

*Extremity and Excess: Proceedings of the 2011 University of Salford
College of Arts and Social Sciences Postgraduate Research Conference*

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First Published in 2012 by
University of Salford Press,
The Crescent, Salford,
M5 4WT

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ISBN: 978-1-902496-66-5

Extremity and Excess

*Proceedings of the 2011 University of Salford College of Arts and Social
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Introduction: Encountering Extremity and Excess

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The Conference

The essays contained within this collection were first presented at 2011's College of Arts and Social Sciences Postgraduate Conference at the University of Salford. The theme of the conference was "Extremity and Excess" – a title aiming to challenge boundaries, blur the lines, speak the illicit, revel in taboo, question authority, trace new frontiers, and to accomplish all of the above within a interdisciplinary context. Held at the Old Fire Station building on the 8th and 9th of September, the conference inspired much debate amongst attendees. With such a diverse array of subjects presented on, the discussions were a veritable melting-pot of ideas and inspiration ranging across many topics – not least, the very nature of extremity and excess itself.

Contributions came from many disciplines, a fair selection of which are represented within this collection. There were papers on language and communication, film and gaming technology, art criticism, political art, street art extreme art, music, education, criminology, sociology,

counterterrorism, erotic cinema, violent cinema, epic cinema, literature, philosophy, and all the shades of cultural criticism and comment that fill up the cracks between those labels. We also had artwork on display from Marc Bosward, who then provided us with an enlightening presentation on the work. We present a selection of the above in this volume in the hope that it will be as enlightening and informative on paper as it was in the event.

At the conference we were delighted to host three illustrious keynote speakers whose contributions provoked much thought and discussion across the two days. The first of these was Professor Robert Eaglestone of Royal Holloway, University of London, author of *The Holocaust and The Postmodern* (Oxford, 2004), whose lecture on “Extremity and Kitsch” discussed representations of the holocaust including the consciously tasteless Chapman brothers’ artworks and the naively abominable *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* – the emotional fallout from which resonated throughout the following panels. Questions about representing extremity and extreme events abounded. Is it an important historical duty, or a morally dubious fetishisation, and is it even possible to convey such events at all through mimetic mediums?

We were also incredibly pleased to host Professor Joanna Hodge of Manchester Metropolitan University whose works include *Derrida on Time* (Routledge, 2007) and *Heidegger and Ethics* (Routledge, 2005) . Her paper – “Varieties of Excess” – was bursting with insights covering Heidegger, Nietzsche, excess, means of philosophical approach, and approaches to philosophy. Coming to us on the second day of the conference, Joanna provided us with a veritable toolkit of theoretical insights (or as she put it,

“a variety of philosophical hammers”) with which to engage our rapidly accumulating ideas as we digested them over lunch.

Finally, to round off the conference we had Xavier Mendik, Director of the Cine-Excess International Film Festival and DVD label at Brunel University, and head of the Cult Film Archive and Research Centre, presenting a paper entitled “Extremity and Euro-Excess” alongside a screening of his documentary *Fear at 400 Degrees* (2010). The documentary dealt with cult 1977 Italian horror movie *Suspiria*, directed by Dario Argento, whose excessive mix of brutal violence and extreme visual style created new pathways between art-house and atrocity. The film has recently been remastered and rereleased courtesy of Nouveaux Pictures and the Cine-Excess DVD label to the delight of many a cult movie enthusiast. A discussion following the screening - chaired by Salford’s own Professor Erik Knudsen - explored the ambivalence of depicting violence, most significantly against women, and also set the film against its historical and cultural backdrop: the Italian “years of lead”.

Overall, the conference was a resounding success – much to the relief of its organisers (the four editors of this volume with the indispensable administrative help of Debbie Hughes). Such a success, in fact, that we invited contributions for a collection of essays based upon the papers delivered. We also hope that this collection will help to draw out some common themes regarding the nature of extremity and excess; an idea itself more palpable than expressible, and which seems to strike at the very innermost core of the subject whilst simultaneously challenging, if not shaping, our entire view of society.

The Papers:

Daniel Cookney: Post-Human Pop: From Simulation to Assimilation

Opening the proceedings is a paper contributed by the Extremity and Excess Conference team's own Daniel Cookney. Focusing on two bands, Kraftwerk and Daft Punk, Cookney probes the ambiguities surrounding the use of the robot in pop iconography. Etymologically derived from the Czech word for worker, the word 'robot' itself draws much from modernist and Marxist valorisation of labour power; a connotation exploited to full effect by Kraftwerk in their automaton personas. Yet it is this power to liberate - to ironically use the machine to free the human - which Daft Punk seek to embody. At these bare extremes of human existence the blatant commerciality of the musical enterprise becomes excessive and questions arise surrounding Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle", the escape from which is impossible under late capitalism.

Rob Gallagher: Larger than Life: Morbidity, Megapixels & the Digital Body

Continuing in the theme of technology and the modern era, Rob Gallagher investigates how, in an era of digital media reaching unprecedented levels of resolution, questions of representation become deeply conflicted. In this paper Gallagher investigates the idea of an "excessively real image" and indicates two approaches to the phenomena. Whilst some utilise digital technologies to remove all excessive elements of reality through a form of Photoshop sterilisation, others fetishise the extremes of noise and decay that these technologies allow and present them centre-stage. When subjected to

these contradictory visual manipulations, the body is pulled apart and reorganised. Gallagher explores this new aesthetic environment, seeking out the ways this new excess is reconciled with the modern audience.

Lydia Brammer: Siding with the Pervert: Engaging with the Twisted Hero in Japanese Ero-guro Cinema:

In terms of excessive visuals, horror cinema has long been established as perhaps the quintessential extreme art form – its content disturbing by design and its moral subtext often more so – yet in “Siding with the Pervert: Engaging with the Twisted Hero in Japanese Ero-guro Cinema” Lydia Brammer delves into Teruo Ishii’s film *The Horrors of Malformed Men* in search of sympathy for the violent protagonist. The film is an example of the Japanese Ero-guro, or erotic-horror style; the origins of which are traced through 1920s and 1930s Japanese grotesque, 1960s erotica movies, and traditional ghost stories. Meanwhile key contextual influences are found in improved distribution of underground cinema internationally as well as in the cultural memory of the Second World War and the subsequent American occupation. From this nexus of influences, Brammer unpacks the many layers of the film’s narrative and shows how these lead the audience to sympathise with the most extreme of anti-heroes.

Erin Whitcroft: Hysterical Poetics: Chatterton’s excessive desire for a ‘real’ world of words

When it comes to dangerous heroes in Romantic poetry, Thomas Chatterton will always be a recurring name. Yet it is not in his infamous life and death that Erin Whitcroft locates excess but rather in his poetry, which she

explores in “Hysterical Poetics: Chatterton’s excessive desire for a ‘real’ world of words”. The fifteenth-century world of Thomas Rowley conjured in Chatterton’s verse evinces tensions over authenticity in the same breath as it revels in Augustan myths of “Merrie England” and the Romantic’s metaphors from nature. The excesses of meaning overburdening Chatterton’s language within his poetry help to evoke a spirit of place, or genius loci, in which Whitcroft finds both the culmination of the poetical myth and the revelation of an emptiness behind it.

Victoria O’Neill: “The simplest of proficiencies – the ability to kill my fellow-men”: Isaak Babel and Making Sense of Extremity

The second of our literature papers also foregrounds questions of realism and the impossibility of ever fully conveying an event. In this essay Victoria O’Neill delves into *Red Cavalry* with an eye to explaining how Isaak Babel managed to turn the extreme conditions he underwent during the Soviet-Polish war of 1919-1921 into literature. By focusing upon the duality of the main character Lyutov, the nature of good and evil is portrayed against a backdrop too chaotic to achieve resolution. O’Neill argues that Babel’s use of melodramatic conventions – stylistic sparsity, narratorial objectivity and minimal characters – condenses the dramatic impact of war into the kind of relatable positions that make literature possible. However, lingering within the work remains the excess of conflict that threatens to emerge at any point.

Will Jackson: Countering Extremism in the Name of Security: Criminalizing Alternative Politics

In terms of extremity and conflict, the modern political landscape has arguably been shaped by one form more than any other: the “extremist” terrorist. Will Jackson, in his paper “Countering Extremism in the Name of Security: Criminalizing Alternative Politics”, argues that this post-9/11 figure haunts modern discourse to a dangerous extent; often justifying government and security forces as they silence the radical voices which formerly constituted the democracy they see themselves defending. Jackson identifies how the labelling of “extreme” views serves a double-function to both exclude the radical from “legitimate” political discussion and to “legitimize” those in power by token of their non-extremity. From this position the monopoly of legitimacy is held by western neoliberalism - the excesses of which in terms of environmental, economic and military violence become increasingly evident as the new millennium progresses.

Rory Harron: Exodus: A non-identity art - everyone is an artist?

Faced by the bonds of social hegemony, art has long sought opportunities for transgression and escape. In “Exodus: A non-identity art – everyone is an artist?”, Rory Harron explores the nature of the renegade artist-figure in relation to works spanning art’s modern history. Questions are raised regarding the expected locations for art and how new forms like street art or council-commissioned sculpture have the potential to radically undermine space, or even the art itself. The paper forms a kind of manifesto wherein Harron argues for an increasing use of anonymity by artists as a step away from traditional struggles in art towards an egalitarian form. This kind of art that pushes the artist out into the extremities – an unknown figure within

society – locates the artist within the audience and creates new potential for creative excesses.

Patrick Wright: Critical Intimacy: Lowry's Seascapes and the Art of Ekphrasis

Following on from Rory Harron's paper, we have another call for loss of identity in art – this time regarding the role of the reviewer – in Patrick Wright's "Critical Intimacy: Lowry's Seascapes and the Art of Ekphrasis". Wright argues that the current consensus surrounding art criticism focuses upon historicist and semiotic readings of artworks to the detriment of the work's immanently impacting qualities. By engaging in works from a purely academic perspective the discourse by which we frame art becomes clinical and shields the audience from the pure excesses of reception that works such as Lowry's seascapes force upon the viewer. Against critical distance, Wright argues for "ekphrasis"; a personal investment in the work such that the work's description is carried within the critic's language and tone directly to the audience in a similarly ineffable fashion.

Marc Bosward: Manifest Destiny, Violence and Transcendence: An Artist's Statement

To conclude the proceedings we have an essay from our guest artist, Marc Bosward. His contribution sits in tandem to the works he presented during the conference – reproductions of which are provided on the book's colour inserts – and compliments his striking images by drawing out the many subtleties of theme they hold. Marc was also good enough to allow his images to be used on the cover of these proceedings and, as we think you

will agree, they truly bring together the many subjects covered here with their fascinating yet macabre atmospherics.

Outlining the Concepts:

Those desiring to engage with some of the more specialized work contained in this volume may find it preferable at this point to skip ahead to the first paper. However, as the conference – and the many discussions surrounding it during and after – led to some useful conclusions regarding the nature of “extremity and excess” as a concept I feel it would be of some value to include these here in the introduction. Perhaps the reader can use these ideas to frame their own reading of the papers, if only to inevitably return and find them wanting. Either way, these reflections are offered in the interests of conveying the spirit of the conference, at least in part.

The centrally recurring metaphor by which extremity and excess were approached in discussions was spatial. There exists within the language of “extremity” at least a suggestion of this (fingers and toes being the “extremities” furthest from the body, for example) yet, perhaps by dint of the two being united in the title, this metaphor carried over into “excess” too. Many were the hand gestures indicating waves of excess rolling over the speaker during question-and-answer sessions, or the subconscious mimes carrying a “weight” of importance, or “gravity”. A memory I find myself returning to was Rob Gallagher’s extended description of an imaginary graph, drawn out in the air with his hands, which located extremity beyond certain axes. This was perhaps the most expressive and

effective description of the pure concept that we encountered on the day of what, upon increased reflection, became seemingly indescribable.

Yet, unlike Rabelais' Panurge who perfects the academic art of indicating meaning by gesture, there is certainly a large amount that can be written regarding this concept. The very unnameability of the idea is perhaps closely related to the bodily means by which we conveyed it to each other. The effect is that of Frazer's "contagious magic" described in *The Golden Bough*: "the mistake of assuming that things which have once been in contact with each other are always in contact" (27), meaning that taboo forces must be ritually exorcised from the body. The idea of "extremity and excess", marked out in binary opposition with ideas like moderation and acceptability, takes on taboo qualities. Once the labels are attached to something it becomes contagious and, perhaps without knowing it, it was this kind of association of which we were performing a ritual bodily cleansing when we tried to discuss the subject.

When the speakers met between panels and made small-talk regarding the topics that their papers centred upon, a similar disassociation took place. The sex and violence that many of the topics under discussion contained seemed to threaten airborne contamination - mostly in the form of embarrassment - in spite of the fact that all were present for the sole purpose of engaging with such topics. Perhaps it was the fear of appearing unprofessional in austere academic surroundings? Being "tarred with the brush" of extremity and excess sounds dangerously limiting when it comes to entering the academic "community". One of the recurring tasks we co-

convenors faced on the day was convincing speakers not to tone down their presentations.

I place the two metaphors of the sentence before last under scare-quotes to help indicate the other aspect that the spatial metaphor implicated during discussions: boundaries and territories. In sociological papers by Will Jackson and Guy Woolnough (whose paper on Victorian police at Cumbrian fairs is available in another publication) this interpretation exists in its most material form; the incarceration of those perceived of holding “extreme views” or indulging in “excessive behaviour” for the good of the “community”. The “contagious” quality embedded within the concept plays out here across the “body politic”. Radical “cells” and “deviant” behavior pose a perceived threat, the answer to which is excision and quarantine.

In a sociological sense, “extremity and excess” represents a threat. In his work *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben describes how “all societies are constructions in the face of chaos” struggling under the “constant possibility of anomic terror” (66) so that they must constantly make exceptions to their own rules in order to maintain social stability. In this sense, that which is considered “excessive” can be treated excessively by society in a manner illegitimate under “normal” circumstances. Yet similarly, this boundary-based concept of a community that makes exceptions also presents another central quality of the extreme and excessive within the modern world – its capacity to be tolerated, made an exception for, legalized, celebrated, and even have academic conferences held about. There remains a distinct attraction to the concept that continued negative definition only serves to heighten. A certain fetishistic reverence is placed upon the object marked

“extreme”; a sense of chaotic potency the likes of which we find praised in “outsider” art, “cult” music, “avant-garde” cinema, or “radical” literature.

The ineffability of the concepts “extremity” and “excess” do not therefore place them outside of academic debate, but rather position them amongst some of the most important issues the humanities have to deal with. For a world “built on illusion and moderation, and artificially restrained”, the like of which Nietzsche wrote against, “a clamour voices all the excess of nature in delight, suffering and knowledge” (51). As a collection, this book represents a sampling of the next generation of academics. If anything these often inventive, occasionally controversial, but always thought-provoking essays demonstrate that the future of the humanities is in safe hands, even if those hands are occasionally busy with miming abstract concepts.

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Post-Human Pop: From Simulation to Assimilation

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Abstract:

The following chapter discusses the adoption of the robot as a primary representational form by, two music acts, Kraftwerk and Daft Punk. While this process might be interpreted as one of extreme dehumanisation and sacrifice, the paper questions whether this deployment of ‘the post-human’ is presented as the antithesis of the extremities and excesses associated with Debord’s ‘spectacle’. It additionally observes a number of key stages in the careers of both bands to highlight media relations and the impact of technology: development that has been characterised by shifting positions surrounding subservience and authorship. It illustrates how the approaches can linked to Baudrillard’s phases of the simulacra yet it contends an explicit rejection of the spectacle simply through the use of these simulations while additionally identifying how the continuation of these forms have become increasingly incompatible with abstinence.

Keywords:

Cyborg, Music, Robot, Representation, Spectacle.

Introduction

When my colleague Elinor Taylor put forward the call for papers that preceded the Extremity and Excess conference, she suggested that the discussion of these topics “places oneself in a position of implied moderation”. However the similarly inferred notions of temperance (or, in fact, ‘normality’) potentially prove contentious when we attempt to locate what is extreme or excessive within our own activities. Research, by its nature, frequently verges on the obsessive: or what we might instead read as ‘extreme’ or ‘excessive’. Furthermore our immersed engagement in these practices additionally has the ability to lose sight of what we study as being related to these specific concepts. This isn’t the Ballardian Death of Affect: a sudden inability to feel. But rather that close association – something that can prompt us to focus on commonalities or an ‘everydayness’. This can recount Barthes’ warning that the penetration of the object has the power to “liberate it but destroy it” (1957, p. 159) or Foucault’s criticism of mainstream social science for “normalising” and “pacifying” its subjects (Fay, 1996, p. 200). My own work, for example, explores the strategic marketing/positioning of electronic dance music. It is not centred on the grotesque. It is not concerned with mass hysteria. Neither does it deal with terrorism [although I do encounter production guises utilising names such as Hijack and Hostage]. Yet the *proximity to* and *familiarity with* what *are* the more fantastical aspects of the general area had resulted in them initially being overlooked when considering their relationship to the conference theme.

Following a subsequent reconciliation - the recognition of much studied behaviour as actually 'abnormal'- the following chapter focuses on the visual representations adopted by two pivotal electronic bands: Kraftwerk and Daft Punk. It does this while questioning whether the eschewing of both the media and the spectacle by these bands can provide an antidote to excessive media coverage. Debord interrogates these "excesses of the media" when giving consideration to the critique of the spectacle: noting how the nature of this communication "is sometimes driven to extremes" (Debord, 1998, p. 7). It may follow that those individuals that are most reluctant to engage in these media excesses are more likely to be reticent in their engagement with the spectacle. In popular music, the spectacle has become commonplace – placing it firmly within what Debord observes as *The Society of the Spectacle* and often relying on methods of dissemination that can be based around performance. The spectacle can also utilise the fame-oriented 'star system' that, in turn, has the ability to be propagated via the media. However David Buxton makes reference to popular music's "decline of the star" (Buxton, 1990, p. 437): citing the emergence of technology as a root cause and highlighting the destruction of the pop star myth as typified by Kraftwerk's robot as human replacement. This particular rejection of the musician as media-perpetrated celebrity has since become adopted as a model in electronic music with the faceless composer or absent performer positioned as a reputedly subcultural alternative to the excesses of fame. In response, the media (particularly those music publications that have committed to a traditional 'rockist' stance) has been known to define such artists' activities as underground, covert and – while seemingly being opposed to its own ideologies – extreme.

The Man-Made Machine/The Machine Made Man

I call them ‘androids’... sly and cruel entities which smile as they reach out to shake hands. But their handshake is the grip of death, and their smile has the coldness of the grave (Dick, 1975, online).

It’s not just Robocop, it is our grandmother with a pacemaker (Gray, Mentor and Figueroa-Sarriera in Gray, 1995, p. 2)

The robot made its Kraftwerkian debut on the reverse of the cover for the *Computer World* album in 1981. Identified by Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) as an extended human and less a futuristic vision than an indicator of man’s current condition, we can view Kraftwerk’s use of this guise as a critique on the role of performer within the mechanics of the music industry. Initially this same idea was touched on through the band’s earlier representation as mannequins or “showroom dummies” – itself a wry comment on the need for the human figure to shift a commodity within the marketplace. In fact Bussy asserts that it was a gruelling tour of America that prompted the Dusseldorf band to question if their reinvention as robots or dummies had already taken place (1993, p. 107). The dummies were actually used for a subsequent album launch and their presence – culminating in the provision of an approximation of attendance - meant that the band felt confident enough to avoid the assembled press until the last five minutes of the event. However radical this may have been, a sole shocked account appears to be from a journalist that demonstrated disdain

for “the Germans who don’t even say ‘Good Evening’” (Bussy, 1993, p. 107) - thus potentially furthering the ‘coldness’ that might be routinely associated with these machines.

With a name meaning ‘power station’, Kraftwerk (albeit in less striking human form) debuted in 1970 and were touted by the UK’s music press as being part of the ‘krautrock’ genre. Although rudimentary recordings from the Dusseldorf band used manipulation and distortion in post-production, the early sound was based around what are observed as traditional rock instruments. The now definitive synthesizer-oriented aesthetic that has come to be associated with the group [an influence that would later contribute to the emergence of the ‘techno’ genre] was not apparent until the band released their third album, *Ralf und Florian*, in 1973. This was additionally a music release that highlighted the tensions between Kraftwerk and the romantic notion of the composer. Whilst the intimate, perhaps ego-driven, *Ralf und Florian* title might suggest the marketing of the performers as ‘personalities’, the music was somewhat distanced from the conventions within popular music. Sonically more mechanical than its functionally-labelled *Kraftwerk 1* (1970) and *Kraftwerk 2* (1972) predecessors, the album features Kraftwerk’s first sacrifice of the supposed warmth of the human voice in favour of the robotic sound of the vocoder. It additionally usurped any freeform arrangements in favour of the metronomic precision of the drum machine to celebrate “its mechanical and repetitive characteristics” (Warner, 2003, p. 47). The subsequent robot form, however, presented a far more contentious metaphor for the pure functionality of the musician as explained by the band’s Florian Schneider:

We always found that many people are robots without knowing it. The interpreters of classical music [...] are like robots, making a reproduction of the music which is always the same. It's automatic, and they do it as if it were natural, which is not true [...] in fact, we have exposed the mechanical and robotic nature of our civilization. (Bussy, 1993, p. 175)

Generally considered to be an automaton made in the shape of man, this “usually pre-programmed or [...] self-adapting and intelligent” being (Johnsen and Corliss in Gray, 1995, p. 89) has its purpose further demonstrated through the etymology of ‘robot’. The origin of the word [something that has alternatively been described as ‘robotnik’] is tied to the Czech ‘worker’ while additionally having origins in wider Slavic languages to describe ‘drudgery’. This appears to be clearly evident to members of Kraftwerk whose *The Robots* (or ‘Die Roboter’) track from 1978 contains the lyric “ja tvoi robotnik” - meaning “I'm your worker”. This, in turn, has been echoed in Kraftwerk's interviews where the band was quoted as stating: “We are not artists, nor musicians... first of all we are workers” (Bussy, 1993, p. 72). In turn, it was potentially explored through performance where movements had the characteristics of the joyless. They remained mechanical and lacked fluidity; they were angular and repetitive. Film footage of the band may have revealed that lyrics such as “we go to into a club... and there we start to dance” (from 1977's *Showroom Dummies*) may have been accompanied by more vigorous activity, yet these

were no less controlled and stilted by what were suggested as involuntary predefined processes. The facial expressions of the four band members continued to be emotionless - devoid of the pleasure or 'release' more usually associated with dance. However, the depiction is still clearly based around physical agitation - and seemingly in contrast to the initial representation of Kraftwerk's robots via photography. However, whether it was the still image on *Computer World* or other, more iconic, imagery composed in homage to Russian designer Ed Lissitzky, official depictions still appeared to favour the Futurist's interests in kinesis: something potentially at odds with that static nature of photography. The Futurists had actually accused photography of "stopping time"; even "destroying the energetic dimension of the act, thus consigning the vital moment to an immutable and immobile representation of something that no longer is" (Lista, 2001, p. 10) – a concept that could have the potential to curtail the modernist stance of a contemporary electronic pop band. Kraftwerk's approach to the still image then appears to try and convey movement – or 'the moment' - through the dynamism of the diagonal line and what is most often an image of the worker actually *at work*. The suggested activity, or mobility, of Kraftwerk has remained an important component – favouring an expression of energy, however routine and doleful the described task may have been.

However, returning to Kraftwerk's ode to 'The Robots' we also find the line "ja tvoi sluga": translated as "I'm your slave" and echoing Baudrillard's same "slave" approximation of the robot (2005, p. 131). How this concept has affected the musician that will use the imagery of the machine in place

of persona has impact within its place as part of the spectacle. Still arguing a case for the ‘non-spectacle’, the definition of these forms by Kraftwerk (and more recently by Paris’ Daft Punk) may communicate to an audience a message of “we serve you”. Certainly, this performance through enslavement avoids an immediate connection between performance and financially-driven fame to assist with the notion that “artistic pursuits and financial gain are often regarded as mutually exclusive” (Warner, 2003, p. 13). Yet the subjugation that is connected to these seemingly ‘functional’ manifestations also helps to erode the superiority or ego associated with the creation of art and, in turn, the depiction of the artist as a god-like creator [that said, the aforementioned creation of the machine in man’s image does have its own potentially blasphemous overtones]. It then provides “a reversal of the received dictum that art should elevate us above our surroundings and transcend functionalism” (Toop, 1995, p. 204): then celebrating “the obvious artificiality of the machine” while additionally reacting against “the bourgeois theatre of illusion” (Raunig, 2010, p. 41). These are traits seemingly integral to the imagery of Daft Punk – a band that can be viewed as furthering Kraftwerk’s post-human pop agenda – as highlighted by the band’s Thomas Bangalter:

We don't believe in the star system. We want the focus to be on the music. If we have to create an image, it must be an artificial image. That combination hides our physicality and also shows our view of the star system. It is not a compromise.
(Grant, 1997, online)

Far from being a compromise, the robot was a perfect vessel for this rejection of celebrity and illusion in its state as a mechanical and unemotional apparatus that is created to solely perform a specific function. It “embodied a critique of the auteur; that is, the domination of artistic practice by a single originating vision” (Gronholm in Albiez and Pattie, 2011, p. 69). But this reification of the artist as anthropomorphic robot is additionally noted as an “expression of and a powerful motive force in industrialized mass society” (Von Bertalanffy, 1973, p. 28). However, the Marxian view of the machine assumes that humans who interact with these technologies – those that are complicit in its labour – are “cast merely as its conscious linkages” (Marx, quoted in Raunig, 2010, p. 18). Kraftwerk may have insisted that “one day, the robots will be the ones that will answer your questions” (Bussy, 1993, p. 114) - thereby suggesting a wish for their more mundane tasks to be delegated. However this utopian vision - where machines would undertake hard toil to allow for more leisure time for human counterparts – is in opposition to Marx’s view. Instead there is a glorification of the machine for its ability to exploit and produce “surplus-value” labour (Raunig, 2010, p. 21). So, when operating as “an external agent which is supposed to be both a replacement for ‘man’ and ‘his’ perfect simulation” (Zylinska, 2002, p. 3), the robot is arguably no less than man: and man no less the slave.

Version 2.0

Cyborgs do not stay still. Already in the few decades that they have existed, they have mutated, in fact and fiction, into second-order entities like genomic and electronic databases and the other denizens of the zone called cyberspace. (Haraway in Gray, 1995, p. xix)

Refuting William Morris' belief that machines were "useful" but "incompatible with true aesthetic production" (Frith and Horne, 1987, p. 173), Kraftwerk's approach supports Timothy Warner's argument that "certain technologies channel the energy of artists to give rise to particular kinds of artefact" (Warner, 2003, p. 12). But while producer Trevor Horn insisted that "technology has affected the music since people built cathedrals" (Warner, 2003, Appendix 1), the technology that influenced a series of musical artefacts from this particular band appeared to be located firmly in the 20th century. The autobahn, the pocket calculator, the computer and the robot were themes explored through appropriately industrial-like processes. In both the making of music and in giving voice to the banalities of industrialization, Kraftwerk then allowed "machines to speak for themselves" (Toop, 1995, p. 201) with that relationship between musical narrative and production reaching what is assumed to be its logical conclusion when Kraftwerk's members transformed into a Fritz Lang-evoking cyborg form. This process completed what the band described as "The Man-Machine": a retro-futuristic automaton that was as mechanical as the trans-continental locomotive or racing bicycles that had additionally

found their way into the Kraftwerk repertoire. But there was an additional weight to this mechanized imagery that comes from the complete history of robots in popular culture: from von Kempelen's Turkish chess player (circa 1770) to The Wizard of Oz's Tin Man right through to B-Movies and the sci-fi blockbusters of the late 20th century. In tandem with Benjamin's discussion of what was transmissible from the moment of a work's production through each and every interpretation, it is possible to perceive the robot's "aura" in the same way: as an object with a cumulative value where its development through a legacy of mechanical fantasy replaces the Benjaminian mechanical reproduction of a single work of art. The concept of the robot is then shaped via all of its uses (through film, toys, industry, etc.) just as the understanding of The Mona Lisa includes its reinterpretation through every subsequent print (Benjamin, 1936, p. 38). To understand the role of the robot in popular culture further, and specifically with regards to its use by Kraftwerk and Daft Punk, it can be examined using Baudrillard's following four phases of the simulacra (Poster, 1988, p. 167):

Phase 1: The reflection of a basic reality.

Phase 2: Masking and perverting a basic reality.

Phase 3: Masking the absence of a basic reality.

Phase 4: Bearing no relation to any reality whatever - it is its own pure simulacrum.

While all of these phases can be highlighted when discussing the simulacra mobilized by both bands, it is the second and third phases that are

particularly interesting. Here the robot is but a disguise that has the potential to redefine, yet at the same time completely clarify, what is functional, dance-oriented music. That “absence of a basic reality” is additionally prominent in that clarification of the machine-built and automated as the antithesis to the ‘authentic’: particularly in relationship to revered music concepts such as ‘the virtuoso’ or even ‘soul’. Additionally, the robots are able to provide a visual referent for what is an invisible form of communication – with the absence of reality then potentially applicable to any musician that represents their aural output through what is visible. While that “reflection of a basic reality” is situated in a further alignment with technology: a suggestion that the machines are, in fact, behind the music. In the final phase - as its own pure simulacrum - there are those representations actually *as* Kraftwerk and Daft Punk: now recognisable by audiences as music entities intertwined with the purportedly ‘non-spectacle’ spectacle that are free to further their own mythologies through often extreme technology-related musical narratives.

However, that “reflection” has, in recent years, come to mirror a new reality and could be interpreted to be as prophetic as McLuhan’s writings on electronic communication. In tandem with cyborg theory’s shift through the android as space traveller and the biomechanical/trans-human experiments of Stelarc and Orlan towards what are now seen as conventional aspects of everyday Web-based life, post-human pop is commonplace; routinely wired into our entertainment networks. And while the internet may have altered the whole music industry (particularly reshaping distribution and, in turn,

power dynamics), it is artists that were already defined through technology-based aesthetics that have additionally explored its creative capabilities.

Subsequently bridging early experiments such as Future Sound of London's *ISDN* broadcasts [collected on 1994's *ISDN* album] with more recent label/artist subscription tariffs, Daft Punk championed the use of 'bonus material' download links in 2001 with the launch of *Daft Club*. In the exact same year that iTunes was introduced, early copies of Daft Punk's sophomore album, *Discovery*, included a 'Daft Card': a credit card complete with a membership number that gave the holder access to additional monthly downloads from *Daft Club*. This stream of MP3s – remixes, unreleased tracks and instrumentals – began with 'Ouverture': a short piece of music [completely unrelated to the band's later 'Overture'] that seemed indebted to the kind of pulsating electronics found on John Carpenter's soundtracks. What was particularly notable about this track was its intro: a cacophonous fanfare constructed from the beeps and discordant white noise of a dial-up connection; a testament to the modes of communication then required to facilitate the *Daft Club* project. [*Daft Club* was eventually given a separate label release on CD following the closure of the microsite in 2003. It is also available for download via iTunes under the title *Daft Club – The Remixes* yet it appears to be the same versions originally distributed as *Discovery* bonus material.] Daft Punk's rejection of human physicality was suddenly coupled with the ability to produce music without physical product: touching on Stelarc's statement that what was significant in the information age was "no longer freedom of ideas but rather freedom of form - freedom to modify" (quoted in Dery, 1996, p.

303). However, the band continued to release albums on vinyl and compact disc whilst further augmenting their relationship with the tangible ‘product’ via advertising campaigns for Adidas and Gap and, more peculiarly, taking on the role of ‘celebrity’ designers to create a coffee table for, furniture store, Habitat. However, where Stelarc’s quote has particular resonance for Daft Punk is less in the “freedom of form”, and more in the “freedom to modify”.

Already hinted at through the multifarious versions or interpretations of their music available through *Daft Club*, 2005’s ‘Technologic’ single was an unmatched pop paean to modification. Following the band’s earlier use of repetitive vocals, Daft Punk’s intonation within ‘Technologic’ was solely a series of vocodered commands predominantly describing methods of digital manipulation. Beginning with “Buy it, use it, break it, fix it / Trash it, change it, mail - upgrade it / Charge it, point it, zoom it, press it / Snap it, work it, quick - erase it”, the lyrics may be lent to a number of processes – including those involving analogue technology - yet other instructions (such as “surf”, “scan” and “scroll”) were more explicit in locating these tasks within the capabilities of the modern computer. Somewhat fulfilling the lyrics’ objective for further manipulation, ‘Technologic’ would later be used as the basis of Busta Rhymes’ ‘Touch It’ (2006) and Zomby’s ‘Daft Punk Rave’ (2008). Additionally while evocative of Apple’s iMac “Rip. Mix. Burn.” advertisement and with the track actually used in a 2005 iPod campaign, the lyrics could be assessed as an optimistic view of the flexibility afforded by emergent technology. Despite this, the accompanying promotional video for the single was a more dystopian

interpretation: a three minute pop promo that reacted against an idealist's view of what has been described as "post-industrial light and magic" (Ross in Penley and Ross, 1991, p. 127).

Following Daft Punk's commissioning of videos by directors including Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry, 'Technologic' was the third self-directed promo by the band. Beginning with the kind of graphics associated with vintage video games or a movie such as 1982's *Tron* [Daft Punk would go on to soundtrack its 2010-released *Tron: Legacy* sequel], a television monitor flashed the lyrics as text in a darkened room. There was a direct relationship here between the communication of lyrics and Daft Punk's 'Television Rules the Nation': a track recorded as part of the same studio sessions as 'Technologic'; it's dominance a reminder that "the screen is the most important political body, gradually eclipsing the national logo as the sign of the postmodern terrain of power" (Gray and Mentor, in Gray, 1995, p. 457). The on-screen doctrine was then revealed as demands issued by a skeletal mechanical figure seemingly with lifelike teeth and eyes that had first been glimpsed observing the screen in the darkened room. Perhaps even more grotesque than the monster from Shelley's *Frankenstein* [a character that's often referenced as the robot's forbear], this unnamed figure was created by Tony Gardner of special effects specialists Alterian Inc. Additionally, it appears to have similarities to, another Gardner creation, the antagonist Chucky that was first made famous in, 1988 horror film, *Child's Play*. For 'Technologic', the de-fleshed 'Droid of Chucky' is often revealed in such extreme close-up that it seems to be additionally dismembered. The unsettling reciting of the lyrics – that, while automated in this way,

suddenly feel endless and particularly futile when punctuated by the “erase it” command - touches on the observations of the early automata: particularly one attraction – Professor Faber’s ‘Euphonis’ talking machine of 1830. Hillier, discussing Faber’s invention, writes that “during the performance, the audience saw only a girl's head with long ringlets but the mechanism and operator were hidden behind a curtained framework which made the mysterious voice more eerie” (1976, p. 52). In the video for ‘Technologic’ the camera eventually pans away to reveal more of the Gardner’s creation and the full scale of the horror is clearly visible. The figure is miniature – seemingly as small as a human baby – yet cut off at the waist and flanked on both sides by Daft Punk in their now typical robot guises. The use of robots of two sizes may depict a hierarchy within the described post-human society: one where models can be constructed for either physical strength or cerebral prowess; where there is a requirement for detached brains and brawn. The fact that the smaller robot is vocal yet immobile while the more imposing figures remain physically imposing yet silent and compliant also fits with a number of nightmarish science-fiction conquest narratives. The scene is particularly compatible with the feared but “ultimate progression of a robot capable of assembling robots” (Hillier, 1976, p. 192). The power hierarchy between the two forms is further highlighted when the smaller is filmed again in the darkened room watching itself on the TV screen: an act of narcissism that may lend itself to the diabolical genius. This, however, contrasts with the position of Kraftwerk whose preoccupation was one involving being watched by others. Within ‘Showroom Dummies’, lyrics state “we are standing here, exposing ourselves” and “we’re being watched, and we feel our pulse” suggesting a

more passive role. On the other hand, it is still validation through the practice of being observed.

Daft Punk [who were amongst the audience for Kraftwerk's performance at the UK's Tribal Gathering festival in 1997] also explored their cyborgs' ambitions to be made flesh. In 2007 their largely silent *Electroma* movie documents their two robot alter egos as they undergo the surgical application of rather comedic human-like latex faces. The story is reminiscent, in part, of that of Pinocchio, however the reaction from other robots to the cyborgs' attempts at 'realness' is hostile. Resigned to their fate as representation solely as electronic beings, the pair drive to the desert and self-destruct. Baudrillard stated that it is tempting to define such an act as one that indicates "a moral denunciation of the diabolical nature of science" (2005, p. 132): especially as this is indeed a theme that had arisen in the latter part of the 20th Century. Graphic designer Ian Anderson, for example, described the era's culture as being "drunk on science" with the following years tipped as likely to be "its antithesis where we use technology creatively to rediscover our humanity" (Pesch & Weisbeck, 1999, p. 7). But the relationship between man and robot could also recount Berger's description of the roles of the conqueror and the colonized. Here, the omnipotent and the "less than human" are interrelated and ultimately affect the way that each sees itself (Berger, 1972, p. 90): a notion that can affect the way that we view Daft Punk's android manifestation in particular. Especially if giving consideration to the naming of the band's third album: *Human After All*.

In any case, the tendencies for groups such as Kraftwerk and Daft Punk to have avoided more conventional approaches associated with the dominant American ‘pop’ and ‘rock’ aesthetics of Western music could, of course, be considered as reflecting their own origins: respectively German and French. And it *has* been argued that European countries like Germany and France haven’t had “their own supply of indigenous rock groups” (Bussy, 1993, p. 14). In Kraftwerk’s case there is a more compelling argument regarding the reasons behind an unconventional approach that centres on a “fatherless” break with tradition (Cunningham in Albiez and Pattie, 2011, p.45): a post-war response to defining a new Germanic culture in “die Stunde Null” or “the hour zero” (Bussy, 1993, p. 29). The latter concept is discussed in greater detail within the Sean Albiez and David Pattie edited *Kraftwerk: Music Non-Stop* with its relevant chapters highlighting how part of this new national identity is in tandem with notions of Teutonic efficiency. However, while notably assembling an image of themselves as robots, Kraftwerk have a more intrinsic association to that post-war period via an affair with the future that existed well beyond Germany. In *Retromania* (2011), Simon Reynolds argues that it is the era that peaked in the late 1960’s (just ahead of the formation of Kraftwerk) and is tied to the utopian visions of tomorrow that can be associated with key events such as The Space Race, the creation of the Futurist-centred *Musique Concrète* and the (often literal) rise of modern social housing. Alongside a slowdown in these irrefutably contemporary developments (due to budget constraints placed on the former or the problems that became associated with the latter) we find the ascendance of Kraftwerk and Daft Punk. However, despite being seemingly

futuristic, both actually appear to recount yesterday's tomorrow with the plunder of science-fiction past for both imagery and ethos.

Toop asked “when do we give up our humanness and simply accept the machines?” (Shapiro, 2000, p. viii). It could be argued that musicians like Kraftwerk and Daft Punk have already sacrificed their humanness in their embracement of the machines. That moment might be assumed to be when both adopted the robot form. Or else it could be defined as when they began making music while eschewing what might be described as traditional instruments. The visible manifestation of that act – the deployment of the simulacra – could have been little more than an affirmation. However, the move from ‘traditional instruments’ to the technological has been all pervasive. Deleuze and Guattari stated that human and tool are now “machine parts on the full body of the respective society” (Deleuze and Guattari, quoted in Raunig, 2010, p. 18): then further suggesting equality between man and machine due to their places within a larger system or network. In contemporary practice, this has been exploited by musicians that subscribed to the same ideologies of which Kraftwerk and Daft Punk appeared to profess. Artists such as Burial, Zomby, SBTRKT, Various Production, Claptone and Akkord have used the screen as both a gateway and a barrier in which to simultaneously distribute their music and protect their identities. Their technological masks, in turn, have invoked the phases of the simulacrum yet these have largely been non-literal representations of music as made by machines. However, the reorganisation that has come to facilitate the dissemination of music (with control over what information is

made public and what remains private) has allowed for each to reject the excesses of Debord's spectacle.

Conversely, while this restructuring of modern communication has taken place, Kraftwerk and Daft Punk's activities have increasingly been located within the high-profile spectacle. In the exact moment when anonymity has been available, they have rejected its allure in favour of the kind of representations more commonly associated with extremity and excess. Still, while seemingly navigating the problematic nature of 'The World Tour' and other excess-based spectacles, both bands, it is argued, have shifted from stances of "we serve you" to "we *are* you". Kraftwerk's Ralf Hutter, for example, discussed a gig at an arts centre where the band was using a drum machine. "At a certain moment," he recounted, "we had it going with some echo loops and some feedback and we just left the stage and joined the dancers" (Toop, 1995, p. 201). This may seem like a modest approach however "there is a fascination, among artists and audiences of popular culture, with the narrative potential of the situations that such machines are able to create [...] In this instance the performer becomes superhuman, and the machine enables them to transcend their actual performing capabilities" (Warner, 2003, p. 43). This demonstrated a contradiction where the artist can simultaneously be superhuman and subhuman, spectacle and non-spectacle, celebrity and non-persona. The argument for the robot – and especially its mask – seems to be that it offered a rejection of the spectacle and all of its excesses in its ability to allow for anonymity, modesty and the reclusive. Especially with the understanding that arena dates are far more

profitable than selling music in the digital age, there has been a complete disconnect between that original ethos and the spectacle.

Daft Punk seemingly attempted to address this disconnect and forge links between the observer and the observed in a video for a version of their 'Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger'. Constructed from the footage captured by 250 cameras located within the audience at 2007's live-based *Alive* project, this official video simultaneously played on the fame-based spectacle of excess. Directed by Olivier Gondry (with a version of the track that additionally utilises elements from other Daft Punk songs including 'Around the World' and 'Television Rules the Nation'), there was a clear association with the dynamics of the rock concert such as the performers elevated above the audience. However it was purposefully delivered through a grainy 'amateur' process (but then uploaded whilst perversely tagged as 'HD') to suggest a spectacle as defined by the audience rather than mediated by the music industry. Subsequently it attempted to focus on the inclusivity of participatory web 2.0 technology [in this case, it is distinctly defined by YouTube's aesthetic] alongside the robot's inherent humility, functionality and servitude. Like Kraftwerk taking residency at the Museum of Modern Art and issuing lavish box set releases, it was firmly located within the spectacle: exhibiting and epitomising the conflicted machine.

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Larger than Life: Morbidity, Megapixels & the Digital Body

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Abstract:

With their perennially increasing display resolutions, polygon counts and shutter speeds, digital media are delivering ever-closer approximations of desirable bodies. Beguiling consumers with the promise of hitherto-impossible extremes of visual fidelity, these technologies recast human figures as constellations of what we might, following Roland Barthes, call ‘adorable details’. However, they can also compromise viewers’ scopic pleasure by rendering visible all manner of not-so-adorable details: real bodies betray acne scars, body hair, cellulite and broken veins; virtual bodies reveal blurred textures, serrated seams and blocky pixels. In such cases, that which is ordinarily thought of as excessive, subordinate or marginal can assume centre stage, giving rise to decadent regimes of use and spectatorship, whereby parts are privileged over wholes and a fixation on noise, loss and imperfection prevails.

Concentrating on videogames, this paper investigates two contradictory (but, crucially, not incompatible) approaches to dealing with noise and decay currently prevalent among creators and consumers of digital media. On the one hand, it points to a quasi-obsessive drive to eradicate, mask or repair these regrettable excesses; on the other, to an impulse to fetishize, frame or synthesize them. Analysing these two modes, it ultimately concludes that while decadent spectatorship is often bound up with the morbid fear of missing a thing, in some cases digital detailism can function instead to help reconcile viewers to entropy, intractability and irrecoverable excess.

Keywords:

bodies, decadence, digital media, videogames

Paper:

As digital cameras, graphics processors, display screens and storage media develop they ground their appeal to consumers in the promise to bring us ever closer to ever-closer approximations of desirable bodies. This promise, I will argue, gives rise to decadent regimes of use and spectatorship. Paul Bourget famously defined the decadent literary style as one ‘in which the unity of the book breaks down to make place for the independence of the page, in which the page breaks down to make place for the independence of the sentence and in which the sentence breaks down to make room for the independence of the word’ (1883 cited in Călinescu, 2003, p.170); it is also, of course, a mode characterised by its attention to the unseemly, the marginal, the unclean. Similarly, under the regime of digital detailism, parts are privileged over wholes and a morbid fixation on noise, dirt, loss and imperfection often prevails. Consequently, the bodies and objects represented come to assume an ambivalent power, causing audiences to vacillate between fascination and repulsion, cynicism and credulity, contented absorption and fractious distraction.

Seeking to understand this ambivalence, my paper investigates two contradictory (but, crucially, not incompatible) ways in which creators and consumers of digital media deal with traces of noise and decay. On the one hand, I point to a quasi-obsessive drive to *eradicate* noise, to mask or repair these regrettable excesses; on the other, to an impulse to *embrace* noise, to fetishize, frame or synthesize it. Addressing a range of media, I concentrate

particularly on how videogames implement these strategies. This ‘young’ medium often functions as a barometer of wider trends in digital culture, and so it proves when it comes to decadent spectatorship and the management of noise. While the texts and practices that I address here could be understood as classically Postmodern, I believe that considering them in terms of *decadence* affords us a useful alternative perspective. Over the course of the paper I hope to ascertain whether the decadent model of engagement that digital media have instituted is necessarily bound up with the morbid fear of missing a thing and the fantasy of technologically suspending decay. For, as I will argue, there is reason to believe that it can function instead to help reconcile viewers to entropy, intractability and irrecoverable excesses, affirming the positive potential of decadent style.

Eradicating Noise, Part One: Better Capture and Rendering Technologies

As media move from analogue to digital delivery formats, consumers have been wooed with a number of improvements and additional features, many of which serve to render media texts susceptible to excerption and magnification. Digitization has brought with it higher fidelity audio and visuals, easier means of copying, editing and dissemination, the capacity to pause, zoom, track, skip and crop - all features that encourage us to conceive of even linear narrative texts as collections of discrete scenes and objects rather than monolithic totalities. If, as Roland Barthes argues, ‘petty calculation is the simple lever that opens up the fantasmagory of adorable detail’ (Barthes, 1976, p.103), then digitization allows us to delegate and

refine the process of calculating and cutting up. Indeed, digitization is, in a sense, nothing but this process of cutting up, of dividing signals into ‘discontinuous fragments, each of which can be addressed independently of the whole’ (Hansen, 2002, p.8). And with each increase in storage capacity and computing power comes a finer grid: more pixels or polygons, longer strings of code.

Of course, these processes of division depend on there being a text or object to divide up. While one can always ‘downscale’ or compress an image, the process doesn’t work the other way round (though, as we shall see, there are various ways to ‘cheat’ it). Certain data just isn’t there in the first place – as anyone who has looked closely enough at a newspaper photo to see the constitutive dots can affirm. In the instance of film, home viewing formats such as VHS, DVD and Blu-ray have gotten successively closer to the resolution of the original prints’ indexical registration of light. Nevertheless, there is a finite amount of information contained in those original documents – whatever occurred in the interstices between the 24 frames photographed each second, for example, is simply not there to be digitized, a fact that is motivating directors such as James Cameron and Peter Jackson to begin shooting at 48 frames per second, offering what Jackson describes as ‘hugely enhanced clarity and smoothness’ by enabling the camera to slice profilmic reality still finer (Sciretta, 2011).

Here we see the first method of seeking to eradicate noise and avoid loss: that of improving capture and rendering mechanisms, of developing cameras, scanners and graphics processors capable of finer divisions, more frames, higher resolutions. Of course, such technological advances can be

hard to apprehend in the abstract. The superiority of a 1080p display over a 780i display is a matter of mathematical fact, but it remains difficult to appreciate the difference until the technology is applied.

Arguably the most effective way of rendering technological advancement perceptible is through representations of the human body, the object that we know best and in which we are most emotionally invested. Thus, in *Mythologies* Barthes famously suggests that Audrey Hepburn incarnates cinema's 'passage from awe to charm' (Barthes 1981, p.57). For Barthes the 'unique specification' of Hepburn's face 'has nothing left of the essence in it, but is constituted by an infinite complexity of morphological functions' (ibid.). The implication is that the changing relationship between the cinema audience and the cinematic apparatus triggered a corresponding shift in standards of cinematic beauty; as film became more familiar, so filmic heroines lapsed from aloof and intimidating sublimity (as embodied by Greta Garbo) into chic and approachable prettiness (epitomised by Hepburn). What remains implicit in his account however is the extent to which the apparatus itself had changed; where Garbo's beauty 'read' in spite of the (comparatively) low fidelity, high contrast images that served as its vehicle, Hepburn's face served to demonstrate developments in camera technology, lighting, film stock and cosmetics which allowed for the representation of a beauty composed of subtle individuating nuances and 'adorable details'.

It is this preoccupation with pleasing details that has spurred the shift to high definition in our own era. But even as HD viewing technologies promise greater intimacy with desirable bodies, they compromise that

fantasy by rendering visible all manner of not-so-adorable details: real bodies betray acne scars, body hair, cellulite and broken veins, virtual bodies reveal blurred textures, polygonal seams and blocky pixels. Videogame graphics designed for cathode ray tube monitors appear suddenly sterile stripped of the blur in which interlaced scanning sheathed them, while make up artists' dodges become painfully obvious at resolutions in which they were never meant to be seen. New technologies serve to reveal embodied imperfections in other ways, too: if HD broadcasts foreground the blemishes afflicting onscreen bodies they also highlight the fallibility of off-screen bodies, rendering perceptible the organic irregularity of camera operators' pans and focus pulls. '[D]istance creates physical perfection and idealization' (Stewart, 2003, p.111), but (apparent) perfection creates a desire for proximity, possession and tactile engagement. Seeking to realise these desires, digital technologies in fact tend to end up undermining the promise of perfection which imperfectly seen images and bodies seem to hold. Glitching, tearing and stuttering announce the limits of the technological, while the aesthetic ideal of a beauty composed of innumerable adorable details proves perilously close to the nightmare of teeming, spasmodic, pitted and decaying fleshliness, renewing the very fears of organic mutability against which digital representations sought to insulate us.

In the face of the gaps or aberrant presences that technological 'advances' bring to light the fantasy of Platonic harmony, of a perfect text/body to which technology can bring us closer, threatens to collapse. The resulting experience is similar to that of the active spectator described by Laura

Mulvey, who is often so preoccupied with trying to ‘capture a favourite or hitherto unseen detail’ that they cease to experience ‘the loss of ego and self-consciousness that has been, for so long, one of the pleasures of movies’ (2006, p.165). But if a morbid concern with organic or electronic noise can blind us to the literal bigger picture, inducing us to fixate on particulars rather than ‘losing ourselves’ in a work, it is important to note that such failures do not fatally compromise the fantasy of perfection; instead the fear of noise and loss, the wish to capture every detail, catalyses the development of representational techniques that expose new blemishes and lacunae, driving a cycle of technological supersession and obsolescence, desire and disappointment.

Eradicating Noise, Part Two: Retouching, Restoration, Remaking

It is in the hope of obviating this disappointment that the second method of treating noise intervenes. This method involves attempting to eradicate or alleviate noise by retouching, remaking or restoring the originals. The irony here is that such processes often centre on the removal of details. The second method of dealing with noise, in other words, operates both in tandem and in tension with the first: we want more of the right sort of details but we also want ways to screen out the wrong sort. As Barthes notes, while beauty ‘is stated, not described... ugliness can be abundantly described’ (1990, p.59), and indeed it is often easier to point out errors, inconsistencies and absences than it is to appreciate competency, subtlety and deft integration. Consequently any increase in descriptive fidelity is arguably more likely to bring to light new forms of ugliness than it is to

affirm beauty. Edmund Burke famously associated beauty not with the positive presence of attractive features but the absence of unattractive ones, prizing overall harmony, a 'smooth' and regular surface rather than 'rugged or broken' one (1990, p.114). This idea of beauty as resulting from a lack of inconsistencies or abnormalities - even of specificities - manifests itself in software such as Digital Anarchy's Beauty Box plug-ins for Photoshop and After Effects, which automatically soften or remove wrinkles and blemishes on captured flesh, determining which information to discard, generalizing, ironing out peaks and troughs in colour and contrast charts, offering a less nuanced, less detailed description of the imaged body (Digitalanarchy.com, 2011). To see the program at work is to see algorithms dispassionately, mathematically affirming Burkean principles.

Videogames also employ various techniques to remedy or remove noise. The Nintendo 64 console (released in 1996) was notorious for its unsubtle implementation of fogging and anti-aliasing routines, designed to soften the stark planes, blocky textures and teathed edges of early polygon graphics. More sophisticated versions of such techniques are still used today. The recent vogue for high definition remakes of 'classic' videogames has also seen developers using various tricks to try and mitigate the more unsightly aspects of old games. This practice of 'porting' older games to new platforms has proven a highly effective way of cheaply meeting the demand for 'new' content while resoundingly demonstrating the obsolescence of old technologies. Remakes mean new hardware can be invested with nostalgic affection for that which it serves to (re)frame, while late adopters are threatened with losing ground on fans and collectors who own the new,

‘definitive’ versions of texts. Paradoxically, re-releases of canonical ‘classics’ promise an experience which simultaneously reaches forward to the ‘as never before’ of the state-of-the-art and backward to notions of the work ‘as you remembered it’ or ‘as it was intended’. Rather than offer a faithful recreation of the original, developers of remakes tend to improve the games’ graphics, either redrawing them completely, ‘upscaling’ them or using filters to soften or enlarge the original assets. The intention is to offer an experience less glaringly out of step with players’ often unrealistically fond memories - to find technological equivalents for the rose-tinted spectacles effect.

The contradictions inherent in this pursuit of ‘the same but better’ are amply demonstrated by *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix* (Backbone Entertainment, 2008), one of the earlier and higher profile HD videogame remakes. A revised edition of a much-loved 1994 fighting game, the title was intended to offer the same experience while replacing the original’s blocky ‘sprites’ (the term used to describe 2D assets such as player avatars) with representations 4.5x as detailed. However, the goal of bringing a classic text up to contemporary standards proved unexpectedly difficult to realise, and *SSFIITHDR* (an acronym which turned out to be appropriately suggestive of informational hypertrophy) was subject to a number of controversies, reworkings and delays, suggestive of the specific problems that reworking gamic texts and bodies entails. Used to producing static comic book images, the artists contracted to provide the new artwork failed to appreciate the extent to which the quality of each frame of animation – the lack of pixilation and the breadth of the colour palette – negatively

impacted the number of frames which could be feasibly rendered and stored by the hardware. Affirming Susan Stewart's contention that because 'the ideal of the body exists within an illusion of stasis' animation inevitably entails 'distortion,' the developers discovered that enhancing the definition of the sprites greatly increased the potential for 'popping', or discontinuities between frames (Stewart, 2003, p.116; Killian, 2008). Obligated to plot a course between the Scylla of granular contours and the Charybdis of jerky motions, they were forced to temper their original ambitions. This might have been less of an issue had *SSFIIHDR* not been destined to be quite literally measured against its predecessor: intended merely to be a glossier chassis for a fundamentally unchanged game, the larger and more detailed sprites had to conform to the proportions of the originals while taking far more care to stay in touch with principles of anatomy. Irregularities negligible at the original resolution became glaring at a scale where an eye formerly represented as a single white square would be rendered via twenty-odd varicoloured pixels (fig. 1).¹

Attempts to rescale them revealed the bodies of the original *Super Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1993) characters to have been little more than illogical composites of eye-catching details. Much like the not-to-scale London tube map, their designs prioritised visual appeal and overall effect above realistic

¹ Fig. 1. Image made from *Bison_BM_26_00_v04.psd*, a Photoshop file released by Capcom to demonstrate progress being made on *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix* (the smaller figure is the original 1993 sprite, the larger one the 'remixed' high definition version. The text flags up issues that artists and animators have to attend to – note the direction to avoid 'popping').



Fig. 1

scale and proportion. The virtue of these designs (which have proven enduringly popular enough to spawn all manner of spin-offs and collectibles, from Hollywood films to statuettes and key rings to coffee table books) was that each fighter possessed individuating touches – tattoos, scars, hairstyles or gestures – that gave them definition as personalities despite their lack of definition as sprites. Like Barthes’ Garbo, they were meant to be archetypal. However, with the remake, inconsequential details, hitherto absent or invisible, both made the task of animation more difficult and threatened to violate fans’ (necessarily subjective and nebulous) notions of how the characters ought to look.

Indeed, such is the depth of fans' investment in these figures – and such was the volume of their online clamour - that publisher Capcom felt obliged to provide regular updates on *SSFIIITHDR*'s development process via their website. This commitment extended to releasing 'work-in-progress' images as Photoshop documents that could be reduced to their constituent layers, zoomed into, rearranged and even altered (indeed, figure 1 was composed from one of these files). 'Enjoy playing "Arm-Chair Producer" [and] ripping these apart' producer Rey Jimenez told fans (Killian, 2007). That the files contained the original sprites also suggests that the publisher was attempting to demonstrate both how faithful the artists had been to their source material and just how indeterminate and grainily unlovely some of that source material was – whatever nostalgic fans might claim.

Embracing Noise: Framing and Simulating Accident, Interference and Decay

Intriguingly, at the same time as such attempts to palliate evidence of interference and decay we are also seeing an alternative approach: instead of doing away with noise, certain forms of digital visual representation now seek to tame noise by fetishizing or synthesizing it, investing it with meaning, affective charge or mnemonic capacity. It is this attitude that lies behind the lingering, digitally enhanced shots of dust clouds, particles and spattering liquids in films such as Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) and Tetsuya Nakashima's *Confessions* (2010), and behind the 'micromovements' and 'ambience acts' (Galloway, 2006, p.11) (rippling

water, scattering particles, shattering glass, billowing fog etc.) that enliven videogames and virtual worlds. These digitally-facilitated simulations or enframings of chaotic, spontaneous, meaningless phenomena perform a specific function, rhetoricising physical realities so that they come to *signify* meaninglessness, contingency or sublimity, and so to facilitate wonder and catharsis. At such moments the pace of films and games often slackens, entering slow motion ‘bullet time’ (as this effect has been known since *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999)) to give viewers time to register these otherwise imperceptible processes. In this way these representations assert the power of technologically-enhanced vision to curb ‘nature’. If, for Walter Benjamin, the activities of the collector constitute a refusal of dumb material circumstance – ‘an attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence’ (2002, p.204) by recuperating it as meaning-full – here the physical forces which preserved objects defy are themselves framed, synthesized or aestheticized, given over to the gaze of spectators who are allowed, however momentarily, to imagine themselves immune to such vicissitudes.

Another form the impulse to embrace noise takes is the simulation of physical deformity and technological interference. In demonstration videos meant to show off new videogame graphics hardware, for example, it is not uncommon for artists to use ugly, grotesque or monstrous bodies (which, given that Marie-Hélène Huet has shown that ‘Monster... belongs to the same etymological family that spawned the word demonstrate as well’, is entirely fitting (1993, p.6)): Sony’s original PlayStation (released in 1994) was promoted with a polygonal model of a Tyrannosaurus Rex’s scaled and

snarling head, while among the promotional footage released to promote the PlayStation 2 in 1999 was a video of a cackling old man, his crow's feet and the individual hairs in his eyebrows rendered with what was, at the time, staggering precision. More recently Epic games, whose Unreal engine underpins many modern titles (game engines essentially provide the technological foundations upon which games themselves are built), have chosen to incarnate their technology's potential with demonstrations featuring a huge, quivering 'meat cube' (Park, 2008) and a lined and scarred mechanic who morphs into a stone golem. If portrait photographers have long sought to invest their subjects with gravitas or pathos by foregrounding rich and irregular dermal textures, the practice of *simulating* such textures is somewhat different, functioning less as a display of defiance than a demonstration of mastery. Proving that decay, decrepitude and organic 'noise' are more suited to description than beauty, these videos use unattractive, aged or monstrous heads to make advances in CG rendering technology perceptible, levying imperfection in the service of myths of technological perfectibility.

Games also use a number of tricks to make the virtual 'camera' viewing the action seem more material, up to and including counterfeiting the fallibilities of real cameras. The otherwise unremarkable shooter *Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days* (IO Interactive, 2010) is designed to look 'like it's being filmed on a busted-up cell phone, with plenty of MPEG compression artifacts, color separation, streaky lighting, and so on' (Gerstmann, 2010). Here simulacral pseudo-noise lends the game's action a visceral realism, even at the cost of partially obscuring the player's view. Where HDTV

distresses viewers by bringing ugliness, ageing and technical constraints into focus, this game again denatures blemishes and deformities, turning them from evidence of chance, collision or entropy into testaments to human expertise and technological sophistication, our capacity to suspend, reverse or subdivide the flow of time.

Indeed, the supplementation of games' spectacles with simulated 'noise' is just one example of the temporal and causal disarticulation that characterises our decadent digital culture. Slavoj Žižek offers another when he considers the 'paradox' of a society where 'on the one hand, one reduces bodily gestures to the necessary minimum (of clicks on the computer mouse...); on the other, one attempts to recover lost bodily fitness by means of jogging, body-building, and so on; on the one hand, one reduces the bodily odours to a minimum (by taking regular showers, etc.); on the other, one attempts to recover these same odours through toilet water and perfumes' (Žižek 1997, pp.134, 135-6). With perfumes as with bootleg 'compression artifacts' the logical sequence of causes and effects (I work and so I sweat and so I smell; corrupted code causes visual interference) breaks down. Just as decadent prose, with its esoteric vocabulary and complex, multi-clausal sentences, creates a situation where words and clauses resist subordination to the 'natural' order of the harmonious sentence, so life in the age of cyberspace sees hypotactic chains dissolve into paratactic arrays of modules and components, whose relations remain to be determined.

This desire to escape the linear flow of time is also apparent in the realm of videogame 'demakes' and 'retro games'. Retro games are modern titles that

mimic the ‘noisy’ style of older 8- and 16-bit era games. Some, like *Dark Void Zero* (Other Ocean Interactive, 2010), even present themselves as ‘lost classics’, forgotten prequels to games that exist now. A simplistic 2D shooter informed by 1980s Nintendo games, *Dark Void Zero* ultimately won more plaudits than the state-of-the-art 3D shooter it was intended to promote. ‘Demakes’ also play with history, imagining how contemporary games would have looked had they been released on now-obsolete hardware platforms. *Halo 2600* (Fries, 2010) reworked the first-person shooter *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001) as a game for the Atari 2600 - a console released in 1977 and discontinued in 1992 (fig. 2). *Arcadia Demade* (LeBreton, 2010a) rebuilds a level from *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007) in the *Doom II: Hell on Earth* (id Software, 1994) game engine, and was undertaken by *Bioshock* level designer JP LeBreton.

In their tolerance for – and indeed celebration of – the obsolete and the imperfect, demakes would initially seem to stand in diametric opposition to remakes and remixes. In fact, many betray similar anxieties; whether they attempt to do away with noise or to own and domesticate it, both modes aim to recover a vanished sense of plenitude, be it by dragging old games into the present or by adapting new games to the conventions of a putative ‘golden era’. It need hardly be said that the sense that things used to be better often has less to do with the games themselves than with nostalgia for one’s lost youth, a period associated with innocence, wonder, limitless spare time and blissful freedom from responsibility: as much a space outside time as a point in time. Not all demakes are exercises in consolatory nostalgia however. LeBreton has written eloquently about how the making of *Arcadia*



Fig. 2. *Halo*'s Master Chief as he appears in the 2001 Xbox game *Halo: Combat Evolved* (l) and as he appears in the 'demake' *Halo 2600* (r). The game on the left is, despite appearances, nine years older than that on the right.

Demade opened new perspectives on the history of game design for him. While *Doom II* spawned a whole genre of games that 'mimick[ed] its superficial qualities', by taking 'less-travelled paths of analysis' (LeBreton, 2010b) and reappraising the title LeBreton was able to imagine how it might have been different, and to consider the implications of this insight for contemporary game design. 'Demaking', in this case, becomes a means of critically reassessing the past and plotting routes *not* taken, rather than sentimentally idealising what has gone before.

Morality, Structure and Decadence: Liberating Excess

I have called the emphasis on detail that digital media encourage decadent. When jagged pixels, dropped frames, ‘popping’ neck muscles or clogged pores (or, indeed, the traces of the cosmetics or digital cloning tools used to mask them) come into focus, they break up the surface of the body/image, leveraging disproportionate attention. Placing an exaggerated emphasis on evidence of corporeal or digital corruption, the regime of digital detailism conforms in many respects to the notion of decadence outlined in Desiré Nisard’s early, highly influential attacks on nineteenth-century French Romantic literature. Nisard stresses the decadents’ tendency not merely to tackle disagreeable subjects but to place ‘such emphasis on detail that the normal relationship of a work’s parts to its whole is destroyed, the work disintegrating into a multitude of overwrought fragments’ (1834 cited in Călinescu, 2003, p.158), fragments from which no prevailing plan or structure, no organic hierarchy can be recovered.

As the crystallisation of a category of ‘decadent’ literature demonstrates, matters of form and structure are often bound up with moral agendas. The interimplication of morality and form echoes through the history of debates regarding pornography: as Laurence O’Toole observes, the ruling that a work was pornographic only if ‘utterly lacking redeeming qualities’ had obvious structural implications, so that ‘so-called ‘sexploitation’ films were able to hide behind the redemptive fig-leaf of a plot, a story, a psychological angle’ (1999, p.8). As with the (often perfunctory) scenes of come-uppance and repentance that allowed early novels to position themselves as improving fables rather than titillating smut, or the Hollywood cliché that a

nude scene is ‘gratuitous’ unless the plot or the character’s psychology in some way ‘call for it’, the nature of the whole is seen, in this case, to licence or mitigate details that might otherwise seem improper. Digitization, however, enables consumers to uncouple causes from effects, acts from contexts, details from wholes. Cutting up texts and bodies with a blithe disregard for harmony, proportion and moderation, digital media are often thought to pander to lax attention spans and give undue prominence to the ‘filthy’; allowing for the segmentation of spatial structures (and, as such, the prioritisation or magnification of certain areas of a body, image or frame) the translation to digital also compromises temporal structures so that, for example, excerpted versions of films showing just the nude scenes will be available for those whose interest in a work is purely carnal. Digitization becomes the cause and symptom of a culture understood to be anomic and perverse, ethically and intellectually torpid.

But the term ‘digital decadence’ need not be derogatory. Indeed, various thinkers have affirmed the critical and creative potential of decadent forms of techno-spectatorship. As Mulvey notes, while the capacity to delay, reverse and slow the playback of films appeals to the possessive, ‘fetishistic spectator’ it also enables a ‘pensive’ mode of viewing, alive to ‘the pro-filmic scene, the complex choreography’ out of which cinematic shots and stories emerge (2006, p.12, p.184). In the process, and somewhat as LeBreton found with *Doom II*, we become newly aware of the text’s status as something constructed and contingent (‘precarious, almost fragile’ (ibid.)). In these cases, rather than divorcing the text from its history and wider context, the transposition into a digital interactive medium enriches

our understanding of that text's relation to a particular time and place, particular attitudes and practices.

As these instances show, digital media can be used in ways that are in keeping with the tradition of employing new viewing technologies to explode and lead us away from what is objectively there, allowing us to focus instead on what *could be*. Esther Leslie records Walter Benjamin's delight in the capacity of new viewing technologies, from film cameras to microscopes, to decompose forms and movements in such a way as to suggest surreal and anachronistic conjunctions ('ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern') 'tap[ping] transformative potentials embodied in actuality' (1999, p.63). Decadence in these cases is not a regrettable side effect of the futile attempt to arrest or obfuscate decay but a force of fructification. Thus, having begun to experiment with using video to slow, fragment or syncopate footage of figures in motion, Jean-Luc Godard remarks that 'as soon as you freeze an image in a movement... you notice in a shot you have filmed, according to how you stop it, that suddenly there are billions of possibilities' (Dubois, 1992, pp.178-9). And, thanks to the proliferation of digital media, the experimental attitude toward the filmed image that Godard's mixing suite allowed him to adopt has become available to millions of consumers.

Godard's observation is echoed by Laura U. Marks' description of Ken Jacobs' piece *XCXHXEXRXXIXEXSX* (1980), in which an early porn reel is slowed to the point of flickering near-stasis so that '[w]hen one of the women takes endless minutes to roll the hem of her chemise an inch further up her leg, that single tiny motion becomes a universe of seen or imagined

moments' (2002, p.69). Pushing to the point of exhausting absurdity the strategies of arrest, attenuation and division by which digital technologies ordinarily solicit a retentive, possessive or sadistic mode of engagement with the mediated body, the piece invites viewers to focus as much on possibility as loss, to connect to the virtual excess out of which the text – and the viewer's perception of it – emerges. Marks dwells on the piece's capacity to 'interact with our individual fantasies... [and] resonate within our bodies' (ibid.) inspiring subjective hallucinations and, in so doing, testifying to what Mark B. N. Hansen terms 'the fundamental creativity of bodily affectivity' (2004, p.136). Following Bergson, Hansen reads perception as an act both of subtraction and creation. As Capcom found when attempting to fix the appearance of *Street Fighter*'s cast, hoping to capture what is 'there' (as Mulvey's fetishistic spectator does) is doubly futile, both because of the incommensurable excess out of which perceptions are extracted and because those perceptions necessarily transform that which they interact with. These critics demonstrate that decadence can be aligned with speculative, reflective and 'open' forms of spectatorship. Instead of morbidly seeking to forestall loss, they celebrate technology's potential to reveal the extent to which what we perceive was never (simply) there in the first place. Digital technologies may be at the forefront of the entertainment industry's quest for a perfect spectacle, for ever-greater extremes of fidelity. In the right hands however they manifest a capacity to reveal multiplicity and release potential, attesting to the critical and creative power of decadence.

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Siding with the Pervert: Engaging with the Twisted Hero in Japanese *Ero-guro* Cinema

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Abstract:

This study investigates the position of the perverted protagonist in Teruo Ishii's *The Horrors of Malformed Men* (1969). The discussion examines the ways in which it possible to engage sympathetically with a character who, although commits unpleasant acts of violence, is victimised, thus eliciting a sympathetic and understanding view of the character. The study explores the Japanese ero-guro ('erotic-grotesque') style and presents the links between *The Horrors of Malformed Men*, an ero-guro film, and traditional Japanese horror which often poses the avenging ghost as a victim whom we can pity.

Keywords:

Erotic; grotesque; horror; Japanese cinema

Introduction

During the years following World War II and the American Occupation that ended in 1952, horror cinema in Japan gradually became a distinguished cinematic form both at home and abroad with Ishirō Honda's *Gojira* (1954) and *Matango/Attack of the Mushroom People* (1963), Kaneto Shindō's *Onibaba* (1964), and Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964) (which won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes Film Festival) being the most successful films of this period. Donald Richie divides Japanese cinema into two major classes: *jidaigeki*, or period-films, which are greatly influenced by kabuki theatre; and *gendaigekki*, or contemporary films (2005, p. 23). Certainly, Japanese horror films can be regarded as either 'period' or 'contemporary', when, after the war and occupation, there appears to be a distinction between films that concern themselves with traditional ghost stories, and films that relate to more contemporary issues. In the West, there have been numerous cinematic adaptations of classic British gothic horror stories such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); in Japan, there have been numerous adaptations of folktales and traditional ghost stories. Nobuyo Nakagawa's *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (1959), for example, is one of the many adaptations of a traditional ghost story about a woman named Oiwa who was murdered when her husband fell for another woman; and Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* is a collection of four films also based on traditional ghost stories, such as the tale of Yuki-onna, a ghostly figure of a woman who stalks travellers in snowy regions of Japan. Contemporary horror films of this period often embody, either implicitly or explicitly, the

nation's post-war trauma. Shindō's *Onibaba* for instance can be read as a representation of the Hiroshima aftermath which reflects on political issues of victim awareness and war responsibility (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 83).

Teruo Ishii's *The Horrors of Malformed Men* also seems to address issues indirectly concerning post-war trauma, particularly on the topics of capitalism and the deformation of the human body, the latter perhaps uncovering sensitive issues surrounding the *hibakusha* ('atomic bomb victims'). Due to its 'depiction of scientifically altered freaks' which perhaps echoes the physical effects of nuclear war, 'it enjoys a politically incorrect reputation in Japan and has never been available on video' (Chris D, 2005, p. 152).

In this article, I propose that Japanese extreme cinema asks the viewer to engage not simply with the hero but also with the supposed villain, causing a split identification process. I argue that due to this split identification it is possible to sympathise with the villain, and not only is this seen in *Malformed Men*, it is a constant device used in contemporary Japanese horror cinema also. I also study the *ero-guro-nansensu* period and examine how it has progressed into an aesthetic style, which can be discerned from *The Horrors of Malformed Men* as well as more contemporary texts.

1. The Erotic Grotesque

Japan in the 1920s and early 1930s saw the emergence of a cultural trend termed *ero-guro-nansensu*, or erotic-grotesque-nonsense. It not only found its strongest expression in paper media such as magazines, satirical comic strips, and post art (Davis, 1999, pp. 49-50), but also influenced film and

literature. In *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988), David Bordwell, for example, observes *ero-guro-nansensu* elements in Yasujiro Ozu's *Days of Youth* (1929) where he states that:

...the *ero* [is] supplied by Watanabe's patting of Chieko's rear end, the *guro* by his scratching a doll's hindquarters and jamming gum in a statuette's eye, and the *nansensu* by the outrageous gag of the runaway ski and by such lines as a student admitting after an exam: 'I didn't memorise anything because I hate to forget to things' (1988, p. 188).

Bordwell's remarks on *Days of Youth* as an example of *ero-guro-nansensu* filmmaking offer a valuable insight into how this cultural phenomenon influenced cinema. These upbeat qualities found in cinema greatly contrast with the literary works of Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965), a detective fiction novelist who often delved into the *ero-guro* fashion. Many of his stories have been adapted for film including *The Horrors of Malformed Men* which contains many elements from Ranpo's works, and his banned novel *The Caterpillar* (1937), about a quadriplegic war veteran, was recently adapted by Kōji Wakamatsu (2010). It is Ranpo's work that truly epitomises the *ero-guro* style. With disregard to the *nansensu* factor, Ranpo's work often focuses on the *ero-guro* aspects, with particular emphasis on *hentai-seiyoku*, or 'abnormal/perverted sexuality', and it is this element which has continued to show in contemporary Japanese media, especially in film and *manga*, which I explore in greater detail towards the end of the article.

In his study of Ranpo's novel *Kotō no Oni/Demon of the Lonely Isle* (1929-30), Jim Reichart explains that the *ero-guro-nansensu* trend was a 'prewar, bourgeois cultural phenomenon that devoted itself to explorations of the deviant, the bizarre, and the ridiculous' (2001, p. 114). He then goes on to explain the content of *Kotō no Oni*, saying that its story, comprising fourteen instalments, involves a 'child assassin, a ruthless villain, a gang of medically engineered "freaks", a deviant sleuth, and a damsel in distress who suffers from an unusual physical disability' (2001, p. 114). This of course significantly differs from the description Bordwell gives regarding the elements of *ero-guro-nansensu* present in Ozu's *Days of Youth* which suggests how broad the style was.

Though one could argue that the oddities which characterised the movement were merely for sensational purposes, exploiting themes and subjects that are subversive and unusual for profits' sake, one must consider the changes Japan was making during this period. Japan in the 1920s rapidly underwent a social change and it became an 'era of urban dandyism' (Bordwell, 1995, p. 15), the country was becoming more absorbed with consumerism. Even the word "modern" was introduced into the Japanese language as *modan* (Silverberg, 2006, p. 7), and 'the ethos of sacrifice and self-improvement promulgated in the Meiji era became replaced by consumer indulgence and popular connoisseurship' (Bordwell, 1995, p. 15).

Gregory Pflugfelder's writings on *ero-guro* suggest that, from a sexology point of view, during the early twentieth century, perversity merely filtered into popular culture for commercial sake. He states that 'nowhere was the perverse more spectacularly celebrated and commodified' (1999, p. 290)

than during the *ero-guro-nansensu* phase in the 1920s and 1930s. Generally speaking, Pflugfelder seems to only label *ero-guro* as a commercial venture, a ‘spectacle for consumption’ (1999, p. 289), and often disregards the importance of the movement as being a social and cultural movement, one that emerged as an almost transgressive crusade to gain autonomy from the rigid social ideals of identity, morality, and sexuality impelled by the state (Reichert, 2001, p. 115). In this sense then, the *ero-guro-nansensu* epoch appears to be a time when expressing sexuality, whether that was conventionally or perversely, played an important part in developing the Japanese identity.

However, *ero-guro* elements have also been present in art work that dates back before the 1920s. Possibly the most famous of perversely-erotic artworks is Hokusai’s *Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife* (or literally: *Octopi and Female Diver*) produced in 1814. It depicts a nude woman receiving cunnilingus from a giant octopus as well as being caressed and kissed by a smaller octopus. Though it may be shocking for observers today, *shunga* (lit. ‘spring pictures’, erotic prints), were used in a variety of ways during the Edo period (1603-1868): as educational and masturbatory/pornography purposes but also as a means of protection for soldiers who ‘might have wished to claim warrior-like pedigrees for their frustrated lifestyles’ (Screech, 1999, p. 36). *Shunga* depicted private fantasies – anything from heterosexual relations to voyeurism, bestiality, homosexuality and workers of the *mizu-shōbai* (‘entertainment sector’). With this in mind, it is clear that atypical representations of sexual encounters have been part of the Japanese

social consciousness far earlier than the pivotal period of 1920s *ero-guro-nansensu*.

2. *The Horrors of Malformed Men*

With the rise of the erotic film in the 1960s, in Japan and abroad, filmmakers began to explore both the artistic and commercial potential of depicting sex and violence on screen. The foremost erotic genre to emerge in 1960s Japan was the pink film, or *pinku eiga*. ‘Defined by its means of production and distribution rather than its content’ (Sharp, 2008, p. 12), the pink film was produced independently, and often had an “underground” appeal. In the 1970s, the increasing interest in sexually explicit films led mainstream studios such as Nikkatsu and Toei to produce their own range of erotic films: Nikkatsu produced a cycle of *roman poruno* (‘Romance Porn’) films such as *Apartment Wife: Afternoon Affair* (Nishimura, 1971) and *A Woman Called Sada Abe* (Tanaka, 1975); and Toei produced films such as *Female Convict 701: Scorpion* (Itō, 1972) and *School of the Holy Beast* (Suzuki, 1974) which were labelled as ‘Pinky Violence’ and often fell into the sexploitation genre. *The Horrors of Malformed Men* was also produced by Toei, and the connection between *pinku eiga* and horror films is evident in the *ero-guro* style of Ishii’s film.

Teruo Ishii’s *ero-guro* films initiated the wave of torture films prevalent in the 1960s. Films such as *Joys of Torture* (1965) and *Oxen Split Torture* (1969) paved the way for later, far more explicit torture films such as Toshio Sato’s *Guts of a Beauty* (1986), the *Guinea Pig* series (1985-93), and the most recent torture film to emerge, *Grotesque* (Shiraishi, 2009),

whose director also made the *kaidan pinku eiga* ('erotic ghost story'), *The Slit-Mouthed Woman* (2007). The connections between horror and sex cannot be made more obvious than the examples of films mentioned above.

The Horrors of Malformed Men, though not a torture film, does possess qualities similar to Ishii's torture films, such as themes of capture, revenge, death, and sadomasochism. Aesthetically, images of nudity, violence, and sex are heavily suggestive, and what was once labelled extreme seems tame compared to today's standards of graphic sex and violence. According to censorship laws, as long as pubic hair, genitalia, and penetration shots are not shown, films that contain 'sexual violence and extreme sadomasochism, unacceptable in the West, managed to get through EIRIN' (Balmain, 2008, p. 70), the Japanese censorship board.

Yasuzo Masumura's *Blind Beast* (1969) is another *ero-guro* film that relies on suggestion to portray violence and sex. The film centres on a blind sculptor who kidnaps a beautiful woman whom he holds prisoner. Eventually she submits to his obsession and towards the end of the film, as a couple, they perform various sadomasochistic acts resulting in death. The erotic shots are static and filmed in mid-shot – there are no fetishizing close-ups – and Masumura is careful not to expose what would upset the censors. For example, whilst the sculptor is working on his latest piece, Aki (Mako Midori), the prisoner, lays seductively half nude and half covered with a blanket (Fig. 1). This is reminiscent of some of the less explicit but suggestive images of courtesans in *shunga*, such as Kitagawa Utamaro's *Lovers in an Upstairs Room of a Teahouse* (1788), which depicts two lovers kissing, half covered, legs and buttocks exposed.

In her seminal study of hard core film pornography, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (1990) Linda Williams presents the sinister similarities between extreme horror films and pornography. She proposes that they offer the same pleasure just in different forms. As the pornographic film offers the pleasure-gasm, the horror film offers the death-gasm; and just as pornography exhibits penetration, horror films display penetrative violence, resulting in open wounds and broken flesh (Williams, 1990, p. 192). Whereas Williams maintains that pornography and horror films are two different entities that share similar properties, I consider *ero-guro* to be the filler between the two for the reason that *ero-guro* focuses on constructing horror as erotic. The abnormal, strange, abject, and uncanny, are rendered erotic and sexual and the style displays the human body as an object and source of pleasure by breaking down, fetishizing, and fragmenting it.

The Horrors of Malformed Men begins by introducing us to the main character Hirosuke (Teruo Yoshida), an amnesiac, who is being held in an insane asylum. Upon escape, he decides to locate the place where he once heard a lullaby, leading him to disguise himself as his older brother so that he may travel to a secret island where his eccentric father resides. Once reunited, Hirosuke is introduced to the man-made "freaks" his father has created, including Siamese twins, women being attached to goats, and men reduced to wild beasts. Then, after discovering his true identity, that he was forced to leave this island in his early years, and that his mother is being kept alive in a cave as punishment for adultery, Hirosuke commits suicide

alongside his sister, with whom he commits incest before knowing that they are related.

The Horrors of Malformed Men presents to the audience a problematic process of identification and it is difficult to ally with one character because of three main reasons. Firstly, due to a switching of alignment from Hirosuke to his father/the monster, Jōgorō (Tatsumi Hijikata), one is eventually led to sympathise with the villain; however, secondly, it is problematic sympathising with the villain because of his position as an abject dread/monster; and thirdly, Hirosuke is presented to us as an unreliable narrator, and therefore this questions his position as an agent with whom we can engage. As explained in the previous chapter, Murray Smith suggests that there are two ways in which one can identify with a protagonist, whether good or bad, in terms of morality: that of alignment when we are “spatially attached to this character and have access to his thoughts” (1995, p. 187), and that of allegiance when we side with the character based on internal moral desirability (1995, p. 188).

At the beginning of *Malformed Men* we are introduced to Hirosuke as the protagonist, the character with whom we align. When he is in his cell we are offered the opportunity to share his position as a lost individual when we witness his memory flashbacks – an image of a young woman juxtaposed with an image of a deformed being – and Hirosuke narrates the thoughts in his head, resembling a monologue. It is these two devices that allow the audience to align with Hirosuke, as we are obligated to follow his path and story until the very end when the alignment is switched. The camera work also influences how we align with Jōgorō towards the end of the film. As he

tells the story concerning his wife's unfaithfulness, which happened due to her disgust with Jōgorō's webbed hands and feet, we are shown his memories visually, seeing what he saw through point-of-view, the camera taking his perspective. When he discovers his wife is not sleeping beside him, Jōgorō goes to peer in at her caressing and engaging in sexual activity with her lover. As he opens the door, the camera quickly zooms in on the action emphasising the act Jōgorō is witnessing, and the closeness of the act to the camera accentuates his shock at what he is seeing. This is then followed by a reaction shot to reinforce Jōgorō's upset and anger.

In his analysis of split identification in the rape scenes in *Irréversible* (Noé, 2002) and *À Ma Soeur!* (Breillat, 2001), Douglas Keeseey suggests that by employing certain camera angles, a level of identification with a character ensues. For example, in the notorious rape scene in *Irréversible*, Keeseey proposes that there are divided levels of identification between rapist and victim, the identification eventually aligning with the victim. He states that 'as the camera follows Alex (Monica Bellucci), the viewer's identification is split between the stalker and Alex, torn between lusting after her and fearing for her' (2010, p. 97). Smith argues, however, that associating point-of-view shots with identification is an overstatement, as identification is not solely shaped by the camera. He suggests that the point-of-view perspective retains a number of different functions – in the horror film, for example, the point-of-view can be used to conceal the identity of the voyeur (1995, p. 84). This is certainly true in some cases, for example in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) the use of point-of-view from the shark's position does not lead us to identify with the animal. Keeseey is not suggesting that one can ally with a

rapist simply through the use of point-of-view shots; he is suggesting, however, that the camera has great power in determining who the audience “become”, who we are aligned with, simply because we see what they see.

When we are following Hirosuke, when we are aligned with him, point-of-view shots are used to emphasise the importance of certain objects. For example, at the beginning of the film when Hirosuke is in his cell, he sketches a picture of the cliffs he remembers. A point-of-view close-up is used in order to highlight the importance of the image, the memory, and the location. Similarly, when he is on a train evading the law after his escape from the asylum, Hirosuke notices a newspaper that contains a front-page article stating that the head of a local household has passed away, who bears extraordinary resemblance to Hirosuke. A point-of-view shot is used to emphasise Hirosuke noticing this article, and the jump-cut used between the point-of-view shot and the close-up of the article is used in similar practice to Jōgorō’s flashback referenced earlier, in that it stresses Hirosuke’s shock at what he is seeing. Thus, in terms of Keesey’s argument, the point-of-view shot does not necessarily elicit allegiance, but simply *alignment*, where we experience being “inside the mind” of a character.

Aviva Briefel argues that ‘pain is central to how we relate to the horror film’ and that it is not necessarily the victim’s pain the audience sympathises with but the monster’s (2005, p. 16). Briefel then states that there are two options that dictate the audience’s identification, which are gendered options but which both involve masochism – the male monsters ‘initiate their sadistic rampages with acts of self-mutilation’ (2005, p. 16),

and the female monster's violence comes from menstruation, 'an event that is either suggested or overtly displayed' (2005, p. 21).

Briefel's argument differs from the likes of other feminist film theorists such as Carol Clover and Barbara Creed, who both advocate that it is the male character – whether that be hero, victim, or perpetrator – who is central to the horror film. In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992), Clover recounts various films that have female leads, including slasher, occult, and rape-revenge films. Even though primarily they have women as the protagonists, the films actually concern themselves with man. The Final Girl in slasher films is presented as masculine: 'just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine' (1992, p. 40); the occult film may appear to be relating to women, 'but behind the female "cover" is always a story of a man in crisis' (1992, p. 65); and rape-revenge films, particularly ones that involve scenes of gang rape, are 'first and foremost to do with male sport and male pecking order' (1992, p. 122). Yet Briefel argues against this, saying that 'these claims depend in large part on the cultural gendering of masochism as a female condition' (2005, p. 25), which, to her, is not the case when the monster is male, as 'the violent empowerment that results from their self-inflicted pain has little to do with conventional forms of female submission' (2005, p. 25). So, for Briefel, the male monster is born by his aggressive nature, his mental affliction, and the female monster is influenced by her biological function.

Though point-of-view shots in *Malformed Men* invite the audience to *feel* what the characters experience, it is actually the stories of the characters which elicit an affiliation and emotional response to a character. As Briefel

proposes, it is the depiction of the monster's pain that can encourage the viewer to understand the reasons behind him becoming a monster, and that he has undergone severe anguish himself which has caused him to become monstrous. For that reason, the viewer is left in a 'spectatorial limbo in which we are unable to situate ourselves on screen' (Briefel, 2005, p. 18), as it is problematic allying with either the monster or his potential victims. After the monster attacks, however, it is only then that we can confidently ally with the victim. *The Horrors of Malformed Men* reverses this with the use of a split identification process. Initially engaging with Hirosuke because he is a victim of amnesia and identifying Jōgorō as the monster, at the end of the film, when Jōgorō explains the reasons behind his madness, the spectator understands his pain, which, as Briefel suggests, leads one to develop sympathy towards the monster. As he dies in his wife's arms, after finally receiving her forgiveness for committing adultery, Jōgorō whispers to her, "Forgive me. I blamed you. But I could never forget you." This scene, the climax of the film, is when the spectator's final sympathies align with Jōgorō, and a complete understanding of his pain materialises.

By this point, aligning with Hirosuke is futile. Not only does he commit incest and suicide, but even though we are aligned with him from the beginning of the film, he is an unreliable narrator. Berys Gaut states that a 'first-person narratorial role by a character might seem to leave no room for an independent authorial perspective on the character's actions' (2007, p. 195), inferring that if a story is told from a first-person perspective, the reader is controlled by them, and must become allied with them. We are first introduced to Hirosuke as a patient in an insane asylum, suffering from

amnesia, which immediately weakens his telling of the story: are his thoughts honest and trustworthy, or is he delusional? Hirotsugu's words do not strengthen his reliability as a storyteller, as he questions his own state of mind, speaking internally, "I am not insane. I was studying to become a doctor. Have I really gone insane?" Gaut identifies this trait in Nabokov's *Lolita*, saying that due to Humbert's – the narrator's – position as a defective character, 'Humbert cannot be trusted as to what happened', for he is manipulating the reader (2007, p. 200), using humour as a tool for seduction.

Gaut suggests that there are two different ways to recognise an unreliable narrator: 'either the narrator may be lying to his reader, knowing the truth himself; or he may be self-deceived, so that he is deceiving himself as well as the reader' (2007, p. 198). Hirotsugu is certainly not a lying narrator, nor can he be classed as being 'self-deceived', primarily because he is an amnesiac and is attempting to recover information which he is lacking. Thomas Elsaesser offers an alternative reason for classing a character as unreliable. He explains that in mind-game films, there is often a central character 'whose mental condition is extreme, unstable, or pathological' (2009, p. 14), which implies that the narrator can be unreliable due to his state of mind. Elsaesser also states, however, that instead of these characters being 'case studies, their ways of seeing, interaction with other characters, and their "being in the world" are presented as normal' (2009, p. 14). Relating this to Hirotsugu in *Malformed Men*, it does lead one to question whether or not what we are seeing through Hirotsugu's eyes is reliable because of his incapacity.

Though I have suggested that *The Horrors of Malformed Men* permits the viewer to eventually align with the monster, one cannot disregard the fact that Jōgorō is a villain, an abject dread. Before we are made to understand his background and ‘monstrous pain’, Jōgorō is presented as a villain, a character who performs wretched and perverted deeds, a character with strange *butō* dance movements (Hijikata was one of the creators of *butō*), and above all, his appearance bears a striking resemblance to that of the traditional revengeful spirit motif called the *onryō*. Although typically female, Jōgorō holds similar traits to this figure, namely in appearance and motive. His long black hair, jerky movements, hidden face, and flowing costume (Fig. 2) mimic that of the demonic women found in traditional Japanese theatre, particularly from *nō* and *kabuki*. The avenging spirit is ‘motivated through revenge or grief’ (Hand in McRoy, 2005, p. 24), and in many cases, it becomes entirely evil, like a demon, because of this anguish. In *Onibaba*, the mother becomes so obsessed with revenge that the demon mask she dons to frighten her daughter ends up becoming stuck to her face; in *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), the ghost of Sadako (Rie Inō) threatens an entire nation with her cursed video.

Due to the affliction they once suffered, the *onryō* become excessive in nature, demanding that their inner torment be felt by everyone. Though they are monstrous, the audience can understand, and maybe even sympathise with them because of their affliction, which leads the viewer to remain morally perplexed. They represent abject dread because of their repulsive appearance. Just as Jōgorō’s deformity repulses his wife, Sadako’s gruesome face literally scares people to death. The dread, the fear, comes

from being able to associate with someone/something truly monstrous. Briefel proposes that ‘it is the monster’s pain that determines audience positioning in the horror film’ (2005, p. 16). In this sense, then, it is Jōgorō’s pain that leads the spectator to sympathise with the villain, the monster who has suffered terribly in the past, the ghost who seeks justice.

Contemporary *ero-guro*

Ero-guro has transformed considerably since the early days of *ero-guro-nansensu* that epitomised 1920s/30s Japan. In Japanese cinema and *manga* of today, the focus rests on the erotic-grotesque. The elements of *ero-guro-nansensu* still exist but have gradually been developed in a way that intensifies the representations of the erotic and the grotesque. This is the primary function of contemporary *ero-guro* – a style which emphasises the link between horror and eroticism, a style to induce fear and disgust but also arousal.

Seijin manga, or ‘adult manga’, are notorious in the West for depicting extreme sex, bizarre fetishes, and sexual perversions. Since, as stated earlier, the Japanese government does not permit genitalia, pubic hair, and the precise details of sexual intercourse to be shown, anything else can be depicted: from eroticising children, to tentacle erotica, and *omorashi* (‘peeing’) pornography, which focuses on women struggling with a full bladder. Suehiro Maruo’s work, for example, contains images of eyeball-licking and mutilation, as well as fascinations with deformities and human oddities reminiscent of the work by Edogawa Ranpo; Shintaro Kago’s work

focuses on body-modification and the grotesque in colourful display; and Toshio Maeda has frequently produced tentacle erotica in a sci-fi/futuristic manner.

These same erotic-grotesque fashions have often emerged in contemporary Japanese films, now often labelled as being part of the new wave of Asian extreme cinema, which possess ‘moral and visceral extremities’ (Choi and Wada-Marciano, 2009, p. 1). Such Japanese directors as Takashi Miike and Shinya Tsukamoto have crafted horror films with elements of *ero-guro*: in Tsukamoto’s *A Snake of June* (2002), Shigehiko (Yūji Kōtari) is captured and placed in a fetish club where men wear funnels over their faces, and is taunted with a metal penis-like tentacle; in Miike’s *Gozu* (2003), Minami (Yūta Sone) has sex with Female Ozaki (Kimika Yoshino) only to become stuck inside her, leading her to give birth to a full-grown man.

Ero-guro has become a stylistic movement, and is no longer the political and cultural movement it once was during the 1920s and 1930s. The focus now lies in exhibiting the bizarre with erotic undertones. Acts that are morally corrupt, sleazy, and “wrong” are made erotic and arousing; abjection and desire become one in *ero-guro*. Anne Allison argues that because Japanese censorship laws forbid the depiction of genitalia, sexual images avoid the ‘realism of genitalia’, and ‘such mass sexual tropes as voyeurism, infantilization, and sadomasochism’ are used in order to construct ‘the stimulation or simulation of sexuality as a fantasy’ (2000, p. 150). In this light, then, does the viewer engage with a protagonist or monster depending on their own fantastical desires? This seems to imply that, although an extreme film may compel us to align with a certain

character, to understand their suffering and pain, it also reminds us that these films are materials that deal with highly sensitive issues that they touch upon matters that delve into the depths of the human psyche, and they feed hidden, animalistic desires that are deemed dirty, disgusting, immoral, abject, and extreme. This is a reminder that what is classed as extreme is subjective, which I propose is what makes this material extreme: that it touches upon those repressed desires within us all.

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Hysterical Poetics: Chatterton's excessive desire for a 'real' world of words

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Abstract:

Thomas Chatterton's life contributed to the creation of the archetypal figure of the dangerous romantic poet. Notorious in his own life-time, and dead in sensational circumstances, Chatterton captured – and continues to capture – the imagination of many artists and writers. These artists and writers, amongst them Rossetti, Wallis, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats, created an aesthetic discourse of the excessive and extreme which has surrounded representations of Chatterton ever since his death and helped to formulate the romantic myth of the 'poet' as fanatical, radical, and 'other'. Wallis's famous painting of Chatterton is marked by this excessive discourse: Chatterton lies dying in a Christ-like pose surrounded by torn scraps of poetry, a modern poet martyr. However, during his lifetime Chatterton's central poetic project, the Rowley poems, was similarly marked by excess. Chatterton created a complex documentary basis for an imaginary history of pseudo-mediaeval Bristol that was literary, historical, architectural and topographical. The imaginative force of this world results from the works' prolixity, intricate detail and variety of modes. James Wood's definition of 'hysterical realism' can be usefully combined with Barthes definition of 'the reality effect' in explaining the odd structure and digressive progress of Chatterton's ambitious poetic approach. This paper traces the 'excessive' aesthetic discourse of Chatterton and his fanatical desire to create a 'real' world on the page.

Keywords: Eighteenth-century, Thomas Chatterton, excessive, aesthetics, poetry

1. The Rowley World: Chatterton's desire for authentication

The imaginary geography of Thomas Chatterton's Rowley world is founded upon a collection of literary, historical and pictorial documents, ostensibly discovered and modernised, and in part composed by the fictional fifteenth century, Bristol-based monk Thomas Rowley. The textual arrangement of this world is complex, but it is a complexity that strives to replicate the authentic documentary conditions of the past while linking it to Bristol's extant, already-legitimated verbal and material vestiges. Where those vestiges run dry, Chatterton goes to work, building on them to forge imagined continuations; an imagined history. The documents Rowley finds for Canynge relating to Bristol monuments, such as St Mary Redcliffe Church and Bristol Castle (which was a mere ruin by Chatterton's day) serve as good examples of the composite nature of Chatterton's Rowley world. For example, the description and drawings of Bristol Castle are based upon the physical ruins, and extant verbal reports. From these fragments Chatterton builds an original historical picture of the edifice, both physical and anecdotal: 'THE owter Walle of the Castle stooden ynne the daies of Wyllyamme Conqueroure the Square Castle wythynne was ybuylden bie Roberte Consulle of Gloucestre'(Taylor,1971, p118). Chatterton adds to history utilising its own modes and forms, and weaving into the extant history-as-text strands of his own, rather than simply receiving and reproducing them. That which is outside of established history can be written in as a part of the same 'original' historical text. This results in what the critic David Taylor has termed an 'imaginative matrix,' a

systematic, self-authenticating documentation of a unified, imagined past, which incorporates extant historical and antiquarian records (Taylor, 1978, p45). Similarly, the critics Russett and Dane point to the hermetic self-sufficiency of Chatterton's world in which there is a 'perfectly closed system of production and reproduction'(Russett and Dane, 2002, p147). Chatterton's creation of a medieval Bristol also resonates with Maurice Blanchot's arguments that literatures most powerful capacity is in its ability to erase the real world altogether. As Leslie Hill comments:

For Blanchot, literature is not in fact dedicated to producing meaning in the world; its goal is rather to abolish the world absolutely in order to put in its place an absolute absence of world and thereby to substitute for real, functional objects a series of imaginary, absent objects. By definition, literature could not be made subject to worldly, moral criteria such as authenticity

(Hill, 1997, p.107).

It is the unique aim of Chatterton's poetic enterprise to effect just such an extreme erasure of the historical world and to create in its place an alternative and 'highly concrete world' (McGann, 1998, p235). Chatterton's imagined world bears the imprint of concrete objects themselves and is in part based around objects that he would have seen as a boy: the monuments of William Canynge at St. Mary Redcliffe church in Bristol, the fragments of parchments with their illuminated script and the ruins of a Carmelite priory which Chatterton would have seen as a student

at Colston's Hospital school in Bristol. It is in pursuit of a mimetic completeness that Chatterton creates a documentary basis for an imagined, pseudo-mediaeval literary, historical, architectural and topographical history of Bristol stretching back to pre-Roman times. Therefore, it is apt that the critic Jerome McGann should describe Chatterton's achievement as 'primarily an ethnographic rather than an aesthetic hoax' (McGann, 1998, p234).

The imaginative force of the Rowley world is in large part the result of the sheer volume and excessive detail of the various documents in a variety of modes that Chatterton creates. For example, the two poems describing the *Battle of Hastings* provide an exhaustive catalogue of weapons with special attention being given to the colours of the costumes worn by the knights. Again the hermetically sealed nature of the Rowley world is emphasized as these poems are further linked to a prose treatise on costume written by Rowley. Rowley describes a knight: 'Who over his back his thick shield did bryng,/ In checkee of redde and silver sheeninge,/ With steede and gold trappings beseeming a King' (Taylor, 1971, p29). The historical and poetical aspects of Chatterton's project are consequently interconnected and function to validate one another (McGann, 1998,p234). The demands of poetry do not outweigh the demand of the historical records. As such, the motive propelling the entire poetic project risks being reduced to the status of a sublimely elaborate footnote. Ian Haywood, discussing the historical appearance of the footnote states that: 'the longer the note, the more powerful its authentication, and the greater its buttressing of the text. Bulk was equated with truth'(Haywood, 1986, p25).

The centrality Chatterton gives to the historical details of the Rowley world is an enactment of what Roland Barthes calls ‘the reality effect’. Barthes argues that within a narrative structure excessive detail and technical language, as used in the descriptions of the Rowley’s Knights apparel, ‘oppose the very order of narrative’. These details:

say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of the “the real” (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity

(Barthes, 1989, p148).

An excess of detail, therefore, encourages the reader to believe in a presence outside mere textuality. The text attempts to escape its existence as a site of placelessness and non-being by grounding itself in detail and the subsequent status of realism that is implied. In this way, Barthes describes the same process Blanchot considered when he explained that the text is always attempting to extend beyond itself; that literature cannot exist without relation to something beyond it.

In the same way that Chatterton’s lengthy catalogues of weapons seek to authenticate, the repeated use of local names in his Rowley works not only aid authenticity but also seek to establish a concrete sense of ‘place’. In the poem *Battle of Hastings II*, war cries are invoked repeatedly not to the men

of Britain but specifically to the men of Bristol: 'Hys Brystowe menne came in hym for to save;' (Taylor, 1971, p86). Localities including the River Avon, Severn, Brandon Hill, Clifton, Jacobs Wells and the area of Redcliffe are also referred to throughout the Rowley documents. Additionally, James Wood's definition of 'Hysterical Realism' builds upon Barthes definition of the reality effect while addressing the weight of authorial anxiety surrounding the persuasive nature of writing. Woods states that in the hysterical text:

The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, overworked.

....

It seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself. It is not a cock-up but a cover-up

(Woods, 2005, p179).

It is this sense of overworking and exhausting the conventions of realism that Chatterton demonstrates in his Rowley project. Chatterton acknowledges that his writing is simultaneously a 'cover-up' and an act of extreme persuasion arguing in a note attached to his *Will* that: 'a great genius can effect anything, endeavouring in the *foregoing Poems* to represent an enthusiastic Methodist...and impose it upon the infatuated world as a reality'(Taylor, 1971, p501). His statement is full of childish bravado and yet his words reverberate with the emotional excess characteristic of hysteria itself. Chatterton establishes in this short phrase a

relationship between writer and reader that is inscribed with excess; he will force his fictions on a reader that inhabits a similar world of intensity. Chatterton constructs an imaginary reader who can be carried away by intense emotions and ‘infatuated’ beyond reason by the ‘reality’ that is forced upon them.

2. Chatterton’s nature poetry: the problem of representation

In 1824 the poet John Clare records in his journal that he has been reading Thomas Chatterton’s poetry to ‘search for extracts to insert in my natural history’. Clare goes on to describe what he has gleaned from his study of the young Bristol poet:

Chatterton seemd fond of taking his similes
from nature his favourite flower seems to
be the ‘kingge ceppe’ and his favourite bird
the ‘pied Chelandrie (Red cap) the only
trees he speaks of are the oak and elm

(as cited in Groom, 1999, p224).

Clare’s interest in Thomas Chatterton’s nature poetry may seem surprising; the critical emphasis given to his role as forger has meant that Chatterton is kept at a distance from the image of the romantic poet’s ‘contemplative accord with a unitary reality’ (Trilling, 2000, p191). Critics instead tend to assume that Clare’s interest is motivated by affiliation with Chatterton’s social marginalization. As such, Chatterton is an unlikely role model for the kind of nature poet Clare would need in order to present a faithful representation of the real world of nature. However, in his choice of the

young poet as a reference source Clare recognises an aspect of Chatterton's poetics overshadowed by the stereotypes surrounding the mythic poet: the extreme importance Chatterton gives to the spirit of place in his literary productions.

Characteristically Chatterton describes the natural landscape and attempts to capture this spirit of place from as many different perspectives as he can: as a contemporary eighteenth century poet, an Ossianic bard and the fifteenth century poet Rowley. While in addition to the imaginative medieval geographies of the Rowley world, Chatterton also envisions the landscapes of North America and Africa in his poetry; all of which is the work of fantasy and imagination for the young and inexperienced poet. Chatterton's Rowley world is at times a decorative and ideal landscape in which apples ripen and the fruit is heavy on the vine creating an Edenic vision of England. In *An Excelente Balade of Charitie* the Rowley poet describes an idyllic landscape:

In Virgyne the sweltrie sun gan sheene,
And hotte upon the mees did caste his raie;
The apple rodded from its palie greene,
And the mole peare did bende the leafy spraie;
The peede chelandri sunge the livelong daie;
(Taylor, 1971, p645).

Chatterton's early depictions of the natural world are reminiscent of his Augustan forbearers and in particular Pope's *Spring: The First Pastoral* in which he speaks of 'swelling Clusters' and 'curling Vines'(Pope, 1740, p31). Nature was, in the case of the earlier Augustan poets, a projection of

nostalgia for peace before the tensions of the civil war. However, in Chatterton's Rowley world the edenic qualities of the natural landscape belie a nostalgia which has more to do with an urban desire for an idyllic natural landscape than an overt concern with the politics of the time (Fritter, 1995). Freud in his lecture *The Future of an Illusion* emphasises the internal tension implicit in the attempt to master nature, a tension which is also inherent in Chatterton's representation of the Rowley world. Freud argues that natural scenery is a defense from the reality-principle arguing that the creation of 'nature-parks' are the counterpart of the mental domain of phantasy. Freud states that nature: 'destroys us, coldly, cruelly, relentlessly, as it seems to us, and possibly through the very things that occasioned our satisfaction. It was precisely because of these dangers with which nature threatens us that we came together and created civilization...For the principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d'etre*, is to defend us against nature.' (Freud, 1989, p693). In addition to a desire to master nature and escape the urban city life of London and Bristol there is also a certain childishness embedded in the fantasy nature of Chatterton's landscapes and his overt attempts at stylistic imitation. Harmon emphasises the childishness of the Rowley creation stating that it: 'no doubt began as an innocent, childish dream based in feelings of a purely subjective matter' (Harmon as cited in Fowler, 1986, p137). While literary critics such as Louise Kaplan, Russett and Dane and Margaret Doody in *The Daring Muse* also emphasise the childishness underlying Chatterton's aesthetics and providing the motivating force for the creation of the Rowley world.

In addition to the Augustan influences on Chatterton's nature poetry he also assumes a style of descriptive nature poetry reminiscent of James Macpherson's eighteenth century Ossianic bard. Macpherson's hugely successful poetry pivoted on the Scottish bardic tradition which was rooted in a specific locality and evocative atmosphere created by the description of the wandering bard. However, Macpherson's bard did not exist and it is this imposition of a fiction and simultaneous pursuit of an authentic spirit of place that unifies both Thomas Chatterton's Rowley poetry and Macpherson's construction of the Ossianic myth. Chatterton utilizes Macpherson's style of serially punctuated description in an attempt to capture the spirit of the landscape in *Ethelgar. A Saxon Poem*:

The flowers grew beneath their feet; the trees spread out their leaves; the sun played upon the rolling brook; the winds gently past along. Dark, pitchy clouds veiled the face of the sun: the winds roared like the noise of battle; the swift hail descended to the ground; the lightning broken from the sable clouds, and gilded the dark brown corners of the sky; the thunder shook the lofty mountains; the tall towers nodded to their foundations; the bending oaks divided the whistling wind; the broken flowers fled in confusion round the mountains side

(Taylor, 1971, p254).

Chatterton's descriptive efforts render the text hysterical within the definitions established by Woods while the excessive layering of similes exhausts any sense of realism and erodes a stable sense of place. Both

Macpherson's original Ossian poetry and Chatterton's imitations can be described as 'hysterical' texts engaged as they are in excessive efforts to evoke a sense of place while simultaneously reducing any sense of reality at all. Nature is simultaneously everywhere, nowhere and constantly moving: 'the flowers grew beneath their feet, the trees spread out their leaves' (Taylor, 1971, p254). The critic Corinna Laughlin deems the Ossian style of language which Chatterton imitates 'a lawless language', but it also creates a sense of placeless where the threshold between a solid and the metaphoric world is erased (Laughlin, 2000, p514). This process of magnification is also a cover-up; in both the Ossian imitations and in the Rowley world there is a fundamental anxiety within their imaginative geography.

An acknowledgment that the text struggles to escape its own form in an attempt to fully replicate reality haunts the exploration of the relationship between poetry and place. The poet's search for the spirit of place neatly illustrates the ghostly role the referent has assumed in the view of language propagated by deconstructionist theory. Jacques Derrida describes literature as both on the edge of metaphysics, as almost beyond everything, and yet not quite (Attridge, 1992, p36). A Derridean approach to poetry implies an acceptance that literature occurs at this site of placelessness; it does not have an existence of its own. However, within this site of placelessness the literary text is continually attempting to grasp the spirit of place, the fundamental reality of the external world and inhere it as a 'presence' within the text. The French writer and philosopher, Maurice Blanchot articulates this distance between the text and the 'real' when he asks:

To what does writing tend? To free us from that which this is. And that which is no less than everything, but first and foremost, it is the presence of 'things solid and preponderant,' everything that makes for us the realm of the objective world. This liberation is accomplished thanks to the strange potential we have of creating a void around us, of placing a distance between ourselves and things

(as cited in Clark, 1992, p74).

Blanchot articulates a tension between the desire to represent a 'solid' world and the placelessness that is a fundamental characteristic of the fictional state; there must always be an absence in a reality depicted on the page. It is in this attempt to find a poetics in which the subject and the object; the 'real' world of nature and the referential world of the text become one that Paul de Man finds the fundamental ambiguity and tension at the heart of the poetics of Romanticism (deMan, 1984, p2). Chatterton's creation of a medieval Bristol embodies this romantic ideal of the self-identical possibilities of language which Paul de Man identifies. Yet within this excessive project perforations appear in the elaborate Rowley simulacrum which demonstrates that the difficulties of reference apply whether an entirely fictional world is being created or whether the text is attempting to describe a contemporary reality. For example, there are some factual inaccuracies in Chatterton's description of the earliest origins of St Mary Redcliffe Church and inconsistent applications of heraldic discourse throughout the Rowley documents. In *The Account of the Family of the De Berghams* an elaborate heraldic genealogy is created for the De Berghams

in the Rowley world where there is no historical precedence. Additionally, Chatterton's family coat of arms is different from that later on described in his *Will*. The slippage in this hermetically sealed world reveals an absence which constantly troubles the reality of the Rowley world (Bryden as cited in Groom, 1999, p69).

3. The Spirit of Place: the absence in reality

Within Chatterton's proliferation of authenticating apparatus there remains a desire to capture an authentic spirit of place which is also a desire to fill the gap troubling the mimetic completeness of his literary productions. Geoffrey H. Hartman's seminal work on the connections between poetry and place argues that one of the central distinctions separating Romantic poetry from Augustan is a belief in the spirit of place or *genius loci* (Hartman, 1970, p311). The *genius loci* originated from the ritualized votive epigram in which 'the voice of the god or genius of the place (*genius loci*) warns us that we are near sacred ground' (Hartman, 1987, p34). As the tradition became secularized within poetry Hartman emphasizes the remaining idea of religiosity and an excessive superstition associated with the concept which was at odds with eighteenth century Protestantism.

Chatterton attempts to establish this authentic spirit of place by establishing a *genius loci* in the Rowley world: the Church of St. Mary Radcliffe. St. Mary Redcliffe is closely associated with Chatterton's own birthplace located on the nearby Redcliffe Hill in Bristol. Chatterton lovingly

describes St. Mary Redcliffe in a poem embedded in *A Brief Account of William Cannings*:

As onn a Hylle one Eve sittyng
At oure Ladie's Chirch mouche wonderyng
The counyng hendie worke so fine,
Han well nighe dazeled mine Eyne
Quod I, some counyng Fairie hand
Yreer'd thus Chapele in this Lande;

(Taylor, 1971, p53).

The church is 'the Glorie and delight of Brystowe and wonder of Sumerset' (Taylor, 1971, p99). Emphasis is also placed on the church being a mode of posthumous fame for its builder in the Rowley poem *Stay, curyous traveller, and pass not bye*: 'Whole rocks on rocks with yron joynd surveie,/ and okes with okes entremed disponed lie' (Taylor, 1971, p99). The Rowley poem *Aella* is written at the fictional Rowley Mayor William Canyng's request as an occasional poem for the church's groundbreaking ceremony: 'Troolie the thyng muste be bewryen:/Inne Stone or woden worke ne founde,/Nete so bielecwoyle to myne Eyre,' and similarly upon its construction a celebratory pageant is requested producing *The Parlyamente of Sprytes* (Taylor, 1971, p107). Chatterton's written word is intimately interwoven, each text linked to one another, and connected with the physicality of the church and the imaginary process of building it from scratch. Gaston Bachelard whose study *The Poetics of Space* considers the *genius loci* of architectural space describes how the relation between the object and the subject constitute the object's reality: 'Objects that are cherished in this way really are born of an intimate light, and they attain to a

higher degree of reality than indifferent objects, or those defined by geometric reality' (Bachelard, 1958, p68). The personal significance St Mary Redcliffe held for Chatterton casts just such an 'intimate light' on his descriptions. However, this personal significance is heightened in the Rowley world to such an extent that it is, in the words of Nick Groom: 'stuffed with such an embarrassment of churches, friaries, inscriptions, and relics of Kings Arthur and Alfred as to make it the crucible of Bristolian, if not national, identity' (Groom, 2002, p171). This tendency towards excess in his description of place again undermines Chatterton's aim to impose the 'real world' on his readers' fancy.

In contrast to the desire expressed in the Rowley works to impose reality on an infatuated world Stephen Cheeke's discussion of the spirit of place emphasizes the fact that the romantic idea of a *genius loci* is based on having had an actual lived experience of the place that is then recorded in the text (2001,p141). It is to this idea of having 'been there' that Chatterton turns to in his later nature poetry. Free from the authenticating burden of the Rowley project Chatterton focuses on the contemporary local landscape in his poems *Clifton* and *Elegy, written at Stanton Drew*.

Chatterton assumes a proto-romantic posture in *Elegy, Written at Stanton Drew* wandering through a haunted landscape in a manner reminiscent of Thomas Warton's 1747 *The Pleasure of Melancholy*. Like Warton's poem Chatterton utilizes the popular mid-eighteenth century tropes of the ruin and the melancholic poet in a lonely landscape. Chatterton also uses the ancient site of Stanton Drew with its stone circles in an effort to create an evocative setting:

All hail ye solemn horrors of this Scene
The blasted Oak, the dusky green,
Ye dreary Altars by whose Side,
The Druid Priest in Crimson dyed,
The Solemn Dirges sung,
And drove the golden knife,
Into the palpitating Seat of Life,

(Taylor, 1971, p379).

Chatterton's use of the ruin as a setting for his poem is a self-conscious attempt at the 'place-making' the eighteenth century landscape architect Capability Brown referred to during the period while the use of the ruin also demands the reader's active reconstruction of a fragmentary and distant past (Aston, 1973, p231). In addition to the ruin, Chatterton also exploits the popular eighteenth century belief that the Stanton Drew stone circles had been a site of the funerary rituals of the Druids. Like Warton's own use of the myth of the Druids Chatterton's landscape seems to reverberate with multiple voices while the landscape is covered by a layer of historical echoes:

When rent with horrid shouts the distant valleys rung,
The bleeding body bends,
The glowing purple stream ascends,
Whilst the troubled spirit near
Hovers in the steamy air,
Again the sacred dirge they sing,
Again the distant hill and coppice valley ring

(Taylor, 1971, p379).

The overlap between religiosity and superstition Harman originally associated with the definition of the *genius loci* is evident in Chatterton's poem as is the original association of the *genius loci* as the 'voice' of place. And yet the voices of the Druids are not enough to fill Chatterton's landscape; he additionally projects a love story onto the scenery. Chatterton attempts to locate the *genius loci* of the Stanton Drew stone circles through a conflation of two overlapping narratives that of a lost druidic culture and a lost beloved. Consequently, like the establishment of St Mary Redcliffe as the *genius loci* of the Rowley world *Elegy, Written at Stanton Drew* also equates a spirit of place with an excess of description.

In contrast to the superstitious excesses of *Elegy, Written at Stanton Drew* in Chatterton's poem *Clifton* the poet climbs the cliffs over Bristol gorge, surveying the city from an elevated position in which he can gain a characteristically eighteenth century 'prospect view'. The poem's initial focus centres around the poet as the observer and reader of the landscape: 'My Heart can here its fav'rite bent pursue;/Here can I gaze, and pause, and muse between,/And draw some moral truth from ev'ry scene' (Taylor, 1971, 342). However, the poet is quickly distracted by a cenotaph and the consequent historical narrative suggested. Distractions from the immediate landscape recur throughout the poem as the poet embarks on several historical digressions and an elegiac remembrance of a forgotten poet called Powel. It is only in-between historical and personal musings that the poet actually describes the gorge and the Clifton landscape in front of him. The historical and commemorative digressions function as one of many layers which cover the landscape. Contradictions and fluctuating emotions are

projected onto the landscape throughout the poem further obscuring it. Chatterton begins by describing Clifton as a town of regeneration, where people come to ‘Bristol’s celebrated Wells,’ and seek health and purification. However, as the poet climbs to the mountain’s summit to take ‘a nearer view’ the landscape is revealed as meagre:

The yellow Avon, creeping at my side,
In sudden billows rolls a muddy tide;
No sportive Naiads on her streams are seen,
No cheerful pastimes deck the gloomy scene;

(Taylor, 1971, p343).

Chatterton’s description may function to establish a personal distance from the mercantile greed of Bristol as it is displayed on the river below as he takes refuge in an Olympian detachment not unlike the singular spectator atop Hagley’s Hill in James Thomson’s *The Seasons*. However, the poet continues to switch between contradictory visions of the gorge. The poem began with a contrasting image of Clifton as: ‘The darling spot which pining maidens seek,’ and it is transformed further through the voice of Powel. Chatterton’s description of the Bristol landscape, when not transformed by historical narrative, is alternatively characterised as sublime, idyllic and mundane:

Yon dusky rocks, that from the stream arise
In rude rough grandeur, threat the distant skies,
Seem as if Nature in a painful throe,
With dire convulsions lab’ring to and fro,
(To give the boiling waves a ready vent)

At one dread stroke the solid mountain rent,
The huge cleft rocks transmit to distant fame,
The sacred gliding of a good Saint's name.

(Taylor, 1971, p342).

The spirit of the place is ephemeral and is constantly slipping away from Chatterton and can be found only in the layers he places over the reality of the landscape itself: the vision of the deceased poet Powel or in the muse associated with historical narratives as she sings 'the deeds of other times,/of saints and heroes' (Taylor, 1971, p344). The poem's internal tension is a dramatization of the sustainability of an idealised and imagined landscape when confronted with the complexity of a real, unadorned, landscape:

O'er the wide landscape cast the circling eye,
How ardent memory prompts the fervid sigh!
O'er the historic page my fancy runs,
Of Britain's fortunes- of her valiant sons

(Taylor, 1971, p343).

Chatterton's gaze is a 'wandering gaze' undisciplined and with a 'circling eye' that cannot fully concentrate on the details of the landscape before him. Later on in the poem Chatterton refers to scanning the 'holy lore' equating the landscape not as natural scenery but as a historical palimpsest. In contrast to the Wordsworthian image of the child's unmediated relationship to nature the young Chatterton can only relate to the landscape through a mediator either in the form of history or through the voice of the poet Powel

who in turn speaks with a Shakespearean intonation. As the poem draws to a close the poet is left with a 'deserted solitary Stage,' finally unable to sustain this vision he must succumb to the reality of the scene; the land as it is before him. For Chatterton's poet the falling away of the layers of the palimpsest is a failure of vision, he leaves defeated: 'treading back the steps I just now trod,/ Mournful and sad I seek my lone abode' (Taylor, 1971, p345). The landscape did not have an authentic spirit of its own; for Chatterton, the spirit of place existed not in the place itself but in the narrative layers he placed on top of the landscape. Chatterton has to invoke and layer multiple voices because he cannot let the *genius loci* speak directly, unmediated, to the reader. Consequently, the moment of authenticity in the poem is also the moment of disappointment. The absence found in the unadorned landscape reflects the texts attempt to reach beyond itself in order to find 'some moral truth from every scene.' However, paradoxically the falling away of the excess adornment and layers Chatterton placed over his landscapes allow him to assume the quintessential romantic mode; a mode which acknowledges the failure of vision and the limits of representation.

Maurice Blanchot's translator, Ann Smock's explanation of the translation of 'l' espace into 'space' provides a definition of space in which literature becomes the very definition of placelessness and an embodiment of loss:

[Espace] means 'space', the region toward which whoever reads or writes is drawn—literature's 'domain'. But, although words such as 'region' or 'domain' or 'realm' are often used to designate this zone, it implies

the withdrawal of what is ordinarily meant by 'place'; it suggests the site of this withdrawal. Literature's space is like the place where someone dies: a nowhere, Blanchot says, which is here

(Blanchot, 1982, p15).

Similarly, in *On Literature* J. Hillis Miller argues that it is only by seeing literary language as a representation of the real world that literary study neutralises and naturalises what is the true strangeness of literature (Miller, 2002, p33). Chatterton's use of pseudo medieval verse, his penchant for neologism contrasted with his inter-textual attempts at the creation of an 'imaginative matrix' make unavoidable a confrontation with literature's 'true strangeness'. Thomas Chatterton's hysteria as symbolized in the elaborate documentation of the Rowley world was in fact an attempt to gain a mimetic completeness which contradicts Blanchot's idea that literature has no place. Unknowingly, Chatterton instead exposed the 'true strangeness' of the literary endeavor. Chatterton's poetry fluctuates violently between the presence and absence that Blanchot distinguishes as the fictional state of language. It is an inherent contradiction of the literary text that it maintains an illusion of a sense of place while simultaneously providing the occasion for a revelation of its own lack. It is within this dialectic, between stability and flux, that Chatterton's search for a spirit of place is dramatised and the role of excess in his ambitious literary projects is prioritised.

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“The simplest of proficiencies – the ability to kill my fellow-men”: Isaak Babel and Making Sense of Extremity

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Abstract:

In this article I consider Isaak Babel’s *Red Cavalry* (1924) collection of stories from the perspective of melodrama. The effectiveness of Babel’s descriptions of violence and brutality can be understood with reference to the characteristics of melodrama. Babel writes in a very sparse and objective way, using short sentences and a minimal cast of characters. By comparing his work with the traditions of extremity or excess associated with melodrama, I hope to shed light on the reasons why *Red Cavalry* so effectively conveys a sense of deep uncertainty and upheaval.

I discuss the role of the individual (Lyutov) in making sense of his world, and argue that by presenting his narrator as an internally divided character Babel resists simple good/evil dichotomies. The various motivations behind the Cossacks’ acts of violence point to the idea that actions cannot be explained solely with reference to good and evil forces.

In my comments on the final stories of the cycle, I argue that the tensions and plots in *Red Cavalry* are only partially resolved. In my view, this is a consequence of Lyutov’s conflicted personality. As he cannot intellectually locate what is desirable, or good, he cannot reach a state of completion in which he achieves fulfillment.

I also highlight the role of Babel’s descriptions of nature, suggesting that they are full of melodramatic colours, contrasts and symbolism. This implies that the suppressed melodramatic must re-surface in some way as a response to the extremity of the conflict and violence the author witnessed.

Keywords:

Babel, Brooks, Melodrama, Red Cavalry

1. Introduction

Isaak Babel began to write the stories which make up *Red Cavalry* in 1921 following his experiences in the Soviet-Polish War of 1919-1921. They were originally published individually as newspaper and journal articles between 1923 and 1925 before being published in a book in 1926.

Babel worked as a newspaper correspondent during the war, fighting alongside General Budyonny's Cossack regiment in 1920 having been told by Maxim Gorky to 'go out into the world' in order to develop his writing skills. The stories which make up *Red Cavalry* are based on events Babel witnessed as Charles Rougle (1996:8) demonstrates.

The place of violence within the world of *Red Cavalry* was problematic for Babel's contemporaries, as it has been for modern readers. Yuri Shcheglov (1994) points out that for Soviets at the time of the war, the use of violence to pursue humanist aims sat uneasily with the idealistic goals of the Revolution. But Carol Luplow (1982), for instance, cites the official Russian government's attempts to justify violence in the struggle against capitalism as 'revolutionary humanism'. In this discourse, violence was seen as a necessity to attain a new and better future. Babel, however, expresses anxieties about the use of physical force, portraying a hero who was intellectually drawn to the Revolution, but was dismayed by the contradiction between its ideals of peace and harmony and the reality of the aggression used to achieve its goals.

In this paper, I will draw on Peter Brooks' work on melodrama (Brooks 1995) to suggest ways in which melodramatic traditions can shed new light

on the narrative techniques Babel uses to describe his world. I focus on two main strands of Brooks' thinking about melodrama - the 'clear nomination of the moral universe' (Brooks 1995:17) and, linked to this, his argument that the events described in melodramatic texts are endowed with an additional, deeper meaning. He argues that: 'things cease to be merely themselves, gestures cease to be merely tokens of social intercourse...they become vehicles of metaphor whose tenor suggests another kind of reality' (Brooks 1995:9). The other 'kind of reality' Brooks refers to here is elsewhere explained as being a spiritual universe of good and evil. For Brooks, melodrama is inextricably linked to the drive to understand the world in moral terms. He argues that 'melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and *raison d'être* the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths' (Brooks 1995:15).

Babel's work is not usually thought of within the context of melodrama. His prose is sparse and minimalist - every word and every punctuation mark seems to matter. As I will illustrate, he uses the opposite of hyperbole – litotes - and understatement to make his points. While his subject matter could be described as intensely melodramatic, the literary devices he uses diffuse the melodrama, but they also, almost as a consequence of the act of understatement, reinforce the extremity of the situation. In this paper I will explore Babel's *Red Cavalry* in the light of Brooks' ideas, arguing that Brooks' work on melodrama can help us to understand why Babel's writing style conveys the horror of the Soviet-Polish War so effectively.

I will begin by considering the two traditions or cultures Babel's hero Lyutov is torn between – his Jewish upbringing in Odessa and the violent

world of the Cossacks he travels alongside. I will then look in more detail at the reasons the Cossacks gave for their acts of extreme violence, arguing that these multiple, and varied, justifications ensure that the Cossacks are seen as individuals, and not as one large mass of people who are indistinguishable from each other. In the next sections I argue that Babel's use of understatement in his descriptions of violence are driven by Lyutov's need to understand the brutality, rather than to categorise it as 'good' or 'evil' or to fight against it. I will briefly summarise some of the arguments made about Babel's use of colloquial, first-person 'skaz', suggesting that this narrative technique, amongst others, contributes to the sense that the text is complex and fragmented. I will then go on to reflect on Babel's use of metaphors in his descriptions of nature. Using Brooks (1995), I will suggest that the strong emotions Babel does not write into other parts of his text emerge through the way his protagonist, Lyutov, perceives the natural world.

2. Conflict and dichotomy

Conflict and dichotomy are key aspects of Babel's writing and critics such as Richard Hallett (1972) and James Falen (1974) trace Babel's sense of being torn back to his childhood. He was born into a Jewish family in Odessa in 1894 and Hallett (1972) suggests that his autobiographical work *Tales of Odessa* points to his sensitivity to the contrast between the old, traditional world of his extended Jewish family, and the 'new' cosmopolitan world of Odessa. Critics such as Patricia Carden (1972) have argued that while Babel experienced these two worlds as the contrast between feeling confined within his family, or free in the larger outside world, he also knew

that his family signified safety and security, while the larger environment of Odessa could bring its own dangers. Ultimately, however, despite the affection Babel had for his family, especially the lifelong devotion he felt for his mother, and his nostalgia for the Jewish rituals of his past, Babel's desire for space and freedom led him to move beyond his family life and eventually beyond Odessa itself (Falen 1974). The conflicts Babel experienced during this formative period permeate his literary output. For example, Christopher Luck (1995) highlights the 'collisions' between the past and the present in the story *Gedali*, in which Babel affectionately describes *Gedali's* old curiosity shop:

This is a shop like the specimen box of a solemn and inquisitive boy who will one day be a professor of botany. In this shop there are both buttons and a dead butterfly, and its little owner is called *Gedali*...he hovers in a labyrinth of globes, skulls and dead flowers, waves a multi-coloured feather duster and blows the dust off the dead flowers. (Babel 1994:117)

Babel's hero, *Lyutov*, struggles to reconcile his thoughtful, intellectual nature with the instinctive physicality of the Cossacks he lives amongst. Falen describes *Red Cavalry* as Babel's 'dialogue with himself' (Falen 1972:126). *Lyutov* is portrayed as both respecting his Jewish identity with its emphasis on morality and the need to live peacefully with others, and also his admiration of the Cossacks' ability to take human life. In the quotation from which I have taken the title of this paper, *Lyutov* articulates his desire for this ability to kill others. He has been berated for cowardice by the Cossacks after being discovered going into battle with an unloaded pistol and the story concludes: 'I was exhausted and, bent under the

sepulchral crown, moved forward, begging fate for the simplest of abilities – the ability to kill a man’ (Babel 1994:222).

Although Lyutov has a strong nostalgic attraction to Jewish ritual, community and history, he also admires the Cossacks he is fighting alongside. The Cossacks are active, virile and magnificent, while Lyutov is shown to conform to the perception of intellectuals as unable to act. This is especially apparent in ‘The Death of Dolgushov’ in which Lyutov is unable to kill Dolgushov although he is fatally injured and asks to be shot. Another Cossack, Afonka, is scathing in his reaction to Lyutov: ‘Go away...or I’ll kill you. You four-eyed lot have as much pity for us as a cat has for a mouse’ (Babel 1994:135).

The Cossacks, on the other hand, have no doubts about the rightness of their actions and do not spend time justifying their violence. In ‘A Letter’, Vasily Timofeich Kurdyukov gives his mother a dispassionate, almost casual, account of how his brother ‘put an end to’ their father (Babel 1994:100). On the other hand, he expresses great concern for his favourite horse, begging his mother to ‘be sure to wash his forelegs with the soap I left behind the icons’ (Babel 1994:97).

Although the sense of tension in the text between the ‘way of peace’ and the ‘way of war’ has a significant influence on the plot of many of the individual stories and even seems to drive Babel to add an additional story, ‘Argamak’, to the cycle in 1932, the two opposing ways of being are not portrayed as complete dichotomies. The narrator empathises both with

characters who personify Jewish culture and tradition, such as Gedali, and with Cossacks, such as the ‘captivating’ Savitsky (Babel 1994:81).

3. Cossacks’ Motivations for Extreme Violence

Unlike in melodrama, where characters speak their minds passionately and there is a clear distinction between good and evil, the motivations for individual acts of violence in Babel’s stories are complex and varied. Some of the violence, for example, is motivated by personal acts of revenge, rather than political reasons.

One of the Cossacks, Pavlichenko, murders his landlord after years of having his wages unfairly withheld. Pavlichenko’s method of killing his landlord is particularly brutal: ‘I trampled on him for an hour or more than an hour, and during that time I got to know him and his life. Shooting – in my opinion – is just a way of getting rid of a fellow, to shoot him is to pardon him...with shooting you don’t get to a man’s soul’ (Babel 1994:149). Luck (1995) suggests that Babel blurs the distinction between victim and perpetrator as many of the characters who inflict violence are also victims of violence. Pavlichenko is an example of both a victim and a perpetrator of violence as he is portrayed as having previously been brutalised by his master’s cruelty and exploitation. The use of understatement in Babel’s description of his revenge would seem to reinforce this point. By avoiding graphic descriptions of blood and destruction and describing instead Pavlichenko’s feet as weapons, and murder as a process, rather than a sudden, quick event, the reader is left with a greater sense of the outraged humanity which led up to the murder.

In highlighting the horrifying capacity of the Cossacks for inflicting pain and suffering, Babel raises questions about morality and whether the force used during the Cossacks' campaigns was justified. He may have agreed with the political aims of the Revolution, but his text suggests that the upheaval caused by the Revolution was also used as a cover for acts of individual revenge and sadism. Pavlichenko's murder of his landlord is an example of a murder motivated by individual revenge.

Babel's narrator, Lyutov, has a strong nostalgic attraction to Jewish ritual, community and history, but he also admires the Cossacks he is fighting alongside. The Cossacks are active, virile and magnificent, while Lyutov is shown to conform to the perception of intellectuals as unable to act. These competing loyalties are manifest in 'The Death of Dolgushov'. Dolgushov has been injured so severely that: '...his stomach had been torn out, his intestines had sagged down on his knees, and the beating of his heart was visible.' (Babel 1994:134) Lyutov, however is unable to kill him in an act of 'mercy killing', despite his pleas to be released from his suffering.

This story raises questions about the line between justified and unjustified killing, of whether Lyutov is right to long for the ability to kill, and of the extent of individuals' culpability for acts of desecration and inhumanity which take place on battlefields or in immediate the aftermath of war. Babel does not suggest any answers to these questions. They are posed repeatedly in different ways, grappled with, but ultimately left unresolved.

The bare physical description of Dolgushov's injuries, without the use of similes or other literary techniques, emphasises their severity. Babel's

refusal to distract the reader with anything by the bare, objective account of the way Dolgushov's injured body looked, forces the reader to face the complexity of the moral issues he raises to which there are no clear answers, unlike in traditional melodrama in which the author has a very particular view of the plot and portrays the protagonists as either good or bad.

In another story, *Salt*, Babel depicts the encounter between a Cossack, Nikita Balmashov, and a woman who deceived the Cossacks into protecting her by pretending to carry a baby. The story is written in the form of a letter sent from Balmashov to a 'Comrade Editor' in an editorial office. Balmashov describes how he shoots the woman dead, justifying his actions in this way: 'taking my trusty rifle from the wall, I wiped that infamy from the face of the working land and the Republic' (Babel 1994:167). In this example, the Cossack's violence is motivated by a combination of injured pride and anger at being tricked, and loyalty to the Revolution. Babel does not comment on the extent of Balmashov's genuine sense of outrage on behalf of the Revolution. He leaves the reader to ponder whether his killing of the woman was motivated more by his own pride and later justified in terms of the revolution's aims for propaganda purposes.

4. Understatement and descriptions of violence

Babel consistently uses understatement in his descriptions of violence throughout the text of *Red Cavalry*. In his attempts to understand his environment and the actions of the Cossacks, Lyutov is portrayed as trying to view the extreme violence around him as dispassionately as possible. For example, in the story *Prishchepa*, the eponymous Cossack returns to his

childhood home where neighbours seized his parents' property after they were taken hostage by the Whites. Lyutov recounts how Prishchepa 'went from one neighbour to another, and the bloody imprint of his boot soles stretched after him' (Babel 1994:151).

In this quotation, the vivid image of Prishchepa's bloody footprints trailing from house to house portrays the sense of the massacre without the need for Babel to describe it in detail. The understatement actually has the effect of highlighting the unspeakable reality of the violence Babel witnessed. His minimalistic style obscures the image of the excessive violence, as though it is so terrible that it cannot be looked at directly.

Another example of this technique is the description of the dispassionate killing of an elderly Jewish man by another Cossack, Kudrya: 'With his right hand Kudrya pulled out his dagger and carefully cut the old man's throat, without splashing any blood on himself' (Babel 1994:161).

Here, Babel's focus on the actions and perspective of the perpetrator of the violence distracts attention from the victim, suggesting perhaps that the old man's suffering is too painful to look at. In contrast to melodramatic traditions, in which suffering is described vividly and emotively, in *Red Cavalry* pain is not focused on, but largely left to the reader to imagine.

5. Lyutov - Grappling with violence

The cyclical text of *Red Cavalry* appears fragmented and confusing with the very short stories appearing disconnected and bearing little relationship with each other. Lyutov, as the central character seems to be the only common

factor in the disparate stories. Luck (1995:122) goes so far as to argue that Lyutov is ‘the lynchpin, the hub around which all else revolves and through whom everything, or almost everything, is viewed.’ While the majority of the stories are told in the first person, with Lyutov as the narrator, other stories are narrated through letters written by Cossacks or by them verbally recounting their stories to Lyutov. As Teresa de Lauretis (1984) would argue, the ‘desire’ driving the narrative is Lyutov’s, and the stories seem to be selected for inclusion in the cycle because they illuminate some aspect of his development.

Through the character of Lyutov, Babel portrays the subjective and very individual perceptions, attitudes and feelings of one man trying to make sense of a changing and complex environment. The text is driven by Lyutov’s desire, and need, to find meaning in the chaos around him – to somehow understand himself in relation to all the facets of his changing environment. Lyutov’s thoughtful, intellectual nature intensifies his struggle to understand and find his place in the world around him. Hallett (1972:55) for example, suggests that *Red Cavalry* is an example of ‘the powerful and obsessive significance that violence has for the intellectual’.

However Babel underplayed it, the extreme and horrific violence he witnessed as a war correspondent was, unlike the plots of melodramas, unfortunately very real. This contrasts with Brooks’ contention that melodrama involves the creation of an exciting, parabolic story from the ‘banal stuff of reality’ (Brooks 1995:2). Babel was, I think, faced with such a disturbing, frightening and confusing reality that artistically he had to work counter to the melodramatic tradition – as it were, to make his

experiences appear more banal. While the melodramatic tradition focused on depicting small, everyday events as great dramas and conflicts between the forces of good and evil, Babel seems to strive in *Red Cavalry* to reduce the great trauma and brutality of the Cossacks' actions to simple tales. By stripping narrative embellishments and any references to higher purposes or moral significance from his stories, and focusing on distilled, sparse accounts of the events, Babel emphasises Lyutov's intense need to understand.

The sparseness of Babel's text may be seen as driven by Lyutov's need to understand. De Lauretis (1984) contends that narrative is often driven by masculine desire to form selves which are unified and whole, and able to act decisively in the world. In *Red Cavalry*, I would argue that Babel's focus on the pertinent issues of violence, action and justice, through the use of sparse, concise descriptions is driven by Lyutov's single-minded pursuit of understanding. As he thinks deeply and problematises simple categories of 'good' and 'evil' Lyutov can reflect upon only small parts of his environment. As such, each short story may be understood as describing a small episode which has triggered the intellectual Lyutov to contemplate the place of violence in the revolutionary battle for humane values.

In *Salt*, for instance, when Balmashov realises that he has been tricked, he tells the woman to:

turn around and look at those two girls who are crying because we have made them suffer this night. Turn around and look at our wives in the wheatfields of the Kuban who are exhausting their womanly strength without their

husbands, and those others, who are also on their own, who from evil necessity are raping the girls that pass into their lives. (Babel 1994:166)

Balmashov both acknowledges the suffering caused by rape but also tries to portray the Cossacks who violated the girls as victims of 'evil necessity'. He compares the Cossacks' wives who are left behind in the fields to care for families and earn livelihoods without their husbands, and the Cossacks themselves who are 'forced' to rape women. In a way this comparison which suggests an acceptance and complacency of brutality is as, if not more, shocking than the stark fact of the rapes.

The originality of Babel's introduction of the subject of rape is also significant. He does not describe the rapes themselves, either from the point of view of the victim or the perpetrator, and he does not show the Cossacks boasting to each other about the violence they inflicted. Instead, the reader is made aware of the rapes (which, the narrator implies, are a routine part of the Cossacks' lives) when Balmashov refers to them as part of his expression of outrage at the woman's actions in eliciting his sympathy for her 'baby'.

This approach adds to the sense that Babel portrays extreme violence effectively by using understated descriptions and relying on the readers' imaginations. His refusal to explain even the most horrific acts of violence using simple oppositions of good and evil and his objective depiction of the events using sparse language emphasise the extremity of the violence and also the extreme feelings of confusion and dislocation the violence evokes for the narrator, Lyutov.

6. Cossack voices

Red Cavalry defies easy categorisation and cannot be interpreted only as the attempt of one intellectual character to understand the world around him. Babel's use of 'skaz' to emphasise Cossacks' voices and viewpoints adds to the disparate nature of the text. 'Skaz', narration told in the first-person which reflects the style in which the character would speak, features colloquial vocabulary and syntax (Lodge 1992) as in the Kurdyulov's correspondence with his mother in *A Letter*. Kurdyulov's letter includes elements of formality such as: 'In the second bit of this letter I hasten to tell you about Papasha, that he killed my brother Fyodor Timofeich Kurdyukov with his sabre about a year ago' (Babel 1994:97). However, the writer then goes on to describe Fyodor's death using more colloquial expressions, describing the events vividly and without moderating his account out of concern for his mother's feelings:

And Papasha began to slash Fyodor with his sabre, saying: 'Mercenary, Red dog, bitch's brood', and various other things and he went on slashing him until it was dark, and then my brother Fyodor Timofeich died (Babel 1994:97).

These quotations show that 'skaz', as Rougle (1996) suggests, is often an incongruous mixture of styles in which uneducated speakers, such as Cossacks, attempt to use 'bookish' or more formal language. The 'skaz' episodes give the reader an insight into the individual personality, history and motivations of their Cossack narrators, preserving, as Mendelson (1982:114) argues, the 'highly personal character of the work'. Andrew (1989) points out that the use of 'skaz' privileges the male 'voice of

violence' as hearing the stories recounted directly from the Cossacks' perspective gives the reader a powerful insight into the motivations behind their violent acts. This is an important point as it demonstrates the limitations of Babel's multiplicity of voices. While he works to ensure that other voices, besides that of Lyutov, are heard in the text, the Cossack 'skaz' elements are still overwhelmingly male and violent. The voices of the victims of violence are arguably still under-represented and repressed in these accounts.

Mendelson (1982) goes on to suggest that it may have been important for Babel to emphasise the individuality of his Cossack characters to guard against the tendency to see them as one single amorphous group as a straightforward, dichotomous division of the characters into two groups of either Jews or Cossacks is not adequate. Babel shows that there are both sympathetic and unsympathetic characters in both groups.

Despite the presence of 'skaz' elements in the cycle of stories, arguments about the centrality of Lyutov's role remain valid. The 'skaz' stories are often included in the work because of their relationship to the narrator. By this I mean that they have been told to Lyutov, or have some other significance for him. *A Letter*, for example, was dictated to Lyutov by its sender and he claims that 'it does not deserve oblivion' (Babel 1994:96).

Babel therefore maintains a careful balance between using Lyutov as the unifying character of his work whose perspective guides the inclusion of subject matter, while giving the text a sense of authenticity by including the voices of characters other than Lyutov. We have already seen that the

Cossacks were motivated to commit violent acts for a variety of reasons. I would argue that portraying the Cossacks' descriptions of their lives and actions through the emotive use of 'skaz' brings a sense of authenticity and sympathy to the Cossacks' viewpoint. This technique of allowing the reader to see events through the eyes of the Cossack characters challenges the centrality of Lyutov as the unifying character, and therefore also challenges Lyutov's subjective views on moral questions of what counts as 'good' or 'evil'.

The disruptive, disorientating force of the variety of voices in *Red Cavalry* seems even greater when we remember that Lyutov is a character who is himself struggling to understand the world around him. Any sense of understanding he has managed to gain is constantly disrupted by the inclusion of another character's viewpoint in the text.

7. Descriptions of Nature

Although there are so many differences between melodramatic writing and Babel's *Red Cavalry*, it seems very significant that there remains in Babel's text an artistic urge towards melodrama. Following Brooks' (1995) application of psychological ideas to melodrama, it is as though Babel (or his main character Lyutov) has repressed strong emotional responses which must surface in other ways. In this reading, Babel's powerful descriptions of nature could be explained as part of his displaced desire for the clear distinctions between good and bad that we see in melodramatic literature. We have already seen that the 'vocabulary of clear, simple, moral and

psychological absolutes' found in melodrama (Brooks1995:28) is completely lacking for most of *Red Cavalry*.

Nonetheless, Babel is known for his unique use of metaphors and vivid colours in his descriptions of the natural world. He writes, for example, 'In the black seaweed of the sky trail the stars' (Babel 1994:168).

His descriptions are highly original and are commented on frequently by critics. Danuta Mendelson (1982) in particular writes about his use of metaphors, arguing that metaphors are reflective of the personality and individuality of the character who uses them. Lyutov seems to allow himself to experience strong feelings through the way he views and responds to nature. Just as the previous quotation emphasised a sense of extreme dread and gloom, my next example hits a lighter tone, emphasising playfulness and harmony: 'The grass rustles all over the world, the heavens swing about above me like a concertina with many keyboards.' (Babel 1994:144) The clarity of the vivid colours he sees in nature contrasts with the ambiguity of the moral decisions Lyutov must make.

The way Lyutov views nature could be read as signifying deep emotional responses to the violence around him which he does not allow himself to express in other ways. 'An orange sun is rolling across the sky like a severed head' (Babel 1994:91) for instance, may be read as an example of Lyutov's transference of his feelings of guilt and disgust about the previous day's killing onto the inanimate sky and sun. As he cannot take a clear and consistent moral stance in relation either to violence or pacifism, it is as

though his longing for clarity can only find expression in his descriptions of the natural world.

Another example of his tendency to give almost melodramatically exaggerated qualities to inanimate objects is: ‘The moon was already hanging above the yard like a cheap earring.’ (Babel 1994:122) Here, in the story *My First Goose*, the moon takes on negative connotations perhaps reflecting the only partial success of Lyutov’s attempts to prove himself to the Cossacks by killing a goose.

8. Partial Resolutions

Lyutov never does find the ‘ability to kill [his] fellow men’, but he does learn to ride. In *Argamak*, Lyutov is shown riding his horse confidently and in a way that does not single him out from the Cossacks:

I rode past them, they did not raise their eyes to me...Their indifference signified that there was nothing special about my manner of sitting in the saddle, I rode the way everyone else did, there was no reason to look at me...I galloped on my way and was happy. (Babel 1994: 229)

This final story ends with Lyutov expressing his satisfaction at the measure of acceptance he has attained: ‘My dream was fulfilled. The Cossacks stopped following me with their eyes’ (Babel 1994:232). Efraim Sicher (1985) argues however that this sense of resolution is incomplete as although Lyutov fulfils his ambition of learning to ride a horse, he is not shown in this story resolving the many other questions about his identity with which he has grappled throughout the cycle. Sicher’s point shows how

Red Cavalry is a multifaceted work which does not follow a linear, narrative structure and so resists a clean, easy conclusion.

Babel expresses the ethical nuances of the changing and complex environment of the Soviet-Polish War by refusing to portray either side as completely good, or right. I would also suggest that, just as no one idea, community, or way of being is shown to be the side of 'right', so the narrator does not have a clear aim, or goal towards which to strive. Lyutov does not decide whether to pursue a peaceful life based in his Jewish heritage or to learn to fight alongside the Cossacks (rather than acting as an observer) the resolution to his story must remain only a partial conclusion. He learns to ride, but does not learn to kill.

9. Conclusion

I have shown how Babel's portrayal of violence and his descriptions of the environment he finds himself in appear to be more striking and haunting because they subvert the traditions of melodrama. One effect of Babel's technique of understating the violence is to make his work readable and to continue to engage the reader, in what could have become a dense and unrelenting recounting of destruction and gruesome bloodshed.

I have also suggested that one explanation for Babel's subversion of melodramatic techniques may be found in the inability to locate clear moral 'good' and 'bad' characteristics in his world. This ambiguity both contributes to the sense that the hero, Lyutov, cannot form judgements

about his surroundings and also means that his story is only partially resolved.

In conclusion then, I have tried to show that the melodramatic tradition is a powerful analytical tool for interpreting even texts which seem at first to contain very few elements of melodrama. I would suggest that the need for some degree of clarity, and the artistic exaggeration that may accompany this need, is so human and universal, that it is likely to emerge in some way or another. For example, in *Red Cavalry*, elements of melodrama can be seen in Babel's descriptions of the natural world.

However, I have also highlighted the way in which Babel achieves a sense of impact in his portrayal of horrific acts of violence through understatement and litotes. *Red Cavalry* has always been read as a text full of oppositions, but the opposition between melodramatic and understated styles of writing is one which could still be explored further.

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Countering Extremism in the Name of Security: Criminalizing Alternative Politics

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Abstract:

This analysis considers the development of counter-extremism strategy in the post-9/11 period. It seeks firstly to locate this development in the context of the evolution of 21st century security strategies and secondly to illustrate that it has a vital role in the current politics of security. Focussing on UK, Australian and U.S. security strategies the paper seeks to illustrate that a common approach to counter-extremism has emerged in recent years leading to an increased prominence of such measures in counter-terrorism strategy. The paper considers why this has occurred, what effects it has on the approach to terrorism and how it affects the dominant understanding of the politics of terrorism. The paper attempts to illustrate the integral role official counter-extremism strategy has in defining extremism and in turn locating those individuals, groups and ideas deemed extreme outside of the parameters of legitimate politics. It seeks to reveal the ways in which counter-extremism work serves to depoliticise those deemed 'extreme' and in turn serves to delegitimise, and in certain cases criminalise, any truly alternative politics to those that define the current regime. The analysis considers the legitimising function the extremist/moderate distinction has in relation to the current politics of security and ultimately, the paper seeks to illustrate that through the construction of the extremist, counter-extremism serves to reinforce a monopoly of legitimacy for liberalism in the current era.

Keywords:

Counter-Terrorism, Extremism, Liberalism, Politics, Security.

Introduction:

The 'war on terror' was presented from the outset as a campaign for security without a visible end point. As we enter the second decade of this 'war' it remains a key focal point of both foreign and domestic policy for each of the members of the coalition of liberal democratic governments who initially united in its name. This analysis seeks to consider the development of the 'war on terror' primarily in the three states that have lead the campaign from its beginning, the US, UK and Australia.

The analysis focuses on the increasing emphasis on the domestic context in the fight against terrorism considering the processes involved in bringing this 'war' home and the reasons for doing so. The concern here lies with the emphasis on 'extremism' that has emerged as a central feature of the 'war on terror' most explicitly in the latter half of its lifespan and the analysis seeks to understand how this fits into the overarching contemporary state politics of security. The development of specific counter-extremism strategies as a core component of the fight against terrorism suggests a shift in focus in the 'war on terror' and an apparent change in the relationship between its foreign policy and domestic components. Through analysis of these strategy documents, this paper seeks to consider this apparent shift and assess the implications it has for the continuation of a project that appears able to continuously expand its remit. There is a concern throughout with the potential convergence between the US, UK and Australia around a common approach to countering extremism and the analysis considers the relationship between the response to extremism and liberal politics.

The analysis begins by situating counter-extremism strategies within the overall structure of security strategies in the US, UK and Australia. The analysis begins from a concern with how the states in question conceive national security and counter-terrorism in the current epoch and moreover how they define the current situation within which security strategy is developed and employed. Essentially, this equates to how the state positions the politics of security historically and this question is at the heart of the analysis.

From this starting point, against the backdrop of an official understanding of the current situation, the analysis seeks to ascertain how the state defines security issues in relation to those populations and phenomena it credits with posing a risk to security. At its core, this involves a focus on the construction of an enemy; the process by which the state establishes and subsequently defines the opposition that characterises the liberal state's approach to security. This will involve a consideration of how the state defines both external and internal enemies in the current era as well as a continual focus on the strategies employed to legitimise the response. It is in this context that the analysis seeks to consider the function of counter-extremism strategies.

2. Securing freedom in the name of 'shared values'

Throughout the security strategies produced in the post-9/11 era we have been told that both the contemporary threat to security and the state response have to be understood in line with how the world had changed by

the beginning of the twenty-first century. The current situation is located this side of a definitive break between centuries and the features of this new era are integral to understanding the current security situation. The twentieth century ended, albeit eleven years early, with a 'decisive victory for the forces of freedom' that left 'a single sustainable model for national success' defined by 'freedom, democracy, and free enterprise'(Bush 2002: iv). The struggles of the twentieth century have been overcome with the 'forces of freedom' unanimously victorious. The defining opposition of this period, that between 'two power blocs' driven by ideology (and located either side of a freedom/tyranny binary), has been replaced by 'more complex and unpredictable sets of relationships' leaving a 'transformed international landscape' (UK Cabinet Office 2008: 3). Essentially, this 'transformed landscape' is one on which there remains no defining opposition between nation states, 'power blocs' or ideologies. The current era began in 1989 with the defeat of the opposing world view and there is now no 'sustained global challenge to the liberal, market-oriented vision of a free society' (UK Cabinet Office 2009: 5). We have reached the end of history; the age of political oppositions, of politics, is over.

So how then is the current era to be understood? It is clearly to be understood in the first instance not as an age of politics – not as an age in which world views or ideologies compete and conflict – a 'fact' much celebrated by the victorious forces of freedom. Fundamentally, the forces of freedom have therefore carte-blanc to define this era in their own image and this is thus an age of freedom, democracy and human rights starkly distinguished from a previous era blighted by war, barbarism and

inhumanity. The ‘militant visions of class, nation and race which promised utopia and delivered misery have been defeated and discredited’ (Bush 2002: 1) and in its place we have a vision of the free world defined by human rights and shared values.

Freedom is crucially defined in political *and* economic terms. Free-market capitalism is presented post-1989 as the victorious economic model and in turn as an inevitable defining feature of the current era. We are to understand the post-1989 period as the period of the triumph of the market which has secured universal acceptance as the only route to ‘peace, prosperity and liberty’. There is now apparently no possibility, or even desire, for an alternative model.

The economy, in its current very specific form, is taken as a given both as the defining feature of the current global situation and as the end point for the development and consolidation of the new post-political era. Free trade is understood to be ‘real freedom’ (Bush 2002: 18) and the economy is thus presented in this formulation as the overcoming of the political. The economy is depoliticised – the age of politics in which economic models and political ideologies were opposed has given way to an ‘age of freedom’ defined by free-trade and the free-market – and the global capitalist market is posited in the contemporary era as the objective state of things. As history is here divided in two eras either side of 1989, the global capitalist market (or moreover the economic sphere in general) is withdrawn from consideration; the end of history marks the end of questioning the role and form of the economy.

This vision of the age of freedom is set out most explicitly in twenty-first century US security strategy produced in its first form in 2002 with the UK and Australian documents produced later in the last decade (2008, 2009, 2010) taking this implicitly (and at times explicitly) as their starting point. The goal of security strategy is to ‘safeguard the nation, its citizens, our prosperity and our way of life’ (UK Cabinet Office 2008: 3). ‘Our way of life’ has to be understood in line with the presentation of the current era, defined by a commitment to human rights and the free-market. The defence of this ‘way of life’ is framed in terms of the defence of these ‘shared values’ (human rights and free-enterprise) that is both premise and consequence of security strategy. The notion of an international order defined by (human) rights is shared in UK, US and Australian security strategy and the defence of this order is at the core of security strategy. Accordingly, we are told that there exists a broad consensus on the features of security strategy among those who share ‘our’ values and goals.

Security is presented as a common goal of those who share a commitment to human rights and by extension the formulation current security strategy advocated by these states is presented as compatible with, and essential for, the defence of human rights. The fusion of human rights and security here serves to extract any political dynamic from the international relations that characterise the current security environment. Security becomes solely about the protection of rights not about the defence of a given political order. In this sense, conflict is reduced to disagreements about rights and politics is effaced from security strategy.

Building a consensus among allies in the ‘war on terror’ around shared values is clearly about developing a unified force behind the promotion of human rights but is also about sustaining and expanding the consensus around the unequivocal status of free-market capitalism. Indeed the two cannot be separated; security is about defending the current political and economic status quo, but presented in a depoliticised frame that mystifies what is clearly a well defined political project.

3. Terrorism as a threat to ‘our’ values

It is from this starting point that the claim that counter-terrorism strategy is ‘grounded entirely in human rights’ (HM Government 2009: 55) needs to be understood. Terrorism threatens these rights and thus constitutes the primary (traditional) threat to security for the international community (this ‘community’ is here defined by its commitment to human rights as those who reject their validity are ‘isolated’, or more appropriately, excluded). The terrorists’ unwillingness (or inability) to justify its actions inside the language of human rights posits them as relics of the previous age of politics; they are presented as the ‘heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century.....following the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism’ (Bush in United States, Executive Office of the President 2003: 55). Given that this age of politics, definitively resigned to the twentieth century, is over, the terrorist’s commitment to politically motivated violence and ideology is seen to distort political action. The clash of ideology thesis is rejected across national security strategies and counter

terrorism strategies because ideology is the sole preserve of the terrorist. The ideological foundation of terrorism is not to be opposed by an alternate ideology but by values. Official security discourse relies upon this false opposition between values and ideology as though an ideology is something other than organised ideas and values.

Legitimate forms of political action (defined exclusively by (the values of) liberal democracy) are said to be antithetical to terrorism and this is essentially because the terrorist fails to circumscribe their politics within the parameters set by human rights. Terrorism is underpinned by ‘destructive visions of political change’ (United States, Executive Office of the President 2003: 29) and these must be undermined through counter-terrorism. The goal is to bring about a consensus around one vision of politics and political action defined through human rights.

The essential problem that security strategy is to address arises from the impossibility of an age of post-politics. Politics cannot in reality be overcome and there exists a major issue with how political oppositions that arise in the current era (or transcend the apparent break between ages) are to be managed. It is here that security strategy has its decisive role. The process of constructing issues as ones of (in)security is about seeking to negate, or at least obscure, the political and it is in this frame that security strategy seeks to define the current threat. The presentation of the current threat(s) to security involves at its core the construction of an enemy that is distinguished from ‘us’ not in terms of a political opposition but through its inability or unwillingness to share the vision of the world articulated above.

It is vital that security strategy documents provide the space to set out this vision as it allows for the subsequent construction of an enemy understood as its antithesis.

4. Countering radicalisation as a core strategic factor

UK strategy sets out four strategic factors that have led to the emergence of the contemporary international terrorist threat: conflict and instability, ideology; technology; and radicalisation. This framing of the drivers of international terrorism is broadly illustrative of a shared understanding between the UK, Australia and the US. The acknowledgement of a relationship between conflict, instability and terrorism involves recognition that contemporary international terrorism 'is specifically connected to disputes and conflicts which involve Muslims and the Islamic world' (HM Government 2009: 39). While this involves recognition of the relationship between disputes and instability in countries such as Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq and the present 'international terrorism', the history of Western involvement in these countries is not acknowledged. The denial of the history of Western interference in these three countries among others serves to maintain the pretence that grievances with Western foreign policy are based wholly on unfounded perceptions.

Grievances about the West in the Islamic world are presented as the result of a fabrication by extremists seeking to exploit 'regional issues' and 'force local events into a global narrative' (HM Government 2009: 41). By formulating the wealth of grievances in this way the account presents them

as separate local concerns that have no broader global political connection or significance. The use of the concept of radicalisation as a general theme for all dissenting voices in this arena serves to delegitimize critique and construct every act defined as terrorism as an apolitical response of unstable and irrational individuals who depend on a 'extremist ideology' drawn from a 'distorted' interpretation of Islam.

In effect, this formulation of the 'mindset' of the terrorist involves a mirroring of a distinctly unilateralistic presentation of opposing forces in the 'war on terror'. Both sides seek to present the other as operating without provocation; detached from one another in their respective projects, justifying their intervention without acknowledgement of their interrelationship. For example, the current round of counter-terrorism strategy is at pains to explain that the terrorist ideology is 'based upon a selective interpretation of Islam, contemporary politics and history' (HM Government 2009: 44). Yet at the same time much of the work of counter-terrorism strategy is devoted to setting out a selective account of contemporary politics and history that has itself a vital depoliticising function. The 'war on terror' is defined by an opposition between sides who seek, at the core of their approach, to depoliticise the other.

As the terrorist threat is presented in a way that reaffirms the existence of two eras the possibility of the terrorist providing a political opposition is dismissed. The distinction is defined here on the basis of the position vis-à-vis human rights. The construction of the enemy in this way serves two purposes: to maintain the depoliticised framing and to legitimise the state's

response. The legitimacy of security strategy is dependent on the maintenance of the façade of an absence of politics both on part of the threat and the response.

5. Defining the external enemy

As noted above, the emphasis in more recent national security strategy and counter-terrorism strategies has been on an enhanced commitment to ‘core values’ as a counter-weight to security measures. Essentially this is presented as increasing the regulatory framework that ensures the conformity of security policy to legal norms. The commitment to regulation is ultimately about defining the liberal character of the approach to security and more specifically in the current era, the liberal character of the ‘war on terror’ that serves to set up the distinction between the liberal and the illiberal terrorist. Daily observation illustrates the great gap between the rhetorical commitment to regulation and the reality of the ‘war on terror’ but the emphasis on human rights and legal regulation throughout these documents is essential to maintain the distinction between “us” and “them”.

This process is further compounded by a universal commitment to *tolerance*. Terrorists are incapable of tolerance as much as they are incapable of operating within parameters set by human rights. The state response is to emphasize the commitment to this value (among others) to reinforce the distinction between those seeking security and those who resort to terrorism as well as to stress the liberal nature of the security regime if we understand tolerance as a, if not *the*, central liberal value.

Tolerance discourse has the effect of framing a multitude of problems as ones of (in)tolerance as opposed to inequality, exploitation and injustice. This is achieved through the liberal emphasis on (and commitment to) what can be understood to be the *culturalization of politics* (Brown 2006). Through this process politics is effaced and cultural differences are instead emphasized withdrawing any potential for political conflict. The commitment to tolerance so central to contemporary security strategy gives rise to an obligation on the state to challenge those who promote intolerance and it is here, given the status of terrorism as the ultimate expression of intolerance, that the rationale for counter-terrorism is reaffirmed. International terrorism faced in the current epoch is understood to be based on a ‘violent and intolerant distortion of Islam’ (HM Government 2009: 87) and through such an understanding the notion of (in)tolerance sits within a framing of terrorism defined exclusively through culture.

Tolerance is understood in liberalism to be the reserve of the West; it is considered to be synonymous with liberal democracy, with Enlightenment and modernity and crucially in this sense, it serves to further distinguish “us” from “them”. The crude distribution of tolerance in security strategy (“we” have it, “they” don’t) serves to refine the liberal character of the West’s response to terrorism and as a consequence the intolerant terrorist is marked out further as an aberration, definitively opposed to the liberal West. Moreover, marking the terrorist out to be driven by religion and an alien culture is a clear reflection of the process whereby ‘non-liberal polities are depicted as “ruled” by culture and religion’ (Brown 2006: 171). In stark

contrast the liberal state is ruled only by law, an assertion that is again ubiquitous in security strategy. The ‘war on terror’ is presented as a war over religion which needs to be understood in the supposedly post-ideological context; ideology has been replaced by religion as the defining feature of twenty-first century oppositions. However, in its response the West does not posit an alternate religion, it responds through a secular, legally regulated strategy.

The opposition between the tolerant and the intolerant that frames security strategy (with particular emphasis in relation to counter-terrorism) involves, according to Brown, a fusion of the 19th century opposition between the civilized and the primitive and the Cold War opposition between freedom and tyranny given that tolerance is aligned in contemporary liberal discourse with civilization and freedom and intolerance equated with fundamentalism and barbarism (Brown 2006: 6). Political conflict is effaced; the irreducible confrontation is instead between those with the capacity for tolerance (the civilized) and those without (the barbaric).

If we understand that the governmentality of tolerance as it circulates through civilizational discourse has as part of its work ‘the containment of the (organicist, non-Western, non-liberal) Other’ (Brown 2006: 166), then the role of tolerance in security strategy becomes clearer; it serves to delineate the defining oppositions that apparently colour the current security environment. That the opposing forces are non-Western and non-liberal is to be taken as given against the back drop of a culturalized framing of terrorism. However, the notion of an organicist Other defined through the

notion of tolerance has wider implications. Here, we must understand that tolerance in liberal discourse can only be generated by autonomous individuals and thus those who are intolerant are defined by their rejection of (liberal) individualism. The rule by culture and/or religion that defines the intolerant, and in our case definitively marks the contemporary international terrorist, illustrates their opposition to and devaluation of the autonomous individual. The liberal individual is itself naturalized and posited as a universal norm.

Security strategy is built on the continued refinement of the essential opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ defined by whichever specific opposition is most convenient in each given area of emphasis. Essentially, this opposition is reduced to the liberal/illiberal and equated to the human/inhuman opening up the possibility of a ‘war’ of extreme violence. The emphasis on tolerance and the confrontation with the intolerant expands this further to build on notions of ‘just war’ and humanitarian intervention that have been shown above to legitimate what in practice is an abdication of all regulation and restraint. The emphasis on human rights and tolerance allow for the isolation of an external enemy with whom a confrontation will be characterised by the legitimate rolling back of civilisation principles and restraint ostensibly provided by human rights. The external threat is dehumanised leaving the state free to summon whatever force is available.

6. Criminalising the internal threat

The construction and definition of the external threat has been an integral part of the post-9/11 approach to security. Since its beginning the 'war on terror' has relied on this construction to legitimate the interventionist strategies and provide a legitimising veil to the broader politics of security. Yet in recent years there has been an intensification of the internal components of this 'war' as it has been increasingly directed at populations within the nations at the forefront of the fight against terrorism. This internal component has been couched in the language of counter-radicalisation and has been to a large extent developed along the lines of the UK model. The concern here has been with the identification of an internal enemy supposedly revealed through the domestic terrorist attacks orchestrated by those with citizenship in the target nation. The London bombings of 7th July 2005 have been presented as the prime example of this internal threat and the approach to radicalisation and extremism has developed significantly since in the UK and beyond. The potential for the 'war on terror' to assume an internal policing role (if indeed the internal and the external can be separated) raises questions about the diffusion of the logic of security throughout state institutions and civil society.

UK and Australian counter-terrorism strategies now share an emphasis on 'radicalisation' and violent extremism understood to be the most important strategic factors in the encouragement of terrorism and thus a predominant focus in current strategy. In response, UK strategy presents and discusses the 'causes' of radicalisation in some detail as the backdrop to a counter-

radicalisation strategy that forms a significant component of counter-terrorism work. The UK approach to countering radicalisation has been cited as a model toward which the Australian government has sought to develop their approach and more recently the US have cited both UK and Australian counter-radicalisation programmes as possible templates for the development of a US counter violent extremism strategy. That counter-radicalisation has become such a prominent part of counter-terrorism is logical given the official understanding of terrorism fuelled predominantly (if not exclusively) by a radical, fundamentalist ideology.

The official explanation of radicalisation focuses on the ‘vulnerability’ of individuals and points to ‘a crisis in identity and, specifically, to a feeling of not belonging’ (HM Government 2009: 42). The association of radical ideas with vulnerable individuals is continually reiterated reinforcing the idea that those who share any radical or ‘extreme’ ideas are vulnerable as a result of their psychological frailties. In this sense the extremist is aligned with the mentally ill as they are both outside of reason. It is this condition and resulting crisis of identity that is understood to give rise to a departure from the mainstream.

This addition to the ‘analysis’ of radicalisation comprehensively depoliticises the ‘radical’ and positions these ideas in both UK and Australian strategy firmly as characteristic of individual Muslims, Muslim families or the Muslim community more generally. This has the effect of discrediting political and economic grievances and constructs the ‘perceptions’ of Western and UK foreign policy as a result of the individual

social and psychological issues attributed to Muslims. This employment of classic psychological positivism serves to explain radicalisation as the result of an internal issue with the Muslim community. The community ‘suffers’ from radicalisation due to its lack of family ties, its composition of recent migrants and crucially, its member’s psychological frailties.

The program of counter-radicalisation work is diffused into all aspects of government widening the state’s policing of ‘suspect’ populations. All local authorities have the accommodation of the program built into their ‘performance framework’ as its facilitation has been installed in the UK at least as an integral part of governance and an internal measure of its success. The diffusion of counter-terrorism measures across government has been presented as a means to ‘maintain momentum’ and ‘keep the global war on terrorism in the forefront’ (United States, Executive Office of the President 2003: 19). As counter-radicalisation work is rolled out across local authorities there is evidence that the desire to ‘maintain momentum’ and sustain the prominence of the ‘war on terrorism’ remains a driving force behind counter-terrorism strategy.

Diffusing counter-terrorism work throughout government and public services is possible as a result of the fact that those orchestrating the ‘war on terror’ have sought to break ‘old orthodoxies that once confined out counterterrorism efforts primarily to the criminal justice domain’ (National Security Council [U.S.] 2006: 1). Releasing counter-terrorism from its confinement within the criminal justice system has been of great use in the ‘war on terror’ as it has enabled the blurring of the boundaries between

policing and war; between domestic counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency in occupied territories, allowing for military adventures to be presented as counter-terrorism initiatives. However, presenting the fight against terrorism as not simply the work of the police (although of course vital to contemporary policing) has allowed such policing measures to expand beyond the criminal justice domain and infiltrate all aspects of government. The logic of security (and here counter-terrorism) has become all pervasive and seemingly all consuming defining the work of a whole range of disparate institutions and services who are transformed through this new (or intensified) policing function.

In the first instance, counter-radicalisation is led by the police but it is not concerned with those in custody or even necessarily those guilty of criminality arguably marking it as a policing initiative designed to police ideas not (illegal) actions. The desire to silence critical thinking let alone political dissent is illustrated by the fact that those organisations expected to facilitate the monitoring and reporting of extremist ideas include schools, colleges and universities as well as children's services, health services, social workers and community groups. This project of countering extremism has been rolled out across society and is reliant on the collaboration of innumerable individuals and groups to assist the police (and assume their role) in the monitoring of ideas seemingly with no age group or place of sanctuary immune. The predominant focus of this component remains with the Muslim community and the teacher, lecturer or social worker must be especially diligent in relation to Muslim children/students

but the climate of suspicion serves to further problematise and in several cases criminalise, dissenting voices.

The official presentation of extremist ideology and the flexibility of its definition provided in official strategy have the ability to denounce all substantive political criticism of the current security agenda - as well as criticism of the current political and economic status quo – as extremist. As Arun Kundnani has noted, the terms ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ are at times defined in practice by the degree to which Muslims support or oppose central government or local authority policies’ (Kundnani 2009). The rejection of ‘shared values’ is sufficient to be labeled as an extremist; ‘violence’ is no longer a prerequisite.

The attempt to undermine any of the ‘core (liberal) values’ is enough to be designated as, at the very least, ‘vulnerable’ to extremism (that is in itself enough stigma to be equivalent to a full diagnosis). Indeed, a personal opinion that illustrates an ‘uncompromising rejection of the principle of the rule of law and the authority of any elected Government in this country’ (HM Government 2010: 9) is sufficient to be an indicator of (vulnerability to) extremism. A rejection of the legitimacy of liberal democracy or indeed a strident political critique of its failings is easily classified as ‘extremist’. The radical and the extremist are comprehensively depoliticised in security discourse and this has the ultimate effect of closing the door to all truly dissenting (non-liberal) voices. The utility of this formulation to the state is unquestionable.

The criminalisation of dissent in this form is essential because the radical seeks at its core to reverse the process of the culturalization of politics. Radicalisation is understood to be a ‘cultural rejection of modernity, rooted in the misinterpreting of globalisation and modernisation as Western impositions’ (MI5 statement quoted in Kundnani 2009: 45fn). The radical, through his ‘misinterpretation’ seeks to define globalisation and modernisation as conscious processes orchestrated – or at least assisted or fuelled – by Western interests. This involves at its core the politicisation of processes – globalisation most explicitly – that are presented in liberal discourse generally in the sense identified in Stuart Hall’s analysis of the New Labour project: as ‘self-regulating and implacable Force(s) of Nature’ (Hall 1998: 11). Radicalisation is ‘seen as the politicisation of a cultural problem’ (Kundnani 2009: 45fn) and thus has the potential to undo the work behind the current official presentation of terrorism defined as noted above by the culturalization of politics. This explicit politicisation is inherently dangerous to the liberal security agenda. By reinforcing the non-negotiable liberal parameters imposed on contemporary politics the construction of the radical and the extremist effectively casts them out of the political arena safeguarding the depoliticised framing of terrorism.

In addition, the official presentation of radicalisation exposes its opposition to liberalism at a deeper level in Australian strategy. Here the problem of radicalisation is that it discourages ‘full participation in Australia’s social and economic life’ (Australian Government 2010: iv) illustrating that the opposition to liberalism posed by radicalisation cuts to the heart of the liberal production of the subject. Radicalisation prevents the subject from

fulfilling their productive potential and clearly must be opposed. The concern with the marginalisation of the radicalised Other is genuine but not driven by a concern with the participation of the individual in social and political life. The concern lies with the potential for the individual to opt out (or be lured out) of the economic system altogether; to refuse to contribute to the labour force and compromise the broader productivity of the capitalist system. The possibility of unproductive subjects outside the West is troubling, but the idea of internal forces who seek to reject the validity of the current domestic order in economic terms requires decisive action. This emphasis confirms Marx's understanding of security as the 'supreme concept of the bourgeois society' (Marx 1975: 230).

The official response then seeks to return the radical to mainstream (liberal) politics by undermining extremist ideas and essentially by enforcing a convergence on liberal shared values. This process of *deradicalisation* is facilitated by 'mainstream' or 'moderate' voices that support the state in the central 'battle for ideas' that defines counter-radicalisation. These voices are selected on the basis that they essentially do not question – or are willing and able to extenuate – the culturalization of terrorism and extremism. Such 'voices' in the UK include state funded organisations like *The Quilliam Foundation* (QF) whose mission is to 'challenge extremism' and 'promote pluralism' reinforcing from the outset the idea that the 'war on terror' is defined through a series of oppositions of which the opposition between fundamentalism and pluralism is crucial.

Counter-radicalisation in this guise serves only enforce the dominant, official understanding of the causes and necessary responses to terrorism. The causes remain confined to the Muslim community (domestically and internationally) and QF advocates that the response to extremism should at its core involve ‘a more self-critical approach (to) be adopted by Muslims’ in which ‘Westophobic ideological influences and social insularity needs to be challenged within Muslim communities by Muslims themselves’ (Quilliam Foundation, n.d.). These ‘moderate’ voices justify the state’s suggestion that ‘some of our counter-terrorism powers will be disproportionately experienced by the Muslim community’ (Bleas in Dodd and Travis 2005) and in the case of QF, their framing of the issue converges more so with Martin Amis’ famous assertion that in the interest of security ‘the Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order’ (quoted in Eagleton 2007); an idea that arguably sits behind the liberal state’s position.

The idea that counter-terrorism can now be defined by a battle for ideas is not new. The development of a counter-radicalisation strategy along the lines set out above has become a major point of convergence for contemporary counter-terrorism strategy through which the UK, Australian and US government have been involved in a mutually beneficial, multi-directional exchange of policy ideas. The ‘revised’ approach to counter-terrorism with its predominant focus on counter-extremism measures is not however new to the ‘war on terror’. The integral role of the ‘war of ideas’ was set out in US counter-terrorism strategy in 2003 and whilst the concept of counter-radicalisation was not used here, the emphasis on promoting

‘values’ as a means to counter extreme ideas is clear. The discourse now contains discussion of a struggle over narratives between the West and the terrorists that maintains the opposition between ‘their’ ideology and ‘our’ values. A battle between ‘narratives’ is but the most recent framing of an opposition that is essentially depoliticised.

The conjunction of a battle of arms and a battle of ideas has been set out to define the ‘war on terror’ as ‘different kind of war’ (National Security Council [U.S.] 2006: 1). This definition, in which terrorism will be fought on the (undefined) battlefield as well as being fought through the promotion of values, is accepted by the UK, Australia and US (and across each of the different administrations in these countries in the post 9/11 era) and serves fundamentally to frame counter-terrorism strategy. The mystification of war that is involved in the presentation of the ‘war on terror’ as in some way unique and novel compounds the processes of depoliticisation that at their core serve to obscure the fact that this is a war of extreme violence much as any other military project. The infusion of a battle of ideas serves essentially to delegitimise the terrorist ‘narrative’ and reinforce the legitimacy of this ‘war’ in its external and internal components as well as the legitimacy of the politics of security.

The inauguration of a counter-radicalisation strategy complete with legal sanctions enhances the process of marginalising radical ideas and the suspect populations who harbour them and initiates a formal process of criminalising the internal enemy. From the more recent ‘realisation’ of an internal threat (ostensibly from 2005 onwards) this process of criminalising

the internal populations has been incorporated into the central project underway in the ‘war on terror’ which involves identifying and isolating an enemy. The ‘moderate voices’ play a central role in the approach to radicalisation reinforcing, and clearly legitimising the official narrative and the subsequent state monopoly over the response. In this sense they serve a vital function in sustaining the main thrust of counter-radicalisation which is to criminalise dissent. The strategies of deradicalisation provide a convenient gloss to what is in reality a clear project of the state utilising its force to silence dissent.

7. Expanding the remit of counter-extremism

The rejection of the status quo is clearly not restricted to those designated as problems under the initially narrow counter-terrorism agenda. The focus on Muslim populations in the post-9/11 era and indeed prior to it has enabled the development of strategies of exclusion of dissenting voices that have much wider application. The depoliticisation and subsequent delegitimisation of alternative politics is of course a well established project of liberal regimes but the formal strategies developed in the era of the ‘war on terror’ have more recently been expanded to encompass a disparate range of groups who are now seen to fit into the category of ‘domestic extremism’.

Essentially, those who seek to (re)politicise issues that have been designated as security issues are in the current era marginalised, labelled as extremists and in many cases criminalised. In this context the concept of ‘domestic

extremism' has been constructed within which those involved in so-called 'single-issue' protests, such as animal rights, environmentalism, anti-globalisation or anti-GM crops' (National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit, n.d.) outside of the acceptable forms of political expression are constructed as extremists. Those designated as extremist are targeted in the UK by a specific police unit following the establishment of the *National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit* in 2004 (now *National Domestic Extremism Unit*) that is unshackled from certain aspects of the regulation that determines ordinary policing practice (Monbiot 2009).

Reinforcing the foreignness of the Muslim Other this formulation also allows for an expansion of the strategy of criminalising dissent to include what are defined as 'individuals or groups whose activities go outside the normal democratic process and engage in crime and disorder' (National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit, n.d.). The causal relationship presented here between abandoning the democratic process and engaging in criminal activity obscures the real process by which the narrow parameters set to the 'democratic process' allow all truly political activism to be criminalised. The politicisation of all issues cannot be tolerated and once issues become incorporated into the security agenda they are comprehensively closed off from any kind of alternative, critical analysis; in this sense politics *is* extreme.

Those who seek to question the status quo and by definition politicise these issues through a rejection of the impotent channels of liberal political expression will be met by the full force of the state's violence. The caveat

attached to extremism strategy that ‘legitimate peaceful protest is to be respected’ is itself restricted to those actions that take place in a ‘peaceful and safe manner and does not cause unnecessary disruption to a community’ (National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit, n.d.). Policing protest is a central function of policing and the development of counter-extremism strategies in this vein formalise further the police’s role in the fabrication of a social and political order. The acceptance of only ‘non-disruptive’ dissent excludes all truly alternative politics that by definition attempt to disrupt the status quo. The legal regulation of extremist ideas and behaviour only reveals further that the primary role to which law has been devoted in bourgeois society is order (Neocleous 2000). The criminalisation of alternative politics is pivotal to a liberal security strategy because its goal is essentially the preservation of the current order in political and economic terms. The current politics of security are liberal politics and not some form of aberration or distortion; the violence with which ‘suspect’ and ‘criminal’ populations are excluded in the context of the ‘war on terror’ and in the name of security is perfectly in line with the ways in which the liberal state has always sought to maintain a monopoly of legitimacy.

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Exodus: A Non-Identity Art - Everyone is an Artist?

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Abstract:

Taking inspiration from Paolo Virno's conception of exodus as a potent political strategy (Virno, 1996: 189), this paper calls for the artist's exit from recognised authorship. However, to avoid slipping into a nihilist vacuum, it must simultaneously affirm an egalitarian mode of art production and display. This would manifest in exhibitions wherein anyone can exhibit. In so doing, it seeks to problematize the alienation and identity divisions between the artist and non-artist. Inspired by Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics, this would strive to be a non-identity art. Adorno's non-identity thought rejects strong self-identification alongside a commitment to egalitarianism. To overcome the complacency and totalitarianism of classification and identification, it demands thinking 'against itself' (Adorno, 2001: 227).

Keywords:

Artist exodus, egalitarianism, non-identity art.

Paper:

At a conference in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1961, Marcel Duchamp declared that ‘the great artist of tomorrow will go underground’ (Duchamp, 1975). This statement from the preeminent art trickster of his age is puzzling. Was it a declaration against the capitalist encroachment on art, an embodiment of some utopian longing for freedom or an ambiguous riddle? With the ambiguous Duchamp, it could be all or none. T.J. Demos argued that Duchamp perpetually sought movement, displacement and exile in both his life and art as a strategy against regimented identity thinking (Demos, 2007: 76). Demos interpreted Duchamp’s practice and that of the wider avant-garde as a dense philosophical and aesthetic negation or destabilization of identity; be it linguistic, nationalistic or representative (2007: 76). This non-identity manifested in Duchamp’s alter-ego Rose Sélavy.

Under the pseudonym R. Mutt, Duchamp anonymously submitted the readymade *Fountain* to the New York Society of Independent Artist’s exhibition in 1917. The myth follows that the exhibition was entirely open with no adjudication. Then upon receiving the urinal, a heated debate developed on what is or is not art and the board ultimately decided to not exhibit the work. Soon after, Duchamp resigned from the board in protest. *Fountain* has become the pivotal artwork of modern art; indeed it could be argued to have heralded in what became known as Postmodernism. The

readymade marked a Copernican shift in aesthetics that has yet to be resolved.

In *Kant after Duchamp*, Thierry de Duve wrestled with the complexity of defining art after the readymade; wherein ‘this is beauty’ has become ‘this is art’ (de Duve, 1996). Previously, great art was thought of as embodied in the auratic object formed by the hands of a visionary artist. In contrast, the readymade has generally been interpreted as signifying that the artist can choose or designate anything as art. While seeing validity in this reading, I would argue that the iconoclastic object also suggested that taste itself was an elitist myth and that a basic object created by an anonymous artisan has potentially as much merit as a painting by one of the Great Masters. This alternative interpretation is genuinely radical as it problematizes the identity of the artist, critic, curator and collector. Such a reading derives in part from its historical context. Along with Francis Picabia and Man Ray, Duchamp formed New York DADA. Though less overtly political than their transatlantic cousins, their thinking cannot be ostracized from the general anti-art tendency. European DADA was a vanguardist assault on bourgeois culture. Disgusted by what they saw as an Imperialist, capitalist war, they sought to rupture conventional culture and create an egalitarian society wherein art would no longer remain the preserve of an elite. In 1920, Richard Huelsenbeck wrote:

DADA is German Bolshevism. The bourgeois must be deprived of the opportunity to ‘buy up art for his justification’. Art should altogether get a sound thrashing, and DADA stands for the thrashing with all the vehemence of its limited nature (Huelsenbeck, 2007: 66).

In de Duve's analysis of *Fountain*, he placed the readymade within a lineage of experimental avant-garde art production that he traced back into the political ideals of the French Revolution and the art of German romanticism. He described how the poet Novalis was the first to proclaim that 'every man should be an artist' (1996: 288). De Duve asserted that such egalitarianism was developed in the aesthetic negations of the rejected artists of the bourgeois Parisian salons and it crystallized in the utopian experiments of the spiritualists Kandinsky and Mondrian and the materialists Tatlin and El Lissitzky. He emphasised that such production sought to embody an aesthetic revolution that would prefigure a political revolution (1996: 290). He wrote:

Since their time, the main thrust of virtually every avant-garde or modern Utopia has been that the practice of professional artist's was to liberate a potential for art-making present in everyone individually and shared by humankind as a whole, a potential whose field was aesthetic but whose horizon was political (1996: 289).

De Duve acknowledged that Duchamp would have dismissed an egalitarian interpretation of the readymade as he 'was never a Utopian' and would utterly reject 'universal creativity' (1996: 290). However, like any artist, Duchamp had little control over the interpretation of the work. Indeed, he personally argued the viewer created half the work. After 1923, Duchamp infamously stopped producing art for public display and focused his energies on discourse and the art of chess. However, following his death in 1968, his hermetic New York studio revealed a return to representational

painting in the *Étant donnés* installation. Perhaps this work was some form of answer to his prophecy of artist's going underground? Duchamp's work and absence cast a long shadow over 20th century art. In the social upheaval of the 1960s, radical avant-garde experimentation re-emerged in the production of Lucy Lippard, Allan Kaprow, Joseph Beuys and many more. David Harding has described the motivation of such artist's:

Individualism, self-expression and 'art about art' began to be replaced in their practice by collaboration, social relevance, process and context and the whole panoply of galleries, dealers and the art market was deemed antithetical. Maxims such as, "the artist is not a special kind of person but every person is a special kind of artist"; "the context is half the work"; and later, "everyone an artist," offered some philosophical base to the changes (Harding, 1995).

During an action in 1964, Joseph Beuys scrolled 'the silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated' onto a wall. This act was an explicit accusation that Duchamp's departure was a forsaking of his political, social and artistic agency. In conversation, Beuys argued that Duchamp failed to realise the logic behind his own experimentation – that everyone is an artist (de Duve, 1996: 285). Beuys believed he was developing Duchamp's legacy through his social sculpture. This was an expanded creativity that developed from thought, discussion and drawing and opened up into seeking to radically transform society. In 1972, he was dismissed as Professor of Sculpture at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf for admitting students who had been rejected (Biro, 1995). This act can clearly be interpreted as seeking to manifest his 'every human being is an artist' dictum through negating the

division between the artist and the non-artist (Beuys, 1992). His infamous pronouncement was not a call for everyone to make sculptures; rather it was a call for people to realize their creative energy and agency in all aspects of their lives.

Faced with the omnipotence of the state and the contradictions of antagonism, Paolo Virno and other Italian autonomists have called for an exodus from dialectical struggle and the creation of alternative, egalitarian public forums. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno have defined the exodus strategy:

Structures of social command are combated not through direct opposition, but by means of withdrawal (...) It is important however, that this politics of withdrawal also simultaneously constitute a new society, a new republic. We might conceive this exodus, then, as an engaged withdrawal or a founding leave taking, which both refuses this social order and constructs an alternative (Hardt & Virno, 1996: 260/ 261).

In his analysis of contemporary art under capitalism, Stephen Wright rejected the art world's habit of creating more work to address problems by insisting that the art world is part of the problem. In response, he called for an 'exodus from the intellectual bankruptcy of the mainstream art world' alongside a general exit from warfare and capitalism (Wright, 2008a). Wright called for the creation of an 'art without artworks, authors or spectators'. He celebrated a stealth or spy art; one that is 'visible, public, and indeed, it is seen-but not as art' (Wright, 2006). He saw this avant-garde trajectory manifesting in the anonymous, activist art of Grupo de Arte

Callejero in Argentina. The street art group brought aesthetic interventions to impact on everyday life through their Escrache performances. This involved marking the houses of torturers from the military regime. Wright argued that such practices wrestle art from its Kantian dormancy (wherein arts purpose is purposeless) and drew it to impinge upon reality (Wright, 2008b).

Anonymous protests against authority have existed for centuries through the art of public graffiti. In 2010, I produced and displayed a series of stencils around the back streets of Glasgow. The stencil that proved catalytic was a reproduction of Steve McCurry's photograph of the Afghani-Pashtun refugee Sharbat Gula. The iconic image was the cover of the National Geographic magazine in 1985. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Gula fled over the border to a refugee camp in Pakistan (Newman, 2002). In the stencil, I added the word 'Afghanistan' and placed small bombs falling from a warplane in the sky. A month or so after the stencil was produced, somebody sprayed over it. Street art etiquette dictates that one should never deface another's work. Unfortunately as the stencils were being produced, I may have accidentally covered another work. Whilst realising I was possibly in the wrong, I was taken aback at the violence of the act. Was it because I breached their code of conduct by defacing a work or was it an attack on my trespassing into their territory?

Despite the malcontent's intention, this act has developed my thought on authorship. Though it was anything but a benign collaboration, it is a truly dialectical art of contradictions in that my anonymous negation of war was

in turn negated. While the graffiti artist was potentially being malicious, they also added to the work. I doubt it was an improvement but the act developed my thinking on authorship. It drew me to reflect upon an expanded authorship; wherein my authorial identity was problematized.

Horrified by the violence and inequalities of fascism, communism and capitalism and dismayed at the compromises and commodification of art, Gustav Metzger implemented an art strike between 1977 and 1980. His outlook and motivation shared similarities with Virno's exodus call. Metzger wrote:

The use of art for social change is bedevilled by the close integration of art and society. The state supports art, it needs art as a cosmetic cloak to its horrifying reality, and uses art to confuse, divert and entertain large numbers of people. Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose the umbilical cord of the state (Metzger, 1974).

In a roundtable debate on Metzger, Ross Birrell described Metzger's production as a 'self-cancelling' practice that resonates with Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics (Morton et al, 2008). Negative dialectics is a dialectical method that rejects all resolution and synthesis. As a non-identity thought; it operates 'against itself' to avoid dogmatic identity thinking (Adorno, 2001: 227). Adorno saw the enlightenment will to classify, to identify and to categorise as leading to control and decay. While appearing relativist in its renunciation of a set belief, it is firmly egalitarian in nature and steeped in an awareness of suffering.

In the discussion on Metzger, Ross Sinclair took Bill Drummond's *No Music Day* (wherein Drummond called on a total renunciation of listening to music for a day) to argue that self-cancelling practices act as a misnomer; they turn 'against themselves in order to better understand them' (Morton et al, 2008). At sunrise on midsummer's day in 2010, I participated in a 17 performance at the Callenish stone circle on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Bill Drummond instigated the 17 project in 2003. The group consists of 17 unknown people who gather together to perform a score of music that Drummond has composed. The 17 reject all recorded music; there is no audience and the event exists only in the moment and in the collective memory (Drummond, 2008). Drummond recently declared:

Doing art should not be a full time job for the validated few. Doing art should be something we all do as part of everyday life... None of us should be getting our highs and lows vicariously through what other people do, we should all do the fighting, kicking, loving, fucking, painting, throwing, jumping, killing, singing, shouting ourselves, and not have actors, sportsmen, musician or artist's doing it for us (Drummond, 2012).

Drummond's former band, the KLF (consisting of himself and Jimmy Cauty) apparently burnt £1million on the remote Scottish island of Jura in 1994 (where George Orwell wrote his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1948). Mikhail Bakunin claimed that 'the passion for destruction is a creative passion' (Bakunin, 1842). The history of modern art can be read as a series of non-violent, destructive negations. Peter Weibel argued that the iconoclastic gesture was instigated in modern art by the crisis of

representation in the 19th century (Weibel, 2002). For Weibel, Hegel's infamous 'end of art' thesis derived from a belief that the art of representation has become fundamentally removed from reality (2002: 591). Through an analysis of the expansion of art in Fluxus, Happenings, Actionism and performance, Weibel claimed that the three constants of classical art (the author, the work of art and the viewer) were all 'radically subverted and transformed' (2002: 664). He argued that these movements were the first modern artistic strategies that replaced representation with reality. While saying this, he acknowledged that the representational pull of documentation through photograph and video problematized these exits from representation. In conclusion, Weibel suggested that Hegel's 'end of art' thesis has not instigated the death of art: 'the iconoclastic hammer does not destroy art, instead, paradoxically, it creates new art' (2002: 632).

The potential of the artist to negate their specific identity became a recurring concern in my considerations of a potent exodus. A pilgrimage of sorts to Hove music festival on a small island in Norway developed my thinking. That which resonates in my memory is not the bands on the stage, the film festival or the circus performers but the primal, rhythmic drumming that emanated from the forest. Over the week of the festival, many people collaborated to create a unique sonic experience. Dozens of drums and drumsticks were attached to trees from which anyone and everyone could perform. There appeared to be no organiser and no publication of the event. Its resonance resided in the manner in which the artist and the audience division became neutralized. We were all artists.

Conflicting emotions have engulfed me in the past when reflecting upon an exhibition, football match, film or concert. Although often enjoyable and informative, I also resented it at times. It clearly reminded me of my failure or inability to act or realise my agency as an artist or footballer or whatever one wishes to achieve in life. While these emotions are negative, they are entirely human and not uncommon. In Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis of the master-slave relationship, he described the emergence of a slave morality steeped in what he termed resentment. He describes such a morality as emerging from those denied the potential for action and who respond with an imaginary revenge (Nietzsche, 2007: 20).

How can such resentment be overcome on a social and artistic level? The anthropologist Christopher Boehm has claimed that early hunter-gatherer societies of before 12,000 years ago were broadly egalitarian in nature. However, he emphasised that while everyone participated in decisions, there was still a form of hierarchy; one however that was based on anti-hierarchical feelings (Boehm, 1999: 9/10). He described how this involved the domination of 'megalomaniacal upstarts' by a collective of weaker members of the group. In a similar analysis, the ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl has described how there was no clear divisions of labour outside of age and gender in such early societies. He stated that music was communally performed and there was 'little specialisation in composition, performance and instrument making' (Nettl, 1956: 10). Meanwhile G.S. Evans has argued that the emergence of a capitalist commodity-based culture in Europe and North America in the 16th and 17th centuries fundamentally altered the production and consumption of art. He claimed

that 'the art-commodity came to replace participatory-art in most people's lives, and art increasingly became a source of alienation (Evans, 1989: 2). In response, Evans called us to reject the fetishism of art products and overcome our artistic alienation through producing our own art.

The romantic conception of the artist is of a creative individual freed from the constraints of 9 to 5 society. However, status accumulation and competition can rupture their quest for a life void of competition. Socialist writer Judy Cox argued that creativity cannot negate the totality of alienation. She claimed that the 'eradication of alienation depends on the transformation of society as a whole' (Cox, 1998). My research began to question how the alienation and the division of labour between the artist and the non-artist can be overcome. It became clear that this involved expanding the framework of what we consider to be artists. Over the past decade, collaboration, social engagement and audience participation have permeated contemporary art discourse and practice. Within such production, the artist often functions as a mediating bridge between the gallery and the wider community. Nicolas Bourriaud defined the socialization of art as Relational Aesthetics; that being where 'the artist sets his sights more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public, and on the invention of models of sociability' (Bourriaud, 2002: 28).

Graham Coulter-Smith has insightfully argued that Bourriaud's thesis holds an irreconcilable contradiction. Whereas he celebrated the death of the individual genius myth, all of his examples of relational producers are recognised individual artist's (Coulter Smith, 2009). Stephen Wright

addressed the ethical contradictions of socially engaged practice through a harsh critique of Judi Werthein's *Jump/Brinco* project (Wright, 2006). For the work, Werthein manufactured Brinco running shoes that were donated to immigrants on the Mexico/U.S. border. Wright argued that Werthein was 'the real winner in this relational aesthetic contrivance' as 'she is the only one whose name is mentioned (the immigrants are anonymous), the only one in a position to accumulate more symbolic capital by having the art world rave about her social engagement' (Wright, 2006). Perhaps art production will only become egalitarian when artist's renounce their ownership of the discipline?

In the essay *Give up Activism!* a group of anonymous, London anarchists called for a renunciation of the activist lifestyle and label (Andrew X, 2001). After reflecting upon their activities, they polemically argued that 'the activist milieu acts like a leftist sect' that 'jealously guard and mystify the skills they have' and in so doing they reinforce 'hierarchical class society' (Andrew X, 2001). The authors conclude by calling for a rejection of the activist label to foster a society without divisions. In so doing they seek to engender a society wherein everyone is an activist. Perhaps they seek to manifest a non-identity activism?

The dilemma of these activists resonates with my concerns on the artist alienated and divided from the people through their specialism. While many artists and art collectives do brilliant work, their authority can function as a barrier. In contemporary art, 'the other' is often placed within the framework of art by the institutions or the artist. This may be the institution

promoting a person (be that an outsider like Jean Michel Basquiat) or the artist promoting awareness of a theme (homelessness, immigration, sexism). In doing so, the artist or institution raises the invisibility of and represents the other. However, they (like politicians) often become lauded by capital and by extension alienated from the other that they sought (and often failed) to represent.

Division permeates all levels of society. Be it a nation, a social class, a profession, a school, a neighbourhood, a sex, a sexuality, an ethnicity, a language, a religion or a football team, we are all identified and bracketed as different from others as we grow. The effects of this social division are far reaching. In Marx's early writings he argued that the division of labour between and within classes created social antagonisms and deep alienation that ruptured social cohesion (Marx & Engels, 1978a: 133). Marx wrote of how there would be no artist's in the Communist society but people who made art alongside fishing, hunting and writing criticism (Marx, 1978b: 160). As fanciful as such imagining may seem, they do not halt the possibility of practical, incremental alterations in culture. It became clear that alienation and the divisions between the artist and the non-artist can be problematized through expanding the art world framework of what we consider to be the artist. The research calls for the fostering of an egalitarian mode of production, display and consumption of art. This involves the artist exit from recognised authorship. Its potential derives from its underexplored nature and its ability to disturb the critic, curator, collector and artist nexus. For what is the reified object or environment if everybody is an artist?

In a similar dialectical trajectory to Guy Debord's call for the abolition and realisation of art in order to transcend art (Debord, 2006: 106), the thesis calls for the negation of the artist and the simultaneous affirmation of an egalitarian mode of art production. This would manifest in exhibitions wherein anyone can exhibit. Inspired in part by Walter Benjamin's writings in the *Author as Producer*, it seeks to celebrate an art wherein readers become writers (Benjamin, 2002).

The thesis does not involve artist's renouncing art but renouncing their authorial identity. It is not the death of the author that is proposed but the multiplication of authors. It is author-less in the sense that is without a hierarchical authority. It seeks to rupture authorial authority through a non-identity conception of the author, wherein authorship is near anonymous. Such a non-identity art strives towards egalitarianism. The thesis celebrates outsider art, naïve art, community art, gypsy art, amateur art, autodidact art, handicapped art, elderly art, children's art, marginalized art and so on. To my analysis, the scribbled doodle by the janitor or the invigilator often has as much cultural validity as the installation in the gallery. Such an outlook should hardly be radical as we approach the centenary of *Fountain*. However, it has yet to gain significant purchase in the art world. However, it has been the imperative of artist's to push open such framing for both aesthetic and political objectives.

Just as the appropriation art of Sherrie Levine negated the artist genius myth, a non-identity art seeks to negate the artist myth full stop. In doing so, it fits within the authorial tradition through its negation of a specific aspect

of said tradition. This thesis is not romantic in the idealized sense; rather it can be interpreted as highly pragmatic and even opportunist. Pierre Bourdieu described the ‘continuous battle between those who have made their names and are struggling to stay in view and those who cannot make their names without relegating to the past the established figures’ (Bourdieu, 2003: 1021). Bourdieu contends that this oedipal friction is endemic in all fields, be it class struggle or cultural production. To celebrate or over-identify with one tendency in art is folly as they (like everything in life) are transitory and will be replaced. While the denigration of the author can be read as an egalitarian call, it is also a dialectical negation of that which preceded it. As such it seeks to develop art. While I admire and am inspired by much radical art and radical artist’s/ groups, contemporary art is overly focused on identities. The thesis is seeking to negate identities. An egalitarian mode of art production can thus be read as a natural development of the authorial tradition. It seeks to develop the general tendency of open source communication and the social turn in contemporary art.

While creativity and art production have become celebrated as pivotal to the development of modern cities, (Florida, 2002) many people feel it is something others do. I have encountered this personal insecurity on many occasions when discussing or making art with non-artists. It is infuriating and usually inaccurate. Paulo Freire believed creativity to be quite ordinary (Pope, 2009: 53) and Paolo Virno emphasised that ‘humans are linguistic beings: art is anybody’s’ (Lavaert & Gielen, 2009). Noam Chomsky argued that the capacity for acquiring language is encoded within our DNA

(Chomsky, 2002) and Carl Jung asserted that there is a universal creative energy (Collective Unconscious) within us all (Jung, 1996).

A non-identity art could manifest in both positive and negative forms. Like people, it could be brilliant, banal, antagonistic, peaceful, kind, cruel and all else in between. Ultimately it will only ever be developed upon or understood through experimentation. Sylvère Lotringer argued that art has finally fulfilled DADA's programme of fusing art into life and it should now 'auto-dissolve' (Lotringer & Power, 2009). He called on art to break its ties with the market, become autonomous and 'realize the Autonomists slogan the margins at the centre' (Lotringer & Power, 2009). The proposal seeks to literally manifest this call to draw the margins to the centre. It problematizes top-down representative art and seeks to celebrate a direct democratic, horizontal mode of art production. However, an insistence on this is itself dogmatic. Horizontalism has recently been celebrated in the anti-capitalist and Occupy social movements. While initially appearing egalitarian, there are contradictions to this form of organisation. As Rodrigo Nunes has argued, open spaces always have exclusions and informal hierarchies (Nunes, 2005: 306). He rejected horizontality as an abstraction, arguing that it can be a fetish which groups cling onto to exclude others. To overcome this, he argued that we must create commonalities and push beyond classification. Such a non-identity outlook is critical. If the thesis has an outlook, it must simultaneously negate itself to overcome reification and the glorification of an abstraction. Though he was an egalitarian, Adorno emphasised that we had to transcend egalitarianism in order to

realise it (Adorno, 1990: 147). As such, a non-identity art must in turn be negated in order to be fully realised.

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Critical Intimacy: Lowry's Seascapes and the Art of Ekphrasis

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Abstract:

This paper will discuss the limits of semiotic and historicist readings of highly abstracted or lacunal paintings, taking L.S. Lowry's *The Sea* (1963) as a case study. Images such as this one, which are largely devoid of form, draw attention to the problem of semiological reductionism in the process of interpretation. They also highlight the inadequacies of historicist criticism, which, after Foucault, regards the text as an effect of discourse. Here I want to offer a radical manifesto for a more sophisticated and complete approach to reading images, one that, though not disregarding the mandate to historicise, attempts to synthesise it with what such a method neglects: a personal and emotive encounter with the image, one that might complement reading around the image with writing in relation to it. I will present ekphrasis, in this context, as a performative writing that involves the translation of an affective visual engagement. I will also contend that ekphrasis is a way for the critic to analyse what lies beyond semiotic and historicist criticism: the affect, where a seemingly neutral analysis of signs gives way to emotion and the poetic. I will do this, moreover, as a means of examining whether the register of academic writing (its logical restraint and often disingenuous objectivity) is a symptom of the historicist method I refer to. What I want to develop then, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, is an intimacy between painting and critic, where the latter remains reflexively aware of a dialogue with the unconscious taking place.

Keywords:

Abstraction, criticism, ekphrasis, Lowry, psychoanalytic

Paper:

Emptiness. A fearful sense of nothing happening. Quiescence. Calm. Stillness. Anguish of having no mirror to confirm existence. Ripples of waves arriving from some infinite shore. The world divided by a line. A canvas of blemishes taking form. Clouds ghosting in dark streaks. A tremulous ebbing heartbeat.

Such are just some of the words conjured by L.S. Lowry's *The Sea*, words which belong to my psyche, words subjective in that they've arisen outside the discipline of art history and the rigours of academic protocol (to which, in the critical mode I occupy here, I'm no longer answerable). These words might even be said to be of greater significance to the analyst, words which, once joined to affect or past experience, begin to paint a self-portrait, start to reveal something of the unconscious and the nucleus of its desire.

How do we talk about such pictures? Why do art historians and critics talk about everything it seems (context, other artists, theories, ideologies, and so forth) without actually talking about what's *there*, what brought them to the image in the first place? Why is there such resistance to (or avoidance of) looking inward, and – in keeping with the poststructuralist decentring of the subject (Lacan, 1966: 323-58) – seeing the image as writing the critic, rather than the other way round?

The disingenuousness of today's rationales for choosing particular texts seems, to me, glaringly undertheorised and to some extent a taboo, not only in that asking such questions risks destabilising the egos of reputed scholars

(his or her authority derived, to some degree, by way of self-effacement, panoptic invisibility, or the defence of intellectualisation (Wright, 2010: 85-100)); but it is proscribed, also, because it places in jeopardy the very disciplinarity, boundaries and motives of what sustains the sometimes obsessive, even repetitive practice of research and pedagogic activity. In actual fact, to begin to examine the dynamics of one's unconscious might well trouble some very entrenched and time-worn positions, where dogma and territoriality are defensive and ultimately self-preserving, where what's at stake, very often, is one's academic reputation and sometimes livelihood. Academia might serve as a refuge for the outsider, but such a refuge can, after time, become sterile and insulating, lacking the intellectual courage needed to deconstruct walls, if and when they form, between one's object and one's inside, one's unconscious.

One might say that what characterises the approach of the critic is that they write *about* their object, writing about it in a dialogue with *others*, other critics or sources; while, conversely, what characterises the approach of the poet is that they write *with* their object in a dialogue with their *unconscious*, symbolising, in and through language, how their object affects them and the meaning of this reciprocity. Nonetheless, given that this distinction might be considered overly-polarised or too much of a generalisation, perhaps there's room for an intermediary mode of critical approach that, as the title of this paper suggests, could be described as ekphratic criticism, or writing *with*, in response to the painting, in a dialogue with the unconscious – but offering this model as a complement to or development of historicising or semiotic-based analysis. Indeed, I want to stress that I do not wish to dispense with a

social history of the art work, but instead to see it, first, as limiting and self-blinding, and to extend it inwards, so to speak, to include what is archaic or infantile in one's critico-libidinal investment in the image as object.

I will begin by stating that this paper is, in part, a response to a Foucauldian historicising paradigm which has permeated the field of art criticism, one that I read as a way of talking about images where the critic interprets them as an 'effect of discourse' and therefore reducible to historical conditions in which they emerged (Foucault, 1984: 63). This approach has many notable examples, but, considering my current focus, two recent texts come to mind: Michael Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* and John Golding's *Paths to the Absolute* (1997 and 2000 respectively). The method epitomised by Golding and Leja, where the image is read in and through a study of its socio-historical context, is limited, its inadequacies revealed most strikingly when interpreting the paintings they do, ones which, for Golding, become progressively more abstracted and minimal with the advance of twentieth-century Modernism – such as Mark Rothko's *Black on Maroon* (1958).

Though a range of examples could have been chosen in order to illustrate the problem of semiological reductionism in the process of interpretation (and, by association, the inadequacy of historicist criticism), I have chosen a highly minimal and lacunal painting (Lowry's *The Sea*), which serves as a case study. I present Lowry, in this article, not so much as a special case, but rather as good an example as any. And since his seascapes, such as this one, exist at the limit of perspectival painting, before it becomes abstract, and contain very few clear-cut signs, they are certainly effective in drawing attention to the limitations of semiotic interpretation. Indeed, after one has

spoken of the distinct signs seen on the surface of the canvas, how can such paintings continue to be read? It is in persevering with reading them still, I believe, beyond this point, that one is simultaneously compelled to read oneself into the process of looking and to question the very disciplinarity of art history, exceeding conventional criticism, and straying (perversely some might say) beyond the hermeneutic paradigm of the humanities into areas such as psychology or creative writing, perhaps with a therapeutic purpose in addition to a scholarly one.

It is clear to me that, in reading pictures beyond the historical, trespassing further into the realm of affect and the personal, means broaching argument with Foucault. And this, since Foucault and historicist criticism remain cornerstones of today's work in the humanities, could be seen, perhaps, as a formidable task in itself. Nevertheless, significant oversights in Foucault's emphasis on the subject as an effect of history have been identified – most aptly, for my purposes, by critics operating in the related fields of feminist and psychoanalytic theory. I am thinking, for instance, of the works of Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray, who, each in their own way, posit an *excessiveness* of the subject, an inner world that exceeds and destabilises one's symbolic identity as it is shaped in and through language and history (Kristeva, 1984; Butler, 1997; Irigaray, 1993). The *psyche*, as these critics maintain, is irreducible to history, language and the symbolic order, and it is the unconscious, as the painting speaks to the subject, that is my primary concern here. By 'speaking' I am referring to the proposal that, rather than believing one is writing *about* one's interpretation of an image (thus placing the signified first), one regards one's image as having found its subject, as it

signifies repressed unconscious content that has, thus far at least, remained unsymbolised, or the affect the image gives form to is *unsymbolizable* in and through communicative language or the language of academic writing.

Once such a rapport is established, rather than write by way of transference (the defensive manoeuvre of convincing oneself that what is psychically inside is outside), one might, by way of affect and awareness, forge what might be understood as critical intimacy with the painting. In this case the subject/viewer remains cognizant that the meaning he or she finds in the image is really the image functioning as a mirror, through which the past history and prehistory of the unconscious can be read. How one writes *in relation with* the form, and then beyond its limit, says something about oneself, in the signs one recognises, in the associations one makes; though, further still, to find meaning in the raw materiality of the painting, standing before it – the thickness and texture of the paint, its yellowing; traces of the artist's movement in physical space; the rhythmic action of the brush, and so forth – and to *feel* something in the chromatic intensity of the surface – holds up, again, a looking glass to those layers of the viewer's psyche which otherwise might *never* find conveyance through writing; and then, with this imaginary conduit in place, ekphrasis – understood as a mode of symbolising what has, thus far, remained silent or mysterious (just like *The Sea* might be read as by historicist critics) – is the means by which criticism incorporates its subject.

At any rate though, bearing in mind historical conditions which may have given rise to such images, to make them more analysable will necessitate an approach that recognises visual elements which transcend signs. Or, to state

this in a different way, though it is possible to begin by interpreting images by way of signs which refer to culture and history, it is then necessary to go beyond these symbolic coordinates, especially when the image is abstracted or minimal, in order to analyse marks, traces or colours which are perhaps too indistinct or amorphous to qualify as signs, and therefore suggest a more archaic order of inscription (Kristeva, 1989: 3-30). In pushing historicising or semiotic models to their absolute limit, they will, at some point, cease to be effective or at least be rendered problematic. Hence, what I would like to draw attention to is this threshold of where historicising or semiotic analysis reaches its point of exhaustion. But it is my belief that, beyond this seeming methodological impasse, what the boundary indicates is the occlusion of the model that could potentially address the excess meaning of the painting: the psychoanalytic. Just to be clear, by 'psychoanalytic' I am not advocating the mere application of a reified method made use of in the humanities (what is regularly reduced to *psychoanalytic theory*, appropriated or curtailed by the academic community for the purpose of literary criticism, film analysis, and so on). I am suggesting rather that the psychoanalytic is applied to one's self as a practice; that the critic involves and thereby puts at *risk* him/herself as a subject in and through the analysis; and that such a critic, *vis-à-vis* his or her object (a painting in this case), is, at once, scholar, poet and analysand.

That a threshold of semiotic and historicising analysis exists can be tested in a micro-analysis of Lowry's seascape, *The Sea*, in, that is, a highly-focused consideration of its formal elements. Such a method can also be understood as a hermeneutically-led experiment that addresses what Foucault, and those who rigidly apply his theories and methods (often reducing texts to history),

neglect: affect, unconscious drives, the imaginary dimension of psychic life and the gross materialism of the body, which many postmodern critics tend to overlook (Eagleton, 2003: 1-22). Hence, what I am encouraging here is a more sophisticated and complete approach to reading pictures (Lowry's *The Sea* offered as a compelling example), one that, though not disregarding the mandate to historicise, is able to synthesise it with what such a method veils though the rigour it demands: an imaginary and affective encounter, which complements reading around the image with writing *in relation to* it.

This latter approach, which could be understood as *ekphratic* (in contrast to *historicist* criticism), might also be seen as a performative writing involving the translation of an affective visual engagement. It is as a result of the critic writing themselves back into the painting, in other words, that allows them to analyse what lies beyond its historicity. To practice ekphrasis thus brings about the very subject of this criticism. This space beyond is what I imagine in terms of the unconscious, where a seemingly detached analysis gives way to feeling and the poetic. All the more reason when the register of academic writing (its logical restraint and often disingenuous objectivity) is delimited by the rationalism of the historicist approach. What I'd like to develop then, drawing upon the psychoanalytic, is an intimacy between painting and critic – where the latter remains reflexively aware of the unconscious *vis-à-vis* the image: infantile memory, repressed content, transference, desire, and so on.

Just to be clear, I am recognising that historicist criticism plays a significant role in reading ambient discourses and signs appearing within the frame in order to reveal the meaning of the picture: in circumscribing the aesthetic context, including empirical testimony provided by the artist, specifically

the reasons for creating such images of limited figures and form; in addition to considering the value of such works in the artist's oeuvre and their status or place within the canon of art history. However such a methodology, I'm suggesting, reaches its limit; and this point is emphatically clear when one finds oneself in the presence of a highly abstracted or lacunal painting, such as Lowry's *The Sea*. So what I am calling for here is a more sophisticated and comprehensive approach to interpreting images, one which succeeds in synthesising historicist considerations with what such considerations neglect: the personal and emotive encounter with the image; or, to state this differently, to complement reading *around the image* and analysing its more obvious and recognisable signs, with writing *in relation to* it, and ultimately writing in a register ekphrastically synchronous with the style of the image – a highly elliptical free verse form of poetry, for example, far removed from the symbolic conventions of prosody, as a fitting response to *The Sea* which correspondingly is a painting at the limit – the Quattrocento limit – paired down, beyond which it would belong to a different conception of painting: *abstraction* in the modernist sense, of the order of Malevich or Rothko.

This way of interpreting images, and writing *in relation to them*, necessarily also radicalises the role of the critic. Assuming unconscious projections take place in the process of writing about images, an image like Lowry's *The Sea* simply makes such projections more conscious, since, with so little to go on as far as signs go, the critic is impelled to read the image in and through his or her psyche, like a Rorschach test, rather than be limited to art history, per se. In addition, such projections (where the nebulousness of the image could be said to gaze straight through into the unconscious of the critic, and, in so

doing, stir up repressed content) contest the boundaries of writing poetically and writing critically. Such limits might also be contested to the point where the register of academic writing tips over, inevitably, into metaphor, rhythm or repetition: poetic language in other words, which, having found an image that resembles, far more closely – *intimately* – the inner world of the psyche rather than the world of history and culture, approximates, in its devices, the *imaginary* realm of sensation and the *real* encounter with trauma or distress (for explication of the Lacanian orders, of the symbolic, imaginary and real, see Evans, 1996: 82-84; 159-61; and 201-203).

I will return now to reevaluating, more specifically, the meaning of Lowry's *The Sea* (1963), parts of which are void of content – or, perhaps, it is more accurate to say that its content is – for me at least – the void. Such canvases belong to a greater lineage in the history of Romantic art where artists have, seemingly, sought to represent the unspeakable, and, in so doing, render the Void indirectly visible. One can identify a formal resemblance to *The Sea* – its depiction of barren nature, with large areas of the canvas empty, and its lack of human presence – with earlier artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner. In actual fact, a certain amount can be said in relation to *The Sea* while still essentially doing art history. It belongs, for instance, to a British strain of Modernism; it's part of a Romantic lineage of representing melancholy, loneliness and the Nietzschean legacy after the 'death of God'; it's a later career excursion by Lowry from his depiction of industrial scenes in Salford and Manchester; evidence of his regional rootedness in the North of England; his love of Sunderland and the coastlines of the North-East. And so on. One might also say something about the form. Perhaps, as far as

influences go, one could point towards the Impressionists and their observations of light and colour; to the desolate and forsaken landscapes of Friedrich; to the formless and often catastrophic scenes of extreme nature in Turner's late canvases; or to literary examples, such as Samuel Beckett, and to the bleakness and existential aspects of his writing. One can go on in this way, tracing infinitely around Lowry and his painting, diligently looking for signifiers of things appropriated, discovering a neglected work and bringing it into the canon, or resituating the artist in the modernist tradition (Howard, 2000).

This style of art history has its merits no doubt, but its limitations can render the critic opaque to him/herself or occlude the precise nature of unconscious desire that leads one to do such research. Indeed, the motive often presented by the critic – part of a broader political or scholarly agenda – often leaves a remainder of pleasure (*jouissance*), a draw back to particular objects/images which can only be partially accounted for by one's ideological investment: a libidinal stake that exceeds one's plausible intentions to simply contribute to the field of knowledge. Absorbed by such pragmatic purposes, the critic can often side-step the invitation to know more, in and through the image, about his or her unconscious, and this evasion can easily sustain a life in academe. The alternative is to become cognizant of the limit of history, of context and consciousness. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest in reference to Turner, his late canvases (as is perhaps also the case with Lowry's *The Sea*) stem from somewhere ageless, immemorial. They are generated, in other words, by the primary processes of the unconscious (which are preverbal, prehistoric), and this, as a complement to history and the sign, must also be part of a dialectic

that furthers what today passes as criticism, into a realisation that the words, which are performed in relation with the object, are an art in themselves.

This reading of *The Sea* may be considered innovative, even provocative, as a great many art historians marginalise such works as ‘unfinished’, consider them ‘impenetrable’, or see them as ‘expressing the inexpressible’ (Howard, 2000: 245). I read them, on the other hand, as far more analysable than they first appear to be, as completed pictures which are valiant and sophisticated attempts by the artist to give form to *melancholic affect*, which though dealt with in earlier works – his industrial scenes and portraits – and symbolised with some success, finds its most direct elaboration here.

This understanding is comparable to Deleuze and Guattari’s aforementioned writings on Turner, whose final canvases are read as ‘truly broken, sundered by what penetrates [them]. All that remains is a background of gold and fog, intense, intensive, traversed in depth by what has just sundered its breadth: the schiz ... Everything becomes mixed and confused, and it is here that the breakthrough – not the breakdown – occurs’ (1984: 132).

It is telling here that, as I think should be celebrated, Deleuze and Guattari’s intellectual rhetoric slips into a more poetic register, which suggests critical intimacy (opposed to critical distance or disinterestedness) has been wilfully established in relation to an object, which here is Turner, whom for Deleuze is an ‘oracle’ (1984: 132; James, 1997: 234). This slippage of styles in *Anti-Oedipus* is an antecedent of what I have been proposing thus far – ekphrasis as a performative practice which, through an affective visual engagement, is a means for the critic to become more cognizant of the truth that their object

is really a mirror of what's already inside (projection). And, to elaborate this new critical dynamic, ekphrasis (understood as a register or style of writing, one commensurate with the formal nature of the image) is conducive. Given that *The Sea* is ambiguous, rhythmic and metaphoric, this likewise demands a writing that's comparable – if, that is, such an image *insists* on being one's object (calling one back to it obsessively, always with a residue of mystery), and one wants to know the whys and wherefores beyond what's sayable as a scholar.

Though respectful of the reading provided by Deleuze and Guattari, I adhere more to Julia Kristeva's model which suggests Lowry's manner of painting, where formlessness and inscrutability have the upper hand, is indicative of an externalisation of the unconscious drives – but remains within language and history, and here *The Sea* is an excellent example. Following Kristeva's lead then, and developing it, I propose a move into a hermeneutical territory beyond semiotics, to study the image in and through the critic's unconscious projections or transference (Kristeva, 1996: 194-95). Such projections are often ideologically driven or institutionally constructed, while some might represent intimate or personal material from childhood or life outside academe. I want to emphasise the point, then, that Lowry's image can be read beyond semiotic and historicist approaches, and that the critic's dynamic engagement *with* the excess of the painting (even if it occurs unconsciously) is inevitable at some stage in the reading; and such a rapport is always present, to some degree, in all textual analysis, even if it is repressed or disavowed.

Post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Julia Kristeva with its indebtedness to the work of Melanie Klein, redresses the poststructuralist overemphasis on the signifier. That is, while language remains a constituent part of the unconscious as Kristeva conceives of it, in her theorisations there is a return to the drives and the biological aspect of the psyche, which Lacan neglected (Kristeva, 1993: 87). Whilst paying attention to the symbolic then (in this context, culture, history, language), Kristeva states that the symbolic must be considered alongside the presymbolic and the biological domain (or the inner world, atemporality, affects) (Kristeva, 1993: 85-86). This analysis is useful here, not only when examining the formal aspect of Lowry's image but also when taking into account feelings or moods that the image signifies for the critic. In fact, in answer to the question where does the critic go next, after the threshold of art history has apparently been met, one might say that an ekphratic embrace of the form is appropriate – finding words which seem to resonate, poetically, with one's thoughts and sensations, in the face of the canvas. In doing so, allowing the picture to shape and correspond with one's words, one is also able to become aware of the personal motives of criticism – how it is not the critic that is really looking at the image, but rather it is the image that gazes at the critic. It is not the critic who finds the image; instead it is the image that signifies what he or she cannot express in academic terms. That is to say, personal material for the critic, which has not yet, for some reason, been signified, draws him or her back to the picture. And, even though there have, no doubt, been countless attempts to rationalise the significance which the critic senses, academic discourse leaves a remainder, something elusive which keeps insisting on being seen (the *real*). It is not enough, then, to read the image in terms of history or

culture and to use academic language; one must instead engage more intimately with a residue that remains, after all that *can* be said *has* been said, of what surrounds and is found inside the canvas. One must use words which analogue the way the painting affects one's look. For Lacan, it is significant to recall the gaze is not on the side of the subject, but rather the gaze is the 'gaze of the Other', or on the side of the *object*. This is explained as follows:

When the subject looks at an object, the object is already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it. This split between the eye and the gaze is nothing other than the subjective division itself, expressed in the field of vision (Evans, 1996: 72).

This idea of the gaze has profound implications and begs a further question: If one turns one's attention from examining the object in an academic sense, to regarding the object as a representation of one's own object (of desire), is it the case then that beyond a scholarly contribution to the history of art, one is impelled to move into the realm of lay-analysis, writing literature with the purpose of developing awareness of oneself? Maybe too, in analysing affect symbolised in the painting, one is also encouraged to stray, perversely, from the humanities to the methodological incorporation of theories in the natural sciences, specifically psychology and neuroscience. Since, in examining the object as an object of psychic space, not only must the unconscious be taken as a starting point in analysing the reading of the painting, but one must also consider the biological stratum of psychic life: areas of the brain such as the hypothalamic nuclei (whose functioning underlies meaning), and the limbic lobe of the brain stem, including the amygdala (whose functioning underlies affects) (Kristeva, 1989: 37-38).

Looking now at Lowry's *The Sea*, and having this picture gaze back at me, I notice that signs are partially present. I can distinguish waves and clouds for instance and the line representing the horizon. Such signs allow me to retain the possibility of at least some historicist or semiotic study. Then, after such work is done, and its insufficiency is marked by an exhaustion of words, the enigma of the canvas, authorial intent and so on, I – the critic – am then led to read myself into the image – as if it were the analyst – where the painting begs a reading of one's unconscious investment in its surface aspects; where writing *with* the image means also writing oneself *into* the image; or, that is, writing one's psychical reasons for seeing it as one's object in the first place – and the critical stance one takes towards it. I write with the picture then, in want of knowing more about it – and myself. I engage in connivance with it, and, at this semiotic limit, am led into ekphrasis – ekphrasis, I want to make clear, not as a departure from criticism, but rather as a complement to it. I'm drawn, in other words, into a writing style that approximates or is analogous to the thing which gazes at me. I'm compelled to find a register that as close as possible corresponds with the forms: *ripples caressing their way in, the blues and greys, which bring forth infinity*. And, knowing then this is about me, my inner world, *I see those colours evoke lost time, mother, her hands, her pulse and skin, close as this, before boundaries and things separated us*.

Unlike these words, chosen in and through a dialogue with affect, jargon, or at least a critical idiom, intellectualises and align us with a community: even within its differences of argument there appears to be a consensus of form, and with that the fantasy of distancing and objectivity is upheld. Conversely poetry, in my saying, for instance, that Lowry's painting is *the breath of an*

angel before we fall, before an absolute preciousness ceases to be, finds a language or recreates language in order to correspond with the encounter; and with that, rather than distancing and objectivity, what's insisted upon is communion with *my* object and with the singularity of *my* experience, no matter how recondite this is to others or contravenes the propriety of academic writing. Perhaps one might protest that I am, by this point, by including the imaginary and affective dimensions of my looking, no longer, strictly speaking, doing scholarly work. But criticism should, I maintain, be able to integrate this development, where rather than abandon or disrespect the conventional approach, it is merely expanded upon, in order to take into account the patent excesses of the visual encounter. The result of not doing so entails not only exhausting what one is able to say about certain texts or images, but also perpetuating a conservative and, at times, sterile or inertial discourse. And this discourse, by upholding the fantasy of objectivity and suppression of style (or conformity to *a* style), says what it does in the same tiresome language. It's the *form* of academic writing – this stuff now, which I retain only provisionally – in other words, which may inhibit the *content* of what it's able to talk about. Its form – technocratic and often territorial – I would suggest, very often acts as a sublimatory defence against admitting what is personal and humbling, even mortifying in our choice of object. The alternative is of course to find words borrowed from elsewhere ... *for those waves which come, lapping her caresses, pulses, whispering sweet lullabies through the walls of a womb.*

This approach might be provocative or destabilising for some, since it poses a challenge to the ego, not in a theoretical sense but rather in a practical one:

in recognising that infantile gains might well be the ultimate motive for their political or intellectual projects. How humbling this might be. How shaming and how disturbing, that it is perhaps an analyst these scholars need in order to know their object (sublimated to the level of a primary 'research interest', or the like), not another publication. And how irreverent of me to say so.

If, then, the mode of ekphrasis I advocate involves a poetic relation with the image, this also involves an examination of feelings and repressed thoughts, very often archaic (pre-Oedipal) material that is personal to the critic. If I'm to remain passive in relation with my object, less defensive perhaps and less willing to sublimate over the space which opens out (a space of wounds and psychic trauma), I'm able to dialogue with the otherness that is a part of me. Indeed academic status, and the entrenchment of a scholarly style, can often work as a screen or scotomise important insights into the object, and for me, self-analysis, as a complement to or extension of the historicist and semiotic methods, promises a more fruitful and complete intellectual endeavour, one, that is, distinct from a repetitive and blinkered practice of intellectualisation. At the same time though, if one does not have access to a trained therapist, perhaps it is the institution of academia that first needs to be reconfigured in order to hold or contain the subject of such criticism, open and vulnerable as they are to their unconscious as well as to possible ridicule from their peers.

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Manifest Destiny, Violence and Transcendence: An Artist's Statement

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Introduction

My principal area of interest is using digital media within a cross-disciplinary methodology that incorporates drawing, painting, collage and photomontage. The primary theme of my work is the need of the human psychology to transcend the isolation of individual existence. Particular focus is given to the destructive and violent expressions of that need from a societal perspective. This central premise underpins the attempt to explore various sociological phenomena, historical and contemporary, related to authoritarianism, conformity and armed conflict. Central to this premise is an analysis of individual and collective deference of personal responsibility to external authorities, institutions and belief systems, with reference to notions of pre-destination and fatalism. The examination of this topic is interlinked with an investigation of the belief in Manifest Destiny, in reference to the birth of and development of Western civilisation, the expansion of the American west, the religious crusades, the holocaust, British Colonialism and post-war western imperialism. Particular focus is given to the assertion of moral and cultural superiority as justification for military aggression and homogeny. A common feature of the work is an attempt to investigate mankind's wish to dominate and control nature and

his environment, to exceed the boundaries of his physical reality, create permanence, and reconcile the spirit with physical, finite existence.

Context

The assertion of a spiritual and divine justification for violence and dominance is embodied by the concept of Manifest Destiny, a nineteenth century notion that gave a semi-religious underpinning to the belief that the United States was destined to expand across the north American continent (Johannsen, 1997: 9). This concept gave a moral authority to the acquisition of territory by force, justifying the war with Mexico and the oppression of Native Americans (Merk and Merk, 1963: 144-147; Fisher, 1985: 26). The phrase lost popularity after the mid nineteenth century (Merk and Merk 1963: 229), but it has echoes in the justification for war, conquest and militarism in recent history.

In his study of the psychological conditions that facilitated Nazism, *The Fear of Freedom* (1941), sociologist Erich Fromm offers an analysis of the human capacity for violence as a manifestation of the innate need to transcend the isolation of individual existence. He argues that violence is motivated by the need to dominate and destroy life. For Fromm, ‘all different forms of sadism which we can observe go back to one essential impulse, namely, to have complete mastery over another person, to make of him a helpless object of our will, to become the absolute ruler over him, to become his God’ (Fromm, 1941: 135). The violent act grants the perpetrator

the psychological satisfaction of a god-like control, transcending his finite and physical existence.

With reference to Nazi Germany, Fromm analysed individual and collective deference to political or religious authority. He argues that human beings have an innate predilection for submission to authority; as without the subjugation of individual will that authority enforces, the human mind experiences feelings of anxiety, insecurity and isolation. The need to submit to authority is hard-wired, satisfied by deference to religious and political organisations. I am interested in depictions of mythological and allegorical texts that conflate violence with images symbolizing holiness and divinity. Notable examples are *The Four Avenging Angels of the Euphrates* by Albrecht Durer (1496 – 1497), *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* by Pieter Bruegel (c.1525), *Massacre of the Innocents* by Peter Paul Rubens (1621) and *Fall of the Rebel Angels* by Gustave Dore (1866). I feel that these images have a relationship to Fromm's arguments, in that violence is often depicted as an expression of divine will and power. The use of force and destruction is presented as awesome spectacle; the effect is attractive and exciting.

Cormack McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) can be read as a condemnation of Manifest Destiny and imperial expansion. The book describes the activities of a band of scalp hunters in the United States – Mexico borderlands in 1849 -1850. Its dominant theme is ubiquitous violence as central to the human condition and as a foundation for the birth of the American civilization. The central character, Judge Holden, embodies

the violence at the core of human existence and elevates conflict to divinity. The character has a peculiar supernatural quality; his description and behavior throughout most of the book suggest that he is a demon or demigod of ambiguous origin. This is consistent with the text's distinct biblical tone and the many religious references it includes, recalling the imagery of Gustave Dore's illustrations for *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy*. Judge Holden asserts that:

‘...it makes no difference what men think of war. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way.... War is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god’ (McCarthy, 1985: 262 - 263)

John Gray's critique of what he describes as utopian political religions (Gray, 2007: 31) has also contributed to the themes addressed in my practice. In his book *Black Mass* (2007) he argues that the major secular political movements of the twentieth century were influenced by the underlying psychology of Christianity and share similar essential components (Gray, 2007: 261). The Christian patterns inherent in Western thought and the enlightenment belief in human progress imbued the utopian ideologies with their apocalyptic aspect. They anticipated the end of history and the birth of a new universal civilization. The pursuit of these political projects triggered conflict, violence and oppression at a huge human cost

(Gray, 2007: 25). This is another idea that I have attempted to address through the iconography and symbols that I have selected and manipulated.

Practice

My practice is based in the assemblage and combination of various elements gathered from a variety of sources. I attempt to create a virtual space that has relatedness to the real and actual through the appropriation of a variety of found ephemera that act as socio-cultural signifiers. This approach to collage and montage is the process of organizing logic in the selection and manipulation of pictorial elements that have cultural and social resonance. Through the process of selection and manipulation, and the appropriation of signifiers and symbols, I hope that their assimilation and synthesis subjugates their individual meaning in the pursuit of my intended message. Its interpretation is dependent on assumed knowledge of the signifiers that the work contains. The viewer can derive knowledge and meaning through interpreting the interrelationship of often incongruous and seemingly unrelated components.

In collage, the principal artistic mediation lies in the control of the context of the object and its relatedness to other elements within the composition. The collage, in organising elements that embody actual socio-cultural phenomena, establishes a hierarchy of factual relatedness. How those ‘facts’ are organized can prioritize some ‘facts’ and negate others, creating a new version or vision of reality.

I am interested in the depiction of the 'real' and 'unreal' within a composite of photographic, found and drawn elements. This synthesis of the photographically 'real' and the drawn or constructed 'unreal' allows collage to conjoin the actual and the truthful with the imagined and illusory. It represents the synthesis of reality and fantasy. Photographic and video elements, in the context of the animated collage, retain a fidelity to the material world, indicating the tangible, the factual and irrefutable. The drawn and constructed elements, through distortion, abstraction and exaggeration, have the potential to describe the internal, the subconscious and unconscious.

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Colour plates

Plate 1 Accompanies Lydia Brammer's *Siding with the Pervert: Engaging with the Twisted Hero in Japanese Ero-guro Cinema* with figs. 1 and 2 respectively images from *Blind Beast* and *The Horrors of Malformed Men*

Plate 2 Accompanies Rory Harron's *Exodus: A non-identity art - everyone is an artist?*

Plate 3 Marc Bosward – *Life Goes On*

Plate 4 (Double page) Marc Bosward – *We Came Through*

Plate 5 (Double page) Marc Bosward - *Enlightenment*

Plate 6 Marc Bosward – *Summer Day*















