

# Jacob's Ladder

Gilles Lazare

## En Attendant...

He took reality "at its word" in order to unmask it, but instead unmasked the impotence of the word worn by reality as a facade.

Hans Sahl on Walter Benjamin

All this is but a dream – upon waking I realise that fantasy is the shadow cast by reality and moves in tandem, no more unreal than the 'reality' it trails. A dream is no more insubstantial than the moment in which we find ourselves awake, but dreaming of another.

## The Labyrinth

Existence lies on the cusp between dream and reality, in the infinite collapse of time to zero, a profane punctum in the fabric of the universe, a space for sacrifice and illumination carried by desire and Fate. That Fate, Ananke, is the Sisyphean task accepted by the human subject as intrinsic even though its completion may be impossible – Fate drives the subject to spend itself, to live in the ecstasy of the moment of absolute 'reality', to sacrifice meaning for being, an implosion of the sacred into a secular world, a primal condition of creativity. It is the anguish of desire, that of wishing to live, to experience the swings of fortune rather than wallow in the bland happiness that is the Fata Morgana peddled by an insipid culture.

The possibility suggests itself that no dreams, however absurd or senseless, are wasted in the universe. Embedded in the dream is a hunger for its own reification, a demand that imposes an obligation on reality and that grows imperceptibly into a bona-fide claim, an IOU clamouring for payment.

Bruno Schulz

It is the task of poets to oppose the wielding of a wanton destructiveness by the forces of 'reason', who pile up the wreckage of the visionary's dreams behind them before sweeping it away with the arrogant nonchalance of a parent scolding a child. This is not merely to be understood as a catastrophe for the dreamer – it mimics the bold energy of nature, the cyclical regeneration of forms, "the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence", one of expenditure and potlatch. Nothing is lost in this tragedy of existence; suffering may be a moment of revelation, the willing acceptance of the insights wrought upon the subject by chance experience. It is the point at which the subject discovers the essential solitude of objects and existences, a signal moment of continuity with being that transcends the discontinuity of consciousness. A moment outside the tyranny of ego.

Poetry happens when short-circuits of sense occur between words, a sudden regeneration of the primeval myths.

Bruno Schulz

Laughter, the Absurd, is the evidence of life bursting within us, rending the envelope of black night which grips us with fear, fear of what it is to live. Only the distant gleam of the stars remains to comfort us, to guide us in the sovereign solitude which constitutes being. The mystical delirium provoked by the poetic fissure of images is a spark for the slippage between dream and reality, the sudden vertigo offered by plunging into the void of continuity, an infinitely fleeting diversion from the labyrinth in which we are caught tracing the threads of consumption.

It is at this juncture between one state and another that humanity consistently finds itself; each rung like another notch in the executioner's knife. Life would thus appear to be the tantalising draw of the dream tempered by the gravitational pull of 'reality', the weight of the material rooting the soul to the earth. Just as the

soul yearns to be free, to soar into the heavens, so too does the body need the vital affirmation of tactility, of fleshy contact with other living beings, with the objects whose 'life' is not measured in years but eternity. Cinema is a microcosm of that tension.

### **Intimate Geographies**

**B**rushing past a bouquet of giant tiger-lillies, their stamen protruding – orange, swollen – I noticed the delicate trace of pollen on my shirt. A fine dust which smeared at my touch leaving a virulent stain on the silk.

**T**he violence of this colour reminded me of the close damp heat, the languid air of surfacing from sleep presaged by the savage dreams of someone who awakes in your arms, screaming. It is a plume of smoke caressing the spires in the twilight dew, dust still hanging in the air and the barn-owl's screech haunting the gloom.

### **A Cinema of Small Gestures**

**C**inema remains a collective and consensual space through which Benjamin's *jetzeit* irrupts into everyday life; the Present experienced as a mass of moments transcending past and future to bring them together in a collision exploding the historical continuum for a spatial understanding of existence. It is the rupture of poetry onto the coherence of mundane forms, an erotic reverie not limited to physical love, but spent as the interminable fragment of time of the *petit mort*, the squandering of energy in the throes of passion, the zero degree of accretion, the leveling and sharing of being which guarantees humanity. A pan of milk boiling over; rivulets of foam cascading down the stove to form pools on the stone floor, witnessed in wonder by a child and silent parent.

**C**inema transfigures the everyday into the magical – it constitutes a profane illumination offered by the revelations of the sensorium, epiphanies triggered by the trivial and the banal. Without the projection of fantasy, the world is forlorn; tempted only by the indifferent flavour of nostalgia.

I am interested above all in the character who is capable of sacrificing himself and his way of life – regardless of whether that sacrifice is made in the name of spiritual values, or for the sake of someone else, or of his own salvation, or of all these things together. Such behaviour precludes by its very nature, all of those selfish interests that make up a 'normal' rationale for action; it refutes the laws of a materialist world view. It is often absurd and impractical. And yet – or indeed for that very reason – the man who acts in that way brings about fundamental changes to people's lives and the course of history.

Andrey Tarkovsky

**T**he camera glides left then right as a pendulum swings, to face the dresser in which a large glass jug of milk is trembling, nudging forward as the roar of jet-engines shakes the house. Finally the jug falls, shatters, spilling a lake of milk across the floor. It can never be whole again; the world can never return to what it was. A sacrifice is set in motion, in the vain hope that squandering all that is dear to a bourgeois concept of 'life' may protect those whom one loves. This unraveling of the web of socialisation can take many forms: it may mean the foregoing of a defining habit, a trait, possessions or a way of life. In the final calculation it may mean the surrendering of the only thing of value against all reason and conditioning. This love for life is absolute, conditional only in its irrevocable finality. It reaches across the impasse of death, binding the living and the dead in a real and excessive way, transfiguring the stale chamber of the grave into a stream of desire. It is the lust for being up to the point of annihilation, that final expenditure: a bliss incommunicable to the living.

### **Pandaemonium**

...the exercise of the imagination is an indispensable function of man like work, eating, sleeping, loving.

Humphrey Jennings

Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, or *Arcades Project*, is well-known; it was his attempt to forge a text of "blows struck with the left hand", a text which, through fragments and quotations would puncture the historical continuum, evading the need for the author's voice to assume a magisterial role so commonly allotted and would, after Apollinaire, stand with its back to the future because the future cannot be seen, discovering what it was and how it came to be through the past.

Not so well-known is that almost contemporaneously a British artist and filmmaker, Humphrey Jennings, had embarked upon a parallel project. His did not attempt a Marxist-theological exploration of modernity via the passage of the flâneur through the cityscape; it meshed a series of "Images", fragments of texts, not to illuminate themselves in isolation but in the sovereignty of the whole. It was a "collection of texts on the Impact of the Machine", a discursive meditation on, or "imaginative history" of the Industrial Revolution; on the fabrication of a Hell on Earth, as the title suggests, borrowing from Milton, Blake, Wesley, Byron, Shelley and a whole host of others, gleaned from letters, pamphlets, newspapers, manifestos and memoirs. For both Benjamin and Jennings, their baroque and surrealistic miscellanies were fundamental positions against the positivist and determined interpretations of knowledge. History, like Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen clapping a telescope to his blind eye, takes a partisan view of the ambiguities which give rise to the flow of events. In the *Passagen-Werk* and *Pandaemonium*, human memory is played out as tableaux, drained of the fixed signification of 'fact' and 'progress'. Benjamin and Jennings present us with excerpts, snapshots of moments which, catching us unawares, paralyse our aptitude to metaphor – creep upon us as the uncanny, emptying the cup of the exotic, the vapid aesthetics of appropriation.

Just as Benjamin was never able to bring the *Passagen-Werk* to a completion, the task of finishing such an open-ended project proved too difficult for Jennings to complete in his lifetime. Twelve red notebooks bound up the material he collected from 1937 until his death, in an accident whilst filming in Greece in 1950. He was forty-three. The book finally appeared in 1985, assembled and edited by his daughter, Mary-Lou Jennings, and an old colleague from his involvement in the Mass Observation movement of the 1930s, Charles Madge.

Through these two works Time is skewed from the rigidity of history to the erotics of ambiguity, valuing nothing more highly than the vision of the individual to navigate through the layers of catastrophe, ever more tightly compressed by the collision of the carnevalesque with the banal drift of culture. But coefficient with this is the acknowledgement that no matter how one may privilege a mythopoeic relation to the world, one is never-the-less tangled in its ambiguous spectrum of production and imagination: the dream that hungers for reification on the threshold of production; the material that longs for imagination to inspire its form.

### Come and See

The topologies of dream and reality meet on the rungs of Jacob's Ladder: a terrain of constant migration, of mediation between the mundane and the spiritual. These topologies are not the banal maps that guide us to pre-ordained destinations, but allow us to become lost – to throw off the mantle of representation in favour of a more proximate investiture of being.

### Sources

*The Sacrifice*, Andrey Tarkovsky 1986

*Mirror*, Andrey Tarkovsky 1974

Hans Sahl, "Walter Benjamin in the Internment Camp" in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (MIT Press, Cambridge and London 1988)

Bruno Schulz, "The Mythologising of Reality" in *Letters & Drawings of Bruno Schulz*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski (Fromm, New York 1988)

Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Faber and Faber, London 1989)

Humphrey Jennings, *Pandaemonium* (André Deutsch, London 1985)

© Giles Lane 1996

published in COIL 5 (Proboscis 1997)