



1. Stan Douglas. *A Luta Continua* 1974. 2012. Colour photograph, 120.7 x 181 cm. From the eight-part suite *Disco Angola*, 2012.

# Introduction

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**H**ere it is, *Mosaic* issue 53.3 from the midst of the pandemic and a little behind schedule because of it, but with contributions from a range of scholars: Phillip E. Wegner, Jill Marsden, Nahum Brown, Fergal Gaynor, Robert Zacharias, Mark Taylor, Ayelet Ishai, Xiaohu Jiang, and Piotr Sadowski.

Allow me to single out the work of precisely three of these authors: Jill Marsden, Fergal Gaynor, and Phillip E. Wegner, each of whom finds their way to *Mosaic* through the fortuitous ties that bind one life to another. Each of their contributions have a certain timeliness of which we are badly in need. Jill Marsden's special focus lies at the perimeter of things where she suggests the question of "literary thinking" begins. Her essay comes to us via loose connections to one of *Mosaic's* long time friends, David Farrell Krell. Marsden works in the vicinity of Krell—a claim many of us would like to make—but she also lets her version of "literary thinking" be taken to places where he does not go. In "Poetic Connections: Sympathy and Community in Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'" we travel with Marsden as she travels with Whitman to a place where criticism on the poet rarely ventures. With hints to her book *After Nietzsche: Notes Towards a Philosophy of Ecstasy* (2002) and with her unique feeling for the edges of things and outsides—here especially bolstered by the work of Jane Bennett—the author brings us into proximity with irreducibly singular moments in Whitman's

“Song of Myself.” She argues these resist being wholly absorbed into Whitman’s well-known “vocabulary of sympathy.” And it is on these singular points that Marsden locates what she calls a “community of common sentiment.” While she herself does not explicitly speak of this community in terms of futurity, I think it productive given recent events, given the timing of this issue, and given her own work on Nietzsche to let this temporal horizon sit as one of the possibilities of her thinking.

Bending things this way has its purpose, of course. Like the expectations we harbour for a quarterly journal like our own to come out like a quarterly journal should, proposing a horizon to exist beyond thought is a promise not unlike exhaling after a long breath in. This performative dimension to breathing—on the minds of so many of us today—is Fergal Gaynor’s subject in “When the Panting Stops’: Breath and Breathing in Beckett and *How It Is*.” Gaynor is a poet with a background in the scholarly intersection between painting and literature in James Joyce with whom I have had the pleasure of spending a few idle hours. With Trevor Joyce, Gaynor runs the SoundEye poetry press in Cork, Ireland. His second book of poetry, a follow up to *VIII Stepping Poems & other pieces* (2011), will appear very soon. With Beckett’s breath as form and text as content, with inhalation and exhalation the minimal, “radically economic representation of human life,” Gaynor foregrounds what he calls the “cold music from which the messy, dreadful doings of the text are excluded, even if one cannot exist without the other.”

Finally, Phillip E. Wegner is the Marston-Milbauer Eminent Scholar and Professor of English at the University of Florida. His books include *Periodizing Jameson: Dialectics, the University, and the Desire for Narrative* (2014), *Shockwaves of Possibility: Essays on Science Fiction, Globalization, and Utopia* (2014), and *Invoking Hope: Theory and Utopia in Dark Times* (2020). I had the good fortune of sitting in on one of Wegner’s classes on Alain Badiou and ethics many years ago and it shaped me. He is one of the crucial voices of American Marxism today and he is perhaps Fredric Jameson’s most astute and compelling respondent. “How to Fix this Intolerable Present with the Naked Eye; or, Periodizing the Contemporary” is Wegner’s contribution to the present issue. His argument for “fixing the intolerable present” turns on science fiction, and specifically the film adaption of *Uncanny X-Men* (1980), *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014).

What strikes this reader as most compelling about Wegner’s essay are three things: the way the author works with, on, and against Jameson’s well-known use of the term post-modernism; his uniquely two-fold version of performatives that are both grounded in history and tethered to the imaginative experience of reading science fiction; and finally, the pressure necessarily placed on singularity in all of this.

With the general waning of the term post-modernism and its replacement by the contemporary, far too many scholars have believed that Jameson's work has lost its purchase on events and been swallowed by the historical shifts that have since ensued. Wegner's work makes Jameson matter more than ever by thinking closely with the latter's work, identifying historically substitutive forms of postness as symptomatic and providing a thread of critical thinking that builds on Jameson's legacy therein. For Wegner, the crucial work to be done in this context is to place acute pressure on the problem of periodization. Replacing the concept of modernism with the notion of the period is Wegner's central move: it provides him a scaled-back armature to think the ever-worsening conditions of capital and it allows him to maintain a critical posture vis-à-vis the present no matter its variable guises.

By understanding Wegner's notion of periodization as a narrative process with historical change built-in, we bring into focus the critic's interest in science fiction. The pragmatic moment in his work turns on the fact that in reading science fiction, we necessarily position ourselves in the past—instancing the hegemonic dominant of the present—and we imaginatively “live” a future of “cognitive estrangement.” One should note the recourse to the Russian formalists' notion of *ostranie* here, for futurity stands out as a performative horizon only against the axiomatic ground provided by the present-past. Besides the innumerable insights he gleans from the translation of the X-Men comic books to the big screen, his instructive thoughts on method, the symptom and superstructure, and beyond the temporal chiasm engineered by science fiction make it clear that futurity today is in short supply for as many reasons as there are singular souls to think it.

We are in dire need of futures now and it is productive to think of general issue 53.3 as the first or second in a string of issues that attempt to develop an analytic of futurities. Something of this concern is shared in Nahum Brown's “Borges on Possible Worlds” and Mark Taylor's consideration of Aldous Huxley's dystopian world in *Ape and Essence*. But it also materializes on our cover image by Vancouver-based artist Stan Douglas. Douglas has been working with an elastic concept of alternate histories, historical reconstruction, uneven modernities, unrealized futures, “speculative fiction,” parallel histories, and examples of the eclipse of local or minor narratives by global processes for many years. In the still from Douglas's *Doppelgänger* (2019), which was first shown at the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, we see a key moment in the filmic narrative where the heroine named Alice appears on the screen with her double after a teleportation accident or anomaly. The scene represents one moment of seeming clarity in a complicated narrative about quantum entanglement, and though few will understand the physics of it all, the on-screen electricity that surges between the two

Alices as they rise up from the milky medium of teleportation is sufficiently underwritten by the tropes of science fiction cinema to be entirely graspable. Even if a whole universe separates the doppelgängers from one another, the simple montage of images connects them. They represent two versions of the present, or more succinctly “alternative presents,” around which the twin narratives of the film(s) revolve. Earth sends a spaceship to an earth-like planet and at the same moment that earth-like planet sends a spaceship to earth with very different repercussions for the two space-time travellers.

Montage itself is one of a number of recurrent tropes in Douglas’s practice, and *Doppelgänger* is an especially crisp condensation of the basic logic. Presented in the artist’s quintessentially classic format of the two-channel video and displayed on side-by-side screens, the dialectical thread that connects the two moving images of *Doppelgänger* accentuates mirroring as much as difference. It is a presentational style and a mode of thinking with a special purchase on history that has served as a staple in the artist’s work since *Hors-Champs* (1992), Douglas’s early breakthrough work on Albert Ayler, exile, and the free jazz movement. In *Der Sandman* (1996), Douglas replaces his earlier experiment with montage on the verso and recto of a suspended screen with a running seam on a single screen that joins two distinct narrative sequences or time loops. The artist has long admired Stanley Kubrick’s great scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where early in the film an australopithecus-like species excitedly throws a bone used for beating another of its kind in the air that becomes a space shuttle, which ultimately docks with the orbiting spaceship, *Discovery*. The seamless transformation of bone as primitive tool and weapon to spacecraft brackets an entire history of technics, with millions of years of development slipped into the edit.

This version of history or narration contained within the flash of an eye is one decisive link with Wegner’s critical emphasis on periodization. Douglas’s research-based practice has consistently hinged on moments of historical transformation that serve as allegorical spurs to his work in video, film, and photography. For example, in *Win, Place or Show* (1998), an unrealized modernist development scheme for the port area of Vancouver serves as pretext. Like *Hors-Champs* and a number of earlier works, *Win, Place or Show* is filtered through a distinct televisual style. And once again the artist’s recourse to a double projection and a vertical seam dividing the action exaggerates the dystopian living arrangement of the two male dockworkers in the film. But that said, there is no determinate form history ultimately takes in the work, for it is the earliest example of what is known as the artist’s recombinant works, all of which are structured on a set number of Beckett-inspired narrative blocks and independent visual sequences that are randomly selected, combined, and played by a computer program. In *Win, Place or Show* this  $n!$  (factorial) number results in twenty thousand hours of unrepeated—



2. Stan Douglas. *Hors-Champs*. 1992. Two channel video projection, black and white, stereo soundtrack, 13:40 minutes each rotation. Dimensions variable. Installation view, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart.



3. Stan Douglas. *Der Sandmann*. 1995. 2-track 16 mm film projection, black and white, stereo soundtrack, 9:50 minutes each rotation. Dimensions variable.

though clearly repetitive—viewing. Near repetition and perfect repetition are something constantly confronted in the face of this corpus and history always has a piece of the action, whether as allegorical reference or a function of possible futures.

It would be nice to be able to trace Douglas's notion of "significant montage" back to the Kubrick moment alone, but things are far more complicated. *Television Spots* (1987-88), one of Douglas's earliest set of works, were conceived of as banal substitutes for the fast, hard sell of the television commercial. These short segments lacking narrative drive or function were broadcast in the commercial break, between regular scheduled late night television programming in a number of Canadian provinces. Further, the importance of music as subject matter throughout Douglas's career must be factored in. Thus in *Luanda-Kinshasa* (2013), the tremendously complicated montage that sutures together six hours of shorter sets performed by a group of musicians creates a space of collaboration. And again the resulting mix throws up a new possibility: for, as Douglas frames it, what if Afrobeat is added to Miles Davis's interest in Indian Classical music in his last studio album? With *Hors-Champs* and this in mind, as well as the example of *Le Détroit* (1999/2000), it should also be clear that what Fred Moten calls "the aesthetics of the black radical tradition" is part of the mix: a lot

happens “in the break.” Further, the intersection of local history and global processes always plays a pivotal role in Douglas’s work. In spite of the larger transformations undergone, these minor histories remain singular, and only brackets bind their locations or phenomena together. Theoretically speaking, Sergei Eisenstein’s notion of dialectical montage has a place, and a vital part of the backstory also hinges on the importance montage has played in the development of the art scene in Vancouver from the 1970s. In particular, one should note the contested notions of the film still derived from Roland Barthes’s “The Third Meaning” (1973). At least two of Douglas’s precursors are important to consider here. First, there is Ian Wallace’s deployment of montage through the adjacency of images, where a slippery version of use forwards narrative and allowed the earlier artist to move his practice through photography from painting to the painterly topology of the studio and beyond to the museum and street. Second, there is Jeff Wall’s perspective on montage in the cinematographic works from the 1980s and early 1990s. In these, montage is employed digitally, in the studio photographs performed through the manipulation of set design, and lastly in the outdoor photographs exemplified by slowing things down to the pace of the everyday and keying intention to the whims of others, the comings and goings of the street, weather, and so on. What is especially instructive given this brief genealogy is that Douglas rethinks Wallace’s basic notion of montage as internal to the *tableau* and as implicit to the high-



4. Stan Douglas. *Win, Place or Show*. 1998. Two channel video projection, four channel soundtrack, 204, 023 variations with an average duration of six minutes each. Dimensions variable.



est form of the aesthetic and further displaces the value Wallace accords the “sequential assembly of photographic enlargements” in favour of the suture itself (Wallace qtd. in Douglas 111).

*Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* (2008), a 30 x 50 ft. photographic installation in the revitalized Woodward’s complex in Vancouver’s downtown Eastside, is perhaps the best example of Douglas’s unique hypostatization or formalization of the logic of montage. Easily and consistently read off its site-specific location and Vancouver’s own part in the history of the counter-culture, the impressive photograph made up of twenty-one smaller photographic panels is a reenactment of the Gastown riot when police and hippies finally came head to head over drugs. Like *Midcentury Studio* (2010) and *Disco Angola* (2012) from around the same period, *Abbott & Cordova* is a uniquely photographic work without ties to the durational problems of video and film. Instead, Douglas uses the mileage montage has afforded his durational works to think the problem of the static image. Consequently this highly lauded public mural spatializes the artist’s investment in montage through leverage made on the previous generation’s achievements. One need only note the remarkable absence of action in



5. Stan Douglas. *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*. 2008. Installation view. Photographic image printed on 21 glass panes, total dimensions: 8m x 13m.

the centre of the intersection itself to see Douglas's syntactical move. This empty space limned on four sides by white painted lines is a key trope in Wallace's work. The rectangle engineered a conceptual link between a painterly past and a photographic future and it did so within the framework of the static image. Douglas in fact appears in a study for Wallace's series "My Heroes in the Street" (1986-92).

Formally speaking, what *Abbott & Cordova* is about, beyond any of the violence that happened on the night of 7 August 1971, then, is Douglas's very distinct approach to history and the policing of autonomy in and as the painterly or photographic image. The space of the intersection is cleared of the messy history of the night's protest. The action happens all at the margins of the framing edge, a very peculiar, indeed oblique perspective on the event, and one that is accentuated by the experience of looking at this massive mural, which is positioned so high above ground level. In short, we see montage working in *Abbott & Cordova*. It labours away at the static image from the sides and in so doing it renders the work of history visible, both at the limits of the frame and as counter narrative, or to frame things using the logic of Douglas's own working method, precisely as a reworking of an *hors champ* condition. In this sense, it is also useful to suppose that when Douglas presents or frames photography as photography, or film as film, it can either have the veneer of sheer illusion about it or be indisputably grounded in truth telling. The fetish character of music, film, and image is a constant concern for Douglas. This is no doubt why the photograph of the MPLA Checkpoint (*Checkpoint*, 1975 [2012]) from *Disco Angola* perfectly figures the grasslands of that country's South West, but was shot on a cattle ranch in California. Or that a similar *écrasement*—Roland Barthes's term for the contraction or



6. Stan Douglas. *Checkpoint*, 1975. 2012. Colour photograph, 132.1 x 303.5 cm. From the eight-part suite *Disco Angola*, 2012.

compression of time and space in his encounters with singular photographs—happens in the case of Douglas’s *A Luta Continua*, 1974 (2012). The doubling that is always part of Douglas’s work—including the conceptual bracket that tethers Disco to Angola or the “alternate presents” of *Doppelgänger*—is a condition we all suffer. There is always the threat that we “Live Reified Time.”

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