

Memory, History, and Metamorphosis The Art of Daniel Reeves

Louise Milne

A good objection helps one forward, a shallow objection... does not seize the matter by the root, where the life is, but so far outside that nothing can be rectified, even if it is wrong. A good objection helps directly towards a solution, a shallow one must first be overcome, and can, from then on be left to one side. Just as a tree bends at a knot in the trunk in order to grow on.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, diary entry, c. 1930 ¹

The relationship between memory and history is a central subject in the art of Daniel Reeves, as it is in contemporary life. No one born in the 20C can grow up to live in the first defining culture of their lives - the cultures of childhood or adolescence - because these cultures vanish and are transformed, materially and spiritually, faster than the child matures. This sea-change in the experience of individual and collective memory was first intuited by the Romantics and articulated many times since Proust. The World Wars massively accelerated these developments; so the metamorphoses of post-industrial culture - the sheer visibility of change - renders us into emigrés. Impossible change is common experience: each life charts a course through shifting, twisting layers of culture. In these conditions of estrangement, memory may be a lifeline or a trap, at once a crucial touchstone for identity, and a net of traumatic repetition. *How did I get here* is no longer a (relatively) innocent Freudian question about the facts of conception, but a much more adult enquiry into the nature of culture, society, government.

My parents' lives and the lives of millions of people were ruined by the First World war. But the human imagination rejects the implications of our situation. War scars humanity in ways we refuse to recognise. After the Second World War the world sat up, licked its wounds ineffectually, and started to prepare for Third World War.

Doris Lessing, Stony Brook, NY, May 1969 ²

To this day I find war play to be deeply disturbing... When child points his finger at me and goes "Bang you're dead", I can almost feel the clods falling on my body bag.

Daniel Reeves (2001)

For Reeves, the experience of Vietnam - he was wounded in an ambush by the Cua Viet River

during the TET offensive in 1968 - was a signal introduction to the agendas of late twentieth century memory, and the inadequacy of inherited models for representing them. His approach can perhaps best be understood by first looking at the common themes of two of his films. The short *Smothering Dreams* (1981) is a haunting meditation on how boys' war games "prepare" the experience of real war (Vietnam).³ In this early film, Reeves telescopes time and space with simple economy: the movements between the boys' games and the young men dying in an ambush is achieved through the constant device of a repeated framing circle. The round view out of blackness into landscape recurs, as the oculus itself changes, becoming an abandoned pipe in a wasteland where kids play at battle, the barrel of a gun, or the view through a sightfinder, where boys a decade or so on older experience the hell of real guns and their consequences. We see also something of the complicity of the wider culture, in scenes depicting the harsh atmosphere of a traditional Catholic schooling.

The motivation of my play is not simple [in] that life is seen from more than one viewpoint. An incident in real life [is] usually the outcome of a whole series of deep-buried motives [though] the spectator commonly settles for the one he finds easiest to understand... Someone commits suicide. "Bad business!", says the business man. "Unrequited love!", say the ladies... But it may be that the motive lay quite elsewhere, or nowhere...

August Strindberg 1888 ⁴

Ten years on, Reeves returned to the subject of memory in the masterly *Obsessive Becoming* (1995). Economy of means in *Smothering Dreams* had a fable-like quality, inviting us with the director simply to look - to look and consider - the self-evident and yet mysterious web that initiates boy-children through war-games into war. *Obsessive Becoming* is much closer in to the matter of this web, taking as its frame the plot of the artist's own family history, and the formal means devised to do this are more visually complex. The film is a tour-de-force montage of old photographs and footage, home movies, interviews, morphing figures, and collaged popular imagery. Reeves has an extraordinary tissue of lies and abuse, over many decades, to unravel on film. One of his objects is to show actual human metamorphosis, of the merged subjective-objective kind that occur in dreams and memory (or as we live

with someone growing older). As in the classic Freudian nightmare scenario (developed as much by artists and writers as by Freud himself), family and friends may assume different faces, or reveal strangers underneath. Reeves morphs together portraits of the main parties, as different accounts of their actual degrees of kinship become manifest and replace each other. The *mise-en-scene* for this is constructed, like childhood memories, also out of the photographic. So, family resemblances change over the years and are reassigned; young faces age and new ones emerge from old. Tectonic pressures slowly crack open what older codes of family relations sought to repress; what was unspeakable achieves speech, and the result is a kind of transcendence, a coming-to-terms. The sense of a dream-analysis is confirmed and structured (as in *Smothering Dreams*) by the pulsing line of Reeves' calm first-person narration, performing the storyteller's magic of having a simultaneous being in past and present, and embodying two ends of the journey.

What makes *Obsessive Becoming* so good is the way in which its formal means are absolutely analytic of its subject: metaphorically and metonymically. Photographs prove that we had a childhood, that we once looked like this, that we visited that beach; but of course they prove no such thing, we cannot remember being the child in the photo, the real way that things looked as a child is the opposite of photographic, the beach could be any beach, nobody can remember the person standing on the left. We use photographs as props to support conventional-collective narratives about the world and our place in it; the basic similarities of family snapshots testifies to the power of these inscriptions. Reeves' alterations - the morphing faces and bodies, the frankly Heartfield-esque reconstructions of cityscapes and holidays - act as a brilliant detournement on this mass of familiar, familial images. The result is to restate the paradoxical nature of memory - *I was / I am not / I am there* - as interwoven with Goya's paradox of artistic expression: *This I saw*. To remember is to make a fiction.

In as far as trauma can be understood in two ways - in terms of the individual, and in terms of society as a whole - Reeves' art is, a least in part, an investigation of this double relation. *Obsessive*

Becoming is “about” the secret history of the artist’s family, but its resonance depends on the wider collective experience of disturbed patterns in the social fabric; breaks and disintegrations in Edmund Burke’s notion of society as the dead, the living and the unborn, bound in contractual obligations of care and stewardship. Reeves is interested in finding aesthetic positions which mediate the scales of trauma in this way, translating from personal to cultural autobiography and back again. The role of metamorphic imagery in his project becomes clearer when the visual techniques he pioneered in *Obsessive Becoming* are compared with the strategies in the digital paintings which followed: *Apotheosis* (1998-2001), *Angelus, I Have This One Afternoon* (c.1999), and *In Woods of God Realization*.

These large-scale works, often printed on glass, constitute a kind of history painting, the genre once thought of as the highest challenge of the Academy, capable of tackling the “great themes” of the sacred and the profane. Such paintings were always about translation; the object was to find new ways of spinning the unstable codes of realism, using canonical subjects as a spur, and altering them in the process.

[The] relation of politics to theory... is determined by... the rule of repeatable materiality... the process by which statements from one institution may be inscribed in the discourse of another. Despite the schemata of use and application that constitute a field of stabilisation for the statement, any change in the statement’s conditions of use and reinvestment, any alteration in its field of experience or verification, or indeed any difference in the problems to be solved, can lead to the emergence of a new statement, the difference of the same.

Homi K. Bhabha (1989) ⁵

To trans / late : to carry over from what has been silent to what is vocal, from the distant to the near. But also to carry back.

George Steiner (1966) ⁶

Well after the demise of the academy, artists continue to invent “live” subjects in the processes of attending to tensions and lacunae in inherited representations: aware that the works of the past always fall short of describing the contemporary situation, and that the ongoing brief of reinterpretation requires the development of new means. In the case of twentieth century history painting, this has meant in practice the mining and recombination of ready-made forms in the context of unprecedented social

change. Those who took on this task generally adopted, on the one hand, abstract and stylised graphisms, and on the other, revolutionary cut-and-paste techniques; both strategies developed in tandem by otherwise diverse avant-garde groups. The two main lines of research were manifested in classic 20C works, filled with symbols and shorthand; from the anti-Nazi political satires of John Heartfield and Picasso's *Guernica*, to the more mythologically-oriented *Large Glass* by Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst's photo-gravure collage dream-novel, *Femme 100 Tetes*.

Cumulative work on aesthetic agendas of this kind was been massively complicated and destabilised by cataclysmic events which killed or maimed key agents and left survivors in a different mental world. This is a kind of cultural trauma specific to the field of art. To see that Lewis Carroll and Samuel Beckett, for instance, have a common project, involves a leap of imagination over two chasms, two displacements of the chessboard. Reeves' work, among other things, makes this tangled lineage clearer; his preferred practice of using found imagery as tesserae in itself speaks eloquently of his awareness of, and willingness to tackle, the Looking Glass of twentieth century history.

As you start to write, the question begins to insist: Why do you remember this and not that? Why do you remember in every detail a whole week, a month, more of a long ago year, but then a complete dark, a blank? How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't?

Doris Lessing (1994) ⁷

How then should the contemporary artist represent collective trauma? Or bear witness to his/her own, first-person, experience of trauma? It is important first to be clear about what we mean by "trauma" in each case. Freud's original German coinage, of course, derives from the word for dream; he saw the nature of dreaming as profoundly bound up with the way the mind copes with shock. As a medical specialist, Freud viewed all dreaming as pathological to various degrees. As an early twentieth century person, he thought of his culture as itself pathological; he shared the pessimistic assessment of human essentiality which was also a hallmark of the work of Pavlov and Kafka. From the viewpoint of

late 20C experience, however, the categories of the pathological appear more as a set of moving goalposts. Aspects of the violent, the erotic and the impossible are re-valued and familiarised, visibly shifting further in and out of mainstream culture. Current theories of representation allow us to see the Freudian traumatic dream in more neutral terms.

Private dream-texts and images, whether related to others or only to the waking self, constitute a phenomenon of condensed and displaced memory. Dreams appear as memories of experiences the ego thinks it has had while disassembled or elsewhere. They are imaginary memory-texts, produced at, and associated with, points of self-composition (waking up) and self-decomposition (falling asleep). Just as the conditions of dream-invention involve a kind of creative assemblage of memory, it is a condition of their making (i.e their remembering) that they appear fragmentary. Dreamers cannot represent, even to themselves, a "whole" dream. The dreamer (re)constructs the dream-memory *as if it had lacunae*, as if it were part of an almost but not quite graspable whole, on the cusp of being representable. In Lacanian terms, this sense of the missing or unavailable pieces of dream is itself a figure of traumatic absence, a sort of black hole attached to the dream-text. Typically, fantastic or terrifying *adynata* ("edge-signs") are generated/located at the point in the dream-text where memory "fails" and the desire for a lost "whole" begins.⁸ A more than normally traumatised dreamer experiences this effect more strongly, as a hidden or occult emanation - a spooky presence, an apprehension - lurking at the interface of the remembered and the "forgotten" aspects of the dream.⁹

Already seeing trauma as the ordinary condition of his society, for such individuals, Freud argued that shells of memories form around what is *not* remembered. He noticed that his patients installed "screen-memories" to cover or mark the magnetic absence which is the sign of trauma: i.e. that which (once) carried too great an emotional charge to be adequately "registered" by (or "translated" through) representation, as a conventional ego-memory. In Freud's case-studies, dreamers manufacture screen-memories to cloak the absence of direct or real memories. To do this, they borrow motifs and

plots from the common culture of popular fantasy, absorbed from early childhood: meetings with magical helpers and hinderers, toys, riddles and masks, myths and monsters.

It is not surprising that psycho-analysis confirms in us our recognition of how great an influence folk fairy-tales have upon the mental life of our children. In some people a recollection of their favourite fairy-tales takes the place of memories of their own childhood: they have made the fairy-tales into screen-memories.

Sigmund Freud (1913) ¹⁰

Such mental images can be imagined as double-sided, like a semiotic Moebius strip; they have a visible and an invisible side, seamlessly merged. Screen-memories permit diagnosis of what Freud saw as the real issue: the point where figuration should have taken place but did not, leaving a distorting vacuum to be filled by substitute figuration. Freudian trauma is thus a kind of blank shock (hiatus of ego), perceived as neither positive nor negative (i.e. it was not engaged through representation), and then displaced into a surrounding web of popular cultural associations; the raw matter of screen-memories. In Freud's time, these already involved modern "ready-made" imagery as well as folktales: pictures on the walls of a study, illustrations in books, family photographs. By the late twentieth century, common materials included much more matter from the mass-media, and artifacts from the rapidly-mythologized decades of the immediate past, stamped by style as out of time. Hence the fascination twentieth century artists had, from the start, with the day before yesterday; with the manipulation of popular cultural forms whose practices and styles were recognizably in flux.

Having established some working definitions, let us see how these concepts of trauma, dream-imagery and screen-memory operate in Reeves' unique take on twentieth century history painting. *I Have This One Afternoon* is a self-portrait in the form of a vast, frieze-like landscape. The work is a fantasy using multiple registers to finesse the genres of the photographic image in everyday life, and evoke the uncanny quality of screen-memories in a traumatic dream. The *mise-en-scène*, or holding pattern, is a blurry shot of a crowded beach. Its blown-up quality creates a Seurat-like density, and also

sets a more sinister, forensic tone; reminiscent of Antonioni's *Blow Up*; a source photo taken for one reason, blown-up to elicit and enable a quite different kind of scrutiny. The space is packed with figures, black-and-white photographic ghosts choreographed into the frozen composition of the original bathers. Many are recognisable as images from a family album; embedded with the strange instant time-coding of photographic decades. There are studio shots and snapshots: bearded and hatted men from the 10's and 20's, a 50's ad pin-up girl, a Lennon-esque young man, c. 1972, an Edwardian young woman holding the hand of a little boy in the "now" world of the beach. The young long-haired man crouches by a woman whose head is a black smear, as if he is her vision, or vice versa. A monster quoted from Hieronymous Bosch, master of nightmares, sits to the right, encased in a bubble.

This quoted hybrid monster is an old and recognisable dream-sign; an *adynaton*, or rhetorical edge-sign, created from parts of the waking world, whose impossible fusion signifies a boundary between the real and the imaginary. It is one of many explicit signs dotted over this tremendous throng of the dead and the living. There are triangular warning signs; some quoted directly (children at play, cattle), others invented or *détourné*: Magritte's shadow girl and hoop, a skull, an *I Ching* ideogram, a man holding a rifle instead of a shovel. These set up formal resonances and rhythms; black lacing on the pin-up girl echoes Chinese lettering. A row of coloured toys embedded in the sand evoke different scales, dimensions, and relationships to the world: a ship, a plastic pistol, a bendy rolling man.

Understand that you have within yourself herds of cattle.. flocks of sheep
and flocks of goats.. and that the birds of the air are also within you..
understand that you are another little world.

Origen, Commentary on *Genesis* (c. 220 AD) ¹¹

As in the great Renaissance dreamscapes of Bosch and Pieter Bruegel, key elements are stated in small cameos, magnified and elaborated in the middle ground, then simplified and concentrated once more in the background. This visual parallelism of small and large was devised initially to express Humanist theories of identity between microcosm and macrocosm.¹² As a formal principle, the technique helps to hold together apparently chaotic sections of the design. In terms of content, it acts to unify the many disparate pieces of symbol, observation, and memory by finding in them a system of

internal visual references.

The baby and the soldier are thus the same person, who is also the young man with long hair, and the little boy in the hat. The different facets of this man over time reappear condensed together in the right-hand corner: where we see as a cluster another head, a soldier's helmet, and a butterfly (emblem of the 1960s, of transience, like Li Po's dream). Behind this figure, in smaller scale, Reeves as a baby appears; and behind the infant, Reeves, as a boy in his military uniform reappears. The adjacent road sign shows a car skidding.

The image invites interpretation as a mass: in this dream, as in memory, they are all me, and I them. Some of this imagery suggests persistent themes in Reeves' art: anger at the mystified, concealed connection between the simulation of violence and the real thing, preoccupation with crowds and figures in a landscape, delight in multiplicity, metamorphosis and simultaneity.

In the Freudian view, personal trauma is signaled in the "distortions" of dreams, as a set of absences, trauma of one kind or another is a *sine qua non* of dream-imagery; conversely the nature of the trauma may be diagnosed from the shuffling of elements in the dream-text. To evolve equivalent dream-forms for representing collective trauma in art is a rather different diagnostic process, which involves close attention to the figuration of memories as the raw materials of history.

[Such] anti-academic styles prioritize complexity over simplicity, pattern over form, repetition over composition, feminine over masculine, curvilinear over rectilinear, and the fractal, the differential and the chaotic over Euclidean order. They celebrate the idea of space over the idea of volume, the space before the object over the volume within it. They elevate concepts of externalized consciousness over constructions of the alienated, interior self.
Dave Hickey (1997) ¹³

Memory does something else besides telling us how we got here from there: its typical forms demonstrate central differences between the private and public media of history. In the discourses of journalism, history and law, evidence of the slippage between individual and collective experience is usually seen as, at best, a matter of competing narratives, at worst, as presenting incommensurable paradoxes. Extreme forms of this are visible to everyone: the grand narrative of the battle in the mouth of the President is totally at odds with the chaotic experience of the participants; the two apprehensions go past each other in the night and may never find common ground. In the field of art, however, such paradoxes may be reframed, and their apparent incommensurability revealed as an artifact of discourse.

To say that part of the “message” of *Smothering Dreams* is that children’s games “prepare” adult battles, is in fact to follow only one line of Western representational reasoning, wherein a causal or linear arrangement in time is constructed, at the cost of excluding the spectator from the frame. More accurately, the premise of this habit of thought is to construct a fictitious position outside time, from whence such chronologies may appear visible. In fact, the boys’ games and their fathers’ wars are embedded in each other, in a non-linear simultaneous space-time frame; the apprehension of a connection between the two occurs in reality, as in memory, as a fusion of resemblances.

The way in which the mind perceives this fusion is not omniscient, objective or linear, but rather as a kind of gestalt. As one sees small boys trying to kill each other with improvised or invisible guns, a mass of memory is evoked simultaneously: playing similar games as a child, watching other children over the years, their faces vanishing into adulthood, footage from wars on the news, a Capa photograph from the Spanish Civil war, the latest Hollywood battle sequence. Such batches of association pass through the mind *as a unit*, in far less time than it takes (partially) to list them; a garden of associations whose forking paths are infinite.

Reeves uses the techniques of morphing the photographic, of employing dream-logic processes of condensation and displacement, and choreographing this in terms of micro- and macrocosm - in *Afternoon*, as in his other works - as a means of representing this thick web of association and instantaneity characteristic of memory. His whole approach is itself a commentary on 20C history.

What it is in Reeves’ sense of ordering that enables him to do this? One starting point would be to think about how the approach to detail in his art opens up a territory between the dualism of archetypal recuperation *versus* absurdist historical contingency. The history paintings construct flexible and intertwined fields within which archetypes, historical events, and contingent (personal) circumstance are organized in ways that match the real “practice” of memory.

Norman Bryson argued that it is the superfluous or illegible aspects of a realist image that render it realist: the “excess”, the detail provided over and above the “narrative” core.¹⁴ So, for example, studying memories of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Brown and Kulik commented on the tangential nature of the classic question, *Where were you when...:* “It is not the memory of the tragic news that invites inquiry, but the memory of one’s own circumstances on first hearing the news.”¹⁵ Memory-texts of the assassination are consistently structured around these contingent or personalized categories.¹⁶ As with cinematography and photo-journalism, these represent the high drama of the event as tangled in

incidentals, the effect of which is absurd in the most serious sense of the word: *The weather was cloudy and gray; She said, 'Oh God, I knew they would kill him'; We all had on our little blue uniforms; I was carrying a carton of Viceroy cigarettes which I dropped.*¹⁷

Attention to this kind of apprehension points the way towards a kind of history painting which knits together the split between satirizing and mythologising tendencies in 20C approaches to the genre. A work such as *Afternoon* choreographs contingent detail - with its indexical link to “meaningless” (i.e. narrative-free) contingent reality - in such a way as to give it equal standing with the archetypes of war, metamorphosis and the human life-trajectory. The paraphernalia of cultural memory becomes a principle for interweaving Proppian codes (i.e. proto-mythic; such as the symbolic road-signs, the three ages of man) and realist codes (the bendy-toy, the lacing of a dress; the carton of Viceroy's, the blue uniforms). Both registers are revealed as equally real and equally artificial: more importantly, perhaps, their dependence on each other is revealed. The more specifically an object is tied to the era of its manufacture, the more it works as a true souvenir, condensing and conjuring the passage of its time and space. This perception is a central focus in the detailing of Reeves' art.

I am both unnerved and inspired by the suggestion that all moments exist in not only the present moment but in all other moments past and still to come...

Daniel Reeves (2001)

He dreamt that Death had appeared to him, as he is commonly painted, and touched him with his dart.

Samuel Coleridge, letter to Thomas Poole (1797)

Reeves invents, explores, and visually analyses the kinships and metamorphoses of recent history in his large-scale digital paintings from the 90's on. Death is an explicit theme; its relation with photography a formal tool. In *Afternoon*, there are segues from the “safe” consumerist beach, through signs of nightmare, the passage of decades, and the re-imported war. Several works employ death-masks for faces, to widely different effect. The horror of dead faces punctuates a dream of Middle America in *Shenandoah Canto* (2000), where sleep-walking figures descend a central staircase, diagonally framed by the lance of a near-invisible St George, killing his painted dragon against a glowing, paradisaical field. *Keats in Korea* fuses the death masks of Keats, Mendelssohn, the naturalist Audubon, and Isaac

Newton onto the bodies of soldiers, in a “found” black-and white amateur photo, donated by a friend of the artist, whose father was in the Korean War. The figures stand partly in and partly by a fire, at which they warm their hands. The effect is more contemplative than gruesome; as if these closed faces carry folded within their last sight, on worlds we cannot see.

I, for unknown reasons / Surrounded by the books / Of prophets
and theologians / Of philosophers, poets / Searched for an answer
/ Scowling, grimacing / Waking up at night, muttering at dawn / ... /
Alas, my memory / Does not want to leave me / And in it, live beings /
Each with its own pain / Each with its own dying / Its own trepidation

Czeslaw Milosz, *A Poem for the End of the Century* (1991)

Undiminished Light works almost as a manifesto for Reeves’ practice in this group of works: a bird-headed man stands at the vanishing-point in a maze of railway lines and wires, gesticulating towards a haloed baby, who sits in the path of a head-on approaching train.¹⁸ Visible in the driver’s cabin are the Cold War leaders, Kruschev and John F Kennedy. Looking down on this scene, hanging in the net of overhead cables, is the head of a flayed man. A girder bears the legend of the title quotation, from the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz. The bird-headed man is another *adynton*, the original of Ernst’s Loplop bird-persona: a plague doctor taken from a Renaissance source. Like the Bosch monster in *Afternoon*, he marks the limits of sight and sense; he is at once signal-man and psychopomp. The sad flayed head evokes Odile Redon’s floating Eye, the Tarot’s Hanged Man, the Man in the Moon. The single war-damaged child stands for millions like him; his retrospective halo confers divinity. With extraordinary economy and visual wit, the picture functions as a kind of prolegomena for the much larger scale of Reeves’ fantastic *Apotheosis* (1998-2001). As in a modern *School of Athens*, huge crowds of the nameable dead are assembled, as if in some vast interstellar station, a terminus for those departing the 20C. Many carry luggage of some kind. They crowd under the emblem of Delacroix’s Lady Liberty, who rises like an astrological figure in the sky, against whirling slices of cosmic geometry. The familiar

rhythms of 20C migration - diaspora, exodus and revolution - are evoked through the dramatis personae of the modern era, democratised to include, as Reeves puts it, *the heroes, perpetrators, victims and bystanders of the 20th century narrative stream*. This ironizing choreography of the crowd has its own genealogy of distinguished predecessors: David's *Oath of the Tennis Court*, Eliot's *Wasteland*, Hamilton's *Sergeant Pepper*, Eisenstein at the Winter Palace. This picture is visibly a mental, imaginary space. The play with scale suggests both outer and inner worlds. The floating geometric solids provide a weightless impossible architecture, Cartesian and Futurist utopias, now as far behind history as they once seemed ahead of it.

We must believe that [the human germ] is crowded with invisible characters, proper to both sexes, to both the right and left side of the body, and to a long line of male and female ancestors separated by hundreds or even thousands of generations from the present time... such] characters, like those written on paper with invisible ink, lie ready to be evolved whenever the organisation is disturbed by certain known or unknown conditions.¹⁹

Charles Darwin, *Variation of Animals & Plants* (1868)

One should think of a mazurka, a minuet, a polonaise, a tango, or rock'n'roll. The image of the mobile figurations of interdependent people on a dance-floor... makes it easier to imagine states, cities families, and also capitalist, communist and feudal systems as figurations... Just as the small dance figurations change - becoming now slower, now quicker - so too, gradually or more suddenly, do the larger figuration which we call societies.

Norbert Elias (1968)²⁰

The ambitious dreamscape of *Apotheosis* gives form to what we might think of as a family album from the 20C Republic of Letters. Some individuals are instantly recognizable, others tug more faintly at memory, wearing the styles of the decades on their faces. The expert amassing here brings a curious balance to Roland Barthes' recognition that death is inherent in the most ordinary photograph: time "captured" by the camera is instantly time lost forever. *Apotheosis* binds together people who could never have met, in Elias' dance of history, and the result feels celebratory, bringing a kind of closure to the complex and terrible cycle of events that in fact united them.

As in *Obsessive Becoming*, harmony emerges through the artist's ability to marshal recognizable signifiers of historical change, from common and private sources of commemoration, and bring them

into balance within the frame, so producing a kind of resolution, or relief. Through multiplicity and simultaneity, *Apotheosis* “solves” an aspect of the problem of how to represent collective trauma - by making an image which acts as a “whole” dream.

The ordinary experience of dreaming itself is a complex function of creativity as well as memory, transforming the imagery of the mundane through the ancient collective conventions of fantasy. These include not only the customary deployment of screen-memories, but also wider principles and techniques of distortion, located in archaic practice: the worlds-turned-upside-down and inside-out; the "non-sense" of the carnivalesque, the magical, and the impossible. Dreams are informed by the mundane and vice versa. Unlike personal dream-memories, which always seem fragmented, artists work in the public realm, with the public codes of fantasy. Dream-fantasy in art is thus a debatable terrain, where the contours of sense and non-sense are drawn and redrawn. Precisely because of the fragmentary perception of dreams in everyday life, the artist's expertise in delineating the moving boundaries of *adynata* - edge-signs - is directed at evoking the changing contours of common dream experience through visual means alone. In practice, artistic fantasy and its popular equivalents in play and nonsense are linked reality-checking systems.²¹ By periodically triangulating from the codes of fantasy, bearings may be recovered, and our sense of how and where the world is skewed thus updated.²²

This is clear in the 1997 piece, *Angelus*, where imagery taken from illustrated children's blocks of the '30's appears unravelled and woven into a luminous grid, which itself could be the dream of the reclining figure in the lower zone of the painting. Reeves liberates some of the cartoon children from their blocks, hangs the blocks parallel to the picture-surface to form a hallucinatory screen, and blows up as the centrepiece the strangest of these images - the thing that caught his attention about the set - a cartoon battleship, manned by cartoon babes. The two circular guns protrude through the grid, over the gambolling children and a fiery factory marked hell billowing smoke in the background. This is a tour-de-force interpenetration of scale and order. The two figures in silhouette, quoted from Millet's original *Angelus*, set a beginning point for the historical span of the piece. The innocence and romanticism of Millet's era segues into a mass-produced debasement of childhood innocence; racist and colonialist elements unfurl out of the nineteenth-century, to become overt and endemic in popular culture of the '30's and '40's. Yet despite carrying this elegant exposition, the point of the picture lies in its dream-like resonance; the sense of seeing the inside and outside at the same time, a long period of time condensed

into one dense moment, the pleasure of pattern and colour in the holding form of the grid.

In 2001, Reeves took this idea of *pleasure* in the oneiric further in the astonishing *In Woods of God Realization*. This long panel explicitly addresses metamorphic fantasy as a reservoir of creative thought and resistance to inherited and/or ossified forms of order; it is also a homage to, and exploration of, Renaissance ways of constructing history paintings that address the secular and the cosmic at the same time. Like *Angelus*, it has a strong rhythmic order, in this case a frieze of dark tree trunks silhouetted against a luminous dark blue sky; a formal device evocative of Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow*. Magical displacements in natural relations produce a poetic pleasure ultimately rooted in the evocation of childhood wonder. This dark wood has the world-filling properties of Altdorfer's forests; it is also a theatre, the place where the curtain rises to reveal a hidden world of love and magic, as in the Forest of Arden, the Grimms' *Household Tales*, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Like Bruegel's returning hunters, the human protagonists, a group of children, are bent away from us, facing into the world of the picture. What do they see there? The picture has three main horizontal zones. A pattern of dark lacy branches against intense blue forms a tapestry across two-thirds of the image. A huge orange-red moon is held and defined by these twisting lines, which turn it into a fine organic ball with stylized, delicate veins; a natural metamorphosis. A narrower strip of yellow-white flames oscillates between this sky band and the dark foreground where the children stand. These flames merge into the blue as long leaves, set off by white birds, creating a vertical pattern in counterpoint to the twisting articulation of the trees.

A frieze of figures is arranged against this zone of light, in the frames provided by the trees. Each space contains a dense cluster of dream-logic, as in the microcosms of *Afternoon*. Formally, they act as glowing niches for weird personae, Exquisite Corpses with a wicked, sardonic edge. One is a skeletal cardinal from a Dance of Death, another has a playing-card body, or a death-mask head; several are effectively inside-out figures, flayed or X-rayed, with body-parts from anatomy text-books; a small skull wears 3-D glasses. Bosch-like ruins rise behind into the flames. The eye travels first to the painted figures of Adam and Eve, borrowed from a Hugo van der Goes' *Adam and Eve*, now in Vienna. Here they are haloed, and formally surrounded by the children, who are curved towards them like doner figures in a Renaissance altarpiece. At some distance from the humans, the snake appears, transmuted into a taxidermist's fossil, the coiled skeleton of a cobra.

To the right, further in, another glowing group is focused around a striking abstract figure, made

of spheres, like a test for colour-blindness. A diagrammatic atomic force-field surrounds the head and torso. It stands in a modern pavilion (complete with bath and sink), also housing a tiny laboratory white rabbit; partnered by a Mickey Mouse crouching behind the next tree. A Joker figure, part Harlequin, part flayed man, dances or writhes nearby. Taken as an *explicatio* of the Adam-and-Eve group, this evokes modernity, good, bad and absurd: genetics, suburbia, hygiene, anality, science, Disney. The earth around is softer and more carpet-like; the grass grows like hair. Between the figure's feet, an open book reads, *Forest Lawn Memorial Park*; the cemetery famously satirised by Evelyn Waugh and Jessica Mitford as exemplary of the foolishness of applying consumerist tropes to death. To the right, like an interested comma leaning in, the final tree-niche holds a portrait of David Hume.

This is a history painting, then, whose argument is located simultaneously in its internal iconography and symbolic form. The parallels between the first and second groups invite us to consider one as an unfurling of the first: as if the children's reverence for their First Parents will change once they eat the apple which Eve holds up to the moon; the results will be the deviant and compartmentalized modern mentality, hell-bent on the mastery of death and nature by any means.

World is crazier and more of it than we think / Incorrigibly plural.... / [I] feel /
 The drunkenness of things being various / And the fire flames with a
 bubbling sound for world / Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes /
 On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands /
 here is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.

Louis MacNeice, *Snow* (1935)

In this sense, it resembles a modern version of Gauguin's masterpiece, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* In *Woods of God Realization* can indeed be read in this way, but twisted and displaced through several dimensional turns, contemplated from the perspective of post-Freudian dream-logic; from the other side of the Looking Glass. The Atom Woman is also beautiful; she stands as an alter-ego, or derivation of Eve; a shocking deconstruction; just as we understand the modernised *transi* - the flayed, dead and skeletal *adynata* - as visual jokes. The sense of the painting is

understood as a particular strategy in the deployment of metamorphic signs and beings, within an extraordinary patterned environment. Here oneiric fantasy works as a last resort of gestalt memory: it resists as much as it underwrites linear recuperation. We are invited to look at this scene both as our adult selves and as children. For children, conscious attention is focussed in the margins of what the adult world sees as important; images, play, and toys are creatively chosen, objects of desire; their first freely given affect (in the Freudian sense),²³ is invested here. Wonder in the child's view is not limited to the adult marvellous; on the contrary, it permeates everyday life. In adults, the sense of wonder becomes more restricted; attached to and located in object-interfaces with the common imaginary, controlled by a repertoire of edge-signs.

For adults, impact with this interface can be an ecstatic and visionary experience, producing a release from the existential oppression of social hierarchy and linear representation. In art, the interface can only to be addressed through analogy; mediated through *adynata*. Just as the boundaries of the pathological and the commonplace shift from decade to decade, so social change stresses the codes of fantasy, requiring that the marvellous be constantly updated and refreshed. Artists achieve this through invention and interjection from the wider pool of everyday imagery, from the historical and the contingent. Their efforts therefore always have unexpected effects.

Visual re-description of an *adynaton* necessarily focuses on the internal relations of the surface. When more than one *adynaton* is introduced, its meaning as a boundary or portal creature is altered, and its intertextual nature is made explicit. One monster threatens the self, more than one, it seems, constitutes an anthropology. The direction of such emphases is frequently towards *dis*-passionate distortion of the body (in Reeves: the Atom woman; the flayed men, the death-masked heads). Interest is diverted from the significance of the composite creature as "other", to the relations *between* the *adynata*, as if they become clues to each other. Clarity of detail sublimates the fear inherent in skewed form and

distortion, redirecting that affect into wonder and pleasure in multiplicity; so producing aesthetic *jouissance*. We examine Reeves' Exquisite Corpses with fascination; their complicated structures and family resemblances captivate our attention.

I saw an enormous person with a stomach as large as the ocean,
and a mouth that could swallow an elephant. I asked him in amazement,
"Who are you, sir?" He answered with surprise, "I am forgetfulness.
How could you have forgotten me?"

Naguib Mahfouz (1994) ²⁴

When such descriptions proliferate, *edge-signs become screen-signs*: the potential affect attached to *adynata* is redirected to the pattern flowing through them. They start to signify an endless hiatus or postponement of that affect which accompanies the state of captivation, a hiatus of the ego. In art which deploys fantastic proliferation, the impossibility of achieving affect is itself the threat and point of the work. This level of artifice achieves an absolute suspension of desire, and the result is a kind of release from the world.

We may start to see now how, through the aesthetics of fantasy, *In the Woods of God Realization* addresses the semiotics of 20C memory, the difficulty of history painting and the nature of collective trauma. Just as screen-memories are surfaces which represent all that can be represented of the trauma; in Reeves' art, metamorphic surfaces - proliferating, folded or complex - work like screen-memories. Hooked together, affect flows out of the motifs themselves into the *connectives* binding motifs together, transposing attention into a potentially infinite ekphrasis. One result is a kind of "pure" decoration: a holding pattern, a wall against affect, positioned at the cusp of sense and nonsense, resisting recuperation as one or the other; this is the direction of *Angelus*. The whole of *In the Woods of God* demands to be considered as a single image which works in this way, due to the wonderful patterning of the branches, flames, moon and tree-trunks, transmuting natural forms into a hypnotic web. Situated in this pattern, Reeves' impossible figures become part of a self-replicating chain; affect is "suppressed" and channelled as a repressed term which announces itself as world-filling, as fascination.

This effect successfully replicates the child's polymorphous sense of the marvellous as

everywhere. While screen-memories distance the individual from his/her trauma, even as they point the specialist towards its existence, the use of edge-signs as cultural screen-memories draws the collective mind together. Sheer detailed attention to the forms of edge-signs entails a degree of visualisation which itself is psychically perceived as equivalent to "a whole dream" for the collective self, providing it with a novel cultural "dream-text" which reinstalls the mythic in the mundane.

In place of the unanswerable Proustian question of memory *How did I get here* Reeves' art changes the focus to the collective: *How can we see how we got here?* The impossible history of modernity finds ground in the discourse of the fantastic, where it becomes malleable and open to interpretation. In aesthetic terms, like contemporary dreamers, we have come to value screen-memories for themselves, for their innate qualities of strangeness and charm. *Woods of God* hides only the children's faces: the irrecoverable first gaze on the world. This is also a self-portrait, but of the collective self. At the same time, as a comment on 20C traumas of distance and alienation, such a "consummation" of fantastic imagery through the network of pattern speaks also of the inevitable movement of culture away from that which could not be represented. New mappings of the fantastic become possible as new generations find what was once unprecedented, normal; what was once horrible, fascinating, what was once ordinary, terrible. The social dance moves on, and leaves behind potent souvenirs, for Reeves to make into marvellous art.

¹ MS 107, p. 81; cf. R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (London, 1990), 259.

² Interviewed by Jonah Raskin on campus, shortly after clashes between students and outside authorities; published in *New American Review* 8 (New York, 1970), 166-79; reprinted in P. Schlueter, ed., *Doris Lessing, A Small Personal Voice, Essays, Reviews, Interviews* (London, 1994), 65-81.

³Dear Louise: The battle took place along the Cua Viet River during the opening days of the infamous TET Offensive of 1968. This was the beginning of a very long end for US military involvement in Viet Nam, although it took seven years for them to figure it out and leave.... Curiously enough, the ambush took place at the same time and in the same village that Ron Kovick writes about in his book, *Born on the 4th of July*, (later made into the film by Oliver Stone). He was in headquarters company scouts and was shot through the spine on the other side of the village. I did not realize this, or make the connection, until many, many years later when a documentary filmmaker told me that Oliver Stone was using *Smothering Dreams* to show to the cast and crew of his work in progress. The short work was received very well indeed, winning three Emmy Awards, and the First Prize at the first Sundance Film Festival in 1982, as well as the Blue Ribbon Prize at the American Film Festival in Manhattan. It finally received a full national broadcast in the USA on the PBS series 'Alive From Off Center' accompanied by a short interview with Susan Stanberg of National Public Radio in Washington, DC. This was filmed at the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial. Channel 4 bought the UK broadcast rights to the work that same year at the Input Festival in Toronto, but did not screen it until the Spring of 1986 as the Falklands War intervened and anti-war work was not in demand... Nearly twenty-five years later from its late summer debut on WNET - New York City - there are a few things I would change in the piece, but it is far too late for that now.

⁴ *Preface to Miss Julie*, trans. M. Meyer (London, 1964; 1976), 93.

⁵"The Commitment to Theory", in J. Pines and P Willemsen, eds, *Questions of Third Cinema* (London, 1989), 114.

⁶ Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation* (Harmondsworth, 1966), 35.

⁷ *Under My Skin* (London, 1994), 12.

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⁹ Absence, recuperated or perceived through representation as occult presence, is integral to the nature of dreams. Lacanian psychoanalysis emends the Freudian model in several respects which are specifically to do with representation. First, that the representation of the self to itself as a whole entity is a false representation: in that to contemplate an image of one's self is already to have split the self into two parts, and that the wholeness of this image papers over, or disguises this split. More profoundly, the self is threatened by its own dismembered condition and generates ever increasing layers of representation in a vain attempt to cushion this awareness. Finally, representation itself is bound up in the awareness of absence: the baby has to conjure up its first sign, the mother's breast, in response to wanting something that is not there. The invocatory power of representation aims to make present things which are absent - so the "subject" of a figure is never "in" the figure, but some simulacrum of presence is called into being by its representation.

¹⁰"The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy-tales" *Zeitschrift*, I (1913); trans. J. Strachey (1925); *Collected Papers IV* (London, 1948), 236-43.

¹¹ Cf Patricia Cox, "Origen and the Bestial Soul. A poetics of Nature," *Vigilae Christianae* 36 (1982), 122; Origen here is discerning a mystical meanings in *Genesis*; as e.g. for *Leviticus* 5 and 6, on sacrificial animals ("And he shall bring his trespass offering to the Lord, a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation, for a trespass offering, unto the priest." 6:6); *the man who is truly man - homo homo - is the one who is no longer imprisoned by the 'serpent-man' and the 'horse-man'*. (Cox, 130; 139, n. 106)

¹² For the concept of macrocosm and microcosm in Renaissance philosophy, see J. B. Bamborough, *The Little World of Man* (London, 1952); cf. also ramifications explored in D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London, 1958).

¹³ "Freaks", in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Los Angeles, 1997), 94.

¹⁴ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting* (New Haven, 1983).

¹⁵ Roger Brown and James Kulik, "Flashbulb Memories", in U. Neisser & I.E. Hyman, Jr, eds, *Memory Observed* (1982; 2nd ed., New York, 2000), 50; reprinted from *Cognition*, 1977 (5), 73-99.

¹⁶ Place, Ongoing event, Informant, Affect in others/Own affect, Aftermath.

¹⁷ Ibid, 57.

¹⁸ Reeves comments: "The bird-man figure is an image of a 15-16c. plague doctor taken from a German encyclopaedia printed in the 1920s. No doubt there are precedents throughout the worlds of iconography, but it is not Grandville nor surrealist, but the true prototype. The original source is early modern German as far as I know. The images elsewhere are... of JFK [and] Nikita Kruschev. Behind Kennedy is a sort of Norman Rockwell image of rows of fine upstanding Americans and behind Kruschev are ranks of Red Guards. The baby in front of the train is taken from a newspaper photograph of the bombing of Shanghai by the Japanese in the 1930s, it is an image of a baby that was basically sitting in the middle of a bombed out street", personal communication, July 2004.

¹⁹ Darwin on reversion and atavism, *The variation of animals and plants under domestication* (1868; 2nd ed., New York, 1883), v. 2, ch. XIII, 35-6.

²⁰ From the original Introduction to his, *The Civilising Process* (1968; Oxford, 1978), 262-3.

²¹ Mythology is the prehistoric model for the *organisational principles* involved; the latter more important here than any claim for the antiquity of particular motifs. The "translation" of mythic materials into written narrative, for example, marks the beginning of literature-as-history and history-as-literature, but these texts (Gilgamesh, the Old Testament, Homer) are themselves episodic and mosaic in form. Obviously, very many "retrievals" of the oldest materials must have been carried out, in order to have brought them up to the present moment. It is not surprising then that we continually find echoes of one in the other: the works of key thinkers and artists often involve a distillation or concentration - in many senses, an abstraction - of structures and tendencies fundamental to folk thought.

²² On the uses and forms of "nonsense", see G.Deleuze, "The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carroll and Antonin Artaud," in J. V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca, NY., 1979), 277-295; on nonsense in folk culture, see E. M. Ackermann, "Das Schlaraffenland" in *German Literature and Folksongs. Social Aspects of an Earthly Paradise, with an Inquiry into its History in European Literature* (Chicago, 1944), ch. 1_3, See also Haavio, p. 212, on Schlaraffenlands as a type of Never_Never Land; and in general on the world wide distribution of the theme, 210_3. It is worth noting that many of these tales refer to linguistic but "non_visual" _ and therefore unpaintable _ reversals or nonsenses. An extract of this kind from Hans Sachs: "A village sat in a peasant, who liked to drink spoons with milk...His corner had four houses...his kitchen stood in the middle of the hearth..." etc. E.R. Curtius identified the earliest extant example of adynaton in the Western tradition in his *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (London, 1953), 94_104.

²³ By affect here I mean desires overtly or covertly sexual, thus also desires frozen in trauma, forms or containers for fear, horror.

²⁴ Naguib Mahfouz, *Echoes of an Autobiography*, trans. D. Johnson-Davies (1994; London, 1997), 48.