

**AMERICAN  
MOUNTAINS**  

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**GREENWAY**





American Mountains 2011

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American Mountains - Greenway  
2011

Edited by Jamie George and Richard Whitby





The oldest roller coasters were descended from the so-called Russian Mountains, which were specially constructed hills of ice located especially around Saint Petersburg, Russia. Ironically, the Russian term for roller coaster, (amerikanskije gorki), translates literally as American Mountains.

- Wikipedia entry

American Mountains is an artist's project that has previously taken the form of exhibitions, websites, printed papers, performances and talks. It has become a device for providing various platforms for both art making and subsidiary or incidental practices and projects.

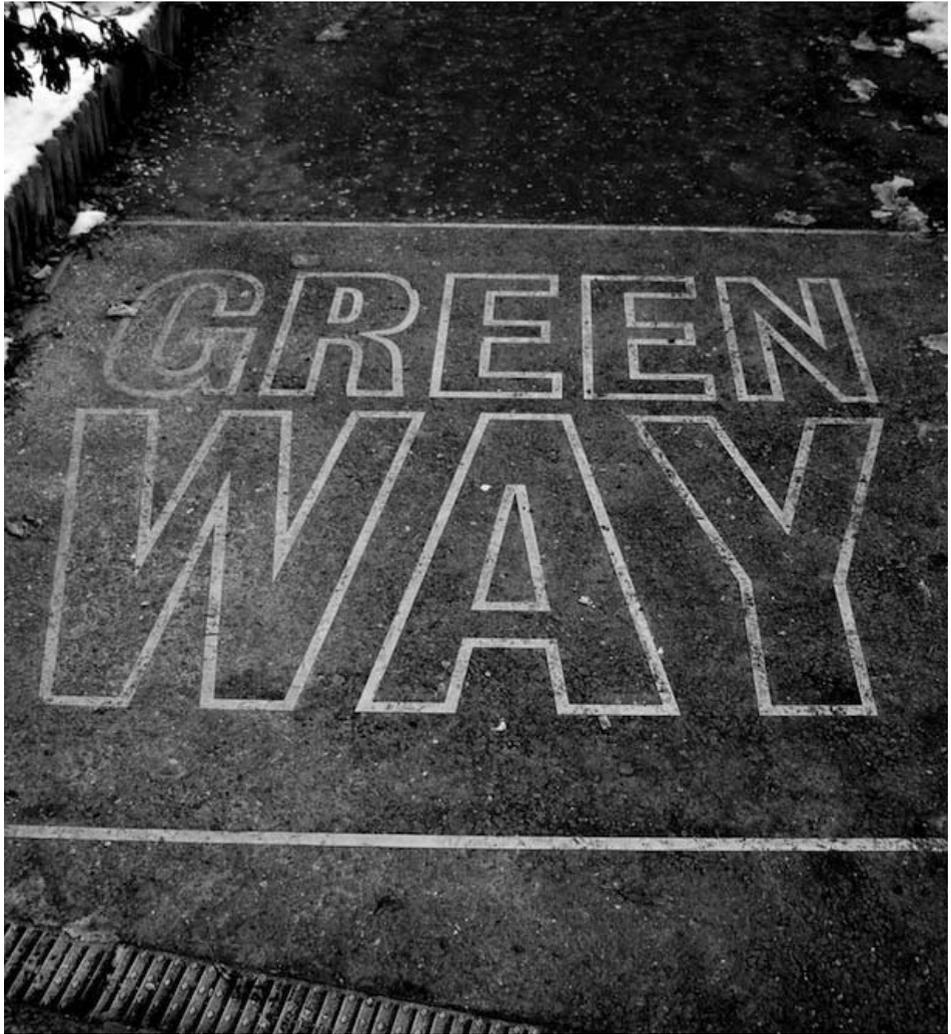
Whatever its format American Mountains is produced expeditiously; monetary and formal economy are preferred. American Mountains is about producing new items or significant collisions between existing ones. American Mountains is free to attend, own or otherwise consume and aims to be open and inviting to any interested party.

Conversation is central to the project and extends to any chosen and relevant area of culture, politics, history etc. American Mountains wants to be (or to become) a politicised entity.

Through conversation, American Mountains seeks to sustain a productive community. Convivial forms of collective labour are employed to the same end, such as the tasks of installation, printing and web-programming.

American Mountains is worried, it is earnest in its desire to contribute; yet it is tentative in its assertion that such contributions have, or can be made.

Etymologically its lineage is one of illusion, distance, unreality, romance – its aim is to become huge and hazy, difficult, strange and foreign to itself.



'American Mountains – Greenway' takes the form of a two-week residency at Grand Union, in Digbeth, Birmingham. Rather than an exhibition, this project will run as an extended workshop, open to the public and resulting in this self-published book, collectively manufactured in the gallery space.

'American Mountains - Greenway' is produced and edited by Jamie George and Richard Whitby

New content for the book will be derived in three open seminar days. The titles of the days (and the chapters of this book) are:

## **THE GREENWAY (GW)**

## **NOT ROMANIA (NR)**

## **WE FUCKED THIS UP (WF)**

List of colour illustrations:

- i. DISUSED LEISURE PARK, CHONGQING, CHINA  
(Photo Jamie George)
- ii. ENGLISH STREET, BOW, EAST LONDON  
(Photo Jamie George)
- iii. SCRAPPED BOAT, NEW YORK  
(Photo Eleanor Wright)
- iv. WATER FEATURE, DUBAI MALL  
(Photo Richard Whitby)

GREENWAY



# THE GREENWAY



## Foreword

The Greenway is a footpath and cycle-way in East London constructed on the embankment containing the Northern Outfall sewer. It may suggest here (in the mannered language of regeneration and property development) a journey, a tour, an ideology, a colour, a banner, a fable (a yellow-brick road). You enter the Greenway at Fish Island off the Hertford Union Canal (connected to the Grand Union Canal). As you walk along the Greenway a faint smell of shit lingers in the air and a strange set of intersecting histories appear, specifically those relating to various industrial and economic revolutions. You walk past the Olympic site. Like its adolescent relation, the Westfield shopping centre in Stratford, it has been termed a 'ready-made' by Iain Sinclair – ideological entities levered into place. The Greenway goes on to intersect with the Crossrail development at Pudding Mill Lane, spanning two London boroughs, ending in Beckton at a main road, a sewage works and spoil heap nicknamed the Beckton Alps, for a while a dry ski slope.

The Greenway offers us a luminous view of the forces that drive the production of a 'space'. It is a site; renovated in the mid-nineties as part of the last economic boom, it is a recreation area: a park, a walk, a cycle route, it is a precursor to the Olympics, it has been renovated, it is being renovated, it is simply the renaming (and branding) of the land above the effluent shat out by London.

Acting as the title for this section, the Greenway as an entity is representative of how, embedded in this idea of space, is the notion of development – and further regeneration and restoration. Often these forces are active on different, transparent levels: sub-urban amenities (electricity and gas in pipelines), military space, aerospace; bureaucratic, technocratic and mnemonic systems, the cultural space of television – or the communicational space of the internet. It is the attendant productivity, and linguistic agency of these overlapping forces that are explored in the works presented in this first chapter. Let us not think of utopias or dystopias but space (with revolutionary potential) in the present tense – be that of East London or Libya.

Jamie George

## **8 Years** **Jamie George**

It was an interesting start to an excursion – the taxi driver not knowing where to drop me. He hesitantly gesticulated towards a side road, as he picked up his next fare and drove away. The amusement park in Chongqing City, China, positioned between two recently built bridges on the banks of Changjiang River, presented itself – as a website tentatively suggested – as “closed...?” Venturing through the partially open gates, I strolled around the park. The park could be correctly described as disused with regard to its original remit. A scattering of people seeking shade, playing majiang and sleeping on outdoor furniture demonstrate its current alternate uses. The rust on most of the rides indicates that their time of moving has passed. The rumour was that the now-defunct roller-coaster was active eight years ago – yet no one really knows when it ceased to run.

With over thirty-one million inhabitants, one would think (if we use Thorpe Park or Alton Towers as a schematic British example) that Chongqing’s people would request the provision of an amusement park’s (operational) rides. Via this particular site, the city becomes an oneiric location, its unbelievable development statistics lose significance, in the same way as the landscape loses its clarity in the heat haze and smog. I am sure that in the UK a site such as this would have long been renovated, re-developed, re-staged or at least closed.

In stark contrast, the East Bank further down the Changjiang River has undergone significant development in recent years. I lose count of the high-rise tower blocks as I scan this insurgent colony. At a guess there are in excess of one hundred buildings in the first tier, situated along the water line – where, before the development eight years ago, mountains loomed. This is tough regeneration. In my head I named this the eight year view.

Apart from the occasional ‘clean-living’ expat, many of the blocks of flats remain empty. Property investors who bought up the apartments wish to keep them ‘as new’. When the time comes to sell them on it is believed they will fetch a higher price if they can be deemed un-lived in. The irony, perhaps, is that the buildings are only intended to have a thirty year life span – the hasty concrete construction, inadequate cladding and plastic plumbing rapidly degrading under various environmental pressures. A local resident tells me that with this inbuilt ruination jobs will be created, materials purchased and designs outputted. A market will be kept afloat. Supported by the pride of national autonomy, it is a strange type of sustainability.

Comparisons to regeneration projects and housing developments in London

and the UK are, on the surface, polarised. The accustomed model finds developers complicit in local government, pre-sales and cross-funding, with painfully slow relocation of incumbent residents. Throughout a generous stretch of the East End of London, now lavishly ornamented with Olympic sites, the urban landscape permanently includes the badly gloss-painted panelling of the developer's designated areas – usually in some variation of red, white and blue.

With the riverside view in mind, I am drawn to list what has happened to me in the last eight years. A UK-based generalized history might note the career of a girl-band, a financial crisis, the perceived growth of terrorism, smart phones, more new shopping malls and two wars.

This is in fact not a project of comparison but an inquiry into the monolith of 'progress'. China's notion of progress is not waiting to be supplanted by Western avariciousness. These two landscapes present a radically alternate yet corresponding, homologous mode. I wonder what 'progress' might mean – a movement (as toward a goal?), an advance? What may be egregious to a British building developer's heritage-bound model, functions fluidly in the un-historicised Chinese scheme.

History is merely an inessential mode of being, the most effective form of infidelity to ourselves. (...) History is man's aggression against himself.<sup>1</sup>

E. M. Cioran's words come with his pre-fix of the 'over-civilisation of the West', and further he states; 'Europe has passed to a provincial destiny'.<sup>2</sup> If historic time is extraneous, spatial transformation (regardless of the model) becomes the agent of 'progress'. The transformation of a site becomes progress's visible location; a location of pardoned spatial complicity.

In Milan Kundera's terms the coercive properties of a social ideal of advance (and no return) demonstrate the goading of Capitalism's permission; a cycle and not a vector.

(A) world that rests essentially on the non-existence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cyclically permitted."<sup>3</sup>

These two locations present a unity of difference. With the social alliance to developing a landscape of 'no-return' what becomes distinct is 'progress' is

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1. E. M. Cioran, 'Thinking Against Oneself', *The Temptation to Exist* 1956,

2. E. M. Cioran, 'A Little Theory of Destiny', *ibid.*

3. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* 1984

not a historic concern but a spatial one.

As I sat below the inactive Ferris wheel, the main visible iconographic statement of Chongqing amusement park, I am intrigued by a newly and partially built structure, a concrete building with steps leading down the bank – a bunker. Through the incongruity of the building I am drawn to think what a city may look like after eight years of ‘un-use’ – peaking oil production, or more war seem viable causes. A bunker maybe the most relevant structure for the next possible period: eight more years of spatial progress.

September 2010





The Greenway park, as I see it, is akin to some sort of punctuation (parentheses or an underline perhaps) in the syntax of Olympic development site in East London. The Olympic Park, an interpolating growth underscoring all the surrounding housing developments. Adherent to the Olympic advance, in the last eight months a nexus of housing developments have appeared in Bow, the 'London Artist's Quarter',<sup>1</sup> where I live and work.

As I walk through the back streets I am preoccupied by the housing developers' designated areas, encased in gloss-painted plywood hoardings; interim semi-architecture, sculptural façades – planted overnight, demarcating each site's perimeter. A 'plywood scarf' wrapped around the Olympic development, in Iain Sinclair's words.<sup>2</sup> Describing the hoardings in Bow, I would go further than an analogous item of clothing that accessorizes and keeps you warm, these hoardings contain a more retarded yet avaricious quality.

These structures act as 'frontiers', a term approximated from Michel de Certeau's discussion of space – a reciprocal for narrative. Asserting the relational coda of spatial production, outlining the confinement process of production.

It is the partition of space that structures it (...) from the distinction that separates a subject from its exteriority (or the totalizing effects of capitalism) (...) There is no spatiality that isn't organized by the determination of frontiers.<sup>3</sup>

Frontiers; a political and geographical term referring to areas near or beyond a boundary. However, De Certeau postulates that frontiers are a type of void. These partitions and boundaries are far from voidal, containing the inherent information of a networks ideology. This is specifically evident in the use of nationalistic colours: red, white and blue, or British racing green, coupled with pixilated, plastic computer-generated images of the proposed developments.

Most days I think this is a dull place, I am thinking about leaving – though I suspect there is 'no-alternative'.<sup>4</sup> It seems like there is no way off this island. Supermarkets, superstores, shopping centres, retail parks, I have thought for some time, act as desert islands in the space of the British Isles. The city is a microcosm of these concerns – the bullying of Tesco Metro.

1. As named by the Bow Arts Trust

2. Iain Sinclair, 'The Olympics Scam', *London Review of Books* 2008

3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* 1984

4. Reference to Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* 2009

The extrapolated 'deserted island' analogous to space, imagined by Gilles Deleuze: "The essence of the desert island is imaginary and not actual, mythology and not geographical. At the same time, its destiny is subject to those human conditions that make mythology possible." He speculates, 'we have to get back to the movement of the imagination that makes the deserted island a model, a prototype of the collective-soul.'<sup>5</sup> A collective soul? Perhaps at least an attempt to discuss space in the present-tense, and review the constant partisan politic and economic projection, rather than amnesiac regression. On a social-landlord website, their fourth key aim is 'to empower each other to fulfil our potential'. This statement evokes the managerial linguistic turn experienced during my bureaucratic teacher training a few years ago.

Observing this spatial 'progress', I watch buildings disappear behind the hoarding façades (incidentally it takes about eight full working days to demolish a school - I've been counting) I think maybe we have reached our full potential.

April 2011

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5. Gilles Deleuze, *The Desert Island* (2002)



ENGLISH ST. E3





**Of Meat and Iconoclasm, a Memoir of the Libyan Insurrection**  
**Adelita Husni-Bey**

We used to go over to Saad's in Fueihat, East Bengasi. I never liked butchers. Skinned heads, bulging eyes gazing towards us, that heavy smell of carcasses hanging from large steel hooks, blood trickling on the faintly coloured tiles. In Milan death was secluded, hidden from sight, at times you wondered whether it had ever really happened at all. Yet I'd be anxious to visit Saad's. He'd stuck old photographs on the corner of the counter, the tape pressing them against the glass had yellowed; those little figurines must have been cold I thought, those landscapes of an time-worn Bengasi, abounding with greenery and boys in t-shirts, they must have been cold, having spent 40 years, at 6 degrees... Abu Saad is weighing my father's meat on a rusty turquoise scale, (it must be roughly as old as the photos) watching me peer curiously at an unrecognisable square, he dims the naked bulbs that are hanging from the ceiling. He quickly shuts the glass doors and stares anxiously into the street for a few moments (it's late anyway, no one is surely going to come round at this time).

He walks back to the counter and kneels under the large portrait of the 'Great Leader', dark sunglasses, wrapped in a jallabiah; variations on an image present in every shop, every government building, every public space. The frame is opulent, laden but it's just a portrait and has no eyes to see. Saad opens a drawer under the till, he pulls out a bundle of photographs which must have been handled a thousand times, the corners are folded, the images dry and cracking. Some are postcards; Tripoli's colonial town centre, the promenade in Bengasi, others are photographs of a young Saad posing with his family; amidst them a photograph of the king. It could have been any country in the mid 1960s. My father and Saad share a knowing smile whilst they recall the shop that sold Arrow t-shirts and Levis jeans in Bujazia, in front of the porch where the missionaries lived. My grandmother would always excitedly exclaim that back then they even had washing machines! As if one morning in 1969 all technological apparatuses had suddenly been abducted by aliens. The cars in the photographs were polished, the generously cared-for gardens of Derna and Cyrenaica profusing the smell of jasmines and rose trees.

They stop us at the usual roadblock on the way back, it's composed of two metallic structures that shadow the men from the sun and large white cement blocks that restrict the road. They ask my father what he's doing with that wrecked Range Rover from '73, you need special permits for that Sir, don't you know? Meanwhile the guard's eyes fall upon the child sunk in the passenger seat, whose seatbelt is too big, whose eyes are blue and who doesn't appear to understand much arabic. You can't cross the desert with that car, Sir. My father

pulls out the logbook and the passports, we smile a little, it's the procedure, the litany of the dictatorship. They let us go, they know us and we've got 3 more roadblocks to pass before we get home.

I'm drawing a tiger, the pencils are spread on the floor and I'm trying to copy this leaping tiger, I found it on the National Geographic. I keep erasing the paws, they're crooked and thick, I want them ample and strong. This is the most important drawing I will ever make.

I repeat it like a mantra.

I grab the eraser again, I'm sweating, today the Ghibli, the desert sandstorm, is raging outside, the palm trees are tense in their fight against the wind. It looks like the morning fog in Milan, except for it's colour. It's red and the thin granules have the capacity to infiltrate every interstice, every crack (my mother complains they end up under the sofas, beneath the tables, in the bed sheets). Here, it's almost jumping from the page, it's musculature is taught, it's paws outstretched, it's not hunting, it's just running, running, running.

It's for uncle Husni. I'm not quite sure how to imagine him, I've got American films passing through my head, films we can tune into with the satellite dish my father keeps adjusting on the roof at night. Maybe he'll stick it to the wall of his cell, maybe he'll fold it and keep it in a book, safely hidden under his bed. The cell is small and dark and he has no lawyer. They picked him up one night and they won't tell him why or how long he will have to stay there, it's already been two months and no one tells him what's going on. Uncle Husni has been in prison 7 times, for many years in total.

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**From: Adel Husni Bey (xxxx@beysons.com)**  
**Sent: 19 February 2011 12:44:02**  
**To: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**

Get on twitter and Facebook, get on the web, the repression in Benghazi is shameful, innocent people fighting for their rights used as targets, killed like mice.

Gheddafi is insane, paranoid and insane.

We are ok.

**From: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**  
**Sent: 19 February 2011 14:40:13**  
**To: adel husni bey (xxxxx@beysons.com)**

DAD ARE YOU OK??? I'VE BEEN TRYING TO CALL MUM AND YOU ALL DAY...  
CAN YOU PLEASE CALL ME...I'M WORRIED....HUGS...KEEP SAFE

**From: Mirellaclemencigh (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx@ymail.com)**  
**Sent: 20 February 2011 11:08:36**  
**To: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**

We cannot call abroad, the lines are down. You have to call us.  
We are ok  
The rioting is in the port area  
Everything's quiet here at home.

p.s. You have to do something for the young Libyans that are fighting in Beng-  
hazi and in the rest of Cirenaica against the Gheddafi militia.

**From: Mirellaclemencigh (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx@ymail.com)**  
**Sent: 20 February 2011 17:08:36**  
**To: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**

Adi, daughter, our love. We are indoors again today, the dogs are running around, Yanco never leaves the room, Pricia is biting my ankles and has long barking conversations with Bubina. She's bored of having puppies and the other dogs are silly enough to chase her around as if she were still young. Some information is beginning to leak from inside the city. We watch everything with avidity, hope and sadness. How are you? We are witnessing history unfold, the overthrow of the tyrant and his descendants who have massacred this country for 40 years, imposing their supposed right to keep usurping hereditarily. We are writing to the Italian media and Radio Popolare to awaken the conscience of the public opinion, too long distracted by Berlusconi's bullshit.

**From: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**  
**Sent: 20 February 2011 18:01:41**  
**To: Mirellaclemencigh (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx@ymail.com)**

Mum,

...Haven't been able to sleep again...of course I am worried, you should see what Aljazeera is transmitting....dad went to the riot???? Can you PLEASE tell him to stay home...? It's difficult enough knowing you are there, and isolated, not alone, but almost alone. Obviously a change is welcome...We were all waiting for it, and certainly those who go to the square knowing they may get a bullet through the chest don't do it light-heartedly...those fighting in Benghazi are being extremely courageous, a courage we cannot even imagine, or maybe it's naivety? ..it's a thin line..they know that the 'great leader' has no scruples, they know it will necessarily be a harder struggle than that of Egypt yet they still go to the square...having said this please stay home...you never know what's going to happen next and you aren't exactly two gazelles, I imagine it must be hard to just sit back and watch, that you want to participate, but you'd need to know the streets well and be fit enough to run....please start thinking of a plan B...and call me as often as you can. The lines are down.

I'm waiting for your call, be strong,

Adi

p.s. I'm ok, very tired, the humidity here penetrates your bones...I'm just waiting to hear your voice.

**From: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**  
**Sent: 20 February 2011 22:55:35**  
**To: adel husni bey (xxxx@beysons.com); Mirellaclemencigh (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx@ymail.com)**

How are you? ...I can't get through...have you decided what to do yet?

**From: Adel Husni Bey (xxxx@beysons.com)**  
**Sent: 21 February 2011 05:51:09**  
**To: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**  
**Cc: mirellaclemencigh@ymail.com (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx@ymail.com)**

Hey Adi,

Benghazi and the whole of Cyrenaica are free. Tripoli will fall soon. It's only a question of a few days and we'll get rid of this 42 year long disaster.. Unfortunately many unarmed civilians have died.



Atomenergie

weg

ntechnik

American Mountains 2011

We are happy and awaiting developments, plan B is only for your mother and the girls. I am not moving from here, I have waited 42 years...people are extremely generous, cooperative, everyone helps out with the means they have, there's no civil war, it's western media crap, they're trying to keep Gheddafi in his place, it's crazy, nobody has taken a strong stand against this fool who's committed barbarian acts in front of their eyes for decades. Free Libya.  
Love, dad

**From: Adel Husni Bey (xxxx@beysons.com)**  
**Sent: 21 February 2011 06:01:39**  
**To: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**

Hi Adi, we're participating actively. With the satellite dish connected to the server in Quarsha we can communicate with the rest of the world, we're collecting information from friends and family and transmitting it abroad. We can't call abroad. Call via Skype, at 12.00, Paris time?  
Lots of kisses from mum. More from me.

Dad

We're absolutely fine.

Read below, the article we wrote for 'il Fatto':

Goodevening,

I am now in an area about 20km from Benghazi. Being far from the town centre we are getting news through people who are in downtown Benghazi, they report very loud explosions near the outpost of Al-Birka, Gheddafi's headquarters in Benghazi, the fight is between insurgents and troops loyal to Gheddafi, the insurgents being composed mostly of the youth of Benghazi. In the area of Cyrenaica, part of the troops loyal to Gheddafi joined the rebels in Al-Baida, Derna and Tobruk, whilst there are no confirmed news concerning rumours of the military in Benghazi defecting.

The situation is also critical at the airport, where the population is attempting to halt the arrival of mercenaries from central Africa, hired by Gheddafi.

It also appears that Gheddafi's brother in law Abdallah Senussi, has been captured and killed whilst attempting to quell the riots, whilst Al Saadi, Gheddafi's son, has allegedly managed to escape the Tibesti hotel, where he had been surrounded. There is no internet access, it is only possible to call abroad at certain times of the day for a limited time. There's a lot of resentment towards Gheddafi for the massacres that are taking place and the death toll is rising dramatically every hour (the latest estimates speak of around 100 deaths since the early hours of the afternoon). The Turkish government has already provided the possibility to evacuate it's nationals. It is an insult to discover our prime minister's only preoccupation is to 'avoid disturbing' Gheddafi.

**GW**

**From: adelita husni bey (xxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com)**

**Sent: 21 February 2011 10:23:36**

**To: adel husni bey (xxxx@beysons.com); xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx@ymail.com**

Hi mum, hi dad, hi girls,

Well done, I feel ok knowing you are all doing well, I am following the situation very closely and I followed Saif's speech last night at one on Aljazeera, no comment.

I am also writing an article, I am trying to write narratively because I feel there is a lot of political analysis and theoretical work being published, I would like to suggest another perspective. I would like to offer my 'lived memory' of life under the regime...also because there appears to be a real lack of 'images' which may describe life before the revolt. I remembered going to that butcher's near Ali's house in Benghazi, when he showed me photographs of Libya before Gheddafi that he kept hidden away in a drawer...dad do you remember? Do you remember that butcher's we used to go to?

Ok, so let's talk soon, I have just spoken to auntie Giglio, who told me she'd spoken to you this morning (she kept me on the phone the usual 10 minutes, talking about Buddhism as usual) and she told me you wanted to come to Italy..and dad?? If you do come back...come back altogether...we've got enough heroes...

I will try to call you in a bit, I might manage,

Hugs

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The pixelated cell-phone footage has been playing on my computer screen for almost a week. The revolution will be televised. Bytes, anonymous fragments, snippets of a revolt shot with a trembling hand, getting a good view by climbing onto the tallest lamppost, ducking on the roof with bullets whistling past your ear. Images of a street which I can recall the smell of, Gheddafi's 'sacred' gigantographies which used to stare at us from above have now been burned, usurped, ridiculed. Images coming from the obituary, nobody is over 25, every body marked by a tiny, circular, burgundy fissure; I ask myself whether I even have the capacity to understand what is happening. 'Tweets' chase each other across my screen, the voices of history going Live, sediments of a collaged chronicle written by multiple unknowing hands, someone tapping a sentence in New York, someone grabbing a Kalashnikov in Derna. The shifting equili-

brium of opinions, fears, allegations. The revolution is an ensemble of amateurial short films, each belonging to a series of events that we acquire as spectators through their live streaming, yet even though we may believe in the possibility of changing the course of historical events, however much we may believe in the possibility of a crucial turning point composed of infinitesimal fragments we are deceived; history is a videotape, or a 16mm film which has been left to decompose in the attic of collective memory. The attic is the social narrative that the Libyan population has witnessed in the past 42 years of the regime, an attic which they have dared to open, a tape which they are now desperately trying to re-edit.

My father climbed onto the roof of our house at dawn, and took a deep breath, filling his lungs, he told me it was the first air he'd consumed in 42 years.

My mother tells me of some 'footage' that hasn't been transmitted, a fragment of the revolution which will never reach a television or any other type of screen. She witnessed and iconoclastic gesture: a young man climbing bear handed onto an 8 storey building to rip an enormous poster in two. On one side Gheddafi, on the other Omar Muktar, the historical leader who lead the anti-colonial struggle in the 1920s, the 70 year old man who was captured and hung by the Italians. Gheddafi had appropriated Muktar's image during the military coup, requiring Muktar's portrait airbrushed next to his, painting it in bright artificial colours which didn't belong to Muktar's time. The dictator thus couples the revolutionary movements, couples the historical metanarratives in order to legitimize his own ascent to power. Half of the giant poster crashes on the sidewalk, raising a cloud of dust whilst the young man dangles dangerously from the rooftop ledge towards Muktar's face and begins kissing it repeatedly.

Libya frees itself of a regime without antecedents, breaking the vow of silence, bending the bars of the psycho-physical prisons that have safely held two generations at bay. The dictator, who had strived and succeeded in penetrating the imaginaries of the Libyans is suddenly at a loss when faced with the unforeseen weapon of iconoclasm. How to counter those who have abused his image, his icon but most importantly those who eradicated the symbology of his power? Those who had thrown shoes at the walls where his and his son's speech had been projected, those who where the unknowing producers of the collectivity of the protest, that though an individual gesture had ripped the contract of citizenship and hierarchy between the ruler and the ruled.

This concatenation of revolts in North Africa can be seen as a collective metaphor for an epic journey of hope. Tens of youths piled in overflowing vessels, their only objective is arrival, in their eyes the trepidation of being the first

to put their feet on foreign soil. Never mind if two weeks down the line they find themselves fishing on the port of Lampedusa out of boredom and maybe hunger. Never mind if the truth of this much idealized democracy will be lost in the spinning barrel of a cement mixer that marks the passing of months, back bent to raise another skyscraper in our financial districts. Who will tell Ali, Muhammad and Amir that they have fought and suffered for words which they first had to reappropriate? That someone has died screaming 'freedom' without debating it's current definition; and that it was us who had rendered those words empty robes with which to clothe our emperors?

Adelita Husni-Bey, February-March 2011

(illustrations by the author)





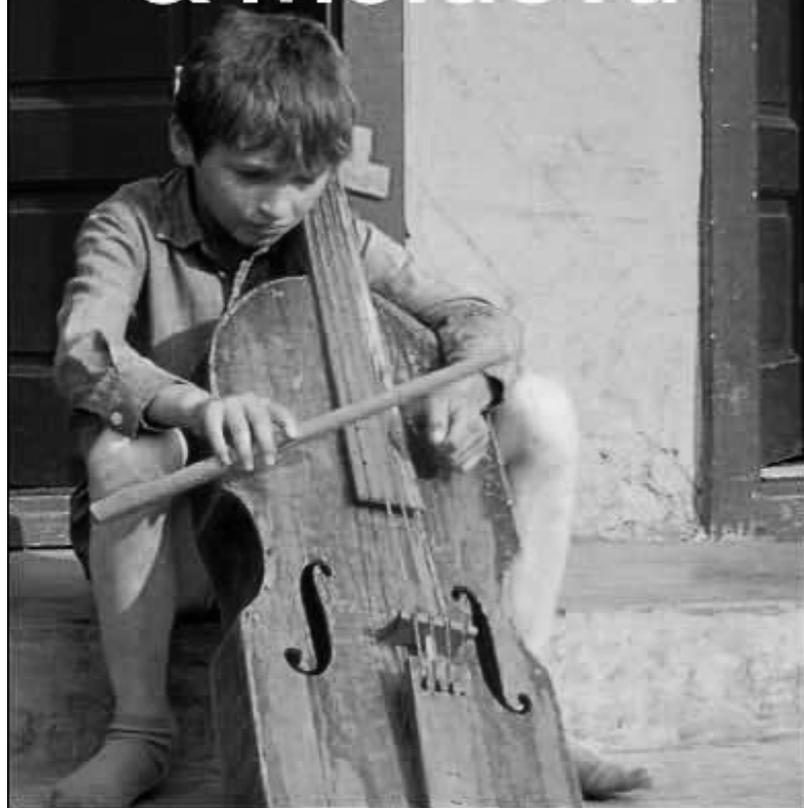
**"A map of Rumania!"**



# **NOT ROMANIA**

lonely planet

# Romania & Moldova



## Foreword

In the films of Canadian director Guy Maddin, Eastern European countries are often invoked as semi-fictional, notional places. For example, *Brand Upon the Brain* (2006) features a character whose pubic hair grows in the shape of a map of Romania. 'Romania' (or the archaic 'Rumania', in the film's script) exists in Maddin's filmic world as a signifier of eroticised 'other', rather than a real political or geographic location. In *My Winnipeg* (2007), Maddin turns this treatment on his apparently unremarkable hometown, although one unknown to the majority of the film's audience. Maddin infuses the banal-looking landscape with rich narratives, making it strange and exotic.

The title of this section refers to the inherent falsity of a place experienced as a tourist. In 'Postcard from Kitsch that I brought with me – Bucharest' I explore a place that is not really Romania, but a version of it built from preconceived ideas and mythologies, encountered or constructed before arriving. The 'post-card' here is asked to house observations – lonely musings from the edge of conventional tourism.

Gemma Sharpe writes from the perspective of an itinerant 'art tourist', travelling between countries and crossing borders that are impenetrable to locals. Diaristic notes are amalgamated from different cities at different times. Eleanor Wright will give an account of a trip to an industrial ruin, initially imagined as a secluded discovery of her own, then eventually revealed as a popular destination for various people. The romance of the ruin shattered by its popularity, spoilt by other cameras and other spectators. Matt Breen's analysis of the film *127 Hours* (2010) discusses the representation of technology as an ever-present mediator between man and nature. Here, a thrill seeking tourist/sportsman comes to grief, but eventually triumphs over his environment with the heavily branded items he brought with him.

The works presented here hope to use or address a feeling of alienation; an encounter with foreignness, extreme environments or mythologised places. These attempts may involve a risk of 'orientalism', of 'ruin-pornography'. The temptation of the tourist is to dwell within the general, to assume a part as representative of the whole (Bucharest is not Romania) but at the same time synecdoche might be a powerful metaphorical tool. I propose that the limited and partial experience of the tourist can be a productive position. To make it so, one must accept that a place is infinitely complex in possible interpretations and experience, whilst choosing to occupy a singular, highly subjective and transient viewpoint.

**Persistence by Practice**  
**Gemma Sharpe**

1.  
Reading Virilio in Naiza's studio, I am blocked. All plans were aimed at arrival here – not living here. So now that I have arrived: writer's block. There are no ways. There are no words. There is a desire to sleep. There is a headache rising like damp from the floor of my neck, locking itself into my upper spine. The silence is my curiosity rendered mute; not with excess, but with its having turned around on itself, transformed into the object. This objectified curiosity stops me from noticing that really, I'm happy here: *main khush hoon*.

2.  
Later, I wrote: think of *Halwa Puri* in Old Lahore with Kuki and Tariq at 6am; the flyover that Mariam told you shakes during rush-hour; the scene of two men selling white crockery off white sheets laid over the bomb site; of finding the way because you knew the word for ten and the nervous excitement of the bootlegger's girlfriend when you got into the car. Remember the burned-out bus pulled reverently along the busy road (slower than the rest of the traffic, it kept up a polite kind of haste, like it was late for the funeral).

3.  
"we're only going to talk to you in Urdu", Aliya said.  
"acha," you replied.

Her husband was kind to you only after you came around to dinner laughing about the Socialist band you'd seen play under a Pepsi banner at a charity gig in the school. You were laughing because the boy with the red star on his hat was selling merchandise to raise money for their cause: bumper stickers adorned with drawings of their mascot, a poor boy called 'Papu' who wants to be a doctor one day. He stopped trying to agitate you with colonial jokes after he saw you identify warped politics. Later he told you that you were cursed with the disease of goodness and that you didn't like stereotypes. Or so he had observed (he had drunk a lot of whisky that evening).

4.

From my blue notebook I read again about the two dead dogs on the road in Agra, and the boy trying to entertain me by catching rats at the train station. I said to myself on that page: *why should it be so much easier to write about cruel things than beautiful things? You saw the Taj Mahal yesterday and you write about corpses and street children. Perhaps it's because you have no photographs of those concerns.*

5.

Much later, I wrote to Salman: There's a part in that Žižek text where he talks about how the 9/11 towers falling looked like a film that we'd already seen but were watching again; that the attacks had already been designed by Hollywood. So Europe and America to you, and even to me, might look like you expect it to from having seen the movies. To some extent India is like its movies – there's something not quite real about it. Its ugliness and its beauty have been perfectly metered out for the gratification of a viewing subject. And my goodness, China is like another world. You're so far into the movie *there* you risk never *wanting* to come out! You're being immediately and uncontrollably brainwashed by a magnitude and strange magnificence that it's dying for you to approve of.

But Pakistan doesn't care what I think of it. It needs no appreciation from me. And thinking about *your* city, it's that coming into Pakistan, for me, was like falling down the rabbit hole and landing in the real place – the world behind the movie. I would look out of my window in Karachi and watch the road for so long and think, "ah, right, this is what it's supposed to look like; this is what they were talking about; this is what the real world is... *I had no idea there would be such beautiful buses.*" Does that make sense?! It's like falling into a cruel diagnosis of reality and then finding reassurance in the beauties that persist.

My view is skewed, and I might come back and completely change my mind and see something different; and one should never foreclose the possibility of that. For now, that's how I feel about Karachi and why I want to come back.

6.

Did I ever tell you the story about the airport security guard I met the first time I came last year? He took me unchecked past the security barriers because I was hungry. He wanted to buy me breakfast and talk to me. There were delays because the computers had shut down and they were hand-writing all the boarding cards. I thought he might interrogate me or something: a gori traveling to India carrying a backpack with a purple yoga mat strapped to the top is perhaps a suspicious sight at Jinnah International. But after breakfast, he took me back to the queues, gave me his phone number and told me not to bother getting a visa next time I wanted to come. I should just call him and he would, "get me in." (At a party next to the Abu Dhabi palace last week someone told me I should just get a National Identity Card. He could make some phone calls and I would have dual citizenship if I wanted it).

7.

A rickshaw crashed outside the window. It had collided with an ice-cream ped-al *wallah* and turned over, smashing its window and collapsing its roof. Two children emerged with their placating father and the driver. A PAK NAVY van was among the fresh batch of drivers coming over the junction towards this scrape on the road. A passerby scooped up the ice-pops that had spilled over the radiator road surface and the van stopped to pick up the children and their father. It would take them to one of the cheap hospitals on its way to somewhere else. The rickshaw driver was left alone to pull his broken occupation to the side of the road, where he began to enact an argument with the ice-cream *wallah*. They were watched over by tall skinny boys holding up chunks of coconut on steel trays.

"Kyar hooa?" ask the onlookers, walking past.

**Postcard from Kitsch that I Brought with Me – Bucharest, Romania**  
**Richard Whitby**

In central Bucharest, near the University, I eat a pizza and drink a beer, and watch a discovery channel documentary that explains how canoe paddles are made, and then how globes are made (from cardboard, in quite an interesting process). I walk North, past the national theatre, past the Radisson hotel – turn down a 10 Lei (2 Pounds) ‘sex massage’ and go back to my hotel room. From watching TV, I learn the word for dandruff, but no others.

I wonder whether my reason for being here is a little disingenuous, whether really the Bucharest I am interested in is long gone, dead as Ceauşescu himself (the communist dictator deposed and executed in 1989). Part of me wants it to be a little more difficult to get in to the country; for my Western passport to raise eyebrows, but the fact is that I came on a Wizzair flight – gateway to ‘New Europe’.

The next day I go to the zoo and make some videos of the wolves and tigers. The zoo is pretty good, if overgrown to the point of obscuring the already reticent animals. Some enclosures are very long rectangles, so that the visitor is at one narrow end, the subject at the other – some include huge glass panels which would allow clear viewing, but for the plumes of condensation seeping in through damaged seals. This kind of obstructive disrepair becomes a leitmotif in the city. As I leave, I video some of the (ubiquitous) stray dogs outside.

I quickly tire of the stupid pidgin English I hear myself speaking to people I know don’t speak any at all, and yet sometimes turn out to be totally fluent. Several times I retreat to dark cinema screens showing American blockbusters. People’s manner suggests not so much my foreignness, as my complete superfluity.

The city is one of incomplete plans – in the early twentieth century, Romania’s first and only King, Carol the First, remodelled large parts of Bucharest in a Parisian style, under the communist regime, much of the city was destroyed and rebuilt in imposing vaguely neo-classical concrete. Now, since the revolution, malls and LED billboards crowd into the main squares of Bucharest. In the last two years or so, the gentrification of central Bucharest has slowed – Hugo Boss adverts now look a little hubristic, as the new Romanian middle class tightens its belt.

What originally drew me to Bucharest was the world's second largest building, Ceaușescu's Parliament Palace<sup>1</sup> – also called 'The House of the People', 'The House of Ceaușescu' and, more recently, the 'International Conference Centre' (this multiple naming of buildings and institutions seems to be a leftover symptom of the communist regime – another building, now the 'House of the Free Press', was originally called in public the 'House of Sparks'; in private the 'House of Lies'<sup>2</sup>). The palace is a gross monument to the dictator's megalomania and at the time of his overthrow, was too near completion and had cost too much already to demolish. Finished in 1994, it is now used as a government building and tourist attraction. A fellow English tourist, when informed of public ambivalence towards plans to keep the building after the revolution said glibly, "Well, it's your history isn't it, yeah...cool..." Surely it's so much more complicated than that?

Outside the Palace, a young woman approached me and in heavily accented English explained that she is from Bessarabia and has been robbed and can't be helped by her embassy and needs 20 Lei to reach her parents, and she has been sick and in hospital. I said sorry, I don't have any cash, and she, half sobbing, says "Everywhere, people are the same". Walking away, I knew I didn't believe her, but my sense of Western European guilt at being comparatively wealthy is easily provoked.

In an exhibition about Vlad Tepes, the medieval inspiration for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a wall text points out that vampirism and the *Dracula* myth are western inventions, designed to portray the Eastern Europeans and Slavs as uncivilized barbarians. I worry that my interest in Bucharest also diminishes it somehow, that is to do with 'kitsch'. If we apply Milan Kundera's definition of totalitarian kitsch as 'the denial of shit', then my curiosity is the inverse of this: the seeking out of 'shit' and a disinterest in what is positive and vital about the city; 'dark tourism' – pursuing a history well within living memory that the nation would perhaps rather put well behind them. It is tempting to caricature the place and its people (an impulse exacerbated in me by reading *Red Horizons*, the sensationalist memoirs of a defected Romanian spy chief, Ion Pacepa). A cursory sketch would include the often gruff, half-scowling manner of people here, oppressive city-heat, bewilderingly haphazard road works everywhere, heavy, over-salted food and a seemingly proud history battered by and half buried under blunt totalitarianism. The place has a tiredness to it, as if the layers of overlapping plans were weighing it down. Romania's frequent political sea-changes seem, when looked at a little more closely, to have more often been mere re-brands. When the communist regime fell, telephone exchanges

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1. The world's largest, in surface area of land occupied, is the Pentagon.

2. Lonely Planet, *Romania*





closed up their clandestine line-tapping rooms. Reformed communists filled the power vacuum, and the tapping rooms were quietly re-opened.<sup>3</sup>

This is the second time I have been in Bucharest this summer, I returned partly to work out the nature of my interest in the city. After spending more time here, I am just as confused. However, by the time I'm leaving, I'm detecting slight smirks of amusement under the scowls at my attempts at Romanian pronunciation ('Cefea filtru...one...please?') and make the realisation that in summer, most Bucharestans abandon the city proper, which I've been traipsing around, and relax in the enormous parks on the edge. The dark 'kitsch' I find in Bucharest is for the most part one I brought with me, and eventually becomes distant to the real place, of now.

September 2010

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3. Denis Diletant, *Ceașescu and the Securitate*.



**Aron Ralston's Canon Elura 70 (With 18x Optical Zoom)**  
**Matt Breen**

What does it mean to be an alienated man? ... He cannot define himself in any environment which has been programmed for him. He can only define himself by getting into situations that are brand new for him (because) his obsessions can cease for a moment. He can stop thinking of himself—in that one moment—as being either this or that, because he can only be one thing at that moment.

In other words, if a man is jumping off a burning building into a fire men's net, that is a profoundly existential situation, as he doesn't know how it's going to turn out... It is probably the most valuable moment in that man's life up to that point... because he doesn't have to time to evaluate it. Therefore, the bad training of the past, the bad habits of the past, cannot inflict themselves upon him, and even more important than the bad training of the past, is the bad programmed training of the past. He is no longer at the mercy of all the mistakes of the past, because at moments of great danger, at moments of great love, there's a tendency for those upper regions of the brain which control us so much of the time be temporarily anaesthetised because they are equipped for every situation but the novel one, the brand new one.

—Norman Mailer in conversation with Marshall McLuhan (CBC Television 1968)

A core cadre of Enron guys used to go on these wild adventures...

To Jeff Skilling, risk was glamorous. He was a huge risk taker. He talked about wanting to go on trips that were so perilous somebody could actually die... They took a memorable trip to the Baja (Peninsula), 1200 miles of rugged terrain in Mexico. This is a trip where people crashed bikes; people broke bones. One guy flipped a Jeep and almost got killed. These sorts of stories at Enron became legend.

—Sherron Watkins and Peter Elkind interviewed in *Enron: The Smartest Guys In The Room* (2005). NB: Jeffrey Skilling was president of Enron Corporation from 1997 until 2001, and one of the chief players in the so-called 'Enron Scandal'. In 2006, Skilling was indicted on charges of conspiracy, securities fraud, wire fraud, insider trading, and making false statements to auditors. He was sentenced to 24 years in prison.

Fergus Daly states in his essay, 'Immanence And Transcendence In The Cinema Of Nature', that: 'Cinema, for the most part, has given us anthropocentric images of the natural world. Either man overcomes or is destroyed by a challenge set for him by nature, or nature is a benevolent or inert backdrop to human

affairs.<sup>1</sup> Director Danny Boyle's most recent project, *127 Hours*, ostensibly falls into the former category. It is an adaptation of *Between A Rock And A Hard Place*, Aron Ralston's autobiographical testimony of his experience of being trapped alone in Blue John Canyon in the Utah desert in 2003. With his right hand crushed beneath an 800-pound boulder, Ralston comes to realise that the only way of surviving is by amputating his own arm, and fleeing to safety. The fact that Ralston does survive is hardly a spoiler for those who haven't seen the film; the referent book is credited in the film's opening sequence, and indeed, this is just the beginning of what unfolds as a very conventional arc of events — it can't come as a surprise to anyone that Ralston finds himself in peril, nor that he ultimately manages to conquer that peril. This, to me, is not the most engaging aspect of *127 Hours*; rather, it's that beneath this superficial struggle posited between man and nature, Boyle insists on presenting an insidious mediator: technology.

I.  
Aron Ralston graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh with a Bachelor of Science in mechanical engineering and, in 1997, he began working as an engineer at Intel Corporation, in 'a far-flung suburb at the Southeastern edge of the mega-sprawl of Phoenix.'<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, Ralston gives very little mention of his professional career in *Between A Rock And A Hard Place*; it lingers, like a sinister entity, in the background of the narrative:

I selected three climbing projects that would come to occupy my entire recreational focus: I would climb all of the Colorado fourteeners; I would climb all of them solo in winter (something that had never been done before); and I would ascend to the highest point in the U.S. In late June 1997, I started my job at Intel, which seemed like a piece of cake compared to being hunted by a winter-thin bear.

[An incident at Bradley Lake, Wyoming, in the same year.]

Compensating for the banality of my new career... I created adventure in my life by exploring Arizona's vast variety of public lands — canyons, mountains, volcanic cones, meteor craters, deserts, and forests.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, by way of contextualising the accident in Blue John Canyon, the book almost totally focuses on his passion for outdoor exploration, which began as a pastime co-nurtured with his father, swiftly developing in adulthood into a

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1. Fergus Daly, 'Immanence and Transcendence in the Cinema of Nature,' Film West, [www.archive.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.archive.sensesofcinema.com) 3rd March 2011

2. Aron Ralston, *Between A Rock And A Hard Place*, London: Simon & Schuster (2010) p.43

3. *ibid* p.72

dedicated life choice, and culminating in a self-appointed mission to scale all fifty-three of Colorado's mountains that exceeded 14,000 feet in height (the 'fourteeners'). Ralston's outdoor pursuits manifested themselves in a variety of activities — climbing, mountaineering, hiking, diving, and biking — and consequently, form part of the recent surge in popularity of extreme sports and extreme pursuits. Ralston is by no means an ambassador of the phenomenon, but his own motivations may give us some perspective on the reasons for the success of these emergent subcultures. He states:

Krakauer's (book), *Into Thin Air*, captured my imagination in the winter of 1998. It documented the Mount Everest disaster, in which eleven people died... (W)ould I lie there dying? Would I leave the others to save myself? Would I go back to find them if I made it to camp? How would I behave in a situation that caused me to summon the essence of my character? The tragedy inspired me to test myself. I wanted to reveal to myself who I was: the kind of person who died, or the kind of person who overcame circumstances to help himself and others. Not only did I want to go to the Himalayas to climb a major peak, I wanted to explore the depth of my spirit.<sup>4</sup>

And, in his online overview of the history of extreme sports, Matt Williamson concordantly recognises a similar emphasis on self-trial and introspection that, perhaps, borders on the masochistic in these activities:

Some sociologists say that extreme sports are similar to vision quests or other traditional rites of passage common in some cultures. In many traditional cultures, rites of passage are severe physical ordeals during which adolescents experience intense personal growth. Initiates often leave their families and undergo a lengthy seclusion during the event. Some modern observers believe that extreme sports enthusiasts seek the same sort of experience by undertaking risky activities in small, closely knit groups.<sup>5</sup>

This isn't, of course, major news at all; anyone with a basic knowledge of the subculture will be aware of this aspect of the discourse, exemplified by the various slogans and buzz-phrases — no fear; just do it; impossible is nothing — that collectively pitch extreme sports and activities as a Damascus-like path to self-discovery and self-actualisation. It feels like a latter-day version of romantic American philosopher Henry Thoreau's isolationist experiences in his

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4. *ibid* p.74

5. Matt Williamson 'The History of Extreme Sports', [www.catalogues.com](http://www.catalogues.com), 4th March 2011

homemade cabin at Walden Pond in the 1850s. He followed the same dictum, 'Explore thyself,'<sup>6</sup> though whereas Thoreau achieved this through an ascetic lifestyle of menial labour and humble self-sufficiency, the extreme enthusiast will instead favour a cherry-picked blend of competition, recreation, endurance, daredevil display, and adrenaline-rush theatrics. The extreme activity is now the means; the natural world is still the place.

So why the need for this transcendentalist endeavour? What's lacking in the first place — or at least, where is it lacking? For Ralston, there's no doubt about it: in normalised civilization, where he was employed, secure, and thoroughly dissatisfied:

I was altogether burned out working in a large corporation... I had to make a choice between following my bliss and keeping my job at Intel. In the end, it didn't even feel like a sacrifice to quit my job, sell most of my household goods, and pack my outdoors toys into my three-year-old Toyota Tacoma pick-up truck... "Holding a corporate job" joined "living east of the Rocky Mountains" on a two-item list of things I vowed never to do again in my life.<sup>7</sup>

Ralston doesn't even pause to debate the pros and cons of routine white-collar existence; for him, the fact that this lifestyle was a joyless and stultifying one is a just presupposition. His directive is clear: he had to quit his desk-job (thereby escaping the trappings of corporatism), he had to sell his stuff (thereby escaping the trappings of consumerism, corporatism's evil sibling) and he had get on the road to the wild (thereby escaping the trappings of civilisation, the evil parent of both). Strange that it's this overt establishing of man-in-nature-minus-civilisation that makes the various stylistic tics of Boyle's *127 Hours* all the more unsettling.

## II.

*127 Hours* opens with a split-screen sequence of pan-global snapshots of collective human activity: Mexican-waving spectators at a sports event; traders on the floor of the stock exchange; Muslims kneeling in communal prayer; holidaymakers saturating a beach; runners in a marathon; and commuters pouring from a subway train, before we are introduced to Aron Ralston, played by James Franco. Later, as we watch him leave his apartment to head for the Utah canyonlands, we watch him drive in the arterial flow of a car-choked highway, neon fast-food logos flashing by in the same split-screen format, until finally, a road sign that reads 'NEXT EXIT 100 MILES'. It is not the denunciation of mo-

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6. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or Life In The Woods*, Oxford University Press (2008) p.410

7. Ralston, p.97

dern society that Ralston implicitly delivers in the book; instead, this sequence seems to function as a formal method of juxtaposition that establishes a contrast against the absolute isolation that Ralston/Franco, alone in Blue John

Canyon, is to later endure. But this visual contrast between nature and civilisation seems only a surface observation; more engaging is the protagonistic role that civilisation later plays in the film — civilisation personified in the form of Ralston's equipment: his stuff, his technology. Ralston is listening to music on his portable CD player when he slips whilst scaling a crevasse in the canyon, falls into a narrow gully in the rock, and dislodges a chockstone (a loose rock wedged in the cleft) on the way. As he stares in disbelief at the boulder that has his arm immovably pinned to the crevasse wall, we are given a cutaway shot of his earphones spinning in midair, blasting out tinny, synthetic music by the rock band Phish. Set against the colossal and age-old sandstone rock of the canyon, there is something fundamentally forlorn and transient about this piece of moulded plastic electronic equipment, something even slightly blasphemous in its curved, 'organic' design. The two elements, earphones and landscape, do not seem compatible or reconcilable. The question of whether Ralston's music distracted him and caused the fall — on which this tension pivots — is left unanswered. In another shot that works to similar effect, we see his mountain bike in the unpopulated scrubland outside of the canyon, chained to a tree with a cable-lock. This is an act of prudence that, to my mind, is so specifically urban as to be not only ridiculous in this context, but also quietly obscene.

After recovering from the shock of the fall, and realising his arm is stuck, Ralston eventually starts to rationalise the situation and, in order to decide what might be useful in prising his arm free of the chockstone, lays out every item he is carrying: food, drink, tools and devices. This too is a sequence of uneasy juxtaposition, but not, I think, in the same way: what seems so unsettling this time is the pervasive branding on each and every one of his items. In scrutinising detail, we watch Ralston inspect his Canon video camera, his Sony digital camera, his Suunto wristwatch, his CamelBak hydration pack, his Leatherman-type (but not Leatherman) multi-purpose tool, his Petz three-LED headlamp and other things besides: all creeping emissaries of the consumerist society Ralston is so keen to hide from. Ralston's logoed possessions, and his subsequent interactions with them, hereafter seem constantly laden with ambiguous meaning. These things are simply always there, at the edge of his struggle with the rock. Ralston goes some way in critiquing them — in particular, the multi-purpose tool, a 'made-in-China piece of shit'<sup>8</sup> that is too blunt to break the skin on his forearm when he decides to amputate it — and yet in his battle against nature they are not useless, as one might expect the message to be; far

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8. Danny Boyle *127 Hours* (2010) UK: Pathé Distribution

from it.

Alone and desperate, Ralston comes to find solace in the company of his video camera. As one hour passes into the next, and day ticks into night then back into day, it becomes a companion and a confidant, a device into which he can pour his mounting anxieties and irrationalities. He records a goodbye note to his family ('Mom, Dad, I love you'<sup>9</sup>) and leaves an instruction to whomever finds the camera that it is returned to them. (This was indeed the case; the real Ralston made several recordings on his camera in Blue John Canyon, though with the exception of twenty seconds of footage, they have never entered the public domain — only close friends, family, and the filmmakers of *127 Hours* have seen this material, lending it a mystique that fans of *The Ring* or *The Blair Witch Project*, or Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House Of Leaves*, will appreciate.) Then, as his hysteria starts to prevail, Ralston embarks upon his most honest and introspective confession, albeit in a surprising form:

[Talking to his camera, as though host of a TV show]

Aron Ralston: Good morning, everyone! It is seven o'clock here in Canyon land, USA. And this morning on the boulder we have a very special guest, self-proclaimed American superhero, Aron Ralston! Let's hear it for Aron!

[We hear applause from a studio audience]

AR: Hey! Hi. Oh gosh it's...it's a real pleasure to be here. Thank you. Thank you. Um... hey, can I say hi to... to my mom and dad?

[Acting as host] AR: Mom and Dad! Mustn't forget Mom and Dad. Right, Aron?

[Studio audience laughter]

AR: Yeah, that's right. Uh... Hey Mom, I'm really sorry I... I didn't answer the phone the other night. Um...if I had I would have told you where I was going and then... well I probably wouldn't be here right now.

[Acting as host] AR: That's for sure! But like I always say, you're supreme selfishness is our gain...

And later on:

AR: Aron from Loser Canyon, Utah. How do you know so much?

[Replying to his own question] AR: Well, I tell you how I know so much. I volunteer for the rescue service. You see, I'm something of a uh...well, a big fucking hard hero. And I can do everything on my own. You see?

[Aron as the host replies] AR: I do see!

[Audience laughter and applause is heard]...

AR: Now, is it true that despite, or maybe because you're a big fuckin'

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9. *ibid*

hard hero, you didn't tell anyone where you were going?

[Replying to his own question] AR: Uh...yeah. That's absolutely correct.

[Aron as the host] AR: Anyone?

[Aron replies to himself] AR: Anyone.

[Aron as the host] AR: Oops!

[Aron as himself] AR: Oops.<sup>10</sup>

This is, to me, one of the most significant passages of *127 Hours*, as for the first time, we appreciate the profound irony of the situation: Ralston went into the desert in search of an extreme, life-changing experience, and of course he found it. Not only was the accident with the boulder his own fault, it is suggested that he essentially set up all the contextual elements (telling nobody of his whereabouts and going by himself) to make the situation as desperate and as difficult as possible. Ralston is forced to address the absurd truth that the situation in Blue John Canyon was one of his own design. That this discovery is delivered in such an inappropriate register — the daytime TV show, with Ralston playing both host and guest, complete with canned laughter and applause — only exacerbates this perverse fact. We sense a mind that is stunted or shackled by technology; whose imaginative circuits have been shaped by the vernaculars of television and the popular media. Ralston's earlier hallucinations help affirm this; desperate with thirst, he daydreams in TV ads — of bottles of Diet Coke and Sunkist glistening with condensation and being drunk by grinning, swim-suited teenagers on the beach.

Nor is Ralston's relationship with his video camera just one of emotional disclosure; it also contains a sexual facet. In one scene, he rewinds through his confessions to find footage of two young female hikers he had met on his travels before the accident. He tries to masturbate, in what presumably for Ralston was one final sexual release before death, but actually seems only to highlight a kind of libidinal debt we owe to technology. There is something depressingly, banally familiar in the act of pleasuring oneself over digital imagery in this way, and the fact that now he's not up to it only further debunks Ralston's hyper-masculine posturing. A big fucking hard hero in this instance is something he most definitely isn't.

In the end, he eventually does what we know to be the inevitable: he manages to exert enough force against the chockstone to break his ulnar and radial bones, and with the drinking tube of his CamelBak acting as a tourniquet, he uses the sufficiently sharp tin-opener blade on the multi-purpose tool to cut through the surrounding muscle, nerves and tissue of his forearm. As the chief source of hype around *127 Hours*, the amputation scene is certainly gruesome,

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10. *ibid*

but curiously, I found it to be completely eclipsed by what follows. Wrenching himself free, and stepping back from the gore, Ralston momentarily stares in wonder at the otherness of his now severed arm, still wedged between the boulder and the canyon wall. The symbolism is clear; the boulder was and always was a synecdoche of nature: hard, unfeeling, implacable, and impossible to reason with, whilst the crushed limb accordingly is mankind, feeble and inert within the grander motions of the natural world. But then Ralston, before walking away, pulls out his digital camera and takes a picture of his arm: a snapshot souvenir of his adventure. With this one glib, touristic gesture, the subtext takes on a whole new dimension. This isn't just a case of man-versus-nature, and never was. This is man-versus-nature, under the ever-present gaze of technology.

### III.

Is *127 Hours*, or its progenitor, *Between A Rock And A Hard Place*, an active critique of extreme activities culture, and the fruitless attempt of mankind to wrest itself free of civilisation's anaesthetics? Not really. The rest of the film plays out on an upbeat note, with Ralston as the victor of what was, without a doubt, a beneficial and uplifting experience, just as he had always hoped such experiences would be. In fact, in a metafictional kind of swoop in the film's denouement, we see (as is *de-rigueur* in current Hollywood true-life stories) the real-life Ralston sat with his wife and infant child. It's a logic in keeping with Williamson's view of extreme activities as rites of passage; having passed through his ordeal, we understand that Ralston is now able to settle down with a mate and sire offspring. In fact, Ralston asserts — and this is described in the film — that it was a prophetic vision of the three-year-old son he had yet to have that inspired him to stay alive. But the appearance of the actual Ralston seems only to remind us of the uneasy context of *127 Hours*, and the sour truth that, regardless of all his individualist rhetoric, what could be more conformist than writing a bestselling book that gets adapted into a hit box-office movie? It's a contradiction, and one that stretches all the way to extreme sports/pursuits culture that, for all its outward declarations of rejecting societal norms, remains a global industry with all the usual marketing strategies, branding exercises and abundant merchandising that we would find in any other commercial enterprise.

What's really interesting is that which flickers and whirrs below the surface in Boyle's film, since in ensemble, they map out a bizarre impulse in our collective psyche. Our desire for the extreme/transcendental experience might be diagnosed as a neurotic tic, a twitching spasm, an anomalous glitch in our species' predicted arc of progress. Where has it come from? From dissatisfaction, most certainly. But this a distinctly contemporary dissatisfaction: a discontent with

Aron continues to be a





the effects of the modern civilized world; a discontent that is fuzzily defined ('careers' and 'corporations' and 'household goods',<sup>11</sup> Ralston complains) but fierce and rancorous all the same. Taking *127 Hours* at face value will have you believe that harbouring such discontent will work to one's favour, if harnessed effectively in the extreme endeavour. After a little deconstruction, the film becomes a lot less self-assured. It maps out the extreme experience as being authentic and orchestrated, dangerous and beneficial, introspective and flamboyant, dissident and trendy — and somehow, for all the warring contradictions, all these things at once.

Weirdly, the final shot of *127 Hours* — a still of the real Aron Ralston on a snow-capped mountain peak, a hi-tech climbing axe fixed to the stump of his arm in place of a prosthetic limb — brought to mind, of all things, a vaguely remembered passage from H.G. Wells' *War Of The Worlds*:

...The perfection of mechanical appliances must ultimately supersede limbs; the perfection of chemical devices, digestion; that such organs as hair, external nose, teeth, ears, and chin were no longer essential parts of the human being, and the tendency of natural selection would lie in the direction of their steady diminution through the coming ages.<sup>12</sup>

Our technology may not encroach as far and as literally as that of the Wellsian Martian, but it's there: always, and inescapably so.

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11. Ralston, p.97

12. H.G. Wells, *War Of The Worlds*, London: Phoenix Giants (1995), p.279

**Eleanor Wright**  
**in conversation with Jamie George**

*8th April 2011 – after playing Eleanor’s sound recordings and video, with a large print on the wall in front of the audience*

Jamie: Can you introduce the picture we are looking at (*see colour image*) and tell us a bit more about your experience.

Eleanor: The proposal I made was to go and kayak around the ship graveyard that is just off Staten Island, New York. I went there last September. The recordings – the second one isn’t actually from the trip, but the first one is from the Staten Island ferry. It’s a remote area, a working place. The surrounding area is chemical plants on the New Jersey side of the Arthur Kill, which is a stretch of water in which the ships have been left, it’s not a breaker’s yard; they’re not being salvaged, they’re just left, dumped. Probably the last ship was added around 40 years ago. I kayaked for one day with an instructor.

I was very aware that when kayaking around I was taking part, actually undergoing or experiencing my proposal and I was very aware of the act of looking at these things which I’d been planning on going to see. It was a really strange feeling or an awkward feeling, rather. I was very aware before I went that I didn’t plan to take photographs – of a place that is almost begging you take photographs of it. Even when you’re on the kayak your drifting past these vessels, they all had this amazing way of revealing themselves in space, which was very filmic. I knew that was going to happen and I wanted to upset that by trying to approach it through field recording. I just wanted to try and access the place, but through another door. I was trying to find some sort of sound and I would get out my microphone and try to record it, but there was water splashing everywhere and it just felt really inappropriate – it felt like I should just be there, kayaking around this graveyard.

I went back to the site on foot with my recording equipment. I wanted to go back and try to understand the place a bit more – all I had done was take pictures and I needed to come back and carry out my task that I originally set out to do. I was going towards the ships and I saw – lounging all over the wrecks – this film crew. They were obviously amateur, they were quite young, they were smoking; they looked kind of hip. They were just on it; on the site and in the ships. I was too scared to do that – I’d spoken to the instructor when I was paddling: ‘Hey, what if I try and climb onto to one of these things?’ – ‘I wouldn’t because the metal’s rusted to one millimetre thick and if your leg goes through that you won’t get it back.’ So I was respectful of these things and I didn’t want





to interrupt them, I guess. All you can do is look at them. But these other guys were shooting action, using the place as a location – what I was intent on rejecting in the first place, so I stormed off in the other direction and trudged through the mud, this stinking mud. I looked down and realised the floor was riddled with all these tiny little yellow crabs, the kind that have one of arm bigger than other, that scuttle away and bury themselves – it's really quite disgusting. That lead me to start thinking of this site, this ruin, and the notion of romanticising a ruin and actually looking down to the ground, the mud that has these crabs sunk in it, living off this place. I'm not just interested in all ruins, there's something about this one; the disgustingness of these crabs, slithering and burrowing themselves in it. As I walked along I was crunching them with my boots. I was creeped out. Again there was that feeling of vulnerability that was there in the kayak, with the bad weather and being thrust towards the ships and then feeling vulnerable with all these disgusting creatures scuttling around me.

Jamie: The first thing to bring up is something related to what Richard mentioned at the beginning of the evening: 'ruin porn', which is being thrown around a little bit, I come across it in a New Republic article which was written in January this year, it was called 'A Case Against Economic Disaster Porn'. There's a quote in there from a blog which is about Chernobyl: 'Ruin porn seeks the poignancy of abandonment, the presence of poetry and absence...The tourists come for abandonment. They do not come for the abandoned'.<sup>1</sup> I'd like to link between what Matt Breen presented and what was mentioned at the beginning of the evening, and ask what are the ethics of tourism, what do you do with this idea of technology, experience and predetermination through research? You've talked at this from the point of making sculpture and you mentioned the word 'sight', and Richard mentioned the 'itinerant artist'. The other day you said 'the site is mythologised – you make it into a proposal, you build it up, you build layers around it – and when you see it, its exactly as you expected, you know what it's going to be like and you have to then trick yourself into having 'an experience'. Finally you said 'it was an awkward experience, I felt fine, not amazing, but fine – I suppose I should take a picture.'

Eleanor: There was a thought that I wouldn't bring a camera at all. It was wrapped up in this larger thing, of being the first time out in the world on my own. But I did take a camera, and I did take pictures and I did blow them up to 3metres long...

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1. Noreen Malone, 'The Case Against Economic Disaster Porn', *The New Republic*, Jan.2011



Jamie: When you explained to me before, about this film crew swarming over them...

Eleanor: Lounging! Disrespecting. I said before about respecting these things. These aren't natural things so its not 'man respecting nature' like in *127 Hours*, but there's the thing of life cycles and dying and them becoming part of the earth, linked to the ground, sinking into the mud, and then the crabs living off it.

Jamie: So being respectful of the thing you are making pilgrimage to. Maybe the next thing to ask is about how to recuperate this experience, which is one that is problematised via looking. So I use the word recuperate, which suggests that the ocular experience, which Matt Breen outlined very well with this relationship to technology, but also this film crew demonstrate that being a lacking or ill place.

Eleanor: I guess that links to placing yourself in a vulnerable position – the kayaking, which I'm not experienced in, but likewise I'm not well versed in field recording. But I am well versed in sculptural technique. I make large-scale installations; I'm able to engineer things. So coming from that kind of knowledge, I wanted to go back to the beginning. The sound was intentionally putting myself in a position where I'm grasping at things I'm not used to, making myself vulnerable.

Jamie: Can we end our chat thinking a bit about the ruin? I suppose some of the things you just mentioned about how you might apply your interest in materials and their histories, and how you go about collecting that, taking it home – through the aural. These images – there's something about the state of the thing – being in a process of becoming, one of life, rather than just decay. I see in this image a relationship to the uncanny and they particularly make me think of the ruins of Pompeii. There's a quote here from Anthony Vidler: 'The burden...was that nature, in its own death throes, had become its own artist: death, like a sculptor, has moulded its victim.'<sup>2</sup> You mentioned about how you had to be respectful of these ruins.

Eleanor: Yes – the active ruin, it's developing, it's still moving. I guess that links to 'ruin pornography'. The text you read was specifically about Detroit being photographed, cropping out anything that disrupted the image as that of a ruin. Creating a falsity, portraying a city as a relic. Ruin pornography is cementing something, or freezing it in one spot and celebrating it as that – it gives us

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2. Anthony Vidler *The Architectural Uncanny* 1994

these strong feelings that we want. In the end, the film crew acted as a catalyst for me to go off in the other direction and find these disgusting crabs, that they then mark this active growth; organic development and feeding – its going forward, and that leaves the ruin porn behind it. And that's where I am right now: growth, rather than regression or stagnation.

Audience member: You talked about trying not to romanticise and to get into that kind of sentiment, and that strikes me as a direct contrast to what Guy Maddin does – he creates a fiction of reality, and through doing so, he encapsulates a kind of truth. Is there a particular reason why you so want to rally against that?

Eleanor: Through embracing that perspective he's sort insinuating everything he wants to say? I guess he comes from a position of knowing, and that he's trying to portray something.

Audience member: But also he's investigating, investigating these subjective viewpoints. How I imagine him going about making the film, OK it's about his hometown, but there must be a lot of research and go and record things and oral histories and combining all of that. By reading between the lines he puts together the pieces, and I suppose you do that too with your own experience, maybe? Maybe for you it's not about laying out a whole of an experience?

Eleanor: I think maybe that I should relate this to sculpture, because through the talks tonight, I did have one moment during Matt's where there was one film clip where I kind of switched off to the talk and I engaged with the film, and then I thought 'oh no, I'm not supposed to be doing that, I'm supposed to be retaining the awareness that this clip is related to this discussion'. I guess film naturally draws you in. In my position, there's something about the object or the things I make, there's a kind of starkness to things, how sculpture sits in a space, there's something about the awkward relationship you have with the objects.

Richard Whitby: Maybe it goes without saying, but whether you did it or not, it seems like what the aim was to avoid the mediated, narcissistic experience that Matt was talking about with *127 Hours* – in a way engineer a genuine bodily or sensory experience, and also it's not prescribed in the way that pornography is - it's not about the satiation of a recognisable desire, it's about a raw experience - maybe 'raw' is a bit extreme sports...

Eleanor: Yes, well, like raw footage, or raw, unprocessed sound, like I've played tonight.

### **Notes on NOT ROMANIA**

Some common threads that have emerged are the possible problems, and benefits of romanticism, questions around the mediating nature of ever present technology and the need for respect to be shown towards ones subject. However these issues are tackled, a certain investment into an experience has been seen to be crucial to the practice of this kind of tourism.

The German Romantic poet Hölderlin was seemingly addicted to the world of Ancient Greece. He translated Sophocles plays as a way of assimilating the culture and language of the Greeks, and wrote that in translating, he was not trying to simply transfer the words themselves into a different language, but to 'make them strange' to the reader. The ancient culture was to be experienced through a weird and twisted form of contemporary German – as this was how he felt the original would have appeared to the Greeks. I'd like to think of this chapter as a 'making strange' of tourism itself, rather than the countries and places we visit. This might be all we can do.

Richard Whitby



# **WE FUCKED THIS UP**



'From one moment to the next it was unclear where the dangers lay. Everyone stopped the machines. Everything came to a standstill. Even those who slowly felt their way forward often didn't recognise the new obstacle until it was directly in front of their eyes.' - speech from Sophie Hamacher's video *The Fog (Der Nebel - 2009)*– ruminates on a catastrophic moment, in the past tense. Apocalyptic landscapes seem to suddenly have become much closer to real life, but also increasingly present themselves in the past tense – it's already too late.

Writing elsewhere, Adelita Husni-Bey has cited blog entries which appear to address us from the future: 'Perhaps I should let you all in on a little secret. No one likes you in the future. This time period is looked at as being full of lazy, self-centred, civically ignorant sheep. Perhaps you should be less concerned about me and more concerned about that.'<sup>1</sup> From his claimed experience as a time traveler from the future, 'John Titor' wrote of life in a rapidly approaching post-nuclear age. In a more sincere and factual project, peak-oil writer Richard Heinberg wrote a similarly retrospective letter on life after fossil fuels: 'You are living at the end of an era. Perhaps you cannot understand that. I hope that, by the time you have finished reading this letter, you will.'<sup>2</sup> In peak-oil thought, the present age is history; we are living in the past but just haven't realised it yet.

In her text, Maya Oppenheimer addresses the recurrent desire to find 'utopia' in the past. This nostalgic impulse to regress, or at least halt the passage of time can be identified in plastic surgery, searches for fountains of youth or taxidermy – insulation against the 'storm' of progress. Siôn Parkinson finds analogies for climate change in the reading of entrails, the search for 'mystic truths' and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Finally, Dave Charlesworth's science-fiction story explores a collapsed world, in which the rich live close to the ground and the poor higher up. Without electricity, and therefore lifts, rope has become a valuable commodity.

A character in Charlesworth's 2010 video *Wander (Walker)* states 'the solvent surface dies to a ghostly facade only the words ... WE FUCKED THIS UP ... will remain.' This section seeks to explore notions of impending doom (environmental or personal), our attempts to ignore it and the projected guilt present in many configurations of the future.

Richard Whitby

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1. Adelita Husni-Bey, '5 Fragments on the Apocalypse', *American Mountains Papers 2010*

2. Richard Heinberg, 'A Letter from the Future', <http://archive.richardheinberg.com>

## Phantasmagoria and Temporal Blending in the Search for Utopia Maya Oppenheimer

It is impossible and indeed irrelevant to sketch out a dominant manner in which individuals choose to view, relate to and consume the past. My approach is much more haphazard and pertains to how we blend historical records, objects and media to actualise a utopian notion of history in order to satisfy an anxious, hopeful future. History is not something to be *revealed* in an archaeological sense, but in keeping with the geographical metaphor, it is experienced in a manner more akin to *prospecting*. This discussion performs the activity in question—a speculative but intentional consideration that presupposes a consumptive need, in my case between an historical record and the modern predisposition to idealise its source material. A person's engagement with the past, whether it is active or passive, introduces a compelling manner with which to discuss ideas of temporality, memory and the intentionality of communication and interaction with history.

In his writing on heritage and popular culture, Peter Fowler states: 'it is not simply a matter of how we shape the past but what the past does to us, both individually and communally...[for] indeed, we shape elements of our present in the light of those parts of the past we select for imitation and emulation.'<sup>1</sup> His comments support this notion of a speculative, directive exploration, but Fowler also implies a certain curation or the arrangement of fluid and imaginary forms that give the impression of sequence as well as simultaneity. Phantasmagorias, Victorian entertainments of shadow play, are a good example of this sort of spectacle. Invented by E G Robertson and first performed in Paris in 1798, phantasmagorias involve slides painted with opaque imagery through which light from a lantern is shone. The resulting shadows trace a narrative of pleasure and intrigue before a popular audience with scenes chosen from popular history, biography or religion—all subtly altered for mass appeal.

Herein lies the link between the past and utopia. I suggest that the so-called ore, the historical moment or motif, is not necessarily one found in the historical record but is a speculative substance mined and exploited for a specific purpose, and therefore altered beyond context due to a process of 'temporal prospecting'. A gap between fact and fancy is especially palpable when liberties are taken in order to fake or idealise history—this can be achieved via false materials, anachronisms or the visible assertion of time on objects manifest in processes such as patina, decay, wrinkles and ruin.

The following discussion highlights three instances wherein we manipulate

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1. Fowler, *The Past in Contemporary Society: Then and Now*, (London: Routledge, 2002),

the effects of time in order to blend the present and the passage of time: souvenir products, taxidermy and aesthetic surgery are rich instances that exemplify a consumer culture at play with chrono-temporal products. I argue this comes from a deeper action than editing history but a need to project ideals that manipulate traces of the past in favour of acting upon and installing utopian principles.

There is an obvious danger in the manipulation of past and historical memory, and this discussion cannot avoid a reflexive tone: is there room for a discussion of Utopia when the motivation seems to be one of conquering the mortality that makes us human and retarding the ageing of space and objects therein. If Utopia is a directive pursuit of an ideal and time converges on a site of appropriation, how will this afore-mentioned phantasmagoria avoid becoming too saturated and fragmented due to its own repetition of wish images? What begins as an exercise in satisfaction, a directive guide towards a desired utopics, may also run the risk of becoming an opaque haunting with circling apparitions, repeated anachronisms and an infinite search for fresh, meaningful shadows.

### Chrono-temporal Utopia

Utopia, as Ernst Bloch wrote in *The Principle of Hope*, is an *expression* of a desire for betterment. Bloch differentiates between abstract utopia—comprised of fantastic, compensatory, and wishful ruminations without a will to affect change—and concrete utopia—the above components coupled with willful action to direct realisation. This is commensurate with Karl Mannheim's future-orientation of utopia, that betterment lies in the future and efforts to mine its relief are directive and discernible as an organising principle of behaviour; in other words, strategies and tactics are put in place to pursue and achieve an ideal.

While there exists this futuristic aura to utopia, there is also a tendency to place a *golden age* at the beginning of time—a pre-industrial, stable rhythm of living, wherein 'at some point in more or less remote times, things were better, almost golden... somewhere a wrong turn was taken in that dark and sacred wood, after which man has had to labour, socially, psychologically, against the natural grain of being.'<sup>2</sup> Both these concepts, of finding relief in the past and in future potential, have the appeal of an *elision* between perfection and impossibility / reality and possibility. An elision that is, so to speak, the initiative inherent in prospecting or the forceful phenomenon that perpetuates such an endeavour.

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2. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1971).

Prospecting moments of the pre-industrial golden age yields a compulsive in-questing and visitation that begets a melancholic desire to re-enact and re-configure the past. It is this atmosphere of return that permeated the Gothic Revival and the amateur historians who waxed poetic of finer, chivalric times. Bishop Richard Hurd, for example, trained his readers in the source and nature of the romantic spirit, which he thought reached its apex in the form of chivalric practice. His *Moral and Political Dialogues* (1788) contains a conversation between three fictional men visiting the ruins of Kenilworth Castle where they debate the meaning of history. They consider the glory of their ancestors' ruins by re-imagining the 'antique towers falling into rubbish' and the 'void and tenantless ruins, clasped in ivy, open to wind and weather, and representing to the eye nothing but the ribs and carcass of their former state'.<sup>3</sup> By doing so, these men are able to approach a sense of the past that satisfies what they find threatening in their industrial, Victorian society.

George Steiner would also posit a literary and image-based re-visitation of the past, particularly as witnessed in Western Europe between 1820 and 1915—what he refers to as 'the imagined garden of liberal culture'.<sup>4</sup> Steiner builds an argument for high and gaining literacy, rules of law, representative government and increased private domestic space as important factors that allowed a flirtation with spatio-temporal wandering, one rooted in a jealousy of one's previous generation—of revolution and emotional catharsis and of the centred, objective vision suddenly lost.

The implication here is to relieve a sense of loss and alienation by supplementing what is missing with a tailored patch of what has been. If a utopian drive means regaining *placedness* and intentionality, I would suggest observations of the past are akin to 'abstract utopia'—compensatory, contemplative, nostalgic; these ideas become concrete only with action, by bringing them into the present via projection, performance and rehearsal, by projecting a phantasmagoria of appealing moments and repeated sequences.

Modernity is often associated with the speeding up of time and rhythm; mechanisation, urbanisation and consumption number among these critical sites. It follows that an innate need to slow down and seek calmer locales away from the blooming, buzzing confusion, emerged—and these spaces are found in the past, that fertile golden age wherein our projections of the ideal life are focused. In the words of Walter Benjamin, 'the past can only be fixed in the image that appears once and for all in the instant of its alienation, just as a memory

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3. Ibid, 147-8.

4. Ibid, 14.

appears suddenly, as in a flash, in a moment of danger.’<sup>5</sup>

### Coats and Coating: Surface as Historical Witness

The study of surfaces has figured largely in many disciplines—Geomorphology as the study of the Earth’s surface, Dermatology as a study of the body’s surface. In both examples, traces and instances of change are examined in order to tease out a larger narrative process, be it one of destruction and disease or age and augmentation. The study of surface within art history and conservation, however, offers an interesting term: *patina*. Referring mainly to a chemical change in the surface of an object such as rust, gloss or tarnish, patina measures the ‘physical property of material culture’.<sup>6</sup> The surface alterations of a silver-gilt table service, for example, indicate the small departures from its original form, thus conveying age and provenance. There is also a symbolic worth at hand. Instances of controlling time and space, however, are commonplace in everyday life. It is worth highlighting a few here.

The pace of contemporary fashion and beauty manipulates a pre-industrial appreciation of age. There is an interesting tension between a contrivance of surface, as found in commercial-aging techniques such as acid-washing denim, scuffed shoes, and distressed ‘cottage’ furniture, and the energy and finances spent to achieve and maintain smooth and supple skin. Some things are more valued with age, and others are not; this tension is settled if one recalls the elemental purpose of locating the Fountain of Youth—an opportunity to prolong the pursuit of happiness.

Owning an aged object implies access to history; on the other hand, exhibiting an ability to toy with time and provenance is savant genius, forgery or even luck. A good example of this attraction exists in the form of a snow globe: controlling the aesthetics of snow accelerates nature’s rhythm but also gives the consumer a sense of power and ownership.<sup>7</sup> The snow globe, as a commodity, reconciles this imbalance by combining linear (consumption) and cyclical (nature) processes within a contained environment, thus synthesising a satisfying rhythm. The consumer is given the ultimate power: to enliven their attachment to an object by forcing nature’s cycle of disruption and renewal. An object that signifies value (experiential, ideological) is placed in the globe, and the owner

5. Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ in *Illuminations* trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992 [1955]), 255.

6. GD McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 32.

7. Henri Lefebvre, *Rythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* trans. by Elden & Moore (2004), 8.

has the ability to repeatedly apply a layer of figurative snow and magic recollection upon its surface. While the object itself is maligned to the realm of kitsch, the interactivity proffered renders the globe a hybrid of fake snow (applied patina) and real memory (acquired patina). Shaking it is a performance of the predictable need to precipitate a coating of worth onto the memory or affiliation represented by its contents.

While the application of a new surface layer renews memory in the case of a snow-globe, there are instances wherein the opposite is true and preservation is the goal. Etymologically, 'taxidermy' means 'to arrange skin'. In *The Book of Skin*, Steven Connor distinguishes between the Latin terms for skin: *cutis* being the living skin, a protective layer, one that is subject to beautification and the *pellis*, which is the dead, flayed skin, the hide.<sup>8</sup> Taxidermy bridges one to the other: it makes the dead, flayed skin appear alive via artistic, realistic arrangement. An essay, entitled 'Our Hobbies' published in *The Ladies Fashion Cabinet* (c. 1850), recounts a father's anecdote of his children taking up the practice, 'they called their particular and peculiar hobby taxidermy—a name of dignified sound and learned extraction, which meant nothing more or less, in my family, than the laying violent hands on, depriving of its body, and fitting it with another; of every animal or bird they could procure for the purpose. It began with a restless, insatiable inclination to skin...'

Continuing with Connor's thoughts on skin, 'there seems to be a literal sense in which the skin gives us both the shape of the world and our shape in it... the extreme arduousness, joy and beauty involved in trying to make a shape which will encompass all the different shapes or spaces of the skin comes from the fact that the skin is itself the generator of such shapes and spaces in the first place... If there were one function of the skin that might seem to unite or underlie all the others, it would be that of providing a background.'<sup>9</sup> Skin has the capacity for temporal storytelling in the form of scars, lesions, wrinkles, baldness, but also in the additive sense of cosmetics, styling, piercing and a broad pursuit of beauty or sub-cultural ideals that surpasses the blemish of age.

While there exists a historied practice of preserving animals by denying the surface affects of death and decay, it is worth delineating the very different view of preservation held concerning the human body—one beyond maintaining surface but one that actively reverses time. If modernity is a constant flux of disintegration and renewal, ruination and regeneration—certain processes have been developed to perform this rhythm on the bodily surface. Protective coatings discussed earlier become botox, collagen, cosmetic filler,

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8. Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 11.

9. *Ibid*, 38.



chemical peels, lotions and creams—all designed and marketed for the dramatic resurfacing of skin.

With a gradual refinement of procedures and growth in technology, plastic surgery promised infinite possibilities. University of London scientists Drs Billingham and Medawar predicted the following technology of age defence: 'it would be a bank, like a skin or artery bank, in which a person could store some of their own youthful body tissues. Later, he [or she] could draw on the bank to replace tissues, which have become worn with age. Middle-aged women might get new faces and necks of wrinkle-free skin... a kind of immortality might also be achieved through this discovery... The skin and perhaps other tissues a person deposited with the bank might live long after him.'<sup>10</sup>

Cosmetic and aesthetic surgery is not just a pursuit of youthful appearance but also an attempt to enliven the ideal visage or characterisation of beauty. There is a simultaneous striving for the benefits of seeming young—for renewed forums in which to pursue happiness, but also to achieve the gifts and advantages thought to befall those who are beautiful. Louis Pearlman, a plastic surgeon, claims, 'the physical and psychological results of... plastic operations makes many patients happier people... Indeed, there are so many subjective factors involved that it is very difficult for us to evaluate the underlying needs, which bring these patients to the plastic surgeon. If there is good reason to believe that an operation will help the individual to adjust and will make him/her happier, then the plastic operation is indicated.'<sup>11</sup>

Today, the aesthetic surgery dialogue revolves around beauty and youth-enhancing treatments with the objectives of happiness and wellbeing normally associated with health-care. The primary forces behind this change are increased media coverage of aesthetic surgery issues, medical advances in the field, and the acceptance of an anti-aging mentality in affluent countries. Plastic surgeons refer to treatments as a procedure that enables patients to fulfil their potential and live their dreams. Figures from the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic surgeons claim Britons spend nearly £2.3 billion on procedures including Botox, chemical peels and laser treatment to smooth wrinkles: £5 million of this figure are sourced from loans. Such spending marks a 17% rise in aesthetic surgery investment, and this during a recession. Women over

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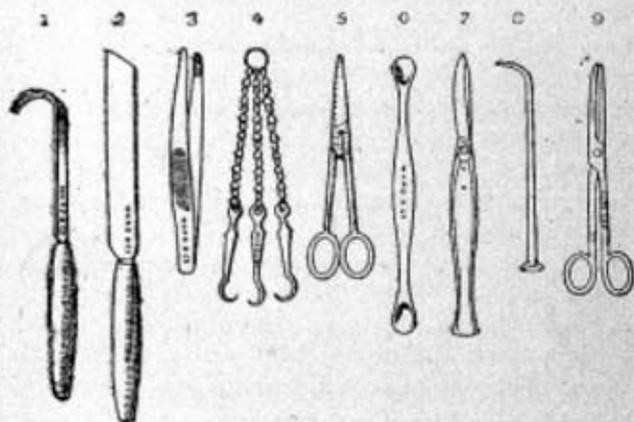
10. The Editor, 'Fountain of Youth,' *The Science Newsletter for the Society for Science & the Public*, 62(1952), 303. This statement allegedly derives from a published experiment wherein a rabbit's ear was impregnated with glycerine and frozen at -79C: it could then be stored intact for months, at the end of which time it could be transplanted and would grow as usual.

11. Louis Pearlman, 'Plastic Surgery', *The American Journal of Nursing* 51(October 1951), 620.

The cavity thus created should be filled with corrosive sublimate in a dry powdered condition, and the incision must be neatly and skilfully closed over it.

### SKINNING AND PREPARATION.

THE apparatus necessary for the skinning of animals is really very simple, and I strongly advise that it



should be kept to the simplest proportions. It is the skill with which the knife is wielded that is more important than the best of knives. A shoemaker's knife, a small saw, a pair of pliers, and perhaps a pair of cutting pincers, are all that are required for operating on the most important game. Some small implements for small specimens being added, this is all the kit that need be carried. To understand the principle of the thing, and to adapt that principle in practice with ingenuity and judgment to the particular conditions that present themselves, is the true learning; and to

forty-five are the fastest growing demographic of consumers and under-go age-related procedures including Botox and face-lifts. One can only predict that this figure will increase as new technologies and dermatological agents are developed to meet safety demands, affordability and convenience.

Steiner anticipated this potential in his cultural revisionist work, *In Bluebeard's Castle*. His concluding chapter, 'Tomorrow', states, 'one can identify half a dozen areas of maximal pressure, points at which pure science and technological realization will alter basic structures of both private and social life.'<sup>12</sup> He identifies international relations, mathematics and economics amongst these but also mentions the 'galaxy of bio-medical "engineering"'. The aforementioned prediction of Billingham and Medawar's tissue bank is echoed here:

Spare-part surgery, the use of chemical agencies against the degeneration of ageing tissues, pre-selection of the sex embryo, the manipulation of genetic factors towards ethical or strategic ends – each of these literally prepares a new typology of man. So does the direct chemical or electro-chemistry control of behaviour. By implanting electrodes in the brain, by giving personality-control drugs, the therapist will be able to programme alterations of consciousness; he will touch on the electro-chemistry of motive to determine the deed.<sup>13</sup>

In this vein, how will our needs and wants, as tributaries of memory and identity, be affected by such processes in the pursuit of perfection? To what extent can we blur the temporal lines? 'Memory-transfer through bio-chemical transplant,' continues Steiner, 'for which controversial claims are now being made, would alter the essential relations of ego and time'.

### **Strategies and Tactics of Performing the Past**

Our tendency to deny or edit the passage of time articulates the pursuit of an ideal state of being and control. It serves, at this point, to return to the analogy of prospecting, but this time with respect to the risks inherent in exploiting a favoured resource.

Fluidity and mutability of time are common tropes within memory theory. Brian Dillon, however, suggests that memory is time's frozen breath, an image he constructs in his book, *In the Dark Room*,<sup>14</sup> which is an account of the emo-

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12. Steiner, *Bluebeard's Castle*, 96.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Brian Dillon, *In the Dark Room: A Journey in Memory* (London: Penguin, 2006).

tional and physical confrontations involved in vacating his childhood home. His theory of memory is more private; it is the result of intimate moments rehearsed in the mind and played out in spaces that trigger recollection. Dillon tells of how his mind was pulled into familiar anxieties that provoked physical sensations and gestures, which were brought forth by a resonating absence of furniture, people and sound. Dillon introduces the potential for haunting inherent in the over-rehearsal or intimate familiarity with the past. Danger lies in a disappointed or stressful return, in the inability to progress, or in suffocation via the conjuration of ghosts.

A worthy example of this disconnect exists in the licensing companies who purchase intellectual rites to dead celebrities and popular culture items. The Authentic Brands Group, for example, is designing a digital avatar of Marilyn Monroe, resurrected to sell us fragrances and handbags. The historical moment, according to Simmel, 'can only yield,' as it no longer offers another narrative nor creates another 'form out of [its] own strength'.<sup>15</sup> Using Marilyn Monroe as a vehicle to market consumer goods is an uncomfortable application. While we are attracted to the beloved shadows of such icons, we must be conscious of a process wherein the present is corroded by an inclination to use objects and representations as mechanisms of replacement and entertainment, a device that extends the mourning of a lost object, person or place into a melancholic re-visitation wherein the past is effaced by its own image.

Giorgio Agamben speaks of the lost transmissibility of tradition, which makes the perpetuation of culture difficult. As such, the past is isolated and rife for reappropriation:

In this situation, then, man keeps his cultural heritage in its totality, and in fact the value of his heritage multiplies vertiginously. However, he loses the possibility of drawing from this heritage the criterion of his actions and his welfare and thus the only concrete place in which he is able, by asking about his origins and his destiny, to found the present is the relationship between past and future.<sup>16</sup>

I suggest this multiplication is compounded by the fictionalisation and manipulation of ageing—time is no longer a referential graft for the sequence of events and heritage, but it is compounded and tampered with, rewritten and witnessed in its augmented form. This guarantees a spiral descent into timelessness where events float without sequent anchors.

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15. Georg Simmel, 'Two Essays (The Ruin),' trans. by David Kettler. *The Hudson Review* 11(Autumn 1958), 371-385, (379).

16. Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 108.

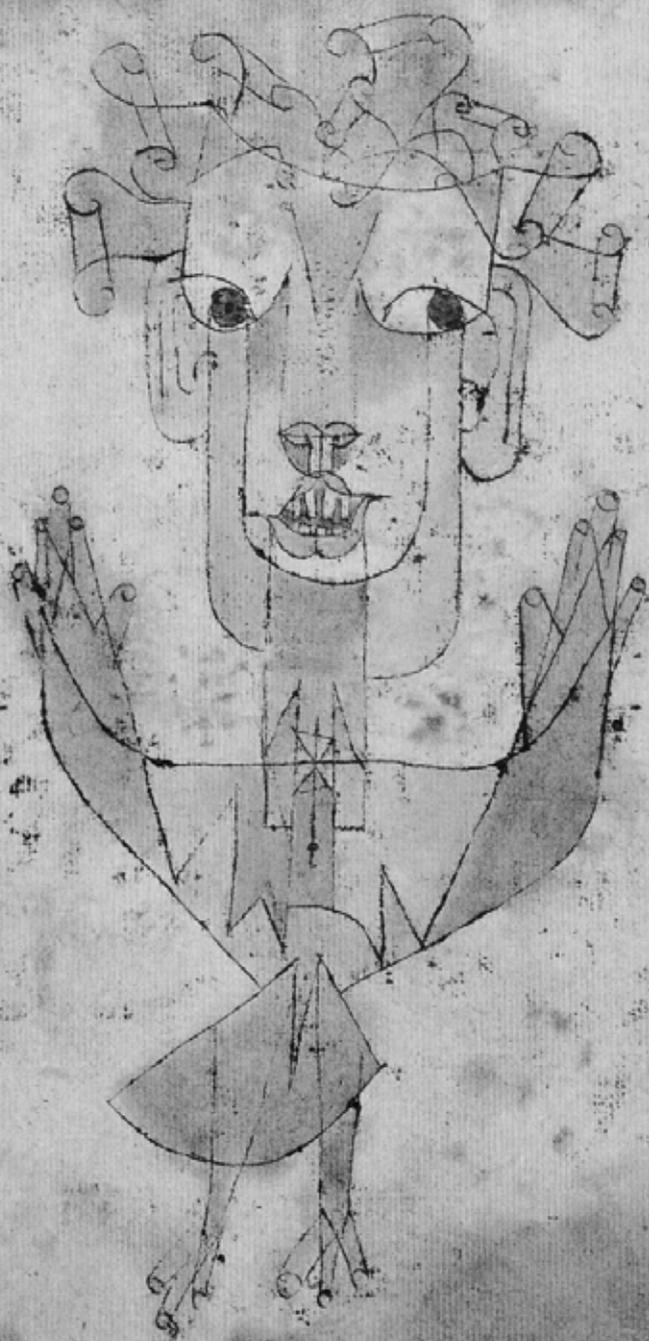
It seems appropriate to end, therefore with Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's 'Angelus Novus' as it 'shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating.' Benjamin builds a compelling description of the angel's struggle:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>17</sup>

So perhaps the phantasmagoria is endless, and this is the ordering principle of faking history —the real-time augmentation of events in order to satisfy contemporary needs and wants by refreshing our historical memory with moments compiled to please the audience. We are waiting for the sequence to end so that sense can be made from the cacophonous accumulation. Until then, we take it in hand, in collusion with the historical past but represented to suit the ephemeral pace of modernity and consumer wish fulfilment.

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17. Benjamin, 'Theses', 249.



K14 1928 32

**Views Into the Interior**  
**Siôn Parkinson**

*From a lecture given at Newlyn Gallery, Cornwall,  
20 January 2011 and Grand Union Gallery, Birmingham, 15th April 2011*

SLIDE: RED



(i) I'm going to speak about three things, in three chunks, and I'll denote the beginning of each chunk through a different slide image.

(ii) The presentation is called 'Views Into the Interior', and in the first chunk I'm going to speak about Entrails. I'll cover my epigastric hernia, my father's secondary cancer, and the Babylonian religious practice of haruspicy, a practice of divination by reading the disembodied bowels of sacrificial animals.

(iii) In the second chunk, I'm going to speak about Revelations. In this chunk, amongst other things, I'll use a quote by Clement Greenberg as a provocation and cover some fragments on the subject of art and 'not-knowing'.

(iv) In the third chunk, I'll talk about Haze. This chunk is primarily given over to speaking about Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* and of the limits of metaphor, particularly the metaphor of the voyage as analogue to notions of exploration and discovery.

(v) I end with the sentence, 'the unapproachable is, however, tremendously significant,' and the whole thing is an allegory for speaking about climate change.

SLIDE: HUMBABA MASK



(1) Late last year, I suffered an acute inflammation of the nose, throat, and chest — a two-week-long illness that for a short time formed a vertical streak of glue and grit through my upper body from my head down into my torso in a line of nouns, serious, validating, and wonderfully rhythmic: sinusitis, laryngitis, tracheitis, and then deep into my lungs and the lining of my bronchial tubes. After two weeks of some rather severe and perhaps exaggerated hacking, I had begun to form small lacerations on the back of my throat and could feel flaps of fleshy vaginations wavering like fish gills each time I coughed or called out too loudly. At night, I would wake up clutching my belly as if to keep my guts in, as I would rise vampire-like in bed, and trying to loosen up the gooey yellow fluid pooling in my lungs, I coughed. From my boots. Despite my efforts to hold it all in place, something popped out. The vigour of my coughing fits had forced a rabbit ear of intestine through the muscle wall in my upper abdomen, or epigastrium. And there, just under the skin, a soft, sausage-shaped lump the length of a playing card. I could feel it with my fingertips. I encouraged my wife to touch it too. “Here, touch it,” I said. She couldn’t feel anything. “I can’t feel anything,” she said. “Just muscle.” “Fatty tissue.” But I had worried and worried and I went into a mild panic. It was a hernia, of course, but in the few moments between learning of it, this lump, and my searching for some accord with my symptom complex, my only thought was of cancer.

(1.1) I can push it back in easily enough, though the sound and the sensation are something I can only describe as ambivalence, like a keen blade in a blanket. (I think it must be the word ‘soft’ with ‘protrusion’ — a ‘soft protrusion’ — that seems wholly incongruous to me.) But now, if I lean over, or if I lunge, or if I lift my child, or if I cough, it pops out again, a horrible *aide memoire* that returns me to the present tense. It — my lump, my epigastric hernia — is a rupture to the stable relations between inside and outside, a role, which up

until now, my skin has so readily maintained. And yet now, in subcutaneous relief, it has become a perennial reminder of something of which I'd much rather remain unaware: Insides. A mess of stinking, squelching viscera tangled in a murky, mucal cavity — a world from which it seems I am leaking out.

(2) Thirteen years ago, my father and I had been up late at night, drinking. He had recently been diagnosed with secondary cancer and there in our living room upon the floor he had invited me to press on his stomach and feel it. He used the word 'riddled,' I remember. I imagined prodding at his belly blindly, and finding there resistance in some hardening teratoma, a colony of teeth where there should be none. I said no, I didn't want to feel 'it' or 'them' and I don't regret it. It was an intimacy I did not want to have with my father's illness. Up until that point, you see, his illness was relatively obscure — it was an internal matter with very little outward manifestation. In other words, you couldn't see his cancer, not with your eyes. To have touched his tumour, at last pressing against his skin, would have been to know too closely his death, weeks away.

(2.1) A few months previous, a time around Christmas, I had awoken suddenly knowing for the first time that my father was going to die and quickly after this thought there followed the idea that I too would die. This was a revelation — not in any particularly striking way. There was no fact previously hidden that was at once disclosed. Yet still, a shift had occurred in how I experienced the world and how I perceived myself within it.

(3) Entrails are connectors for the oral and the anal. We could take this further by saying that entrails connect the exterior world with the interior world. Here, the meandering alimentary canal and its impossibly long, dark stretches of coiling and contracting courses are punctuating with bags in varying degrees of inflation like rising rounded peaks in a soft rolling landscape. In Roman and Etruscan religious practices, soothsayers would read the bowels in such terms in a form of divination called haruspicy.

(3.1) To divine is to discover the unknown through the decoding of symbols, 'designating one thing through another,' as the micro-historian Carlo Ginzburg said.<sup>1</sup> In haruspicy, a priest or harsupex would rip the viscera from the belly of an animal and throw it to the scrub like the severed head of a Gorgon. The haruspex would then scrutinise the lungs, heart, stomach, intestines and, in particular, the liver of the animal, observing variations in colour, atrophy, hypertrophy and other irregularities. Portentous events would be revealed through abnormalities in the geography of the entrails.

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1. Ginzburg, Carlo (John & Anne C. Tedeschi, trans.) 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm' in *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, Hutchinson Radius, London, 1986, p.99

(3.2) Here, the bowels relinquish their physiological purpose and instead take on one that is purely symbolic. Entrails for the haruspex were a means to access information previously hidden to the world, and it is through the process of deciphering these signs that the haruspex would determine *truth*; truth as the 'will of the gods' or more simply, the probability of certain events unfolding in time. By looking at an animal's insides and interpreting them as a series of signs or symptoms — disembowelling meaning, as it were — the haruspex would bring truth to the exteriority of the world.

SLIDE: EARTHRISE



(4) In the sciences, examples of so-called paradigm shift are legion: Copernicus who pierced the heavens with too sharp an eye, ruptured the gimbals and sent the earth spinning across the floor; Darwin and his gaseous bowels aboard the Beagle, writing of his changing views at a time when he was developing his theory of evolution by natural selection; DNA research and the birth of molecular biology; and then from a completely different vantage point looking in, the Apollo 8 spacecraft rendered Total Perspective Vortex in January 1968, the moment the Earth was snapped in fuzzy black-rimmed illumination through the shuttle's portal, the grey moon spinning in conflict beneath them. And in this photograph, this ultimate objectifying image, we saw for the first time a blue-green flame burning in an indifferent darkness, and we — human beings — were all of a sudden made utterly invisible.

(4.1) But to visual art — and what since? As the critic Clement Greenberg said, 'I don't see art as having ever, in a real sense, affected the course of human affairs.'<sup>2</sup> And as the artist Suzi Gablik says in her essay 'Art & The Big Picture'

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2. Quoted in Gablik, Suzi, 'Art & The Big Picture' in *Artful Ecologies I*, RANE Research Group, University College Falmouth, Falmouth, 2008, pp.8-9

(published by the RANE research group at Falmouth in 2008), 'in this single comment, Greenberg voices an attitude that has coalesced into the received aesthetic wisdom of an entire era. We are still,' Gablik says, 'dealing with the fallout from this philosophy.'<sup>3</sup>

(4.2) There are surely some instances of incremental change effected through art and perhaps this is all we can achieve now. But does Greenberg's comment still not ring true? If we were to be dogmatic, we could say that in times of such political ferment, and with such a global threat looming large, this is surely a provocation that must be met squarely by anyone who has a stake in being called an artist. Where do lie the transformative powers of the artist, and for that matter, the art school more generally, as producers of artists and of cultural capital?

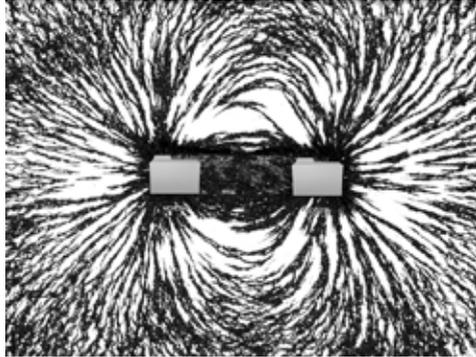
(4.7) And still, I'm unsure of my own position on all of this. *The True Artist Helps The World By Revealing Mystic Truths* says the title of a 1967 work by Bruce Nauman. Well, do they? Yes, art helps throw light on the world, but, in less grandiose terms, it is a light refracted, scattered and diffused through the smears of not-knowing. And gladly, I would say. For is it the work of the artist to illuminate? Or is it instead to obfuscate, to frustrate the world further, to mystify it further? Is the work of the artist to forever make things of crystalline hard edges and stark outline, something you can make out from far off? Or is it, like language; something you can never quite see where its edges are? I'm not speaking about art that turns its back on the world — not that it ever could.<sup>4</sup> And not something that perpetuates darkness but art that can do nothing more than reside in a haze, an inscrutable fog. Or an ache, or a common-sense-itch that sits in your gut, and there steadily ossifying into a little lump, hardened through the buffeting vicissitudes of a lifetime's experience.

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3. Ibid, p.9

4. ... as the writer Donald Barthelme would argue. (See Barthelme, D. [Herzinger, K. ed.] *Not-Knowing: The Essays & Interviews*, Counterpoint, Berkeley, 1997, p.23.) In one of a dozen easily quotable passages in the title essay, 'Not-Knowing', Barthelme argues the case for vitality of seemingly 'sick' art — art that appears to the critic ambiguous, or in want of recuperation via interpretation. And though he is speaking about writing in the main, he does move to a broader position to speak for art in general. Here it goes: 'Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art. However much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, and straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being, simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken.' (Ibid, p.15)

SLIDE: MAGNET, IRON FILINGS, N & S



(5) In his essay, 'Haze: On Nebular Modernism' (2006) writer and critic Steven Connor draws parallels between the work of Joseph Conrad and the meteorological phenomenon 'haze', a term he explains as being 'like mist, fog, and smog'.<sup>5</sup> Haze is 'a phenomenon not just of ambivalence,' he says, 'but more exactly, of interference... a kind of visual noise, which implicates the conditions of perception and registration in its nature.'<sup>6</sup>

(5.1) Joseph Conrad, of course, famously insisted that the work of the writer was 'to make you see'.<sup>7</sup> Here, Conrad's writer strikes a similarly romantic figure to Nauman's artist, that hero, the intermediary servant. They both speak of a drive towards clarity, towards exactitude — towards revelation, for chrisake! — though it is a drive that will be forever thwarted. But, as Steven Connor insists in his essay, Conrad did not simply want to afford his readers clarity. Instead, he wanted them to 'see the effect of dimming and dazzling provided by haze'.<sup>8</sup>

(5.2) Connor singles out the oscillating meanings of the mist in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but in broader terms it has often been noticed that one can follow the shifting atmosphere of lightness and darkness in the book as signifiers of a physical movement towards the centre of something: Marlow's voyage to the African interior and the *maddening* wilderness; light and dark as an allegory for the alteration or *degradation* of the mind of the voyager.

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5. Connor's 'Haze: On Nebular Modernism' is a paper originally given at Modernism and Beyond: Interdisciplinary Seminar in Art Theory and Literary Theory, Trinity College, Oxford, 12 May 2006. See: <http://www.stevenconnor.com/haze/>

6. Ibid

7. Conrad, J. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Penguin Classics, London, 2007, p.i

8. Connor, S. 'Haze: On Nebular Modernism' (2006): <http://www.stevenconnor.com/haze/>

(5.3) Each word in *Heart of Darkness* drives us towards journey's end, where we expect to receive some meaning, or enlightenment — both for ourselves as readers, and for Marlow. Still, it seems a fuzzy sort of illumination — a 'haze', if you will. 'It was sombre enough, too,' he says, 'and pitiful — not extraordinary in any way... And yet it seemed to throw a light.'<sup>9</sup>

(5.4) Instead of finding meaning or enlightenment, what both Marlow and Kurtz find there in the 'dark-faced and pensive' jungle is the realisation of hollow-ness.<sup>10</sup> Linking to what I've been speaking about previously and the metaphor of bodily insides, we hear the Central Station manager proclaim that 'men who come out here should have no entrails.'<sup>11</sup> And though speaking of the various tropical diseases that has befallen the men there, the sentiment suits our subject well: men and women who are to survive the voyage, it seems, must already be equipped with an alimentary space, an emptiness inside in which to welcome nothing.

(5.5) And of course, at the end, after journeying from light to dark Marlow finds no illumination save the self-knowledge of eternal gloom. 'I have wrestled with death,' Marlow says on the return journey, 'I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say.'<sup>12</sup> But it's a change nonetheless. A return to some kind of light then, but not a clear kind of light. It is instead an obscuration, a vague grey-ish spray that forever envelops him. And here the metaphor begins to show its cracks; the voyage as analogue to notions of creativity and discovery, to learning and to permanent shifts in behaviour.

(5.6) In the introduction to my copy of the book, Paul O'Prey quotes the philosopher James Guetti from his essay, 'Heart of Darkness: The Failure of Imagination'. Writing of the limits of metaphor, Guetti says Conrad's story...

as the account of a journey into the centre of things — of Africa, of Kurtz, of Marlow, and of human existence — poses itself as the refutation of such a journey and as the refutation of the general metaphorical conception that meaning may be found within, beneath, at the centre. At the end of the search we encounter a darkness, and it is no more defined than at the beginning of the journey and the narrative; *it continues to exist only as something unapproachable*.<sup>13</sup>

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9. Conrad, J. *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin, London, 1989.

10. Ibid, p.32

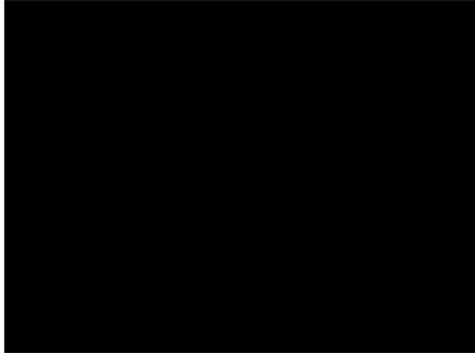
11. Ibid, p.58

12. Ibid, p.112

13. Paul O'Prey, Introduction to Conrad, J. *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin, London, 1989,

(5.7) But Guetti offers us a reprieve, and a good summation of what I have been trying to speak of here. Well, perhaps not to speak of, but to speak near. Of things hidden, or hazy, buried in our bellies or secreted in the dark. The unapproachable. That thing too terrifying, too daunting, too distant an idea to ever reconcile. And I agree with Guetti when he says that ‘the unapproachable is, however, tremendously significant.’<sup>14</sup>

SLIDE: BLACK



(6) Postscript: How is this — how is *any* of this — to do with anthropogenic climate change, as I claimed at the start? Well, tenaciously, I get the whiff of a corpse, whether it be a slowly strangulating elbow of an organ peeking through a cavity wall, or emanating up through a pin-hole perforation in my belly-button, the salience of dying, death, or mortality I get through the image of the Earth — the Earth, through the paper slits of a big billboard poster, or for fifty years the cover of Time Magazine, fifteen years of the Independent dripping a benign Counsel of Despair, and revelations too, trying hard to shake shoulders and shift paradigms of behaviour, and despite it all, darkness — ignorance, impotence, cowardice, and complicity, still. And still, one hundred years on from Conrad and Marlow and ivory and rubber and piano keys and bicycle tires ringing through the jungle — the fucking rapacity — and then and now oil, and oil, and oil, pissing out and into our open mouths, ringed in treacle-brown. It’s somewhere there, in or eking out of all these images; something rotting, rancid, puking up blood and bile, from in to out, a view into the interior, and in that empty space left still dripping with dinner, the dull ache of grief for something we know is dying, but not quite dead.

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pp.19-20

14. Ibid, p. 20

**A Vertical People**  
**Dave Charlesworth**

**The Last Letter**

The population of the city has fallen by seventy percent in the previous four years. In the last year thousands more have fled to make their way to the regions beyond the rising concrete spires of Leeds. After the first year of the migration there weren't enough engineers left to maintain the crumbling roadways or creaking bridges, and only a few men and women with the specific technical knowledge to keep the improvised power source of Packard® 'mule' generators alive. Power generation for the wealthier areas of the metropolis is now almost exclusively housed in locally situated substations paid for at a high premium. These electric oases provide around ten percent of those who remain with power enough for darker hours of the day. Other substations, ramshackle in their construction, operation and output, generate charge through the burning of organic materials. In the early days they were piling up the unused detritus and the scraps of packaging abandoned by the people of the West Riding as they themselves moved out to safer areas of the country.

As with all resources, these supplies were limited. Of those who remained some consumed rapidly, bathing themselves in heat and light in the short term. Meanwhile, others stockpiled their combustible assets waiting for a jump in their value as they became scarce. As throw-away-fuel became harder to come by, local energy stations developed different strategies to cope with the demand against the shortfall in fuel; some rationed what they had out amongst their consumers, others started to raid apartments, flats and houses, ripping out anything that would burn, torching one house so another hundred could continue to receive light. Finally, substations in communities where the denizens weren't willing to destroy their habitats turned instead on municipal libraries burning books, magazines, pamphlets and records in exchange for heat and light.

*'The grid's dead and with it went many other things we'd become so accustomed to. We now find ourselves in a period of learning. A re-enlightenment. The corporations that had inhabited the glass buildings to the South would have called it a re-skilling of the work force; it would have been an easier process had there been free access to what was left of the Net – but that domain remains locked off from most of the world. I myself employ new strategies to pass time. I learn what I can about the environment that changes around us. I watch the people, chart the rise and fall of those who seek control of the various districts of the city. Constantly re-positioning itself in a brashy ebb and flow, authority resides for one moment with an old family, eventually dispossessed by some gang who are in turn crushed by*

*a tidal wave of citizen action taking control of the area for a short period before some natural calamity robs them of this unity. I keep a journal of what I see and hear, I talk to citizens, listen to rumours, keep an archive and produce communique for other interested parties.'*

It was somewhere among my interest as a commissioner of some of his activities and as a recipient of what he would painfully admit was his friendship that I had to act when he disappeared. The towers, originally twenty-three in total, form a long chain that zigzags around the western reaches of the city. A handful are now completely empty, all one hundred and fifty storeys, including the vast bulging central atriums. These atriums are created as the building swells away from its tight upright lines into a bulging disk like edifice which slopes away sharply at floor one hundred and tapers gently back to a central point around floor one-forty. The final ten storeys form a spire, reaching deep into the stale Yorkshire air of the thinning atmosphere. Among these multiform ruins, this is where I began.

### **Shadow Market & Rope**

The tall residential towers of Leeds' long faded business district of Holbec climb into the fading sunlight like the thick trunks of tall trees whose growth and progress towards the sun have formed a vast maze of darkness that falls across the undergrowth below their canopy. The faint glow of 'Manuals®' blinking off and on as the last rays of searing daylight pass through the green stained atmosphere. In the distance the faint chatter of a 'Mule®' powering on for the night.

"Be needin t'rope pal?" A voice carries towards me, it pitches through the ceaseless piles of churned up paving, an unkempt cobbled area which at one time was a quaint selling point for the monstrous domicile giants. A northern voice with other more unusual tones, a trapped Slavic intonation or perhaps an imprisoned Greek lilt, lost in an air shimmering with distractions.

I disregard the voice, not alone among the hoots and hollers of an unseen yet ever present marketplace of shadows. Whilst life on the ground is full of uncertainty, trade in contraband and illegal tech is brisk and full of devious wealth. I regard the streets around me, once open promenades, formerly well lit, well organised, with a wealth of state protected vegetation. Now they are a dark and unnatural place, the shadows play for your attention as testy storekeepers attempt to move their stock. The very fabric of the promenade lies wrecked, altered to facilitate its new usage. Cobble stones are torn from the pathway

and stacked to build temporary barricades and structures, trading ziggurats and cairns, the forbidding entrances of which point away from the now mud and dirt pathway.

Each night, as darkness falls between the towers, a number of burning phosphorus lamps are fired up. The lamps are bright enough to throw stark light onto the walkway, yet shallow to the ground such that they cast long shadows between these temporary structures. There is an odd sense of cooperation here, camaraderie in the shadows.

“Rope, pal!” The voice insists again.

The dialogue is short, clipped, impolite, urgent. I am not disinterested in trading but I have little need for the commodities that attract such a high price here.

The voice changes tack assuming it is addressing a foreigner, an outlander or a Manc.

“DO YOOUU NEEEEED ROPE?”

“SEEEEE” I give my eyes the authority to regard the origin of the voice for a moment. Its owner is gracelessly making his way towards me out of the shadows, still half shrouded in darkness. I observe his fidgeting gaze shifting from my position among the cobble piles and dirt and beyond to each end of the paving-stone-stack lined walkway leading towards the foot of tower five.

A thing to behold. A walking trading post or at least a catalogue. That which he plies in the street is indexed upon his very person. Arm lengths of varying chords, ropes, twine and other implements of lashing adorn the garment. He’s a streetwalker, a licensed trader and in all likelihood beholden to a gang or an individual of quite considerable wealth. Either way, his business. Rope. It’s big business in this area; elsewhere in the city the commodity is something else, it’s all based on need, what is scarce that people can’t live without. Politely I decline and move on.

Moving closer to the tower, I am met by the first of the several score rope stations that fan out under the disk-shaped portion of the tower. When dormant they are elevated to a height of ten or so metres above the ground. Some of these stations are active moving goods up and down the tower, passing upwards, disappearing from sight among a shroud of twine. Stations at ground level are swarmed by people rapidly loading and unloading goods. They switch deeds for transport and fill out service receipts to ensure the goods arrive safe-

ly and to the right hands. A station near to me isn't so heavily thronged and I can make out the shape of a long box like object of a durable lightweight plastic composition. It is hitched at each of its four corners to a central stretch of rope. It's a staggering sight. The rope then extends upwards until the weight of the line can no longer be seen at a distance. The ropes can extend all the way to any number of storeys ranging from ninety to one-twenty-five as the disk returns back upon itself. The full length of the chord is comprised of a number of different rope lengths stretching some two thousand feet. These rope stations, likely powered by a mechanical winch system, provide a mechanism supplying the lower atrium of the building with all manner of goods and on occasions even people.

The ropes, beyond the hanging canopy of evenly spaced rope stations, reach up to the lower floors. They are, on the whole, well kept single lengths of cord, whilst many of the cords above the thirtieth floor are comprised of a number of lengths of twine. You can witness the change in wealth of the occupants from the exterior of the building. According to the signs in this building, the areas from floors five to fifteen are occupied by an established middle wealth order. A handful of floors between the fifteenth and twentieth storeys will be occupied by the super wealthy and are likely to have a shared hand-cranked elevator system which will be used by a number of families within that band. The ten storeys beyond floor twenty will be occupied by a new middle wealth order and everything above that will belong to the poorest in society, the very poor living at such a height that they may never even venture from the formerly affluent echoing bed chambers. We are now a vertical people.

As your gaze follows the building upwards, you see the change in wealth in the lengths of rope, the poorer the residents get the more shambling their chord becomes. A mixture of different sorts is a key indicator, after that the length of the individual sections of rope. The social etiquette among the wealthy is to match rope, to have the transition between one length and the next be as seamless as possible, such pretension cannot be afforded by the poorest in society, they produce their lines from all manner of lengths: sometimes the lower reaches of the rope are made of lengths of linen. Then at some stage the altitude of the building is so high that the residents can simply no longer afford to keep buying rope in such quantities. The final twenty stories including the lower atrium space are serviced by cooperatively run stations and private enterprises that charge a subscription or usage fee. Everything above this is abandoned as none can practically live there. The upper floors were sealed off many years ago in order to prevent undesirable activity.

The form of the tower at its base is cylindrical with front entrance at the end of the formerly impressive concourse. The front entrance is full of fading grandeur, the still polished concrete floors and hanging lighting systems or ornate and interwoven 'Plexiglass™' forms that at one time would have thrown a crisp light upon the portering staff busy within. The porters still exist, though their uniforms are that of high end security professionals, remaining quiet and vigilant in the low light of a Manual ticking away on the dusty concrete floor.

The exterior architecture of clean interlocking kite-forms has become almost hidden behind an organic mass of hanging cords that pass from windows on every floor of the building. There are no lift services in the building. They have fallen into disrepair, or the building corporation hasn't got the resources to provide manualised electricity to keep them operational.

As I enter the lobby area, I am surprised to be greeted by the head porter. He welcomes me warmly.

"Good evening Mr. Ross, you're expected." A sweeping gesture of 'Kevlar®' arm which seems absurd and out of place, invites me to proceed up a staircase flanked on both sides by dormant passenger lifts.

The green hour of dusk begins; I begin my ascent of the fifth tower in the chain.

### **The Stairwell**

Robert Ross begins his ascent of the stairs. The stairwell is unusually dark. He hadn't imagined that he would have needed to use his Manual this early in the foray. He engages the switch on the lamp with some degree of annoyance, knowing he will now have to take some of the time he had hoped to spend resting on the gruelling journey upwards to wind his light-source by hand. Setting the Manual to 'low brilliance' and slinging its thick webbing strap over his shoulder, he starts to climb.

At FLOOR 12 - He is faintly aware of a flickering in his peripheral vision. A blur of colour just out of range of the corner of his left eye, the dark panelling walls of the stairwell seem to be illuminated for a moment by a pale fleeting light. Ross turns his head quickly, his gesture returned by blank walls clad entirely with dormant 'Rectangu-form-LCD™' display panels. They are untouched by the thick swathes of graffiti which covered the stairwells which had previously visited, the panelled walls in this tower seem meticulously well preserved, as

do the staircases themselves.

At FLOOR 23 - Ross begins to modulate his movements up the stairwell, switching from quick economical single steps, to attempting them two at a time and switching again to a sort of rhythmical mantra, a rhyme from a long forgotten story that he learned as a child.

*Under tower and balcony,  
By garden-wall and gallery,  
A gleaming shape she floated by,  
Dead-pale between the houses high,*

At FLOOR 45 - Ross pauses to wind up his fading Manual breathing new life into the beacon with every turn of the handle. When he resumes his ascent after a few minutes, he has abandoned the poetic circularity of his previous methodology and has now taken to traversing the steps three at a time in powerful strides, a perfect illustration of the man's arrogance. There is no hope of halving this journey time. Of reducing what must be done in distance and in time.

At FLOOR 51 - He is already slowing down. The concrete stairs below him no longer ring out with bright footfalls but emanate a rough echo of his now slow shuffling pace. As he becomes aware of the sound of his own feet heavy on the concrete surface, that he begins to realise something is very wrong. He thinks of all the journeys he has taken in the towers before. His mind transports him to occasions where he has had to climb past hordes of people slowly making their way up the cavernous stairwell to the upper floors, pushing past residents arriving at their respective floors, scrumming to get through the crush of others coming and going. It isn't always like that, not always a crush, in the upscale stairwell things are calmer, yet still with a hubbub of the sound of people passing here and there, of private portering staff patrolling to ensure that the hustlers and makeshift stalls of varying kinds that populate the workforce stair-head are not able to set up shop and bother the residents. This silence is remarkable, a rarity. The absence of sound has its own presence, like the moment after the babble of a crowd is pierced by a shrill scream; the knowledge that something has happened or that something will happen; he now finds himself in an extended moment of anticipation.

At FLOOR 62 - Ross pauses, pulls the webbing strap of the Manual over his head and places it flickering obediently at his feet, taking off his long suffoca-

ting jacket. Placing his Manual at his feet, he begins to stretch and shrug off the tiredness that he has accrued over the distance he has travelled upwards in the guts of the tower.

Ross shoots a look over the hand-rail that forms a broad squared spiral that passes up and down the vast space. Below he sees nothing; glancing upwards at first he again sees nothing. Then slowly he makes out something at a distance, a dim blinking yellowish light, the kind thrown off by a Manual lamp. In a moment Ross forgets himself, bolting up through the stairwell towards the dull cadmium light of the other Manual, calling out as he dashes and stumbles up the well.

At FLOOR 64 - "Hey, hey you!"

At FLOOR 66 - "Can you hear me?" Craning his neck, swinging wildly around the banister rail, feet pounding the concrete, trying to keep an eye steadily trained on the light.

Pausing at FLOOR 70 - "I know you're there, I don't mean any harm." Starting to move again. "Why are we the only ones here? Where is everyone?"

At what he assumes is FLOOR 72, the distance travelled has become uncertain; he is no longer aided by the light of his own Manual steadily burning 20 floors down. The bold numbers stencilled on the mighty concrete buttresses are now masked by shadows. The Manual two floors above him is now a steady source of light. A dim yellow hue is cast as a halo of light across the concrete of the stairwell.

He rounds the corner to FLOOR 73, craning his neck in an effort to catch sight of the Manual's owner. The light is still steady and in a moment he will be upon it. He slows his pace, not wanting to alarm its silent owner, perhaps injured or sleeping. Taking the final corner, to make eye contact with the light, he stumbles and as he corrects his balance, the light blinks out.

In darkness, Ross crashes onto the stairwell landing at FLOOR 74, he is exhausted, scrabbling around on the dark concrete seeking out the extinguished light source, no longer certain of what he is even looking for. He draws himself up, eyes struggling to perceive anything in the dim light. Yet there is light. A residue, a trace, making its way up the gaps between the concrete stairway and the wall.

In a moment, his body pitches urgently, this way and that, hands clinging to

the stair rail that stretches the equal distance up and down to infinity, to where he has come from and where he intends to go. Dragging himself to look over the edge, he stares down to the dim glowing light of his Manual at FLOOR 62. His eyes take in its light, drinking it in, trying to remember what it was like, its colour, its form, the way it plays on other surfaces, for he knows within a few moments, that light too will blink out. Its Manual arm clicking into the off position.

Click.

He lies back, immersed in darkness. He feels enveloped in tiredness, exhausted, dripping with sweat from the tense failure of a climb. He reckons himself to be halfway up the tower, but now no longer knows where he is. His body could be falling at a great rate of knots or being projected upward through the space; without light he finds it impossible to tell. He stares unblinking upward for some time, trying to recall the past few hours.

The ascent before the darkness. The empty lobby of the tower and the unquestioning way that he followed the directing gesture of the portering guard. The hanging rope-stations, like the hanging canopy of some great tree. He wondered further whether any of them were operational right now. Unseen, out of sight, passing the full height of the building, passing the spot he was resting at now, powered by unseen hands or alien mechanisms, transporting essential goods at a sluggish rate. He thought further, harder, going deeper within himself, remembering an occasion under the canopy of a large tree. Young hands cutting footholds into the trunk of the tree with a pocketknife. The feeling of keen fingers and toes finding purchase in these recesses, lifting their young master higher among the branches. Makeshift footholds are exchanged for the natural rungs offered by the tree's limbs. An observer would witness the spindly form of a child disappearing from view behind a dense mask of foliage.

At FLOOR 74 Robert Ross closes his eyes, giving in to the tiredness and the memories. Forgetting the darkness and the disorientation, he starts to slip into sleep. Above him, many floors higher in the stairwell, a brilliant light flickers on. Not the weak yellow light of a Manual but a brilliant light, the colour of starkest white. The light begins to follow the squared spiral of the stairwell down towards Ross, moving faster and faster, covering the distance between FLOOR 150 and FLOOR 74 in around ten seconds.

Within moments Robert Ross is submerged in the purest white light, which seems to be emanating from the previously dark 'Rectangu-form-LCD™' cladding, formally a deep, flat, black colour. He remains asleep, unaware of the

squall around him, not noticing the white light separating into its spectral components, streams of light being carried around him across the now increasingly active 'LCD™' user interface walls. As Ross begins to stir, the multicoloured lights begin to fade to darkness. Over time the darkness reveals tiny details of itself and after more time it becomes the clear image of a dense forest shrouded in darkness, gently moving in a silent breeze.

In the haze of slumber, he thinks about how his mind is prone to reinterpret the world in long and unwieldy processes of metaphor and simile, how everything that is new in his experience is tempered by his experience of the past. Here lies the revenge of history casting a black mark upon the now. Suggesting repetition, repetition, repetition. Nothing is really new, just a copy of other experiences.

His eyes flicker, then open, hands shielding eyes against the light that has obliterated the darkness. As he lifts his body upright, as he opens his mouth to utter a protective spell composed of expletives, the white circle begins to shrink and then explodes outwards filling the whole floor and stairwell with pure white light. Under its intensity, Ross blacks out, everything returns to darkness.

*Under tower and balcony,  
By garden-wall and gallery,  
A gleaming shape she floated by,  
Dead-pale between the houses high,  
Silent into Camelot.*

### **Ross's Notes on the Remnants of the Net**

The work was hard; it required access to the remnants of the internet. Networks are dying all over the world and the window through which we access this resource is shrinking. Like some awesome eye, the boundary between ourselves and this light is contracting. Soon it will be a pinprick of light that the interested few will claw at for the last drops of knowledge. This however is a long way off, for now it is a hackers paradise; a secret mirror world to ours. Some would say it contains a more accurate imprint of the human condition than the current state of society. It contains sights, sounds and languages now lost to us. Widely accessed, containing thousands of years of history and a hundred years of collective thought, our one time reliance upon it and its loss has created a purgatory in the real world. Those that can access this other/same world are entirely at liberty, no rules and no organisations or state.

The risk of becoming so totally wrapped up in these worlds is great, a good number of great minds have found the reflection too seductive and have wandered into the place behind the pane, slowly ebbing out of touch with reality until their final lifeline of the physical world breaks and they float away on memories, memes and content. Not a bad way to go, so I'm told.

Others try to bend technology to do their will. Spurred on by years of rumours of cyborgs, men machines and digital avatars. These circuit freaks have started to wire themselves in to mainframes of decrepit machinery, writing complex algorithms through which they communicate to one another through a vocabulary of billions of archived images. Each communication is a rebus; every image is part of a code. I have had the rare opportunity to tap into a conversation between two circuit heads. For two hours I must have seen nearly a million images, each image a complex and unique utterance; the same word can be said in an infinite number of ways. I understood nothing of what I saw, but the two conversants were fluent and fast speaking, there was no break in the chatter. No space for thought, communication was instant. After a while, I became aware that I was not party to the real conversation at all, but was merely skimming a surface, peering at envelopes, that the real expressions were likely to be taking place in the hidden binary code of each picture.

Yet as strange and rare as this occurrence of being able to break into an image stream may be, it was quickly followed only a few days later by the sighting of one of the creatures in the flesh. It was a hulking, clanking wreck of a being, bent double as it passed the face of Leeds Mechanics Institute. Despite their secretive ways and scarcity of their occurrence, he didn't seem to mind that he was lit up in full view, illuminated by the pale white light of the moon against the white stone of the building. He found himself in no hurry; he slowly and methodically dragged his electronic clad skin onwards towards the old town. I was tempted to change the course of my travel in order to pass in front of him, to look him in the eyes, to greet him warmly as a friend. Yet in a moment he paused, lolling his head, listening to my shallow breathing at a distance, a demonstration of his awareness of my presence. Following for a short while, I kept my distance and lost him among the rising wrecked buildings of Briggate.

### **Arboretum**

He's awake, but he hasn't moved yet. Just stirring listlessly in and out of consciousness he is being carried on a wave of induced sleep, something he hasn't achieved on his own for some time. This time he's had help and those who have helped him are still there, watching over him. A slumped frame, stripped

of clothing lying prone in the long grass, he has been carefully removed from a place he should never have seen. His exile was inevitable but well handled, carried up many flights of stairs, higher into the tower. Further away from the complicated existence of the ground dwellers. His polite curiosity tinged with arrogant insistence has taken him further than he could have hoped. He has been carried some distance in the twisting cavernous corridors of the disk.

It's raining, still dark above. The rhythm of the heavy droplets beating across the dense vegetation that now surrounds him. The gentle rising chill of the moisture soaking his skin and hair begins to stir him more rapidly into consciousness.

Time seems to have stood still; his awareness is flooding back to him as the torrents of fresh rainwater wash over his skin. His nostrils are filling with a strange odour, one that is fresh and unfamiliar yet tinged with the acrid scent of freshly turned mud. His hands reach out to grasp the artefacts around him. His eyes are trying to focus, attempting to make light out of the darkness. His mind wanders to the conversation of images that he observed, now many months ago, running through artefacts of memory still uncertain and unknown.

Bridge. Car. Hill. Grass. Priest. Rocket. Camera. Vishnu. Spiral. Lamp. Country. Homer. Saturn. Owl. Comet. Munroe. Crane. Clap. Tower.

He drags himself up upon an elbow and gazes around, immediately losing control of his ordinarily calm persona as the sheer strangeness of the world around him causes him to reel in shock. Before the reality that has beset him has begun to fully register, he finds himself on his feet moving rapidly, this way and that. Panicking in the darkness.

His bare feet strike down upon what appears to be a thick lawn of luscious grass, clumped with wet soil and outcroppings of rocks and other snatches of natural features. Regarding his hands for the first time, he finds clumps of dirt and earth, firmly ensconced within tightly balled fists. Everywhere around him there are trees in all directions. If he were to pay the close attention to them, he would discover that indeed no two would be of the same variety. Yet it had been so long since he, or anyone he knew had seen such an object of natural beauty, that he would have been hard pressed to even recall that such a wealth of varieties had once existed in such common abundance.

He moves quickly through this alien landscape, as if he has hijacked one of his own wildest dreams. Laughing, hollering, hooting, claspng the disbelief on his face, waving his arms wildly in praise of this beautiful night, he comes to rest

against the trunk of an enormous tree the extent of which climbs beyond view, masked in a thick and moist canopy of dense multiform greenery. Long fronds of vegetation reach down from the higher parts of the deep green canopy that surrounds him.

Reaching upwards touching the low branches of the strong bough upon which he rests, he plucks a large leaf from it. He sinks to his haunches, back propped against the tree shading his naked form from the ceaseless driving rain. He tests the weight of the leaf, snaps it along its spine, peels away lengths of cell membrane, inspecting each element of its fragility. Eventually he works the leaf into a fine wet pulp, puts it to his lips and tastes it. It is as acrid a taste as he has ever experienced, not to his liking but he has not had food that hasn't come from a packet in a long time.

This place is familiar, he has been somewhere like it before. Long ago, before the illnesses, the darkness, the tendency to remain tethered to a city, before the world became a place of fear and uncertainty. He visited such a place with his mother; a bright sunny day, a walk along a tree lined pathway, the tall trees, oak he recalls, planted in a vast "V" shape as a young man's tribute to his brother lost at war.

He remembers running up and down the pathway, gazing up at the sunlight attempting to break through a vast ceiling of translucent green. He holds a leaf in his hand as he runs, its drying embers fragmenting as he hares from one place to another, eventually looking down to see his hand holding a beaten and battered skeleton of a leave. The stronger pith of the leaf remains like as a network of veins, a reminder that it was once alive.

The rain stops. It does it suddenly. He is immediately forced out of his thoughts. The long drumming sound of water beaten foliage has been replaced by the sound of the creaking of branches and the sound of leaves shedding the trace of the shower. Beyond the noise of the flora correcting themselves, the silence is deafening and for the first time he feels unsure of his surroundings, of how he came to be here, where his clothes went, how far from the citadel he is, is he alone, is he safe.

### **Retracing His Steps**

Of all the times I have visited the tall towers of Leeds, I always have the oddest feeling that I am a small insect staring up at the vast looming bodies of wood that make up some dense forest. That I, and others around me, are hard wired

to clamber over their surfaces, to seek out fissures within their trunks, to explore and utilise an internal maze of spaces. This feeling is present now more than ever since Ross has disappeared.

As I stand at the base of tower five, recalling stories of the ancient forests of America now likely burned to the ground, I think of an image I saw framed by yellow borders on the cover of an old magazine. The image was a photograph of the length of a felled sequoia tree, the mighty trunk and ruin of landscape that its collapse had produced, disappears out of focus beyond the focal length of the camera. I thumb through the brittle pages of the magazine to the article that it corresponds to, within which are another series of images showing the tree, cut into a series of three-foot deep cross sections. The cross sections were dispersed throughout the world as preserved records of a particular moment. The collapse of the tree coincided with the collapse of other things; the contraction of economies, the toppling of leaders, new virulent disease and the rise and loss of technology. The tree has become a register, a placard of all these things. I often rest on the final image of the article, a large and detailed photograph of the rings on the tree. Overlaid on the image are a series of arrows pointing to the key moments of the past that the tree's life has spanned; the battle of Hastings, the signing of the Magna Carta, the discovery of America and its later Declaration of Independence. The last marker right on the very edge of the wood, right up against the preserved outer bark reads, "the world as we know it changes forever".





**Notes on WE FUCKED THIS UP**

The genre that might be termed 'apocalyptic' is based upon the detailed visual rendering of dismal imagined futures and events – yet so much of the content speaks of our presumed blindness to the consequences of our actions, now. Yet we read of little else...

Days after the recent natural disaster, Japan's central bank pumped record amounts of money into the markets to keep the economy afloat on top of the destruction the earthquake and resulting tsunami flooded in. Apocalypse becomes a televised, mediated and thus massively exploitable vision, the architectonic and technocratic, the analogous personification of death and the othering or making foreign of disaster. In this sense, we know what to do.

Paralysis, resignation, indifference, denial – these are our prevalent responses to immanent disaster, which may well leave us wondering what exactly we were doing when this all became immutable history.

Jamie George

**American Mountains and/or Activism**

**Alex Head, Jamie George and Richard Whitby in conversation**

*March 2011. Alex Head is an artist and also involved in the Transition Towns movement, which is a direct response to a future without fossil fuels.*

Alex: In many ways I feel that artists and activists share similar concerns; we both need an audience; we both aim to establish visual codes and languages around specific issues. Coming from an activist knowledge that I have from the Transition Towns movement – I think if someone from transition came to the last American Mountains, I don't think they'd necessarily click with it straight away, they might not be used to seeing things in a white space, etc, but I think ultimately they'd get tonnes out of it. But the problem you've got now is one of defining what the parameters are?

Richard: I think the problem all along has been about defining what this is, why do it? That kind of reassessment is also a founding principle of it, as well – to worry about it as we go. But the problem now, with the third one, it suggests a heightened analysis of it, because of it being in a different city. If we think of AM as a community, it also has so far existed within a community in London. We've spoken a lot about it becoming politicised in some way. I don't know how far we've got along that road, or even what that would mean.

Alex: Its more a case of working out where the politics is – it's always there. I think that frustration with representing yourself as an artist is always there. I've taken on this term of 'Micro Communities Artist'. To say, ok, I'm not making something universal, but with each project I will try to identify a community's need and address that. It's about discussing individual identity.

I can see that you guys are taking it on tour. For me the value of it is this kind of imaginative space, which AM relies upon, and also reflects. Ultimately, speaking to people at events that we've done with Transition Towns, the place where an artistic perspective and an activist one meet is that imaginative space, that people need to work out how to deal with the future. What allows that to feel like a positive practice is your ability or willingness to engage with almost anyone – anyone who will listen. On one hand you're giving people background information on what is behind world events but on the other, its just great fun. Its so easy in London to feel separate from your neighbour – but you can do so much with the social space we share. Its not about some 'becoming' of the audience - getting people to 'realise how they are manipulated' or anything like that, it doesn't have to be like that. It can just be about meeting each other.

Jamie: Well, that echoes something we were talking about – just doing stuff! On a really simple level – outputting, because we can and because we are with people. There are issues and problems with what we output...

Richard: But better than that...

Jamie: I think one of the primary issues for me is ‘fraternity’ – I find that very exciting. A closeness, or proximity. Yeah, we work together sometimes, but there’s this other thing that is AM, and it’s that short distance that I find the difficult thing to lock into. But at the core of it is this fraternal relationships.

Richard: I think one of the key things is that it will never be what it could be. Like a pipe-dream. It won’t ever be what it should or could be.

Alex: I guess with Transition there’s an attitude of pick yourself up and carry on, which we have to retain.

Richard: And that, put onto a global scale, is the essence of the movement

Alex: I guess there’s a real ‘make-do’ tack that it operates on. Ultimately its improvisational. Its a direct response to peak-oil. The founder is a perma-culture lecturer, he wrote the book, as it were. The transition movement basically laughs in the face of the ‘big society’, because it prescribes something to people who have been doing it for years, so that the government can cut back massively. The big society is a sign of the times. The pay-off for engaging with all this is that it does drive you slightly mad. Most of the reason for joining the Transition group was to find a way of dealing with the burden of the knowledge. Sitting at home and watching documentaries about what we’re up against is really hard. There’s definitely a need for that. There’s a lot of naïvety. And because its not something that can be solved, it may never become a mainstream political issue. Business is already manoeuvring itself. But all the stuff in the Middle East is really interesting, no-one saw that coming at all. Michael Ruppert has done the most work as far as I can tell. He’s still going, man! He said if you see Iran getting invaded, head for the hills! So it’s interesting to see a people’s movement happening.

Richard: One thing is – if you talk about the transition movement as having information to give, then what is the AM equivalent to that? The danger is that we might posture ourselves in a way that suggests that there is something like that, when there isn’t. There is no information to deliver. It’s potentially arrogant, vacuous.

Alex: I don't consider myself an activist in the traditional sense. I don't think there needs to be a territorial line drawn in that way. The question becomes one of who you are making it for. That's probably a better way of doing it. You can't shoehorn content.

Jamie: That's one of the things I feel most happy about – this reflexive thing, to working within AM. Switching between that activity and then making my work in a studio.

Alex: One way of doing this is just to get out of the gallery.

Richard: I think actually this next stage is the opposite of that – staying in the gallery, but not making the art. Actually there's no element of this that is worked out or locked down – other than the title!

Jamie: One of the issues can be how formal it can be, things having a 'look'. We want this to look like itself.

Alex: I like to think that as people engage with some of these things I'm talking about, it will become part of the way people work, and it won't be a case of 'this is this and this is this', we'll just do it.

Jamie: Richard and I have written a statement about what AM might want to be, rather than what it is. We used the word 'worried'. On a personal level, I grew up being 'worried'.

Richard: I think we are trying to give it a sensibility rather than an agenda. I think that's all we can do.

Alex: It's funny, if you look at psychogeography – that's not a movement, it does have a political root to it, but ultimately they're poets.

Richard: That always seemed more like a trait to me, rather than a group, or movement. I think the suggestion to call the thing an ongoing project, rather than presenting an endpoint, really freed us up.

Alex: Maybe AM isn't the right platform for these social concerns that are coming out of it?

Richard: Yeah – I mean, we've talked about it being totally open, but then we have a list of names on the flyer in bold type.

Jamie: I think we want to aim to do exactly what we are claiming to do.

Richard: So the reason that we asked to have this conversation was that you asked Jamie what would happen when AM became 'activist'. And that made us worry.

Alex: It's almost like asking 'Have we been being activists?' – I ask that to myself often. It's about doing what you want. But being an activist is about going against something that you feel is massively, morally wrong. But I'm an artist first.

Jamie: I like the fact that all the design decisions have been 'the decisions'. I'm intrigued by that – it's been about production.

Alex: It's a sort of rallying. But at the same time there's an unbelief to it.

Jamie: There's a bit of farce to it.

Richard: I think the thing we've realised this time is the benefits of essentially no money – and that necessitates time, time spent together, on production.

Alex: Its funny, walking here I realised the proximity to Canary Wharf – you could almost hear the stock market crash from here!

Richard: Yes, well, the illusion that is capitalism has become a central thing in the project. If we are talking about it having a politic, then that is it. I don't know if I see an overt politic coming out of it...

Jamie: Well, in a way, I hope not, because of the space we give in commissioning works. I think it reflects a time anyway. How could we get to a consensus, anyway?

Richard: I think in really basic terms, the peak oil stuff can lead to maybe more modest conclusions about consumption. Like not making things that are shit! The capitalist idea of infinite expansion, that we all, largely, accept - which is ridiculous if you think about it at all.

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