

N°2/09

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Martin Healy

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EL DORADO

In Voltaire's *Candide* or *Candide: or Optimism*, the author repeatedly mocks the character of Pangloss for his absolute and unrelenting belief in the idea that "all is for the best". Despite encountering natural disasters such as the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and tsunami, numerous catastrophes, and ill-fated adventures, Pangloss, tutor to Candide, maintains his belief in the greater good of the events that befall the duo on their travels. The compulsion and unquestioning nature of this belief, a satire on the philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz, becomes almost hysterical as Pangloss and Candide experience calamity after calamity, and witness immeasurable hardship and suffering in the world, after their enforced departure from an Edenic paradise. In contrast to all that is witnessed, Pangloss' belief is enticing, a piece of solid ground, perhaps, where one can stand and view the world.

The experiences of Candide and Pangloss, respectively discount and affirm belief in a natural order and a rationale in the world. Their physical journey through the world in search of solace corresponds to Candide's interior journey in search of understanding. In the end he advocates that "we must cultivate our garden".¹

The quest to discover or return to paradise is central to copious narratives and fables. The possibility of an undiscovered El Dorado



lingers within a collective psyche, and particularly within the genre of science fiction. Central to the quest, this journey to another place, is the supposition that through distance we may achieve greater objectivity in relation to established norms and beliefs. And yet, belief is something unsubstantiated, requiring faith and fidelity, and grounded in the irrational. At times it is seducing.

A relationship between belief, experience, and the visual is intrinsic to the work of Martin Healy. Contemporary myths and legends such as the Jersey Devil, the occurrences at Amityville, or UFO sightings in rural English settings embody a collective search for the possible or “the other,” despite discerning judgement. Healy uses film and photography—mechanisms of authority with built-in reference to the scopic regime as truth—to question the nature of belief. Paradoxically, while belief may exist without evidence, the very notion of the “document” belies this. It is to this question of the document that *Facsimile*, the title for Healy’s new film, alludes. A facsimile complexifies the relationship between the real and the seemingly real, undermining our understanding of such notions and weakening the significance of the visual.

In *Facsimile*, a sequence of slowly panning shots of verdant tropical foliage shifts from viewpoint to viewpoint within a dense oasis of forbidden or undiscovered territory that recall tales of Eden or El Dorado. The lushness of the trees and the density of the images are seductive, yet the images disorient the viewer as they slowly shift from one perspective to another. We suspend our disbelief in the visual and in the image, but an unnatural stillness resonates in this alluring paradise. A soundtrack of exotic bird calls and ambient sound is interrupted by a gentle, calm male voice speaking in French

and subtitled in English. The speaker’s utterances reveal a cryptic narrative; the images represent an island paradise, in which thoughts and feelings replicate, but escape is impossible. It is an infinite projection. As the final lines are spoken, there is a glimpse of light from above, diffusing through panes of glass within a building. The image is betrayed by the structure that encloses it. This lush island does not exist; the scene is within a glasshouse of a botanical garden.

The spoken text quotes from *The Invention of Morel*, a 1940 novella by Argentine writer Adolfo Bioy Casares, which charts the arrival of a man on a seemingly deserted island while fleeing from his past. Wandering through a deserted museum building, he encounters a number of arrivals, including the beautiful Faustine, and is enraptured by her from afar. Reality and fiction combine and are paradoxically confused as these figures are revealed to be projections replayed each week, the invention of the scientific genius Morel. The unnamed narrator’s infatuation leads him to his own death and abandonment to life with his fantastical love. As Octavio Paz wrote about Bioy’s work, “The body is imaginary, and we bow to the tyranny of a phantom. Love is a privileged perception, the most total and lucid not only of the unreality of the world but of our own unreality: not only do we traverse a realm of shadows; we ourselves are shadows”.²

Healy’s evocation of Bioy’s fiction engenders belief in the image, the lush island paradise, the seduction of past, present, and future imaginings, and the possibility of immortality. Time is suspended as one gives oneself over to the artifice of the moving image and to such an experience. Both spectator and narrator participate in this abandonment to

love or belief, seduced by the image. Perhaps, as critic Roy Exley states “‘Now’ is an aporia wedged between nostalgia and hope. The abyss on either side of the present... is papered over intuitively by our schemes, dreams and recollections”.³

Belief, seduction, and artifice combine within this enrapturing film to envelop the spectator and surround the senses. Entering this cinematic installation, the viewer seems to inhabit the space of the projection, thus becoming complicit in the film’s structure of belief. In the final revelation of the artifice of both narrated story and represented images, it is the spectator who is abandoned to the real in a darkened room.

notes

1. Voltaire, *Candide* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 95.
2. Quoted in Suzanne Jill Levine, “Introduction,” in Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel* (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), p. vi.
3. Roy Exley, “Tending the Abyss,” *Contemporary Visual Arts* 19 (1998), p. 36.

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GEORGINA JACKSON is a curator and writer. From 2005 until 2008 she was Exhibitions Curator at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, where she co-curated *TACITA DEAN, 2007*, and was assistant curator of *Beyond the White Cube: a retrospective of Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland, 2006*, and *The Studio, 2006-7*. Recently she has curated a series of solo exhibitions at the Goethe Institute, Dublin as well as *Left Pop-bringing it back home*, a special project for the second Moscow Biennale, co-curated with Nicola Lees, Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Moscow, 2007. She is currently a Phd candidate and Research Scholar at the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin.

Facsimile (video still)
2008, Single Channel Video, HD Cam, 5.50 minutes looped

The artist would like to thank
Camera: Ronan Fox
Assisted by: Declan King
Edited by: Stephen O'Connell, Robbie O'Farrell
Sound: Karl Burke
Voice-Over: Phillippe Saltel

