

'Rings of Saturn'

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Time is change. It is utterly abstract yet its exemplification in this world tends to be concrete and is therefore static. Instead of an expansive embrace of infinity, the axis on which our age now turns is caught in a contradictory alignment of being or experience with its depiction, or the 'symbols' of time in calendars, clocks, numbers and, most revealingly, in stock markets.

The penultimate years of the Second World War heralded for Walter Benjamin the demise of representation as both a cultural product and the object of art. Two decades earlier, in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin decried the warped 'conception of the symbol into aesthetics' as a 'romantic and destructive extravagance which preceded the desolation of modern art criticism', its ruins moreover comprising the modern metropolis and social alienation.¹ Finding its apotheosis in the Baroque period and returning in the guise of the modernist artwork, Benjamin harkened back to the classical form of Greek tragedy. He argued that tragedy emerged 'from the depths of being' to intercept and 'triumph over' the false construct of symbolism.² Instead of an aesthetic mirage, in its true form, tragedy deployed the powerful agent of allegory: fusing representation to being and not just a referent.

Time's representation is caught up in a similar deception. Contemporary life and its inventions have brought us no closer to veritable time: the positive atomisation of human life is inseparable from the boundlessness of what lies beyond the instant, while civilisations make and comprehend progress in measurable terms. The devices of temporality have been invalidated, dismantled and reassembled over and over, so that civilisation and our being in time have been exploded to the point

where we are now extinct forces or supernovae in our own cosmos. To deny the forces of the natural world is a form of bad faith, or mauvaise foi in Jean-Paul Sartre's thought, a condition that for Friedrich Nietzsche was the root of ressentiment – in very simplified terms, the slavish blame for one's own suffering and weakness on aspects of the world.³ While these philosophers mourned the scattered fragments of modern civilisation, in 1936, just as Nazi Germany was about to storm through Europe, Benjamin saw hope in the revolutionary possibilities of cinema. Was this form, which had cast the 'prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second,' a renewal of the allegorical promise?⁴

Allow me now to introduce a little girl called Nora. Likewise, a spectral allegory – raised from Benjamin's grave – she's five years old but an adult in every other way. With swarthy hands, a firm chest and raised veins on her forearms, her eyes are ponds of river silt after rain: murky yet never still. Acting as an oracle, Nora meets with seven artists in the 2012 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Stephen Bram, Marco Fusinato, Shaun Gladwell, Susan Jacobs, Jonathan Jones, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Tim Silver. She comes to them in a dream in which they appear to her as the rings of the planet Saturn. They take this cosmic form because they are caught in the temporality of the contemporary.⁵ Nora speaks with the artists, gathering their insights on time, dialogues that are reproduced in a small green book. Not long after she has passed from my mind, I find the same book on my bedside table.

The first page bears the title: Saturn's baroque manoeuvres and the theft of time. The next page lists its contents. I flick through the inch-thick volume to find that only a few of the remaining 100 or more leaves are printed, the pages of text scattered irregularly among blank sheets.

One night many years ago my father bought me a present, my first book. I often retrieve the memory of that night. It is well after bedtime at the end of a winter's day. I am under my light blue blankets at home. The light has been switched off. I open my eyes and see the outline of seven figures standing in a semicircle at the foot of my bed. They have their backs to me but I can make out that each one is of a distinct stature and posture; two of which are probably women, the other five look like men. The shortest one comes towards the bed. He

turns on my bedside lamp. He picks up a green book from the table, passes it to me and then falls back into line, this time facing inwards.

No one speaks yet I hear the seven voices, somehow channelled through the short man: 'We come to you as Saturn's rings. Even though we are artists, we've been atomised, scattered into dust.' I plead, 'But I don't understand. What should I do?' The voices explain that I must be their medium. But it is easy: all they require is that I write down what they are about to say in the green book. Reassured, I begin to converse with them, as they step forward one at a time. After this is done, they head for the door in a collective unearthly shuffle. Just as they are about to leave, I stop them to ask: 'But what about the uncountable rings?' 'Oh that's unrequited Nora. Saturn has tricked us – we have been exiled from the image of time. It's as the curators of the 2012 Adelaide Biennial proscribed: all we have left is similarity (parallel), juxtaposition (collisions) and encounter (trespass). But, tiny oracle, with your green book, you can traverse this impossible deception and take our news back to the people of Earth, so that our tragedy might be reborn.' And with those illusive words, the seven artists go out through the door.

Dialogues from the little green book

Nora speaks with Tim Silver

I yearn to remember, but I cannot hold onto the image of myself. I ...

Go on Silver, I'm listening.

I'll end up in a long gallery; a hall of mirrors, with heroes, kings and poets.

You're meant to be dead when you get there, right?

It's terrible. How can I go on suffering? Look, I am sweating.

What did they fill you with? Some kind of sediment?

That's right. But I have been frozen. It will not last.

I guess time is only wasted in the experience of the living.

Isn't it the young who waste youth?

They look like tears to me, Silver. Are you crying?

No, this bust is an anti-death mask. I'm going to wear it until the end of the show.

Marco Fusinato

Hello Nora.

Yes, Marco, I'm here.

Turn around. The audience is waiting.

Where?

Behind those lights.

I'm not happy with the angle.

There's nothing we can do. It's the only way to handle the situation.

You drank the black milk, right?

Isn't that a line from a Paul Valéry poem? Anyway, how did you know?

Because they're laughing at you.

But I'm invisible now. I am absurd. Amnesiac.

What do you mean Fusinato?

If I were really looking, it would be impossible to open my eyes.

I see it now: the light has made you unbearable. Even to yourself.

I know. It was meant to be perfect here in my totality. But when I step into this room the greatest emptiness takes over. I am blind.

All we can hold onto is each other.

Stay with me Nora.

I will.

Susan Jacobs

About three years ago I had a disturbing dream. Maybe it is older than that. I was on holidays with a woman, my best friend in fact, who I'd known since I was a toddler. But it was later on that worked out that it was a holiday, I think by implication, because more than a decade before my friend and I had travelled together through Italy. It was warm (perhaps an Italian summer) and we were lying down side-by-side on a slope. A slope without sand, a beach without water.

Sorry, but I'm not sure why you're telling me about this dream, Nora.

Of course – it's your turn to speak. I'm getting to the point. So, the woman and I were lying next to each other, and then I feel something firm, smooth and heavy move over my sleepy limbs. I presume it's her leg. It's odd, but not beyond the limits of our longstanding intimacy. I keep my eyes closed. It continues: the sensation starts to disturb me. It cannot be her touch. I take a quick look. I'm grasping a thick, contorted snake that's writhing out from under my friend's skirt.

That's crazy. I get it now.

What? Oh, I wasn't sure if I should mention the dream but, as soon as I saw that bronze sculpture, with her bicephalous reptilian circlet, and the residual sand recordings that you put in the gallery, the recollection was unavoidable.⁶

I too suffered a trauma. It returned in the middle of the day, in a manner over which I had no control, inside the civilised space of the museum. But what did you do Nora?

I was already fighting the serpent. With one hand I fiercely clutched its flesh, just below its head, and then with my other hand I used the form of the animal to double the contortion onto itself to rip its body in two. A moment later I saw that my friend was missing something where the snake had been, under the floral fabric of her summery skirt.

I had the same feeling when I went to the Art Gallery of South Australia. The weight of the bronze, the two raised arms of the pretty nymph. She was the same serpent and neither

feared the other. I had been feeling at war with myself. It wasn't a contest with snake for me though.

Why not Susan?

Like you said, the killing made you realise that your friend had been hiding the snake under her skirt all that time. It's even worse when you keep something like that from yourself. It leaves tracks in the sand.

Stephen Bram

I once saw infinity but I put it into the line. For centuries I have been in a corner, since pictorial space took it all apart with its baroque adornments.

You're right. I can't see any way out. Unless I could play hopscotch.

Yes child, we're caught inside my construction now. Can you see the frames of light? They fill the realm that the line cannot draw. Can you feel the collapse of time between the two poles?

Hold my hand. I'm lost, in between one realm and the other, in a diminishing horizon.

Let's call it declination Nora.

What's that?

Can't you feel it? It's always in us: we suffer because the magnetic north pole and the geographic North Pole do not coincide. It has no location; it's an arabesque of matter.

I can see what you're doing now. But will I ever be oriented again?

No. It's not so simple. If you think of a suit, a tailored suit; it has to be bias-cut to accommodate its lining. It's necessarily anamorphic. To expand from this repressed space you'll have to fold out the infinity line I just mentioned. Fine or semi-opaque paper is best

for the inner panes. Stretch it over the endless edges and the passing of fog, dust or moisture will be registered there, which everyone will see from wherever they stand, both inside and out.

That's so incredibly beautiful Stephen. Only I still can't feel anything. Is this a void?

Not at all Nora. My realm has substance; it's the same surface as in motion pictures. Cinematic form was once embodied in celluloid, so the old screen is the outer world of the modern brain.

If only we could go back... Yet an image is a filter between a thing and its representation.

Exactly. Clever girl! The verb to 'film' comes from Old English filmen: meaning 'thin skin' or membrane.

Oh, I am starting to feel again.

Just one more thing before we go Nora: an untitled space is never a white page. It's simply a registration of what has gone unrecorded.

Yes, yes, it's flashing up on the paper walls. Here come the unseen ornaments of forgetting.

Yvonne Koolmatrie

I remember myself as you are now. I only found this memory when I went back to the river. It had been almost a generation since the water had spoken. When I came to the banks I saw how it had nearly died. No one was listening to it. I sat down. I saw the cloudy sky pass over the milk-ochre currents. Its sweet taste almost sour, if that's what salt does to syrup. Anyway, the ancient days of that vein – which had once carried all of us, the creatures, the stories, the dead leaves, small fishes – were now stagnant and stultified, almost aphonic. But I did not give up. I knew there was still a chance for life. Memory is invested in those species that disappear in the dark corners of life: the extinction all living beings face. Things vanish in pockets, to turn up just as the search has been abandoned.

Did you recognise the place, Yvonne? Had you been there before?

Many years ago, before I sat down by the river, mum told me that our family had been there lots of times. But after I returned I couldn't remember what I'd known in advance. I had to start again. That's what the river said. It said, "There are no old stories because they have no presence in our time. They're not in the moment of telling, remembering or forgetting but continually happening now."

I see that you make your work from the river grass. They're like those pockets you mentioned.

Yes. Except I'm not sure what they are. I never know what the form's going to be like.

And do the Ngarrindjeri share their traditions with you?

We hear the same things. When I sat down by the water it was the grass that I first apprehended. And the reeds sing for the river because it's too tired. I weave a sound shape. The blades and fronds tell me what to do.

Shaun Gladwell

You are just a small child Nora, so this isn't strange to you, but I only experience gravity when my feet come off the ground.

That doesn't happen to me very often, it's true. I'm scared that I'll lose control; that I'll be dragged under.

We've forgotten how to hover. Except I've found the point of contact between sea and sky. I'm suspended between a body weighed down in the world and some other creature of non-force through which greater, inexplicable things can rush.

For me, young as I look, the senses flatten out into a blooming field. Poppies signify a blot or blind spot in the picture plane. A pasture for the unnamed dead.

I am a man. My liminal, tentacle senses are in touch with the natural world. On the pivot of an active body, at the point of motion I encounter the essential tactility of memory but also its annihilation.

How can you feel all of this?

I am in my body, despite myself. It's at the ends of my toes, but only when I upturn the perceptual order of it all. My mind is a sphere due to gravity and concentration, which likewise shapes the earth. You should try my method of inversion.

Oh that's a great idea. I want to be like those other figures in your photographs: he's a blue kite in the wind, and she a luminous jellyfish.

Jonathan Jones

I thought I was the origin of sight.

It's the opposite, Jones. In the middle of the landscape you disappear.

I've always blamed the vanishing point for that.

Linear perspective is deceptive, a flattening of both time and space. For, on one end of the spectrum is infinite regress; on the other is surveillance. What's more, vision depends on the material of light, nothing else.

I'm not convinced either. The trees have fallen, yet history has no shadow in this picture. I am in mourning.

Yes, yes, Jones. Felled, felled. All felled. Do you know who cut them down?

It was not like the poplars in England; the red gums on my river rot in their place of execution. They were once so grand.

Now the water is stagnated. Yet the current is deeper than we think.

I want to share that secret with you Nora: our aquifers are alive with electric shadows, little beings that move at the speed of light, registers of timelessness that can rise to the surface, their pattern an aide-memoire.

You're right, I can feel the confluence and currents of the past in place, person, object. They're flowing in me.

This is what I think: we've arrived at the end of an era and it's time to come back to the point of contact between the source of experience and its tributaries in time. Exactly where the tree fell.

It's good to see you smiling Jones.

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Saturn's rings are said to be 4.6 billion years old, as countless and as ancient as the planet. Once called Sun, Saturn was the source of earth time for those who believed that the world revolved around that ethereal planet. But here's the impasse: if there's more than one referent star heliotropism cannot be the answer (and thus the solar lie only spins back into darkness). No, if we are to feel again the pure, productive emotion of unseen forces we need to overcome the twilight of our bodies and memory in linear time. In its travels to interstellar systems of thought, the work of these seven artists offers a way to restore the historical and temporal consciousness of the astonishing constancy of boundless existence.

¹ Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, trans John Osborne, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1977 (1928), p. 160.

² Benjamin, p. 183.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, 1872, underpinned Benjamin's work in The Origin of German Tragic Drama. Nietzsche's main thesis was that Ancient Greek tragedy afforded an opportunity for a total apprehension of the human condition because of its unique assimilation of both Apollonian and Dionysian elements in a synthesis of a dichotomy in which the rigid, idealised Apollonian arts brought form to the abstract, illusory revelry of the Dionysian, to encompass the inherent nihilism and meaninglessness of human existence.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1985, pp. 235–36.

⁵ Saturn has seven ring groups, four major groups and two minor groups, but within this there are thousands of smaller rings, which are impossible to count.

⁶ Sir Edgar Bertram Mackennal, Circe, 1893, bronze, height 240 cm, collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (Felton Bequest 1910).