Artwork: The Doors of Perception

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What is Los Angeles?

There is a quote at the beginning of Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz* which, in effect, sums up the organising thread of the entire work. Citing Morrow Mayo, a prominent L.A. Times critic during the 1930s, Davis underlines the notion of Los Angeles as the archetypical expression of a capitalist political economy:

Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouthwash.¹

Despite the attempts of utopian visionaries, whether socialists like the Young People’s Socialist League, or “benevolent” capitalists like Henry Kaiser, the ‘lebensraum’ maintained in the “City of Angels” is one which is firmly founded upon the zero sum promise of economic prosperity through capitalist exchange. This is the thread which connects General Otis, one of the original nineteenth century promoters of LA as an idyl-by-the-sea, to Henry Kaiser, and finally to the Bloods and Crips of our own era, whose new empire of crack induced violence can now be seen as merely another phase in the increasingly brutal Faustian exchange of soul and community for power and financial gain. Davis assures us that however complicated the actual realities of L.A., in the end its struggles are indelibly class struggles.² In fact in Davis’s view LA is the place where the full force of late capitalism, and of postmodernism, find their most ‘advanced’ expressions - a terrifying thought for those coping with the aftermath of recent riots in south central LA and other American cities.

*City of Quartz* is divided into seven chapters, introduced by a short prologue. The prologue tells us that “the best place to view the Los Angeles of the next millennium is from the ruins of its alternative future”. These Davis finds in the ruins of the “General Assembly Hall of the Socialist City of Llano del Rio”, the focal point for a pre World War I socialist utopia, and his model of an “anti-LA”. Chapter one reviews the place of LA in the