the coming winter and she could see them in the light of the moon' (*DBS*, 10). The surrealism of the image is reflected in Erickson's strange and intriguing characterisations. Additionally, the interconnectedness of Erickson's literature is intimated here, given how central motifs such as light and weather are incorporated alongside details of arresting character traits. The opening of the text conforms to an effect Budac identifies as the reader being confronted 'with a reality already distorted by the mind with popular culture tropes to put things in order' to varying degrees.[29]

[27] Litchfield, '(Re)Imagining Los Angeles', p. 121.
[28] *The Wizard of Oz*, dir. by Victor Fleming (Loew's Inc., 1939).
[29] Budac, 'The Blue and White Visual Narrative…', p. 66.

The novel deviates at this point to make reference to Jason, her future husband and aspiring Olympic cyclist. The nature of this digression, prompted by memories of her childhood further indicates the interconnectedness of characters, settings and time periods even at this early stage of the narrative:

> Twenty years later, when she was making love to him, she thought of them, rather than of her husband on his bicycle riding a highway that led away from her. 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 (*DBS*, 10).

The internal associating of her husband's hair with the fur of one of the feral cats she recalls calling allows for a twenty year span to be bridged seamlessly. This in itself offers an indication as to how Erickson's fiction operates. Although the content can often seem disparate and fragmented, it is invariably connected via some form of the protagonist's conscious or unconscious awareness. In this instance, memory functions as the tissue unifying these different conceptions. The significance of perceptual faculties in Erickson's novels with regard to interpreting and shaping events is outlined. Further, a sense of the intangible concerning the workings of these faculties is broached. This is suggested through geographical metaphor, describing the state of Lauren and Jason's relationship during these early years of their relationship: 'They were both across the borderland of their youth, traveling with visas on the verge of expiration, imperilled by the pending truth of their trespasses' (*DBS*, 10). Notions of travel, transience and physical landscape are expressed in illusory terms here, as opposed to being signified literally to denote fixed emotions.

As is implied in its title, constant transience is a major theme of *Days*. This is expressed in both literal and metaphorical terms, with character movement across states and continents married with the changing nature of interpersonal relationships and lengthy periods of introspection that signify personal realisation. The intended effect is to disorient in both aspects. Erickson's flitting between internal and external forms assists in the perpetuation of a textual fluidity that sees the novel's disparate features gradually intertwine. Prior to this, the dislocated and unfixed nature of both the interpersonal and the physical serve to displace the protagonist. It is this same feature that allows time to be bridged instantly, significant events to be described cursorily, and changes in interpersonal relationships to be presented almost nonchalantly. The effect on the protagonist is one of uncertainty that comes to be reflected in their surroundings.

An example of this can be found in these same formative stages of the text. Lauren and Jason's courtship and eventual marriage are referenced fleetingly prior to their move to San Francisco. Whilst on the plane, she is struck by a powerful feeling that she has fallen pregnant: 'The night after the wedding they left for San Francisco and on the plane, hypnotized by the roar of the takeoff, she knew instinctively she was pregnant with Jules' (*DBS*, 11-12). The events described are undoubtedly significant, yet they are relayed to the reader as though trivial. Reference to being 'hypnotized' by the plane's take-off appears critical here, signifying the effect of flitting constantly between conceptions and states of being. This aspect of Erickson's writing evokes the modernist style of skimming or omitting

entire plot points that would ordinarily be deemed paramount textual features in order to foster a wistful, melancholic ambience.

Lauren and Jason's relocation to San Francisco represents the novel's first manipulation of geography. The following excerpt depicts an acute sense of displacement through subverting Lynch's ideas of imageability. The ultimate result found here is a gradual defamiliarizing of the urban environment. The following describes their move to an apartment on a 'secret street' called Pauline Boulevard, and Lauren's subsequent attempt to locate the street after a period spent living in Los Angeles:

> They lived on a secret street, which was entered through a small hallway at the top of a series of steps that ran up a hill. But for this hallway, the block was entirely closed, obscure to traffic and the knowledge of residents who had lived in the city their whole lives; the street wasn't in Lauren's map, nor in the local directory he bought her first day there, nor in an atlas in the library; the shutters of the window banged open and shut by themselves, and the doorways were blank until the sun set, when darkness engulfed the street. There was one very old automobile at the end of the block, and she couldn't imagine how it had gotten there, unless it had been lowered from the sky […] (*DBS*, 12).

The extract alludes to Lynch's observation on 'paths', 'landmarks' and 'nodes' as means of establishing familiarity within a particular environment. However, each of these is presented as being concealed, enclosed or confusing. Notions of mind-mapping have been distorted in this presentation. Such an impression is furthered due to the street's absence from local maps or directories. This causes Lauren a degree of consternation. An element of illogicality is additionally suggested in reference to the automobile's mysterious presence at the end of the block, raising questions as to how it could have conceivably found itself in such a confined space. Reflecting Lauren's confused state, notions of the shutters seemingly opening and closing by themselves and the setting sun changing the entire complexion of the street can be viewed as an early example of psychotopography, albeit on a minor scale. A clear impression of the character's emotional state is established at this early junction of the text to indicate of the novel's thematic direction. A sense of this continued upon description of Lauren returning to San Francisco three years later and after having since moved to Los Angeles with Jason:

> Three summers later when Jason was in Europe training for Munich, Lauren went up to San Francisco for a weekend and looked for her old street, Pauline Boulevard. She never found it: Three hours that afternoon she walked back and forth along Columbus Street looking for the steps that ran past an Italian deli; she looked for the turn she had made hundreds of times. The steps nowhere to be seen. She asked neighbors, shopkeepers, patrolmen, mail deliverers; but none of them had ever heard of Pauline Boulevard. She asked the deli owner about the step that ran past his shop, but he had no recollection of them (*DBS*, 12).

An interconnection between geography and memory is suggested here. The inconsistencies of memory are literally reflected in the form of geographical inconsistencies. Previous points of familiarity—such as the steps running past the Italian deli, or the small hallway—have seemingly disappeared to induce dislocation. The protagonist is left feeling distressed as a consequence. The environment itself is defamiliarized, whereby the protagonist comes to feel displaced in apparently familiar surroundings. This, in turn, creates feelings of anxiety, as though the environment itself has existed within the confines of her consciousness. Paul Kincaid argues in favour of this very assertion, noting how, 'The reality of the past, Erickson

suggests is exactly like memory, able to dissolve and reform in surreal conjunctions, as if we are not deceived by memory, but the reality it purports to represent.'[30] This captures the essence of psychotopography. In synching external features with internal faculties, properties of settings are able to be subject to the same kind of surreal dissolutions and reformations that Kincaid identifies.

The difficulties and traumas that Lauren experiences are explored in the text from this point on. Jason's time away spent training for the Olympics causes a strain on the couple to begin with. Whilst away, he is unfaithful to Lauren with a number of different women. Lauren eventually becomes aware of this after having given birth to a son named Jules. Ill-feeling between the two is compounded when it becomes apparent that Jason finds it difficult to relate to his own son. Later, Jules dies in abrupt and unspecified circumstances. Concurrent to these developments, it is strongly implied that Lauren is suffering from post-natal depression. This is suggested in symbolic terms, having witnessed a surreal funeral procession for a deceased child who lived in the local neighbourhood: 'At the sight of this Lauren quickly glanced down at Jules in horror, fully expecting him to be the child in the cart' (*DBS*, 14). An obvious example of foreshadowing, the episode itself can be considered an indication of her fragile mental state.

Jules' death represents the culmination of these issues. Prior to this, Lauren enters a fugue state such is the extent of her distress. An impression of displacement is created via this presentation. The fugue state that she enters is induced by Jason's revelation that he has fathered a child with another woman. Lauren heads to the airport and buys a plane ticket back to Kansas; an act that that furthers its representation as a fixed point of familiarity akin to its representation in *The Wizard of Oz*. Disoriented, she mistakenly boards the wrong plane and lands in Los Angeles. Her confusion is exacerbated upon landing, as she attempts to process her surroundings: 'In the taxi she vaguely peered out the window and looked at the tall grass. At Sunset and La Cienega she got out of the taxi and began walking west along the Strip' (*DBS*, 17). A process of defamiliarization is suggested here, in which the imageability of the long grass and its ability to evoke Kansas is distorted to leave the protagonist feeling displaced. The inextricable association of Kansas with the long grass in her consciousness plays a key role in the character's disorientation. Subsequent reference to Sunset and La Cienega compound the effect as the polarities of rural Kansas and bustling Los Angeles are juxtaposed in confusing terms within her skewed perceptual faculties. Erickson's distortion of temporal perception further aids this depiction: 'It was one in the morning. She didn't know the time' (*DBS*, 17). In counterbalancing a definitive reference to the time with the character's unawareness of it, the notion of displacement is able to manifest in an abstract, disjointed fashion.

It is here she first meets Michel, the French-American, eyepatch-sporting amnesiac night club owner with whom she later engages in an affair. At this point of the text, however, he is referred to as 'Adrien-Michel'; an additional signifier of the novel's theme of duality. Their encounter is presented as being sighted through Lauren's compromised faculties. As such,

[30] Kincaid, 'Secret Maps', p. 27.

Michel's presence is denoted by the striking image of his blue coat. The character is displayed in fragmentary terms, with his stutter functioning as another distinctive feature. The journey to his apartment sees Lauren sight her surroundings through the impaired lens of believing that she is in Kansas: 'In the darkness beyond the window she could see the Kansas fields blowing back and forth, as though the entire earth was rocking. On the horizon was the house where she grew up […]' (*DBS*, 19). Setting is overtly correlated with memory in this portrayal, assisting in the perpetuation of its ultimate malleability in Erickson's texts. Consistent with the juxtaposition posed between rural Kansas and urban Los Angeles, the fixed form of the latter is contrasted with hazy conceptions of the former. It is the pastoral image of Kansas that prevails during this passage of description, filtered through Lauren's consciousness.

Her home state's association with feelings of familiarity and security comes to be tarnished, however. It is strongly implied in the text that she is raped by Michel in his car after he takes her back to his apartment. This is described as occurring off-road 'in the middle of nowhere'; a colloquialism that offers the impression of the act being somewhat unreal due to a sense of dislocation (*DBS*, 19). Lauren's recollections of Kansas continue to be projected onto her external surroundings whilst she is raped:

> The wind purred in the grass, and just past her house, before the hills surrounding the fields, there seemed to stretch a long obstruction, as though it might be a wall lining the distance. His body shifted in his coat and he pressed against her. He was still running his fingers over her face and looking at her; she continued staring out into the dark, never turning to face him. The shadow of his coat enveloped her, until she was lying across the seat beneath him, and she said, somewhat foolishly she imagined, but as a verbal reflex nonetheless, "It hurts." (*DBS*, 19)

It stands to reason that her conceptions of Kansas become infected by the described traumatic incident; the verb 'purred' evoking Lauren's strange relationship with cats. This, in itself, can be seen as a subversion of the concept of childhood trauma. Instead of the traumatic incident itself occurring during childhood, the trauma of the implied rape is imposed onto childhood memories. The two become intertwined. As such, an impression is created of the rape resembling a continual, free-flowing state in contrast to as a sequence of acts. A sense of disorientation is consequently perpetuated. In accordance with Freudian thought, it is possible to view Lauren and Michel's later affair as an example of repetition compulsion; an unconscious desire to repeat traumatic events in an attempt at dealing with the incident. The ultimate end to this 'an effort to come to grips with and to accept the fact of death', over 'the libido's efforts to expend its cathexis of sexual energy.'[31] The nature of this conflict rationalises Lauren's repetition compulsion, whilst also denoting the implicitness of duality within Erickson's constructs.

The affair subsequently following the rape can be considered in the context of Freud's analysis of the two major instinctual drives dictating individual actions: 'Eros' (sexual

[31] Dino Felluga, 'Modules on Freud: Transference and Trauma', *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* (31st January, 2011). <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/freud5.html>. [Accessed 30th November 2018].

instincts compatible with self-preservation) and 'Thanatos' (the self-destructive 'death drive' seeking a return to the solitude of non-existence). Consistent with the novel's primary theme of duality and double identity, both of these drives reflect Lauren's actions in the text. The various traumas instigated by the actions of Jason and Michel, in addition to Jules' death, add credence to claims that the affair is a perverse subconscious manifestation of self-preservation. Seeking to insulate herself from further anguish at Jason's hands, Lauren's conscious involvement with Michel appears as a counterpoint to being rape whilst unconscious. Opposite to the implicit demands of sexual instincts, the self-destructive death drive can be seen to manifest in the stark, cataclysmic changes to various landscapes that Lauren unconsciously affects. The major plot points of the affair and the subsequent environmental changes wrought through psychotopography appear wholly influenced by this episode. Essentially, the topographic changes themselves are representations of Lauren's numerous internalised conflicts.

Lauren's conceptions of Los Angeles appear unconsciously altered as a result of this incident. She and Jason relocate to the city in the months following Jules' death. Upon their arrival in the city, it is striking that Lauren finds everything 'mysteriously familiar' (*DBS*, 36). The feeling itself evokes her rape in the fugue state, but is also aided by a host of strange similarities with their old apartment in San Francisco. These are documented much earlier in the text, sandwiched between description of their moving into Pauline Boulevard and Lauren's attempt to locate the same address three years later. The positioning of such details can be seen as a notable example of Erickson's temporal manipulation for purposes of disorientation with regard to both character and reader:

> The sign on the building read Pauline Boulevard; and she was astonished when, two years later, they moved to Los Angeles and, after weeks of looking for a place, they were referred by an agency to an apartment in the Hollywood Hills at the address of twenty-seven Pauline Boulevard. They took the apartment (*DBS*, 12).

The prominence and significance of interconnections in Erickson's texts is also posed in the extract. An odd effect becomes noticeable in retrospect following examination of Lauren's trip to Los Angeles whilst in a fugue state. Lauren and Jason's relocation to Los Angeles marks the second time she has been in the city, despite her ignorance of the fact. This influences the 'mysteriously familiar' sensation that first strikes her. Distinctions between lucid and compromised states of being are suggested as having blurred, resulting in a feeling of déjà vu. Allied with the commonalities their new residence has with their previous address in San Francisco, and the feelings of displacement and disorientation that typifies Lauren's character becomes understandable.

Lauren's affair with Michel acts as the catalyst for such uncertain emotions to be crystallized in the form of topographic change. The affair itself is encapsulated via reference to the Blue Isosceles; the nightclub of which he is the manager. Her curiosity towards him is piqued when he calls at the apartment she and Jason share, asking for a spare fuse following a power outage. 'There had always been an element of beauty in the things to which she was attracted; but he was not beautiful,' it is noted (*DBS*, 44). She is further bemused when he first introduces himself as 'Adrien', before correcting himself to inform her that his name is

‘Michel’. Alongside allusions to duality, a further trope typical of Erickson’s fiction is present here in the form of temporal manipulation. Michel’s comment that the clocks have stopped in his apartment impart a sense of this particular effect.

Each of these textual elements combines to induce a myriad of confusing and curious thoughts within Lauren’s psyche. The sandstorms that engulf Los Angeles emanate from this state, serving to bring her and Michel closer together. The nature of the sandstorms symbolise the desert merging with the city to convey Lauren’s sense of displacement in a literal manner. The familiar Erickson motif of windows is a prominent feature of their description. ‘All the windows were left like round portholes, the sand filling the corners’; a resemblance that invokes feelings of disorientation on account of the juxtaposition between a desert swathe and impressions of oceanic submergence (*DBS*, 46). Interestingly, however, the connection between windows and perspective is subverted by Erickson here. The position of her apartment window restricts her view, meaning that although she gazes out across the city ‘she could never see the storms approaching’ (*DBS*, 46). The dramatic changes to the landscape become even starker, given that she is unable to see the developments in question. Rather than bear witness to the changes in gradual form, she is instead faced with a newly reconfigured landscape that has altered irrevocably. Her feelings of displacement are exacerbated on account of this defamiliarization. The moonbridges that Michel previously sights being constructed are used by people as a means of viewing the approaching storms, ‘sighting the black cloud far away on the edges of the Santa Ana Freeway’ (*DBS*, 46). A common architectural feature of Southeast Asia, the very presence of the moonbridges evokes Los Angeles’ hybrid architecture whilst simultaneously furthering a sense of dislocation. The protagonist’s anxieties deepen as a result, stemming from this same dislocation.

With the darkening storm clouds carrying ominous connotations and symbolising Lauren’s worsening demeanour, the escalating nature of the sandstorms can also be seen to capture her and Michel’s relationship. Frequent citywide blackouts occur in conjunction with her numerous arguments with Jason. After he leaves for Europe to continue his training programme, Lauren and Michel grow closer. Their relationship is not a romantic one initially, originally based on Lauren’s need for consolation and Michel’s uncertainty over his own identity. The turbulent state of this dependence is often reflected in the meteorological changes instigated by the storms in a depiction of normalised and recurrent melancholia: ‘They woke at morning to a black sky. In the course of the day the sky went from black to gray at noon and then deepened to brown to black again by sunset’ (*DBS*, 68). Again, it is these same fluctuations that accentuate Lauren’s displacement. Later, she is hospitalised after the Blue Isosceles becomes submerged in sand and a riot breaks out. It is here she realises her feelings for Michel. A point of symmetry occurs here as the two make love and the earlier rape is referenced: ‘Almost unconsciously she said, It hurts, Michel’ (*DBS*, 75). This can be considered a further example of the numerous interconnections found in Erickson’s work, in which every plot point and textual facet is symbiotically linked regardless of how seemingly disparate.

The depth of interconnections in Erickson's fiction is conveyed as this story resumes following the interlude in which the life and career of Adolphe Sarre is detailed. The two journey to Paris for different reasons. Michel wishes to discover his past, whilst Lauren intends to meet with Jason. The pair's arrival in Paris leads to the city experiencing sub-zero conditions. A clear example of psychotopography reflective of the unstable nature of their respective relationships, the conditions also prompt a drastic response from the city's residents. As sighted by the estranged twin brother of Adolphe Sarre—a sailor named Billy Boat—the city becomes littered with fires as people take to burning their possessions to keep warm: 'Fires on the street corners, fires on the bridges, fires in the buildings themselves: Parisians setting their furniture on fire, diaries and family portraits, stale food, up in smoke' (*DBS*, 160). The apocalyptic imagery perpetuated in reaction to the freezing conditions encapsulates what Paul Kincaid claims is 'the destruction of memories and the past.'[32] Again, this can be seen to be illustrative of the implicitness of innate personal faculties in shaping Erickson's settings. The bleak arctic weather appearing in conjunction with Lauren and Michel's arrival in the city, the response of Parisians furthers the notion of topographic reconstruction that naturally lends themselves to apocalyptic conceptions. This in itself highlights how psychotopography manifests. Conscious and deliberate action usually follows in response to unconscious emotional shifts underpinning environmental change that consequently alters the character's surroundings to an even greater degree.

Further movement in the novel is equated with memory. A riot breaks out at the premiere of a restored copy of *The Death of Marat* that causes Lauren and Michel to leave Paris. The state of their relationship and their own memories are reflected in the riots engulfing the city. The grand-nephew of Adolphe Sarre, Michel's family history is presented as a catalyst triggering the civil disorder. As this incident occurs, Michel and Lauren engage in intercourse. A film Michel made as a student is dismantled and used to tie Lauren's hands in an act of foreplay. The image symbolises the wish to consciously split past from present, whilst simultaneously evoking Freudian discourse on conflicting drives whilst furthering the novel's motif of chaos and destruction. The Sarre family history emblematised via film, the motif is used here to demonstrate how oppositional forms are counterbalanced throughout Erickson's fiction. These polarities typically encapsulated via singular motifs or images are invariably seen to have an effect on the surrounding topography. In assigning memory and other internal faculties with some form of tangibility or geographic specificity, a character's internal workings are able to be mapped.

Both the personal and collective memories of Michel and the Sarre family are respectively literalised through film, Lauren's memory is conversely invoked through the city's destruction. The sights and sounds of the riots stir her memory. Apocalyptic impressions continue to build as details of the riots are given. As Lauren and Michel make love, her mind is cast back to a childhood recollection of a wildfire sweeping across the Kansan planes. The constant counterbalancing of disparate entities across Erickson's fiction is illustrated here in this portrayal, indicating of the close interconnection between memory, destruction and

[32] Kincaid, 'Secret Maps', p. 31.

topographic change. Images of the two cataclysmic events are conveyed parallel to each other to create a sense of a temporal divide being bridged:

> Nothing around her made an impact, not the sounds from the boulevards below or the cold through the window or the voices from the other rooms—nothing until she smelled the burning of the chestnut trees: and that took her back somewhere: the sensation of his tongue inside her felt like a wisp of smoke winding up through her, and she remembered once long before in Kansas waking in the middle of the night and smelling the fires outside her window […] People running back and forth in the dark, figures outlined by the huge bonfires on the flat landscape and the fall leaves crackling from the heat, the long full skirts of women sweeping by, the wide spinning umbrellas they held to shield themselves from the raining soot, and more and more leaves fed to the fires (*DBS*, 179-180).

The above excerpt features yet another reference to windows alongside implications of their association with perceptual faculties. The two separate descriptions of disaster are ultimately connected by the protagonist's innate faculties. This can be considered a suitable demonstration of psychotopography, in which the surrounding landscape is implicitly correlated with the character to result in a range of fluctuating conceptions that are connected by innate faculties such as memory and emotion. The connection is synesthetic in nature. An aspect of personal history, for instance, is recalled by the riots in the present and through sensory evocation ('he smelled the burning of the chestnut trees: and that took her back somewhere […].'). Environmental changes are shown as a recurrence, mirroring the manner in which these faculties operate. The mutability of topography in Erickson's fiction is affirmed via such a presentation, signalling of the extent of the connection between character and environment.

As the novel progresses, the emotional affecting of topography becomes more pronounced. The connection between character and environment is made explicit. After Paris' harshest winter gives way to citywide riots, Lauren and Michel make their way to Venice. The two diverge en route. Lauren takes a boat steered by Billy Boat, who dies along the way. Michel, meanwhile, takes the train. Whilst passing through Wyndeaux, Michel becomes stuck in a time loop as he repeatedly passes through the village's train station. His carriage empties of passengers and out of the window, he sees a vision of what he believes is his own conception, as well as the graves of his twin brothers. The significance of the window is again posed here; a representation of a lens that offers character a perspective radically different to their own perceptions of reality, regardless of how strange or surreal it may be. This is a typical occurrence in Erickson's novels in which distinctions between perceptions of reality are gradually eroded to facilitate some form of sensory displacement in the character. Kincaid considers this episode to encapsulate the novel itself: '[…] We have all the oft-repeated symbols of this novel brought together: temporal and topographic dislocation, doppelgangers, alienation, and the shifting connections of identity across the twentieth century.'[33]

Michel eventually arrives in Venice as a wizened old man, having seemingly been trapped in the time loop for decades despite only a matter of days having passed. Again, this indicates how all entities in Erickson's fiction—be they temporal or topographic—are mutable such is

[33] Kincaid, 'Secret Maps', p. 32.

the closeness of their interconnection. A form of defamiliarization is found to occur in Venice similar to those depicted previously. As the race in which Jason participates begins, a mysterious, obfuscating fog envelops the city. The cyclists go missing and are nowhere to be found. Unable to recognise Michel, Lauren becomes apprehensive at being followed by a strange old man. The interpersonal distance catalysed by the fog can be seen to evoke their first meeting in Los Angeles whilst Lauren was in a fugue state. Her compromised faculties during this encounter were seen to affect her interpretation of the landscape, as conceptions of Kansas and connotations of home became imposed upon Los Angeles. Similarly, Venice is sighted in half-formed and incomplete terms through the dense fog; Erickson's description of Lauren's observations creates the impression of the city disappearing around her. 'Dejected, she returned to San Marco Square, where she could see the porticos of the plaza through the mists, and the tower which shot up vanishing into the fog' precedes reference to her climbing the tower and finding that 'nothing of the city could be seen' (*DBS*, 217). The suggested disappearance of Venice's features appears in conjunction with her melancholia; the city's apparent shifting around her reflective of abrupt emotional changes.

An even stranger incident occurs during this portion of the text in which Venice's canals are found to have drained without explanation. This coincides with Lauren feeling disoriented in her surrounding as description of the empty canals is paralleled with reference to her 'becoming more confused in her direction.'[34] A subversion of Lynch's notion of imageability can be seen to be existent here, in which striking and identifiable features of the city used as a means of gauging direction are suddenly altered. In manipulating certain properties or familiar qualities of these landmarks, a sense of displacement is able to be fostered. The image of Venice with its canals drained appears wholly surreal, directly affecting perceptions of the city. The fog engulfs Venice can, therefore, be considered to represent this same confusion. Connection between character and setting becomes strengthened consequently; a point made by Kincaid in his observations that the extremities of topographic change are demonstrative of the impending 'emotional climax of the book' (*DBS*, 221).

This emotional climax is typified by an abrupt interpersonal split that is at odds with the novel's frequent posing of the closeness of various interconnections. After the cyclists are found and the race comes to a strange conclusion with no definitive winner, Lauren decides to stay with Jason. A dejected Michel ventures to Wyndeaux attempting to excavate the graves of his twin brothers. That the coffins are found to be empty symbolises the absence of resolution for a character largely unsure of both his past and identity. Typical of Erickson's narratives, the plot reconnects with its original starting point as Lauren is shown to have resettled in her native Kansas following Jason's death in an unspecified terror attack.

Now a ward for special needs children, she is shown as elderly woman at the novel's conclusion calling out for Michel in her sleep. Connotations of comfort, security and familiarity can be ascertained from her return to Kansas; hence the unconscious manifestation of this suppressed yearning for Michel. The chaos and confusion associated with Erickson's portrayals of urban environments are a mirroring of the complex nature of each character's

[34] ibid, p. 221.

interconnected relationship. Conversely, the calmness that Kansas imbues within her consciousness leads to an ultimate realisation long after the events of the text have concluded.

'Post-Los Angeles': *Amnesiascope*

Published eleven years after *Days*, the 'post-Los Angeles' setting of *Amnesiascope* represents arguably the most striking development of Erickson's various psychotopographic depictions. The concept evident to varying degrees in intervening works such as *Rubicon Beach* and *Arc d'X*, in addition to temporal dislocation constituting a key feature of *Tours*, Erickson makes the intrinsic relationship between character and setting the most prominent theme of his fifth novel. The presence of an author surrogate inhabiting a version of Los Angeles that Erickson claims has 'fleeting similarities to the one we know, where all cultural immunities have collapsed, so that any random influence permeates the city's membrane' can be viewed as an indication of the mutually reactive nature of this relationship.[35] Erickson's use of the word 'membrane' is intriguing here, creating the impression of a lifeform of sorts. In this respect, it is possible to view the city being representative of the workings of internal faculties such as memory and emotion. The ebbs, flows, and random fluctuations of these faculties are effectively transposed onto a 'fantastical' depiction of Los Angeles in which Erickson has sought to address 'more personal concerns.'[36] The relationship that underpins psychotopographic conceptions is suggested as being arguably the novel's foremost preoccupation.

It is through this very relationship that Erickson is able to channel and convey his own conceptions of his home city. The 'post-Los Angeles' setting is one completely of Erickson's creation; a 'Los Angeles of my imagination', as the author has stated.[37] The absence of any aspiration towards a realist depiction of Los Angeles enables Erickson to portray his thoughts and conceptions in a number of intriguing manners. Characterisation and a fragmented episodic structure illustrate these personal impressions to a degree, but it is in the 'post-Los Angeles' setting that this is most evident. The city's constantly shifting topography and surreal properties serve to express the protagonist's free-flowing internal faculties. In addition to the text's lengthy digressions and narrative inconsistencies, the striking transmutable facets of 'post-Los Angeles' represent a further means through which the narrator's internal discord is able to be charted. Whereas the narrator's relationship with film affords him an opportunity to consider the nature of his own psychology, such conceptions and changes in perception are unconsciously manifesting in his surroundings.

The shifting nature of the city bears resemblance to Soja's 'exopolis' vision of the city, as has already been outlined. The setting also represents a distortion of Lynch's observations relating to how the individual engages with their surroundings. The distortion of concepts such as imageability, and of nodes and landmarks is a noticeable feature of *Days*, and one

[35] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', p. 398.
[36] ibid, p. 398.
[37] See Introduction.

that is continued in *Amnesiascope.* With much of the episodic plot detailed in Chapter 4, this section will focus on how the psychotopographic content found in the novel invites comparison with the works of both theorists.

Firstly, the central premise of *Amnesiascope* evokes Soja's six visions of Los Angeles. The post-apocalyptic city found in the text is multi-faceted, incorporating a number of elements commonly associated with Los Angeles. These include reference to the city as a metropolis consisting of intersecting freeways and bustling streets that Reyner Banham has described as being an implicit component of the Angeleno's consciousness; 'a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life' given that their totality is in effect a 'single comprehensible place.'[38] Cultural forms synonymous with the city are also present in the text. Film is one such obvious feature, alongside allusions to commerce and fine dining. The city is also presented as a diverse melting pot with insinuation of frequent outbreaks of civil disorder. Each of these facets is represented in the 'post-Los Angeles' of the novel, either in implicit or explicit terms. Consideration of this leads to the conclusion that the real Los Angeles functions as an analogue for the setting of *Amnesiascope* that is itself ripe for manipulation and subversion.

Soja's six visions capture the essence of Los Angeles, encapsulating its globalised, socially dichotomous and cultural reality. The 'exopolis' and its implications of displacement through constantly shifting centre points ties in with the themes posed in *Amnesiascope*. The 'post-Los Angeles' of the novel encompasses all of these facets of its true life counterpart—of globalised influences, simmering chaos, and 'non-sequitur streets'—and distorts them to accentuate a posed strangeness to consequently amplify feelings of displacement (*A,* 4). An influence of Soja, Henri Lefebvre remarked that the American city structure inherently perpetuates such feelings; that 'The alienation of the city embraces and perpetuates all forms of alienation […] The more it concentrates the means to live, the more unliveable it becomes.'[39] In essence, the city's representation as a capitalist totem serves to induce these suggested feelings of isolation and displacement within the individual in question. Soja's 'exopolis' vision, however, gives an impression as to how these very feelings are instigated by the relentless expansion of the globalised metropolis. Soja notes how the 'exopolis' is in effect an example of a 'diffusion of hyperreality'; a heightened city that has become devoid of traditional city qualities through its development.[40] As such, the contemporary city becomes increasingly difficult to conceive or interpret. Every aspect of its being is simply a concealment of further half-formed notions pertaining to an ultimate absence of traditional city qualities. It stands as an unending representation of conscious superficiality. Ultimately, the absence of these traditional city qualities serve to alienate the individual; an effect that becomes increasingly more prominent in *Amnesiascope*.

Soja conveys a sense of this, elaborating on typical Baudrillardan assertions of hyperrealities defined by an interchangeability of consciously projected actualities and artifices as

[38] Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, p. 195.
[39] 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).
[40] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 278.

exemplified via Californian theme parks and their creation of 'degeneration of cinematographic illusion' resulting in a 'parody of the world of imagination.'[41] Here, Soja develops this notion and applies it to the context of interpreting the properties of the 'exopolis':

> The simpler worlds of the artificial theme parks are no longer the only places where the disappearance of the real is revealingly concealed. This ecstatic disappearance permeates everyday life, enabling the hyperreal to increasingly influence not only what we wear and what we eat and how we choose to entertain ourselves; but also where and how we choose to live, who and what we vote for, how government is run […] Unmasking the corruption, deceit, greed, emptiness, the tinselled superficialities and exploitative social relations of our contemporary lifeworlds is still useful […] What has been revealed, however, is that practically everything discoverable beneath the surface is also another mask. To dig even deeper will bring us *back to the surface,* to an Orange County that continues to function symbolically as an exceedingly attractive lived space, undemystifiable because its (hyper)reality *is* mystification itself.[42]

Although Soja's appraisal here can be considered convoluted to a degree, simply on account of its scope, there are a number of points of comparison with Erickson's 'post-Los Angeles'. Soja's speculation as to the nature and working of the 'exopolis' refers to the Orange County region of California, encompassing Los Angeles and surrounding districts. In itself, this is reflective of the spread of the city that is largely devoid of traditional city properties. Erickson's 'post-Los Angeles' channels a similar impression; the construct consisting of a range of facades that mask a chaotic undercurrent. Additionally, it is possible to view this presentation as a mirroring of the narrator's character in how his assertions of familiarity within his milieu serve to conceal internal discord. The varying extent of these anxieties is subsequently captured in the transmutable nature of the setting to evoke Soja's vision of a centreless, perpetually shifting Los Angeles.

Movement is a central feature of Erickson's novel right from the outset. The narrator's living situation in the Hotel Hamblin is outlined—a plot point that inherently implies a state of impermanence—is outlined to the reader. It is via his observations here that a sense of the setting being implicitly aligned with the protagonist. The recurring motif of windows once again evident, the narrator describes the panoramic scene from his hotel suite:

> My new suite is on the top floor of the southwest corner of the building, with eight huge windows that run to the ceiling, facing every direction but north. At one place in the apartment I can see east, west and south all at the same time (*A,* 4).

Description of space in the above excerpt appears intriguing in respect of the narrator being able to see a panoramic view of the city from his accommodation. A clear sense of personality and space are established here; the two correlated in unspoken terms. Analysis of the fluctuating nature of this connection stands as the novel's greatest preoccupation. The relationship is consistently charted throughout its fragmented episodic form. Prior to the narrator's outlining of his living situation, 'post-Los Angeles' is described in general terms.

[41] Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 58.
[42] Soja, *Thirdspace*, pp. 278-279.

The city's streets are described as having 'no linear logic' that seemingly 'disappear on one side of the city only to suddenly reappear on the other' (*A,* 3).

An impression is already created here of the city constantly shifting of its accord. Although the narrator's comment can be viewed as a metaphor for the city's confusing geography, the notion of urban sentiency is nonetheless posed as though an organism. The idea that streets disappear before suddenly appearing again at random implies of an urban sentience at play, in which the city itself is engaged in a constant, self-conscious process of arbitrary change. This same motif can serve to stoke a character's feeling of displacement. The sensation itself becomes all the more noticeable upon consideration of the narrator's residency in a hotel suite. The city's shifting can be seen to mirror the narrator's own state of impermanence, changing his accommodation on a fairly regular basis be it through either restlessness or necessity. This correlating of character with setting constitutes the novel's most enduring point of fascination, subsequently allowing for psychotopographic change to manifest.

The novel's 'post-Los Angeles' setting represents a reimagining of general tropes and attitudes associated with the city. These tropes and familiar conceptions are often undermined by Erickson in the text. This not only demonstrates his own frustration at portrayals of his own home city that inform outside perceptions—as he has previously expressed in relation to Bret Easton Ellis' work—but creates a wholly personal depiction of the city linked to his own imagination and experience unburdened by preconceived conventions.[43]

Set in the aftermath of the seismic 'Quake' disaster, the concept of 'post-Los Angeles' riffs on the familiar themes of disaster and topographic reconfiguration being at the core of the city's being. Apocalyptic imagery is counterbalanced with reference to familiar tropes associated with Los Angeles. The image of the narrator and Viv driving with a coerced stripper through an abandoned LAX airport is juxtaposed with a notion of the protagonist having a steady occupation as a film critic for a local newspaper. Similarly, reference to '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' captures this same contrast, paralleling apocalyptic imagery with opulence and fine dining (*A,* 5). The concept of 'post-Los Angeles' is crystallized through such contrasts. Indeed, consideration of the 'post' prefix leads to assessment that the city has gone beyond its natural end. The Quake has effectively signalled the end of the conventional city form to leave in its place a free-flowing entity; the facets of which existing from its 'pre' period merely conceal social and environmental crises that reflect the narrator's internal anxieties masked by a confident veneer. A similarity with Soja's 'exopolis' vision can be noted in this respect.

In detailing the properties of 'post-Los Angeles' in the early stages of the text, the narrator is presented as a flaneur-type figure. Here, the narrator evokes Dante's *Inferno* via this admission: 'I love the ashes. I love the endless smoky twilight of Los Angeles. I love walking along Sunset Boulevard […] Driving across one black ring after another all the way to the sea through the charred palisades past abandoned houses' (*A,* 5). A comparison with psychogeography can be made here in relation to its close association with wandering. It is

[43] See Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.

through the narrator's exploration of his surroundings that a clear impression of 'post-Los Angeles' is able to be gained. Disaster and destruction are enshrined in the landscape. The basic nature of this is simply accepted by the narrator in fairly nonchalant terms, as is revealed through his observations. The processing of this environment signals the forging of a connection between character and setting. The nature of this made more explicit as the narrator goes on to discuss his relative contentment within his surroundings:

> 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 to the rooftop, watch 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 (*A*, 5).

Impressions of destruction are continually evoked amid the narrator's expression of giddiness and his previous declaration of 'loving the ashes'. A permanent sense of chaos is posed via unspecified reference to 'the riots of ten years ago' alongside mention of fires burning in the present. The above excerpt carries with it connotations of hell; a conception aided by the image of swirling rings of fire inspiring further connotations of Dante's *Inferno*. Further, the burning of a 'dead swath' between the protagonist and his memories indicates a form of separation between the two entities. The abstracting of an innate faculty from the self is an arresting concept in itself, implying of a fragmentation occurring within his consciousness. In assigning this a degree of physicality—albeit one conversely linked with decay and destruction as a 'dead swath'—an intrinsic connection with the landscape is able to be forged. The ultimate effect of this is able to be sighted through the narrator's anxieties that unconsciously influence his surrounding topography.

The connection between setting and character becomes further embedded into the text's fabric after the narrator informs of his fascination with a billboard featuring an attractive woman named Justine that doesn't appear to be advertising anything at all. The narrator observes that her image has reappeared over the past ten years 'up and down the Sunset Strip, Hollywood Boulevard, La Cienega Boulevard' (*A*, 16). With the image appearing yet again, watching over the city 'as the Red Angel of Los Angeles, from block to block and street to street and billboard to billboard and year to year', the narrator demonstrates an ability to perfectly recall the phone number adorning the billboard from memory: 'I don't have to write it down, because in the L.A. of Numbers I am Memory Central, just as in the L.A. of Names I am Memory Void' (*A*, 16). The inconsistency of memory is expressed through geographical comparison, bestowing a form of tangibility upon the faculty. The same technique is evident in *Arc d'X*, in which districts of Aeonopolis are named after moods and emotions.

In contrast to Aeonopolis, however, 'post-Los Angeles' is presented as an unfixed and malleable environment. Though it is suggested in *Arc d'X* that Aeonopolis is the product of Sally Hemings' psyche and obviously a wholly subjective setting, it represents an altogether more conventional depiction of a city structure, devoid of wild fluctuations in topographic content and direction. 'Post-Los Angeles' can therefore be viewed as a further development of Erickson's conceived settings. The capitalised references to 'Memory Central' and 'Memory Void' here underscore psychotopographic changes, as innate inconsistencies are correlated with a permanently fluctuating external environment. The properties of the 'post-

Los Angeles' setting are consequently implied as being as free-flowing and tangential as the workings of internal faculties.

Typical of Erickson's literature, the presence of cataclysms acts as a modifier for topographic change. The distinction between 'pre' and 'post' versions of Los Angeles is established via the narrator's recollections of the days following the Quake. A twin picture of widespread dilapidation and urban squalor is offered:

> Wandering from one dead apartment building to another, slipping past the red X's that marked the doors of buildings that had been condemned. Down at the beach an old aquablue building called the Seacastle greeted the brown waves that rumbled in, the basement long since flooded, the rooms now empty except for the other squatters that strayed from room to room until they found one to claim. From the street below, I could make out through the windows the apartments as they were abandoned: prim apartments, disheveled ones, some trashed when the earth lurched awake from its bad dream, and some that unscathed except for the fact that the entire structure could teeter and crash (*A*, 29).

Los Angeles here is effectively presented as a husk. Familiar features are evident, yet these have been emptied of symbolic value or representative qualities. 'Prim apartments' and other impressive structures are now defined by their emptiness as opposed to their aesthetics. Reference to a 'dead apartment building' attaches a degree of personality to these features, furthering impressions of urban sentiency. Allusion is made to distinct states of living and death, illustrated by implied 'pre' and 'post' periods of Los Angeles' existence. The uncertainty as to what the future holds for Los Angeles in its 'post-disaster' state is suggested in description of red X's across the doors of abandoned buildings; the letter a regular motif of Erickson's fiction as a signifier of the unknown, whilst also suggesting a desire to erase the past.

'Post-Los Angeles' is additionally personified in reference to the earth lurching awake from a 'bad dream.' The depiction of the post-disaster city is rendered even starker through its association with human tangibility with regard to the presence of a continuous verb form. Additionally, is a presentation that becomes all the more complex and multi-layered upon consideration of dream-like properties. An obvious human trait, reference to dreams also serves to break down seemingly fixed external points of distinction in Erickson's texts. The twin result is the simultaneous perpetuation of a stylistic fluidity and a surreal narrative form that both disorients and displaces the protagonist. This same sense of displacement is what instigates incidents of psychotopographic reconstruction in Erickson's novels.

The subsequent aimless drift of the city's residents is also detailed in conjunction with the city's altered topography. Not only does this occur individually, but reference is made to this in a grander sense. The city's displaced residents are referred to in the text as 'Quake nomads' (*A,* 32). Evoking the title of Erickson's quasi-journalistic work *American Nomad,* an impression of a collective restlessness is implied, instigated via the changed landscape. Displacement is suggested as being an inescapable aspect of the 'post-Los Angeles' societal structure. This manifests directly from the disaster itself that has irrevocably altered the surrounding landscape. The relationship between character and setting becomes even more pronounced as a result.

The narrator's navigation of the post-disaster city expresses these issues in microcosmic form, with his own displacement causing self-examination. His time spent living in the Seacastle, for instance, is associated with the disintegration of a relationship with a woman named Sally; a figure who brings to mind Sally Hemings through her association with darkness in the protagonist's consciousness. The two 'moving in circles around each other' in the Seacastle channels this same restlessness, whilst linking their declining relationship with a wider topographic decay (*A*, 31). Here, the narrator recalls being with her 'on the balcony, naked from the waist down and staring at the charred cliffs of Malibu', involuntarily contrasting the memory with one of being with Viv in the same structure and sighting 'the dead city to the east before it lapsed into the final darkness of night' (*A*, 32). The destroyed landscape is inextricably linked to the narrator's being in these recollections; the setting itself functioning as a metaphor for these relationships that are themselves in a constant process of change. The narrator concludes this period of introspection by further aligning himself with the city, claiming 'But it's at night, on the other hand, that *my* Los Angeles, the dead city inside me, is especially beautiful in the light of the moon' (*A*, 32). A personal connection is stressed here via the italicising of 'my'. In addition, death and beauty are counterbalanced as conflicting entities within this recollection to indicate of the radical shifts in conceptions of events that are subsequently mirrored in the changing topography.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the inconsistencies that develop within the narrator's milieu are further representations of his fluctuating conceptions. Incidents such as the narrator's hoax review of Adolphe Sarre's *The Death of Marat* and the confusion concerning the making of *White Whisper* encapsulate the uncertain nature of perceptual faculties. Further, these incidents themselves appear consistent with external shifts. Consistent with Erickson's assertions of the novel's setting representing a conceived version of Los Angeles, new landmarks and districts have emerged in the years following the Quake. Reference to a 'Black Clock Park' creates further impressions of a temporal dislocation upon consideration of the narrative content of *Tours*. *Amnesiascope* also includes repeated discussion of a district called 'Baghdadville' to conjure additional connotations of chaos and disorder. There is also a recurrent suggestion of the existence of different time zones within 'post-Los Angeles'; something first expressed in an early description of the narrator 'Crossing into the Mulholland Time Zone from Zed Time' (*A*, 9). The impression created is one of a dislocation that incorporates temporal and spatial uncertainty. The resultant feelings of disorientation directly stem from these intersecting points of confusion. Not only is topography presented as a malleable entity in the text, but so too is temporality. The ultimate effect of these dislocations is the presentation of a landscape that is subject to unpredictable free-flowing shifts reflective of the protagonist's interpretation of the reconfigured city.

As the narrative develops, the surreal symbiotic nature of these internal and external shifts becomes fully evident. Inconsistencies in both the narrative and wider landscape are seen as being symptomatic of the failings of memory. In itself, this causes much internal angst. Comparable to the psychotopography of *Days*, these feelings are crystallized via wild changes in the weather that reshape the environment even further. Following on from the anxieties created by his failed relationships and the inconsistencies in his personal

experiences, the narrator's sense of unease is compounded by an association with a prostitute, who refuses to leave his suite at the Hotel Hamblin. Given his attempts at reconciling with Viv, the narrator is forced to keep her out of sight. A plan is exacted with his friend, Ventura, to transfer her between rooms in the hotel. This unfolds as an unrelenting deluge occurs outside that lasts for days. Gradually, its effect on the dilapidated Hotel Hamblin comes to be seen: 'Time passed. The rain fell. The ceiling in the hallways appeared to sag. Small brown rivulets ran down from where my walls met the roof… I could barely keep up anymore with emptying the buckets and mopping up the carpet' (*A*, 174).

This episode symbolises the interconnection between character and setting. An environmental facet can be considered to represent the narrator's internal discord here. The deluge's affecting of the hotel perfectly emblematises psychotopography as an effect in how the narrator's angst externalises and ultimately comes to reshape his surroundings. Comparable to how the narrator's familiarity within 'post-Los Angeles' slowly erodes, the heavy rainfall eventually penetrates the hotel's confines. The submerged Los Angeles of *Rubicon Beach* evoked in description of 'the rapids of the Sunset Strip', the Hotel Hamblin's eventual flooding represents further topographic change (*A*, 181). Ironically, this manifestation of the narrator's anxiety actually comes to solve his issue with the prostitute. Whilst passing her around the Hamblin's rooms with Ventura, the ceiling suddenly collapses to cause hundreds of gallons of water crashing down into the hotel:

> She began screaming like a banshee. Still screaming, water flooding the hallway around her, she fled down the stairs and out of the front of the building, and down the stairs and out the front of the building, and down Jacob Hamblin Road where we could hear her all the way to Santa Monica Boulevard (*A*, 181).

The image of external conditions impinging upon internal confines blurs points of distinction to an even greater degree in the text. The emphasis Erickson consistently places on interconnections throughout his novels necessitates the blurring of these tangible distinctions that consequently fosters an intrinsic link between character and setting. With cataclysmic conditions often literalising the protagonist's emotions and conception, the topographic change that occurs as a result displace the character to a more noticeable extent. In this instance, however, the effect of psychotopography works in a different way. Undoubtedly a representation of the narrator's internal anxieties in this regard, the adverse conditions and the topographic changes they instigate instead serve to provide the narrator with a clarity of thought that has largely been absent throughout the narrative. His convoluted consciousness analogised via external fluctuations and narrative disconnects, this depiction of psychotopography constitutes the culmination of these personal issues. Expressed metaphorically through the prostitute's fleeing from the tidal wave inside the hotel, this psychotopographic manifestation acts as a means of cleansing the narrator's psyche. The events that follow this plot point can be construed as confirming this observation. The narrator's realisation that he wishes to resume his relationship with Viv, allied with his reconciliation with his mother can be seen in evidential terms. This leads to a renewed acceptance of both himself and his surroundings as the two are entities are paralleled alongside each other once more come the novel's conclusion:

> I don't promise 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 narrator's final consideration here overtly links his being to the wider environment. Internal faculties are paired alongside physical geography in order to map the workings of these functions; a sentiment encapsulated in reference to 'memory to the moment' as a means of channelling how this relationship works in the text. In essence, memory is seen to capture the moment, yet its inherent faults leave the moment itself to be recalled inaccurately to give the impression of narrative inconsistency. This, in turn, impacts upon description of setting, giving rise to its portrayal as a quasi-sentient, free-flowing entity which perpetuates such inconsistencies. The narrator's allusion to being split between these two entities expressed via reference to 'memory' and to 'moment' underpins the entire concept of personal displacement within such an environment. Given how psychotopography operates, this same sense of displacement consequently initiates further alterations to the landscape that serves to make the protagonist's alienation all the more pronounced.

Summary: Erickson's Psychotopographies

R.L. Litchfield has observed that the concept of psychotopography can be viewed as being reflective of Los Angeles' unique geographic and social history. Here, she identifies the various conditions that underpin its presence in Erickson's fiction:

> Los Angeles is a city of fragmentations that is in a state of flux. As a product of the unique topography and the strange periods of boom expansion the city is one of contradictions: topographic, meteorological, emotional, and even psychic. All of this leads to a strange experience of a place that has grown very difficult to map, know, or experience coherently.[44]

Erickson's recollections of growing up in the San Fernando Valley contain reference to such notions. A state of seemingly perpetual change is typically discussed in past interviews, with Erickson also having only become aware of Los Angeles' uniqueness having spent time living away from the city. Psychotopography—the forging of a mutually reactive connection between character and setting—represents an innovative means of expressing this same uniqueness rooted in Erickson's own youthful interpretation of his environment. In developing the implicit connection between the two entities commonly seen in literary psychogeography, Erickson is able to make the effect central to both the narrative and thematic content of his texts. Characterisation is able to manifest through its employment. Certain recurring preoccupations and interests are channelled via its depictions. The effect is central to Erickson's fiction, representing arguably his most intriguing literary trademark.

The effect's working and function simultaneously deconstructs and evokes the works of spatial theorists closely associated with Los Angeles such as Lynch and Soja respectively. Despite the frequency of interviews that Erickson has given, it has proven difficult to get him

[44] Litchfield, '(Re)Imagining Los Angeles', p. 8.

to elaborate on specific features of his work in any great detail. This makes it difficult to assert with any great certainty that these works have influenced Erickson's psychotopographic portrayals. A number of similarities, however, are undeniable and made all the more interesting through a shared fascination with Los Angeles. Lynch's concept of imageability is frequently undermined in Erickson's novels, as protagonists become displaced within apparently familiar surroundings. The entire notion of 'mind mapping' to establish familiarity with a particular environment is instead manipulated by Erickson to highlight inherent inconsistencies in perceptual faculties.

Although Erickson's depictions of psychotopography are by no means exclusive to Los Angeles, it can reasonably be argued that his depictions of the city constitute his most fascinating demonstrations of the effect. Erickson's own recollections resonate with Soja's analysis of the city representing 'paradoxical but functionally interdependent juxtapositions.'[45] A constant counterbalancing of conflicting entities is present in Erickson's fiction, with close interconnections between themes and characters consistently posed to create impressions of a prevailing narrative and stylistic fluidity. As demonstrated, this extends even to depictions of setting, as the free-flowing internal faculties of Erickson's characters are invariably reflected in the surrounding topography.

[45] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 193.

Conclusion

In examining Steve Erickson's literary interests and concerns it becomes clear that he is a writer worthy of critical engagement. Mystifyingly overlooked by critics despite recognition from a number of contemporary authors, it is hoped that this thesis will signal the beginning of a more comprehensive form of analysis directed towards his oeuvre. Whilst the difficulties of studying contemporary writers have been discussed at length during this thesis, the various issues outlined (e.g. difficulties concerning classification, changes in authorial focus, a continuing oeuvre) should be no means by seen as impediments to critically engaging with a writer as stylistically interesting and with as much thematic depth as Erickson.

Despite his disinclination to be classified as such, Erickson's works can undoubtedly be considered in a postmodern context.[1] Narrative and structural experimentation is evident in a significant number of texts. Interconnections are prominent across his oeuvre with regard to characters, settings and themes. Seemingly disparate images and sequences are often conveyed in a free-flowing manner as points of distinction blur to create an atmosphere typified by disorientation. Erickson's fascination with film representing a form of personal and cultural memory is one such area in which this process occurs, making for psychologically complex characterisations and fluid narratives. Indeed, Erickson's interest in film—in addition to other forms of popular culture—and the affect that this has on his literature is symptomatic of postmodernism. Whilst Erickson may reject the label of postmodernism, there is unsurprisingly much evidence to contrary, given that his time spent growing up in Los Angeles during the 1950s and 1960s coincided with increased media accessibility and proliferation. The effect of film and music on his works is obvious, even after so much as a cursory read. Not only are the affecting properties of each often referenced in his novels, the incorporation of filmic techniques into the structure of his texts and music often featuring as prominent motif suggests that these interests represent intriguing and distinctly personal ways in which thematic content is conveyed to the reader.

As a native Angeleno, Erickson's works bear many familiar hallmarks of Los Angeles fiction, such as a recurring preoccupation with multifaceted presentations of endings and endings. Establishing distinctions between the Hollywood novel and the Los Angeles novels as a form enables readers to observe that his interest in film lies with representing the medium as an affecting process, in contrast to simply depicting the business of the film industry. Nevertheless, a notable recurring trope of Los Angeles—the notion of ever-present, cyclical destruction—is channelled into Erickson's works. Although this is not only presented in literal terms, the concept of endings and their different permutations are commonplace within his fiction. Often Erickson's depiction of alternate or reimagined histories is intertwined with impressions of ominous disaster or wider uncertainty. These depictions are typically found to signal either a form of personal reinvention or an entirely different and seemingly disparate plot thread. Such abrupt shifts highlight an interconnection in Erickson's literature between endings and new beginnings. As such, the tone of a particular narrative can change radically as different thematic preoccupations come to the fore. For instance, a

[1] See Chapter 1.

novel's beginning in a relativistic fashion or in a manner consistent with conventions of historical fiction is usually demarcated in explicit terms. The narrative becomes stranger with regard to tone, focus and even setting as different plot strands are often introduced. As a literary effect, this very development demonstrates how a fascination with endings manifests structurally in Erickson's fiction.

Much of Erickson's concerns as a writer lie in national contexts. This in itself can be viewed as underpinning his frequent literary excursions into the field of alternate or reimagined histories. Additionally, Erickson's interest in the uniqueness and innate eccentricities of his home city of Los Angeles can be considered reflective of a concern with the national consciousness, on account of his claim that the city is generally perceived as a 'little port of weirdness, not connected with the rest.'[2] Erickson regards Los Angeles to represent America in a microcosm, in contrast to the perceptions of outsiders and other writers associated with the city. Erickson's numerous literary versions of Los Angeles can be viewed as a mirroring of America itself, embodying the same inconsistencies that he observes of his home city. Notions of unresolved historical paradoxes and conflicts as being ingrained in the national consciousness constitute a major feature of Erickson's writings on America. The scope of his interest in this field can be gauged by his interest in articulating how the country has gradually moved away from its original Jeffersonian ideals.

The nebulousness of the 'American Dream' as a concept is referenced to illustrate how this process has occurred. As alluded to through Erickson's recollections of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan's presidential debate prior to the 1980 election, aspirations of commerce and material wealth appear to have usurped proposed ideals of stringent democracy and widespread political engagement.[3] A collective fascination with figures from the spheres of entertainment and pop culture appears to be one notable result of this development. Often these figures are used by Erickson in an attempt at assessing the national consciousness. On other occasions, their public and working lives are analysed in the context of a wider national experience. Erickson's reflections on American politics and its intertwinement with pop culture seem to indicate of a perception that the nation is bereft of direction and that its original ideas have lapsed. His observations on Reagan's ability to project a presidential persona on camera appear to hint at a vacuity at the core of the national consciousness at the close of the twentieth century. Evident also in Erickson's coverage of Bill Clinton's campaign for re-election, this contemporary phenomenon can be seen to have reached its nadir in the Trump-inspired bleakness of *Shadowbahn*. 'Let's not let ourselves off the hook by supposing Donald Trump is something that happened to America. Rather, America happened to America, and Trump is the result', Erickson has noted in this respect.[4] For Erickson, promises of change are ultimately superficial. Whilst the twin issues of reconciliation and resolution are tentatively suggested throughout Erickson's American writings, these are only viewed as being achievable through a willingness to address the country's transgressions and paradoxes. That Thomas Jefferson as a historical figure

[2] See Chapter 2.
[3] See Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.
[4] Milazzo, '"America Happened to America"'.

personifies many of these issues despite the ideals he espoused adds a further layer of complication to Erickson's examinations of his country.

As can be seen from his use of popular figures from the world of entertainment to channel social concerns or reflect on the state of the national consciousness, media engagement and representation is a recurring interest of Erickson's in his work. Film represents the most notable of these, despite numerous references to music and television throughout his oeuvre. His portrayals of film spectatorship allow for an interconnection between dreams and memory to come to prominence. Erickson's characterisations become enriched by the nature of this interconnection. Inspired by the spectacle of film, a range of repressed urges and unconscious desires announce themselves to the character. The content of these fantasies is typically presented as intermingling with a conscious interpretation of the film. A surreal picture emerges in which facets of film are relayed in conjunction with the dreams, desires and memories they elicit in the spectator's consciousness. The blurring of external points of distinction and states of being that can be regarded as a notable feature of Erickson's fiction is produced in the most obvious result of this effect. Though it should be stated that the blurring effect so synonymous with Erickson's work is not exclusively engendered via this process, a shared connection lies in the fact that is conveyed through emphasis on compromised or impaired internal faculties, such as in the cases of Adolphe Sarre from *Days* and Vikar from *Zeroville*. The affecting properties of film are demonstrated as a result, showing how they influence a character's psychology whilst shaping their external world view. Furthermore, presentations such as these highlight exactly where Erickson's interest lies with regard to film to make explicit the fallacy of considering him in the context of Hollywood novelists.

Erickson's depictions of changing character psychology represent a significant feature of his work. The manner in which these complex psychological portrayals are usually achieved already discussed, exactly what they subsequently affect is worthy of intrigue. The literary effect 'psychotopography' constitutes perhaps the most interesting and identifiable aspect of Erickson's work. In emphasising an intrinsic relationship between character and setting, Erickson is able to literally convey the full extent of his portrayals of complex psychologies. Lingering trauma or feelings of despair, for instance, are shown to cloud faculties that impact interpretation of a particular environment. As these emotions change or develop, their effect comes to be symbolised in the form of cataclysms or hostile weather conditions that irrevocably alter the surrounding topography. The relationship is shown to be reactive, with these environmental changes often causing further distress on account of feeling alienated within one's surroundings. Such feelings serve to influence further topographic change in a cyclical manner. The effect that Erickson perpetuates represents an additional means through which the blurring of internal and external points of distinction manifests. Influenced by Erickson's own youthful recollections of stark environmental change occurring around him in an apparently seamless fashion, impressions of urban sentience are posed.[5] Reflecting the extraordinary scale of change occurring around him at a rapid pace as an adolescent, Erickson's portrayals of setting are characterised by a free-flowing transmutable effect. Every

[5] See Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'.

conceivable environmental facet is subject to change as a process of defamiliarization occurs. In addition to psychotopography representing an effect that is a striking feature of Erickson's work, it can also be seen as a development of the author's concerns in a local context, channelling the profound influence of his youthful recollections in textual form.

Erickson's interests and concerns extend to both national and local spheres, as well as encompassing perceptions of film and other forms of pop culture. The form and style of Erickson's books reflect his different media interests, prominent themes such as the interconnectedness of dreams and memory, the blurring of external distinctions, the ever-presence of historic paradoxes and transgressions are conveyed to the reader in striking and innovative ways. As a result, his texts appear postmodern with regard both structure and content. The considered, well-crafted interplay between each of these elements is what elicits much of the intrigue concerning Erickson's literature. The sheer scope, focus and uniqueness of his work demand that he is a writer worthy of sustained, comprehensive critical appraisal. In identifying and examining Steve Erickson's interests and concerns, it is sincerely hoped that this represents the beginning of a wider academic development.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Erickson's Awards and Accolades

- National Endowment for the Arts (1987).
- Notable Book of the Year, *New York Times Book Review* (1987): *Rubicon Beach*.
- Notable Book of the Year, *New York Times Book Review* (1989): *Tours of the Black Clock.*
- Best Books of the Year, *Village Voice* (1989): *Tours of the Black Clock.*
- Notable Book of the Year, *New York Times Book Review* (1993): *Arc d'X*.
- Best Fiction of the Year, *Entertainment Weekly* (1993): *Arc d'X*.
- Best Novel nominee, *British Fantasy Society* (1997): *Amnesiascope*.
- Notable Book of the Year, *New York Times Book Review* (1999): *The Sea Came in at Midnight*.
- Best Books of the Year, *Uncut* (1999): *The Sea Came in at Midnight*.
- Best Novel nominee, British Fantasy Society (1999): *The Sea Came in at Midnight*.
- 2001 MacDowell Fellow.
- 2002 MacDowell Fellow.
- Best Books of the Year, *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (2005): *Our Ecstatic Days*.
- Best Books of the Year, *Uncut* (2005): *Our Ecstatic Days*.
- John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (2007).
- Best Books of the Year, *Newsweek* (2007): *Zeroville*.
- Best Books of the Year, *Washington Post BookWorld* (2007): *Zeroville*.
- Best Books of the Year, *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (2007): *Zeroville*.
- American Academy of Arts and Letters, Award in Literature (2010).
- Best Books of the Year, *Los Angeles Times* (2012): *These Dreams of You*.
- Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award (2014).
- Best Books of the Year, *Los Angeles Times* (2017): *Shadowbahn*.
- Best Books of the Year, *Bookworm*, KCRW (2017): *Shadowbahn*.

Appendix 2

Steve Erickson's Essential Movie Library

The Essential Movie Library was a weekly blog series written by Erickson for *Los Angeles*. A feature that ran for just over two years—the first entry released on 16th October 2012 and the final piece published on 28th October 2014—each blog represented a mini-appraisal of each film. Usually consisting of no more than three paragraphs, each selection was justified for selection by the belief that 'they ought to be in every well stocked home library.' 'These are the films that if you haven't seen yet, you should,' Erickson commented in his inaugural blog on Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* trilogy. As has been demonstrated, a significant number of these films have been referenced in Erickson's literature. They are as follows:

#1 *The Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990)
#2 *Vertigo* (1958)
#3 *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)
#4 *The Third Man* (1949)
#5 *The Lady Eve* (1941)
#6 *Casablanca* (1942)
#7 *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)
#8 *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977)
#9 *Double Indemnity* (1944)
#10 *My Darling Clementine* (1946)
#11 *Jules and Jim* (1962)
#12 *Citizen Kane* (1941)
#13 *
#14 *Seven Samurai* (1954)
#15 *City Lights* (1931)
#16 *8 ½* (1963)
#17 *Tokyo Story* (1953)
#18 *Lost Highway* (1997)
#19 *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940)
#20 *Persona* (1966)
#21 *Blade Runner* (1982)
#22 *Black Narcissus* (1947)
#23 *His Girl Friday* (1940)
#24 *Sunrise* (1927)
#25 **
#26 *Heat* (1995)
#27 *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)
#28 *The Passenger* (1975)
#29 ***
#30 *Some Like It Hot* (1959)

#31 *Weekend* (1968)****
#32 *Stalker* (1979)
#33 *Chinatown* (1974)
#34 *The Rules of the Game* (1939)
#35 *Raging Bull* (1980)
#36 *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972)
#37 *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003)*****
#38 *The General* (1926)
#39 *Branded to Kill* (1967)
#40 *Out of the Past* (1947)
#41 *Apocalypse Now* (1979)
#42 *Belle de Jour* (1967)
#43 *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968)
#44 *Touch of Evil* (1958)
#45 *In the Mood for Love*/ *2046* (2000, 2004)******
#46 *Malcolm X* (1992)
#47 *L'Avventura* (1960)
#48 *Wings of Desire* (1987)
#49 *Notorious* (1946)
#50 *The Battle of Algiers* (1966)
#51 *To Be or Not to Be* (1942)
#52 *Talk to Her* (2002)
#53 *In a Lonely Place* (1950)
#54 *Metropolis* (1927)
#55 *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)
#56 *Contempt* (1963)
#57 *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973)
#58 *La Dolce Vita* (1960)
#59 *Melancholia* (2011)
#60 *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957)
#61 *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)
#62 *The Conformist* (1970)
#63 *The Searchers* (1956)
#64 *A Hard Day's Night* (1964)
#65 *Caché* (2005)
#66 *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965)
#67 *Pulp Fiction* (1994)
#68 *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)
#69 *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)
#70 *Blue Velvet* (1986)
#71 *The 400 Blows* (1959)
#72 *Rear Window* (1954)
#73 *Groundhog Day* (1993)
#74 *Sexy Beast* (2000)

#75 *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973)
#76 *Barton Fink* (1991)
#77 *The Wild Bunch* (1969)
#78 *Le Samouraï* (1967)
#79 *Boogie Nights* (1997)
#80 *A Place in the Sun* (1951)
#81 *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)
#82 *The Bourne* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007)
#83 *******
#84 *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991)
#85 *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992)
#86 *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)
#87 *The Long Goodbye* (1973)
#88 *Madame de…* (1953)
#89 *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)
#90 *Dead Man* (1995)
#91 *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)
#92 *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945)
#93 *Pinocchio* (1940)
#94 *Empire of the Sun* (1987)
#95 *Green Snake* (1993)
#96 *24 Hour Party People* (2002)
#97 *Love Streams* (1984)
#98 *The Scarlet Empress* (1934)
#99 *Demonlover* (2002)
#100 *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)
#101 *Nightdreams* (1981)

*No entry for #13.

**No entry for #25.

***No entry for #29.

****Erickson gives the year of the film's American release. The film was released in France in 1967.

*****Erickson considers this a single film as opposed to a trilogy, having been shot continuously and subsequently divided into three films.

******In the Mood for Love* and *2046* are the respective second and third parts of an informal trilogy directed by the Wong Kar-wai. The first film of the trilogy is *Days of Being Wild* (1990).

*******No entry for #83.

Appendix 3

‘L.A.’s 100 Most Iconic Songs’ by Steve Erickson

Originally appearing in the November 2001 issue of *Los Angeles*, this article written by Erickson was republished online on 17th March 2017. As the title suggests, the piece listed the one hundred songs that Erickson considers to ‘soundtrack the city.’ Erickson elaborated further on this sentiment in the piece: ‘These songs […] were all recorded here, but beyond that they are not just from L.A., they’re of L.A. They’re not necessarily about L.A., or by longtime residents, let alone natives […] Rather these are records with the current of the city running through them.’ The respective merits of each song are extolled in condensed form. Songs are artists referenced in Erickson’s literature are denoted with an asterisk:

#1 ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’, Sam Cooke (1964)*
#2 ‘You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’’, The Righteous Brothers (1964)
#3 ‘Lonely Woman’, Ornette Coleman (1959)
#4 ‘Stardust’, Nat King Cole (1956)
#5 ‘Every Grain of Sand’, Bob Dylan (1981)*
#6 ‘Angel Eyes’, Frank Sintra (1958)*
#7 ‘When You Wish Upon A Star’, Cliff Edwards (1940)*
#8 ‘A Night In Tunisia’, Charlie Parker (1946)
#9 ‘Blue Yodel No. 9’, Jimmie Rodgers and Louis Armstrong (1930)
#10 ‘Peter Gunn’, Henry Mancini (1958)
#11 ‘That Lucky Old Sun’, Ray Charles (1963)*
#12 ‘Sing Me Back Home’, Merle Haggard (1967)
#13 ‘Stormy Monday’, T-Bone Walker (1947)
#14 ‘Too Marvelous For Words’, Art Tatum (1953)
#15 ‘Family Affair’, Sly and the Family Stone (1971)
#16 ‘Be My Baby’, the Ronettes (1963)
#17 ‘I’ve Got You Under My Skin’, Frank Sinatra (1956)*
#18 ‘The Chase’, Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray (1947)
#19 ‘Louie Louie’, Richard Berry (1956)
#20 ‘Crystal Shop’, the Doors (1967)*
#21 ‘Caroline, No’, Brian Wilson (1966)
#22 ‘Burning Love’, Elvis Presley (1972)*
#23 ‘Over The Rainbow’, Judy Garland (1939)
#24 ‘Summertime Blues’, Eddie Cochrane (1958)
#25 ‘Eight Miles High’, the Byrds (1966)
#26 ‘I’m A Lonesome Fugitive’, Merle Haggard (1966)
#27 ‘Mule Skinner Blues’, Jimmie Rodgers (1930)
#28 ‘Don’t Worry Baby’, the Beach Boys (1964)
#29 ‘Cruisin’’, Smokey Robinson (1979)
#30 ‘Laura’, David Raksin (1944)

#31 ‘The Honeydripper’, Joe Liggins and his Orchestra (1945)
#32 ‘Let’s Have A Party’, Wanda Jackson (1958)
#33 ‘Jailhouse Rock’, Elvis Presley (1957)*
#34 ‘Hound Dog’, Big Mama Thornton (1953)
#35 ‘Loose’, the Stooges (1970)*
#36 ‘Let’s Get It On’, Marvin Gaye (1973)
#37 ‘Misirlou’, Dick Dale and the Del-Tones (1962)
#38 ‘I Had Too Much To Dream (Last Night)’, the Electric Prunes (1966)
#39 ‘Sail Away’, Randy Newman (1972)
#40 ‘Los Angeles’, X (1980)*
#41 ‘Ohio’, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (1970)*
#42 ‘Alone Again Or’, Love (1961)
#43 ‘Night And Day’, Fred Astaire and the RKO Orchestra (1934)
#44 ‘For What It’s Worth’, Buffalo Springfield (1966)
#45 ‘Boulder To Birmingham’, Emmylou Harris (1966)
#46 ‘I Can’t Get Started’, Lester Young (1942)
#47 ‘Cry Me A River’, Julie London (1955)
#48 ‘Closer’, Nine Inch Nails (1994)
#49 ‘Blue’, Joni Mitchell (1974)
#50 ‘A Matter Of Time’, Los Lobos (1984)
#51 ‘I Don’t Need No Doctor’, Ray Charles (1966)*
#52 ‘Birds’, Neil Young (1970)
#53 ‘La Bamba’, Richie Valens (1959)
#54 ‘The Man I Love’, the Nat King Cole Trio (1944)
#55 ‘Ain’t Nobody’s Business’, Jimmy Witherspoon (1947)
#56 ‘$1000 Wedding’, Gram Parsons (1973)
#57 ‘Billie Jean’, Michael Jackson (1982)
#58 ‘Please Send Me Someone To Love’, Percy Mayfield (1950)
#59 ‘Powerhouse’, Carl Stalling (1951)
#60 ‘Roll With Me, Henry’, Etta James (1955)
#61 ‘Earth Angel’, the Penguins (1954)
#62 ‘Stan’, Eminem (2000)
#63 ‘Pushin’ Too Hard’, the Seeds (1966)
#64 ‘Whittier Blvd.’, Thee Midniters (1964)
#65 ‘It’s A Lonesome Old Town’, Frank Sinatra (1958)*
#66 ‘Wild Is The Wind’, David Bowie (1976)*
#67 ‘When I Fall In Love’, Jeri Southern (1952)
#68 ‘Riot In Cell Block #9’, the Robins (1954)
#69 ‘Lover Man’, Charlie Parker (1946)
#70 ‘My Funny Valentine’, Chet Baker (1954)
#71 ‘Rise Above’, Black Flag (1981)
#72 ‘Twelve Thirty’, the Mamas and the Papas (1967)
#73 ‘Theme from *Chinatown*’, Jerry Goldsmith (1974)*
#74 ‘Fuck Tha Police’, N.W.A (1988)

#75 ‘Hearts Of Stone’, the Jewels (1954)
#76 ‘Chelsea Bridge’, Gerry Mulligan and Ben Webster (1959)
#77 ‘For A Dancer’, Jackson Browne (1974)
#78 ‘Farmer John’, the Premiers (1964)
#79 ‘She’s Got It’, Little Richard (1956)
#80 ‘Sue Egypt’, Captain Beefheart (1980)
#81 ‘Long Ago (And Far Away)’, Jo Stafford (1944)
#82 ‘The Dark Tree’, Horace Tapsco (1989)
#83 ‘This Town’, the Go-Go’s (1981)
#84 ‘Welcome To The Jungle’, Guns ‘N’ Roses (1987)
#85 ‘I Can’t Make You Love Me’, Bonnie Raitt (1991)
#86 ‘MacArthur Park’, Richard Harris (1968)
#87 ‘Peel Their Caps Back’, Ice-T (1989)
#88 ‘Moonlight In Vermont’, Willie Nelson (1978)
#89 ‘*Route 66* theme’, Nelson Riddle (1962)
#90 ‘Doctor Wu’, Steely Dan (1975)
#91 ‘The Letter’, the Medallions (1954)
#92 ‘Fever’, Peggy Lee (1958)
#93 ‘Fade Into You’, Mazzy Star (1993)
#94 ‘Ode To Billie Jo’, Bobbie Gentry (1967)
#95 ‘James Brown Is Dead’, L.A. Style (1992)
#96 ‘The Heart Of Saturday Night’, Tom Waits (1974)
#97 ‘Harlem Nocturne’, the Johnny Otis Orchestra (1945)
#98 ‘Sixteen Tons’, Tennessee Ernie Ford (1955)
#99 ‘White Christmas’, Bing Crosby (1941)
#100 ‘Loser’, Beck (1994)

Bibliography

List of Works Cited

A Place in the Sun, dir. by George Stevens (Paramount Pictures, 1951).

Anon., 'Kirkus Review: *Leap Year*', *Kirkus* (12th October, 1989) <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/steve-erickson-3/leap-year-2/>. [Accessed: 14th January 2019].

Banham, Reyner, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

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

Baudrillard, Jean, *America* (London: Verso, 2010).

Biskind, Peter, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

Boorstin, Daniel J., *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1964).

Bordwell, David, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985).

Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

Budac, Alexandru, 'The Blue and White Visual Narrative in Steve Erickson's *Day Between Stations*', *British and American Studies*, 22 (2016), 65-71.

Canby, Vincent, 'Beatty's *Reds*, with Diane Keaton', *New York Times* (4th December, 1981). <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/04/movies/beatty-s-reds-with-diane-keaton.html>. [Accessed: 14th December 2018].

Chandler, Raymond, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin, 2011).

Cook, David A., *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

Coverley, Merlin, *Pyschogeography* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2010).

Davis, Mike, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Pimlico, 1998).

——, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 1999).

Duffy, Nikolai, 'American Inheritance: Steve Erickson and the Pursuit of Happiness', *European Journal of American Culture*, 31 (2012), 41-53.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, 'Into the Void', *The New York Times* (8th June, 1997). <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/08/books/into-the-void.html>. [Accessed: 14th January 2019].

Elias, Amy J., 'The Postmodern Turn on(:) the Enlightenment', *Contemporary Literature*, 37 (1996), 553-558.

Erickson, Glenn, 'The Ultimate Savant Essay: *Invaders from Mars*. Part Two: Cinematic Dreamscape', *DVD Savant* (n.d.). <https://www.dvdtalk.com/dvdsavant/s97InvadersB.html>. [Accessed: 6th September 2018].

Erickson, Steve, 'Amazon's *Bosch* Channels Classic Detective Noir', *Los Angeles* (10th March, 2016). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/amazons-bosch-channels-classic-detective-noir/>. [Accessed: 8th October 2018].

——, *American Nomad* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

——, 'American Weimar', *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* (8th January, 1995). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/weimar.html>. [Accessed: 30th December 2018].

——, *Amnesiascope* (London: Quartet Books, 1997).

——, *Arc d'X* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993).

——, *Days Between Stations* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005).

——, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*', *Science Fiction Eye* (Summer, 1993). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/arceye.html>. [Accessed: 5th September 2018].

——, 'Henry Miller: Exhibitionist of the Soul', *Conjunctions* (Fall, 1997). <http://www.conjunctions.com/print/article/steve-erickson-c29>. [Accessed: 7th September 2018].

——, 'I Was a Teenage Conservative', *The American Prospect* (5th December, 2012). <http://prospect.org/article/i-was-teenage-conservative>. [Accessed: 11th September 2018].

——, 'In Science Fiction, We Are Never Home', *Nautilus* (26th December, 2013). <http://nautil.us/issue/8/home/in-science-fiction-we-are-never-home>. [Accessed: 21st August 2018].

——, 'L.A.'s 100 Most Iconic Songs', *Los Angeles* (17th March, 2017). <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/l-s-100-iconic-songs/>. [Accessed: 4th October 2018].

——, '*Maps to the Stars* Grapples with the Movie Business's Most Complicated Character: Hollywood Itself', *Los Angeles* (1st October, 2014).

<https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/maps-to-the-stars-grapples-with-the-movie-businesss-most-complicated-character-hollywood-itself/>. [Accessed: 29th December 2018].

——, News Flash: This Was Always A Close Election', *The American Prospect* (25th October, 2012). <https://prospect.org/article/news-flash-was-always-close-election>. [Accessed: 15th January 2019].

——, 'Obama, Post-Post-Partisanship', *The American Prospect* (6th June, 2012). <http://prospect.org/article/obama-post-post-partisanship>. [Accessed: 25th September 2018].

——, *Our Ecstatic Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

——, 'Paul Thomas Anderson & the Cinema of Outcasts', *Los Angeles* (26th January, 2015). <https://www.lamag.com/longform/paul-thomas-anderson-cinema-outcasts/>. [Accessed: 29th December 2018].

——, *Rubicon Beach* (London: Quartet Books, 1998).

——, *Shadowbahn* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2018).

——, 'The Adaptation of J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* Challenges the Notion of What's "Unfilmable"', *Los Angeles* (28th April, 2016). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/adaptation-j-g-ballards-high-rise-challenges-notion-whats-unfilmable/>. [Accessed: 23rd November 2018].

——, 'The Apocalypse—Stay Tuned', *New York Times* (1st February, 1991). <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/01/opinion/the-apocalypse-stay-tuned.html>. [Accessed: 8th November 2018].

——, 'The Essential Movie Library #1: *The Godfather* Trilogy (1972, 1973, 1990)', *Los Angeles* (16th October, 2012). <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/the-essential-movie-library-1-the-godfather-trilogy-1972-1974-1990/>. [Accessed: 10th September 2018].

——, 'The Essential Movie Library #2: *Vertigo* (1958)', *Los Angeles* (23rd October, 2012). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-2-vertigo-1958/>. [Accessed: 8th November 2018].

——, 'The Essential Movie Library #15: *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, *Los Angeles* (3rd December, 2013). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-57-pat-garrett-and-billy-the-kid-1973/>. [Accessed: 29th December 2018].

——, 'The Essential Movie Library #17: *Tokyo Story* (1953)', *Los Angeles* (26th February, 2013). <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/the-essential-movie-library-17-tokyo-story-1953/>. [Accessed: 10th September 2018].

——, 'The Essential Movie Library #20: *Persona* (1966)', *Los Angeles* (19th March, 2013). <http://www.lamag.com/laculture/the-essential-movie-library-20-persona-1966/>. [Accessed: 10th September 2018].

——, ‘The Essential Movie Library #21: *Blade Runner* (1982)’, *Los Angeles* (26th March, 2013). <http://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/the-essential-movie-library-21-blade-runner-1982/>. [Accessed: 21st August 2018].

——, ‘The Essential Movie Library #44: *Touch of Evil* (1958)’, *Los Angeles* (3rd September, 2013). <http://www.lamag.com/laculture/the-essential-movie-library-44-touch-of-evil-1958/>, [Accessed: 8th November 2018].

——, ‘The Essential Movie Library #60: *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957)’, *Los Angeles* (7th January, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-60-sweet-smell-of-success-1957/>. [Accessed: 8th November 2018].

——, ‘The Essential Movie Library #76: *Barton Fink* (1991)’, *Los Angeles* (29th April, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-76-barton-fink-1991/>. [Accessed: 18th October 2018].

——, ‘The Essential Movie Library #89: *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)’, *Los Angeles* (29th July, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-89-bride-of-frankenstein-1935/>. [Accessed: 8th November 2018].

——, ‘The Essential Movie Library #91: *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)’, *Los Angeles* (12th August, 2014). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-essential-movie-library-91-the-manchurian-candidate-1962/>. [Accessed: 8th November 2018].

——, ‘The Good Book’, *Los Angeles* (8th May, 2013). <https://www.lamag.com/steveerickson/the-good-book/>. [Accessed: 29th December 2018].

——, *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (London: Quartet, 1999).

——, *These Dreams of You* (New York: Europa, 2012).

——, *Zeroville* (New York: Europa, 2007).

Evenson, Brian, ‘The Romantic Fabulist Predicts A Dreamy Apocalypse’, *The Believer* (1st June, 2003). <https://believermag.com/the-romantic-fabulist-predicts-a-dreamy-apocalypse/>. [Accessed: 5th September 2018].

Faulkner, William, ‘Golden Land’, in *Writing Los Angeles*, ed. by David L. Ulin (New York: Literacy Classics of the United States, 2002), pp. 131-151.

Felluga, Dino, ‘Modules on Freud: Transference and Trauma’, *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* (31st January, 2011). <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/freud5.html>. [Accessed: 30th November 2018].

Freud, Sigmund, ‘An Outline of Psychoanalysis’, in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 1-63.

——, ‘Fragment of an Analysis of Hysteria (Dora)’, in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 435-540.

——, ‘Screen Memories’, in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 541-560.

Ganteau, Jean-Michel and Susana Onega, *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

Joseph Hart, ‘A New Way of Walking’, *Utne Reader* (July-August, 2004). <https://www.utne.com/community/a-new-way-of-walking>. [Accessed: 23rd November 2018].

Hopper, Hal, and Tom Adair, ‘There’s No You’, *Where Are You?*, sang by Frank Sinatra (Los Angeles, CA: Capitol, 1957) [on LP].

Huxley, Aldous, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2007).

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

Kincaid, Paul, ‘Defying Rational Chronology: Time and Identity in the Work of Steve Erickson’, *Foundation*, 58 (1993), 27-42.

——, ‘Secret Maps: The Topography of Fantasy and Morality in the Work of Steve Erickson’, *Foundation*, 57 (1993), 26-48 (p. 35).

——, ‘*Shadowbahn* by Steve Erickson’, *Strange Horizons* (17th July 2017). <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/shadowbahn-by-steve-erickson/>. [accessed: 21st September 2018].

Knipfel, Jim, ‘This Binary Moment: Novelist Steve Erickson on Our Cold Civil War’, *The Believer* (10th September, 2018). <https://believermag.com/logger/this-binary-moment/>. [Accessed: 9th January 2019].

Koshikawa, Yoshiaki, ‘LA as Free-Associative City’, *The Rising* Generation (September, 1997). <http://www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~yoshiaki/LA_as_Free_Associative_City.htm>. [Accessed: 6th January 2017].

——, ‘Steve Erickson Meets Ryu Murakami: Self-Expanding into the World of the Unconsciousness’, *Shincho* (22nd April, 1997). <http://www.shinchosha.co.jp/shincho/9707/ryu_steve.html>. [Accessed: 7th September 2018].

Kreilkamp, Ivan, ‘Steve Erickson’s Cineautistic *Zeroville*’, *Ivan Kreilkamp* (15th May, 2012). <https://ivankreilkamp.com/2012/05/15/steve-ericksons-cineautistic-zeroville/>. [Accessed: 27th March 2018].

Lane, James Mx, 'Steve Erickson', *BOMB* (1st July, 1987). <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/steve-erickson/>. [Accessed: 7th September 2018].

Lefebvre, Henri, '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.

Lethem, Jonathan, 'Best Book of 2017: *Shadowbahn*', *Granta* (December, 2015). <https://granta.com/best-book-20-shadowbahn/>. [Accessed: 7th August 2018].

Litchfield, R.L., '(Re)Imagining Los Angeles: Five Psychotopographies in the Fiction of Steve Erickson' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2010).

Lynch, Kevin, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).

McCaffery, Larry, '"Tsunami…": Introduction', in *Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation*, ed. by Larry McCaffery (Normal, IL: Fiction Collective Two, 1995), pp. 15-32.

McCaffery, Larry, and Takayuki Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', *Contemporary Literature*, 38 (1997), 394-421.

McElroy, Joseph, 'A Review of *Our Ecstatic Days* by Steve Erickson', *The Believer* (1st February, 2005). <https://believermag.com/steve-ericksons-our-ecstatic-days/>. [Accessed: 17th October 2018].

Milazzo, Joe, '"America Happened to America": A Conversation with Steve Erickson', *Entropy* (10th August, 2017). <https://entropymag.org/conversation-steve-erickson/>. [Accessed: 24th September 2018].

Miller, Anthony, 'Steve Erickson', *Susan Henderson's LitPark* (2nd April, 2008). <https://www.litpark.com/2008/04/02/steve-erickson/>. [Accessed: 6th September 2018].

Monaco, James, *How To Read A Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2007).

——, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Murphy, Jim, 'Pursuits and Revolutions: History's Figures in Steve Erickson's *Arc d'X*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46 (2000), 451-479.

Olivas, Daniel 'TEV Interview: Steve Erickson', *The Elegant Variation* (3rd January, 2008). <http://marksarvas.blogs.com/elegvar/2008/01/tev-interview-s.html>. [Accessed: 16th October 2018].

Postman, Neil, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (York: Methuen, 1987).

Pynchon, Thomas, 'A Journey Into The Mind of Watts', *New York Times* (12th June, 1966). <http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/uncollected/watts.html>. [Accessed: 4th October 2018].

Rifkin, Alan, 'Soul Survivor', *Buzz* (April, 1993). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/soul.html>. [Accessed: 5th September 2018].

Schmeidel, Stacey, 'Brief Interview with a Five Man Draft', *Amherst* (Spring, 1999). <https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/magazine/extra/node/66410>. [Accessed: 7th August 2018].

Slide, Anthony, *The Hollywood Novel: A Critical Guide to Over 1200 Works* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1995).

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

——, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

——, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

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

Springsteen, Bruce, 'Youngstown', *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (Los Angeles, CA: Columbia, 1995) [on CD].

Starr, Kevin, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Stubbs, Angela, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', *Bookslut* (December 2007). <http://www.bookslut.com/features/2007_12_012067.php>. [Accessed: 17th October 2018].

Taylor, Charles, 'It Takes Two: *Shadowbahn* by Steve Erickson', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (20th February 2017). <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/it-takes-two-shadowbahn-by-steve-erickson/#!>. [Accessed: 24th September 2018].

The Wizard of Oz, dir. by Victor Fleming (Loew's Inc., 1939).

Thomson, David, *How to Watch a Movie* (London: Profile, 2016).

——, *The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood* (London: Little, Brown, 2005).

Trucks, Rob, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson', *The Blue Moon Review* (Summer, 1996). <http://www.thebluemoon.com/4/ericksoniv.html>. [Accessed: 7th September 2018].

Ulin, David L., 'Introduction: 'Golden Land'', in *Writing Los Angeles*, ed. by David L. Ulin (New York: Literacy Classics of the United States, 2002), p. 131.

Ventura, Michael, 'Phantasmal America', *The L.A. Weekly* (29th August, 1986). <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/phant.html>. [Accessed: 6th September 2018].

Zacharek, Stephanie, 'Hate the Players', *The Slate* (3rd August, 2012). <http://www.slate.com/culture/2018/03/alan-hollinghurst-hates-similes.html>. [Accessed: 27th March 2018].