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Roman Vasseur: We began to talk about cinema offering a space to construct temporary architectures and monuments, and that these could be monuments constructed out of some form of violent destruction. I mentioned this as being reminiscent of Georges Bataille's account of the Notre Dame in flames and the resulting scorched architectural carcass. I think that you pick this up in the film of the Venetian Casino in Las Vegas, as a site where these architectures collide.

Jaspar Joseph-Lester: It is interesting you should mention this as I've recently been reading Norman Klein's writing on scripted space, which he has revised for a new book (*Episode*, Artwords Press, 2008). This seems to connect with what you describe as the 'collision of architectures'. In his text 'Another History of Forgetting; The Mouth of the Belmont Tunnel in Los Angeles', Klein has written a section on the Afghani villages built in Fort Irwin and the role that scripted space has in 'distancing' us from the violence of war. Students are invited to visit the simulated Iraq and northern Afghanistan where they can see how soldiers are prepared for the 'theatre of war'. Thirteen Iraqi villages have been recreated with sound effects and IED bombs designed by Hollywood explosion effects experts. I'm interested in the nature of these monuments that, as you point out, are built out of some violent destruction. However, I'm not sure if this type of architecture really functions as a distancing effect. It seems instead to generate its own form of violence and destruction. Not so much a simulation but the very thing itself, this staging is the war.

Although this might sound a bit Baudrillardian, there is an important difference: the collision of architectures seems to be an expression of a basic human need – not simply a reflection of Capitalism and object/subject relations. I recently took a group of MA students to New York and we met for breakfast one morning in Katz Deli. The sign over the adjacent table to where we were sitting informed us that this was the establishment: WHERE HARRY MET SALLY ... HOPE YOU HAVE WHAT SHE HAD, ENJOY! I guess that we don't need to think all that deeply about the experiential relationships that a sign like this can conjure up! What seems most interesting is the architecture that it produces; the type of space that a narrative can generate or even the way the space is always conceived around such constructs.

The Venetian Hotel Casino Resort in Las Vegas certainly functions as a stage set, but it is a staging that destroys a notion of an authentic origin. The very act of reproduction immediately establishes a more general fictioning of built space.¹ The video to which you refer (*Grand Canal*, 2008) was made to follow the construction and destruction of these spaces. Over the years the journey through the canals of Venice extends to Tokyo and China, and includes apartment blocks and high street shops as well as the spaces of leisure and entertainment that we might otherwise associate with this experiential placemaking. The collision between spaces is really the object of this video. This does involve violent destruction; it is the destruction of Venice itself – which might be something to be celebrated.



In your talk you discussed the act of returning matter to its cinematic point of origin, introducing the material (the earth) to a range of sites where it has already existed.² The surplus value that surrounds the material is somehow materialised as the earth is transported to Los Angeles. While this might not be architecture in a formal spatial sense, it seems to speak of a collision of materialities. Is this what you mean by 'the Coliseum of the real'?

RV: You are talking here about the project that involved the taking of a crate of earth from the Borgo Pass in Transylvania to Los Angeles via London and New York, thereby actuating a spatially over-determined narrative and the very materiality of that narrative; a narrative that is about vampires and vampiric in its operation. The work was geographically epic but less architectural than I'm implying here.

The metaphor of 'the Coliseum of the real' I'd liken more to an urban design creation of J G Ballard: event as a temporal structure for participation and communion. An architecture like the Westway isn't in Ballard's fiction 'architecture' (i.e., entirely within the realms of lived experience) until it has been fictionalised and its ideology subjected to a mutual and sensuous autopsy in order to make a single ideological and somatic arrangement; architecture and body as one stitched-together but corporeal edifice upon which is inscribed a given philosophy. In Ballard's fiction the rationalism of an architecture or building is effectively de-socialised, taken outside of the conventions of the polis and subjected instead to de Sade's logic and method of actuating and critiquing power. If the architecture is understood as a material embodiment of an ideology, its parish demands that it is – symbolically and in horror genre terms – psychically destroyed before it can have meaning.

Film, and in particular Hollywood film's neurotic relation to the built environment and assured artistry in 'imagineering' the collapse or explosion of structures, seems repeatedly to make this assault on architectures as if they were at risk of collapsing into a plane of representation unless you attempt to rip a hole in that plane of representation. Both Ballard's and Hollywood's narratives conduct this assault on the normative processes of architecture in a way that actuates their power in a seductive and meaningful way. I'm thinking of films such as Michael Mann's *Heat*, which tells of bank robbers in Los Angeles, who traverse its electronic and hard-built architecture as highly professional anti-architects able to deconstruct the weave of the city's networked fabric due to their engineering prowess. The film is both celebratory and critical of the architecture of contemporary Los Angeles and its seductive



alienating capabilities. This dual dialogue with the city conflates in the pornographic, epic gun battle at the end.

I'm currently spending a lot of time in the postwar new town of Harlow, which recently we found out was used for shooting scenes in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. The incursion of this myth into the town's fabric has allowed me to sidestep a kind of postwar rationalism that at times heavily constructs and disciplines your psychogeography. I am acting as lead artist for the town, working with the design teams on an approach to the art and architecture aspects of a master-planning proposal for a town which, in its layout and principles, is the vision of one man, Sir Frederick Gibberd. The town was built around the topography of the existing landscape from 1948 onwards and has one of the largest collections of postwar sculpture in Britain. Gibberd's references for the town included a Shakespearean interpretation of the Italian republican city and a neo-romantic prelapsarian vision of Britain grafted together to form spaces that signal the wholesale delivery of democracy. The public areas were designed as flexible spaces for festivals and events, and the buildings act as backdrops to this operatic vision of town life. Apparently Bataille planned a book that would explore the carnival origins of democracy and I think it is this proposal that points towards the paradox of Gibberd's vision, a vision keen to advertise its democratic values. The town refers to apparently 'real' things to qualify the trajectory of the project: Greco-roman architecture and sculptures placed on plinths, for example, and yet it's this neurotic attention to lineage and historical destiny that keeps it in stasis. The vision refers to a metropolitan centre that

nobody will ever see but is present *via* the architect's reliance on it as a referent. Whilst the fabric of the colonial settlement fades into folly, its parent city lives on in a pristine narcissistic condition. The town can never shed the skin of its parent, albeit a fictional parent culture. Consequently a series of uncanny spaces for performing out a notion of democracy is produced, a phenomenon that lends itself perhaps more to Klein's idea of scripted spaces that you mentioned, but one that potentially evacuates anything dionysian from the structure of architecture as event. Had Gibberd understood the festival or carnivalesque as the celebration of gaps in the fabric of society rather than this pre-lapsian moment of consensus, then some form of democracy might be instated in the present rather than as a performance of an historical condition.

This conversation made me think of an incredible painting by Tintoretto that is hung in the Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, or rather, one part of that painting. Titled *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, it shows rocks thrown by the mob about to hit the glowing and beatific head of the saint. The painting, being a pre-photographic rendering of movement, depicts the rocks in detail, hanging in midair with a very separate blurred tail that indicates movement. The rocks oscillate between untamed matter and representation, and are in an unresolved state of becoming language. For that reason also the image lies between action and architecture. It is both inside and outside a socialised state. This image and state of coming into language lends itself to the simulated Afghan villages scenario you describe where violence is being rehearsed into a place and time where it is ritualised; violence ritualised to such a degree that it becomes akin to an echo of an event from which it never originated but is still current and authentic, even ancient. This was what prompted the *Black Propaganda* leaflet drop of 2005 to take place in the desert.³ I was interested in the drop itself as an action that threatens to become language (a language bomb), and also in the sense of a rehearsal or exercise that takes on its own internal logic viewed remotely as an end point as opposed to rehearsal for 'the real'. I think of those architectures for FIBA (fighting in a built up area) and the Afghan villages in the US as an institutionalised version of the earnest play that Hollywood engages which acknowledges a surplus of matter and energy in its economy. If one takes this Batailleian view, then the actual war is only a means of qualifying these rituals of excess that might otherwise be seen as criminal.



J J-L: I was struck by your use of the term ‘imagineering’, which is Walt Disney’s way of describing the interrelated nature of design and animation work at Disney studios: imagination+engineering.

For me, it is particularly interesting because it seems to describe a certain materiality; it’s as if ‘imagineering’ is a way of constructing the imagination, which is not to say that the imagination is not already constructed, but rather, the imagination exists as an architectural structure to move through. This is something that we addressed in the exhibition ‘One Way Street’, where videos were set within a temporary architecture of screens and wooden structures.⁴ Through this total experiential domain we explored how video, like architecture, is ideological, political, and capable of powerful experiential affect. It is interesting how Disney relied on the term ‘imagineering’, which soon became a job title for his employees. The title ‘imagineer’ was not just for the animators; it extended to the hundreds of planners, designers, architects, engineers, computer scientists, and construction managers who translated Disney’s cartoons into architectural space. You mentioned *A Clockwork Orange* and how some of the scenes had been shot in Harlow. Is this a dark inversion of the Disney principle (remember the nose), instead of the family friendly cartoon being translated into the fantasy space of Disneyland, the utopian city planning of the 1960s is re-fictionalised into a disturbing cinematic experience?

RV: Alex, the main character of *A Clockwork Orange*, exists somewhere between Gibberd’s and Disney’s philosophies. He loves Beethoven but it is the affect of the Ninth Symphony and not its class or civilising associations that are made manifest in Alex, and so he exposes something about both Walt and Frederick’s projects, beyond their industrially produced fantasy on the one hand and utopian functionalism on the other. He performs the force of their logic and employment of culture in extending their logic into actions and then architectures.

I was conscious of the Disney reference with the use of the term ‘imagineering’, but I didn’t realise its widespread application throughout the Disney firm. What the term does signal and underline is a ferocious belief in the Disney project – in other words its materiality and the sheer force of that vision. The parallels between the vision of a new town architect like Gibberd and that of Disney whose architecture or ‘imagineering’ was franchiseable are close at times but are also dramatically at odds because of Gibberd’s impermeable architecture,

whereas Disney creates an architecture of belief that can be moved through and supersedes its cultural references – as you say – destroying their parent architectures as it creates the 'here and now', Gibberd attempts to sustain an historical continuity that perpetually entertains its demise without ever expiring. An architectural form of the mirror stage forever stuck looking at its own reflection, Gibberd's vision is a collision of architectures, a feat of 'imagineering' and amputated fictions but one that nevertheless created a town that has become myth and architecture. For this reason I think the opportunity now exists to go beyond a scripted experience of living in that town; I think more so in a way than the perfectly preserved Goetheanum (and the anthroposophical community that surrounds it) that you filmed in Dornach, Switzerland for the film *Spirit* that was included in the 'One Way Street' exhibition.⁵ Rudolf Steiner and his disciples considered themselves pioneers of the spirit, always and forever pioneers.

J J-L: Anthroposophical architecture represents a specific approach to scripted space and experiential placemaking. Rather than a town, this architectural community exists like a university campus. It is pristine because it operates in a bubble of research and learning. However, I was interested in it as a micro city where the relations between spaces of work and leisure are choreographed around ideological imperatives that are fairly transparent. The notion of 'serving the spiritual needs of man' is interesting and perhaps alarming when comprehended and externalised through an architectural vernacular. The relation that the Goetheanum may have with both Disney's and Gibberd's vision for shared social space is one that invests in the surplus materiality of architectural space. That is, in each case there is a comprehensive understanding of the persuasive affects of these spatial languages. Like the real affects of lens-based media, the fictioning of space mutates into the realities of shared social space to become 'fact'. I'm not sure that any pioneer can remain always and forever a pioneer; as cultural producers we are all producers of the real and this carries with it a political and ethical responsibility.

RV: Maybe these architectures could be collected and 'imagineered' into a new form of theme park: Democracy World. Experience the magic ... experience Democracy.



Notes:

1. Fictioning describes the process of constructing fictional narratives as modes of embodied experience. This process is closely related to what Jon Jerde has termed 'experiential place-making' and what Norman Klein describes as 'scripted space'.

2. *500 Pounds of Common Earth, 1 Meter Cubed, Transylvania to Los Angeles* was shown at the Austrian Cultural Foundation 2001, and then at galleries in New York and Los Angeles before being permanently installed at the Centre for Land Use desert research facility in the Mojave Desert.

3. Roman Vasseur's video *Black Propaganda at Melancholy Ranch* (2005) reports and dramatises a remote event in a desert setting where a light plane breeches the uninhabited landscape and bombards the terrain with leaflets simultaneously reporting and threatening a language bomb.

4. 'One Way Street' is a group exhibition co-curated by Amanda Beech, Jaspas Joseph-Lester and Matthew Poole. It has been shown at The Sheppard Gallery, University of Nevada (2007) and KX Gallery, Hamburg (2007). Roman Vasseur's *Black Propaganda at Melancholy Ranch* (2005) was included in the exhibition.

5. Jaspas Joseph-Lester's video *Spirit* (2007) focuses on a small housing community in Dornach, Switzerland. Through the video the relation between spaces of work, home and leisure are experienced through a single vernacular of unusual architectural forms.

