

ONEIROMAKARONATHA*

Sideways Notes from the Digital Sandbox

By George Alexander

1 PLAYBACK /

"We're always trying to defeat death by leaving images", deceased painter Francis Bacon was saying on television the other night. Luckily there was a Maxell tape in my VCR, enabling me to capture this moment for indefinitely repeatable playback. Or so goes a recent Maxell ad where a boy watches a tape of his baseball catch over and over throughout his lifetime, aging during successive incarnations like the astronaut from 2001 while the picture stays perpetually young. A flickering version of the Eternal Return? Baseball diamonds aren't forever. Why? Entropy. An increase in pack tension on the tape spool can delaminate the magnetic layer from its mylar or ester base. Hence disfigurement, ridging, edge damage, cinching. And time has strange loops in it now. Why does last month's Telegraph Mirror seem more remote than the Jurassic dinosaurs?

2 MEMORY/

Can you remember what memory was? When your head was your hardware. A writhing sea of neurons kept constantly busy inventing what happened. You kept the past alive—images and words—in your brain, on an island called In the Beginning or Once Upon a Time. On it you kept track of everything that existed. You knew maybe a hundred names of family and friends and the powerful. Beyond the island was wilderness—no telling what creatures lived there, between reality and imagination. Fascinating and terrifying. Now the faces in the memory bank are public personalities, familiar strangers: people in Reebok ads, veejays and deejays, game-show hosts, the sons and daughters of game-show hosts. On talk shows people talk about others on other talk shows. People hold up placards for applause and you wish you could be there laughing along with them all on the Steve Vizard show. Nostalgia for the present in a culture of permanent playback. There is no there there.

3 HISTORY /

Dragged along by the current of time what a hullabaloo of history—what shrieks, blood, kettledrums: homes flattened, statues toppled and empty ornaments curling in intense heat, melted telephones, the charred stumps of date palms, ledger pages flapping in the wind. The weightless narratives and heavy weapons that make up history, our history. Pages swirl into heaps—there's Paul the tentmaker of Tarsus spreading Christendom, and before that Pax Romana, and before that on that Mediterranean littoral, the cutting edge of the Fertile., Saladin the Kurd met the Crusaders, who were thrown back on Famagusta in Cyprus and later had swarthy Othello for governor. When any educated European would study Maimonides, Ibn Arabi, or Averroes. When Baghdad was Rome. Ottoman and Venetian architectures overlay the traces of Macedonian Greek and Caliphate Arab. Phoenicia, Petra, Baalbek, Gaza, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Damascus, Aleppo—the birthplaces of primitive schismatic Christianity. Before that the Palace of Knossos, and before that animal muzzles rowing impassively beneath a sea of peat. In the beginning there was

no word. Two thousand million years to form lips, to give me these stubby, grubby fingers with which to write: HOMO (soi disant) SAPIENS. Then writing: stelae, cuneiform rolls, papyri, books. Then maps, diagrams, architectural blueprints, geometric formulas. Cultures—Celtic, Greek, Tantric—working overtime for millenia to sustain by ritual and rote a collection of data that would have fit comfortably on a couple of CD-ROM discs.

4. TOTAL RECALL/

Today the tools of global integration—the satellite media net, the multinational corporation—have created a genre of art style called technological sublime. It brings together wireheads, lit profs, psychologists, visual artists, slippery post-structuralists, SF writers, liquid architects, creative types on military payrolls, and cyberslackers. The mystic urge for total awareness and information control is as old as the Memory Theatres of Ramon Lull and Giordano Bruno. These were charts, systematised wheels of all available knowledge, celestial and terrestrial, run by mathematics. Now this urge is being actualised in Internet—that sprawling octopus of millions of computers swapping documents, providing data services, sharing bulletin boards; also MUDS (Multi-user dimensions) where role playing Daggers and Dungeons are as allegorical as Dante's Divine Comedy(1300), and allow users to explore a space with a specific and expandable cartography: caverns, forests, sleazy bars

5 FINDING YOURSELF/

The Japanese drive cars with digital navigation screens; the Pentagon can locate you by signals bounced off satellites of the Global Positioning System. As virtual geography becomes more vivid, physical geography is becoming more virtual. The more time people spend working and playing in cyberspace, the less dependent they are on any one "real world" location for material and emotional sustenance. The coming of digital cartography accelerates this, making every neighbourhood on earth as easily navigable as one's own, and thus clearing the way for the circulation of vast technomadic populations, accustomed to living at two places at once and in none for too long. This relentless mobility spells doom for any institution whose power is grounded in a fixed physical geography, and you'd better believe the nation state's on that list. No wonder the traditional symbol of a sovereign's power has been a hand-held globe. Wait for the hand-held smart-map.

6 AUSTRALIA/

It's a whole bunch of cultures sitting on top of everyone else smelling each other's restaurant exhaust fans. It's Oz raw materials, cooked in a Mediterranean fashion, with spicy Asian spin: dried galangal, coconut paste, kaffir lime leaves, lemon grass. On TV they call it multiculturalism.

7 COMPUTER DREAMING/

"Relax", she said, "put yourself in my hands. This is called Computer Dreaming." It happened while I was playing with the dancing green phosphors on my monitor and listening to short-wave radio: parts of the world trying to make contact with other

parts. It must have been Radio Cythera. Suddenly the office wall broke apart and an old Greek woman decked in bracelets walked through the opening with a mobile phone. She looked like she was cooking a pastitso* and talking to a long extinct glossoptera in the frying pan: Depuis che je latrev zestanov la flogue destimat che me pirpolis che me gargalev jusqua a ton pat. ÑDid you come by photography or boat? I asked ÑMy name is Scheherezade, I'm from the 1001 Australian Nights. A universe of layers, permeable, mutable, destructable. She left me some ancient telephone directories to distant places. It was like ET rigging up celestial telephones from the junk of suburban houses. Since then the visible world keeps splitting along a fault lines to display another world which can in turn be peeled away and tossed aside. ÑHello? Anyone out there? ÑYes, who is this? ÑClick . Buzz. It's Art History over the last millenia with Phil George, George Alexander and Zippy the Pinhead all on the same electronic wire. Voices overlapping in atomised riffs. Voices talking to themselves (intercranial messages), talking to their gods (Doc Marten or Doc Freud) to dead grandparents and dead poets, errant lovers, doomful doctors. Space aliens. Astral Plane drifters. Everybody must get phoned. ÑBuzz. Static. Click. Not much here here. On the transhistoric party line. The definitive late-century limbo. Just voices floating in some etherised slipstream and calling out their messages. There's no fixed locus, no switchboard, no centre where calls intersect. There's just voices joining the network at random as the circuit hooks in. A place of unformulated menace, a place of contraries, the space of solitary bodies encumbered by ephemeral harems, a foreclosed space of desire, an improbable space of rootedness too, a space of dream.

8 CONFUSION/

Have you ever started to feel all the issues are just mushing together in your mind, spinning slowly at first, then faster, swirling wildly out of control until the muscles that hold your opinions begin to weaken and fall away and suddenly all the conflicts of the world go swirling by in one gigantic cyclonic rush unconnectd to anybody. ÑNo, I've never felt like that, have you? ÑNo

No. 9 CYBERKOANS/

ÑA wise man will find himself surfing many channels ÑA ringing phone is not the best way to fill a back pocket Ñwindows to the soul won't run on systems with low RAM ÑAll that is digital melts into analog Ñknowledge is woven of many fibre-optic cables. Ñthe drive to know is spurred by the drive to diddle.

GEORGE ALEXANDER (with thanks to Ed Morales, Geoffrey O'Brien, Erik Davis, Ammiel Alcalay, Frances Yates, Julian Dibbell, Joe Rosebranch) * Macaronic: applied to burlesque verse in which vernacular words were mixed with Latin; the literary analogue of macaroni ('a gross, rude, and rustic mixture of flour, cheese, and butter') * pastitso: Greek macaroni pasta mixed with meat sauce, topped with a Bechamel sauce and baked. (as in pastiche: a borrowing of motifs from other works of art or literature).