

WALKER AND WALKER
MOUNT ANALOGUE REVISITED
DECEMBER



A MISSING MAP

A curatorial expansion of the mother's tankstation exhibition programme during 2010 created space in the schedule to include the ongoing possibility of temporary events, screenings and happenings/performances, things that unfold in time. The initial event of this kind was the first Irish public presentation of *Mount Analogue Revisited* (2009-10), a recent film work by Walker and Walker, which ran for three nights and played to willing and receptive audiences. Originally shot on 35mm film, the 51 minute long work was projected at scale as an HD video transfer in a purpose-created forty-seater theatre.

This visually reductive, but intellectually forceful piece is a compact reworking of the French para-surrealist novelist and poet René Daumal's enigmatically uncompleted work, *Mount Analogue; A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Adventures in Mountain Climbing*, an acknowledged masterpiece published posthumously in 1952. Daumal's premature death¹ left unfinished this story of a voyage to an unknown island, thought to exist only in myth and scholarly speculation, wherein the voyagers, a trio of specifically skilled individuals, seek an improbable, mystical mountain populated by a utopian society and rumoured to link Heaven and Earth. All the crew members of the aptly-named yacht, *The Impossible* are 'specialists' of some sort; artists, writers, communicators, teachers, climbers; however Walker and Walker restrict their crew to three, a surrogate for Daumal himself, Pierre Sogol, a nominal expedition leader who ostensibly performs the function of narrator and a Russian of Finnish origin, Ivan Lapse, who is an authority on world languages and the author of a book on communication by gesture.

Daumal's text suggests that the location of the mountain island can only be perceived by realising that one has travelled further in traversing it than one would by travelling in a straight line, and that it can only be viewed from a particular point, at a certain time of day, when the sun's rays hit the earth at a certain angle.

"Its summit must be inaccessible, but its base accessible to human beings as nature made them. It must be unique and it must exist geographically. The door to the invisible must be visible."

Although Walker and Walker's film in many respects holds true to the spirit of Daumal's text² – an exploration or journey of spiritual self-knowledge – it is by no means a literal or standard film 'adaptation' as such, in that the artists have visually condensed the complex narrative to the form of a series of searching philosophical conversations that integrate the character of the author, Daumal, as an active protagonist. Literally, nobody goes anywhere for the duration of the film, they remain in a closed room as the artists translate the arduous physical trek into an internalised mental one.

The 'interviews' that follow are predicated upon a brief passage within the book, wherein the crew of ambiguous explorers/adventurers, on some form of spiritual/climbing quest, are escorted upon the boat's arrival at the shores of Mount Analogue, to a very ordinary municipal building and interrogated by an official. The visitors, who although unannounced seem strangely expected, are politely but searchingly probed to give detailed accounts of who they are, the purpose of their visit, and how they know or believe the mountain to exist.

Within the confines of these interviews, Walker and Walker have fabricated an elaborate series of conversations between the three crew members and an official, the existential nature of which is not only derived from Daumal's text, but broadens out towards a greater theoretical investigation of the human need for spiritual quest. In this Walker and Walker are evidently influenced by a broad range of literary and intellectual references, including Plato, Novalis, Stanislaw Lem, Edgar Allen Poe, Maurice Blanchot, Hermann Hesse, and William James. Through the protagonists, the artists seem to speak of their beliefs and disbeliefs in relation to the possible existence of the mountain, whether its existence is physical or metaphysical, and given the limits of reason and rationality, the practical difficulties involved in making a

journey to an un-locatable, superior world. All the expressed viewpoints serve to inform a proposition towards the loosening of the limits of rationality in the pursuit of a utopian society. Gradually threatening twists and implications appear, beginning to sound alarm bells that signal problems in what apparently seemed like a socialistically perfect structure.

As the events play out through pure dialogue the viewer begins to search the single, utilitarian and unadorned room for clues. It is furnished with only a simple desk of nondescript design, and lit by a large window that looks out to nothing other than white light. In the absence of things, we find a telling stain in the paintwork of the wall behind the interviewees, perhaps left from a removed framed picture, the format of which perhaps suggests a removed map, again corresponding to the *nowhereness* of the mountain and the Greek derivation of *utopia*, as literally meaning 'not place'. The inevitable bond of utopia to dystopia increasingly seems to threaten the weary and worn-looking voyagers as they are imprisoned by an on-going 'shallowing-off' in depth of lens field throughout the film. The claustrophobic setting, the restriction of the action to language of speculative reality in combination with the ever-tightening of photographic focus serves to encapsulate or bottle-up the fantastical nature of the text within the film to the point where it feels ready to explode, made ever more combustible by the evident problems inherent to the apparent utopia. The costumes of all protagonists are implicitly military, possibly Soviet, perhaps implying a culture of identification and the suppression of individuality.

Authority is apparently exercised by the 'Corps des Guides' who assume all administrative functions and in turn control the police. The representative of the Corps des Guides explains why police are needed in such an ideal society what is expected of the team. After they have had time to settle in they must then begin the ascent of the mountain. They are given a sack of tokens as an advance against necessary provisions and methods of repayment are explained. Rather than gold, the currency is based on a particular type of crystal found on the mountain, challenging the notion of the quest as an entirely spiritual one, as they must hunt for the 'peradam', a spherical crystal with a refractive index so close to that of air that it is almost impossible to see. Those who are not sufficiently 'attuned' will never discover a sufficient quantity of these and for necessary repayment they must find manual work in the village. Sogol asks what happens if a team cannot find either the crystals or gainful employment. The guide returns with the question, "what happens to hens that don't lay eggs?"

With a long silence following this implied threat, Walker and Walker depart the darkness that appears to be settling on this ideal world. Walker and Walker re-emphasize the point that there is no perfect world, not even the longest journey to the smallest hope of it, just as there no shortened routes to a superior version of our own necessarily flawed existence. The end; "real life awaits".

David Godbold

¹ I In occupied Paris in April 1944, a fortnight before the Normandy landings, while René Daumal was working on *Mount Analogue*, a visitor knocked at the door and he broke off in mid-sentence of his fifth chapter. Terminally ill with tuberculosis, he was unable to resume and died on the 21st of May. He was 36 years old.

² Unlike another adaptation; Alejandro Jodorowsky's 1973 cult version, *The Holy Mountain*, which intersects it with various other ideas of spiritual self-knowledge journeys. However much of Jodorowsky's visually psychedelic story still retains the metaphysical thrust of *Mount Analogue* such as the climb to the Alchemist, the assembly of individuals with specific skills, the discovery of the mountain that unites Heaven and Earth and symbolic challenges along the mountain ascent. As mentioned above, Daumal died before finishing his allegorical novel, adding to the enigmatic quality, and Jodorowsky's improvised ending provides a clever way of completing the work (symbolic and otherwise.) At the summit of the mountain the climbers who have endured the tests and rituals confront the 'cloaked immortals' who are shown to be only faceless dummies. The alchemist then reveals and deconstructs the film apparatus just outside the cinematic frame (cameras, microphone, lights and crew etc) and says "Zoom back camera!", instructing everyone, including the audience, to leave the holy mountain. "Real life awaits us," he says, and the movie ends.

