

Shelby Meyer

Living in Los Angeles & Dreaming of Living in Los Angeles are the Exact Same Thing

IP Section 001

Living in Los Angeles & Dreaming of Living in Los Angeles are the Exact Same Thing is a book, exploring Los Angeles in terms of hyperreality and metaphysics. This project seeks to merge the real and the fake, in terms of content, and emulate the visual style of Los Angeles cityscape.

Introduction:

I got stuck behind a “See-Stars-Homes-Hollywood-Hills” tour bus almost every time I drove home from work this summer. I mean these buses drove me up a wall, they stopped every 15 seconds and drove regularly 25mph below the speed limit. Granted I was spending a lot of time stuck behind them, I started thinking. There are literal bus-fulls of tourists driving the same road (that takes me from my unpaid job to my cockroach-infested UCLA apartment) to see movie stars’ homes and scenic southern California overlooks. Technically, Mulholland Drive is just a windy street in the Santa Monica Mountains, but to the tourists it’s was a movie namesake, a place memorialized in films, and visually gorgeous. It seems a lot of Los Angeles was like that.

To say Los Angeles is heavily represented in media is an understatement; the sheer number of movies & songs glorifying the illustrious “California Lifestyle” is enough to pique the interest of every dreamer stuck somewhere they don’t want to be. The promise of Hollywood “driving-down-the-PCH-in-a-convertable” stardom has sparked many to make the western migration. Oddly enough the seedy “Bukowski-novel-Jim-Morrison”

underbelly has seduced just as many. Representation of Los Angeles is so common, that it's easy to be familiar with it's landmarks and style, even if you've never been there. It creates a unique tension between the reality of a space, and the faux history the representation creates.

I'm seeking to capture the hyperreal experience of living in LA through visual storytelling. Specifically, I've designed a book that, through digitally combined images, tells stories about living in Los Angeles. Some of the stories are from reality, some are from movies, and some are completely made up. Presented in a collection, however, they craft a dreamy, almost real/almost fake visual narrative of Los Angeles.

Contextual Discussion:

My interest in Los Angeles as a potential IP subject began about a semester before the class started. It was spring of 2017, and I was sitting at a coffee house during my second visit to the city. I was switching between reading Thomas Pynchon and an incredibly dense essay on postmodern cultural theory. It was purely coincidental that I was trying to understand the cultural implications of the postmodern world as I sat across the street is the long-since-closed Tower Records. The business went under years ago and the building is completely empty on the inside. However, the exterior had been decorated to look like it did in the 1980s. It's a convincing facade, and to the uninformed viewer it looks like an operational record store, but there's nothing beneath the surface. It's an even bigger coincidence that the "incredibly dense essay on postmodernism" was Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

Jameson is a Marxist scholar and cultural critic, who defines nostalgia as “the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image and ‘1930s-ness’ or ‘1950s-ness’ by the attributes of fashion” (Jameson 67)¹. He further explains this example using the film *Body Heat*. While the film is set in the early 1980s, visual artifacts that anchor it to that time period are blurred; the film’s overall quality is much closer to films of the 1930s. Nostalgia, or rather depictions of the past, Jameson argues, are not accurate to the reality of the time period. This is relevant to my project because, even in depicting real memories of Los Angeles, they will have a layer of fake-ness to them. I will be depicting what that time and place felt like while I was there; rather than the reality of the situation.

Another postmodern text I found relevant is cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*; specifically, his definition of hyperreality helped me put a name to the real-fake world I was living in Los Angeles. Baudrillard explains that simulated realities, such as Disneyland, are meant to feel separated from the “real” world, but actually highlight fantasy elements exist there as well, meaning that the real world is simultaneously fantasy.

“The Disneyland imaginary is neither true or false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It’s meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those

¹ Jameson, Fredric. “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” In *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992.

adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness.” (Baudrillard 172)²

Adults visit the fantasy, but the fantasy exists outside of Disneyland too. His exact definition of hyperreality is: “A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary” (Jean Baudrillard 167)³. Since LA is so often depicted in films, each one can be seen as a simulated reality, albeit to a lesser extent. The world shown on screen is perfectly crafted for the viewer. They only see what the producer wants them to see. But the filming locations are also real places. Representations of Los Angeles create a specific window into the city, perhaps a romantic one, perhaps a pessimistic one, but these windows can highlight some of the reality of what’s there.

Most of my research had been about Los Angeles, through a postmodern lens, and less about the actual form my final project would take. Fortunately, I found a transition text that directed my progress.

Ed Ruscha’s photo work is so synonymous with Los Angeles, that I’ve had trouble finding written work that doesn’t mention him. My introduction to his work was *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. It is an accordion style pamphlet lined on both sides with a nearly continuous series of black and white images. The photos are, as the title states, of every building that one would see traveling up and down Sunset Boulevard. One side of the

² Baudrillard, Jean. “Simulacra and Simulations.” In *Selected Writing*, edited by Mark Poster, 166-84. Palo Alto, CA 2001: Stanford University Press.

³ Baudrillard, Jean. “Simulacra and Simulations.” In *Selected Writing*, edited by Mark Poster, 166-84. Palo Alto, CA 2001: Stanford University Press.

street is printed along the top margin, and the other is printed upside down on the bottom margin to give the impression of walking down the center of the street. The center of the spreads remain white with occasional street and address information.⁴ The images don't have a strong bias to them; they do little to create more than a strict informational presentation of what's there. The concept comes in, when the stereotypes of the area are looked at. He isn't trying to break the glamorous stereotypes directly, he's just showing what's actually there.

What I found interesting was, that despite this deglamorization, Sunset Blvd retains its glossy reputation. Ruscha, for lack of a better word, exposes Sunset Blvd for the boring thoroughfare it is. The street itself isn't glamorous, and yet it carries a star-studded reputation and intrigue, and people still want to look at it. The photographs reveal a reality that differs from the reputation, but I'm interested in seeing what the fantasy looks like as well. Fantasy & reality are so intertwined, that both have conceptual strength and are important to making Los Angeles what it is.

In terms of form, Ruscha's presentation mimics the act of driving down the street, starting at one end, and showing each building on both sides positioned opposite one another. Each page feeds into the next, creating a linear narrative even though, objectively, there isn't a story. I took the same accordion style to create a continuous sheet, where each page bleeds into the next. After spending a lot of time with maps, I noted that LA does not follow many urban planning rules. It doesn't really have a center (like most cities do) and doesn't follow a gridded road structure. Rather the city is a sprawling collection of

⁴ Ruscha, Edward. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Los Angeles, 1966.

neighborhoods, connected by meandering streets & blending at the edges. The connectivity of Ruscha's book mimics that structure, but also left room to explore in terms of content.

Methodology:

I began the semester thinking about billboards. Billboards pepper the streets of Los Angeles and change frequently; one week there are 4 Stephen King based works being advertised, and the next Gucci & Hulu ads take their place. I thought it could be interesting to create fake media advertisement about the spaces these billboards occupy. How could I represent the physical place through constantly changing content?

To start, I hung up a geographically- inspired photo collage in my studio, made a few small scale collages, and started reading like an overeager liberal arts grad student. (I read a lot of relevant things that I can't put in this thesis because of the word limit, it's a little heartbreaking). I was reading (and not-making anything) until Franc and Sophia visited my studio; I was ready to layout my textual findings, but our conversation drifted to the photos on the wall. I had laid out a linear journey that was both map-like, and specifically directional. They suggested I stop spending so much time reading, and spend more time looking at visual material (and making).

I started looking at photography books and maps. I decided on a book for the form, it provided a directional structure and sense of time and movement I was looking for. I

planned to represent Los Angeles with imagery and use my postmodern cultural findings for the text. I was prepared to write an analysis of Los Angeles as a city, and how it falls into certain postmodern concepts. Except I'm not an urban studies scholar, or a cultural critic, I'm a designer. My project had shifted from an art project to a paper in a field I wasn't even studying and I desperately needed to refocus.

Most of my semester review was encouragement to realign my project to the visuals actually start making them. I decided to explore the hyperreal nature of LA, rather than just write about it, by combining memories, representation, and lies in a text. There is no difference how each is visually shown. I wanted to keep researching, but forced myself to do "bad mockups" aka visual explorations that I didn't take seriously. I was collaging, drawing, and cutting out shapes but I didn't think the head much value. I did however really like how digital stacking of images looked. They create atmospheric blends of photographs, that make the images blend.

After my guest critique with Rosie Sharp, I again shifted my project. I began organizing collages based on movie vocabulary. Specifically, the title sequence, character introductions, establishing moments, and finale. It gave it more of a narrative arc, despite the pages functioning more as vignettes. I began creating atmospheric imagery to tell the stories. It creates a visual feeling, but provides little content as to what the story is about. It looks dreamlike, and like Los Angeles, but also leaves room to ponder what exactly the narrative is.

Creative Work:



Original Wall Collage

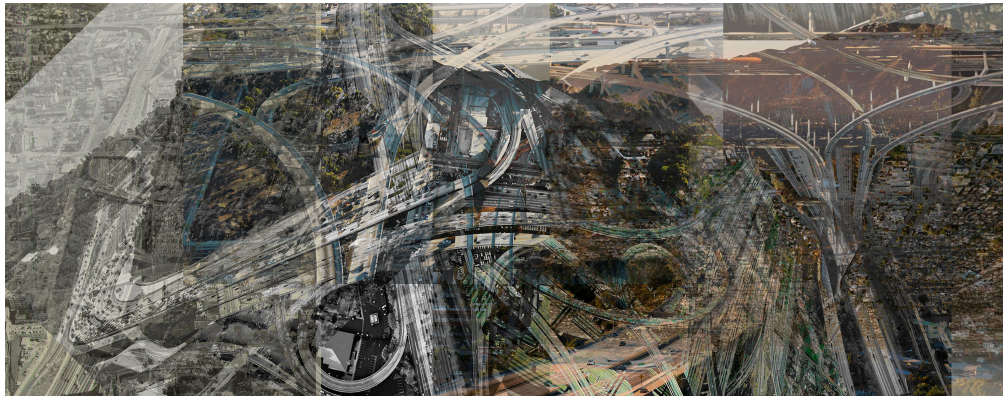
Images taped & pinned to the wall. Moving through Los Angeles from west to east, I grouped images that were connected to different parts of the city and placed them in a semi-linear order. It functions, loosely, as a map of the city, but

also has a clear directionality. This early stage collage really directed what I ended up making, collecting relevant photos to specific portions of Los Angeles and placing them in a disjointed line is close to the compositions I made.



Digital Stacks

Using visually similar images, I stacked between 5-10 photos to create an atmospheric tone. These images were helpful for me to break lines between images, and create interesting textures the final book



Page Sample One:

Example of atmospheric page. Expressing the feeling of traffic, with a clogged no-end-in-sight collection of streets. The edges between images are blurred and yet continuous.



Page Sample Two:

Example of personal stories. Once shallow, and the other more complex.

On the left: I spend a lot of my time researching without a particular goal, meaning I spent time in the UCLA library exploring. I used photos of a UCLA lecture hall from the 1960s, and a still from the 1973 detective film *The Long Goodbye*. Together they tell the story of my mindless research on a campus I didn't really belong, but also create a vintage preppy style.

On the right: I dyed half of my hair blonde before arriving in Los Angeles, and visualized my feelings on my new hair.



Sample Page Three:

Using the classic movie end screen as inspiration, I ended my book with a sunset image with scripted text. It serves an end the story, an end to the dream, while acknowledging the tropes



The final book is presented on a pedestal with a few images from my initial studio collages above it. The presentation allows for easy viewing and casual browsing of the pages.

Conclusion:

I feel my piece is an exploration of Los Angeles through visual themes, existing cultural content, and personal experience. It's presented with cinematic language but consists of vignettes to better craft the collected essence of LA. In the future, I'd be interested in creating a time based piece that tackles the same issue. I wonder what could happen where

I control the speed of the collaged elements. Animation and video collage, I feel, would create a new dimension to the content and present additional film vocabulary to work with.

Bibliography

- Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations." In *Selected Writing*, edited by Mark Poster, 166-84. Palo Alto, CA 2001: Stanford University Press.
- Brown, Jane, Edward Ruscha, and David L. Ulin. *Both Sides of Sunset: Photographing Los Angeles*. New York, NY: Metropolis Books, 2015.
- Hoskyns, Barney. "The City That Celebrates Itself: Los Angeles on Los Angeles." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 316-24.
- Jameson, Fredric. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." In *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992.
- Los Angeles Plays Itself*. Directed by Thom Andersen. United States: Thom Andersen Productions, 2003. DVD.
- Ruscha, Edward. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Los Angeles, 1966.