

Representing Traumatic Space

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Abstract

This presentation will begin by the screening of *Traum a Dream* (2003, 7 mins, Digital Video, Sound)

A representation of traumatised space, depicting a person who is consumed by a body of pain, consumed by fire. Slowly something is remembered (Festival Catalogue: Transmediale.03. February 2003).

The screening will allow a discussion of some of the material embedded in and ideas used in the film's construction. This includes Atwood's view of the colony as victim, Peter pan and never-never-land, Kroker's concept of the panicked body as it relates to the cinema of Mike Hoolboom's hyper-collage and also the use of the abstract and repetition to depict the process of remembering, re-ordering and forgetting. It is also suggested that Random Access Memory as a method of information storage in Digital Media can provide a model for the architecture of traumatised space and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Paper

Representing Traumatic Space

Bombarded with fragmentary impressions, this protected eye sees too much and registers nothing. Susan Buck-Morris¹

The following paper talks to some of the issues and settings that facilitated the construction of the short film *Traum A Dream* (dir. Dirk de Bruyn, Australia 6 minutes 2003) presented at the Imaginary Worlds Symposium. The catalogue for Transmediale.03

¹ Buck-Morris, Susan *The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe* October Number 73 Summer 1995: P 8

describes *Traum A Dream* as “A representation of traumatised space, depicting a person who is consumed by a body of pain, consumed by fire. Slowly something is remembered.”

The background section presents the context in which the work arose out of the shock of personal experience. In the Psychological and Theoretical Models and Concerns sections connections are made between Collage, Experimental Film and Digital Media in terms of a non-narrative tradition. A psychological model of trauma is also outlined with an appraisal of the ability of non-narrative film and video in its analog and digital forms to communicate this experience. Kroker’s concept of post-modern panic is outlined and discussed in relation to the contemporary film-work of Canadian artist Mike Hoolboom. Finally the paper concludes with some commentary that relates directly to some of the content of the presented video *Traum A Dream*.

Background

Traum A Dream was completed as a Digital Video but it also exists as part of the Interactive CD-Rom Diary 3.2. This interactive started out as a diary of family life in the late 90’s, a family with 3 boys Arie 10, Abe 14, and Kees 18 and partner Alison. It was to be a digital photo album to celebrate the nuclear family. The aim was to explore how the analog practices of family photo albums, kids drawings and so on could work effectively in the digital realm, to develop some sort of layered documentation of mementoes/artefacts of family life.

During its making it became something else. The family disintegrated. Alison and I separated and we all now live separate lives. That project then became more about that loss and a struggle through that mourning a journey that facilitated the resurfacing of other “traumatic” experiences from earlier in life. This project became a trace of that multi-layered journey, encapsulated by the following Schwitters quote:

“Everything has broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments. Collage was like an image of the revolution within me- not as it was, but as it might have been” Kurt Schwitters²

Because of its open-ended nature at some point in the making of an interactive the question arises: How do you finish? How do you move away from something without end, how do you get out of a never ending story and finish with that mourning?

I moved away by going to an earlier linear form, by completing a short digital film to distil something of the process I had been through. *Traum A Dream* is the last piece added to this CD- ROM. It also exists as a stand-alone piece. It offered a form of closure. I had come back with something from this journey.

Psychological and Theoretical Models and Concerns

Traum A Dream has been tempered out of the notion that we inhabit a culture that traumatises us, bludgeons and nags corrosively at our bodies. Though impacted by experiences like those described, it is also derived from the work of writers and researchers like Atwood’s examination of *Survival*, Kroker’s panic bodies, Small’s *Direct Theory*, Antonin Artaud, Judith Herman¹ and Bessel van der Kolk². The video is part of a search for a language to convey such an abusing engagement through the abstract animation of flicker, abrasive texture, palimpsest, repetition and half words, text and phrases that draws on traditions of experimental film and collage.

The tradition of Experimental Cinema and Visual Music is part of an ongoing project searching for innovative audiovisual techniques to articulate personal experience. Small

² Kurt Schwitters in John Russell, *The Meanings of Modern Art* Vol 6 1975

¹ Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York. Basic Books. 1992

² Van der Kolk, Bessel. McFarlane, Alexander. Weisaeth, Lars (eds) *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind Body, and Society*. New York. Guilford Press 1998

contends in *Direct Theory*³ that Experimental Cinema is a stand-alone genre of filmmaking that bypasses the written and spoken word because such work states its theory directly, often through the materiality of the moving image, in dialogue with its soundtrack. Such a reflexive cinema is primed to directly articulate ideas concerning the construction of the self, the body and memory. Montage, which can be regarded as the collage of the moving image, has been a dominant strategy within this project.

Collage is concerned with re-constructing found materials into a new complex whole. Laliberte⁴ states that these constructions were designed to elicit a psychological response from the viewer. Its method reflects the childhood state before the body is perceived as a unified whole.

The body as it is perceived or experienced by the child is the fragmented or body-in-bits-and-pieces. This is an uncoordinated, discrete assemblage of parts, exhibiting no regulated organization or internal cohesion.⁵

The collage that Braque and Picasso brought to painting moved through Futurism, Dada and Surrealism. The long standing barriers between painting and sculpture were disintegrating, opening up the way to the collage, montage, assemblage and construction-the new and volatile art forms of an exciting albeit frightening age.⁶

These volatile shock strategies find a new technology to amplify their technique in digital time based works that incorporate modules of sound, photography, text, the graphic and the moving image, offering the potential of a varied, randomised, sampled ordering of such material in space and time.

I'm of the mind that collage is the pre-eminent artistic technique of this century, and in that light, the 19th century myth of Frankenstein can be read as foreshadowing (not to

³ Small, Edward S. *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre*. Southern Illinois University Press. 1994

⁴ Laliberte, Norman and Mogelow, Alex *Collage Montage Assemblage* Van Nostrand Reinhold. New York 1980: P 11

⁵ Grosz, Elisabeth *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, 1990

⁶ Laliberte: P 1

mention bodying forth) the 20th century innovation of collage---the monster is an ad hoc assemblage, a kludge, of body parts, badly hacked together Mark Dery⁷

The operations of transforming with collage, assemblage and montage embody the logic of psychological development and its break-down. Not only can such hacked assemblages of body parts intimate the pre-ordered state of childhood but it can be used to signify the experience of Trauma itself:

What clinical research has shown are that when trauma strikes the developing psych of a child, a fragmentation of consciousness occurs in which different “pieces” (Jung called them splinter psyches or complexes) organise themselves according to archaic and typical (archetypal) patterns.⁸

Traumatised victims of abuse store the memory of that abuse as fragments, cut-up and separated from each other, often continuously re-playing parts of that memory, these replays becoming dissociated intrusive thoughts, undiminished flash-backs, with each replay being as potent as the first. The shock does not go away, does not dissipate. In *The Inner World of Trauma* Donald Kalsched presents patients with multiple personality disorder and post-traumatic stress that articulates this model of trauma.

Dissociation is a trick the psyche plays on itself. It allows the psyche to go on by dividing the unbearable experience and distributing it to different compartments of the mind and body, especially the unconscious aspects of the mind and body.... Experience itself becomes discontinuous. Mental imagery may be split from affect, or both affect and image may be disassociated from conscious knowledge. Flashbacks seemingly disconnected from a behavioural context occur. The memory of one’s life has holes in it-

⁷ Dery Mark <<http://www.frankolsonproject.org/Collage/Fragmentation.html>> last accessed 28 September 2005

⁸ Kalsched, Donald. *The Inner World of Trauma- Archetypal Defences of the Personal Spirit* Routledge London 1996: P3

a full narrative history cannot be told by the person whose life has been interrupted by trauma.⁹

Digital media can display characteristics in keeping with such a model of trauma (indeed the whole tradition of non-narrative cinema informs this model). In the Interactive CD Rom information is stored as RAM (random access memory) in separated sites on the CD (or hard drive). Imagery and sounds may be stored in varied locations. Repeated plays of the interactive CD-Rom (or a navigatable DVD with menus, chapters, alternate angles, sub-titles etc) do not change the material presented. Menus and hierarchical structures can facilitate a discontinuous, sampled experience.

It has been suggested that collage's path to digital media passes through the tradition of experimental film. Malcolm Le Grice, leading practitioner in structuralist film and foundation member of the London Film Maker's Co-op, in *Experimental Film in the Digital Age* notes this digital enabling of a non-linear cinema that finds its beginnings in experimental film.

The tradition of experimental film and video has already provided the basis for exploring these concerns (of non-linearity) not as a response to the new technology but as a consequence of artistic reflection on the human condition"¹⁰

Whereas within Experimental film and video these strategies were routinely criticised as failing to deliver meaning to its audience (a reaction that can, in itself, also suggest the articulation of a traumatic experience):

In Harry Hooton (as in *Earth Message* and the other shorter works screened with it) I can find no reason why any particular shot should come just where it does, and not twenty minutes earlier or later. If you re-shuffle the lot it could make no important difference.

⁹ Ibid: P13

¹⁰ Le Grice, *Malcolm Experimental Film in the Digital Age* BFI Publishing London 2001: P296

This is Anti-cinema.¹¹ Within contemporary critical writing New Media art such observations are considered part of digital's fabric. (Manovich¹² suggests that the random and the sampled is part of the syntax of the modular and mathematically based language of new media.)

Such an Anti-cinema as Lawson identifies offers up the architecture to inflict a trauma directly upon its audience. The architecture of new media, with its multiple navigation options opening up multiple readings and repetition, may offer a more readable, less immersive rendering of the traumatic space illustrated by Kalsched.

To re-iterate, this model of trauma is reminiscent of the architecture of interactive media and resonates particularly clearly with the notion of Random Access Memory. Random access memory (RAM) in CD-ROMs describes how information is stored randomly and in fragments across the disc and is then reconstituted during the interaction. Navigation through an interactive can be repetitive, using circular forms, non-linear structures explored by Experimental film and specifically by British Structuralist Filmmakers in the 60's.¹³ This patterning/ architecture has similarities to the experience of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). "The DSM definition of PTSD recognizes that trauma can lead to extremes of retention and forgetting: terrifying experiences may be remembered with extreme vividness, or totally resist integration."¹⁴

It is this emphasis on architecture, on form, rather than content that the digital so clearly shares with areas of experimental cinema. The self-reflexive mode of Direct Theory that Small articulates emphasizes the structural, architectural emphasis of this non-narrative cinema.

¹¹ Lawson, Sylvia *Harry Hooton* in *Nation* October 3 1970: P 21

¹² Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*

¹³ for a discussion of the non-narrative tradition see:

Le Grice, Malcolm. *Experimental Film in the Digital Age*. London BFI Publishing 2001

¹⁴ van der Kolk, Bessel A. & Fisler Rita *Dissociation and the Fragmentary Nature of Traumatic memories: Overview and Exploratory Study*. <Accessed at <http://www.trauma-pages.com/vanderk2.htm> on 28 september 2005>

At the extreme end of this content/structure spectrum, a Formalist Cinema would contend that art has no content and that, in fact, the structure is the content. I think it telling that such a modernist cinema can also be read as content denied. With such a tension we bring the hidden, the underground, the unspeakable into play and we bring into focus those structures, those architectures, those games that hold those denied secrets in our culture, including how we keep in our bodies the traumas of the past. Such a formalist cinema can be read as “baring the device” of denial.

“I am vacant by the stupification of my tongue”¹⁵

French poet and writer Antonin Artaud championed a radical and extreme suspicion of language, proposing a theatre of cruelty in which to articulate an inner world of stops starts, fragments and gaps carried within. This other/ anti-self/erasing self resonates with the idea of the panicked or traumatised body explored by Canadian cultural terrorists Arthur and Marilouise Kroker¹⁶ and Canadian filmmaker Mike Hoolboom in films like *Steps To Harbour* (Canada 17minutes 1992) and *Panic Bodies* Canada 70 minutes 1998). Artaud grapples in primal terms with intense sensation and feeling, and argues that thinking must rise directly out of the body. This resonates with Small’s direct and self-reflexive notion about experimental film. The material of film is the flesh. It is its own articulation. There is no hiding the operations conducted on the moving image. It is about the Shklovsky’s Russian Formalist “baring the device”¹⁷

Once the hangover had passed we uncovered a mess of unconnected moments, and spent the next 3 years trying to give them shape. Mike Hoolboom¹⁸

Hoolboom’s *Steps to Harbour* is a short abstracted film that is harsh, bruising and repetitive, a response to the HIV that had invaded his body. Naked mantra as stun gun: to

¹⁵ Artaud, Antonin. Weaver, Helen (trans.) *The Nerve Meter in Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* Berkeley and Los Angeles. University of California Press 1988 p.83

¹⁶ Kroker, Arthur and Marilouise. *Body Invaders: Sexuality and the Postmodern Condition*. London McMillan 1988

¹⁷ Small p. 55-56

¹⁸ Hoolboom, Mike *Plague Years* YYZ Books. Toronto 1998; P88

expunge the virus, to punish the body. The state of the artist's body is transferred onto the film's surface. The body's fatigue becomes the burnout of film. Visualization collapses into some trashed tactile realm, a dialectic that continuously re-invents itself. The animation is of a frantic palimpsest, of quick transition rather than movement. Such visual jolts, flashes can leave their afterimage like a hovering bruise.

I am reminded of a friend's account of her abusive relationship with an ex-partner, where every time she was beaten each strike led to a mental as well as physical numbing. The physical bruise faded slowly, the mental turning off stayed. The jolts remained embedded in her body.

Hoolboom's feature length *Panic Bodies* suggests a connection to the Krokers'¹⁹ work. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker use Baudrillard's postmodernist pain as a starting point to comment on the effects of digital information overload on our bodies with such phrases as panic sex and electric flesh and use of the phrase panic bodies to refer to images to a kind of cultural burnout. Such images can be extracted from the dysfunctions of overeating, illicit drug use, anorexia, extreme sports, HIV+, paedophilia and the gym culture of over perfected bodies. These are images resonating with the traces of traumatic experience.

Within Hoolboom's panic films through such titles as *Shiteater* (re-cycled as a section of *Panic Bodies*) and *Frank's Cock* (Canada 8 minutes 1994). we are knocking uneasily at the door of Bataille's sacred excess, that dubious shock-space in which through its direct tactics we can discern and re-experience traces of trauma. "And beneath the forgetting, there is only the scribbling of another Bataille, another vomiting of flavourless blood, another heterogeneity of excess to mark the upturned orb of the pineal eye."²⁰

¹⁹ see Kroker, Arthur. Kroker, Marilouise & Cook, David *Panic Encyclopedia*. London Macmillan 1989 and Kroker, Arthur. Weinstein, Michael. *Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class*. New York. St Martin's Press 1994

²⁰ Kroker, Arthur *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-aesthetics* New World Perspectives (Culture Texts Series) Montreal 1987 :27

Through Hoolboom's recombinant editing acumen (hyper-collage) he takes us into the territory now marked by Kroker's "pure aestheticisation of experience" (a kind of post-modern dissociative state) and the "recombinant commodity form": "We talk about the recombinant commodity form, in an economy run by the biological logic of cloning, displacing and re-sequencing. Or virtualized exchange, the replacement of a consumer culture by the desire to simply disappear, from shopping to turning your body into a brand name sign.²¹"

Commentary on Traum a Dream

Issues of panic and stress can connect to preoccupations with lost innocence, abuse, victim mentality, denial and memory loss that have made their way into the film. They are not presented here as a concise argument but as background noise or traces to the film itself which attempts to present directly in some form the experience of a body in trauma, the experience of being overloaded, disassociated. These preoccupations may, at a pinch, be seen as areas of concern that impinge on or trigger such an abused state.

Traum A Dream begins with Neil Postman's voice declaring that there are no longer any secrets from the young. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*²² Postman discusses the emergence of the concept of childhood at the time of the printing press and then shaped by the evolving education system. The intrusion of television into every home introduced children early, too early he argues, to adult concepts and activities and subverts their ability to think abstractly. The very concept of childhood is being destroyed through the access to the secrets, the taboos of adulthood. The Internet with its access to pornography and the documenting of extreme and bizarre behaviours that the Krokers²³ allude to, slips this trend into hyper-drive.

²¹ *Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class. According to Arthur Kroker.* In conversation with Geert Lovink at <http://www.thing.desk.nl/bilwet/TXT/KROKER.INT.txt>

²² Postman, Neil, *The Disappearance of Childhood.* Vintage Books 1994

²³ see Kroker, Arthur. Kroker, Marilouise & Cook, David *Panic Encyclopedia.* London Macmillan 1989

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule”.²⁴

This text appears near the start of the film. The idea of living in a state of emergency, also manufactured by the politics of fear, of negotiating the everyday in a state of heightened awareness seems to suggest this panic state, approaching PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) on a mass scale.

Michael Jackson, pin-up for the Kroker’s collage invocation: “Cosmetic body cuts, then, for perfect panic faces”²⁵ also makes an entrance in the opening frames with a subversive Baldwinian cosmetic cut to the words of one his songs to now play as: *I never knew my body was giving me pain I never never knew*. Here is denial and also the idea of the double negative that is incorporated throughout in the wordplay of the film. Deleuze & Guattari in discussing Kafka²⁶ mention the importance of the double negative in talking from a position of disempowerment.

Can we ask: do two negatives make a positive? In *Survival* Atwood²⁷ ties the ideas of Victim and colony together: Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Canada, as a whole is a victim, or an “oppressed minority or exploited... Let us suppose in short that Canada is a colony. A partial definition of a colony is that it is a place from which a profit is made, but not by the people who live there: the major profit from a colony is made in the centre of the empire²⁸. There is also here in such power relationships a sniff of the structure of pedophilia, where the authoritative adult exploits a profit for him or herself out of the child.

²⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books 1969 p. 257.

²⁵ Kroker, Arthur. Kroker, Marilouise & Cook, David *Panic Encyclopedia*. London Macmillan 1989 p. 187

²⁶ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. University of Minnesota Press. 1986

²⁷ Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Mclelland and Stewart. Toronto, 1996 (1972)

²⁸ *Ibid*: P 35

Atwood suggests that If Canada is a collective victim, it should pay some attention to the Basic Victim Positions.²⁹ These are in ascending order empowerment: deny you are a victim (1), you are a victim because of an act of fate (2), acknowledge you are a victim but refuse its inevitability (3) and be a creative non-victim (4).

The double negative is a way the traumatized victim or the colony, in denial mode, speaks, to try and be positive about itself: *Australia is not a bad place to be*. And there is that phrase: *never never*. Buying *on the never never* places you on that ambiguous knife-edge of pseudo-ownership hazily visible at some distant future horizon line that ascribes your awareness. *We of the never never* is the central site of some hardy DIY (Do it yourself) mythical Aussie persona. Daryl Somers has pointed out that “if you never never go you’ll never never know”.

And so we arrive at the gates of never-never land: a pleasing country existing only in dreams or imagination, a dreamland, an imaginary place, a place for a child to escape to, a safe place. This can also be seen as a disassociated world where a Peter Pan never panics and never lands inside his adult self.

Both Michael Jackson, with his Neverland Ranch, a possible site for pedophilia (another image of Kroker’s panic body) , and Stephen Spielberg in the Neverland of his film *Hook* (USA 144 minutes 1991) have cut one “never” out of their dreamland concoctions. *Hook* has been plundered for sound bites that are scattered through *Traum A Dream*: Hook’s snoring, Hook’s statement: *make time stand still, still*: as chant of the traumatized body, Wendy’s imploring statement: *Never-never land makes you forget, never forget*, and there are others. In Wendy’s statement the lost *never* has been restored digitally. It must not be forgotten, whatever the reason for its removal.

²⁹Ibid: P 36

Written as if inscribed on the body, on the skin of the film, “*never say never*” flickers briefly at the film’s mid-point: An ambiguous Aussie DIY affirmation to never give up, to enunciate your powerlessness, to creatively beat the odds. It has not been registered on the film photographically or digitally but like a tattoo, it has been drawn and etched directly and unevenly onto the film’s surface with a fine-tipped pen: the most primal of photographic modes.

The remembering of an unknown loss in the final spoken text of *Traum A Dream* is an attempt to reclaim story, regain meaning and to interface with that body-in-bits-and-pieces that Grosz articulates:

*And so he began
Against the double*

Double talk talk

*Against his will
His will
And so he began
He began
He began to remember
What he didn’t want
What he didn’t want to Remember
What had been taken?
Before
Before he knew
A secret from before
Before he knew
Before he knew himself.*

Traum A Dream (2003)

Dirk de Bruyn has been involved with personal film making as a practitioner, curator and writer in Melbourne and internationally for over 30 years. His 30+ moving image works include Running (1976, 30 mins, 16mm, Optical Sound), Homecomings (1987, 100 mins, 16mm, Optical Sound, Music by Michael Luck), Conversations with my Mother (1990, 100 mins, 16mm, Optical Sound), A X Canada (1995, 80 mins, 16mm, Optical Sound), Diary V 3.2 (2003, Interactive CD-Rom), Traum a Dream (2003, 7 mins, Digital Video, Sound). He is currently teaching Animation and Digital Culture at Deakin University, Burwood Campus, His MA research "The Personal Family History as an Interactive Document" was completed in 2003 at the School of Creative Media, RMIT University.