







Do electric crows fly over Adelaide?

SASA GALLERY

22 July - 30 August 2013

## 9732. Wake up, time to die.

Michael Tawa

"...knowledge is *at the bottom* of the educational hierarchy. Its the first strand of Victorian anti-intellectualism, rooted in the military-Christian worldview of the old elite, and revitalised in mid-century by its most prestigious schools (and, later, by careers in the Empire)."<sup>1</sup>

In his recent essay *Fog*, Franco Moretti notes the Victorian literary propensity for "crowds of adjectives", and tracks the transfer of linguistic qualifiers from physical to emotional, ethical, intellectual then metaphysical registers - at which point they threaten to become metaphorical, and in the process, to lose precision.<sup>2</sup> Asking "what has made meaning more important than precision?" Moretti ventures a surprising observation.<sup>3</sup> The disavowal and sentimentalism of early bourgeois Victorian literature, characterised by the inherently vague language of the 'middle-class', betrayed a fear and hatred of knowledge - an anti-intellectualism "indigenous to the business mind" in the guise of excessive concern for moral significance and re-enchantment.<sup>4</sup> Moretti contends that a certain amount of vagueness ("less ethical clarity, but greater emotional strength: less precision, more meaning"<sup>5</sup>), and a certain porousness or wavering undecidability in the language, became a condition of meaning, and asks: "what if the fog were *itself* the message?"<sup>6</sup>

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In 2019, the Nexus phase of robotic evolution produces the Nexus 6 Replicants: creatures identical to humans; as strong, agile and intelligent as their creators. Replicants are consigned to the *Off-world* and used for colonisation; but they are liable to become mutinous, triggering *retirement* by special police Blade Runner units.

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Being-without-memory is by definition non-human being. Humans are beings that remember; human-being is mnemonic and mnemotechnical. "Let me tell you about my mother", says the Replicant, drawing on his implanted emotional codes. Whatever memories they have are not inherent, as Rachel tells the Blade Runner; they are traces and recollections of lives lived by others. The Replicant's subject-body functions as an empty armature for alien mnemonic data. Memories are not embodied but *embedded* as in a constitutive machinic apparatus (Nexus 6, Incept date 2016, Pris [birthdate Valentine's day] - a 'Basic

Pleasure Model.' Function: Military, Leisure). The purpose of memories is not to produce subjectivities, to transform Replicant-being into human-being. Rather, Replicants are "gifted with a past" to produce conditions that enable them to be controlled ("did you get your precious photos?").

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The vaporous metaphor in Moretti is apposite. Fog and mist are the ambit of *atmosphere* - a particularly charged yet *vapid* theme in contemporary architecture.<sup>7</sup> Flat and insipid, the vapid is literally what has 'exhaled its vapor', becoming dull, stale and lifeless. It marks the withdrawal of vitality, flavor and savor: those vapors, exhalations and miasmas - human and urban - whose nefarious affects a nascent Modernity was, without qualm, so compelled to neutralise, evacuate and quell.<sup>8</sup>

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The colonisation of distant worlds by Nexus 6 Replicants is necessary because the city - and before it (or because of it) the earth - has, like the Blade Runner himself, become degraded ("a new life awaits you in the Off-world colony, the chance to begin again in a Golden Land of opportunity and adventure. Lets go to The Colonies"). The old world looks snagged somewhere in the *Kali Yuga*: the last, most debased of four ages in the Hindu cosmic chronology, characterised by the circulation of residual dregs from all previous cycles - physical, psychic and spiritual. A litany of vestiges resounds throughout the dark, exotic and depleted grain of 'LA': traces of the great brands (Atari, Bulova, RCA, Pan Am); an older America ('Yukon', diners); takeover corporations (Shimagu Dumingu); ruined Hindu and/or Mayan and/or Pharaonic temple fragments; hypnotic pedal points of oriental music; museological relics; art deco moldings from the Empire State; swatches of Hollywood films noir; swoons of Helmut Newton models circa Vogue 1980. In this nightmare post-capitalist slum ("commerce is our goal here at Tyrell Corporation"), a makeshift world of losers, foreigners and delinquents, marginals, scavengers, tourists, terrorists-in-waiting and touts ("helping America into the new world") constitute the clear and present *other face* of (multi) cultural appropriation.

A slum, but strictly hierarchical. First, there is ground zero: a humid, toxic wasteland in a state of immanent condensation; a bazaar of shop houses where real nature has become irretrievable ("dya think I'd be

workin' in a place like this if I could afford a real snake?" ). The city is an armature of flues and flamethrowers; an urban body that effloresces, fasciculates, leaks, exhales, dissipates and expectorates. Everything appears given over to transit and circulation; to the interminable transaction of fluids and information. Then there is the infinitely remote, lofty, incandescent and crystalline over-world of Corporation HQ. Finally there is the Off-world: the out-of-frame and off-screen colonies of a *Paradise Regain'd* (*Eden rais'd in the wast Wilderness*)<sup>9</sup>, as fake as those of Lang's *Metropolis* and Lynch's *Blue Velvet*.

Yet for all of its hierarchical, *sentimentalising* tropes (heaven, earth, hell; initiation, sacrifice, resurrection), things get distinctly scrambled. In this metropolis, there is no foreground or midground; everything is *background*, context. The tectonics and materialities of the city are disassembled or dissolved into ubiquitous interfaces, collages of defrayed sweating surfaces, fuselages, voids and ducts, clefts and cavernous vistas. Everything takes place in the deep interstices of a milieu whose coordinates point to an outside where everything is turned inside out; where there can be no home, no hearth, no interior - only the expansive, restless exposition to the unfamiliar and the un-enduring. The outside constantly and excessively glares into gloomy insides of profound shadow. On the street one is never sure whether everything is in an interminable state of emergency, reconstruction or repair. Even music has disappeared, along with the memories that once attached to it. Yet, music is what finally triggers the Replicant's memory and recovery of 'his' own past. The film is, after all, an old fashioned detective story.

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Blade Runner exceeds in the slippages and elisions of mixed metaphors and multiple referends. Consider this pastiche: exotic dancers (Folies Bergère), dwarfs (Tod Browning's *Freaks*, 1932), goths, red army foot soldiers, nuns, yellow cabs, Bedouins, Tegeleg nomads, Nazi sympathisers, Hare Krishnas, Talmudic scholars, wailing wall weepers, shoeshine boys. Even 9732, the number of the Blade Runner's apartment, is a vestigial patch-up of Wright's 1924 Ennis Brown House, itself a patch up of Mayan ruins, framed by a profusion of geomantic coding that saturates the film.<sup>10</sup> Practically *inauthentic*, 9732's studio-reconstructed interiors function like a cluttered, over-signifying archive and apparatus of mnemonic triggers: piano, sheet music, framed photographs, books, files, mementoes, heirloom furniture, television monitors, mirrors

(simulacra that shadow the ruinous cinematic sets of decades of Hollywood boys own adventures). The otherwise displaced and discomfited protagonist ("nothing is worse than having an itch you can never scratch") retreats into this site of sedimented meaning and overcharged sentiment to contemplate his internal crises.

The pervasive juxtaposition of codes, temporalities, spatialities, types and genres - this interminable list and catalogue of disseveral signs - works in two directions. It multiplies and pullulates sense (exceeding in signification); and it obfuscates and darkens it (producing a semantic fog). Mist and vapor predominate over precise, proportionate articulation and substantially disable any prospects of sense. This irresolvable, *disingenuous* double bind - at once vapid and affluent - is the true, resolutely anti-intellectual, *Victorian* register of the film: Postmodernism's late and defining prequel.

1. Franco Moretti, 'Fog' in *New Left Review* 81, May/June 2013: 86, citing Samuel Smiles' 1859 'best seller' *Self-Help*.
2. Moretti, 'Fog': 77, 79.
3. Moretti, 'Fog': 80-1.
4. Moretti, 'Fog': 82.
5. Moretti, 'Fog': 85 and 86, citing Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*: 113-4. Moretti foregrounds the attendant instrumentalisation of knowledge: "an industrial society needs knowledge; but it needs it *in so far as it's useful*... Following knowledge like a shadow, 'useful' turns it into a tool: no longer an end in itself, knowledge is directed by the adjective towards a pre-determined function and a circumscribed horizon": 87.
6. Moretti, 'Fog': 91.
7. Bruno Latour, 'Atmosphère, Atmosphère' in Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, London: Tate Modern, 2003. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2011; Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere As The Subject Matter of Architecture" in Herzog and de Meuron, *Natural Histories*. Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture and Lars Mueller Publishers, 2005; Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995; and Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres*. Berlin: Birkhauser, 2006.
8. The words 'vapor', 'quell' and 'kill' are cognate; see Dutch *kwalm* = steam, vapor, mist; German *Qualm* = smoke, vapor, stupor and Old English *cwealm* = murder, agonising death.
9. Milton, *Paradise Regain'd*, Book 1.
10. See James Pontolillo's cryptic reading of the recurrent number 23 in the film: [http://www.cs.kent.edu/~cschafer/web2/hw/br/pgs/jp\\_essay.html](http://www.cs.kent.edu/~cschafer/web2/hw/br/pgs/jp_essay.html).

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**Curators:** Steve Kelly and Associate Professor Thomas Mical  
**Artists/Designers:** Andrew Butler, Disong Cheng, Katherine Donaldson, Mark Frost, Klaira Griffin, Peter Hilhorst, Kirrin Hembury, Todd Hislop, Tom Hocking, Shane Haddy, Patrick Holmes, Calum Hurley, Henry Jarvis, Margrethe Johannsen, Andre Lawrence, Jordon Leeflang, Michael Marnier, Michale Majchrzak, Carly Mewett, Sarah Miller, Tessa Parry, Despina Pipikos, Jenna Schina, Jordon Schumacher, Morgan Thomson, Pedro Torres, Jessica Ware, Samuel Wiechula, Jack Wilde, Taylor Wiley, Karishma Wilson, Michael Wong.

**External Scholar:** Professor Michael Tawa, Lecturer in Architecture: History and Theory, Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning, University of Sydney

**Editor:** Dr Mary Knights

**Catalogue design:** Keith Giles

**Project management:** Dr Mary Knights & Keith Giles

SASA Gallery staff:

Dr Mary Knights, Director, SASA Gallery  
Keith Giles, Curatorial Manager, SASA Gallery

Julian Tremayne, Installation Consultant

SASA Gallery Research/Education team:

Chris Boha, Ursula Halpin, Sue Kneebone,

Andre Lawrence, Madeline Reece, Sandra Uray-Kennett

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### SASA GALLERY

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