

mother's annual 2017

### **Yuri Pattison *context, collapse***

October – December

#### **Soft Sell Syndrome**

We are living in the testing grounds of fictions. Some (#adamandeve) have taken hold more than others (#flyingspaghettimonster); others have persisted for millennia, now competing with those only a matter of months old (#bitcoinhieroglyphics). Imagined hypothetical machines like *Star Trek* Okudagram e-clipboards and *Dick Tracy* two-way wristwatches are now realised, relatively accessible gadgets; while cinemas are dominated by superhero stories written for 1950s American comic books (due in no small part to the fact that special effects cost and abilities have finally caught up with the psychedelic lines of the likes of Jack Kirby). William Gibson's maxim about the future being here but unevenly distributed has its own multiple lives as an online meme.

Within Yuri Pattison's *context, collapse*, several fictions are being tested out on a group of unwitting subjects: small people walking aimlessly on the far side of a white globe, every once and a while bumping into other inhabitants of this barren land. At points, their pace becomes more frantic, some breaking into a run, until the whole thing resets and starts again, with a sole body wandering across the plain. These crowd simulator programmes (*peace mode (off) – context collapse* and *peace mode (on) – context collapse*, all works 2017) run continually, visible on several screens on the floor and ceiling of a former office environment. A few tiny, plastic versions of these people lay trapped in mineral oil in a Perspex case embedded in the office's dropped-ceiling panel system, while others can be seen in the model metropolises glimpsed in another video set into the flooring, *context collapse surveys*. Nearby, a small semi-private seating booth – an extant, sound-absorbing, Vitra meeting cabin - is set up, where a video shows people from a middle distance (appearing roughly the same size as the figurines) setting up tents and large, streaming structures: the 2017 Burning Man festival, a once semi-mythical annual event started in a dry lake bed in the Nevada desert in 1990, envisioned as a temporary city that would be built, operate on ideals of bartering (or 'gifting', as the organisers prefer to describe it now #litigationlanguage) and 'radical self-expression', and be dismantled after a week.

While Burning Man started as a few San Francisco dudes celebrating the summer solstice, it now has its own registered airport and over 70,000 attendees with its own devoted 'Burners' – many that hail from the exec rooms and open-plan workspaces of Silicon Valley. Author Fred Turner has described the shared values of Silicon Valley and Burning Man as 'teamwork, flow, peer production, meritocracy and reputation building'<sup>i</sup> (#drankthekoolaid). It's a curious equivalence between a hedonistic pseudo-primitive carnival and the voracious gig economy of the smart-casual tech world, but it seems the Nevada desert has become the imagined id for the Valley, as a mind-expanding alternative to the corporate team-building exercise (#lsdorgy).

In the mostly empty space of Pattison's installation, a sense of unease begins to rise from the hard facts of the wires running along the floor and the documentary images. Apparent headlines crawl underneath the Burning Man footage, but the news seems from a parallel reality: 'Virtual Politician to Run in New Zealand 2020'; 'Trump, who played Gomer Pyle, dead at 87'. These slight fictions undermine what we're seeing, but also ask us to sniff out the wider narratives in the room. One shared fiction that wanders throughout Pattison's works here is that of the blank slate: the clean globe that the 'crowd' inhabits; the desert as an assumed nothingness, meant to repeatedly bear a spontaneous urbanisation process; as well as the modular adaptability of the office block itself that houses the exhibition<sup>ii</sup>. Another fiction hovering nearby is one that relies on the first, that of the open platform: a supposedly free, non-hierarchical, self-governing zone. Both fictions have had their echoes and precursors, as well as an easy familiarity: think of users of Twitter who promote the company as some kind of democratic soapbox; or the European colonial project's conceptions of other continents. Both fictions enable an othering of space as, to use contemporary corporate syntax, an 'unexplored site of potential', designating it as something that can be remade, remodelled, ruptured. The fiction of unregulated freedom is a favourite for entrepreneurs, looking to evade or tweak 'the system', the notion of 'revolutionising the market' a soft-sell millenarianism. The tech culture's rhetoric of democratic evangelism attempts to hide the discrepancies of power that it displaces; though of course no one ever sees themselves as the bad guy.

Much has been made of Silicon Valley's ideological debts to the work of Ayn Rand (though this also seems to credit her with an outsize influence that mirrors the tunnel vision of her own individualist heroes). And while the previous generation of startup dreamers might have been fuelled by *The Fountainhead*, the following generation was more likely raised on the genre-manipulations of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, JJ Abrams's *Lost*, or Alan Moore's *Watchmen*: stories that brought a bit of everyday 'realism' to their fantasies, and buffeted their moral relativism with winking humour. Stories where the adversary isn't actually a bad person, they're just ever so slightly misguided, and take their good ideas just a little too far (#wellintentionedextremist).

The narratives we heed, and those we choose to believe or partake in, are no small matter. Film theorist Thomas Elsaesser classifies narrative as a form of storage, or 'mnemotechnic practice'<sup>iii</sup>; in his writing he describes the rise of a contemporary mainstream 'what if' narrative, finding its most visible outlet in the Hollywood 'mind-game film'. This type of film usually involves multiple timelines or parallel realities, with characters often misguidedly navigating paradoxical dilemmas (#Lynchian #spacetimecontinuum); as a result, Elsaesser posits, the members of the audience, who are actively trying to 'solve' the film as they watch, are trained to become accustomed to accepting complexity. It has, on one level, authoritarian implications:

As pedagogical exercises and learning processes – training new survival skills that deploy the body's somatic responses and the mind's 'aberrant' pathologies – mind-game films are by this very fact also disciplinary machines in Foucault's sense, re-formatting the body in view of tasks and affordances the control society requires from its dysfunctional functioning members.<sup>iv</sup>

Elsaesser, in his most recent writing, also notes the similarity between the mind-game film and current video games, noting as an aside that 'mind-game films, well aware of their likely audiences' intimate familiarity and expertise, *already assume video games to be the default value of these spectators' cinema experience rather than classical linear narrative.*<sup>v</sup>

The strength of Elsaesser's ideas is in suggesting the interpellative implications of 'what if' cultural narratives, what they teach us, even subconsciously, to just go along with. But his last point also suggests the varying ways the mind-game film narrative might be interpreted: some might take it as a subject, allowing themselves be controlled and shaped by its rules; while others, of a certain mentality, will see it simply as a game, that can be gamed, that can be won. What Pattison's work continually makes clear is that we are in the midst of a cultural shift, still making sense of how technology is changing our lives, and our brains; but his particular alignment of software, hardware and their attendant fictions and rhetoric in his installations doesn't just outline the shape of the particular handbasket in which we are currently going hellwards. The specific aspect of that dilemma he explores in *context, collapse* is the use, or supposition, of a 'god's eye' perspective; how a simulation gaming option can become a way of viewing life, where everything can be modelled and seen as a 'what if' scenario. The actual values of the Valley are a contemporary winking combination of Victorian conceptions of the charitable 'common good' combined with Spencer Herbert's 'survival of the fittest', cloaked in the rhetoric of the open platform: we are all the test subjects. What becomes apparent is that our sense of agency relies on what narratives we ascribe to; and it isn't just that assets, or material wealth, are unevenly distributed; narratives are, too. (#whoseagencyisitanyway)

Chris Fite-Wassilak

<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Hannah Kuchler, 'Burning Man Keeps Silicon Valley Fired Up', Financial Times, 30 August, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> The building has previously housed planning consultancy offices, photographic, design and artist studios, galleries, the employment training provider free2learn.org.uk, as well as the British Academy of Jewellery and the Chinese Visa Application Service Centre; due to be demolished, it is planned to be replaced with a hotel and 'flexible office workspace'.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Contingency, Causality, Complexity: Distributed Agency in the Mind-Game Film', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*