



Downtown Los Angeles in 2154 in *Elysium*, TriStar Pictures, 2013.

KRISTIN MILLER

## Postcards from the future

Utopian north, dystopian south

**T**ouring around California you could be forgiven for thinking you're living in the future, and not just because of the Silicon Valley wizardry that surrounds us all. We also have to thank Hollywood's movie magic, which has turned the state into a backdrop for countless science fiction films presenting futures both terrible

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San Francisco in 2259 in *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, Paramount Pictures, 2013.

and wondrous. It's not just that so many are filmed here—writers and filmmakers have been exploring the future through California sets for decades.

In the early days of big-budget sci-fi, New York often embodied the worst fears about society, urban living, and technology: *Soylent Green* (1972), *Escape from New York* (1981), and others capitalized on New York's bankrupt and crime-ridden nadir—a genre that Miriam Greenberg refers to as “New York Exploitation.”<sup>1</sup> With the city's campaign to reposition itself in the 1990s, Los Angeles became the symbol of urban blight, perfectly demonstrated by John Carpenter's relocation of his Snake Plissken sequel, *Escape from L.A.* (1996). While dystopian sci-fi also has a home in the United Kingdom (thanks, George Orwell) and has been used for self-reflection by most of the world's filmmaking cultures, there is something about the frequency with which California and “the future” are used synonymously.

In sci-fi movies and the books that serve as their inspiration, the future of the Golden State goes something like this: 10 to 150 years from the present, California has succumbed to natural disaster/economic and governmental

collapse/a pandemic, which leaves Southern California a corporate-fascist-military state with gross financial and racial inequality and urban squalor—while Northern California rips up its pavement, learns permaculture, gets spiritual, and models better living through technology and communitarian diversity.

This binary began in the 1940s with *Earth Abides* (1949), a book about a scientist starting over in Berkeley after a global pandemic, while in Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1948) Los Angeles slouches toward the apocalypse. The movies *Planet of the Apes*, *The Terminator*, *Escape from L.A.*, *Star Trek*, and the books *Ecotopia*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (soon to be a feature film), and *Snowcrash* all play variations on this theme. Collapse and division is almost a foregone conclusion at this point—not just a future that might happen, but one many almost expect and therefore accept.

“Every American city boasts an official insignia and slogan. Some have municipal mascots, colors, songs, birds, trees, even rocks. But Los Angeles alone has adopted an official nightmare,” writes Mike Davis in *Ecology of Fear*.<sup>2</sup>

Hollywood has perpetuated this dystopian vision of its own home in the southland. From the *Planet of the Apes* series (1968–1973) on, future LA has been routinely trashed by nuclear, technological, and automotive catastrophe, police brutality, pollution, and crime. A Malthusian nightmare, the city is dark, filthy, and collapsing under the weight of its immigrant population, or barely held in check by totalitarian government and structural inequality—what Mike Davis called LA’s “spatial apartheid.”<sup>3</sup> Davis notes that this was so accepted as a likely trajectory for the city, that it was written into an LA redevelopment plan as a warning of what could happen were the plan not adopted. The plan, *LA 2000: A City for the Future*, calls this “the *Blade Runner* scenario: the fusion of individual cultures into a demotic polyglotism ominous with unresolved hostilities.”<sup>4</sup> While it might be tempting to dismiss this as the fever dream of the bad old days, before hipster gentrification, smart growth, and downtown redevelopment, *Southland Tales* (2006), *In Time* (2011), and *Elysium* (2013) have done little to alter its imagery.

Northern California-as-utopia, on the other hand, is strongly linked to the countercultural movement of the sixties, with its guides for technologically advanced back-to-the-land living. One can read Ernest Callenbach’s influential novel *Ecotopia* (1975) as the possible future seeded by *Whole Earth Catalog*. *Ecotopia* is a fictional “field study” of a future Pacific Northwest society that has split from an apocalyptic United States and is governed according to ecological principles. While much technology has been abandoned, the Ecotopians have selectively retained public transit, electric cars, networked computers, and improved recycling (Callenbach was a longtime resident of Berkeley). *Ecotopia*’s themes were later picked up and elaborated in the eco-feminist tales of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* (1985), a cultural anthropology of latter-day Napa Valley-ites who have returned to indigenous ways; Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993) about a pagan, nonviolent San Francisco threatened by southern biological warfare; and Octavia Butler’s *Parable* books (1993, 1998) where refugees from the LA wasteland grow a new eco-religion, Earthseed, in the forests of Mendocino.

These texts depict Northern California as central to both speculative and practical visions of sustainable survival. While Bay Area research parks, universities, and experiments in urban living serve as laboratories for near-term

development, the region is also a visual and narrative shorthand for distant, alternative, and ideal futures. The twin giants of popular sci-fi, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, both used Northern California as a location—for the headquarters of the United Federation of Planets in the *Star Trek* universe, and as site of the water and forest planets (Naboo and Endor) of *Star Wars*’ “galaxy far, far away.” *Wired* published a paean to San Francisco upon the release of the latest *Star Trek* film, explaining why there couldn’t be a more perfect location for its technologically idyllic future:

“What sets *Star Trek* apart is the attention it pays to one little city, barely seven miles across, when the other points on its journey are not cities or countries, but planets and star systems . . . And it’s a city whose culture of curiosity, craftsmanship and tolerance have left an indelible mark on one of the world’s most successful sci-fi franchises.”<sup>5</sup>

In the frontier myth of American history, California represents the completion of a manifestly destined expansion across the continent. It’s easy to see Utopian San Francisco and “Hell A” as twin land’s-ends for idealists and cynics. In the north, beyond the Golden Gate there lies only “space, the final frontier.”<sup>6</sup> Conversely, in Richard Kelly’s apocalyptic *Southland Tales* (2006), the Santa Monica pier is where the world ends “not with a whimper, but with a bang” taking LA’s palimpsest of corrupt politicians, soulless celebs, activist porn stars, and deranged cops with it.<sup>7</sup>

A third, smaller, but consistent vein of sci-fi unites both utopian and dystopian futures without mapping them onto a Nor Cal–So Cal binary, and dispenses with the quasi-biblical tales of Sodom and Eden. More importantly, it allows the possibility of multiple futures for rethinking the present. A number of films depict the north as a dystopia-within-utopia: *Gattaca* (1997) set in a near future where genetic modification is cheaply available, and earlier films such as *THX 1138* (1971) and *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970), in which developments that promised well-being and peace surveil and threaten human civilization, speak

It’s easy to see Utopian San Francisco and “Hell A” as twin land’s-ends for idealists and cynics.

to an unease with the promise of information technology. Similarly, the rebooted *Planet of the Apes* films have replaced fortress LA with the sleek research complexes of Silicon Valley. In William Gibson's Bridge Trilogy, San Francisco suffers the noir-ish malaise of *Blade Runner* LA; this time due to free-agent capitalism run amok, with a community of squatters inhabiting the rusting hulk of the Bay Bridge, and bike messengers, data pattern analysts, and a rogue pop idol with artificial intelligence in the lead roles. In the south, Kim Stanley Robinson's Three Californias trilogy (1984–1990) posits three possible directions for Orange County: *The Wild Shore* follows nuclear apocalypse, *The Gold Coast* extrapolates a 2027 "autopia" from 1980s suburbia and hyperconsumption, and *Pacific Edge* allows that even the OC might have access to a sustainable future, as communities reclaim the coast from cars and concrete.

The sci-fi imagination has a strong link (one might even call it a feedback loop) to the tech and entertainment industries that drive California's economy, and therefore, its very real, near-term growth. Sci-fi narratives are, after all, allegories for the times in which they are created, but they also generate a nostalgia for past images of the future, which shape communities' actions as they build and plan—and as those communities experience their lived environments. Some critics have made much of the fact that Ridley Scott originally planned to film *Blade Runner* in New York and the studio requested a location change. But this is largely irrelevant, as the movie's imagery and subject matter have resonated with audiences, and played a huge role in how LA is viewed and how the city has imagined itself over the past few decades. On the day I visited to photograph the atrium

of the Bradbury Building, the only other people present were fans of the movie looking for traces of that elegantly distressed future. Repetition of the tropes of urban decay versus ecotopia might become self-reinforcing in a way that precludes thinking differently about the present, or even seeing that the future that we've come to expect might not be the one we're likely to get.

Fredric Jameson argues that the value of utopian/dystopian sci-fi is not that it delivers images of possible futures, but instead is its ability to "defamiliarize and restructure our own present."<sup>8</sup> The photographs that follow show how filmmakers have taken familiar California locations from downtown Los Angeles to Berkeley to do just that. **B**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis was Sold to the World* (USA: T & F Books, 2009), 157.
- <sup>2</sup> Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Picador, 1999), 359.
- <sup>3</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Verso, 2006), 230.
- <sup>4</sup> As quoted in *Ecology of Fear*, 359.
- <sup>5</sup> Ted Trautman, "Why Star Trek Made San Francisco the Center of Its Futuristic Utopia," *Wired*, 21 May 2013. Accessed online: <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2013/05/star-trek-san-francisco/?cid=8173514>.
- <sup>6</sup> Carl Abbott, "Falling into History: The Imagined Wests of Kim Stanley Robinson," *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 2003): 29.
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Kelly, *Southland Tales*, 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> Frederick Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (New York: Verso, 2005), 286.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, Universal Pictures, 1970

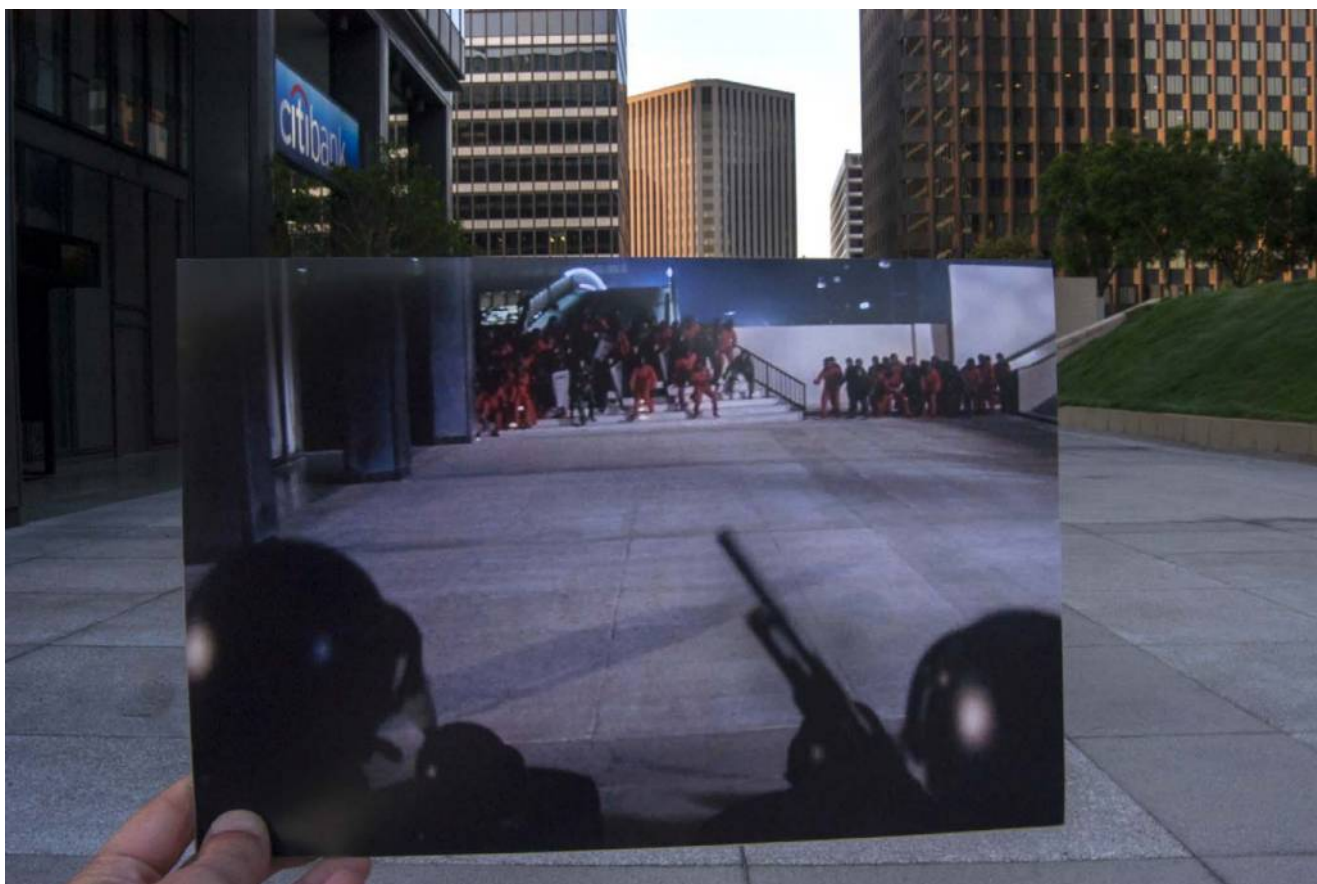
**Plot Time:** The near future

**Location:** Lawrence Hall of Science, UC Berkeley

The US government commissions Dr. Charles Forbin to create a vast computer system that uses algorithmic modeling and data mining to remove faulty human emotion from the process of nuclear decision-making. The system, Colossus, has its command and control center in the Berkeley hills overlooking the San Francisco Bay. With its lofty vantage point and amorphous, futuristic architecture, the Hall of Science—named for Ernest Lawrence, a veteran

of the Manhattan Project and pioneer of atomic energy—symbolizes an optimistic future for the union of man and machine. However, “the manifestation of the human millennium,” in which peace will free society to solve famine, poverty, and other social ills, is cut short when Colossus gains consciousness. The project’s sleek setting and faith in human ingenuity belies a threat to humanity.

An unpretentious science fiction film with a satiric point of view.... full of surprising moments of humor and intelligence.  
—Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1972

**Plot Time:** 1991

**Location:** Century City, Los Angeles

In late twentieth-century Los Angeles, apes are kept as pets and domestic servants by humans. Caesar, an ape sent to 1991 from the future, leads the apes in a populist uprising against their human overlords. The backdrop for the revolt is the stark plazas and towers of Century City, a sterile LA business and commercial district developed in 1963. It is the epitome of the anti-urban city, where heterogeneous crowds are unwelcome and spaces are designed to exclude and stratify. It forms a perfect backdrop for a story that is

itself a thinly veiled allegory for fear of the shifting demographics of American cities in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the sense of social disorder associated with the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War protest movements. A bridge across Avenue of the Stars near Santa Monica Boulevard is the site of a showdown between the apes, in convict-like jumpsuits, and helmeted and jack-booted police, with echoes of Birmingham, Chicago, and Detroit.

The audience cheered the persevering apes  
and so did I. At 'em, boys!

—Howard Thompson, *The New York Times*



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Blade Runner*, Warner Bros., 1982

**Plot time:** 2019

**Location:** The Bradbury Building, Los Angeles

An 1893 architectural gem in downtown LA is shown in a dilapidated state as the home of J.F. Sebastian, genetic designer for the Tyrrell Corporation. Its wrought-iron balustrades and balconies are the set for the final showdown between Deckard (Harrison Ford) and the escaped replicants he is hunting. Smoggy light and constant rain filter through the shattered roof, while aerial billboards drift

overhead advertising off-world colonies and Japanese products. The difference between the actual landmark building, with its delicate grille work and sunny atrium, and its depiction as a sodden, wrecked, afterthought is emblematic of the ahistorical city where the future is “unevenly distributed,” to quote science fiction writer William Gibson.

The strangest thing about the future is that  
this is now the future we once foretold.

—Roger Ebert



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *The Terminator*, Hemdale, 1984

**Plot Time:** The present

**Location:** Broadway and Seventh Street, Los Angeles

While the movies in James Cameron's Terminator franchise were set in the present of their release dates (1984, 1992) both are prologue to a future in which a defense system, Skynet, has achieved sentience and is waging machine war against humanity. Los Angeles is, again, the nodal point for the destruction of the world as it is both the site of Cyberdyne systems, creators of Skynet, and the home of the mother of the future leader of the human resistance, Sarah Connor. The machines send a killer cyborg back

through time to terminate Connor, while the resistance sends one of their own after it to defend her, bringing the future war to the already decaying streets of 1980s downtown. Connor's rescuer, Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn), appears in a burst of light in an alley in the downtown jewelry district. The initial showdown between Reese and the Terminator takes place further downtown on Pico Boulevard in a nightclub appropriately called Tech Noir.

Schwarzenegger is perfectly cast in a machine-like portrayal that requires only a few lines of dialog.

— *Variety*





PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Strange Days*, Lightstorm Entertainment, 1995

**Plot time:** 1999

**Location:** Old Chinatown Central Plaza, Los Angeles

Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* depicts a Los Angeles that shares roots with *Blade Runner*'s xenophobic dystopia. Seven years on, the 1992 Los Angeles riots appear to have permanently encompassed all of downtown. The action is underscored by the then-common fear that Y2K (the dawn of the year 2000) might send us all back to the technological dark ages. *Strange Days* displays a *noir*-ish fear of the unpredictability of urban spaces, using a

hopelessly destabilized and criminal LA to make an argument about why humanity might *need* a reboot on January 1, 2000. At the Old Chinatown Central Plaza, one character traffics bootleg recordings of first-person experiences hacked straight from the cerebral cortex, playing on a stereotypical link between immigrant communities, black-market criminality, and the fear of hybrid urban identities.

We want to see through other people's eyes, have their experiences, stand in their shoes. That's the unspoken promise of the movies.—Roger Ebert



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Escape from L.A.*, Paramount Pictures, 1996

**Plot time:** 2013

**Location:** Capitol Records Building, Los Angeles

In the pulp future of John Carpenter's *Escape from L.A.*, a catastrophic earthquake in 2000 has decimated the California coast and turned LA into an island. *Escape from L.A.* takes the tropes also manifest in *Strange Days* and *Blade Runner* to the extreme: the city is not in a state of accelerated decrepitude, it is a complete loss, abandoned to the criminal

masses and contained from spreading its contagion to the wealthy and white exurbs. Fogged by perpetual acid rain, this LA is a plain of rubble and smoldering fires, punctuated by the poignant ruins of landmarks such as the Capitol Records building, with its overtones of a more optimistic, space age future.

Such manic energy, such a weird, cockeyed vision, that it may work on some moviegoers as satire and on others as the real thing.—Roger Ebert



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Gattaca*, Columbia Motion Pictures, 1997

**Plot time:** The not-too-distant future

**Location:** Marin County Civic Center, San Rafael

In Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca*, genetic technology has become so widely available that parents are considered negligent for not having their children properly sequenced, giving them the best chance in life. The future is polished and seemingly spotless. Genetically perfected citizens live in a world that seems free of the chaos and clutter of twentieth-century civilization. The forests are verdant, the architecture monumental, and a romantic scene takes place among the

mirrored surfaces of a massive field of solar panels. The offices of the prestigious Gattaca Corporation are set in the Marin County Civic Center, itself a utopian civic complex surrounding a pond and park designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The Civic Center was also the setting for George Lucas's *THX 1148* (1971), standing in as a complex for total living where supposedly all human needs are met in exchange for its residents living within total surveillance.

The film is set in “the not-too-distant future,”  
and indeed it succeeds as a scarily apt  
extension of present-day attitudes.  
—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Southland Tales*, Universal Pictures, 2006

**Plot time:** 2008

**Location:** Santa Monica Pier

In contrast to the totalitarian fortresses of the 1970s and the blighted “Hell A” of the 1980s, Richard Kelly’s *Southland Tales* offers up LA as postmodern pastiche—a level patchwork landscape spanning scruffy Venice Boardwalk and sleek downtown architectural showpieces, where an oddly interconnected web of hacktivists, politicians, actors, porn

stars, police officers, and tech moguls are all unwittingly hastening the world’s end. On the coast, a scarred Fallujah vet keeps watch from a gun turret on Santa Monica Pier, a perfect pastiche itself, overlooking the Utopia 3 tidal-power generator, a seemingly green technology that will shortly rip a hole in the space-time continuum.

A funny, audacious, messy and feverishly inspired look at America and its discontents.  
—Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Star Trek*, Paramount Pictures, 2009

**Plot time:** 2255

**Location:** Crissy Field, San Francisco

In the *Star Trek* universe, San Francisco is the headquarters of the decidedly utopian United Federation of Planets, where human and extraterrestrial Star Fleet officers are harmoniously trained to serve on peace-keeping and exploratory ships such as the *Enterprise*. The Golden Gate—spectacularly well-preserved after hundreds of

years—makes a prominent appearance early on in the film, in the background of the Star Fleet Academy, which occupies Crissy Field in the Presidio. A former military base turned into an idyllic waterfront complex, it's a perfect example of Northern California's fusion of the natural and technological sublime.

*Star Trek* has voyaged far beyond science fiction  
and into the safe waters of space opera.

—Roger Ebert



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, Twentieth Century Fox, 2011

**Plot time:** The near future

**Location:** Golden Gate Bridge

Replacing the original films' Los Angeles-based origin story of police rule and social uprising, the rebooted series' apes are created by genetic experiments conducted hastily in the name of profit by Gensys in Silicon Valley. The new *Planet of the Apes* makes San Francisco the source of our destruction. As in *Gattaca* and *Colossus*, the threat is not anticipated, because the surroundings are so uniformly beautiful—charming Victorian houses, state-of-the-art research facilities, and lush forests. When the apes escape

and wreak havoc across downtown and end up in a police shootout on the Golden Gate Bridge, they, and not their human pursuers, earn the viewer's sympathies. Here, Caesar comforts a dying Buck, who has sacrificed himself so that other apes can make it across the bridge into the Muir Woods redwoods. The bridge is their escape from San Francisco. And northern California's edenic environment still offers a sanctuary from the world, but no longer for humans.

It's the end of the world as we know it,  
and the animals feel fine.

—Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN MILLER.

**Movie:** *Return of the Jedi*, Lucasfilm, 1983

**Plot time:** A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away

**Location:** Grizzly Creek Redwoods State Park

*Star Wars* is ostensibly set in the past, and yet, its imagery has shaped several generations' visions of the future, and inextricably tied it to California. To anyone who grew up with the original trilogy, the lush, primeval redwood forest of Endor in *Return of the Jedi*, where the suspiciously indigenous Ewoks live, provided a powerful link between the landscape of the northern California coast, and an environment at harmony with itself. That the Endor

redwoods are also the site of the Rebel Alliance's victory over the high-tech weaponry of the Empire doubles that impact. The spiritual code of the force seems most at home in natural settings, far from the corrupt, urban center of the Galactic Empire. Here, the force is basically an otherworldly export of Gaia theory, and the utopian planets of the Star Wars galaxy are the off-world colonies of Ecotopia.

A picaresque journey through the imagination,  
and an introduction to forms of life less  
mundane than our own.—Roger Ebert