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edited by Michael Keith
Emma Jackson
Britt Hatzius

photograph on front cover by Britt Hatzius

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The Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR)
Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

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Photographers, visual artists and media practitioners, as well as those with a background in social sciences, interested in exploring the creative interplay between cultural research, urban studies and photographic practice. You should have a degree or equivalent in a relevant area.

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For further information about the Centre: Please call 020 7919 7390, e-mail cucr@gold.ac.uk or visit www.gold.ac.uk/cucr/
INTRODUCTION

*Michael Keith, Head of CUCR*

[Centre for Urban and Community Research]

Welcome to the Spring 2007 edition of Streetsigns, the in house journal of the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR) at Goldsmiths. Street Signs tries to give you a flavour of the sort of work that is going on in the Centre and most of the contributors are present or past students or members of staff here.

The work of the Centre is strongly interdisciplinary. We have tried over the last decade to develop a sense of engagement with the city that is sensitive to processes, politics and cultures that are commonly unseen or unheard but place this alongside theoretical reflection on changing city form. CUCR sits within its parent department of Sociology but works with colleagues in disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences. Two graduate programmes are run at the Centre, one MA in Culture, Globalisation and the City and the other in Photography and Urban Culture. Both programmes work with students from humanities and social sciences. Both are interdisciplinary and involve people moving in and out of a range of professional backgrounds, from architecture, arts practice, local government work, youth work, photography, media professions and urban regeneration. You can find out more details about the MA programmes at [http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/](http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/).

Students on programmes at CUCR are invited to become members of ‘a community of scholars’, linking up graduate programmes to the range of funded research projects that are developed here. These have been most commonly funded by the ESRC but we also work for local authorities, urban regeneration agencies and practises, charitable trusts and foundations. Our research is also fairly eclectic but at any one time there are normally over a dozen projects that are ‘live’, focusing on our five thematic areas of work that address issues of city change and regeneration; the politics of metropolitan residence; identity and cultural studies of urbanism, the visual cultures of contemporary urbanism and the evaluation of social policy programmes ([http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/html/research.html](http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/html/research.html)).

In the strand of work around regeneration we have just completed a piece of work for English Partnerships, working in Barking and Dagenham, where the vision of change for London Thames Gateway has run head to head with the emergence of populist support for the far right and the electoral success of the British National Party. Broadly connected to this strand of the Centre’s programme, Scott Lash and Michael Keith have been setting up a three year project which is principally based in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Beijing but also draws on our London experience. It is funded as part of the ESRC World Economy and Finance programme and an article in this edition of Streetsigns says a little more about the project’s development.

On issues of metropolitan residence we have just completed a number of smaller projects that address new institutional forms of participatory democracy. We are also reaching the end of a six year action research engagement with a community led SRB (Single Regeneration Budget) programme that addressed the contested redevelopment of an estate in South London and an attempt to generate a locally owned network of community development and welfare support functions.

Our collaboration with Sheffield Hallam and the Manchester Institute of Popular Culture to use ethnographic and participatory methods to evaluate ‘Positive Futures’, a youth engagement programme, has also just come to an end. The research team was led by Ben Gidley, with Imogen Slater as the main researcher, and involvement by Gavin Bailey, Alex Robertson, Jane Tooke, Emma Jackson and Hilde Stephenson. A final report launch event was held in November at Bramall Lane (the ground of Sheffield United), attended by Linford Christie among others.

Moving forward, CUCR has been successful in two funding applications to the Rothschild Foundation Europe (formerly Hanadiv). One is for a mapping study of cultural and interfaith initiatives against racism, xenophobia and anti-semitism in Europe, led by Roger Hewitt and Keith Kahn-Harris, with a research team that includes Maria Dumas and Daniel Zylbersztajn. The other is for a two year study by Ben Gidley and Keith Kahn-Harris entitled ‘From Security to Insecurity’, about the British Jewish community’s response to multiculturalism.
Roger Hewitt and Caroline Knowles have also been successful in generating a new project funded by the European Commission - worth 500,000 Euros over 20 months starting in March 2007. ‘The architecture of contemporary religious transmission’ is based in three cities across Europe (London, Oslo, Hamburg) and partners CUCR with the Universities of Bergen and Hamburg. The project develops the multi-media strand of the Centre’s work. Using photographic approaches to the visual cultures of the city, it will deploy visual ethnographic methods, working with young people in the 18-25 age range that are Muslim, Christian and non-religious, involving Vicky Skiftou, postdoctoral researcher, and Britt Hatzius, photographer, filmmaker and visual researcher.

We are also developing an action research project in Swanley, Kent, in partnership with Read Strategies Ltd and West Kent Extra. The project, involving Martin Myers, Alison Rooke and Ben Gidley, seeks to develop a good practice model of neighbourhood work on a social housing estate.

The ‘Beyond The Numbers’ Game project, part of the European-funded Inclusion Through Media programme, is developing an interactive evaluation toolkit for exploring participatory youth media. This project involves Ben Gidley, Imogen Slater, Simon Rowe, Alison Rooke, Debbie Humphry and Tony Dowmnt of the Media department.

Our Joseph Rowntree Foundation-funded project on diversity and governance continues, with Marj Mayo and Kalbir Shukra leading on a case study in Coventry. We have continued our relationship with Neighbourhood Renewal in Camberwell, with a project on poverty and life history, on which India MacWeeney has worked.

In the last edition of Street Signs an article featured the graduate programmes’ visit to the city of Riga. The work was developed into an exhibition at Viewfinder Photography Gallery in Greenwich that examined the forms of urbanism that emerge at the ‘edge of Europe’, as the post-soviet moment becomes urban. Running from 18th January to 15th February ‘Riga Architexture Today; the breakdown and build up of the Latvian capital’ used photography and text from staff and students and was well received.

If you want to know more then please do not hesitate to contact us on cucr@gold.ac.uk
This photographic work concentrates on modern urban and rural landscapes in and around London and Luton, with a particularly focus on the effects Luton Airport has on its surroundings. Luton Airport is to become one of Europe’s biggest airports within the next twenty years.

Within my work I’m interested in exploring the influences of modernity on the urban and rural landscape. Modernity here can be understood as a permanent possibility of change, repetition or transformation. The analysis of the effects of a potential single event (here the building and expansion of the airport) on a local landscape (Luton) offers an intriguing contrast between what we perceive as ‘modern’ and what was there before - fields, houses and other familiar structures. This contrast becomes most obvious during the night. In darkness what is “new”, “old” or “commonplace” becomes contestable. I wanted to offer a visual understanding of an aesthetic pleasure which is situated, on the one hand in a more common view of beauty and, on the other hand, in a deep feeling of estrangement and the uncanny. More specifically, the entwining of the strange and the uncanny with space and time provides us with a different perspective of modernity. What fascinates me is to think about modernity through photography as an event which overcomes and repeats itself in time.

For this reason I wanted to address discussions about the visual structuring of photographic projects of modern spaces and transformational places which are highly fragmented; and with it, the possibilities and limits of photography. The ambiguity of images due to the choices made about the point of view, framing, and other technical aspects could question the value of such a project. However, what I find intriguing is to use these ambiguities and uncertainties, inherent in photography, to create a pattern based on repetition and variation of typologies such as airport, houses, fields and objects. These patterns shall provide the possibility of overcoming the boundaries between what is inside or outside an image and offer another way of exploring the possibilities and differences that lay within one particular surrounding.
Shanghai:
Capital of the 21st century?

Michael Keith

If for Walter Benjamin Paris was the capital of the 19th century and for some eminent geographers and urbanists Los Angeles the iconic city of the late 20th then is Shanghai to capture the exemplary urbanism of the 21st century? You might think so from the manner in which the Chinese metropolis of some 20 million people, host of the 2010 World Expo, has been the focus of representational hype in recent years in writing, film and art (1). In a growing stream of serious journalism and academic description, Chinese urbanism in general and the experience of Shanghai in particular, are held up to represent the future of the city. Indeed in the year when the globe went urban, with just over half the world’s population now living in cities, a flurry of interest has focused on the dynamism of contemporary Chinese life (2). Perhaps then, if the future of the world rests on the shoulders of China’s 1.3 billion people then the fate of Shanghai assumes even greater symbolic weight.

In trying to represent a “generic urbanism” of the mid 21st century the director Michael Winterbottom, in his critically acclaimed film ‘Code 46’, draws on photographic fragments of Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and India and “joined up bits of those cultures into the culture” of the governance DNA of the city(3). But it is the glossy exteriors of the new architecture of Shanghai that is used to convey a sense of the future. In the film the principal protagonist (played by Tim Robbins) flies into Shanghai across the Dubai desert. In Winterbottom’s dystopian future the city exemplifies the metropolitan heart of the system; citizens are allowed inside, denizens remain at the gates, albeit the boundaries of this Shanghai are marked by the 21st century turnpikes of the 14 lane highway that separates the old city from the new airport.

The narrative of the film plays both to a sense of science fiction futures and the traditional genre of the ‘Bildungsroman’ in which the characters arrive in the city and discover themselves as they explore the metropolis(4). A fragile sense of becoming maps the cartography of the persona and the spiritual journey of the protagonists. In Goethe and in Dickens this sense of discovery links an understanding of being modern to a sense of being metropolitan as the strangeness of the city is rationalized, mapped and reimagined.

A similar sense of bewildering excess greets every first time arrival in Shanghai. It is an excess that is captured by both the scale of the city but also by the immersion in new sights, sounds, smells, words and textures. In an obvious way this newness questions what it means to live in the city in ways that recall other historical moments when the shock of the new was identified with particular forms of metropolitan experience. Famously, at the turn of the 20th century Georg Simmel identified modernity with the sensorium of the city(5). The innocent arriving from the countryside in fin de siècle Berlin, Vienna, Paris or London was confronted by the technologies of the industrial revolution that challenged the sense of self as well as any understanding of the spaces and society in which they had arrived. The concatenation of print, lights, sound, and crowds bombarded the senses of the city dweller and a notion of urbanism arose partially through the editing down of this overload into a comprehensible narrative of city life.

Simmel’s modernity challenged what it meant to be human and what it meant to be urban. Similarly, today’s traveler arriving in Shanghai can easily believe that they have flown into the future. The architecture of the international airport in the new Pudong is designed by Paul Andreu. He is the airport builder of the present, whose architecture sits at the edge of 21st century engineering skills (or just beyond in the case of the Charles de Gaulle terminal 2e in Paris that collapsed in 2004 killing 4 people after innovation exceeded technological competence). From the airport you can reach the city centre in 15 minutes on the Maglev (Magnetic Levitation) connection that travels at 431 kilometres / hour and makes the Japanese bullet train look tardy and transforms the surrounding Pudong landscape into a city panorama on fast forward.

As a researcher arriving in the autumn of 2006 the surface veneer of the city is extraordinary; a sensory overload that at times feels like a 21st century version of Simmel’s urbanism a hundred years earlier. In Winterbottom’s film, on arrival Robbins’ character is transported to JinMao tower, where he checks in at the Grand Hyatt, an SOM designed hotel which starts fifty stories up in the air and goes up to a rooftop bar fifty stories higher again. Wallpaper magazine
describes the building as a cross between a “Buddhist pagoda and a Gotham style skyscraper”(6) and its beautifully vertiginous atrium creates an effect (though not a design replica) similar to Frank Lloyd Wright’s New York Guggenheim, only this time the spiral takes the eye down all one hundred floors. The combination of the present day practices of architectural corporations and the city imaginary of transnational futures comes together as Winterbottom’s camera fits across the city’s new financial district of Pudong and the narrative develops as Robbins’ protagonist tries to unpick the DNA of the city that joins its stunning architectural artifacts to its social fabric (a hybrid language of ‘papelles’, ‘khidafiz’ and ‘cerveza’) and political economy (including a migrant cosmopolitanism).

The film’s beauty is not quite matched by its unfulfilled narrative promise. But it does perversely provide a powerful sense of what it means to arrive in today’s Shanghai and an intimation of what some might see as the tensions implicit in making sense of the city and making a space to live in its urbanism; tensions that foreground forms of being and modes of becoming, strangeness and familiarity, ethnographic proximity and appropriate critical distance. Should we call this Chinese urbanism, mega city urbanism or merely the 21st century’s expression of global capitalism? How does its future inhabit our present? At the Centre for Urban and Community Research (and the Centre for Cultural Studies) at Goldsmiths College, we are just starting a three year project that attempts to address the social forms of the new economy of China. The project is based in Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong and focuses particularly on the development of new financial markets and new forms of urbanism and city transformation in the context of the ESRC’s programme on ‘World Economy and Finance”(7). One of the many challenges of the project is to find a medium that can do justice to the novelty and dynamism of China’s change whilst situating it within a firmly global context; a sense that the received wisdom of narratives of economy, globalisation and urbanism might learn from the Chinese experience without turning its extraordinary form into something either naively celebratory or complacently dystopian.

In this context the project aspires to revolve around an approach that is largely dialogical, developing jointly with colleagues in China’s academy and drawing on the work of researchers from universities in London and China. It involves a collaboration with Professor Wang Xiaoming at Shanghai University, a specialist in cultural studies and analysis of city change. Xiaoming is part of a collective of individuals behind the Chinese journal Dushu (Writings) that has received increasing attention in the west(8). Part of the first and second research visits to China to set up the project in late 2006/early 2007 involved interviews with Xiaoming and some of his colleagues that edit or write for the paper, Wang Hui(9) and Cui Zhiyuan. Cui Zhiyuan has subsequently lectured at Goldsmiths College and will be followed in the spring of 2007 by a visit from Professor Wang Xiaoming. Collectively, they and the school of writers associated with them have become known in China as the ‘new left’, a term initially used against them pejoratively but that they have in turn embraced. They are known for their critique of the marketisation process in China, and particularly for their analysis of the genealogical development of the interplay of economy and culture in approaches that are openly interdisciplinary in their nature.

In part this work might be seen as decoupling modernity from neoliberalism. Their scholarship involves an embrace of novelty, change and the global circulation of ideas and ethics. It involves equally a trenchant analysis of the balance sheet of recent changes; recognizing both the outstanding pace of economic growth and the release from poverty of over 400 million people in the last decade with promotion of extremes of inequality that confront the Shanghai visitor as colonial echoes resonate along the riverfront architecture of Shanghai’s Bund, where the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank’s first headquarters and a replica of Big Ben remind the viewer of another past.

In this complex tapestry of past and present the need to find a language that does justice to the city’s economic, social and political landscape is challenging. In part, Wang Xiaoming’s work focuses on the power of description and the moral imperative of portraying the nature of contemporary culture before subjecting it to political or ethical analysis and ethical prediction. In a sense he asks what it means to be modern in today’s China. In the 1970s Chen Jingrun, a Chinese mathematician, was the first to generate an arithmetic proof of Golbach’s Conjecture, the proposition dating from the 18th work of Christian Golbach, a German schoolteacher, that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes. Chen Jingrun’s work won international recognition. As a symbol of the ‘modern’ in the China of the 1980s Chen Jingrun was acclaimed nationally. Xiaoming asks whether the same would be
true in the 21st century, if knowledge so free of commodity value sits easily with more materialistic definitions of the modern in 21st century China (10).

A cultural studies of the city juxtaposes the myths of the modern in today's urban China with its more prosaic realities. The modern in Shanghai is commonly taken to be exemplified by the members of the middle class; the new rich that garner air space and press coverage. Yet as Xiaoming points out the city is shaped as much by more numerous but less visible forces. To take just one example, in the case of more than two million migrant workers from the countryside that form the bulk of the unskilled workforce, and do not always have citizenship rights in the city, “planners of Shanghai’s municipal development often ignore them as if they did not exist” (11). And yet the demands of more than two million households shape the markets of street vendors, the global networks of migrant labour, the consumption patterns in video and pirate DVD markets and the shape of the unregulated city. Only an empirical engagement with this more penumbral world can generate an understanding of how it is, let alone what it will become.

Inspired by the first generation of Birmingham’s school of cultural studies Xiaoming contextualises the ability of the intellectual to ‘intervene’ in the shaping of the new world but valorises their power to describe it. This power of description is matched by a moral imperative that outlines the thinking that narrates the new Chinese realities through a veil of ideological distortion that masks some of the less nuanced realisations of modernisation and marketisation in today’s China. The modern in China is consequently contradictory and complex in nature, not simply a linear move from one historical moment to the next and certainly not a Whiggish progress from communism to capitalism. He speaks with an ambivalence that senses that the processes of modernisation bring together all the best and worst about Shanghai’s past with all that is best and worst in the cultural traffic of globalisation. In his writing there is a sense of the contradictory and nuanced nature of modernisation that explicitly rejects simplistic dichotomies of traditional / modern, closed / open, conservative / reformer, market / planned, socialism / capitalism, communist / anticommunist: “[A]s long as openness is not viewed as a paradise, and modernization is seen as a necessary process that brings both gains and losses, we can say that China is not only being modernized but is already half way down the road of globalization. But it is hard here not to think of the Krylov’s fable of the cart pulled simultaneously in three different directions by a swan, a pike and a crayfish” (12).

The academic imperative to describe reinforces a sense of a cultural studies obligation to analyse the mediating stories that narrate and distort realities of the nature of Chinese modernisation (drawing on notion of ‘ideology’ developed from Marcuse). It implies a more ambiguous take on China’s new urbanism and a resolutely synthetic engagement with both the unseen city and the protagonists that theorise the newly regenerated metropolis.

For Cui and his contemporaries a theory of marketisation demands a complementary theory of rights and of political formation in the structuring of property markets in particular. Markets are consequently considered in terms of the interplay between state and market regulation. Interestingly, in both written work, interview discussion and his lecture at Goldsmiths, Cui returns to enlightenment traditions of liberal thought that interrogate the central role of property rights in structuring the liberal subject and the work of J-P. Proudhon, F. Lassalle and J.S. Mill that addresses this problematic in another age. In a ‘back to the future’ synthesis of philosophical scholarship and a political history of the present, it is Cui’s fascination with political economies of the enlightenment that leads him to reexamine the thinking that confronted the greed of Europe’s industrialization. He has a particular concern with the writing of Henry George (the 19th century American political economist) whose work on land tax focused on the social responsibility to develop land for its use value rather than acquire it and bank it for its accumulation value.

China’s moves towards a new economy are taking place in the shadow of the catastrophic excesses of Russian perestroika and east European kleptocratic privatization. What became known as the ‘Washington Consensus’ that normalized ‘neoliberal orthodoxies’ of economic policy in the late 20th century took the market as natural phenomenon. Cui’s work is important in part for the ways in which he attempts both a diagnostic understanding of how new markets, and property markets in particular, are being constructed but also because of his fascination with a return to 18th and 19th century political economy to
think how markets might be made otherwise. In part our research is interested in interrogating and describing the ways in which new markets are socially and politically constructed. In the looking glass world of today’s China, the move towards marketisation represents in part a move away from monopoly ownership of land by the state to variations on contingently commodified land rights. Buying property in China for development normally involves the purchase not of land per se but of the right to use the land (either commercially or residentially) for a fixed period of time (most commonly for fifty or seventy years respectively). For Cui an understanding of the development of markets has to begin from an understanding of their ethical, legal and philosophical construction, a deconstruction that prefigures an engagement with the forms of new market that are being developed in today’s China(13). Cui’s work consequently demonstrates the manner in which the past might inhabit the present slightly differently in thinking about the evolving economies of tomorrow’s cities, fusing the cultural forms of China and the west in creating something novel; itself a form of cultural as well as mercantile exchange. But Shanghai itself is a product of the contact zones of the colonial and the postcolonial city. In a beautifully written book Leo Ou-Fan Lee has described how in the period from 1930 to 1945 the encounter between Shanghai, modernity and the colonial present mapped the city through a cultural traffic that played back and forth between what it meant to be modern and what it meant to be Chinese. A cartography of cinemas, theatres, clubs and bars generated a cultural traffic between west and east, past, present and future that speaks to the present in ways that might urge us to think carefully about descriptions of the cultural formation of today’s megacity(14).

So one message to emerge from some of the writing by Chinese scholars must be about the manner in which an urban sense of ‘learning from China’ involves a notion of this traffic; that shapes the landscapes of 21st century Shanghai and China’s new economy but not as a teleological endpoint of capitalist development nor simply as a new territorialisation of the western market. A history of Shanghai’s present involves an understanding of governance forms at a distance and up close; an invocation of globalisation Chinese style and urbanism Chinese style as neither an end point of history nor a unique form of geography but instead as an extraordinary moment in the routed transformation of contemporary urbanism. In understanding whether Shanghai is to be capital of the 21st century it might be essential to work out the ways in which it is simultaneously haunted by the 20th century and structured by the dynamics of here and elsewhere. To begin to understand how Shanghai’s future inhabits our present it may be essential to rethink the manner in which urbanism’s past haunts its present in the genealogy of what it means to be modern and to be urban.

Rather than transform Shanghai into a either utopian or dystopian exemplar of some form of generic urbanism, both engagement up close and the critical distance of academic inquiry might make us think slightly differently about the cultural traffic globally of ideas about the ethics and practices of property rights, economic growth and the social construction of markets, as well as about the palimpsests that reveal the city’s hidden pasts that haunt its present. In such urbanism the trajectories of the temporal and the cartographies of ideas might reveal some equally interesting material about how we can learn from the ways in which the Chinese experience speaks to what it means to be metropolitan.

(1) See for example Deyan Sudjic’s fascinating but problematic piece on Shanghai ‘The speed and the friction’ in the Urban Age project at http://www.urban-age.net/0_downloads/UBulletin1June2005.pdf
(3) http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_040806winter.html
(11) Wang op cit p277
(12) Personal interview January 2007 and ‘A manifesto for cultural studies’(op cit) p.286
St Matthew’s Estate
Christina Saez
Brixton, London 2006
The dreams of trees and the dreams of concrete are not as dissimilar as we like to think. Rising from a common ground, both aim for the same sky, reaching high towards the sun. But the trees that grow in our cities remind us of the resilience of life, and provide the oxygen that feeds our lungs. The towers we build in our struggle for grandeur become monsters that hide the sun from us, in whose bellies our nightmares rest.*

Christina Saez

*The dreams of trees and the dreams of concrete are not as dissimilar as we like to think. Rising from a common ground, both aim for the same sky, reaching high towards the sun. But the trees that grow in our cities remind us of the resilience of life, and provide the oxygen that feeds our lungs. The towers we build in our struggle for grandeur become monsters that hide the sun from us, in whose bellies our nightmares rest.*

Christina Saez
There is a sign at the foot of the hill that leads to Portbou’s cliff side cemetery, it reads: “Memorial W Benjamin” and an arrow directs visitors to the philosopher’s grave. Next to this public notice is a ‘no entry’ sign Benjamin took his own life here in this coastal town on 26th September, 1940 after the Spanish border police had ruled that he did not have the appropriate papers to exit Vichy France. His aim was to escape via Lisbon and join other intellectual émigrés like his friend Theodor Adorno in America. In the Hotel de Francia he wrote on a scrap of paper his final message:

In a situation with no escape, I have no other choice but to finish it all. It is in a tiny village in the Pyrenees, where no one knows me, that my life must come to its end. I would ask you to pass on my thoughts to my friend Adorno and to explain to him the situation in which I have now found myself. I no longer have enough time to write all those letters I would dearly have written. (1)

Refused entry to Spain and unable to break free of the magnetic field of Nazi Europe he made what Marshall Berman called a “pre-emptive strike on himself.” (2) Like many exiles he carried vials of morphine in case he arrived at just such a moment of hopelessness. The “no entry sign” that sits innocently here is a profane illumination like one of Benjamin’s “dialectical images.” As it basks in the afterglow of a Catalonian summer, the sign is a reminder of the deadly exit and entry points that were policed in this small, innocuous resort town.

Led by his guide Heddy Gurland, Benjamin had trekked 15 kilometres on foot from Banyul-sur-mer the day before. He crossed the mountain on the opposite side of the bay from the cemetery. It wasn’t just the physical struggle to traverse the landscape that exhausted him but rather a matter of being swallowed in dark times. Many had tried and failed to escape from Franco’s Spain through this border down in the other direction. As Michael Taussig comments in his beautiful book Walter Benjamin’s Grave, Franco’s victims also haunt the region. (3) Brutal secrets are interned in marked and unmarked graves scattered through this achingly beautiful landscape.

Arriving in Portbou I started to look for what had already been described and take photographs that replicated ones already seen. I did this unwittingly, and not for the first time, following a course that another writer had already plotted. I had read about this place many times and journeyed here through Marshall Berman’s essay on Benjamin and Michael Taussig’s book. In a sense I was looking for things that were already familiar like the memorial to Benjamin called Passages by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan and the epigram that adorned it: “It is more arduous to honour the memory of the nameless than the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless.” Although I had not been able to find this evocative passage in any of Benjamin’s published works.

If you travel to a place that you have read about, there is always a point when the expectations one assimilates through reading start to pull away at themselves, as if the pages of the book need to be torn out, re-written and replaced. For Michael Taussig this is the moment when the social reality depicted in the writing turns back on its literary facsimile and asks what has been learned and insists on a fair shake. “Reality is a shell game; our writing should be too. For a moment they interlock, but then a new pattern of ordered disorder forms, always the one before the last.” (4)

Ascending the hill I notice the streams of iron ore that stain the dark rocky crags. Another sign bears Benjamin’s name, this time a white marble plaque laid into the wall of the Cementiri Municipal in 1979.
Hannah Arendt had complained in 1940 in a letter to Gershom Scholem that “his name is not written anywhere.”(5) She had come to pay her respects shortly after Benjamin’s suicide. Would she be consoled now? Benjamin’s name is written in Portbou but few seem to recognise it. The car park outside the cemetery is full but not with the cars of people visiting the memorial, rather it is a convenient place to park close to the beaches below. Franco’s generals are honoured in the street names of the town. The life of the street comes to be associated with the name erasing the person who owned it previously. They are names without a referent, an appellation without a life, a label attached to nothing. I wondered whether Benjamin’s fate is any different from the generals.

In this region bodies are interned after death above ground in a ‘niche’ for five years. The niche is then emptied and the remains are placed in a common grave or fosa común. As Taussig explains, Walter Benjamin was re-named in the Catalonian funeral rites ‘Benjamin Walter’ and buried not as a Jew but as a Roman Catholic. On the upper tier in the graveyard there is a small garden of remembrance, a path leading to an uncut stone that bears Benjamin’s name along with the quotation: “There is no document of civilisation that is not a document of barbarism”. On top of it are stones placed by people who have come here to remember him. We place our stones and my son picks a small toy bird that is on the floor and nests it among them.

The uncut stone is a grave that is not a grave. The powders of Benjamin’s remains mingle with the rest of the nameless heaped beneath the graveyard in the Foso común. Gershom Scholem wrote back to Hannah Arendt after her visit and claimed that the grave was apocryphal. Taussig suggests by contrast that the story of the grave is an allegory for Benjamin’s life; an existence that did not fit, a misrecognised bare life that the geopolitics of Nazism made precarious and unliveable. Walking down the stairs we pass over the rusted square plate that provides the hatch into which his remains were poured.

Outside the cemetery is the triangular entrance to Dani Karavan’s Passages. It was inaugurated in 1994 at the same time as the uncut stone was placed in the graveyard. Initially the memorial was commissioned by the Federal Republic of Germany to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Benjamin’s birth in 1892. The completion of the project was delayed because the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mysteriously withdrew its funding. Although it was never admitted many believe this was because the German authorities felt uncomfortable paying for a memorial outside Germany to a secular Jew with Marxist leanings. Konrad and Ingrid Scheurmann of the Arbeitskreisselbstandinger Kulture Institute raised the $657,000 necessary to complete the project from Laenders (German regional bodies) and the Catalonia government.(6) According to Karavan, Passages is a homage to the victims of Nazism and not only a memorial to a great philosopher.

Standing at the entrance of the narrow stairway made of corten steel you hear the trains in the vast railway
Descending the stairs of Passages, the dark corridor suddenly becomes very quiet and the air is chilled by the lack of sunlight. The affect is claustrophobic and frightening. One of my children turns around and runs back up to the light. The iron walls are scratched and marked by vandals that have carved their lover’s names into the metal. Halfway down, the ceiling opens to the opal sky. I catch an outline of myself reflected in the glass below and the sea. The view is breathtaking, no surprise that Hannah Arendt described it as “by far the most fantastic and most beautiful spot I have ever seen in my life.”(7) A few more steps and a glass panel blocks the way forward. The shell game takes another turn.

The glass has been shattered. The German lines of Benjamin’s eulogy to the nameless are clear enough and they appear as if written in the sky. However, the Spanish, Catalan, French and English translations below are unreadable through the shattered lines and shards of cracked glass. But shattered by whom? Could it have been the apologists and imitators of the Nazis? There is plenty of fascist graffiti to be found in the backstreets and doorways of Catalonia’s urban underbelly. But a closer look reveals that the glass isn’t smashed from this side. Rather the stones are heaped up beyond the glass, it had been shattered from the other side. I imagine youths armed with rocks taking pot shots at the ruined homage from the beach below. Perhaps, the fierce winds – called the transnontaña – drove the waves and stones against the glass. The embers of memory have not glowed under the force of this gale, rather the memorial is shattered and eroded by it.

Should it be surprising that this homage to the nameless should end up a ruin? A memorial that isn’t touched or cared for in the act of mourning will ossify and sink into the landscape like the remains of a corpse being cleaned out of one of the niches and scraped into the fosa común. The vandalised monument is a reminder that Benjamin remained what he was all along - an anonymous target broken by human malice or the force of the wind. The stones cast against it outweigh those placed on his gravestone as acts of commemoration.

The size of station - built by Gustave Eiffel - seems disproportionate and out of place in such a small coastal resort. In the era of the Schengen agreement the “Euro zone” crossing the Franco-Spanish border has little of its former significance. You no longer have to change currency or possess an exit visa. Yet, the sound of the express trains having their wheels changed to Iberian gauges from standard European ones is an echo from Benjamin’s time, an eerie reminder of the transports that shipped Jews by train to the death factories at Auschwitz. Intermixed with this are the voices of tourists on the beach below and a speedboat heading for the Marina just around the headland.
The epigram written in the sky on shattered glass remains a beautiful illusion. But there is another secret here and another move in the shell game. I found the reference for this quotation. It appears in a deleted excerpt from Benjamin’s famous last essay, the title of which in English is most commonly referred to as “Thesis on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin never intended for the passage to be published and this is why its origin is so elusive. During the war paper was scarce and Benjamin collected anything that he could write on. He wrote the eulogy to the nameless on the fragile orange band of a Swiss newspaper called Schweizer Zeitung am Sonntag. In the recent translation of Benjamin’s complete works the quote appears in a “paralipomena.” The new translation includes a telling fragment not present in citation used in Karavan’s Passages. “It is more difficult to honour the memory of the anonymous than it is to honour the memory of the famous, the celebrated, not excluding poets and thinkers. The historical construction is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous” (emphasis added) (8). Benjamin would not have included himself among the nameless. Etched into the shattered glass the philosopher’s words rather call up the trace of the disappeared people who fill countless unknown fosas along the border. These final flimsy communiqués perhaps stand in for what he may have meant by “all those letters I would have dearly written.”

On the way out of town the coast road to the north of Portbou climbs the ragged cliffs in a sequence of tight hairpin bends. From this vantage point - on the opposite side of the bay - the scale of Karavan’s Passages is breathtaking. A huge channel carved into landscape, a rusty indelible line that appears to be sinking into the rock. At the top of the cliff is the checkpoint that Benjamin would have crossed on his way into town. Disused now, the office where the border police stood and checked papers provides a canvass for graffiti artists. Hip-hop tags associated with the calligraphy of the New York subway smother almost every surface. The abandoned checkpoint is a relic from the order that determined Benjamin’s fate. A strange inert ruin inhabited only by the spectre of its former power. It is a reminder that the borders of

Fortress Europe have shifted and so too has the nature of their violence. The nameless today do not pass through here, rather they will be in the airports trying to dodge passport control, or stowed away under the wheels of a high speed Eurostar or in the back of a smuggler’s truck.

(4) Ibid. xi
Scavenging in the ‘Memory Holes’

by Francisco Calafate

“When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about’, goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man that has stayed at home, making an honest living and who knows the local tales and traditions”

W. Benjamin, Storyteller, 1936

In a shop in Camden Town, last week’s price is crossed out to reveal the discount offered today. Only those who were there last week know that the same sign has been on display at least since then; probably for many weeks. But the newcomers in transit have no reason to doubt the unique opportunity that is passing before them. The touristy pace and gaze turns the urban landscape into an unstoppable stream. Familiar images that compose the metaphorical city, woven in the mills of mass culture, float on the stream, grasping the attention of lenses and prompting standardized comments.

Everyday thousands of tourists pass by Westminster and Parliament Square without any previous memory of the place except for the visual impressions resulting from exposure to the mass culture industries. Brian Haw is probably one of the few anchored inhabitants of that apparently fluid urban space. He’s been living in the square for 5 years now in continuous protest against the British intervention in Iraq. I imagine that for a local story holder like him who is rarely asked to tell his stories, the range of diversity covered by the mass of tourists is very narrow. They all exhibit the same signs – backpacks, bum bags, baseball caps, maps, guides to the metaphorical city, digital cameras pointing at the same spots. The images they make will invariably mimic the ones produced by the mass media.

I have a memory of the divergence between those images and reality. On October 17 2004, I participated in a demonstration against the Iraq war. It might have been a small event, when compared to the ‘million march’ of February 2003; but still it joined some scores of thousands protesters from all over Europe, most of them gathered in London for the third European Social Forum. As soon as the crowd started to dissolve, I was struck by the prompt arrival of an army of street cleaners and water trucks. Back home I had visual proof of their efficiency, on BBC News there was not one single reference to the demonstration. It was as if it never had existed for the reporters of the day. And when the anchor called the Westminster correspondent for an account of the day’s parliamentary debate (on the role of the Blackwatch in Iraq, no less), he could read his lines against a quiet, clean and fresh backdrop. The erasers had done their job.

The metaphorical city pictured by the mass media, cultural industries, tourist guides and local government promotion may be just one of the multiple layers that compose history. It is, nevertheless, one more similar to a dark blanket with a ‘memory hole’ embracing and absorbing all other accounts.

“He tried to remember in what year he had first heard mention Big Brother. He thought it must have been at some time in the sixties, but it was impossible to be certain. In the Party histories, of course, Big Brother figured
as the leader and guardian of the Revolution since its very earliest days… There was no knowing how much of this legend was true and how much invented”
George Orwell, 1984, 1949

If we mention the phrase ‘Big Brother’, most people will immediately understand it as a reference to the global TV reality show. Maybe a significant part will think of issues related to urban surveillance. I have been very surprised to find out, through my spontaneous sociological research, that a considerable number of people who live in London ignore that ‘Big Brother’ is originally the name of the elusive leader of Oceania, the dystopian empire in George Orwell’s socio-politic futuristic fiction Nineteen Eighty Four. Although the empire doesn’t have a capital city, the action of the novel takes place in London.

But the biggest irony of it all is that the erasing of memory is one of the central pillars on which the society of Oceania stands. Winston, the hero of the story, is an obedient yet dissatisfied servant of the ‘Ministry of Truth’. His job consists of erasing, rewriting and replacing records and archives to fit the changing interests of the ruling ‘Party’. When facts need to be altered, all the written archives have to be replaced. And the old ones are chucked through the ‘memory hole’.

“The idea that we are writing in time, at a particular moment, which is partial and positioned and in place, is a major advance. I think we are also writing against time, trying to capture an outline of an existence that is fleeting” Les Back, 2004

Nowadays, the ethereal spaces where memory is generated and accumulated make the task of rewriting history technologically much simpler than it could be imagined from Orwell’s point of view in the late 1940’s. If all memory after 1983 had been erased, we could be left with Orwell’s point of view in the late 1940’s. However, even if there are infinite layers where we can read what happened in that year (including for now many living memories) our age threatens the erasure of memory in other ways. In the era of ‘copy-pasting’, texts have entered a new ‘age of mechanical reproduction’, detached from the original, from reference but also from publication context. The academic rules of referencing are sometimes seen as an anachronism. They can appear to be an obstacle to the flow of the narrative. But the obligation to reference plays in part an irreplacevable role in the present information society: the role of preserving memory alive and guaranteeing that the present work will have the same treatment in the future.

One of the many contradictions of modernity is that the creation of a linear and infinite counting of time coexists with the permanent need of rendering the present past. Between rubbish and archive, erasing and history, old fashioned and retro, the movement along borders demands forgetfulness to reinstate cyclical renovation. Simplistic narratives, which shape dominant mass culture, impose that much must be forgotten. The acceptance of the complexity of urban life, the effort to turn it into faithful narratives, and to listen to the unheard voices are major contributions expected from social sciences and art against the growing pile of debris at the end of the memory holes.
Walking around Madrid’s city centre at night can be like a graphic journey through lights, writings, shapes and shades. Bars and shops display a kind of pride for tradition, where stories can be found if you look for them. It feels like travelling through time: one minute you might feel like you are inside a Spanish pop song from the 90’s and, the next, in a post civil war novel. Unexpected sounds and smells are curiously familiar.

The coexisting citygraphs create a sort of hypnotic vision: a back and forth rhythmic dance; a flow of emotions constantly changing from glance to glance.
Pastiche and / or sobriety; notes on a citizenship ceremony

by Caroline Blunt

If I was to draw up a list of curious research encounters, my recent observation of a British citizenship ceremony in a London borough would rank high among those anomalous situations. Whilst I had read the Home Office's account of national history and culture (*Life in the United Kingdom; A journey to Citizenship*, 2004) and had the ceremony explained, little could have prepared me for a ritual which had me feeling under-dressed yet under-whelmed and acutely ambivalent.

Observing the citizens-to-be arriving at the civic suite, it was clear that there was some sympathy with my uncertainty as to just what this ceremony meant. Dress ranged from 'party' to 'interview' to 'very casual' and body language seemed to communicate a mixture of nervousness, celebration and nonchalance. Was the ceremony in the category 'formal' or 'formality' and was it an occasion for celebration, mere compliance or surveillance? That the balloons and ribbons festooning the ceremony in the category 'formal' or 'formality' and was it an occasion for celebration, mere compliance or surveillance? That the balloons and ribbons festooning the morning's events*  whilst* I had read the Home Office's account of national history and culture (*Life in the United Kingdom; A journey to Citizenship*, 2004) and had the ceremony explained, little could have prepared me for a ritual which had me feeling under-dressed yet under-whelmed and acutely ambivalent.

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It was, indeed, an unfamiliar experience. Speaking afterwards to new citizens, I heard expressions of pride, talk of the 'need for a ritual', of the difficulty or ease of the 'Life in the UK' test and also questions as to whether such a test should be a requirement for all national citizens – new and ‘born and bred’. One person told me that, having grown up in a police state, he was shocked by peoples’ complacency about and indifference towards the relative security and
democracy they enjoyed in Britain. Another told me of how he had grown up in the British Empire and that his education had amply prepared him for questions about the Magna Carta. He reflected on what he called a paradox of British citizenship whereby his obligation to swear an allegiance to the Queen now meant that he could engage with anti-monarchist politics. I confessed to one participant that, although I was a citizen (albeit by virtue of ancestry rather than birth), I had downloaded a practice copy of the citizenship test and failed it several times (go to www.britishness-test.co.uk). Whilst questions such as ‘On mothering Sunday children remember their mothers by giving them flowers and or chocolates – true/false’ had been relatively easy to answer; the question ‘The monarchy (choose two answers) a) is losing its appeal with the general public, b) still remains important and popular among most people in Britain, c) is viewed as a symbol of unity or d) is considered out of date by many people’, or about how many members there are in the Northern Ireland Assembly had me falling short of the knowledge requirements citizenship applicants have to fulfill.

Approaching the nation as an artefact peculiar for its ‘objective modernity to the historian’s eye … and subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists’ (Anderson 1983: 5), I drew on the notion that the nation ‘like any social reality, never reach a stage where they just “exist”’; they are not only constructions, but also continually in the making’ (Hage 1996: 465). My interest was therefore in what the recent citizenship requirements and the ceremony might reveal about how Britain as a nation was making itself and how accessible Britain as a ‘home’ or ‘homeland’ was in an emotional/material/political sense. Debates around multiculturalism had changed; celebration of multiculturalism had been (necessarily?) politicalised with diversity of heritage as a value in itself being claimed and this seemed to move further towards less an atmosphere of conviviality and more to trade off and incompatibility. In 2004, Gordon Brown had attempted to sketch the make-up of a national character or British identity. He suggested that ‘[c]reating a shared national purpose also reflects a deeper need: to rediscover a clear and confident sense of who we are as a country’. Contrary to the pastoral definition of Baldwin, the mixture of humour and defensiveness in G.K. Chesterton, the cricket test of Tebbit or the elegiac tones of Marr or Nairn (see Wright 2006 for discussion), Brown identified what he called a ‘golden thread’ running through British history, a thread characterised by: a commitment to liberty; the idea of duty as a virtue enshrining the idea of a public realm and public service; a tradition of fair play; an ethic of public service rather than self-interested individualism; creativity and inventiveness; and an outward looking internationalism. If such a golden thread sounds benign enough, Hage (1996) alerts us to the ways in which there has been a tendency to believe that there are generally ‘two different nationalisms: a Western nationalism that promotes rational modalities of interacting with “otherness”, and an “Eastern” nationalism (often including everything non-Western) that generates practices of extermination, and that some do not even wish to call nationalism (Enzensberger 1994; Schnapper 1994)’ (Hage 1996: 463). Contrary to this convenient distanciation, Hage (1996) argues that ‘a logic of extermination is inherent in any form of nation building today’ (1996: 464), adding importantly that he does ‘not wish to minimise the empirical (or moral, for that matter) difference between the nationalist practices of exterminating national otherness and the practices that aim just to marginalise it, transform it, or valorise it’ (1996: 464). He goes further to outline the constituents of the notions of “motherland” and “fatherland” and the ways in which they are variously built or made. Motherland building, Hage argues, is not so benign as it appears, depending as it does on the ‘domesticating of otherness’ (1996: 480). And fatherland building involves the monitoring of any potential “counter will” to the national will. He cites the example of the outlawing of the Muslim veil by the French government and interprets this as a response to a perception that the veil symbolises adherence to a Muslim fatherland beyond French borders; an ‘Islamic transnational will’ threatens the will of the Fatherland of France (1996: 483-4).

Alongside the emergence of debates about the Muslim veil in Britain then, how does a citizenship test and ceremony that funnels people through a quantitative and narrow process sit alongside the notion of a ‘golden thread’ and in particular its sub threads of fair play and liberty? Whilst the ‘Life in the UK’ handbook states that the citizenship test/ceremony is intended to ‘make gaining British citizenship meaningful and celebratory rather than simply a bureaucratic process’ (2004: 3) because ‘Becoming a British citizen is a significant life event’ (2004:3), I had approached the phenomenon as an unwelcome assertion or imposition of the nation; an example of fatherland politics masquerading as bountiful protective motherland politics? The symbolic power of the test and ceremony, their exclusivity and domesticking elements, seemed antithetical to perceptions of national culture and identity at large and yet not surprisingly in tune with a political culture flexing its muscles vis-à-vis world insecurity and national dissent. However, I was struck by a dual sense among the new citizens that the requirements of their citizenship (test and ceremony) were either ‘no big deal’ or ‘a rather good idea’. It is perhaps, as several long-time British citizens have commented to me recently, all too easy both to dissociate oneself from the nation as home and as belonging to a nation and enthusiastically subscribe to a notion of extra-national membership - of belonging to a globalised world - without appreciating the extent of material/political
differences between which national chunk one has ended up in, in the world. A semblance of security and democracy is taken for granted perhaps even where we make use of it to campaign for people living in less secure/war torn places. If this is beginning to sound like an advert for the citizenship test/ceremony then you would be mistaken. The whole encounter has left me undecided and unsure. On the one hand, the knowledge required for the test would seem to be a fatherland-type knowledge, for example it offers no opportunity for a dialogical definition of what knowledge citizenship requires or whether one needs specific knowledge to be a citizen; there is only one right answer to each of the 24 questions. On the other hand, that the new citizens were generally positive about the experience cannot be dismissed as some sort of false consciousness. If the process is, amongst and alongside other things, an attempt to counter an ethnically exclusive identity for the nation then perhaps it is to be welcomed. However, having been in operation since 2004 its existence does not seem to have had much impact on exclusive cultural claims on the nation. At the moment, thankfully, there are no explicit requirements or restrictions within the citizenship ceremony upon, for example, the wearing of other national, cultural or religious dress. However, it is perhaps on this note, among others, that close attention needs to be paid to the citizenship procedures and requirements. Up and running since 2004 there has been surprisingly little comment upon the phenomenon and given Hage’s (1996) assertion about the exterminatory logic of all nationalisms together with the state of the world in which we are all living, there’s good reason for this to change.

If you would like to attend a citizenship ceremony as an observer you need to request permission from a local council. Willingness to have observers may vary.

Website: www.britishness-test.co.uk (You can download unlimited practice tests for a period of 90 days for the price of £10.00)
This extract is taken from a personal autobiography in progress that explores the complexities of being a mixed-race subject and the paradoxical relationship to racial identification.

I feel my whiteness has just been extinct, as the fascination of otherness continues to linger through the white gaze. I live in a city full of variety, though the concept of race only seems to be applied to non-white groups. The many questions asked regarding my ethnicity become banal; ‘Where are you from?”, “Earth”… “No, seriously where?” “Peckham”. Finally, the classic question comes along, “where are you from originally?” I laugh and say, “I was born in England but my black ancestry is Angolan.” I then stand there and wait for the question regarding my whiteness…and I’m left there waiting…

The absence of acknowledgement, the acknowledgement of my mother, makes me feel incomplete and is a clear reminder of how the power of semiotics and the use of rhetorical language are influential in society. I asked myself so many questions, questions that appear to have various answers. Could this individual’s understanding and knowledge of ethnicity be nothing but an unconscious habit? An assumption? Or just plan ignorance?

As I undergo the everyday experience of subjectivity I become the embodiment of my physical characteristics, a black male subject. I feel no shame in appearing so. Nor do I denounce my African ancestry. Though, it is unfortunate that there is a connection to a negative space of iconographical and invented concepts, which are indeed historical and still evident in contemporary society. As Fanon wrote, I am the slave not of the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance.

The colour of one’s skin is frequently interpreted as a signifier of culture and in specific identification. So, if my physical image has the appearance of a black man, is this what I represent? The paradox of having the appearance of one thing but also identifying with something not recognized by many is indeed a difficult one. I often wonder how obvious my whiteness is. Black people can see it straight away but white individuals don’t, leaving me to wonder why. Could it be a matter of, ‘he looks black so let’s talk about black things’?

I know about the history of slavery, but there is a part of my history, that in the sound of a vociferous voice tells me to explore my mother’s ancestry. And why shouldn’t it? Would it not be an insult to my mother not to do so? And how can I dismiss a part of me? I have tried to fit in to the many categories but I’m always left feeling disappointed, uncomfortable and more to the point unconvinced. There is always somebody to remind you that you don’t belong. So I end up back to where I began. Nowhere. I often like this nowhere—sometimes I even run to it, it’s one of my salvations. It’s the nowhere where nobody is there.

In the form of a human being, I search for some salvation, the part many cease to identify. She is one of the few who I can trust to see past the colour of my skin. A heroine who has always protected me from harm, she is a warrior that fought the many who rejected me. Traces of her are here with me as I stare at my own reflection and see my eyes are hers, and as I sit here and write, the familiarity of these hands though they are of a different hue enacts pleasant memories of a mother’s hold. Boudicca, you are my saviour.

My racial identity has been an unstable and confusing journey from as early as I can remember. As I continue in my quest to explore my ethnicity, there are still times when I contradict myself. Many have told me that I look Maori – Latin American – African. So far I’ve come to a conclusion, though it may change, that I am many and all as I represent being.
I found a garden centre catalogue last summer which contained a strange advert for a ‘ram raid barrier’ (see figure.1). This comes in different styles and is almost designed like a Metropolitan Drinking Fountain & Cattle Trough Association replica. It also resembles a dolmen. It is set in concrete to resemble stone. Drainage holes enable it to be filled with plants and/or flowers.

I put the advert to one side, unsure what to do with it. Later, I read Simon Faulkner’s 2003 essay, “Asylum Seeker”, Imagined Geography and Visual Culture. This essay identified elements within UK tabloid cartoons which posited a garden England as ideologically walled off from an ‘alien’ other. It immediately began to resonate with this odd find, which I couldn’t quite bring myself to throw away. Faulkner wrote:

‘The tabloids... construct an overtly value-laden set of geographical contrasts between the inside and outside of Britain, and between “Britishness” and the refugee as “other”’. (Faulkner, 2003).

Faulkner described how ‘Britishness’ is defined in the UK tabloid press as rural and white, as opposed to urban and multi-cultural. He was writing about the other as ‘immigrant’, as ‘asylum seeker’, yet strands of his argument seemed to illuminate this curious advertisement, which almost seemed like a joke. Certainly, the idea of a ‘garden England’ under siege was present. Yet perhaps the ‘ram raid’, with all its connotational baggage, is a different terror, imaginary or otherwise, to that which Faulkner was attempting to tease out.

There seemed to be a jarring contrast between the product’s rustic design, its heavyweight construction and intended dual-usage as both rampart and flower bed. Dolmen means ‘stone table’ in Breton, which has been said to invoke the image of giants building
them. As components of tombs, Dolmen are also said to form a barrier between the living and the dead.

There may also be a way in here, to a broader reading of ‘asylum’. Although the ‘asylum’ Faulkner discusses is not directly applicable to the advert in question, ‘asylum’ may be connotationally present. Liza Schuster, in ‘Asylum and the Lessons of History’, supplies a broader reading of the term:

‘The word asylum originally came from the Greek “asyllos”, that which may not be seized or violated and usually referred to a place that was sacred or magical, such as a temple. Those who took sanctuary in such a place put themselves under the protection of the gods and so out of secular control’. (Schuster, 2002).

The idea of the ‘rural idyll’ has a strong hold over western culture, stretching back well over two thousand years. Later, Schuster writes of how the state came to be the guardian of ‘asylum’. Yet she describes how, historically, states act out of self-interest in relation to ‘asylum’, rather than compassion, how ‘Liberalism only served to disguise...brutal reality’. (ibid).

The Metropolitan Drinking Fountain & Cattle Trough Association placed more than 800 constructions in London. The drinking fountains were erected due to public ill health through choleric water supplies and a tendency for citizens to drink its ‘safer’ alternative, beer. The cattle troughs were designed to improve animal welfare. Many such troughs still exist in towns and cities, the curated remnants of a vanished era, some filled with flowers.

At this point the ram raid barrier seems to collapse into jarring, soil-covered fragments. Remnants to be picked over: A broken hulk of philanthropist welfare institution here, a section of castle wall there. As an object it serves, if only metaphorically, as a figure for both provision and control. More importantly I think, it speaks of the link between the two, as well as the attempt to erase that link via spatial curation.

Patrick Wright has written of such curation, how we ‘Rationalise nostalgias’ (Wright, 1985). Quoting Philippe Hoyau, he explained that ‘the whole frame of reference has shifted in a new and vernacular direction.’ The past” may still be an imaginary object, but it is now organised around three major models: the family, conviviality and the countryside. Purged of its leading political tensions, the past can then be offered to one and all in newly inclusive ceremonies of collective identification: “History annuls itself in ethnology... it dissolves itself in the circumscribed depth of the countryside and congeals in the time of repetition.” (ibid).

Wright has written that ‘...colonialist expectation... no longer finding its customary outlets in the periphery of a mastered world, recoils bitterly on its disappointing home territory’ (ibid) and discusses the 20’s, when the ‘culture of the German countryside migrated into the hideous, but nonetheless “hopeful” symbolism of national Socialism’ (ibid). Academia, Wright says, does not completely enframe history, or rather, what he terms the ‘modern past’:

The ‘modern past’ can be disseminated and popularised via TV, film, or tourism. Older forms of everyday, ritualised activity, from dolmens to water troughs, ‘the sacred’ to ‘the state’, are subsumed by the ‘modern past’. Wright continues:

‘...a phrase of rhyming slang, an old piece of industrial machinery (preferably in situ), a hand-painted plate from the turn of the century and a cherished landscape or place. It is not official cultural policy which determines the meaning or the extent of the modern past.’ (ibid).

There are many cattle troughs in London, made of granite, which are now anchored in the public, municipal concrete. The ‘effective ram raid barrier’ is made of concrete and is now available for private sales.

Some references


http://drinkingfountains.org
The political economy of hybridity: Towards a radical cultural politics

Anamik Saha

The following paper was given at the conference Dis-Orient X, marking ten years since the publication of the book 'Dis-Orienting Rhythms: the Politics of the New Asian Dance Music' (Sharma, Sharma and Hutnyk (eds), Zed Books 1996). Reflecting on this important contribution to cultural studies, speakers considered the current state of British Asian cultural and racial politics.

I first encountered ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ in 1998 - 2 years after it was published - when I was a student about to start the third year of my undergraduate degree in Communications at Goldsmiths. I did not find the book through the usual academic channels; at that point it was not on any of my reading lists, it did not get referred to by any of my lecturers - it’s place in the British cultural studies canon would eventually come. I actually found it via a review in a magazine called ‘2nd Generation’. This was a cultural/style magazine that emerged around the same time as the explosion of – for want of a better term – the ‘Asian Underground’ scene, focusing on the aesthetics and the politics of a (very) loose collective of British-born South Asian cultural producers that I think it is fair to say, were making the first significant strides into mainstream popular culture.

The appearance of this review in ‘2nd Generation’ was quite odd; specifically because of its academic nature which was at odds with the rest of the magazine’s tone, but its inclusion for me, signalled the spirit of the time. Now in hindsight we can see that the scene was in some ways quite elitist, London-centric and not actually that inclusive (but then again what club scene isn’t?), but as someone who was attending these nights, these were exciting times. As contrived as it sounds I was literally reading ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ during the day and going to ‘Swaraj at the Blue Note’ in the evenings. I am sure I am in danger of over-romanticising, but for a brief, brief moment, here was a musical scene where theory and practice actually converged. To be honest, I didn’t care much for the music – I was much more into the discordant lo-fi indie of ‘Cornershop’ and other similar bands than the stylised drum & bass of Talvin Singh – but it was the cultural politics of the scene that most excited me. Indeed this was the central concern for the editors of ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’.

What immediately struck me about the book was how it had the confidence – though I think attitude may be a more appropriate word– to adopt a critical stance towards unpacking the politics of the New Asian dance musics. This was not a simplistic celebration of a new trendily hybrid subculture, caught up in the brown-is-the-new-black rhetoric and the Cool Britannia zeitgeist. Rather it treated the scene more seriously than that, and in return demanded that this genre be framed within a wider political discourse. Indeed, while the authors of ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ picked up the baton of new ethnicities, their version of anti-essentialism was first and foremost anti-racist. Thus the book had as its centre the notion that popular culture can act as resistance. It is the conditions of this notion that I will explore – and in the spirit of ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’, critique.

‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ succeeded in developing a critical framework that prevented a slippage into the empty pluralist valorisation of post-Bhangra. However in the foregrounding of anti-racist politics in its discussion of music, there was a tendency to applaud just those acts who had an explicit political agenda; bands such as ‘Fun^da^mental’, ‘Asian Dub Foundation’ and ‘Hustlers HC’. This is not a criticism – it is no coincidence that these bands were also the ones making the most interesting sounds – but what about those acts who were making less charged music? In fact my immediate reaction to the book, was to consider the resistive potential in the less explicit cultural politics of guitar bands like ‘Cornershop’ and riot grrrl act ‘Voodoo Queens’. And my search for their transruptive potential took me to a new terrain, which is where I began to consider the structural determinants of British Asian cultural politics.

Radical hybridity emerged from what I consider the most important discussion in ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’, regarding the commodification of British Asian music. While many will valorise the spaces created by British Asian musicians in mainstream popular culture, Hutnyk and Ash Sharma argued that this space exists solely in the commodity system and therefore cannot have any disruptive effect on it. This is played out through the selling of difference, where a lingering colonial desire for the “Other” has meant that south Asian diasporic cultural forms in particular are Orientalised and sold as exotic. However Hutnyk sees oppositional narratives emerging from the ‘radical hybridity’ of bands such as ‘Asian Dub Foundation’ and ‘Fun^da^mental’, who partner their experiments in fusion with explicit anti-racist, anti-imperialist lyrics. Thus for Hutnyk, ‘radical hybridity’ is the only viable version of hybridity that can escape the Orientalist processes of exoticisation.

This is clearly an important critique but I am slightly uneasy over the demands for an upfront political agenda. Not least, this exacerbates the problem of the burden of representation that Stuart Hall warns us, blights the
producers of the new culturally diverse arts. But rather what I would like to suggest, is that transcriptions – as Barnor Hesse calls them – can emerge from less obvious places, namely the production process itself. The authors of ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ acutely warn us to how processes of commodification are embedded with a neo-colonial ideology that transforms hybrid texts into sites of exotica. Therefore it seems to me that to disrupt these processes is a struggle that will occur not over the content of the texts, but in the very production of these texts, that is, the location where commodification occurs. And this is where a notion of the political economy of hybridity begins to emerge.

First we need briefly to revisit the very concept of hybridity itself. It is worth acknowledging that there is a very convincing argument for doing away with the concept altogether – that what initially held much promise in the cultural sphere, has actually distracted us from continuing racial violence that has become especially intensified by the global war on terror. While I agree with these sentiments I still believe there is a role for hybridity politics to play – albeit in reworked way. Why may it still be relevant? For one Stuart Hall warns us that while essentialism has been displaced theoretically, it still hasn’t been displaced politically. Similarly in an important keynote at the recent conference on South Asian Popular Culture, Claire Alexander suggested that despite opening with the famous declaration ‘of the end of innocence, the end of the essential black subject’, the new ethnicities moment is not actually over, as is made evident in the consistently negative representations of British Muslims in the media. For me then, a version of hybridity still retains some value in a cultural political agenda, but only when situated, at the very least, within postcolonial discourses of resistance rather than an empty postmodern version of cultural syncretism that has blighted globalisation debates.

Yet returning to the critique offered by ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’, what does it mean for British Asian cultural texts if Bhabha’s ‘third space’ is a commodified space, which is essentially what several of the writers allude to? This is precisely where a political-economic version of hybridity can represent an intervention. It firstly demands that producers of the new culturally diverse arts are conscious of how their art is most susceptible to the neo-colonial processes of Orientalism. But more crucially it demands a recognition of how such processes are embedded in commercialism and free market logic through the selling of difference. Such an acknowledgement should then point to how industry practice determines the degree to which these processes can be avoided or disrupted. Thus a political-economic version of hybridity relieves the artist of having to justify their art within the text, but instead focuses the attention on the production process. In my view this is the most important way of avoiding imperialist co-option and allowing our oppositional voices and alternative stories to come through…

I am going to have to leave elaboration of this point for another time. I want to conclude with a slight detour into the cultural politics of our work as social scientists. Recently I spoke at the conference of South Asian Popular Culture. Whilst I was impressed by the diversity and range of papers given, I was surprised to see little engagement with perhaps the biggest global phenomenon to affect South Asians today (even non-Muslims): Islamophobia and the War on Terror. Of course theorists of South Asian cultures should not be burdened with having to discuss their work in terms of the current geopolitical climate. Yet it does raise the issue of why are we writing about these issues? In her keynote Claire Alexander asked us whether an excessive focus on popular culture is a luxury we can afford. That is not to say we have to drop discussions of culture for debate on terrorism and US foreign policy. Rather, what I think Alexander is suggesting, is how our research on everyday cultures needs to maintain, no matter to what degree, a commitment to social transformation.

And it is such a commitment that made ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ such an important intervention and why it remains an important example of how we can frame discussions about Black and Asian popular culture. Unfortunately, in my view, in the 10 years since its publication, we have seen little scholarship that has generated the same kind of progressive discussion as ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ – or at least none that will have us meeting up 10 years later discussing it’s influence/relevance. This is mirrored in the music scene were there has been little to celebrate and engage with apart from sporadic moments such as the innovative sound and lyrical engagement of M.I.A and the chart success of Punjabi MC. Indeed the original cultural activists and producers from the scene 10 years ago – who when not openly espousing a political position, at least were working from a reaction to being marginalised in the cultural sphere- have instead been replaced by entrepreneurs who are more concerned with emulating the bling bling aspects of commercial US rap and R&B, rather than then engage with whoever their communities might be. This is admittedly a rather cynical observation and one I hope to be challenged on. But it’s especially at times like these where the need for deep, and engaged critique is as vital as ever - for cultural producers and social researchers alike – even for those of us who are dealing with issues that do not explicitly deal with current geo-political circumstances. And if we are ever unsure as to how we should frame our discussions of Other everyday cultures and vernacular forms, then maybe we need to return to ‘Dis-Orienting Rhythms’ to show us the way.
Created in London’s Piccadilly Circus, this silent movie tries to penetrate the one-dimensional surfaces of the LCD screens which characterize this public space. This piece explores the ideas of visual rhythm, optical consumption and subconscious visual culture. The movement of my physical body is the central art medium in this sensation-centered piece. The compositional structure of the work adopts the anatomical bilateralism of the body, producing an organic syntax of the visual subject which reflects a sensual interaction with the city.
The Irrepressibility of Magnifera

Alex Rhys-Taylor

The mango trees serenely rust when they are in flower,
Nobody knows the name of that voluble cedar
Whose bell-flowers fall, the pomme-arac purples its floor...

Not only are they relieved of our customary sorrow,
They are without hunger, without any appetite,
But are part of the earth's vegetal fury, their veins grow...

Ants carry the freight of their sweetness, their absence in all that we eat,
Their savour that sweetens all of our multiple juices...

And here at first is the astonishment: that earth rejoices
In the middle of our agony, earth that will have her
For good: wind shines white stones and the shallows' voices.

Derek Walcott, The Bounty vi, (1997:13)

Seven years old and crouched at the boundary of a dusty scrubland beyond which the wicket and her brothers stood, she waited, arms outstretched and hands cupped. The red leather ball skipped cheerfully towards her. As it approached, its hops and skips revealing its velocity, Marcia tentatively brought her elbows towards her torso so as to cushion the impending blow. Accompanied by a small ripple of applause, the ball hopped neatly into her palms. Unsure whether the applause was for her or the batsman, she blushed. In that unsteady moment Marcia slowly stood. Taking the ball in her right hand, Marcia moved the arm to shoulder height, twisting the trunk of her body as she reached her forearm out sideways before swinging the arm back behind her head. Maintaining the flow of the movement she unravelled her body, arm and wrist launching the ball in a steady arch towards her brother's hands (1). This time she was sure the applause was for her. From that moment, basking in the approval of her brothers and their friends, the preceding action was inscribed on her comportment; as was her confidence to confound even her expectations of herself.

Although the refinement and habituation of the throwing action would quickly attain a subtle importance in Marcia's daily life, it would not be for the same reasons as for her brothers, who derived esteem from their peers for competitive throwing ability. Rather, for Marcia, the mastery over the relations between torso, legs, wrist, posture, hand and eyes was essential if she was to be able to knock the ripest mangos to the ground before they fell and bruised. The best mangos were naturally the ones that ballooned slowly at the end of spindly branches too thin for any of the impatient local children to clamber across. This also meant that, away from the mass of the tree, they were hardest to hit with a projectile. Accordingly, a good throw was essential lest the heavy fruit were to disrupt the night time chrrups and snores of the household when they landed, bruised and leaden with sugar, on the corrugated roof of Marcia's hillside family abode.

Throughout her early childhood in Anse La Raye, a small fishing community at the foot of Saint Lucia's domineering mountains, the local mango tree was a central feature in the tapestry of memory and habit that Marcia would carry and work upon throughout her life. Viewed against the heavenly turquoise of the mountains from one side and the infinite blue of the ocean from the other, the tree's Lilliputian flowers were a seasonal source of delight, divination and temporal orientation for Marcia. The broad crown in which the flowers sat also variously offered welcome shade and protection from the rain, both for the dwelling it presided over, and for a considerable area around.

The tree's gnarly and knotted bark also played its part. At first it provided a tableau for the infant Marcia to run her hungry fingers along. Not long after, the same bark became the means by which Marcia would grip, twist and pull her herself over and through the inner parts of the tree (much to the chagrin of her mother and aunts). On her sixth birthday Marcia was also inducted into the familial relationship with the trunk. Sat on her aunt's knee she was told the story of how the trunk saved Marcia's great grandfather in a hurricane that had turned everything else around it to flotsam. The 'winds,' so decisive in every narrative of the region had, she was told, blown away
Marcia’s great, great uncle, whose arms were “too weak” to lift the trunk, to death(2) . That year the flowers had come late and the fruit failed to ripen evenly. Yet Marcia felt sure that in the time between the tree’s adolescence and her own childhood, the trunk had grown thick enough to save at least her and her two brothers should the necessity arise.

Indeed, fearing that her home would not survive another storm, she often cajoled her reluctant brothers into rehearsing their survival routine, clammy hands and scratched forearms linking trunks against the maelstrom that the island’s winds excite.

Above all else the most crucial facet of the tree for Marcia was its fruit. There were other mango trees scattered over the hills in the area but the largest stood in liminal spaces at the edges of farmland. Here they had stood, from the eighteenth century onwards, 7000 nautical miles from home and obliged to fruit. Some of the older trees had fruit comparable to Marcia’s. But nothing, she felt, quite matched the sweetness of the relatively small yet plump variety that she felled from the thinnest branches of what she considered her tree. Marcia was aware that compared to the fleshy behemoths that were sold at the nearest market the diminutive dimensions of the mango led it to appear inferior in the eyes of many of her peers. But as Marcia was fast to point out, their size was the essence of their strength: owing to the near equal ratio between flesh and stone, the fibres emanating from the stone interlocked with those nearer the skin, trapping the fragrant sweet flesh between their filaments. More than anything else, Marcia relished the fact that this meant that the seed itself could be sucked on for over an hour: A considerable part of Marcia’s most enjoyable days were spent squeezing the seed between the roof of her mouth and tongue until it relinquished all of its sweetness. She also shared the fruit with her friends who would often come round after attending the nearby Roman Catholic church. Sometimes they brought mangos and other fruit for her too. Sitting with friends, family and acquaintances, sucking mangos until they reached the wood-flavoured kernel, was integral to the formation of the relationships that Marcia would cherish throughout her life, and forever inseparable from her thoughts of them.

Not long after her twelfth birthday Marcia, her mother and one of her brothers made their way to the shore and, with luggage, stepped onto her mother’s brother’s fishing boat. Leaving the village always entailed a fusion of excitement and fear for Marcia, but this time she was acutely fearful of the increasing distance between the source of her sight and ear and eye, moving across bays toward the port of Castries, her tears had dried. It was here, getting off the boat, that Marcia first saw mechanised loading systems placing cargos of fish and banana onto the boats that so often passed in front of the bay she called home. It was from here also that Marcia, her mother and brother stepped onto a larger boat and set sail for Britain.

It is the middle of an unusually hot summer in the year 2006 and Ridley Road market in Hackney, East London is just recovering from a brief drenching. The smell of petroleum fume-caked tarmac, decomposing vegetation and cardboard is awakened by the rain. The fragrance dances through the air on swirling thermals of evaporating moisture. Mixing with the incense burning in a nearby stall and the oceanic aroma of the fresh fish across the market, the aromas lend an intensity and transformative quality to everything they meet. Parting the air with her movement, Marcia is slowly but deftly pulling a wicker basket through the cramped confines of the stalls, sidestepping discarded pallets and twisting her aged yet supple torso, with minimum cognition, between the crowds. So far she has stopped at three stalls: once to buy a role of aluminium foil and kitchen paper, the next to buy a tub of hand lotion and the third to pick up two brown paper bags. One contains mushrooms and the second a bunch of asparagus ‘Fresh from the Vale of Evesham’. All the items are carefully placed into her basket.

Although she is wearing a soft brimmed hat, it is far from waterproof so during the rain storm she stands beneath the blue and white striped canopy of the vegetable stall. Here she shares conversation with two other shoppers and the Ghanaian vendor of the stall. They chat, first and perhaps predictably, about the weather. The comparison to the climate of homelands turns conversation toward Ghana’s recent defeat to Brazil in the World Cup. Marcia had made it her business long ago to keep up with the latest sports news and had lubricated many relationships with this knowledge for as long as she could remember. This particular exchange ends as the pattering on the shelter fades and the vendor prods the canvas ceiling with a broom. With a splash, the rainwater is reintroduced to the cramped confines of the stalls, parting the air with her movement, Marcia is slowly but deftly pulling a wicker basket through the cramped confines of the stalls, sidestepping discarded pallets and twisting her aged yet supple torso, with minimum cognition, between the crowds. So far she has stopped at three stalls: once to buy a role of aluminium foil and kitchen paper, the next to buy a tub of hand lotion and the third to pick up two brown paper bags. One contains mushrooms and the second a bunch of asparagus ‘Fresh from the Vale of Evesham’. All the items are carefully placed into her basket.

Down the market’s main thoroughfare she moves. Glancing at the stalls moving past her left and right, her peripheral vision peruses the creative uses of pavement space beyond them. At first her pace is steady but over the course of a hundred yards it steadily slows until all momentum is lost behind a cluster of elbows and blue carrier bags. The faint fragrance of mangos picks its way through the scents of dried fish, polythene and incense and engulfs the mass of elbows. The fragrance’s origin is heralded by the stall vendor.
Following the harvest season of 2005, the workers of the mango crop in Pakistan remain little-better off than their compatriots in the storm-ridden Americas(3), yet it has been a bumper season for mangos in India and Pakistan. The meteorology that yielded the fruit manifests itself globally in market saturation and low prices of a particular cultivar(4). One major supermarket, having got a particularly good deal on a bulk purchase of the fruit, premiers it in its own television advert, chropped into a bowl of yoghurt. At the market, traders have, for weeks, been ferociously competing for sales of the large, yellow, honey-inflected flesh produced throughout the South Asian region.

One trader, actualising the potential generated by the aggregation of fragrant fruit, moist air and passers-by with change rattling in their pockets, has sliced up some taster chunks of the mango which he forks out from a paper plate, while his assistant lifts small rectangular boxes over the front of the crowd to the mainly female customers. After briefly ruminating on her semi-conscious arrival into the crowd, Marcia steps into the fray. Over the next minute, she shuffles and twists her way to the front of the throng. Here she abruptly dispenses with the tasters and casts an eye over the fruit. The sensitivity to colour she acquired in the rainbows of her childhood overrides any need to squeeze the fruit for ripeness. Taste and texture are conferred by hue and scent alone. In exchange for her coins the vendor's assistant hands Marcia the orange and black cardboard. She undoes the incongruous ribbon of blue tinsel wrapped around the box, opens it and checks its contents. Having placed it into a nearly full basket, she re-performs, in reverse, the earlier twists and shuffles through the sea of globally inflected East End elbows.

Although no clear decision is reached about the matter, primarily because she carried no shopping list, Marcia now feels that her trip is complete. The rhythms of her current movements are fading out and a new set are being cued up. As she steadily moves towards the bottom of the market, the experience of her body is already elsewhere... at her grand-daughter’s house. ‘One mango for me, one for Rhiannon and one for little David, and maybe one for Granville over the road,’ she thinks to herself without, as it were, thinking about it. She overlays her walk through the market with a silent rehearsal of future actions: a small twist at the waist and reach behind her into her basket followed by the handing over of the fruit to Rhiannon, her eldest granddaughter. She feels herself picking up her great grandchild David from the glossy white kitchen floor that he loves so much to slide from side to side on (in thick socks between cupboard handle and washing machine). Keeping his eyes in her sight see reaches blindly to the plate behind her and offers a carefully prepared sliver of the fruit to his mouth. He will either eat it straight away or throw it at the floor then giggle uncontrollably before wriggling out of her arms and mulching the pulp into his fluffy socks. She glances down and extends her step over some glass crumbled into the granular floor of the market. As she glances back up, her nose meets the distinctive hot doughy smell of the nearby Bagel Bake. She recalls the trembling hand of a close friend who recently died of heart failure compounded by diabetes. Musing on her mortality, of friends and relatives lost, her thoughts quickly return to the fruit. She imagines handing Rhiannon her fruit.

As a determined young vegetarian Rhiannon took special delight in receiving a mango or some other fruit from her grandmother, so much so that the exchange became central to the formation of the more enduring aspects of her sense of self. However, following a family holiday to Saint Lucia, where Rhiannon was shown the old tree that her grandmother used to clamber around, Rhiannon can no longer smell the fruit without contorting; given her dietary constraints she was offered little other than mango for breakfast (pulped or sliced), lunch, as a snack, starter or dessert for the entire ten days she was there. Yet despite this she generally concedes to take the fruit, feigning an excitement at its presence. Seeing a mime of her enthusiasm for the fruit, authentic or not, always pleased Marcia. Knowing this seemed to genuinely please Rhiannon too.

Still rehearsing the future, Marcia has already turned out of Rhiannon’s door and moved up the hill to the bus stop from where she will travel three stops further down the road to her own flat. Having walked up the stairs (it takes only a second in her imagination), she will sit down in her chair with a knife, plate and several folded sheets of kitchen paper laid upon her lap. Then she will turn the mango on its end and, following the direction of the small cleavage in the fruit, slice it into thirds: two cups of flesh and a centre piece containing the seed and whatever flesh remains attached to it. She will turn the cups inside out and bite the flesh away from the wall of the skin, then pick up the seed, remove the remaining skin and suck the flesh off that.

Yet as delicious as the locally bought mango is, its flesh slips off somewhat dissatisfyingly. No sooner will she have cut into the ochre flesh than the consumption of the fruit will be over. The experience brings forth the constellation of the childhood mango, the squeezing of the seed between tongue and palate, the sucking and sharing of the fruit. Cross referenced against the present a distance, both geographical and temporal, is instantiated in her mouth and moves through her tired bones.

Approaching the very exit of the market, where the smell of petrol intensifies and the main road nears, Marcia is approached by a young, nervous looking young man clutching a clip board and microphone. He had been
following roughly the same path and pace that she had made through the crowd. She puts his familiarity down to the fact that she'd seen him sometime, someplace before, recently. She is not sure where or when.

“Um. Hello. I’m… I’m a writer… a sociolo… would you… mind speaking to m…”

A lack of patience, a weariness of questioners and an appreciation of the man’s nerves propels her to interject.

“What are you writing about?”, she asks quickly but kindly.

“Well, I’m… this might sound weird, but I’m interested in this market and what it means to the people that shop here… And the food, I’m really interested in what the food here means to people.”

“Ok. Who are you writing this for?”

“Myself at present but we’ll see. Can I ask… what have you bought today?”

Marcia reels off the list… “Kitchen paper… asparagus, mangos.”

“What type of mangos are they? I spoke to a guy up there that’s selling Ghanaian mangos, he was quite proud of them…”

“These are the Pakistani mango.”

“I see… You got a box. You must like them?”

“They’re not the same as the ones from home.”

“Where’s ho… where did you come from originally?”

“Saint Lucia.”

“Oh, I don’t know it. I mean, I know where it is but… I quite like the Pakistani mango. They’re the ones that taste a bit like honey, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“They’re not your ideal choice?”

“Well, they sell mangos from home too, but they’re quite expensive and they’re not very nice… We had a mango tree and we’d climb it and pick them from the tree when it’s mature. It’s a very nice mango, but now they pick it young and bring it here and by time it’s right it’s not very sweet. The Pakistani one you know… it’s sweet but when you reach the seed… you know the seed?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just there’s not very much to suck on the seed. The flesh goes off it too easily you know?”

“I don’t think I do,” the researcher replies to Marcia.

“You can’t suck on it,” she says. Light flits across her watery eyes. “You don’t miss much from at home you know… apart from the mango.”

Marcia goes on to talk a little longer about her antagonistic relationship with the doughier elements of her youthful diet. Closing the exchange, the researcher thanks Marcia for her time, tells her how interesting it has been talking to her and returns to the crowd clutching his overly conspicuous notepad. It is raining again and Marcia heads for the nearest bus stop. Rhiannon’s house is a little too far to walk in this heat and rain and it feels as though she has been around the world twice already today.

“Sensory memory, as the meditation on the historical substance of experience… brings the past into the present as a natal even,”(5) is a generosity that imparts an indeterminate effect on the present and future. Embodied memories can never be thought of as repetition or simply as reproductive. They are rather creative and (re)productive. Flames that fly across eyes can be mistaken for tears but are quite different. They are the surface expression of a poesis, a productive and generous (6) remembering. But in the same way that this generosity is unrequited by culture at large, this entire account has verged on effacing the contributions of its erstwhile and most generous protagonists. As Derek Walcott says of the ever adaptable Mangifera: They are without hunger, without any appetite, but are part of the earth’s vegetal fury, their veins grow.

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Diprose, R On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas Albany,: SUNY, 2002
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Footnotes:
(1) The description of the throwing action is drawn from Erwin Straus’ 1966 description in “The Upright Posture”. The idea that for a woman to undertake such an action involves transcending the limitations inscribed on feminine comportment is drawn from Iris Marion Young’s 1978 critique of Straus, “Throwing Like A Girl” (Marion Young 2004).
(2) The idea of mortality being determined by the strength of the mango tree’s trunk is drawn from Edouard Glissant’s ‘fiction’, ‘The Fourth Century’. On his occasional sojourns the author too has noted solitary mango trees on erstwhile plantation laden slopes.
(3) According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Pakistan saw a 44 percent increase in their yearly mango yield between 2004 and 2006. Data on the Americas are forthcoming but anecdotal evidence suggests it reflects a decrease.
(4) 2005, of course was the most active and Atlantic Hurricane season recorded since records began (Katrina, Wilma Dennis etc).
(5) Seremetakis (1994:4)
(6) Rosalyn Diprose defines such prreffractive, corporeal and sensuous acts of generosity as central to the intersubjective relations of any given culture. Typically she also states they are disregarded at the expense of the givers. While such gifts contribute to habitability and perhaps transform landscapes of structural inequality such those of the East End and its affiliated geographies, they are also effaced by the political economy that underpins officially approved interventions into the context.
It stares at us. We stare back. We just stand there the three of us: me, Isabel and the bear.

We weren’t exactly trying to evade the security guards. Not really. The art fair was in a brightly lit marquee. People drank champagne out of little bottles and some shouted into their phones. We weren’t trying to evade the security guards. Well we were. A bit. We saw a narrow dark unguarded passageway and seized our moment.

We stand face to face with the bear, separated by a fence that looks less substantial in the dark. It stares at us. We stare back. After quite some time the bear walks away, turning its head back every couple of steps.

In the dark, in the zoo, it seems like the animals somehow have the upper hand. They have skills like night vision and the element of surprise. In the dark, with our inferior vision the smells and sounds of the zoo, become more intense. We walk past the komodo dragons.

I am scared of alarms, of detection, of getting into trouble. I’m the sort of person who finds not having a ticket on a train highly distressing. Isabel, on the other hand, couldn’t care less about the human element. She is more frightened of the animals.

We hear a loud ‘wooooo’, it sounds suspiciously like a person trying to make a scary bird noise. I follow the sound past a series of bird cages.

It is a genuine bird noise made by a gigantic owl. The owl comes close to the grill that separates us. It stretches wide its wings and emits the sound again ‘wooooooo’. It paces towards us. If owls can pace. ‘We are making it angry’ says Isabel, who walks away. ‘But it was making the noise before we came!’ I reply, but she has gone and it is dark so I follow. It should be pointed out that we communicate in whispers. We are intruders and must be quiet. We are also aided in this by our soft soled shoes which allow us to pad silently around the zoo. Careers as cat burglars beckon.

A fence separates us from Regents Park. A man with an umbrella and a beard is walking on the other side of the fence. I want him to see us being in the zoo, but he doesn’t.

We make our way to the pygmy hippo. We stare at the pond, no hippo, and then we see the top of its shiny pig-sized head poking out of the water.

It silently swims to the other side, turns round and swims back. It is doing laps. Isabel turns to me ‘Have, you, got, some, thing, to, give, it, to, eat?’ she pronounces each word slowly. I am not altogether sure if she is joking.

We walk past more birds. I never really pay much attention to the birds in the zoo. In the day they aren’t an obvious attraction, but by night everything is different. The ‘Birds of Africa’ sit eerily still silhouetted against the night sky on tall skeletal trees. Maybe they are sleeping.

The aquarium is closed. ‘The only thing better than the aquarium is the aquarium at night.’ says Isabel.

The zoo is split in half by a road. A subway connects the two halves. I suggest we go under the road to find the giraffes. We really can’t see anything now. The animals are below us. I know what is down there, antelopes and goats. Hoofed animals. Some of which look rather satanic, I have always thought - although I have heard (from Isabel) that the devil is a black poodle, which is altogether more unexpected and therefore more frightening.

I am now really scared of being caught. Isabel is more scared of the animals on this side of the road. We don’t make it to the giraffes.

We walk back through the zoo and into the fair which is too noisy and bright for us. Maybe we have slightly improved our night vision. We leave.
Over-written in stone*

Paul Hendrich

A palimpsest is a manuscript or piece of writing that has been written over but of which something of the original writing still remains beneath. Letcher, Blain and Wallis (2003:2) have described Stonehenge as a palimpsest. The struggle between English Heritage and Neo-Pagan groups for control of the historical discourse and ultimately the use of the stones is ongoing, it reveals through writing and rewriting the traces of its origins but an origin mediated by the agendas of a current generation. It is a history performed by the opposing camps with access to and use of the stones being the ultimate prize. The official line is that these mysterious bluestones, their origins and purpose lost in the mists of time and only speculatively linked to pagan ritual, have stood on Salisbury Plain in their present form for 3000 years. The antiquarians view is that these objects should stand untouched for another 3000 years and as such public exposure should be minimal. This view is maintained through the numerous images of Stonehenge standing solitary on a misty plain at sunrise, devoid of human life. A closer investigation of the material history of these megaliths shows that they stand in their current situation following the intervention of archaeologists in the 1950s. Prior to this they had been allowed to subside and collapse and served as a curio to the leisured classes of a previous age. A famous landscape painting by Constable shows the stones sat in a heap with a gentleman sitting atop them; quite different from today's fenced off menhirs and souvenir shops attempting to suspend time through the creation of a museum exhibit.

Deptford Town Hall has the potential to act as a palimpsest. It was opened in 1905 almost 50 years after the closure of the Royal Dockyards, an association that had made Deptford a world-class destination during the age of sail. With the incorporation of Deptford as a borough the great and good of that turn-of-the-century generation needed to distinguish Deptford from its neighbours. What better way than a celebration of celebrity associated with the areas chief industry? The celebrities they chose were Francis Drake, Robert Blake, Horatio Nelson and a composite Admiral of the day. They represented Edwardian empire and Englishness at its finest.

In 1967 Deptford was incorporated into Lewisham and its unique identity was suppressed for the greater good, Deptford fell further into decline. When Heseltine decided that inner city development was needed, Deptford was resurrected. And what better place to administer this renewal from than Deptford Town Hall? But time passes and government grants diminish and the white elephant falls out of favour and into new hands, Goldsmiths College. Goldsmiths is a college in the community but how active is it in addressing community issues? The Town Hall currently stands anonymous on the New Cross Road. It carries the signs of a municipal past and an academic present but really serves as neither. Access involves a series of electronic and human gatekeepers and it doesn’t actively invite students or local residents into its remarkable rooms.
The Town Hall Pirates are attempting to overwrite this manuscript and history is a tool in this process. In our post-colonial era the characters on the front of Deptford Town Hall look more like a rogues’ gallery than a collection of British heroes. Drake was a pioneer of the slave trade, Blake was Cromwell’s enforcer in controlling the Atlantic trade triangle and Nelson was a vociferous opponent of abolition. These are hardly the kinds of characters that Goldsmiths would consider worthy of endorsing the institution. Neither do they sit comfortably in a community story that includes the Battle of Lewisham and the New Cross fire.

But why should we care about this anachronistic building? If we don’t tell a new story about the building then some else will. Searching BNP TV on YouTube recently I came across Nick Griffin’s address to the Trafalgar Club dinner guests. The Trafalgar Club is “an elite fund-raising” group and its members look every part ‘the elite’; formal attire, twin set and pearls abound. Nick takes pride in the fact that the 1805 naval battle led by Nelson saw off foreign incursion through the sacrifice of brave “English, Scots, Irish and Welsh” men. What Nick fails to inform his audience and that a quick search of the National online archives reveals is that 1 in 10 of his brave men were non-white. Jamaicans, Africans and Chinese all helped to see off Bonaparte and, unlike the British contingent, foreigners were unlikely to have been pressed into service.

The reconstruction and performance of history is a political act and one that needs to be actively engaged in. Those that have a stake in the Town Hall, the community of residents, students and staff in and around the college, have a responsibility in wrestling with this building and its meanings. It is a struggle in which we have all the advantages of creativity, insight, energy and wit. It would be remiss of us not to employ them to overwork the palimpsest.

* the title refers to a forthcoming paper by Les Back ‘Written in Stone’

References:
Nick Griffin’s speech to the Trafalgar Club: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LNw9O3Ujvg

The Surreal in the Everyday

Angelos Rallis

For the early Surrealists the outmoded objects of mass culture had revolutionary potential as they were capable of revealing the surreal in everyday life and therefore releasing new possibilities of meaning, such as evidence of the past, in the present material world. The Surrealist expansion of reality, as described in texts such as Louis Aragon’s Paysan de Paris and Andre Breton’s Nadja and demonstrated through the lens by Atget sought to reveal the invisible Paris, a ghostly Paris which “at every site and at every moment comes to mix itself dangerously with the other Paris” (Caillois, p. 83).

Surrealists, in their first manifestos in the 1920s, tried to move the focus away from representation to actual traces of unconscious activity in the material reality of their time; automatic architecture, shop displays of the spectacular Parisian boulevards and mannequins mingle with images of buildings, trees, streets and reflected human activity (in the International Surrealist Exposition (1) of 1938 a room was devoted entirely to female mannequins fantastically dressed by various members of the group). Inevitably, surrealist theories on modernization were marked by subject and object distinctions; on the one hand the outmoded objects with their liberating power and on the other the attack on human figure and its build environment. What is lacking in early surrealist texts is a more anthropological view of the city where the focus shifts from the object to the subject, or better to the subject in relation to the object and the environment. The surrealists only fleetingly addressed issues concerning the figures of the ragpicker and the whore, leading Walter Benjamin to reproach them for stopping short of overt political intervention (2).

For me, the surreal and allegoric is not something attributed solely to objects of materialism to be found in modern shopping malls and fleas markets but something that exists abundant in the everyday human activity as people stroll through the urban environment. As with the scenes of everyday life in theatre plays that unfold live in front of the spectators, human gestures, interactions and movements through the city all serve to define the scene in the streets- and identify what is there, what lies hidden and what is absent- and therefore are capable of transmitting revolutionary energy across generations. The nature of photography to record fragments of a second in the film, by itself, is capable enough to resemble the surreal. What is left for the photographer is to identify the moment and press the shutter in order to collect the human activity that will express the functioning of his thought like the ragpicker selects, collects and catalogues rubbish that will become objects of utility in the future.

(2) see Susan Laxton: Paris as a Gameboard, Man Ray’s Atget, 2002
These structures are specifically built to house and provide shelter for the security guards that are ubiquitous in the wealthy neighborhoods (Lomas de Chapultepec) of Mexico City. A characteristic of the built environment of Mexico City is an absence of zoning codes. In the posh neighborhoods this means that a modernist dream house may stand next to a Tudor-revival mansion or a Spanish-influenced colonial home. One thing that is uniform in these neighborhoods is the explicit display of security; exemplified by 20 foot high walls, one-way mirrored glass, security guards and the structures they inhabit.

These photographs depict the architectural/cultural dichotomy of having a 10 sq. ft structure in front of a 2000 sq. ft. mansion - both a ‘house’. The men (it is a gendered space) who work/live (often 24 hour shifts) in these casetas decorate them with photos of women (the virgin of Guadalupe and pinups) and fill them with amenities such as radios, televisions, hot plates for cooking tortillas and in some even toilets. They are very personal spaces, placed in a public setting: the sidewalk. In Mexico City, sidewalks are appropriated for other types of private usage – protesting, sleeping, cooking.

Casetas: Mexico City security huts

by Jeremy Clouser
Wannabe West Siders in the Imaginary Ghetto

Extract from ‘Imagining the real: hip hop, race, space and authenticity'
By India Court MacWeeney

Entering Española
Five years ago, I was working at a youth shelter on the desolate south end of Santa Fé, New Mexico as a youth worker. Many of the young people I worked with came from the neighbouring city of Espanola. For these kids rap was more often than not the music of choice.

Española is a quasi-urban environment of 10,000 people surrounded by farmland, Indian pueblos and 'Spanish' villages steeped in local folkways. It is located in Rio Arriba County: the poorest in the state. Española sometimes comes into view of the larger New Mexico community in the form of newspaper articles on heroin trafficking and is known (locally anyway) as the ‘lowrider capital of the world’, as the Chicano tradition of customizing classic cars is a still going strong there.

While Chicano is a ‘minority’ identity in the United States, Chicanos in Española are the ‘majority’ at 84.4 % (US Census 2000). The idea for my dissertation (of which this is an excerpt) stemmed from an interest in how kids from a dominantly Chicano community related to and through a mediated notion of ‘blackness’ and ‘ghetoness’ in their consumption of rap, and how rap music ‘came to occupy the space between their experience of race and their conceptualisation of it’ (Hewitt, 1986, p.7).

That all the young people I interviewed were boys, hip hop aficionados and connected to youth arts programs was something of an accident. I had actually been looking for disaffected kids, disengaged youth groups (such as clubs and classes) who may have flirted with the informal economy and gangs; youth who connected to mainstream gangsta rap through a fantasy of criminalised blackness. Instead I found a group of highly connected to mainstream gangsta rap through a fantasy of ‘cool’. In our conversation on the same theme, Angel and Jeremy emerged through (gangsta rap) are simultaneously real, authentic:

Jeremy: I really don’t think they can relate to the ghetto thing they just want to – that’s what they want to look like.
Int: Why do you think they want to?
Angel: I think they want to be like everyone else, instead of being like an individual.

Through their critique of the wannabe west siders my informants describe what they are not. They articulate their social identities as individuals in opposition to the ‘trend’ of playing the ‘gangbanger’ role.

A source of particular irritation for Angel and Jeremy (and a subject of conversation with the other boys as well) was Trey, a young graffiti writer and artist who I met at a local arts centre used ‘ghetto’ in this way in his description of Española:

Trey: There’s a real, real ghetto-ness to this place. It’s really ghetto, but it’s ghetto in a Northern New Mexico kind of way… I don’t know, we are ghetto, man, we’re the lowrider capital of the world!

Trey does not call Española ‘the ghetto’ but rather describes it as ‘being ghetto’: a quality, a state of being and of living. Like the adjective that it produced, ‘the ghetto’ has become a signer of tangible ‘realities’ (Kelley, 2004) and intangible qualities. In response to media images and ghettocentric rap, there has been a global romanticisation of the urban ghetto as a space on the edge of law and order: ‘a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom’ (Kelley, 2004, p.130). While my informants critiqued a local social class of rap consumers as ‘ghetto people’ or as another of my informants labelled them: ‘wannabe west siders’ for subscribing to the fantasies that Kelley (2004) illustrates, they also clearly acknowledged that young people in Española are more likely to be the victims of urban problems than ‘suburban boredom’.

Joe, a local man in his 40s who I spoke with, referred to these kinds of ghetto fantasies as the ‘urban myth’. Joe’s idea was that kids in the area - motivated by their genuine experiences of social or personal hardship - identify with the spaces and identities of the mediated ‘ghetto’ as a means to normalize such experiences. In the ‘urban myth’, the notion of the ghetto and the ‘gangsta’ who lords over it has both ‘a real and a fantastical component’ (Brake, 1985, p.47) as ‘the spaces of Compton and other similar minority communities that emerge through (gangsta rap) are simultaneously real, imaginary, symbolic, and mythical’ (Forman, 2002, p.198).

In hip-hop culture the notion of ‘authenticity’ is a guiding principle (Forman, 2002; Rivera, 2003; Baldwin, 2004). Thus the inauthenticity of the wannabe west siders results in a loss of ‘cool’. In our conversation on the same theme, Angel and Jeremy, who I met through a local arts instructor, defined themselves in contrast to this group as individualistic and authentic:

Jeremy: I really don’t think they can relate to the ghetto thing they just want to – that’s what they want to look like.
Int: Why do you think they want to?
Angel: I think they want to be like everyone else, instead of being like an individual.

While Rose argues ‘(T)he ghetto exists for millions of young black and other people of color – it is a profoundly significant social location…’ (1994a, p.12), the notion of this space is also discursively constructed (Forman, 2002). Through these discourses the noun ghetto has come to double as an adjective. Trey, a young graffiti writer and artist who I met at a local arts centre used ‘ghetto’ in this way in his description of Española:
Chicano youth in Española who ‘want to be black’. When I asked for an explanation of this trend, they responded by saying that the images of black wealth and power which dominate many mainstream rap videos were taken at face value and emulated by ‘unhip and unsophisticated’ (Thornton, 1996, p.99) young people in Española.

Rose (1994b, p.82) argues that ‘black style through hip hop has contributed to the continuing blackening of mainstream popular culture’. Indeed, their critiques not withstanding, most of the boys I interviewed consume black rap in far greater proportion to Chicano rap such as Aztlan Underground or SPM (South Park Mexican) and their speech (like that of most youth) is peppered with (originally) black argot such as ‘dawg’ and ‘fo sho’. In Española, through black styles of dress, speech and music, a ‘celebration of blackness in the absence of blackness’ is plainly apparent (Bennett, 2000, p.152). Rivera (2003) has argued that within hip hop, “Pan-latinidad” or the notion of ‘La Gran Familia’ of Spanish speakers, has ‘oddly “niggafied” certain Latino groups such as Chicanos, through their association with New York Caribbean Latinos’ (p.107). There is also a tradition of syncretism between black and Chicano styles within hip hop in the American West . Francisco, a community youth worker, spoke to black and Chicano style meshing in our interview:

Francisco: I used to work with a lady and she said it seems like all the blacks want to be Chicano and all the Chicanos want to be black. There is definitely style meshing, in the clothes and you hear it in the music too. Like rap music came from black people, but a lot of Chicanos are rapping now. There’s a lot of blacks rapping in Spanish now too.

But even as my informants embody this syncretism, many expressed feelings of ‘cultural nationalism’ (Jankowski, 1986) about Northern New Mexico Chicano culture. For Jeremy and Angel, knowledge of their ethnic and regional roots functions as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979):

Jeremy: People don’t care as much about their heritage or their ethnicities or anything like that. No one cares anymore, everyone just wants to be part of the media, what the media shows you. We’re lucky, ‘cause we’ve had the opportunity to be exposed to our ethnicities through ENLACE (youth program). But not everyone in this town has that and not everyone cares... there are a lot of people that don’t care.

Alexander (2000) found that in press accounts of the ‘Asian gang’ in the UK, the urban (black) street style that young Asian men adopted was interpreted as a signifier of cultural disintegration and betrayal. Angel similarly speaks about the dissolution of local Chhich is transmitted through the media. He sets up an opposition here between the authentic and the adopted, waxing nostalgic about a time when Española ‘was itself’ and kids weren’t ‘trying to be black’.

Jeremy: He’s half (black)…To us he’s not black cause we saw what actual black people look like. Like when we got back here and saw all the black people we knew we were like ‘what the heck, imitation black!’…you know, it’s just not the same.

Angel: Act, look.

Jeremy: Complexion, the way they look, the way they act... the way they walk (Angel chimes in)

Int: How do they act?

Jeremy: They try to be like the people that we saw... and they’re not doing a good job.

Thornton (1996) has argued that ‘Nothing depletes (subcultural) capital more than the sight of someone trying...
Local Chicano youths’ efforts towards blackness are assessed on the basis of their consumption of black urban hip hop style. However, local black kids who are trying to be ‘really black’ are assessed for authenticity on the basis of their complexion, phenotype, argot and behaviour. The boys have determined that the black kids they know in Español are ‘not doing a good job’ in their performance of black racial ‘etiquette’ (Omi and Winant, 1986). Central to their notion of blackness is a sense of geographic and class specific authentic ‘nigganess’ (Rivera, 2003) which may have been initially defined through images of ghetto-centric blackness in popular culture (and rap music in particular), and has been apparently verified by their experiences with ‘actual black people’. The difference of black culture in Español then becomes defined as ‘imitation’ and thereby inauthentic. Authenticity is positioned as central to earning respect — the ‘blackest guy in this town’ is not authentic — and Angel and Jeremy’s snide commentary would imply that he has not earned theirs.

Who we are (not)
It is in part through the lens of tastes in hip hop music and style that these young people construct a view of who they are (not). Through negative distinctions between themselves and others my informants explained themselves to me: an interested stranger. In our dialogue, and through their commentary on space, race and ‘wannabes’, they communicated their authenticity, their personal values and cultural allegiances. They did this, much more, by articulating that which they opposed than by articulating what and who they supported. Their understanding and description of themselves as ‘for real kids’ — individualists and hip-hoppers with sub-cultural capital (Thornton, 1996) to spare — further reinforced the wall they erected between themselves and the wannabe others, even as this wall was unstable at best.

Dyson (1996) describes how the ‘spectre of mainstream pollution’ within hip hop discourses splits rap into the conscious and the commercial. In getting to know my informants, I found that their ‘official’ opinions often mimicked this split. They frequently longed for an imagined hip hop past prior to commercialization, commodification, gangstas and bling, an imagined cultural past prior to syncretism. However, a deeper reading of our conversations, reveals my informants’ positions on commercial rap, wannabe west siders and (trying to be) blacks as fluid and changeable; contradictory even. As Back (1996) wrote in reference to youth on a South London housing estate: ‘...the subjectivities of these young people are multiple and reflect the diversity of ideologies and discourses that they both consume and engage with’ (p.53). In their brushes with black culture, in their underground tastes in music, in their own version of the ghetto; they are experiencing the world in its immediacy and simultaneously constructing an imagined space for the ‘real’ to inhabit.

Bibliography.
Some notes on space and marching

by Steve Hanson

A march was held by Stop the War Coalition on Saturday 23rd of September 2006, to coincide with the arrival of delegates for the Labour Party conference. The conference would take place in the G-Mex Centre, Manchester, and was to be Tony Blair’s last.

What I started to think - and eventually write this subjective piece about - is how the city space appears to be altered by the act of mass marching. The perspectives of the buildings change. I cinematise my surroundings via a largely Hollywood-originated visual language, which I imported from an early age. The streets alter in a seeming slow-motion. A slower motion only, that is. The sheer, or ‘mere’, weight of march traffic creates a snail’s pace. Second floor street signs become crucial for navigation as the ground floor façades vanish behind the mass of demonstrators. This ‘façade’, which Engels famously described as hiding the poverty which supports it, as well as those whom it glorifies, disappears behind citizens again. However, these façades are not those which Engels described, but ones expanded in the post-IRA bomb reconstruction after 1996. They now include digital screens broadcasting News 24, which isn’t neutered by marchers, being well above street level. Yet the city I usually navigate via almost instinctive, transparent memory map, vanishes. I once walked the emerging, but largely covered-over, post-bomb Manchester with a pre-bomb map. The disorientation here is not dissimilar. The iconic tall buildings of tourist literature, the ones I rarely look at in the street, suddenly become a little more visible. I start to use them to navigate. The overhead tram wires act as surrogate street borders. Yet it is the slow sweep and details usually missed which move to the front of my perceptions. This is intermittent though, as much of the time I stare at feet and legs and backs, which emit signs and logos, political or otherwise.

Back space, front space. There is a Goffmanesque taxonomy of gazing, mainly with the shoppers and workers. During a long pavement Café section of the route, the two-way starring is almost comical. Yet to think I can read a hawk or a dove here is to ignore the ambivalence present in the large majority of faces. Blankly indifferent isn’t any species of bird. Besides which, to binarise political nuances is to reduce them ad absurdum. The police stare with their cyclops eyes, we photograph back. The press snap away at certain points. Who represents the event? Cheshire-set fashions next to orange Guantanamo jumpsuits with bagged heads up the freakishly carnival ante. I apply this to the march as a whole, not just to the pavement Café section.

Free placards were handed out at the start. Most of them are printed in a stark red, black and white format, used on both tabloid newspapers and some books about globalisation. The placards are mass-produced, A3 posters, stapled to cheap lengths of rough pine. The older form of fabric banners used by union chapels and chapters are present too, as are newly-made Tony Blair puppets and other carnival items. Yet they are tempered by this mass of three or four slogans, multiplied by hundreds. Helicopter news photography highlights this best after the event, an infinitely more multiple, macro repetition of a whole lot of repetition. The forms the banners take illuminate both logo and no-logo cultures simultaneously. It would be tempting to talk of the cotton industry-age demonstrations here, comparing the two forms of banner, from a hand-stitched, unique object - folk art even - to a mass of media age tabloidese. The industrial age to the postindustrial, yet this risks the sentimentalisation of a continuous, altering process. Despite the lack of nuance in the slogans on the mass-produced placards, I felt sympathetic towards most of the sentiments. Yet I couldn’t quite bring myself to carry an SWP or MAB placard, so I carried nothing.

At one point, a pre-planned ‘die-in’ was announced and we all lay down in the street. My companion pointed out that we were lying under the as-yet uncompleted, highest residential building in Britain, whose architect designed a nearby block which contains the first flat in the city to sell for over one million. I was less keen to hear that the floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows have recently been dropping out of their own accord. A vast sea of difference sprawled in the road tends to have a peculiar effect on spaces which are normally inhabited in particular sets of modes. This flashmob-like element further altered spatial relations, briefly. Like the rest of the march, it opened a liminal space, a kind of interregnum of possibility. Carnival ruptures, carnival incorporates, but how much lasting affect our day had remains open for debate.
LISTINGS and REVIEWS

“Thinking with Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria: Testimonies of Uprooting”

Exhibition Review

by Kimberly Keith

The Kingsway Corridor in the Richard Hoggart Building has been transformed into an art gallery with the installation of the exhibition Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria: Testimonies of Uprooting. The recessed glass cabinets and white walls offer a simple background for the 150 photographs, while the black and white tiles on the floor provide a striking symmetry with the square monochromatic photos. The label copy, text panels and title lettering are of a professional quality that could be found in any museum or gallery. The Kingsway Corridor usually plays host to a smattering of photocopied notices announcing upcoming campus events and this the first time this space has been utilized to host a professionally curated exhibition. Hopefully, it will be the first of many. In thinking about Bourdieu’s theory of Habitus, and how it focuses on the cultural structures that exist in people’s bodies, the transformation of the Kingsway Corridor from a thoroughfare into a gallery presents a significant change in how people relate to that particular space, how they interact with each other in that space and how ‘art’ is conceptualized and experienced.

‘Art’, as a description of the content of Testimonies, is somewhat of a contested term in relation to the use and context of the photographs on display. Bourdieu originally captured the images to provide himself with a visual record, an aide mémoire, of his fieldwork in Algeria during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). The photos were taken to record how the Algerian people existed during a certain point in time, to provide a document of social history, not to produce a body of artwork where the Algerian people were the objectified subjects of colonial violence. Yet, by placing the photographs in frames, hanging them next to text panels and displaying them as a collection
of images, they have been elevated to the status of artwork in the conventional sense, through the utilization of exhibition mechanisms and techniques traditionally employed by galleries and museums. The content of the photos further extends the opportunity for debate about whether they are ‘art’ or not; some of the photos were seemingly created with traditional art historical compositional elements (such as Mendiant (Beggar), Bab-el-Oued, Alger) and others appear to be quick snapshots without much compositional thought at all (Blida, Avril 1960 series).

While there may be debate regarding their artistic merit, there is no doubt about their being powerful documents of social history. The subject matter of the images provokes thought around the topics of homelessness, colonialism, poverty, tradition and community. Specific images shed light on issues debated in the contemporary media, such as the wearing of the veil and female circumcision. Fifty years on, Bourdieu’s photographs continue to provide an impetus for the exploration of how we objectify the ‘other’, and how this objectification is carried out in our classrooms and on our streets.

The exhibition has come to Goldsmiths as part of the ‘Thinking With Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria: Testimonies of Uprooting’ seminar series, which has been funded by a grant from the ESRC. Further support has been provided by the Bourdieu Foundation, Camera Austria, Goldsmiths College and the BSA Race Forum. This series was proposed by Dr Nirmal Puwar and Professor Les Back, of Goldsmiths Sociology department, in collaboration with Professor Derek Robbins of the University of East London, Culture Studies department and Dr Azzedine Haddour of University College London, French department. The exhibition will be on display from November 2006 through May 2007, which will give students and the general public ample time to engage with the images. The series was launched with an event on November 9th, which included a screening of Sociology as a Martial Art, which is a documentary film about the life of Pierre Bourdieu. This was followed by a workshop entitled ‘Opening Up the Exhibition Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria: Testimonies of Uprooting’. Upcoming full-day seminars are: March 23rd at UEL, ‘Politics and Phenomenology: the Algerian War of Independence and the Development of the Social Philosophies of Jean-François Lyotard and Pierre Bourdieu’; and on a yet to be determined date in April at UCL entitled ‘The Impact of the Algerian War on French Social Theory’.

Details of each of these seminars can be found on the Goldsmiths website at http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/.
When the levees break

by Maria Dumas

It has been more than a year since Hurricane Katrina swept through the Gulf States of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. And thus, it is over a year since the levees, which were trying to prevent the simmering racism of America from emerging, exploded and made visible what most people already knew: the levees were nothing but a deception – providing a false sense of equality.

Throughout history New Orleans has always been known as ‘the Other’: the exotic; and thus, Louisiana is considered to be the banana republic of the USA. In literature, New Orleans has been the place where young women lost their innocence and men their honour. Poets and painters have depicted images of a fog of mystery surrounding the city and behind it a carnivalesque atmosphere of death and ecstasy enveloping anyone who dared to visit, many of whom would never leave again. To the conservative Christian America New Orleans represents every possible vice; the pagan practice of voodoo, the festival of Southern Decadence, and the celebration of eccentricities, Mardi Gras. Whatsoever spin is put on New Orleans, as a culturally diverse city or as “a cesspool of sin”, an important factor has always been, that all labels were marketable. Until a year ago, the tourist brochures for New Orleans have all proudly displayed images of the French Quarter, walking tours of the ‘Cities of the Dead’ and other tourist attractions accompanied by the (in)famous slogans of New Orleans; ‘the Big Easy’ and the more sinister; ‘the City that Care Forgot’. In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina it became obvious that care forgot part of the city and so the notion of the ‘Cities of the Dead’ is no longer a charade but a very real human catastrophe.

The stark divisions between rich and poor/white and black, which the levees had struggled to prevent from spilling over and causing a mess, were exposed in the pitiful attempt by the U.S. government to evacuate the citizens of New Orleans. It would be nice to offer some cliché about how ‘nature does not discriminate’ but as Spike Lee examines in his documentary, aptly referred to as a ‘Requiem in Four Acts’ and entitled ‘When the Levees Broke’, the disaster of New Orleans was mainly man-made and not a novel phenomenon as the following quote shows:

“It is difficult, in a faithful description, to avoid giving an exaggerated idea of these floods. Certainly, large portions of the city are inundated; miles of streets become canals […] Those who have the choice avoid such districts […] The humbler classes, on the other hand, suffer severely […] The rich and the authorities, having defaulted in the ounce of preventive, come forward with their ineffectual pound of cure; relief committees are formed and skiffs ply back and forth distributing bread to the thus doubly humbled and doubly damaged poor” (Cable, 1883:420)

The quote is taken from George W. Cable’s essay ‘Flood and Plague in New Orleans’ which appeared in a popular journal in 1883. Mostly known as a writer of fiction, this piece, describing the conditions of the poor during the numerous floodsings of his beloved city, reveals Cable as an engaging ethnographer shedding light on the social and racial stratification of urban America. More than 100 years later the quote seems topical and Cable’s concerns appear worryingly familiar.

Spike Lee shares these concerns and they are echoed by the people in his documentary. Through a mix of personal narratives, informal conversations, official interviews, private footage and borrowed news footage Lee takes us through the days leading up to the breaking of the levees and the aftermath of the flooding of New Orleans. Immediately after the levees broke Lee announced that he would make a documentary as he felt that otherwise ‘the truth’ about what happened those late summer-days in New Orleans may never be told. Following his announcement Lee was ridiculed by journalists and scolded by politicians for entertaining so-called conspiracy theories – among others that the levees were bombed by the army to flush out the poor neighbourhoods in order to regenerate the city of New Orleans. Lee never expressed a belief in these conspiracy theories, he simply stated that he would not put it past the current U.S. Administration to do such a thing as this had been done before. In 1927 the levees surrounding the poor area of St Bernard were blown up in order to save the more expensive area of the lake front, and rumours flourish that this also happened in 1965 after Hurricane Betsy.

However, Lee’s documentary is not about conspiracy theories – it is about honouring the memory of those who died during the Hurricane’s destruction and the flooding of New Orleans – and this is done by telling and showing everything. Although it is tough to watch we must keep our eyes open: As a citizen of New Orleans is quoted as saying by referring to Emmett Till’s mother (1):

“She said,’If I have to see it, they have to see it’. That’s what I say about New Orleans” (quoted in Tisserand, 2005).

And that is what should be said about Spike Lee’s Requiem – “if the citizens of New Orleans had to live it, we have to see it”, only then we may prevent the levees from breaking again or even better, prevent the necessity of their being built in the first place.


Lee, S., (2005), ‘Real Time With Bill Maher’, Spike Lee appeared as a panelist on the HBO talkshow which aired Friday October 21 2005, extract from interview available on: http://newsbusters.org/node/2441


(1) Emmett Till was beaten and lynched by racists while visiting relatives in Mississippi. His mother chose to have an open casket at his funeral to show the world the manifestations of racism and hate inscribed on her son’s body.
In December 2006 Goldsmiths College, CUCR and INCITE* collaborated with Intel research - PAPR (People and Practises Research) - on a small research project in London on bicycle couriers and bike commuters.

The four week project focused on exploring temporal experiences in relation to mobility. Intel research have a history of collaborating with academic institutions. “Now you see it” was to profit from Goldsmiths’ experience in thinking through the nature of (visual) representation and reflexive research practices. The collaborators at Goldsmiths were Nina Wakeford, Les Back, Alison Rooke and I. As a visual researcher I was to design and carry out some of the fieldwork here in London, experiment with visual and audio data collection and finally present an installation at the Intel research office in Portland.

Once contacts had been made and a general feel for the thematic framework was established, I started by strapping small digital cameras in home-made polystyrene boxes to messengers’ and commuters’ bicycles. Racing across town, squeezing through gaps on busy roads, gliding over street surfaces and jumping red lights, the video material tried to capture some of the immediacy, acute awareness and the risk experienced by cyclists. While spending hours standing in the cold speaking to bike messengers it occurred to me that most of the conversations I was having didn’t necessarily revolve around speed or keeping to particular time slots but rather an intuitive sense of time, a feel for flows and rhythms and the experience of risk and an acute awareness when navigating the city by bike.

When thinking through ways of presenting the material, the visual data went through a rigorous editing process: my close scrutiny, critical assessment and experimentation became one of the most important and interesting parts of the process. Video and sound seemed obviously closer to recording a sense of time, while the photographic elements were much more challenging attempts at capturing rhythms and flows. The aim of the site-specific installation was to find an adequate way of re-presenting the visual ethnographic data, without simply illustrating what had emerged as three or four main arguments.

* INCITE is a research group for critical inquiry into technology and ethnography lead by Nina Wakeford which has recently moved to the sociology department.

“Now you see it”

Britt Hatzius

These photographs document the Installation presented at Intel Research, Portland, U.S. December 2006

Top: two photographs of London buses printed life-size and hung close to each other to re-create the narrow gap cyclists risk when cycling on busy roads in London

Centre: a quote from one of the bike messengers reflecting on the acute awareness and immediacy of cycling, printed on acetate and mounted on windows facing out.

Bottom: left: split-screen edit of video footage of commuter - on the same journey, one camera pointing up at his face, the other looking out in front.

Right: Footage of a single 90min journey of a bike messenger.
Re-Visioning Black Urbanism

Seminars and Events running throughout 2007

Re-Visioning Black Urbanism is a series of special inter-disciplinary seminars and events exploring new modes of inhabiting, imagining and making cities from progressive black and culturally diverse perspectives. The next two seminars in the 'Black Urbanism series will take place on March 20th and April 20th. They will address the subjects of 'The City and the Grassroots' and 'Regeneration and Culture' and will take place at City Hall, the Greater London Authority building on the south side of Tower Bridge (nearest tube station London Bridge). Seminars start at 2.30pm. For more info contact Paul Goodwin - p.goodwin@gold.ac.uk

For all news, events, seminars and conferences organized by the CUCR please refer to website: www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/html/news.html
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