Introduction

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N ordic noir, shame culture, heterotopias, trauma, celebrity, existential angst, dystopian athletics, and a discography: these are the subjects of *Mosaic* 54.4, a general collection of essays broaching a broad range of topics.

In "Vengeance Unbound: Henning Mankell's *The Man From Beijing*," Daniel McKay tackles the transposition of "Nordic Noir" into a global context, in particular that of the United States and China. The substitutive relationships that follow from this move are read against the background of the consolidation of Neo-Liberal capitalism in the 1990s, in and as the novel's characters, through the decline of Sweden's welfare state, and as the repetitive historical violence of an increasingly rogue system. A light is shined on the intentions of Mankell's crime fiction that is quite extraordinary. And there is spill over, for this is no simple pint at the Oxford Bar on Rose Street with Ian Rankin presiding—all the while conspirators are plotting to overthrow the Crown in the back room. The psychological profiling typical of the whodunnit is replaced by a subtle critique that variously personifies geopolitical players at a crucial conjuncture of capital.

Inside/outside relationships, the possibility of a reparative suturing between them, and geographic as much as psychographic deferral occupy Michael Greenstein in "Dynamics of Place: Foucault's Heterotopias in Anne Michaels's *The Winter Vault*."

In a greatly abridged version of a representative passage of his narration of Michaels's novel, Africa and Canada are joined at the hip, the Nile flows into the St. Lawrence, each floods settlements on their respective banks, Charles Dickens usurps the narration, and with the novel's characters moved by the flow as much as its countercurrents—e.g., after a stillbirth Jean longs to be a Nubian woman, her fate like theirs written on her palm—origin and end, birth and death are made inseparably corelative. Capturing and conceptualizing these complex temporal relationships that resonate between one another defy the specificities of identity, geographical site, and history in an imaginative act of mimesis that is at the crux of Greenstein's criticism.

In "The Differing Shame Cultures of Tony Williams's *Nutcase* and *Grettir's Saga,*" Kathryn Hume conjures a wonderous picture of the days of yore. Against this, the comparatist presents two cultures in dialogue and at odds. Both hold up a dark mirror to the immortals, what she describes as "the heroic world" of myth, where "a king or lord sits in a magnificent hall. His warriors feast there perpetually, drinking to the great deeds they mean to do, and the king hands out gold arm bands and swords." On the one hand there is the eleventh century Icelandic loafer, Grettir, and on the other hand there is Aiden the north midlands do-nothing living in a council house. If we should be wary of the echoes of Tonybee, Spengler, and Eliot here, it is difficult not to read Hume's analysis of culture in decline with just a little purchase on our own. So many empty nights without ale and *Game of Thrones*.

"A Traumatic Reading of Maurya's Passivity in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*" by Chu He presents an embryonic moment of the "Irish trauma play" that turns on a retrospective character study keyed to PTSD. The key moment and question confronted is Maurya's silence as her last son, Bartley, sails out to sea. It is a strange moment in the play, but we all know how death interrupts words, and is also from whence words come. Thus, Maurya's daughter Cathleen asks, "Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door? Isn't it sorrow enough is on every one in the house without you sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear?" (Synge, *Riders* 61).

In Laurie Vickroy's "'It's More Terrible Not to Remember': Alexievich and Women's War Literature," the author probes the work of Svetlana Alexievich who created a kind of counter archive to official Soviet propaganda grounded in women's history— herstory arrived at through the talking cure. Alexievich sought out, collaborated with, and collected the testimonials of female Russian war veterans whose experiences of conflict in the twentieth century were not only repressed in official narratives, but whose memories of war both brush up against and bleed into war time experiences in ways that complicate the questions of trauma. Alexievich's is not a theoretical

account, but a practical collection of testimonials that has a logic of its own. Trauma here is loosely analyzed and situated within a range of distinguishability. There is trauma proper, no doubt, but there are also many forms of micro-trauma and there is ideological repression on a mass scale. Indeed, it is the very bloody line dug between repression and trauma that is of greatest interest.

In "'We've Got to Believe *Something*': Joyce Carol Oates and Celebrity," David Rutledge explores the problem of celebrity through the perspective of what he describes as audience studies and in particular the question of "para-social" relationships. With a distinct sociological edge on interpretation, a characterization of culture in the grip of no single absolute, and the integral ties of family left in ruins, Rutledge convincingly explores the empty "totem[s] of a teenage mythology" that Oates had explored before him. Celebrity emerges as a construction of a sub-culture without any purchase on the truth of the individual in question. There is no "me in the spot-light / losing my religion," as Michael Stipes frames the problem, there are only simulacral fragments made up of so much "teenage litter" accumulating around false idols.

Daniel Krahn's "Ontology on the Shore: Murakami, Heidegger, and Narrative Confusion in *Kafka on the Shore*" plumbs the limits of identity through repetition, private space that is shared space, split subjects, linked dreams, sexual unions, intergenerational mirroring, and psychic projection. Krahn argues these recurrent motifs of Murakami's fiction scratch away at the deepest pre-suppositions of realism, and he shows that in building these bridges across unbridgeable thresholds, narrative confusion is a cipher for an infinite string of prosthetic attachments that ground the self. This quality of temporal and spatial unboundedness described as a continual process of exteriorizing interiority is productively related by the author to the "thrownness" of Dasein.

In "Fit to Breed: Exercise and Sport in Women's Speculative Fiction," Karen Ya-Chu Yang interprets Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ursula Le Guin's "The Matter of Seggri" as dystopian allegories of "reproductive fitness." Through recourse to feminist theory and the medical humanities, and with pleasure replaced by function, "working out" has never been less appealing. This is especially true in the face of Atwood's puzzling phrase, "work[ing] it out together," which points to a double bind where practice makes perfect, but power relations are never finally solvable.

Finally, in "Ten Songs that Came Up in Conversations with Rodney Graham," former CBC radio host David Wisdom provides what we hope to be the first of many discographies tied to each issue we publish. Wisdom recounts a number of the wide-ranging conversations on music he had with artist Rodney Graham, whose work *Antiquarian Sleeping in his Shop* (2017) is featured on our cover.

A s with any general issue there are as many literatures and histories present as temporalities instanced. In the pieces collected here, the contributions turn primarily on the novel, the Northern hemisphere, and the increasing complexities of life in the modern period. Beyond this one might detect a loosely shared recourse to forms of doubling and repetition with temporalities in tow. These tropological structures that shape and reshape the material have been an obsession of mine for some time. Thus our cover, which features the work of Rodney Graham, Wisdom's "Ten Songs…" for Rodney Graham, and this introduction to Graham's work here. In the late 1990s I had a formative dialogue with the Vancouver-based photo-conceptual artist. For Graham, who passed away on 22 October 2022, repetition and doubling as much as chronology and multiple temporalities were recurrent tropes. They allowed him to mark consciousness as epiphenomenal and variably flag other states as the province of his work—writing and playing music to parse the many registers of the lyric voice, donning pyjamas and downing a sedative to unlock the pleasures of sleep, painting so as to touch still more inaccessible regions of the self, and finally, directing and starring in film to figure death.

These tropes came into special focus in 1997 on the occasion of the artist's participation in the Venice Biennale that year. His well-known contribution for the Canadian pavilion was the infinitely repeating film loop known as *Vexation Island*. The film is set on a tiny desert island with Graham in the role of castaway, dressed in the guise of a shipwrecked pirate. For the vast majority of the film, he lies perfectly still on the beach and is less the object of the camera's attention than one part of a larger whole (Figures 1 and 2). Indeed, the slow ten-minute sequence of shots, pans, and bird's-eye views that

1. Rodney Graham, *Vexation Island*, 1997. 35mm film transferred to DVD, 9 minute loop. Produced by Lisson Gallery.

comprise the film seem intent on providing as many dreamy perspectives on the tropical *mis-en-scène* as possible. Perhaps we endure the slow montage of images for this reason alone. As much flat scenography as an ad for an island vacation, the shots are deliberately structured through deferral and only barely accrue the prospective slant of narrative expectation. Rich blues and aquamarine colours tint the open air, open seas, and lagoon of this little slice of paradise. We see the island from on-high, hear the gentle lapping of waves, note a palm tree, a figure in the sand beneath the tree, a barrel of rum, and a parrot. Then more island views, more waves, the sun, and finally close-ups of Graham with eyes closed. Squawks and words from the parrot eventually wake him up, whereupon he gains his bearings, spies a coconut in the tree above him, and shakes the tree, at which point the narrative famously concludes with the artist being knocked out by the falling coconut that hits him on the head (Figure 3). The loop proper begins when this comical climax returns to the slow montage of images that led up to it. Cause and effect are hopelessly tangled here, for the climax just past provides a perfect pretext for the slow lead-in to come and vice versa. Subject becomes object and object becomes subject in an unending series of substitutions. Sleeping, unconsciousness, and potentially being pirate drunk blur with dreaming, concussion, and seeing double to make *Vexation Island* an exemplary instance of the artist's obsession with shaping and bending time to mirror the deepest processes and recesses of the self.

"Putting the complex into the simple," one of William Empson's definitions of the pastoral (23), is a good condensation of Graham's literal attempt to make time all his very own as well as mark it as subject to a kind of repetition that was both in and out of his reach. During the 1980s Graham became known, especially in Europe, for

2. Rodney Graham, *Vexation Island*, 1997. 35mm film transferred to DVD, 9 minute loop. Produced by Lisson Gallery.

3. Rodney Graham, *Vexation Island*, 1997. 35mm film transferred to DVD, 9 minute loop. Produced by Lisson Gallery.

very sophisticated and literate text-based works that were a playful blend of citationality, close reading, and critical analysis. The Brussels-based bookmaker Yves Gevaert was a collaborator and friend; the works of Raymond Roussel as much as Foucault's labyrinthine interpretation of Roussel became an important touchstone.[1] During this period Graham produced an array of extremely complicated musical appropriations of Richard Wagner and Carl Czerny, as well as textual supplements to the works of Edgar Allen Poe, Georg Büchner, Sigmund Freud, Herman Melville, and others. But by the turn of the millennium he was pushing his work towards a very slack aesthetic. This is what really hits the spectator on viewing his slapstick pirate movie with hints to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as much as the film adaptions of *Treasure Island* (1950) and *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962). Though utterly vacuous (Graham calls the film a "travesty"), narcissistic (he describes it as a "star-vehicle"), and paced dangerously close to just killing time (with, of course, the exception of that one "catastrophic" moment of slapstick comedy in the tradition of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin), *Vexation Island*'s particular iteration of the film loop is carefully keyed to duration, the unique circularity of the artist's corpus, film history, and more ("Sighting" 15; "Artist Note" 52).

Which brings me to Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971). At one of the rare moments when the filmic narrative picks up speed, Aschenbach, the failing composer and anti-hero, insists, "Time does not press." Indeed, time's slow flow in Visconti's cinematic classic resembles a rest cure for the age-old measure. Time is spaced. It is subject to the most ponderous sequence of images. Simply recall the opening scene with Aschenbach drifting off to sleep. Even with the spectacle of Venice in sight, he is barely able to keep his eyes open. And naturally enough, we poor viewers must

4. Rodney Graham, *Halcion Sleep*, 1994. Black and white video transferred to DVD, 27 minutes.

struggle to stay awake and focused as well. Cinematic time is treated with the same palliative care the fated composer demands. I am certain Graham knew Visconti's film inside-out and would have quietly chuckled at this painful opening sequence during the conceptual planning of *Vexation Island*. Though the artist's filmic references ran distinctly to classic comedy, *Death in Venice* has its place, if supplementary.

Forgive me this, but Graham's death last year strikes me as an interpretative event that should not be left unthought. *Death in Venice* as a deep conceptual backstory (as much as Death in Venice as a citation not sanctioned by the corpus) was inseparably correlative to Graham's playful contribution to the forty-seventh Venice biennale. His untimely passing is not without connection to his obsession with temporality, a concentration on life's ups and downs, its long plateaus and repetitions, and the singular version of the perfect film loop he made for Venice. Such passages, their repetition and deferral as well as the transition to more passages, mark a set of crossroads that Graham repeatedly confronted in his practice as creative impasses of one kind or another. But then the artist's incredibly unique practice that began in the late 1970s always dug the line between death and signification. Sleeping, dreaming, double vision, spacing-out, seeing stars, blinded by the flash of his own camera, accentuating musical "rests" on the

model of Wagner, or tripping on acid were interconnected tropes for the artist—all ways that allowed Graham to avoid making art *per se* by being more himself.

Take *Halcion Sleep* (1994), one of a number of classics that employ the crutch. The twenty-six-minute single-take video shows the artist sleeping in the back seat of a van having taken a double dose of sleeping pills chosen for their "pleasant associations" (Figure 4). Picture a black and white video displayed on a small television set with tailor made pyjamas hanging beside the presentation. Think of the work as the performance of little to nothing, keyed especially to minimizing the external stimulus generated by the background suspense of a film noir car chase. Finally, imagine a young Rodney Graham acting out the past—in particular, the family car trip—while living out the troubling implications of reality, which were all too close to the fictions of post war cinema. Incredibly accomplished and funny, yet made at a time when the artist was thinking of quitting art and instead pursuing psychoanalysis. Filtered through a kind of Rousselian *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, things bleed into autobiography here, and as with so many other diversions and digressions instanced in the corpus, an unprincipled narcissism leaves its trace. If *Halcion Sleep* is about dreaming, wish fulfilment, and a desire to merge with a more vital, bygone current, *Vexation Island* is this and more.

Graham once described *Vexation Island* to me as a conversation piece. This was coincident with not wanting the work to be too much of an imposition on the time of his audience. Presumably, merely identifying Graham, seeing the parrot and tree or bruise on his head, and getting the gag was enough. Moreover, the crucial logic of absence, distraction, and amusement should be understood as traction gained on the "serious" and "high-minded" work of fellow Vancouver artists Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall. Though happy to identify as an art school drop-out, Graham was one of a number of important students of Wallace and Wall—Ken Lum and Stan Douglas among them. He would become close friends with all of them. He played together in a band with Wallace and Wall, and in the early 1970s collaborated with the latter on an unrealised film project, which resulted in *Stills from a Film in Progress* (1973). The largely static and photo-based practices of his "elders" provided the key spur for Graham to explore duration and cinematic time. Logocentrism was the issue; precisely not providing a stable "landing pad for subjectivity" the crux (Wallace, "Rewind" 79). More important was positing a kind of rolling or fluid present situated in nature where the passage of time like water in a stream is constantly renewed.

Just how idiosyncratic, obdurate, and temporally twisted a thing each of Graham's film works are complicates the point, for all of Graham's works are keyed to a quite conventional notion of spacing that is blown open by inside outside relationships. In recognition of his generational difference from Wallace and Wall, who began their

5. Rodney Graham, *Illuminated Ravine,* 1979. Performance/installation.

practices as painters, Graham found his footing in nature, consequently constructed his practice as maladroit, and necessarily situated it in the home rather than the studio. This siting was accompanied by a version of self-analysis modelled after Sigmund Freud, but particularly keyed to Land art, the generational paradigm in which Graham came of age as an artist. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1901) is important here—especially the vegetal diversion represented by "The Dream of the Botanical Monograph"—as well as his historical hermeneutic grounded in the tensions of the family home. In Graham's corpus, the "movie house" of *Two Generators* (1984), the back seat of his brother's van in *Halcion Sleep* (1994), the purpose-built space of display modelled on his kitchen in *Coruscating Cinnamon Granules* (1996), or, in the case of *Vexation Island*, the Canadian pavilion in Venice which reminded him of a rustic cabin, are all manifestations of "living under the same roof" as Freud would put it and Derrida would underline (Graham, "Siting" 17; Freud, "Beyond" 14; Derrida 293). The gentle relations between all these cinematic sites relate back (through condensation and displacement) to the artist's first "screen memories" from a summer spent with his family living in a logging camp, when his father was "camp-manager, cook […] and [Sunday] projectionist" (Graham, "Siting" 17). This experience temptingly comes into focus as a sort of Ur-scene, and it should be clear that Graham's version of

spacing—especially as it corresponds to "living under the same roof"—comes with a time stamp attached, a Freudian horizon couched in the past that recurs.

Looking back over the artist's corpus of film works, it seems memories from this "primal" moment were lit-up for the young artist by developments in environmental art in the 1970s and precisely powered-up in his earliest film work, *Two Generators.* Like *75 Polaroids* (1976) and the gothic lighting of *Illuminated Ravine* (1979)—both "filmed" in the forest—the unnerving lighting event that is *Two Generators,* poses no contradiction to the rule of the household. Although by the 1990s Graham would come around, the darker current driving *75 Polaroids, Two Generators,* and *Illuminated Ravine* (Figure 5) continued to retain its magnetism.[2] We should also realize that these various spaces or topologies—half inside and half outside—were part of Graham's self-analysis of a generational hang-up that left him out in the cold Canadian landscape. Coming of age as an artist in the thick of earthworks—Robert Smithson was a key influence—he had only a furtive connection with the studio (and hence the practice of painting) for a good part of his career. Unlike Wallace and Wall, who had begun as painters, noodling away on his guitar or going out for lunch was often the best Graham could do in this hallowed site. I am exaggerating of course, and, in Venice, change was already afoot that would eventually lead to Graham's later practice of painting, but the mythic proportions of the prohibition on working in the studio were real.

6. Rodney Graham, *Phonokinetoscope*, 2001. 16mm film and vinyl record, 5 minute variable dimensions.

7. Rodney Graham, *Phonokinetoscope*, 2001. 16mm film and vinyl record, 5 minute variable dimensions.

Working outside had to be carefully paired with a familial "roof," and this goes as much for Graham's films as his book works and supplements (so many with slipcases, vitrines, Judd-like housings, bindings with the mere thickness of a book, exquisite valises). In any case, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, Graham's reliance on housing cinema "under the same roof" would begin to migrate both onto the technical componentry particular to his film works and infiltrate what we can call their intra-cinematographic elements. {As regards the technical componentry, spacing is both lit-eralized and bent by various objects of obsession—a vintage typewriter, a bicycle, an Eiki projector. These often betray the unresolved triangular relations of a family drama as much as the time stamp of history. Thus, the historicity of affect, a patina that is so tarnished in *Rheinmetall/Victoria-8* (2003) and which so enchants in *Phonokinetoscope* (2001) (Figures 6 and 7). Despite the hectoring "law of the father" in the one and the counter-culture rebellion of the other, each is structured by Oedipal indecision. [In *Phonokinetoscope* specifically, a bicycle from the late 1960s is ridden backward, presumably to counteract its role as phallic extension of the body. On the chrome fender one sees a majestic letter F, a monogram for Fischer, the German bike maker, but also a substitute for the artist's first name, a metonymic

anagram for a much-loved Fender guitar [another prosthetic], as well as the F-word plain and simple. And no doubt Graham played his Fender on the psychedelic sound-track that he wrote and performed for the film. The riff—"You're the kind of girl that fits into my world"—appropriated from the chorus of one of Syd Barrett's trippiest songs from *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967) is distinctly plaintive, of love lost and regained, lost again and found anew. Think Pink Floyd meets Marcel Proust and Phil Spector's "wall of sound" at a chemistry lab frequented by Dave Hickey of *Air Guitar* fame. It all comes off as an ever so slightly forced autobiographical portrait of youth by an aging rocker. Dropping a tab of acid in mimesis of the zeitgeist gripping ravers in Berlin where he was living at the time is the giveaway.]} As regards intra-cinemato-graphic elements, the most important and consistent trope is the recurrent presence of Graham himself, in spite of the various personas he plays. This tends to transform all the distinct video and film works Graham made *and* appears in between 1994-2010 into one long, though periodic and discontinuous film—perhaps a tribute to the seven roles Jerry Lewis plays in *The Family Jewels* (1965), though equally, a gesture to the maddening heteronyms adopted by Fernando Pessoa. My point? Processes of becoming are inseparable from the passage of time, always at the expense of a former self, and because the logic of "living under the same roof"[3] is slightly leaky, always a vehicle for generating future selves through supplementation.

In the case of *Vexation Island*, the familial complex is reproduced through the key "actors" and temptingly reduced to a string of substitutive caricatures: bird=mother, tree=father, Graham=Graham caught in-between. With tree-hugger in open conflict with tree-cutter, the psychoanalytic system begins to spin, picks up speed, and takes off with the corpus in tow. On top of these associations, far more delicate echoes of a conceptual and meta-textual kind haunt the film. Graham's identification with the failing composer, Aschenbach, is one of these, as is his conceptualisation of *Vexation Island* as a remake of *Death in Venice*. In this regard, the film is also a unique version of Graham's ongoing obsession with the invention of cinema. Building on the tempo-ral reversal of his *Camera Obscura Mobile* (1996) (Figure 8) and the rotating housing of *Reading Machine for Lenz* (1994)—both fictional precursors to cinema that, as Graham puts it, variously "investigat[e] the cinematic precondition of movement" ("Siting" 13)—*Vexation Island* explores an arche-cinema beneath the threshold of vis-ibility that is supplementary to cinematic experience. The Graham we see in costume and featured in *Vexation Island* is distinct from Graham's person. This second Graham, in fact more primary than his screen persona, is subject to time in ways that the screen idol is not, and which now more than ever reminds us that the short films of Dutch conceptualist Bas Jan Ader—whether rolling off a roof or cycling into a

8. Rodney Graham, *Camera Obscura Mobile*, 1996. Small carriage on wheels, 193 x 183 x 114 cm.

canal in Amsterdam—were no less important to Graham than the former artist's fateful voyage (perhaps a last performance?) when he disappeared at sea in a solo attempt to cross the Atlantic. Though Graham's unique version of spacing or distance on the appropriated system of cinematography similarly hinges on the avant-garde gambit of merging art and life, he differentiates the life from the work. Life death is the crux rather than death as such. Like the protagonist of Graham's *Lenz*, whose mist enshrouded ups and downs are of such Goethean proportions that only the *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) can fathom the heartache, this other Graham is without roof overhead, open to the weather, subject to *"dauer im weschel."* This returns us to the

significance that *Death in Venice* held for the artist as well as to Graham's remarkable reading of spacing in Freud's great text from 1920, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

In the interpretative encounter with Graham's work, simple decoding (say on the substitutive model of Freudian repression) always falls short of the mark. Close reading with special attention to the blindnesses implicit to reading is necessary, for Graham would have us attend to the limits of our own comprehension just as he attends to his own. Like the screen image of the Freudian "dreamwork," interpretative decoding is backlit by a far more troubling source. *Vexation Island* brings this origin to a focus at the same time as it presents the problem through one of the artist's great, slack, and bungling tropes. Like sleeping or tripping out, getting knocked out by a coconut points to a horizon beyond which philosophical thought cannot tread. The unconscious is nothing without this "beyond." Graham's film works bleed into this subject in absentia through repetition, what Derrida earmarks as "*the dead time within the presence of the living present*" (*Of Grammatology* 68). This is where "Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject," as Derrida puts it; where Graham's work on the durational aspects of cinema intersects with the former's notion of the "horizontality of spacing." Both the theoretician of *différance* and the repetitive filmmaker suggest, "The unconscious is nothing without this cadence and before this caesura" (69).

Here again we brush up against a loose context for the emergent Vancouver art scene. Like Wallace and Wall, Graham variously worked to cast off inherited *topoi* and *dispositifs* that historically limited his practice to a domestic version of an inside/outside problematic, and which initially barred him from establishing and working within the setting of the studio or a studio system. But as I have indicated, Graham's generational path was different than Wallace's and Wall's. The entropic outside that comes into tantalizing reach in *Vexation Island* and other later works serves to slowly bring the paradoxical interior of the modern subject into visibility as an exterior. This outside is where the bottom caves in or the ground falls away, and we glimpse a "beyond." It is where we catch sight of the artist's deeper interest in film as "star vehicle" and what I have characterised as his morbid attraction to *Death in Venice*. It is the point at which Graham the astute reader of theoretical literature and film steps into the foreground, where we feel the force of Visconti hot on the trail of a Freudian Mann, and Freud retracing the footsteps he had taken in establishing the institution of psychoanalysis.

Freud's crucial text in this regard is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he broaches both the game of *fort/da* and war neuroses (15): *Vexation Island* is inseparable from its piercing logic. The soul-searching quality of the essay is what drove Freud to revisit the problem of the "uncanny," and its question of the doppelgänger

or double as both "assurance of immortality" and "ghastly harbinger of death" ("The 'Uncanny'" 235). These are all labyrinthine questions that have been meticulously pored over, but simply returning to the handful of pivotal readings of Freud will not do in the context of Graham's film loop. The relationship between *Vexation Island* and Freud's great text on traumata is unique. The fundamental problem Freud confronts is that while the "'economic' point of view" of the pleasure principle is a complete and self-contained system of understanding mental operations (with necessary extensions provided by "topographical" and "dynamic" models) the example of traumatic neuroses suggests that it cannot be closed off entirely ("Beyond" 7). For after all, dreams are not wish fulfillments for those suffering from traumatic neuroses, they return the patient to the scene of the trauma, and so on. With regard to *Vexation Island* specifically, seeing through the image of Graham lying on a bed (or better couch) of sand all the while subject to the repeated vocalizations of the bird to wake up is a beginning. The film is a therapeutic picture co-starring a far more primordial analyst than either Lacan or Derrida would care to imagine—humorously it proposes something like an avian-analysis hinging on zoomorphic transference. Returning again to pragmatic questions, getting repeatedly knocked unconscious within a dream-like setting is basic. The question of trauma, in particular head trauma, is key even if overshadowed by the humorous antics of it all. Language as force and impact rather than meaning is the coconut's point. Or rather, the infinitely deferred point, for it is only through the repetition of one coconut hitting another coconut again and again that time has its say. In as much, content is always beside the point, but nevertheless it points to *Vexation Island* as an affective turn in Graham's practice, the moment when cadence plumbs the outside of a tightly orchestrated system regulated by the pleasure principle. Which is not to say the Oedipal theatrics variously instanced in the work are irrelevant, but rather that the thinly veiled questions of sexing gesture towards the repetition of a more vexing problem.

This beyond is acutely clear if we compare Graham's film with Visconti's. For Aschenbach there is no pleasure in any of his fleeting encounters with the youthful Tadzio that are not at the same time brushes with death. The boy swings on a pole, Aschenbach faints; he follows Tadzio down streets where washing reminds us of the plague; they exchange glances, Aschenbach's pallor nears that of a death mask. As the narrative unfolds, the aging composer certainly regains some degree of youthfulness through his obsession, but ultimately the lovesick composer progressively approaches death, finally—with hair dye dripping from under his hat that predicts the bruise on Graham's own head—falling into a beach chair to die. This is not the case in *Vexation Island* where we confront the problem of the double from the onset.

A figure lies on the beach. After a few minutes we know that it is Graham and after one loop that his character dressed in swashbuckling pirate costume has been knocked unconscious, but this is only a diversion. We might have imagined the figure to be dead, but no viewer really dares confront the possibility in a serious way. Freud asks, "Who would be so bold as to call it an uncanny moment, for instance, when Snow-White opens her eyes once more?" ("The 'Uncanny'" 246). The tropical *mise-en-scène*, the colour, the sound of the ocean, the parrot's speech are all too powerful; "we order our judgement to the imaginary reality imposed on us" (18b). Yet the difference between the "pleasure principle" and what Freud will go on to call the "death-drive" haunts *Vexation Island.* The latter works "noiselessly" away behind the scenes, as David Farrell Krell frames the problem in an earlier issue of this journal (28). For if the Rodney Graham we know and love plays atop the scene, the death-drive remains far below in a sealed crypt. There is no mastering of the death-drive. Graham recognised this fact: it is the root cause of the film's infinite repetition; what subjects the film and his fictive character in it to the cruel scene of endless supplementation. All of which means that *Vexation Island* is at least two films, one of which is of an "earlier origin" than the other (Freud, "Beyond" 32). Like the distinction between Graham's person and his film persona, the distance between these two films—a new kind of spacing that is temporal through and through—is what Graham discovered in his "film adventure." If all language comes out of death, and most language forgets this origin, it seems *Vexation Island* manages to maintain a curious kind of grip on it. *Vexation Island* is the artist's first succinct statement incorporating the death drive into an already established language of humorous, erudite, gently sexualised, literate reference. "Lifedeath" with Graham in the starring role is forever after the rule of the practice, the childhood game of *fort/da*, so important to Freud's understanding of "the dark and dismal subject of the traumatic neurosis" in 1920, the exemplary model of repetition ("Beyond" 14).[4]

One more thing about *Vexation Island*, which relates to the importance of over-interpreting Graham's work more generally and the issue of an avian borne psychoanalysis specifically. With the artist lying supine on the beach and for a brief moment looking up, focalization allows us to glimpse the sky for what it is. A moment later when he shakes the palm tree to dislodge the coconut it is as if he metaphorically paints the firmament with the frond like bristles of the tree. The substitutive relationship the act produces turns the sky into a blue ceiling before our very eyes. This reproduces the trope of "living under the same roof" the artist adopted from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and moreover expands the Greek notion of *oikos* or household to a planetary scale. As viewers we enter into an aesthetic contract with this

relational universe—Gilles Deleuze's "plane of immanence" was much on the mind of the artist at the time (Deleuze and Guattari 266). The effect upsets what Graham calls "a peaceful whole of humanized nature" ("Siting" 15). Hinting at the re-shuffling of extant values through, for instance, "a bird-centred nature," the artist's suggestion is that by placing the "catastrophic instant" at the "exact centre" of his film, a symbolic, anthropocentric universe will be thrown into flux. He writes, "the three fluxes are divided and become external to each other" (15). In this regard, the figure of the castaway is an allegory of exile and existential isolation, a proxy for the Freudian death-drive and a trope for what Krell tells us Derrida relates to the movement of "being toward death" (Heidegger qtd. in Krell 20). In *Vexation Island* our encounter with Graham is both timed to please as well as eccentric, or essentially "untimely." Here we confront an extremely rigorous, anti-humanist side of Graham that is rarely discussed in relation to the artist's "self-centred" practice.

Other works of Graham's hint at this backstory. I am reminded of *Schema: Complications of Payment* (1996), where the grandmother who holds the purse strings must die to repay a debt. There is *Millennial Project for an Urban Plaza* (1982) and *Reading Machine for Parsifal. One Signature* (1992), both of which unfold at scales of time which leave us in the dust. And there is *Aberdeen* (2000), the artist's documentary style tribute to Kurt Cobain's hometown presented as a slide-projection with sampled rock music. There is the artist's early interest in Smithson's notion of entropy, or indeed what I remember of Graham's whimsical interest in Kierkegaard who had orchestrated things in such a way that he might die at the very moment his inheritance had run out. What a curious anecdote to retain, unless, that is, one is acutely sensitive to an analytics of "precocious death" (Derrida qtd. in Krell 30). Finally, Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948) comes to mind. It was a favourite film and one of a handful of "screen memories" the artist remembers from his summer at the logging camp. Think especially of the brief exchange between ballet impresario Boris Lermontov and the aspirant dancer Victoria Page.

Lermontov asks: "What do you want from life? To *live*?"

Page answers: "To dance."

Yet, without reading the closed captions, all I hear is a demonic echo: not "to dance," but "to die," which, of course, is what happens to Page by the end of the movie, and to Graham at the beginning of *Vexation Island*.

The preoccupations that began to define the artist's practice in the wake of *Vexation Island* provide the best supplementary evidence for the same. Whether painting, playing in his own band, or making large scale photographs, each depended on a slippery negotiation of the generational issues that originally imprisoned his work. I

9. Rodney Graham, *The Gifted Amateur, Nov. 10th, 1962*, 2007. Three painted aluminum lightboxes with trans-mounted chromogenic transparencies, 285.7 x 558.5 x 17.8 cm.

would wager that the logic for travelling back in time to a history (of painting) that was not his own was built on the prior scaffolding of "primary narcissism" (Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" 235) where infantile wishes always come true as "possible futures" (236), and that this in turn oriented him to the "primordial" nature of the death-drive relative to the latter. Given the prehistory allotted to such phantasy and the anteriority granted to the death-drive—Freud says it "appears to be of earlier origin than the aim of attaining pleasure and avoiding 'pain'" ("Beyond" 32)—the generational debates around painting that once excluded Graham from working in the studio and were more exclusively Wallace's and Wall's terrain became accessible. *The Gifted Amateur, Nov. 10th, 1962* (2007) (Figure 9), a large scale back-lit photograph set in a house with the artist in pyjamas working on a "drip" painting à la Morris Louis, is the example closest to me. It is an instance of blurring large-scale photography and the durational aspects of cinema with painting. It is a daydream, and judging by the results, perhaps Graham shouldn't have quit his night job! Learning how to paint would take the artist a long time. Learning how to paint already occupied him at the time of filming *Vexation Island.* Graham shows himself getting better from 2007 on, and, in the case of *The Gifted Amateur*, with special reference to Tony Hancock's *The Rebel* (1961). The final line of the aspiring painter in the film says it all: "None of you know what you're looking at. You wait till I'm dead, you'll see…" (Hancock).

Despite the elaborate *mise-en-scènes* in all the large scale backlit photo-works, beginning in 2000 with *Fishing on a Jetty,* what "pricks me," as Barthes put it in

10. Rodney Graham, *Artist in Artists' Bar, 1950s*, 2016. Painted aluminum lightbox with transmounted chromogenic transpareny, 241.3 x 181.9 x 17.8 cm.

11. Rodney Graham, *Antiquarian Sleeping in his Shop*, 2017. Three painted aluminum lightboxes with trans-mounted chromogenic transparencies, 275.9 x 555.7 x 17.8 cm.

Camera Lucida, are the temporal processes that grip the artist (26). Little more than ciphers of time's passage, these indicators point to the always receding and inevitably approaching horizon that we all face. Thus, I note the artist's greying hair in *The Gifted Amateur.* I am surprised by what a good fit he is for the *paterfamilias* in his last film work, *The Green Cinematograph (Programme I: Pipe Smoker and Overflowing Sink)* (2010). I am shocked by the decline of *The Avid Reader, 1949* (2011, three large scale backlit transparencies), but comforted by the identity of the passer-by—Shannon Oksanen, the artist's wife. Differently again, I can sit with *Artist in Artist Bar, 1950s* (2016) (Figure 10), and be somehow reminded of Édouard Manet's *Le Bon Bock* (1873) and Carl Spitzweg's *The Bookworm* (1850). Inspired by these vectors, I immediately reach for the paintings above the beer buzzed artist not only as thought or speech bubbles, but as froth foaming up from beyond the psychic system. *Antiquarian Sleeping in his Shop* (Figure 11) is different again, though sleep and the latter example of expression "degree zero" similarly calm me. Graham has fallen asleep reading the autobiography of another autodidact and polymath. Bric-a-brac fills the shop. There are lots of different hats. Portraits of unknown people painted in last century's style. Totems. A copy of Alan Clayson's *Death Disks: An Account of Fatality in the Popular Song.* And a small stack of Ian Fleming's James Bonds. All appear to be Jonathan Cape, first editions, and given pride of place—even over *Dr. No*—is *Goldfinger.* But we do not need to see its version of Benjaminian *Trauerspiel* as cover art to suspect that here in the antiquarian's shop we are "confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a

petrified, primordial landscape" (Benjamin 166). The sheer exteriority of the uncon-scious given visibility as the many objects tells a tale of city life, accumulation, econ-omy, infinite development, and unending colonisation, but it is a deeper relationship with these historical traces, without their fraught indicators of time attached, which rules the space. The entry of what Aristotle calls "*zoç* into the sphere of the *polis*" makes no room for these multiple temporalities (Agamben 4).

In short, all of Graham's large backlit photographs must surely be understood as breaching the well-known boundaries between mediums, as well as connecting the dots between the death-drive and the mimetic satisfactions of the pleasure principle. They create what Deleuze called a "movement image," and what Graham, at the time of *Vexation Island,* knowingly modified and renamed the "clinomatic image," a fall into visibility with a swerve attached ("Siting" 9). "Whether we think becoming or express it, or even perceive it," Deleuze writes in *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, "we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us" (2). The utter uniqueness of Graham's version of this "cinematograph" and what it leaves behind is the repeated point. Becoming is an unending process in Graham's late works and, of course, it is not only the fiction of a former self that is left in the dust. It is the body with its increasing aches and pains, its frailties and necessary naps, always approaching Poe's "valley of the shadow" (79). This Rodney Graham—indeed, all these Rodney Grahams—will be missed. Missed again and again.

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NOTES

1/ See Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth.*

2/ It is important to note that *75 Polaroids* is shown in a purpose-built room that approximates the eerie reach of the flash used, and that *Illuminated Ravine* was turned on during the nighttime screening hours typical of actual movie houses, at 7:00pm and 9:00pm.

3/ Graham's seven works include *Halcion Sleep* (1994), *Complications of Payment* (1996), *Vexation Island* (1997), *How I Became a Ramblin' Man* (1999), *City Self/Country Self* (2000), *Phonokinetoscope* (2001), and *The Green Cinematograph (Programme I: Pipe Smoker and Overflowing Sink)* (2010).

4/ For "life/death" see *Mosaic: A matter of lifedeath,* vol.48, nos. 1, 2 and 3, January, June, and September 2014.

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