OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

L.A. GLOWS

Why Southern California doesn't look like any place else.

BY LAWRENCE WESCHLER

THE day of that infamous slow-motion Bronco chase—actually, it was already past sundown here in New York as I sat before the glowing TV in our darkening kitchen, transfixed by the unfurling stream of bob-and-wafting helicopter images, hot tears streaming down my cheeks—my eight-year-old daughter gazed for a while at the screen and then over at me, at which point, baffled and concerned, she inquired, "What's wrong, Daddy? Did you know that guy?"

"What guy?" I stammered, surfacing from my trance, momentarily disoriented. "Oh, no, no. I didn't know the guy. I don't give a damn about the guy. It's that *light!* That's the light I keep telling you girls about." You girls: her mother and her. That light: the late-afternoon light of Los Angeles—golden pink off the bay through the smog and onto the palm fronds. A light I've found myself pining for every day of the nearly two decades since I left Southern California.

The rapturous light of the city has been known to drive Angelenos into a state of "egoless bliss."

MONTHS passed, and on sporadic returns to L.A., for one project or another, I occasionally recounted my Bronco-chase experience, and everybody knew exactly what I was talking about. The light of the place is a subject that Angelenos are endlessly voluble about—only, it turns out, people bring all sorts of different associations to the subject.

For example, David Hockney maintains that the extravagant light of Los Angeles was one of the strongest lures drawing him to Southern California in the first place, more than thirty years ago—and, in fact, long before that. "As a child, growing up in Bradford, in the North of England, across the gothic gloom of those endless winters," he recalls, "I remember how my father used to take me along with him to see the Laurel and Hardy movies. And one of the things I noticed right away, long before I could articulate it exactly, was how Stan and Ollie, bundled in their winter overcoats, were casting these wonderfully strong, crisp shadows. We never got shadows of any sort in winter. And already I knew that someday I wanted to settle in a place with winter shadows like that."

Robert Irwin, one of the presiding masters of L.A.'s Light and Space artistic movement of the late sixties and early seventies, and a native Angeleno, concurred that there's something extraordinary about the light of L.A., though he said that it was sometimes hard to characterize it exactly. "One of its most common features, however," he suggested, "is the haze that fractures the light, scattering it in such a way that on many days the world almost has *no* shadows. Broad daylight—and, in fact, lots and lots of light—and no shadows. Really peculiar, almost dreamlike. . . . I love walking down the street when the light gets all reverberant, bouncing around like that, and everything's just humming in your face."

A few days after my conversation with Irwin, I happened to be talking with John Bailey, the cinematographer, most recently of "As Good As It Gets," and he energetically confirmed Irwin's observation: "I have a sophisticated light meter, which in my work I'm always consulting. Most places in the world when it's overcast enough so that you get no shadows, the meter lets you know you have to set your aperture a stop to a stop and a half below full sun. Here in L.A. the same kind of diffuse light, no shadows—I could hardly believe the first time I encountered this—and my meter will read almost the same as for full sunlight. Other days, though, you'll be getting open sun, which, of course, here means open desert sun—a harshly contrasting light. After all, for all its human settlement, the Southland is still this freak of nature—a desert abutting the sea. And open desert light is very harsh—you get these deep, deep shadows."

I mentioned the Laurel and Hardy shadows of Hockney's youth. "Exactly," Bailey said. "Shadows and no shadows—that's the duality of L.A. light, isn't it? And how appropriate for a place where the sun rises in the desert and sets in the ocean."

ANOTHER day, I called Hal Zirin, out at Caltech—the man who founded and until recently ran the solar observatory up at Big Bear Lake. I suppose I was wondering how the sun itself looked in the light of L.A. "Ah, Southern California," Zirin responded, with improbable enthusiasm. "God's gift to astronomy!" I laughed, figuring he

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"Haven't you ever seen California wine being made?"

was joking. "Oh no," he assured me. "I'm completely serious. Mt. Wilson, Mt. Palomar, the Griffith Observatory, our solar observatory out at Big Bear . . . It's not for nothing that during the first two-thirds of this century a good three-quarters of the most significant discoveries in astronomy were made here in Southern California."

So wherefore was it?

"Well, it's all thanks to the incredible stability, the uncanny stillness, of the air around L.A. It goes back to that business people are always talking about—a desert thrusting up against the ocean, and, specifically, against the eastern shore of a northern ocean, with its cold, clockwise, southward-moving current. And the other crucial element in the mix is these high mountain ranges girdling the basin—so that what happens here is that ocean-cooled air drifts in over the coastal plain and gets trapped beneath the warmer desert air floating in over the mountains to the east. That's the famous thermal inversion, and the opposite of the usual arrangement, where warm surface air progressively cools as it rises. And the atmosphere below the inversion layer is incredibly stable. You must have noticed, for instance, how, if you're on a transcontinental jet coming in for a landing at LAX, once you pass over the mountains on your final approach, no matter how turbulent the flight may have been prior to that, suddenly the plane becomes completely silent and steady and still." (Actually, I had noticed and wondered about it.) "That's the stable air of L.A."

And why was such stability so important to astronomy?

"Well," Zirin explained, "have you noticed, for instance, how if you go out to the Arizona desert, say, it may be incredibly clear but the road off in the distance is shimmering? That's the heat rising in waves off the surface of the ground. On the other hand, go out to the Santa Monica palisade and gaze out over the cool water. It's completely clear and distinct, clean out to the horizon. The heat rising from the ground in most places—or, rather, the resultant interplay of pockets of hot and cold air, acting like distorting lenses in the atmosphere up above—is in turn what makes stars shimmer and twinkle in the night sky. A twinkling star can be very pretty and romantic, but twinkling is distortion, by definition, and if you're an astronomer you want your star—or, for that matter, your sun, if that's what you're looking at—to be distortion-free: solid as a rock. And that's what you get here. The stars don't twinkle in L.A."

And, it occurred to me, that might also account for the preternatural clarity of the encircling mountains, off in the distance—that hushed sense you sometimes get that you could just reach out and touch them—on those smog-free days, that is, when you're able to see them at all.

ANGELENOS tend to take perverse credit for the uncanny light of the place, as if they themselves were the ones who made it all happen; and, in fact, according to at least one way of looking at things, they may have a point. Someone told me that if it was air pollution I wanted to consider I should go talk to Glen Cass, at Caltech, a jovial, rotund, clear-eyed, and short-cropped professor of environmental engineering with a very specific interest in smog: he's obsessed with the effect of air pollution on visibility—in other words, exactly why it is that some afternoons he can go up on the roof of the Millikan Library there at Caltech, gaze out toward the San Gabriel Mountains, towering well over a mile high, less than five miles to the north, and not make out a thing through the bright, white (shadow-obliterating) atmospheric haze.

So, I asked Cass, what, exactly, was all that white stuff choking the view of his beloved mountains?

"Well, it turns out that there are all

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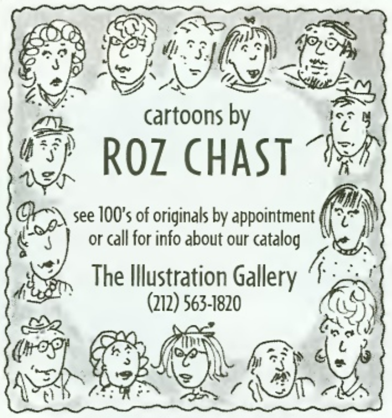

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sorts of different sizes of particles floating in the air—from absolutely minuscule to relatively large and coarse," he explained. "Some of those—and especially the larger ones—simply get in the way of the line of vision between you and, say, that mountain over there. They blot out or defract the beams of reflected sunlight emanating from the mountain that would otherwise be conveying visual detail to your eyes. Contrary to what you might think, though, it's not so much the large, coarse particles that pose the biggest problem. Instead, it's those of a specific intermediate size—about half a micrometre, to be exact—that constitute the jokers in the deck when it comes to visibility.

"And the thing about particles of that size is that they happen to have about the same diameter as the wavelength of natural sunlight. So that, when the sunlight from over my shoulder, say, hits one of those particles floating between me and the mountain that I'm trying to make out, the light bounces off the particle and right into my eye. On some days there can be billions of such particles in the line of sight between me and the mountain—each of them with the mirrorlike potential to bounce white sunlight directly back into my eye. It can get to be like having a billion tiny suns between you and the thing you're trying to see. That's what the white stuff is. And we have a technical term for it."

I hunkered down over my notebook, preparing to take down complex technological dictation.

"We call it airlight."

The next morning, I happened to be jogging on the beach in Santa Monica, heading north, in the direction of Malibu, as the sun was rising behind me. The sky was already bright, though the sun was still occluded behind a low-clinging fog bank over LAX. The Malibu mountains up ahead were dark and clear and distinct, and seemed as if freshly minted. Presently, the sun must have broken out from behind the fog bank—I realized this because suddenly the sand around me turned pale purplish pink and my own long shadow shot out before me. I looked up at the mountains, and they were *gone:* lost in the airlight.

Later, as I was describing the experience to a poet friend, Dennis Phillips, and trying to explain the business about the billion tiny suns, he interrupted, correcting me. "No, no," he said. "You mean a billion tiny moons."

ACTUALLY, the air-pollution situation in L.A. has been improving markedly over the past fifteen years, as Cass is only too happy to affirm. Nevertheless, the light seems more uncanny than ever—or, rather, it may simply be reverting to its original splendor. What with the thermal inversion, even as the smog has subsided a softer version of the airlight phenomenon has persisted—one noted by Carey McWilliams, the poet laureate of California historians, who in 1946 recorded how, the region's aridity notwithstanding, "the charm of Southern California is largely to be found in the air and the light. Light and air are really one element: indivisible, mutually interacting, thoroughly interpenetrated."

I was recalling McWilliams's comments one morning while breakfasting with the architect Coy Howard, a true student of the light, and he concurred. "It's an incredibly loaded subject—this diaphanous soup we live in," he said. "It feels primeval—there's a sense of the undifferentiated, the nonhierarchical. It's not exactly a dramatic light. In fact, 'dramatic' is exactly what it's not. If anything, it's meditative. And there's something really peculiar about it. In places where you get a crisp, sharp light with deep, clean shadows—which we do get here sometimes—you get confronted with a strong contrasting duality: illumination and opacity. But when you have the kind of veiled light we get here more regularly you become aware of a sort of multiplicity—not illumination so much as luminosity. Southern California glows, not just all day but at night as well, and the opacity melts away into translucency, and even transparency."

I wasn't quite getting it, so Howard tried again.

"Things in the light here have a kind of threeness instead of the usual twoness. There's the thing—the object—and its shadow, but then a sense of reflection as well. You know how you can be walking along the beach, let's say, and you'll see a seagull walking along ahead of you, and a wave comes in, splashing its feet. At that moment, you'll see the bird, its shadow, and its reflection. Well, there's something about the environment here—the air, the atmosphere, the light—that makes *everything* shimmer like that. There's a kind of glowing thickness to the world—the diaphanous soup I was talking about—which, in turn, grounds a magic-meditative sense of presence."

The poet Paul Vangelisti knew exactly what Coy Howard was getting at when I related our conversation to him. In fact, he was blown away, for he claimed he'd been trying to frame almost that same point earlier that day, in the latest of a series of daily poems he'd been working on, based on the view across the neighboring arroyo from the window of his Echo Park studio, celebrating, in this instance:

. . . the pigeon flock
soaring and tumbling every noon
silver then white then sunlight
against the weight of air at the window.

"Coy Howard's associations run to seagulls," Vangelisti pointed out, "and mine run to pigeons—maybe not that surprising a convergence after all, since birds are the true citizens of light. But I know just what he means about the sense of threeness—silver then white then sunlight—and about the meditative, as opposed to the dramatic, quality of the light here."

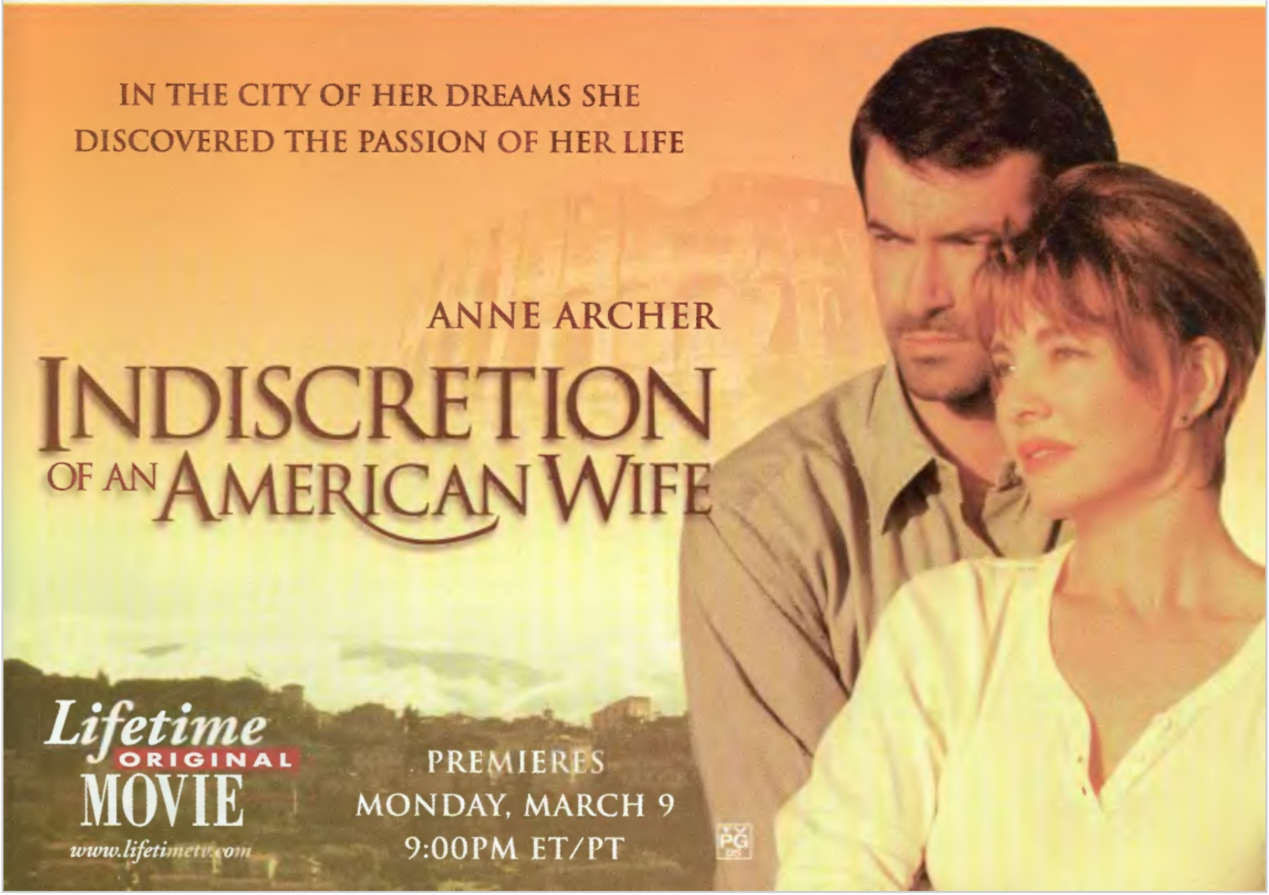
The light is a constantly recurring theme among the poets of L.A., but I can think of few whose work is as light-saturated, as light-blasted, as Vangelisti's. He entitled his first collection, back in 1973, simply "Air."

"For one thing," he elaborated, "I think the light of L.A. is the whitest light I've ever seen, and the sky is one of the highest. You really notice it if you're playing baseball and you're in the outfield. You're always losing the ball in that high white sky. And then, too, there's a strange thing that happens with the sense of distance and of expanse. Because from here in Echo Park the ocean off in the distance is oceanic, but so is the intervening land, and indeed so is the sky. It's that even, undifferentiated, nonhierarchical quality Coy Howard is talking about. And a weird thing is how that light yields a simultaneous sense of distance and of flatness: things seem very sharp up close and far away, with nothing in between. And the uncanny result is that you lose yourself—somehow not outwardly but, rather, inwardly. Here the light draws you *inward*."

ANNE AYRES, the gallery director at the Otis Institute, told me that some days the light of L.A. can drive her into a state of "egoless bliss." And John Bailey described to me his own occasional bouts with "rapture." But there were others I got in touch with who were having none of it.

"You're talking to the wrong guy," the director Peter Bogdanovich warned me when I reached him. "See, I'm a New Yorker, and though I've lived in L.A. for thirty years, I really haven't been that happy here the last fifteen. I miss seasons, and I hate the way the light of the place throws you into such a trance that you fail to realize how time is passing. It's like what Orson Welles once told me. 'The terrible thing about L.A.,' he said, 'is that you sit down, you're twenty-five, and when you get up you're sixty-two.' "

"But light is *over!*" Paul Schimmel, the chief curator at MOCA, the Museum



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VILLE ET VILLAGE

of Contemporary Art, exclaimed when I broached my pet subject to him. "There hasn't been light in this city for more than ten years now." Schimmel was the creator of "Helter Skelter," a seminal show at MOCA, which endeavored to prove precisely that point back in 1992. On first arriving in L.A., in 1981, Schimmel had half expected to encounter some third- or fourth-generation version of the Light and Space orthodoxies that had come to be so closely identified with the L.A. art scene during the sixties and the early seventies—through the hegemony of masters ranging from Robert Irwin to Richard Diebenkorn. Instead, he found a younger generation of artists—exemplified by the likes of Mike Kelley and Nancy Rubins—who seemed to have rejected the light aesthetic entirely, opting instead for a decidedly darker, seedier, more grimly unsettling and dystopian view of the L.A. reality. "Partly," Schimmel speculated, "this was because by the late seventies and early eighties light in L.A. had been so academicized that it had really become little more than a commercial cliché. There was nowhere else to go with it. In part, too, long before a lot of other people, these artists were onto some of the bleak social transformations that were eroding the city itself. 'Helter Skelter' closed on a Sunday, and the worst riots in the city's history erupted the following Wednesday."

Of course, in its very title the "Helter Skelter" show acknowledged the fact that its countervision of the L.A. reality was itself rooted in a long countertradition—one that wended back from the Manson murders into the noir world of the great crime novelists and filmmakers of the thirties and forties. It's interesting how those noir novelists and filmmakers almost completely inoculated themselves against the blandishments of the light of L.A., in part by setting most of their scenes either at night or indoors—in fact, usually both. One of the distinct charms of such seventies reworkings of the genre as Polanski's "Chinatown" and, even more notably, Altman's "The Long Goodbye" was the way the filmmakers forced their hardened protagonists out into the light of day. (Altman's Marlowe spent the entire film in a perpetual squint, scuttling about like a naked crab summarily wrested from the dark, nestling comfort of its shell.)

GENERALLY speaking, people I spoke with about the light of L.A. tended to fall on one side or the other. There were a few, however, whose responses were decidedly more nuanced.

One such was Don Waldie, whose remarkable book "Holy Days: A Suburban Memoir" I'd been reading on one of my flights out to Los Angeles. Born and raised in Lakewood (a sort of blue-collar West Coast Levittown, row upon row of near-identical frame-and-stucco tract houses laid out in a meticulously even grid just north of Long Beach), Waldie still lives in the community—indeed, in the very house—in which he was reared. In fact, his day job is public-information officer for Lakewood. Waldie doesn't drive, so he has to walk to and from City Hall each day—twenty-five minutes across an unvaryingly regular pattern of perpendicular zigs and zags. It was during such walks that he began composing—one at a time—the hauntingly lyrical, startlingly brief chapters that make up his book.

I resolved to include him in my survey, so as soon as I'd landed in L.A. I placed a call to Lakewood City Hall—he was out—and left a message on his machine. That evening, I got my own personal whiff of his method.

"Ah, yes," he said cheerfully when I reached him at home. "The light around here is quite remarkable, isn't it? In fact, I gave the matter some thought on my walk home this evening. And it seems to me, actually, that there are four—or, anyway, at least four—lights in L.A. To begin with, there's the cruel, actinic light of late July. Its glare cuts piteously through the general shabbiness of Los Angeles. Second comes the nostalgic, golden light of late October. It turns Los Angeles into El Dorado, a city of fool's gold. It's the light William Faulkner—in his story 'Golden Land'—called 'treacherous unbrightness.' It's the light the tourists come for—the light, to be more specific, of unearned nostalgia. Third, there's the gunmetal-gray light of the months between December and July. Summer in Los Angeles doesn't begin until mid-July. In the months before, the light can be as monotonous as Seattle's. Finally comes the light, clear as stone-dry champagne, after a full day of rain.

Everything in this light is somehow simultaneously particularized and idealized: each perfect, specific, ideal little tract house, one beside the next. And that's the light that breaks hearts in L.A."

THAT and other lights. One evening, out on the palisade, I was watching the sunset in the company of a theatrical-lighting designer. Actually, we had our backs to the sea—the blush of sky and air and land is somehow even more glorious to the east in L.A. when the sun is setting. "Incredible," my designer friend marvelled, "the effects He gets with just one unit."

Incredible, too, the effects Vin Scully gets with just one unit—in his case, his voice. As the legendary radio announcer for the L.A. Dodgers, Scully has spent his life in that light, broadcasting the sunset itself between pitches night after night. (Indeed, it may be thanks to those broadcasts that many Angelenos, including me, first became truly sensitized to the light—and to the light of language as well.) When I reached him by phone, it didn't take much more than the word "light" to get him launched, rhapsodizing, for instance, about how "come late July, with the sun setting off third base, the air actually turns purple tinged with gold, an awesome sight to behold, the Master Painter at work once again, and, owing to the orientation of the stadium, out beyond center field, you're staring at the mountains, and mountains beyond mountains, indeed, the purple mountains' majesty spread out there for everyone to see. And on evenings like that it can get to be like a Frederic Remington or a Charles Russell painting, the dust billowing up from the passing cars on the freeway. If you squint your eyes and only let your imagination soar, it's as if a herd of wild horses were kicking by."

AS I write, I'm back in New York, exiled from that light. Sixty years ago, it occurs to me, my maternal grandfather, the Austrian Jewish modernist composer Ernst Toch, found himself exiled into that light. He and my grandmother lived on the Franklin Street hill, at the very edge of Santa Monica and Brentwood, north of Wilshire, in a house facing out toward the Santa Monica Mountains. The view from their house, and particularly from the bay window of his composing studio, under the knotty branches of a spreading coral tree and out over the Brentwood Golf Course, was incredibly lovely, especially at the golden hour. (Come to think of it, maybe *that's* where I first became smitten with this thing about the light of Southern California.) Occasionally, my grandparents would entertain guests up there. They'd meander around the grounds and through the house and eventually into his studio, approaching his desk—wedged up against that magnificent bay window, with its enthralling light-filled view—and invariably somebody would crack wise, saying something along the lines of "Well, no wonder you can compose, with a view like that!"

At which point, invariably, my grandfather would respond, "Well, actually, no. When I compose, I have to close the curtains." ◆

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