

# ***Kicking A Dead Horse***





Upon leaving, the road stretches straight and flat and black, the tarmac shimmering something ghoulish in the wrath.

Blindingly arid; - The ground houses blackened cacti, interrupted by an occasional model-town standing amongst the scattering of glass bottles and pebbles. Midwestern model sets - props on another scale. Pylons stretch for miles and weave in and out of the interstate, which is the only thing that vibrates with some trace of man, cutting a God-scale swathe through the dust. Eventually the more mountainous regions shift into frame, where vertiginous outcrops jut impossibly, caking the road in shadow, causing strobing when the gas is compressed a little further. The purr of the engine panting and ticking over, hidden below a throbbing acrylic nacelle, cast in the hottest-pink possible - extra bright against the faded gunmetal of the bonnet's phoenix motif. Dark blotches cuddle spiraling trails on the mountains to the far west, while tar coloured tunnels gape ajar, swallowing light and culling it into splintered shards. Take this mouth, appear from another on the next cliff-face moments later. Hours pass as flatlands pan, completely stationary to the perpendicular movement of the Cadillac. Gliding for miles and then sitting for days, here, where it's the style to pull off the dusty interstate and meet old friends in blackout motels; shops shuttered for the forever-off season, while hands grip the steering-wheel until they're as raw as the car's blistered naugahyde itself.

A mirage unfolding. A few bleached-out signs hint at little footfall during the off-season. We are tourists in this land.

While refueling, we buy every Magic-Tree air freshener available, paying by cashiers' cheque before attaching them to the central-rear-view-mirror, one-by-one, until the brittle plastic aches under the elastic strain; a real attempt to cover the stench of shit that now wafts around us, pervading our character as if it has been sewn into the lining of one of our pastel suit jackets. Mirages complete themselves in the stillness, acting out the same scene over and over. The limitless silence eventually recounts echoes of a "Studio Executive entrance" sign, rising above the horizon. But all the vowels are painted out, replaced by blatant white brushstrokes.

My thoughts drift through the *middle American daydream*, towards a beautiful and fabled summer, sat aloft in a cradle of crawling grass, this time blue with the evening shimmer, and held between a crackling beechwood fire, with a tent pitched on a mound. June days commemorated, after a massacre by some thick and fast frost - the kind that comes alongside the bedtime gloam, whilst sitting with swollen bellies in front of vast logfires and discussing the futures we then held.

These memories sink into the shin-high mist. The burble of nearby water on rocks: pebbles lining the bank, while obscure arcana is strewn about the scene - maps, scrolls, broomsticks, ancient stones: ways of imparting knowledge. We drew on rockface, and then on paper.

Then, As promised, the interstate parts towards a dirt-track, housing the spectral signifiers of a studio backlot. Sunlight glances off the set's various facades, its rambunctious joints arching willfully in the heat. Wooden pillars bulge like blocked pipework. The rear of the scene appears to be held together by generous caulking along all visible seams, which have been rounded-off by an approximate pass of spray-paint. The static whir of an empty electrical speaker - originally reserved for workplace announcements - imbues the environment with a level of anti-ambience, and signals the coming-unlive of the site once more. The absence of subsonics in the unending note pipes an echoing whine that meanders through the Middle-American daydream. Here lies a workplace architecturally charged with stifled 'toonish potentiality. A site of invisible labor which no longer understands how it once functioned.

X-ray scans of the slight mound on which the studio is set reveal a tomography of an olden workplace - the endoskeleton of collapsed mine shafts below, complete with wooden carts and metal tracks, like some long-forgotten theme park ride. An ancient burial ground also, but closer to the surface, and far more mundane in its lack of intended 'fun', with its serious undertones of death, spirituality, haunting, relics, the unearthing of a colonial past, etc. - The mine marking this place as an eternal site of intense labor, as now; - the burial obviously denoting an odd convergence of ley lines, stars, or something more mystical. To build the site: crawling machines trampling archaic rockeries, dislodging parts of ahistoric land from its own space, from the desert's slow and geological time. Bucketed claws then *digging deep* into the earth leaving behind a blunt, stumpy architecture in a pie-bowl of dry dirt where a lake once sat.

The lean-to structures obscure tumbledown versions of their previous selves, forming a myriad of physical palimpsests which are now being driven towards modernization. Sheets of corrugated steel, miles of chain-link fencing, and vast lengths of plastic wrap contrast the square's ancient cornerstones from a nearby quarry, the sagging mandapams outside each set-piece, and the graffiti scrawlings hidden under ancient animation desks in forever-locked rooms. The once great animation-studio now recounts the intentions of a Potemkin village more than ever. A mysterious zone populated by faux-structures, structurally integral to it's new ethos.

***On site there are no longer film-sets, but life-sets: relaxation lounges for the executives, smoking rooms, private pools, tiled balconies, meteorite fragments on display and vast penthouse suites: the works. Now that the Wi-Fi is up and running, components for office block renovation leak in from cyberspace. Holographic I-beams grow along the Z-Axis, from between the cracks of the dry lakebed. The consumer idyll which occupies the highway some miles back quickly undergoes a drastic neotokyoization, as the studio becomes surrounded by scaffolding on all sides. Postmodern renditions of living blocs overshadow the sun, while vast layers of virtualized strata support crystal-line Helicopter pads in the Heavens. Double-glazed penthouse windows project panoramas of grey living blocs outside stretching into the distance - visibly saturated by material goods***

*and luxuriously textured objects in their own windows: fruit bowls, patterned carpets, electronic juicers, walk-in showers, fridge-freezers, flat screen televisions, faux plants, and Scandinavian furniture dragged in from the street. The rich above and smaller flats below, and all completely empty.*

*History re-enacted to degradation in cyberspace, until all is subsumed by the waves of online capital. At this saturation all spaces are nullified into stage-sets beyond the cinematic frame of the windowsill, interrupting our perfect dreams of the silver-screen. Blizzard-white lattices unfold within the synaptic recesses of increasingly mechanized minds — as lights flare behind the eyelids — as the smell of scored carbon proliferates the nostrils. This is the formation of a big multinational from the ground up.*



[...]

The view into the animation studio's window now also reveals a solitary environment dislodged from its own temporality, dislocated from whatever lies beyond the closed door's frame by a barricade of redundant technology. Through the fug, condensation tracks dribble down the window. Memories of old drawings become re-acted out in reverberant shadow shows. The to-mography of the ground elevates and declines, the floorboards impossibly elasticated by vibration of memory, by the creative charge the place once held. A gentle undulation maps the convergence of the gaps between these boards - now acting as dark ley-lines, meeting each time the next bloc is completed. Sunlight bleeds in through the blinds, revealing dust particles as microscopic interventions in space - spherical isometries, crystalline structures blindingly reflective - making their way down from the slats to filter between the wooden floorboards. The room's contents become droned by the same hexen curse: the racks of analogue equipment are left to degrade on a wooden desk.

Although a battle lost, echoes of the studio's final protest reverberate throughout the foundations of the newbuilds. I come to, to *medieval* Tomatoes pelting the car's bonnet, and a caustic air of silence, the engine filling the hole instead. Rolling along now, glazed visions from stationary protestors clutching rough-cut signage, each home-made prop - like the studio's various structures - held together by clumsily glued seams. *The waxen flesh* of their masks making the crowd a single, cultish form, here: signs as pitchforks, faces as several dwarves, as princesses - faces made up in a violent manner, faces haunting in their stillness, in their otherworldly alterity. Faces whittled along scabrous seams, puckered impossibly inwards, as if sculpted with expanding foam instead of fabric. An army dribbling in the dry haze, sheened in a lurid glisten. Grey handsy smears on contorted 'toony faces, all plastered with grin. Characters realised into caricatures of the studio's disparately paid workforce. Human-proportioned animal-effigies dangled on long sticks, sporing soot over the crowd. Rueful gusts - no doubt the formidable stench of trace evidence, memories, fragments of the past uses of these objects. Also, the release of something spiritual: work hours disregarded through the burning of all preliminary sketches, concept art, and original plates from the archival shed at the back of the square. Scolded ideas, drifting cruelly around the fountain in the middle of it all.

Bronzed, they hold hands and wave at the horizon, standing in a fountain of crystal water, now little more than an isle of dirt in a stagnant pond from all the ash and human shit. The statue, rife with an emerald patina, stands aloft from the crowd - protestors climbing the head executive, who's face has been slowly wind burned into a leaden gurn. A small stone wall and a mottled metal bar keep it from the rest of reality. The parched waterworks that once cascaded from the flower on the bronze lapel have long since been switched off. The edge of the fountain is also decorated by the broom-stick workforce of an early animation produced by the studio, their original enslavement accidental, being charmed into blind and rhythmic labor. This metaphor now becomes apparent as a thinly veiled reference to the studio's ability to bend subjectivities to its will, to quell anger, to obfuscate blame, to disguise bitter pills as a copium for the masses.

A workforce turning the studio's creations against it: each hand-drawn sign being imbued with the same ancient hex: blank slates become transmuted into protest instruments by way of skill refinement, craftsmanship, through

years of inquisition. A seance undertaken late at night in the blacked out studios some months ago now. Alchemical sacrifice, blood sacrifice - the rendering of the fleshen body - a transmutation of figurative bodily fluids, as in, blood sweat and tears - as in, labor related liquids. This powerful spell rendered through the basest of communications: flattened, drawn planes... encoding spite into each still's very essence. A Drawn attempt at rendering a reality unfettered by work time. Remaining in costume without performing. Class subordination rendered into two-dimensional reality. Cartoon faces as political machinegun. A nightmarish mimesis: A protest march of harmful yet innocent images - the fun of cartoons turned against the owner, a role reversal of fetish value, of master and drone - the animators still subservient in a profound and powerful way, and as revenge for their devalued status, elevating the executive's to that of a true villain, killed somewhere offscreen in the film's final moments.

***“Where lies the future? What has happened to our future?!”***



The desert now as Icarian hellscape, with high flight having its consequences. A melting; crashing, followed by a purgatorial marooning on the Burbank solitude, all while stuck-fast with feathers. Gazing back through the galvanized chain-link fence marking the studio's perimeter.

Analogue video camera whirring like a dynamo - handheld chaoticism capturing all. Securicrat riot gear stands no chance: tussle in the entropic stillness.

Protest pyres burning priceless archives of animation cells.

### ***Miasma of burnt fiction.***



Grins widen as flames climb, lapping at the sky. A sooty penumbra casting longer shadows, the ritual now forming an occult smoke-signal. Flaming effigies fill the car's skylight - characters' 'made flesh' here in terms of their figurative demise. Image based assault. Cute violence, deployed as militant tactic. The movement was mutating, reforming out of atomized digits into a conglomerate structure rivaling the vertiginous empire they stood facing. The insane strata - the brute mechanism of cyberspatial tendencies. Camaraderie collapsing and expanding, again and again.

Drown the car in the fountain.

They watch us praying for the spell to break, willing it under our breath. How deep must we delve to undo this? A true longing for the prelapsarian bliss of mundanity, of anywhere before now, and for that fabled summer. Ending the days by driving towards the sunset, now painted as a mural on the wall at the back of the studio's lot. A blizzard of flashes; rocks pelting the sides of the car. It's pointless kick a dead horse, collapsed on the Burbank solitude. In death, it is only a matter of time before a resurgence via haunting. The Cadillac exits the studio, and returns to the silence of the desert.





***James Sibley, 2021.***  
***@james.\_.ess***  
***www.jamesibley.co.uk***