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A HISTORY OF FAILURE

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A History of Failure

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### Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced



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## A HISTORY OF FAILURE

*To study history means submitting to chaos and nevertheless retaining faith in order and meaning. It is a very serious task, young man, and possibly a tragic one.*

—Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* 1943

*In short, one must synthesise – for only by such synthesis can one discern the underlying continuity, the unified and coherent fabric, which lies at the core of any historical problem [...] Finally, it is not sufficient to confine oneself exclusively to facts [...]*

—Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* 1983

A history of failure implies several things. It can point to a chronology of the concept of failure, like so many contemporary history books that chart a minute aspect of culture. It could refer to a personal record, like a criminal having a history of violence. The implication is also there that history itself has failed to achieve, failed to describe, failed to move forward, failed to be history at all.

History in this essay is not just the study of the past, but also its use in culture – to separate us from nature, to validate ideologies or

to provide insight into our present. History in these terms is not a sequence of physical events, but the representation of these events. These representations exhibit curious behaviour: no matter their function they appeal to truth. History uses the language of the real to validate itself (Culler 2002: Kindle edition<sup>1</sup>), and this language is often constituted into narrative (which I will discuss in some detail later).

When history fails, when the representation of events no longer functions as intended, it points to fissures and cracks in its monolithic forms and supposed truth-value, which allow critique to pry open a space. This isn't from a desire to discredit history as purely relativist or purely ideological, nor a desire to live in an ahistorical world of unified liberal capitalism. Rather, living in a country, or perhaps world, in which the tool of history has been (is) a truncheon, leaving us all battered and bruised, this critical space becomes necessary to understanding our present.

In an essay entitled *Botched Millenniums* (2008), Colin Dickey charts failed apocalypses, from the delayed millennium of the 15th century Taborites, to contemporary Rapture cults in the USA. Besides celebrating the joy of the obscure,<sup>2</sup> Dickey asks what it means to write of these unrealized apocalypses. Acknowledging the repeated failure of the Christian Millennium to come to pass would be to act like Walter Benjamin's angel of history.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin describes a painting by Paul Klee in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) 2007) as an angel with a storm called progress catching its wings. Dickey paraphrases:

*Benjamin's angel sees history as only this singular catastrophe, but it is a singular catastrophe which eternally recurs, in large part because the failure from which it stems must be continually forgotten in the name of progress. To persist in a belief of*

<sup>1</sup> Kindle ebooks are published without page numbers. This issue has not been clearly documented in any standard resources on Harvard referencing. I will notify that a book is a kindle edition in the referencing.

<sup>2</sup> Dickey has also written a book on ransacktepy, the theft of famous skulls.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin's angel of history suffers from citation exhaustion. Nevertheless, it has become emblematic of a constellation of concerns around history, progress and apocalypse, which are all significant points of reference in this essay.



*redemptive history requires turning one's back on this repeated catastrophe.* (Dickey 2008: 20)

A history of failure, then, refuses redemptive history. There is no messiah, nor any messianic analogues: no Singularity, no Utopia. Ultimately, it denies that history is teleological. Dickey compares a history of failure to German author W.G. Sebald's conception of natural history. Sebald's book *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2004) is a criticism of German authors' silence on the Allied firebombing of Dresden and other German cities during World War 2. Through his criticism, he examines these acts of mass destruction, showing the failure of humanism, rationality and the linear progress of history (Dickey 2008: 20). Sebald talks instead of natural history, which is directionless and full of failures and extinctions:

*Is the destruction not, rather, irrefutable proof that the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature?* (Sebald 2004: 66)

The 20th century was a time of unprecedented destruction. A small selection of the many examples includes the World Wars; the Holocaust and Stalin's purges and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Cold War proxy conflicts in South-East Asia, South America and Africa; Idi Amin's abuse of Uganda and the genocides in Rwanda. If this devastation (and its continuation in the 21st century)



Hanover in ruins 1945

are a result of the clashes of various teleologies, specifically those defined by progress and its bedfellows nationalism, colonialism and imperialism, these can no longer be seen as autonomous or vectored, but should instead be seen as arbitrary, as part of the randomness of natural history. Humans are not above natural history; they have no messianic destiny. Natural history is closer to what I would think of as Darwinian. Evolutionary selection does not support progress; rather, the ability to respond to changing, erratic conditions favours survival. Darwin never coined the phrase "survival of the fittest".<sup>4</sup> "Fittest" is a misnomer, implying progress with its apotheosis in humanity, rather than the eking out of a niche through accident: survival of the fit enough.

If we consider time in such a natural history, it is not a hard vector, but a web full of eddies and slips, snakes and ladders. A thorough explanation of time in physics, religion and philosophy is way beyond the possibilities of this essay. However, two understandings of time apply here. The first is our general everyday experience of time as a sequence of events, something which can be measured by the clock.

<sup>4</sup> It was in fact Herbert Spencer, Darwin's contemporary, who revealingly extended evolution to human economic and social life (now known as Social Darwinism) (Ayala 2001 online)



Guy Tillim, *Guélimare, Mazambique* [2008]

The second is time as perceptual, reliant on being perceived to exist. Without the act of measurement it is unclear whether it happens at all. Time in this conception appears to be anthropocentric, or at least sentience-dependent (Toynbee, Smart & Markowitz 2011: online). My use of time in this essay falls in between these two ideas. There are clearly sequential events – the earth turns, things die, creatures evolve – but time considered as an arrow is a human conception.

In a reflection of a history of failure my text is itself sequential, but operates in fits and starts, sudden endings and dalliances. This follows the form of the work it sets out to document, which is purposefully disparate in form, media and meaning. Nevertheless, there are significant overlaps and continuities, both in my work and the text. I have tried to structure the essay so that previous works cast insight onto later works, and vice versa, without having to rearticulate points or argument. In structure, this essay is, to a degree, literary. In Julian Barnes's book *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (2009), each chapter forms a unique story, from the tale of a woodworm stowing away on Noah's Ark to the story of the wreck of the Medusa. However disparate his stories seem, Barnes inserts continuities. The woodworm recurs in a legal trial, while the search for the remains of Noah's ark

becomes a plot point in a later story. Themes of the sea, the power of religion and the outcast make uneven reappearances throughout the book. These continuities and intertextual relationships imply that there is an expansive narrative arc over all the disparate stories, which Barnes ironizes in his title, linking them as a history. Whether or not there is an intelligible broader interpretation available, the result is that in attempting to rationalize the linking principle, one pays closer attention to the details of the stories. In other words, by implying correspondences between apparently unrelated narratives one reads the texts with a searching eye. My text follows this structure, divided into seven sections, each dealing with one work. Each section has a formal similarity. It begins with a description of the work, which in part reflects my production where, as I will show in further detail, I attempt to embed ideas into the formal nature of the work. I also want to avoid the kind of stern but affectionate lecture Watson gets from Sherlock Holmes:

*It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.* (Doyle [1891] 1976: 3)

From this point each section teases out the literary, cultural, artistic or visual allusions, and discusses key elements and themes. Besides these formal similarities, continuities crop up in different sections, creating conceptual links between them, between both the sections of the text and my work.

There are several main trajectories or plots within this essay. It will investigate how nostalgia uses the past in an ideological way, in the sense of legitimating a power structure (Eagleton 2007: 5), and how this is disrupted. It examines the sense of ambiguity that my work creates about the past and how this challenges ideas of historical determinism. Most importantly, the essay builds up to the idea that the works are not about history at all, but that these representations of the past and future act as allegories to the present. This text is driven by an implicit desire for a sense of engaged presence working against a feeling of a deferred or paralysed present.

It is clear that narrative in a literary sense is important in this text as a form of rhetoric. However, it is equally important to briefly review

the idea of history as narrative, as this text uses this form regularly. As opposed to annals and chronicles, one of the distinguishing features of a historical text is that it orders sequential facts into a narrative. This narrative structure adds a comprehensibility to events, a beginning and an end (White 1980: 23). Inspired by Structuralist literary criticism, historiographers like Hayden White analysed historical representation as a literary genre. The use of this self-analysis of history is, in the words of Nancy Partner (2009) to draw attention to "the semantic, tropological, poly-referential, and formal powers of literary language to control meaning beyond the superficial reach of the historian's conscious intention" (Partner 2009: Kindle edition).

In an essay which compares Roland Barthes and Hayden White, Stephen Bann (2009) examines their contributions to historiography, and in particular their understanding of narrative. Barthes, Bann suggests, considers the use of narrative as a "massive confidence trick" (Bann 2009: Kindle edition). Narrative in this sense creates a mythology, which resists rational analysis. To quote Barthes directly, historians "institute narration as the privileged signifier of the real" (Barthes in Bann 2009: Kindle edition). Narrative naturalizes historical representation.

White, on the other hand, suggests a use of narrative as a way of creating order and producing meaning, to "speak about continuities, transitions and integrations" (White in Bann 2009: Kindle edition). Narrative here provides a structure for understanding the past, even if, as White suggests, it privileges a particular socially moralizing point of view (White 1980: 26)

These are rather simplistic observations, excerpts essentially out of both Barthes' and White's highly developed and shifting concepts, and a radical summation of Bann's argument. Nevertheless, they point to how narrative functions in a text, how it grasps events together into a whole that is at once rhetorical and meaningful. This reflects an ambivalence in my own text between a desire for critical and analytic clarity and the use of rhetorical devices, especially using narrative to create meaning.

The use of narrative in my text, however, presents a problem of framing. Narrative can justify the point of view of the protagonist, in



Constance Stuart Lariabee *Homeless man* (1947-48)

this instance me. As Partner says, "taking the protagonist position is a serious political act. Storyness is argument" (Partner 2009: Kindle edition). With this in mind, the text often avoids overtly framing myself. This is not as a kowtow to some sort of relativism, but rather a conscious acknowledgement of the neo-colonial impulse to privilege a white male subjectivity. It is an act of self-conscious guilty self-censorship (which, ironically, still takes a protagonist's position). However, this anxious caution could appear to result in a lack of framing. The narrative could appear to be telling itself, or claiming a "natural" position. It seems important then to state that many of my specific iterations of concerns and emotions – melancholy, ambivalence, irony, nostalgia, anxiety and apocalypticism – are not universal experiences, but stem from my consciousness as a neo-colonial post-apartheid subject.



Albrecht Dürer *Melancholia I* (1514)

As a final introductory word, I have placed certain images within the text sometimes without captions and generally without explanation. Inspired by W.G. Sebald's use of images in his novels, these are designed to add to the text, not as illustrations but as spaces of contemplation.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sebald's use of images is discussed in Lise Patt and Christel Dillbohner (Eds) *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald* (2007).



## THE LONG GOODBYE

There is a low-lit room, and inside it is a bar that sits awkwardly in the middle of the room, too narrow to reach the walls. The bar is a rich red wood colour, glowing under the spotlights. On it is a water stain, a glass with a sticky green residue and a crumpled napkin. This is *The Long Goodbye* after it has been performed. There is the sweet, stale smell of old gin in the air.

The work is named after a novel by the hard-boiled detective writer, Raymond Chandler. He is well known for inventing the archetypal pulp detective Phillip Marlowe, street smart and tough, yet moral at heart. Chandler was an alcoholic. It is an aspect of his biography that is played up (like the infamous and much repeated incident of his finishing the script for *The Blue Dahlia* in an alcoholic siege), often to the detriment of serious sustained critical attention (Moss 1997: online). He nevertheless writes of alcohol with a restrained poetry. In his novel *The Long Goodbye* (1953), the character Terry Lennox is a drunk:

*The first time I laid eyes on Terry Lennox he was drunk in a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith outside the terrace of The Dancers. The parking lot attendant had brought the car out and he was still holding the door open because Terry Lennox's left foot was still*

*dangling outside, as if he had forgotten he had one. He had a young-looking face but his hair was bone white.* (Chandler 1953; Kindle edition)

The novel follows the relationship between Lennox and Phillip Marlowe. The plot is intricate, but the first third captures Lennox's gentle alcoholic decline, until his apparent suicide. Marlowe never quite likes Lennox; he has a distaste for his exceptional wealth (which comes by way of an unhappy marriage) and his perceived moral bankruptcy. Nevertheless, they begin a friendship that slowly warms up and meet occasionally at a bar called Victor's for an afternoon drink. Lennox introduces Marlowe to the gimlet:

*We sat in a corner of the bar at Victor's and drank gimlets. "They don't know how to make them here," he said. "What they call a gimlet is some lime or lemon juice and gin with a dash of sugar and bitters. A real gimlet is half gin and half Rose's Lime Juice and nothing else. It beats martinis hollow."* (Chandler 1953; Kindle edition)

Their conversation often turns around the pleasures and intricacies of drinking. Lennox waxes lyrical over the joy of a bar:

*"I like bars just after they open for the evening [...] I like to watch the man mix the first one of the evening and put it down on a crisp mat and put the little folded napkin beside it. I like to taste it slowly. The first quiet drink of the evening in a quiet bar—that's wonderful."* (Chandler 1953; Kindle edition)

The significant relationship of the novel works around an intersection of melancholy, distaste and a touch of sentimentality, couched in the language of drinking. After Lennox's suicide, Marlowe receives a note with a maudlin request:

*So forget it and me. But first drink a gimlet for me at Victor's. And next time you make coffee, pour me a cup, and put some bourbon in it and light me a cigarette and put it beside the cup. And after that forget the whole thing.* (Chandler 1953; Kindle edition)

Marlowe follows Lennox's request, which sets in motion the rest of the book's plotline, the titular 'long goodbye.'

At the heart of Marlowe's relationship to Lennox is a dialectic conflict between the Old World and the New World. Lennox, with his suave

wealth, posh English accent and obsession with gimlets, is linked to the Old World (Newman 1999; online). Chandler, in his non-fiction analysis of the detective genre, *The Simple Art of Murder* (1945), characterizes Marlowe's world, the New World, as one in which "gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities [...], where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing [...]" (Chandler 1945; Kindle edition). Marlowe is Chandler's moral redemption for this world: "But down these mean streets a man must go who is neither tarnished nor afraid [...] He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world." In his redemptive role, Marlowe must be both part of the world and in opposition to it. To achieve this Marlowe finds himself caught up in a nostalgia for the old, as exemplified by Lennox, although Lennox cannot live up to this need. Marlowe has a desire for a past world and an elusive, happier time, where his moral stance would not be oppositional but integral. Marlowe's desire is put in direct discord with his modern world.

A similar conflict between the past and the modern exists in my family. Stories were often told of my English great-grandfather, Thomas, who was a raging alcoholic. The stories often hint at sour relations and abuse, although they always have a comic flavour. My favourite tells of his pub-crawls across Pretoria, in the 1920s. The following is an extract from an unpublished family history written by my brother, Jared Rossouw:

*All three kids would wait outside the Pub while he had a drink inside. Then, he would wipe his mouth and stand up with a flourish. He'd walk out of the pub and shout: "WE ARE THE PEOPLE!" and then this was always followed by, "ARE WE DOWNHEARTED?" This was the cue for the three of them to shout back "NO!" and then they would walk on to the next pub or perhaps the British League club and Thomas would have another drink.* (Rossouw 2007; online)

Thomas encompasses both a jolly colonial melancholy and bawdy nationalism. Washed up in Pretoria, he was caught between his own uselessness as an expatriate and his faith in the British world. His



Dave Southwood's image from the Kimberley Hotel in the 90s

response, rather than Marlowe's conflicted desire, is a braces-snapping, humorous ridiculousness, similar in character to Lennox's self-disgust and irony. Both Thomas and Marlowe, however, are caught up in the same essential conflict between the old and the new.

My *The Long Goodbye* takes its visual and emotional cues from the Chandler novel and this fragment of a family story. The work exists as a performance and as the remnants of that performance. It comprises a section of a wooden bar, built from imbuia and keruing with inlays of maple and has a brass footrail running along its length. It is of an unspecified vintage, but not from an immediately identifiable time frame. The materials are typical of those used in older bars, especially the brass rail, and the decorated edges and posts are decidedly old-fashioned. The bar doesn't represent any specific bar, but it is inspired by the look and feel of two bars, Barnato's at The Kimberley Hotel in Cape Town, and The Kitchener in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. These two bars are older than 100 years, and have recently undergone a popular youth-driven revival owing to their location in rapidly gentrifying

neighbourhoods. These bars are typically South African colonial.<sup>6</sup> In both these spaces the colonial past is recouped through the desire for "authentic" urban spaces. The colonial past slides unremarked and without critical thought into consciousness, carried on a wave of fuzzy nostalgia. It resembles in action the laugh and half-smile I exhibit on rereading the tale of Thomas above, in which a generally despicable character becomes acceptable through a process of family memory. This nostalgic operation is discussed in further detail later.

The bar is full size in height and depth, but its length is truncated, as if it is a section of a much larger bar. It is performed with a bartender, who only serves gimlets, a "real gimlet" consisting of half gin and half Rose's Lime Cordial over ice, to those in the room. The bartender is authorized to serve as much liquor as he can, but only one person is allowed at the bar at a time, and must drink at the bar for however long it takes. The audience can move freely around the bar, but there is a space demarcated on the floor, separating the participant.

When exhibited, or indeed in this text, *The Long Goodbye* serves as a way into the affective tone of *The History of Failure*. It is an interactive performance that serves to immerse a viewer into a sense of 'pastness.' There is a tension here that reads across the show, between the past that is imaginary and the present that is absent, here literally a drunken obliteration of the present. The bar's function is also to make strange. It achieves this, in part, by being descriptive, by which I mean it gives a detailed visual account of a represented object. It maintains its status as an artwork through lighting, gallery context and title. However, it also accurately resembles a real bar, both in material and use. It is both a bar and an unbar. It is a not-bar, representative of a real bar, while not falling into the category of a readymade. It is a crafted object. This gap is reflected by the viewer, who is at the bar, drinking a real drink, while also participating within an artwork. There is a scene and a stage, but simultaneously an actuality. The viewer is both observer and participant. The gap is further emphasized by the fact that the viewer is in the present in dress and style (and presumably

<sup>6</sup> Barnato's is named for the mining magnate Barney Barnato (1871-1917) and the Kitchener is named for English Field Marshall Lord Kitchener (1850-1914), the commander-in-chief of the English army during the South African War (1899-1902).



awareness), while the bar suggests the past. The lighting of the bar is carefully positioned to highlight the viewer.

The intention is that through this strangeness, the viewer will perform an oblique look, both at themselves and the artworks on the show. The term 'oblique look' is a paraphrase from an essay written by Fredric Jameson about the functions of science fiction writing. Jameson describes scifi as representational, in that it works within a conventional literary realism, albeit with a setting and rendering in the future (Jameson 2007: 286). The narratives are "for the most part not modernizing, not reflexive and self-undermining and deconstructing affairs" (Jameson 2007: 286). However, this textual descriptiveness has a more complex function with relation to temporality. Its ostensible content – images of the future – act to defamiliarize and restructure our present. The present "[...] in this society, and in the physical and psychic dissociation of the human subjects who inhabit it – is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated, empty of affect" (Jameson 2007: 287). Strategies of indirection and distraction are necessary in order to experience the present, or even endure the present self. Considering images of how things will be by necessity requires us to examine our present for the seeds of that future. Description acts as a catalyst to this process, validating the images' veracity. The imagined future works, in this instance, as an allegory of the present. Allegory here means one autonomous text, narrative or idea standing for another, interpreted through correlations and synchronicities. In this example the present is "read through" (Owens 1992: 54) the imagined future. Jameson makes an analogy between his understanding of scifi and Raymond Chandler's novels. Chandler, he suggests, was interested in the now of Los Angeles (Chandler's "now" having become a historical "now" for us), "the cracked sidewalks, tarnished sunlight [...] the unfiltered experience of the daily life of capitalism" (Jameson 2007: 287). Chandler mobilizes an entertainment genre as an indirection, a distraction, not only from our daily stresses and worries, but from the defense mechanisms that prevent us from accessing the present. "The intolerable space of Southern California," – and here we can substitute

7. Hereafter, I'll refer to this genre using the common term scifi. The importance of this genre of writing, while seemingly out of left field here, will become clear as this essay progresses.

an unmediated experience of the present – "can enter the eye laterally, with its intensity undiminished" (Jameson 2007: 287). Reading here is an escape, an oblivion from the present, but the text presents the present in a way that circumvents our resistance.

*The Long Goodbye* mobilizes entertainment – the act of drinking, the theatrical step of the viewer into the illusion of the past – and descriptiveness in order to achieve a similar lateral entrance of the viewer's presence into consciousness. After the performance, the work exists as a residue. The lime becomes sticky and rotten in the bottom of the unwashed glasses, the ice bucket leaks water over the floor. In its deactivated phase it becomes a *memento mori*, a decay of the activated moment into the past.

*The Long Goodbye* provides a sense of the old and tries to activate a present moment. It also presents a melancholy, both that of the drunk and that of the displaced subject as exemplified by Marlowe, Lennox and Thomas. This melancholy is further reiterated after the performance by the decay and abandonment of the objects. The other major tension in the work, the nostalgic pull between the old and new, is more clearly analyzed by looking at *The Essex Castle*.

## THE ESSEX CASTLE



*The Essex Castle* is a work that takes the act of deflection literally. It consists of a tiny model of a steam ship, approximately 12cm long. The ship is painted in a geometric camouflage pattern known as dazzle. The model is floating in a transparent medium inside a Three Ships Whisky bottle, which in turn is mounted on an oval panel of African mahogany. Underneath is an engraved bronze plaque, which reads:

"ESSEX CASTLE" - 1946

*Soon after World War II my grandparents came out on the passenger liner "Essex Castle."*

*It was still camouflaged from when it was a troop ship, making it impossible to tell where it was heading, or how fast.*

The work operates in a similar way to the act of description mentioned in *The Long Goodbye*, a tension in the object between being both the object and a representation of that object, in this instance a ship-in-a-bottle. However, a model has its own sensibility and set of implications. In an article on the appeal of miniature villages, writer Sam Jacob considers the power of a model:

*Modern landscapes can be alienating, seemingly indifferent to you as an individual. By shrinking the town it changes the power*

*relationship. They are a way of compressing reality into something more digestible and they allow you to get a sense of the whole society working. It's a way of seeing and understanding how the world works. What is it that makes a place? What is it that makes a society? What makes us? It overcomes our alienation by giving us a god's-eye perspective.* (Jacob in Heathcote 2009, online)

Jacob's view captures the essence of model-making in that it helps to bridge an alienation in space. It misses out, however, on how models can bridge a sense of alienation in time. Susan Stewart's seminal study of the miniature (as well as the gigantic and the collection) *On Longing* (1996) grapples with this idea. Similar to Jacob, Stewart suggests that models offer a transcendent view, a view that is not realizable in lived experience. The transcendent view offers a sense of authorial knowledge, not apparent in the partial view of daily life (Stewart 1996: 69). However, this "authenticity" of the miniature object is compounded by the model's freezing of time. It exists outside of historical time:

*The reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its "use value" transformed into the infinite time of reverie.* (Stewart 1996: 66)

The miniature demarcates boundaries around itself and its infinite time through the bodily inaccessibility of its scale (Stewart 1996: 65). This element is further emphasized in *The Essex Castle* by its enclosure in a glass bottle. The object remains whole and uncontaminated by the world outside its borders. In fact, the narrowness of the bottleneck and the apparent impossibility of being able to fit the ship into the bottle suggests or pretends that there is no outside for this model, or at least that "inside" forms a conundrum (the model was, in fact, constructed inside the bottle, from the outside, with very long, thin handmade tools). Unlike the fragmented and partial views of contemporary life (the "inauthenticity" of mediated modernity), the model can provide both totality and stillness.

The arrested time and wholeness of the miniature object becomes a site for nostalgic fantasy that is predicated on a longing for completeness. The labour that goes into a model emphasizes this nostalgic action, "a nostalgia for craft" (Stewart 1996: 65). There is a distinction between



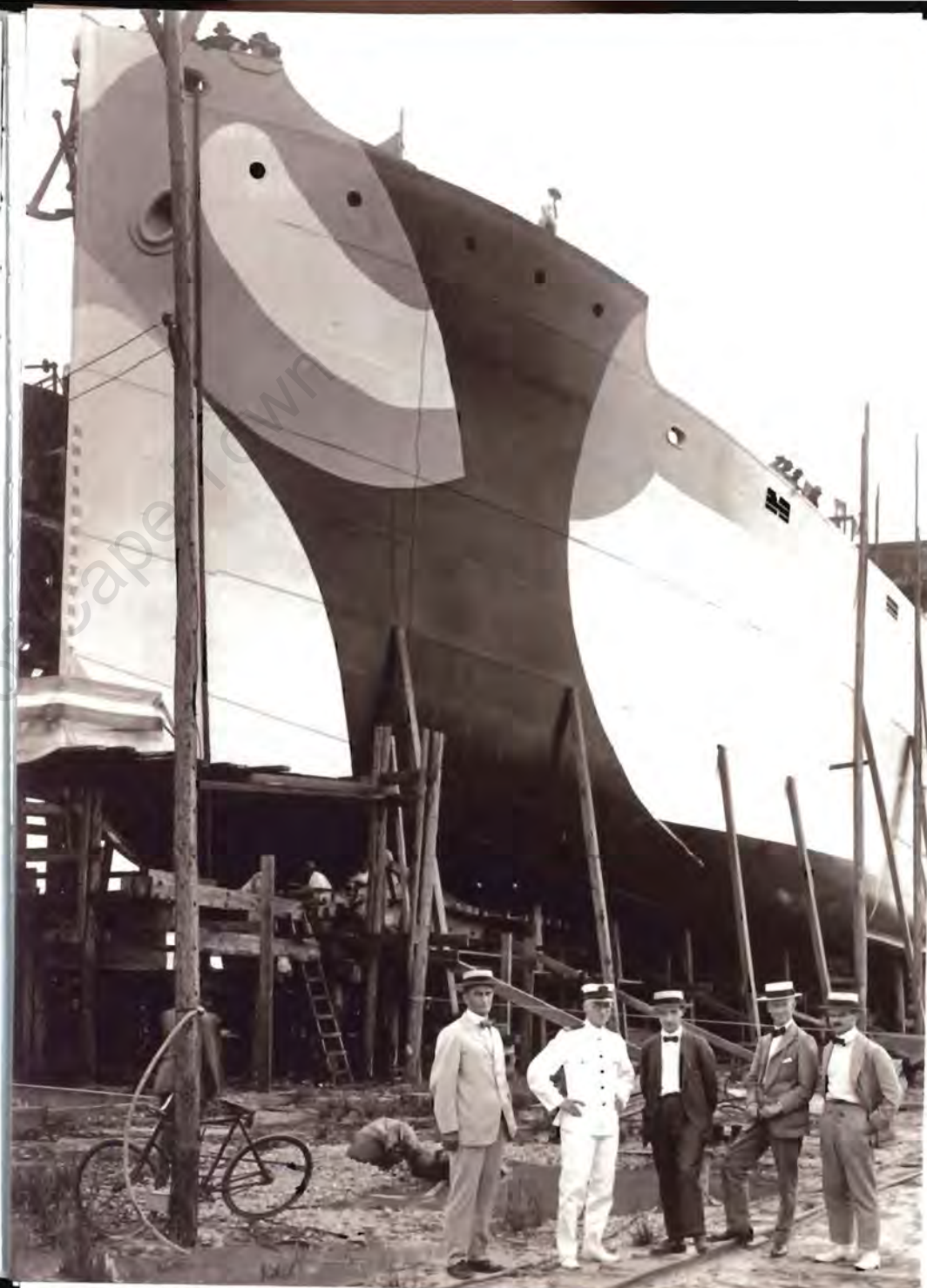
industrial labour, which emphasizes repetition and speed, and the labour of craft, which stresses uniqueness, slow duration and the work of the hand (Stewart 1996: 65). The size of the miniature also harks back to the toys of childhood. The miniature calls up a desire for pre-modern labour, which is perceived as authentic rather than alienated, and the innocence of childhood. These desires are particularly apparent in the settler, like my grandparents in the story told on the plaque. The dazzle camouflage on the model becomes synecdochic for their trip into a new colonial consciousness. The settler has dislocated him/herself from an imagined wholeness, creating a need for totality and stillness partially filled by nostalgia.

The style of *The Essex Castle* reflects the domestic or, more appropriately, the bar space. The wood and bronze would look as comfortable above a mantelpiece as next to a dartboard. It is an accoutrement associated with a space of intimacy and play, but also with privacy and isolation. The ship-in-a-bottle is the kind of busy work or tinkering often associated with the disenfranchised male, the dork or the retired engineer, the landlocked sailor longing for a deferred wholeness. It is not Phillip Marlowe, but Raymond Chandler. Chandler needs something exterior, in this case Marlowe, or even booze, to make him feel whole. Susan Stewart characterizes nostalgia as "a

sadness without an object" (Stewart 1996: 23). It is a desire for lived experience "at the lost point of origin" (Stewart 1996:19), an imagined ancestry and a past in which the person looking back remembers themselves as being whole. Nostalgia is typified by lack because the impossibility of living in this mythical origin requires a narrative of the past that redeems the denied present. Like the uncontaminated space of the model, this narrative is unfeasibly pure and, like all narratives, necessarily ideological. It is ironically inauthentic because it can never fulfill the desire for authentic lived experience (Stewart 1996: 23). This function of nostalgia, the search for origins, is again exemplified in the settler mentality, or in the double consciousness of their progeny. Ships-in-a-bottle, or indeed most examples of model-making, seem to be essentially nostalgic objects, both in their making, characterized by an obsessive desire to address the particulars of the 'original'; and in the viewing and collecting. They trigger a desire for transcendence, for unmediated experience. They freeze time in their denial of the present, while one's experience of the model concurrently denies experience and claims authenticity.

The lacuna between a desire for completeness and denied experience is one that haunts *A History of Failure*, and is continually pushed and hinted at. It is a difficult aspect of this project to address, in part because it stems from the stodgy angst of a post-millennium, post-apartheid, white male. It's a neo-colonial melancholy within myself, the disempowered empowered, that I am resisting, embarrassed about even, but which paradoxically drives this project. It's the double consciousness of my settler ancestry and lived native experience.

The dazzle paint scheme of the model embodies a disruption of this anxiety. My great-grandfather, Thomas Cole, pictured on the far right opposite, was a painter. He produced rather conventional paintings – portraits, flowers, landscapes – and smarmy commercial art – Coca Cola Santas, Van Rijn cigarette boxes, Weethix labels. However, during World War I he was recruited by the British Admiralty, as were many young artists, into Lieutenant-Commander Norman Wilkinson's corps of dazzle ship painters. Dazzle was a spectacular camouflage pattern, with bold geometric designs used on British and, later, American ships.



*The primary object of this scheme was not so much to cause the enemy to miss his shot when actually in firing position, but to mislead him, when the ship was first sighted, as to the position to take up. (Wilkinson in Newark 2007: 74)*

It was a camouflage of deflection, which interfered with the stereoscopic sighting tools of pre-sonar, pre-radar submarines and ships, and originated from a need in World War I to defend against new technologies, specifically the aeroplane and the torpedo. Many young avant-garde artists recruited into the war effort used modernist ideas about painting in their camouflage designs. Franz Marc (1880-1916), the German Expressionist, directly claimed this relation in his work as a camoufleur. He painted disruptive patterns onto tarpaulins to help disguise moving objects from the air, claiming his tarpaulins charted "a development from Manet to Kandinsky" (Marc in Newark 2007: 68). Less well known, but with a closer design relationship to dazzle, was André Mare (1885-1932). Mare was associated with the Cubists, especially the Duchamp-Villon circle. In his writings and sketchbooks he makes a link between the Cubist disarticulation of form and military camouflage (Newark 2007: 72).<sup>8</sup>

Each dazzle ship had a unique scheme designed by specialized corps of painters. The schemes' efficacy was tested by painting models and looking at them through modified periscopes (Newark 2007: 78). The painting of *The Essex Castle* could be considered an accurate act out of the history of World War I, via my great-grandfather and a few selected Modern artists. The circularity of this act is pleasing if serendipitous, but is broken by the blatant untruths of the work: a Union-Castle ship did bring my grandparents to South Africa after World War 2, but the *Essex Castle* never existed. The model ship's form is based on the *Arundel Castle*, which, with its two smoke stacks and gigantic size, cut a particularly recognizable profile in Cape Town harbour in the 40s and 50s. However, my grandparents never sailed on the *Arundel* either. The model's colour scheme is the distinctive red, black, white and lavender-grey of a Union-Castle ship, but the Union-Castle line was never painted with dazzle patterns. In fact, as mentioned above, dazzle

<sup>8</sup> Picasso suggested that modern camouflage directly evolved from Cubist experiments with disruption of space. However, no unequivocal evidence backs up this claim (Newark 2007: 72).



Théodore Géricault *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19)

was a distinctive World War I pattern rendered useless by the invention of radar and sonar in World War 2. The name *Essex* is derived from a famous whaleship sunk by an enormous sperm whale. The survivors, drifting in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, had to eat each other to stay alive.

The lies inherent in the work challenge the function of the model to provide authority, authenticity and transcendence. It provides fakery masked as authenticity, which emphasizes the narrative quality of that authenticity, and hence its ideological function. Instead of providing transcendence, it provides rhetoric. It uses the trusted language of nostalgia, the unchallengeable and convincing utterances of personal family history, to persuade of its authority. It is this passed-down experience, which forms the subject of nostalgic fantasies, that also provides the authority for a national identity. If an act of nostalgia uses the same language as nationalism (here considered as the strange, twisty Englishness that haunts the ex-colonial family), then those languages could be considered roughly analogous. I distrust the nostalgic impulse, because the sense of nostalgia generated in this instance seems tied to a nostalgia for a vanished Empire.



Yinka Shonibare *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* (2010)

While a viewer might suspect an untruth, the lies are not necessarily self-evident. They are hinted at by the constructed nature of the scene, the model, the speciousness of art itself and by the spectacle of the gallery setting. However, untruth is never overtly stated. The visual qualities of the work, then, point to a similar function as the fictions. This is well illustrated by an example: Yinka Shonibare's 2010 work for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, London, entitled *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* is a work incredibly resonant in function to *The Essex Castle*. Typically Shonibare creates sculptures in the form of "European" artefacts, most commonly from the 19th century, covered or created from Dutch wax cloth – a cloth associated with Africa, but in itself a strange hybrid of origins. *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* is a massive scale model of the famous *HMS Victory*, set in a giant bottle, decked out with sails made from Dutch wax cloth. This "intervention" into a historical narrative, the Battle of Trafalgar, and a monumental person, Lord Nelson, suggests that the authority of accepted history is rhetorical. Although the scale is huge in terms of traditional ships-in-bottles, the ship's size and container are faintly ridiculous, teasing the notion of Nelson's monumentality. Shonibare's use of Dutch wax cloth points

to an essential hybridity within English and African history. It pokes holes in the idea of both British national purity and Africa's supposed primitive purity in this imperial model. A simple visual change of the sails upsets the authority of the model.

In *The Essex Castle* the dazzle design performs a similar role. Although the design itself is accurate enough (to that of World War 1 ships), the absurdity of the bright, almost jazzy, patterning on so serious an object unsettles its authorial stability. The function of dazzle, to deflect vision and obscure form, performs a metaphoric role within the model to destabilize its overt meaning. This unsettledness is doubled up by the earlier mentioned function of the dazzle as a signifier of dislocation. In a poetic turn, it suggests that my grandparents, and by correlation their dreams of South Africa as a Utopia far from war-torn Europe and their longing for home, are equally unsound.

This utopian dreaming is better explicated, albeit from a different perspective, by examining *The Union of South Africa*.



## THE UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA

*The Union of South Africa* is a disc with a one metre diameter, resting on the floor. The disc contains a model landscape of mostly scrubby bushes and grasses. A dirt road and a rusting fence create a radius, while two spindly trees struggle for life. The tones and model plants are suggestive of a South African landscape, with a Karoo dryness and dustiness. Tracing the edges of the disc is a circular raised gravel embankment from which emerges a model railway track. The track traces the circle but then lifts off the ground, forming a helix with six revolutions that stretches to a height of just over three and a half metres, suspended with fine steel cable. On the final revolution, perched precariously high above one's head, is a model steam train, its tender, and a single passenger carriage. The engine is green and distinctively streamlined. The model represents the LNER Class A4 4488 locomotive built in 1937, and named for the Union of South Africa. The LNER Class A4s were the fastest trains in the world, with the Union of South Africa's sister train the 4468 Mallard still holding the record for the fastest steam locomotive (Wikipedia 2011: online).

After the train, the track helix comes to an abrupt end in midair.



The model train has similar implications, in terms of its modelness, as the bottled ship *The Essex Castle*, with its transcendent authority, frozen time and evocation of nostalgia. Train models also have specific implications unique to their form. Railroads, in the real, brought a distinctly new relationship to the land. The opportunity to cross the land at great speed changed the felt experience of land travel to one of a rapidly shifting landscape. This panoramic experience is reflected in

the model train, whose tracks are laid through a miniature landscape. A model transcends not only the mechanical, but also the land itself, by being above the range of normal human experience of the land (Stewart 1996: 59). Although only suggested by *The Union of South Africa*, the model train's potential movement around the track accentuates its toyness. Susan Stewart characterizes this movement as a shift "from work to play, from utility to aesthetics, from ends to means" (Stewart 1996: 59). The shift signals a celebration of the mechanical for its own sake, and correspondingly an erasure of labour.

This erasure, "the immortal leisure promised by surplus value" (Stewart 1996: 59), is well evident in Christo Doherty's recent body of work *Small Worlds* (2009). Doherty photographed a variety of model train engineers' layouts in which the photographs' tight depth of field highlights the smallness of the models and their particular unreality. More important, however, is their timelessness, a static absence of labour in favour of play and nostalgia. Doherty's photographs highlight the model train's aesthetic function. The erasure of labour, as we will see, becomes a significant element within *The Union of South Africa*, and within views of the South African landscape in general.

The shape of the model train, in particular its streamlining, introduces a different tension within the work. Here is an object that is both purposefully modern in design, yet nostalgic because it

invokes the style of the 1930s. The shape of the track, the helix moving upwards, implies progress, but is also at odds with the nostalgic content. Svetlana Boym suggests in her book, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), that this tension is not in conflict at all: nostalgic manifestations are side effects of progress. It is not tension, but causation. Nostalgia could be considered as a direct result of modernity.<sup>9</sup> Progress, in Boym's conception, is the result of a new modern comprehension of time, one

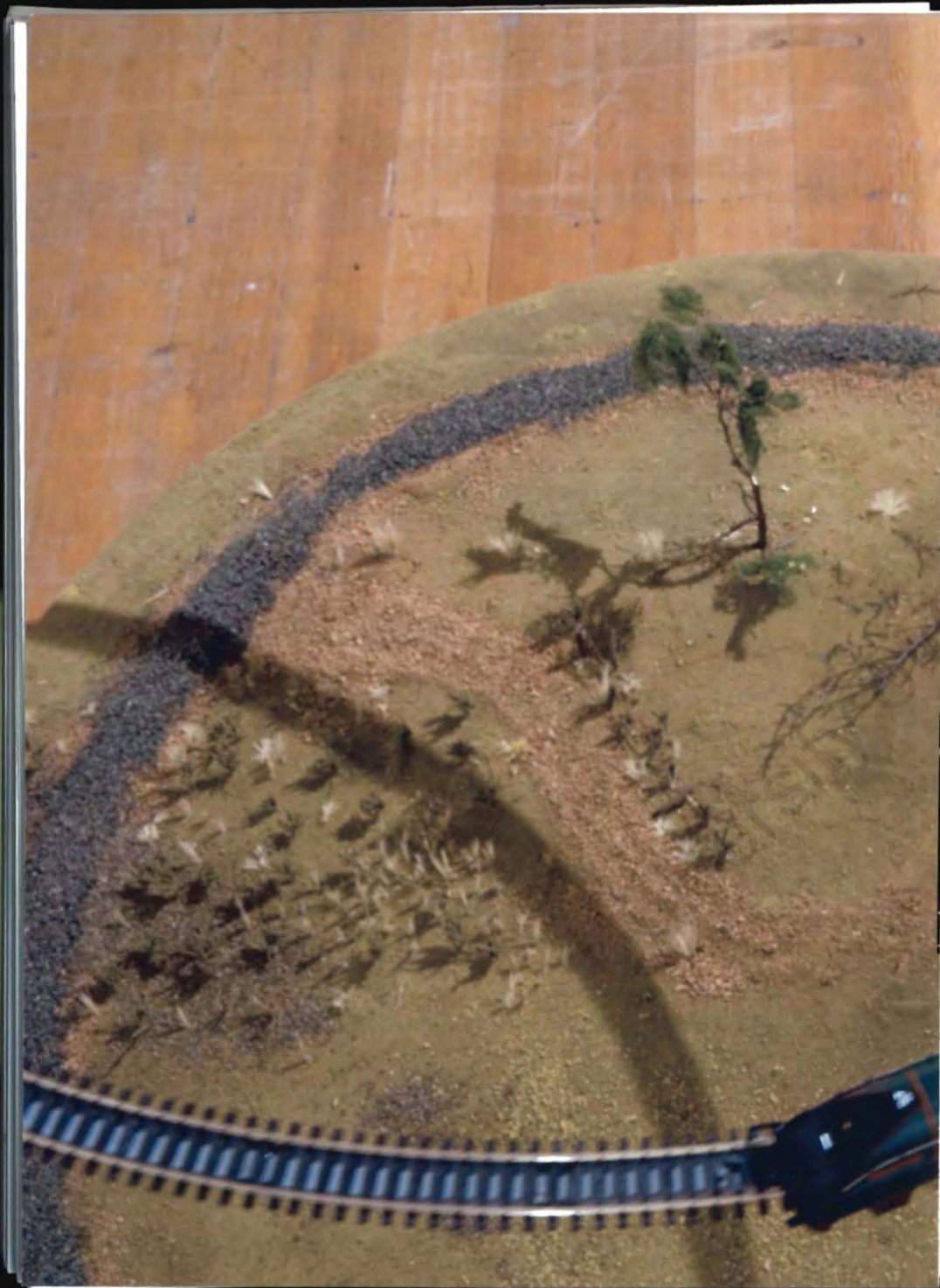


that moves sequentially forward. It is the time of the factory clock, which implies an expectation of production in the future. Nostalgia, a hankering for the presence of the past, can only exist within this time, time which delineates the past so absolutely; it is a consequence of temporal divisions. Boym quotes Bruno Latour:

*The modern time of progress and the anti-modern time of "tradition" are twins who failed to recognize one another. The idea of an identical repetition of the past and that of a radical rupture with any past are two symmetrical results of a single concept of time. (Latour in Boym 2001: 19)*

Nostalgia is dependent on this concept of time as unrepeatable and irreversible. The present, in this conception, is continually deferred to an oncoming expectation of the future. This time sits easily in the Christian world (as 30s South Africa could have been regarded), because it is a secular reflection of its religious eschatology. Thus, far from being about the past, nostalgia is a symptom of this deferment to the future. It is the desire for lived experience, as opposed to expectation of the future, but is imagined in the irrevocable point of origin (Boym 2001: 10). Jean Baudrillard associates this deferment with the erosion of the real, a process he sees happening through simulation: "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There

<sup>9</sup> I'm referring to modernity here as the period of industrial capitalism. The term "progress" is also used in this context.



is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity” (1994: 6). This point of origin, the nostalgic past, is never real; it is mythical and narrative. As such, there is deep-seated fear of an actual analytic reflection on history. The nostalgic object is kept at a distance as a vehicle for longing. Longing resembles the emotions of lived experience, but doesn't act as a signpost for critical reflection on the past. The object becomes fetishized, but the desire is not necessarily for a return to the past so much as for the preservation of the fetishized object (Burgess 2006: 285). The object becomes a screen for the projection of emotions rather than a revelation of the events of the past. In contemporary times this is reflected in the commodification of the fetishized object as “retro”. A critical reflection on history, as opposed to a fetishized commodity, denies the very structure of time that upholds the nostalgic object. History, with its byways and eddies, doesn't reflect the unrepeatable, sequential time that defers the present. The model becomes the perfect embodiment of nostalgia: distant, frozen and authenticated by the visual – the appearance of being old – rather than the historical.

*The Union of South Africa*, with its South African landscape and modern train, invokes a particular kind of nostalgic object. Boym characterizes nostalgia, or at least how nostalgia is made sense of in culture, in two ways: the restorative and the reflective. She suggests that “restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and time” (Boym 2011: 41). *The Union of South Africa* resembles an object of restorative nostalgia (although its function for me might well be reflective). This form uses the conservative rhetoric of tradition, or continuity with the past; it is the backbone of nationalism. The past is perceived as a pure time, and nostalgic desire drives us to return to that sense of wholeness. It is conspiratorial and exclusive in nature. It desires to restore a homeland against the evil forces of otherness. The distinct nationalism of *The Union of South Africa* pushes the objects that comprise it towards this type of nostalgia. However, as Frederic Jameson says, “[...] a history lesson is the best cure for nostalgic pathos” (1991: 156).



H. Pieterse Bosveld, *Landscape* (1932)

The Union of South Africa, as a political and territorial unit, was formed in 1910. After the divisive South African War (1899-1902), the new Union needed to construct a unified community of nationhood, albeit only for its white citizens, from the two former Boer Republics and the British colonies in order to justify and protect its own existence. This community would have to be imagined, as at this time “South Africa” did not exist beyond fragments and micro-allegiances. The image of individual communion to the nation still had to be created (Anderson 1991: 6). One of the ways this nationhood was mediated and constructed was through land, which could be envisioned as communal and encompassing the whole (Foster 2008: 3). In 1909, the government formed a corporation called the South African Railways & Harbours (SAR&H), which grew steadily in the following decades. The SAR&H became a hugely powerful company, employing at this time 10 percent of the country's entire population (Foster 2008: 202). Within this role it had enormous nation-building capacity and, while South Africa was still a dominion of the British Empire, an important carrier of imperialism. The company itself required a unified nation for its effective financial functioning, and so promoted economic and social integration of

the divided white community, linking the pre-Union republics into a cohesive whole. More importantly, it linked remote dorps to the centers of economy. The railway served as a symbol of white progress and economic stability. It pushed against the ideological resistance of the small towns to modernization and British imperialism, because it provided tangible economic benefits (Foster 2008: 203-4).

Beyond this, the railways transformed how South Africa's national territory was pictured and imagined. The speed of locomotive motion through the land and the railway's broad web of infrastructure changed an experience of the land from an individual and localized one rooted in agricultural labour to a panoramic collective view that was coherent and accessible. The ability to see a lot of land at great speed promoted the notion of a national landscape (Foster 2008: 201-9). This view was further promoted by the publication of the *South African Railways & Harbours Magazine*. This monthly journal was one of the most widely read periodicals of the time (Foster 2008: 205). Along with picture postcards, the magazine was a major distribution point for images that reflected this idea of a national landscape. The photographs allowed the idea of a collective, national landscape to be synthesized. The frequent inclusion of trains in these images provided a modern counterpoint to the wilderness and the insertion of a modern subjectivity that assisted the development of a national identity and character: modern, yet rooted to the land.

The use of photography as a medium made it possible to scale and read the landscape (Foster 2008: 214). In fact, as Susan Stewart suggests, photographs function in a similar way to models, providing a sense of authentic distanced experience (Stewart 1996: 48). The photograph, like the model, provides a visual authenticity that fixes objects as both nostalgic and historical. Importantly for the artwork *The Union of South Africa*, these photographs validated a desire for the landscape to be regarded as empty and timeless. This seeming emptiness and timelessness served three functions within the newly emergent sense of South African nationhood. Firstly, it provided an image of an idealized past, necessary to provide a sense of common history and to fill the anxious nostalgia for the premodern that defined rural whites (Foster 2008: 231). Secondly, it supplied an imaginary land to be filled. This



Manique Peber *Bosveld, Transvaal* (2010)

fulfilled the English South African desire for an expansive colonial land and the Afrikaner's myth of a promised land for a chosen people (Foster 1998: 253) and allowed South Africa to be seen as a Utopia by both the Afrikaners and the English. Finally, it served as an act of erasure – it erased the acts of labour, necessary when picturing a Utopia. It erased the conflict about the land, erased its divisive history, and entirely erased the black communities already resident on the land. If they were pictured at all, it would be as a picturesque exotic, without any claims to the modernizing land. The black population was squeezed out of the land both by these photographs and physically by law,<sup>10</sup> to create

<sup>10</sup> The Native Land Act of 1913 regulated the ownership and acquisition of land by black people in South Africa. There were some black settlement areas allowed, a forerunner to the apartheid system of homelands.



Top Star Drive-in, Johannesburg 2011

an emptiness against which a new notion of white nationhood could be inscribed (Foster 1998: 229).

This foundational violence is re-invoked and repeated by South African nostalgia for the past. The objects comprising *The Union of South Africa* are, as mentioned, deeply nostalgic in a restorative sense, appealing to a conservative continuity with the past. However, the track is about to end, the train will fall off. Implicit in the work is an imminent disaster.

The model train's streamlined shape reflects this restorative, violent and political nostalgia. It is of a particular 30s style related to Art Deco, known as Streamline Moderne and characterized by swept-back shapes and clean lines. It is a style that evoked a sense of futurity. The style is satirised in a short story by William Gibson called *The Gernsback Continuum* (1988), in which a contemporary photographer is commissioned to document Streamline Moderne artefacts for a book.

*"Think of it," Dialta Downes had said, "as a kind of alternate America: a 1980 that never happened. An architecture of broken dreams."* (Gibson 1988: Kindle edition)

This raygun architecture and signage is how the 1930s imagined the future. As the photographer becomes more immersed in this future of the past, he starts to have waking visions of the vintage world of tomorrow. His therapist suggests that he is seeing "semiotic ghosts" (Gibson 1988: Kindle edition). He wakes up one morning to see the city of this future, all spires and flying cars. Nearby, a blond and blue-eyed family is eating food pills next to a chromed, finned automobile. He describes it as having "all the sinister fruitiness of Hitler Youth propaganda" (Gibson 1988: Kindle edition). The cure for his semiotic ghosts, as he eventually finds out, is to immerse himself in contemporary culture. He watches bad daytime TV and reads about the petrol crisis in the Economist. He describes it as the "condensed catastrophe" of the "near-dystopia we live in" (Gibson 1988: Kindle edition). This apocalyptic cure, like the abrupt ending of the train track, is something I will discuss in more detail later.

One of the notable designers of Streamline Moderne, Norman Bel Geddes, provides an interesting insight into the "sinister fruitiness" of the style. Bel Geddes was a proponent of streamlining, not only as a design principle but as a theory of social organization too. Bel Geddes was, along with Henry Ford and Walt Disney, an active theorist of eugenics. Streamlining, with its ideas of surface cleanliness, found its social parallel in the eugenic body (Cogdell 2000). Bel Geddes' design principles, both social and practical, culminated in Futurama. Futurama, as discussed by Roland Marchand (1992), was a model city designed for the 1939 New York World's Fair. It was commissioned by General Motors and proved to be incredibly popular, with legendarily long queues. Futurama, also called "The World of Tomorrow", was Norman Bel Geddes' vision of a utopian 1960. The future was shown as idyllic, with efficient rural areas connected by massive highways to ordered and clean cities. The entire model was visible to the public through a system of conveyor belts, which gave them an aerial view of the "World of Tomorrow". The GM pavilion itself was designed to give the viewer an immersive experience (Marchand 1992: 31).

Bel Geddes' vision of the future was exclusive and evasive. There were no slums, the poor were not represented, the miniature scale

made little provision for human relations and the rural villages were centralized around a church (Marchand 1992: 40).

The transcendental view of a clean, empty national future viewed from above is reflected in *The Union of South Africa*. This idea of a specific transcendental view sums up many of the issues raised by the work. When expanded to the concept of South African land, this view invokes an authority, which is associated with an emptiness for both Boer and English settler desires. When shrunk to the scale of the model, this view conjures a nostalgia and a mythical purity. The train object itself suggests a particular South African modernism, tied to the land in a primitivist Utopian sense while embracing the progressiveness of technology. This aspect, condensed in the idea of streamlined Art Deco styling, is better discussed through the zeppelin that appears in *The De La Rey*.

University of Cape Town



# OVERNIGHT TO CAPE TOWN

## THE DE LA REY

*The De La Rey* is a work in four parts. The first part is a wall of four identical wheat-pasted posters, torn and layered over each other as if they have been there forever. The poster is in an Art Deco style, with simple colours, clean lines and tonal gradients. It pictures an airship<sup>11</sup> floating above a (slightly modified) representation of the Old Mutual building in central Cape Town. Across the bottom runs the promise: "Overnight to Cape Town".

The second is a black and white, large-scale glossy photograph of the airship emerging from a bank of clouds. It is framed in a grey frame with linear decorative molding. It operates somewhere between a commemorative photograph and official corporate decoration.

The third is a series of sixteen aged postcards mounted together, showing both backs and fronts. The front of the postcards show the airship in flight across various South African landscapes and during an Antarctic flight. The postcard backs are addressed and covered with

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout this essay I use zeppelin and airship interchangeably to denote a rigid, gas filled, lighter than air flying machine. It is not to be confused with a blimp, which gains form from gas pressure rather than from a rigid skeleton.



stamps, cancels and cachets.<sup>12</sup> The addresses and franking show that the postcards originate from all around South Africa, including South West Africa, in the late 1930s. The stamps, in denominations of shillings, are specially designed with zeppelin motifs. Together with the quality of the photographs, these provide a sense of time and place for the cards. The cachets proclaim that the airship is called the *De La Rey*<sup>13</sup> and that it has made several important flights.

The final part is a large ragged fragment of what could be assumed to be the *De La Rey*'s fabric covering. It is frayed and holey, suggesting a catastrophic end.

Together these four works are simulations of authentic objects that create the existence of the airship *De La Rey*. The zeppelin has

<sup>12</sup> Cancels are the inked date stamps used to cancel postage stamps when they are used. Cachets are special ink stamps used to commemorate a special delivery of mail, like the inauguration of a new route or the first flight of a zeppelin. Stamps, cancels and cachets are all part of a piece of mail's franking. Zeppelins were often funded by philatelists, who invested in the future value of zeppelin stamps and cachets (Grossman 2010: online).

<sup>13</sup> The name *De La Rey* is a play on the fact that the infamous airship *Hindenburg* was named for a famous German WWI general. *De La Rey* was a well-loved South African War Boer general and is the subject of a particularly nostalgic song by contemporary Afrikaans singer Bok van Blerk.

a particularly interesting relationship to industrial modernization. It was a symbol of modernity because of its technical complexity, enormous size and fulfillment of the dream of long-distance flight. The war-diarist, Katherine Mansfield, writing of her first encounter with a zeppelin, gives a sense of the power it wielded over the imagination:

*I never thought of Zeppelins until I saw the rush of heads and bodies turning upwards as the Ultimate Fish passed by, flying high, with fins of silky grey. It is absurd to say that romance is dead when things*



Ivan Milford-Barberton Sculpture from the Old Mutual Building, Cape Town (1940)


*like this happen – & the noise it made almost soothing you know steady and clear doo-da-doo-da – like a horn. I longed to go out and follow it but instead I waited and still the trumpets blared – and finally when it was over I made some tea & felt that a great danger was past & longed to throw my arms around someone it gave me a feeling of boundless physical relief – like the aftermath of an earthquake.* (Mansfield in Freedman 2004: 53)

Mansfield's narrative of the zeppelin describes an encounter with modernist sublime (Freedman 2004: 50). As the zenith of Streamline Moderne design, it provides an awesome experience between futurity and fear. The propensity for zeppelins to burst into flames provides a neat counterpoint to this idea of it as the ultimate modernist object. Progress, here, engenders its own self-destruction.

Like the train in *The Union of South Africa*, zeppelins were Art Deco objects, designed in the same style of industrial Deco styling known as Streamline Moderne. In a paper on South African Art Deco architecture, Marilyn Martin suggests that the decorative programmes of the buildings might have political implications:

*A striving for nationalism and pride in one's own achievement against internationalism and imperialism could also be expressed*






*In sculptural embellishment. The appropriation of decorative schemes and the South African theme present[s] an image of the dominance and success of capitalism and Afrikanerdom. (Martin 1994: 25)*

These decorative embellishments often presented a strange mix of modernist style with primitivist ideology, such as the reliefs on the Old Mutual Building, which depict racial categories believed to exist in South Africa. Federico Freschi more explicitly associates the Art Deco architectural style itself with the development of *volkskapitalisme*, literally capitalism for the people, and the formation of a modern Afrikaner identity. The style was at odds with British colonial architecture and thus implied a unique Afrikaner identity. Freschi equates the idea of modernity, as symbolized by the Art Deco skyscrapers such as the Old Mutual Building in Cape Town and the SANTAM and SANLAM Building (now known as Waalburg, also in Cape Town), with a construction of ideology and Afrikaner national identity (2004: 15). In essence, the identity of a modernizing Afrikaner was reflected in the construction of Art Deco buildings, while the notion of roots, land and primitivism, important to the Boer aspect of Afrikaner identity, were acknowledged in the decorative schemes. In addition to the *De La Rey* as an imagined Art Deco construction, two actual South African Art Deco buildings make important appearances in the work. The Old Mutual Building forms the centerpiece of the poster, while the Tower of Light, a Moderne building constructed for the 1936 Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg, appears in the cachets on the postcards.

While the framework for imagining *The De La Rey's* existence and its potential function as a nation-building project is present in South African history, *The De La Rey's* narrative must still be considered as a fake history. If, as noted before, a new common history was inscribed on the South African landscape, then that history implied a common destiny, one that partly encompassed progress and modernization.



The play between believability and fakeness works towards breaking down this historical determinism apparent in the production of a South African identity. By historical determinism, I mean the concept of history as governed by laws or destiny outside the will of human beings, like the myth that history is naturally leading to worldwide establishment of liberal democracy. In South Africa this determinism was pulled by the Christian god and pushed by the pressure of the burgeoning exclusive national identity. Its two touch points would be the Afrikaner as God's chosen people and the colonial pseudo-science of Social Darwinism.

The action of this fake history can be elaborated by looking at literature, in particular a sub-genre of sci-fi called alternate history.<sup>14</sup> It is alternate not in the sense of a hidden or secret history which could be realistically recovered, as in revisionist history, but is a different, fictional history. A popular recent example is *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002) by Kim Stanley Robinson. The novel imagines a world in which the Black Death wipes out 99 percent of the European population in the middle ages. This changes the course of history radically, with China, India and the Middle East becoming the dominant world powers. This genre imagines a split in some part of history – in this example the spread of the bubonic plague – and imagines the consequences of that split.

Alternate history novels are fictional explorations of the historical technique called counterfactual history. Counterfactual history is an object of hostility or scorn among many professional historians (Ferguson 1997: 5) for its potential to tend towards the ridiculously fanciful or nonsensical. It literally imagines alternative possibilities in history. Recently, the idea of counterfactual history has regained some academic traction. In Niall Ferguson's book *Virtual History* (1997), he

<sup>14</sup> Alternate history is grammatically incorrect – more properly 'counterfactual history' – but has fallen into common usage.

edits together a series of counterfactual histories. In his introduction to the volume, he posits that counterfactuals are an integral part of causal interpretation. If one wants to determine if something has significance as a cause, one has to imagine the results of removing it from the equation (Ferguson 1997: 80). Karl Popper makes a similar point in *The Poverty of Historicism*:

*There are, indeed, countless possible conditions; and in order to be able to examine these possibilities in our search for the true conditions of a trend, we have all the time to try to imagine conditions under which the trend in question would disappear. But this is just what the historicist cannot do [...] The poverty of historicism, we might say, is a poverty of imagination. (2002: 119-20).*

The implication of this argument is that in order to figure out the causes of the present, one must think counterfactually. This allows for contingency in history and allows that causes are contingent, not determined. Though this may act as a reasonable refutation of historical determinism, belief in these theories is still a powerful force in contemporary global politics. Ferguson believes that the propagation of counterfactual histories and their acceptance into mainstream thought is "a necessary antidote to determinism"<sup>15</sup> (Ferguson 1997: 89). Counterfactual history, then, can have two interrelated functions: to work against determinism and to cast light onto the present moment.

Ferguson's understanding of useful counterfactuals requires them to be plausible (Ferguson 1997: 85). If we are structuring a counterfactual question along the lines of "If...Then...", then, for the consequent (the 'then') to be plausible, the antecedent (the 'if') must be plausible (Bunzl 2004: 5).<sup>16</sup> This requires evidence that the antecedent was a plausible option for those involved at the time. If we look at counterfactual history as an element of alternate history novels, however, the burden

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that Ferguson's political views fall distinctly and a little unpleasantly to the Right. His personal counterfactual fantasy is imagining Germany winning the Great War. Counterfactuals are by no means free of ideology, but I don't believe this necessarily refutes Ferguson's argument against determinism.

<sup>16</sup> "If a force of Senegalese liberation fighters had destroyed the concentration camps prior to 1945, then Israel wouldn't exist as a state today" for example, is not a credible counterfactual.





of this evidence is placed within the plausibility of the narrative and effective suspension of disbelief. In the world of fiction, plausibility is a function of form.

If, in the language of counterfactuals, *The De La Rey* could be considered as an alternate history, then its plausibility would rely on the visual validity of the work. The visual style of *The De La Rey's* four components is highly representational, in particular the photograph and the postcard fronts, which carry within them their own illusion of truth. Photographs generally read as a scaled-down, readable version of the real. Through the clarity of their representation they validate their own past, and thus the addition of the fake element, in this instance a zeppelin generated with 3-d imaging software, assumes the authenticity of the photograph. It is important to note here that even my use of photographs presents them as objects – they are postcards with bent corners and worn surfaces – not two-dimensional representations. The poster claims validity through a replication of Art Deco poster style, especially the use of simple geometric motifs, tonal gradients and a limited colour palette, and printing techniques, in this instance offset lithography. The fragment of zeppelin skin becomes a believable object through a process of aging and abrading of the surface. Like the

bar discussed earlier in the essay, the objects that suggest the existence of the *De La Rey* are both what they appear to be – photographs, strip of cloth, a poster – and at the same time artworks that represent those things. They are simultaneously real and illusion.

In the alternate history novel *The Man in the High Castle* (1982) by Philip K Dick, the ambiguity between objects and realistic representations of them is teased out. The novel takes place in a timeline in which Germany and Japan won World War 2. The Japanese, occupying the former United States of America, have begun to fetishize authentic American culture. This in turn has spawned a market in highly believable fakes. One of the forgery kingpins, Wyndham-Matson, muses to his mistress about the difference between the real and the fake:

*She said, "What is historicity?"*

*"When a thing has history in it. Listen. One of those two Zippo lighters was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's pocket when he was assassinated. And one wasn't. One has historicity, a hell of a lot of it. As much as any object ever had. And one has nothing. Can you feel it?" he nudged her. "You can't. You can't tell which is which. There's no 'mystical plasmic presence,' no 'aura' around it." (Dick 1982: 35)*

Eventually the woman suggests that neither Zippo belonged to Roosevelt:

*Wyndham-Matson giggled. "That's my point! I'd have to prove it to you with some sort of document. A paper of authenticity. And so it's all a fake, a mass delusion. The paper proves its worth not the object itself!"*

*"Show me the paper."*

*"Sure." Hopping up, he made his way back into the study. From the wall he took the Smithsonian Institution's framed certificate: the paper and the lighter had cost him a fortune, but they were worth it – because they enabled him to prove he was right, that the word "fake" meant nothing really, since the word "authentic" meant nothing really. (Dick 1982: 36)*

Dick is suggesting that there is essentially no difference between objects and accurate representations of them. Historicity and authenticity are found not in the objects themselves – there is no "mystical plasmic



presence” – but in their presentation and context. In *The De La Rey*, however, the original objects don't exist; only the presentation does.

An analogy for the highly believable fakeness of *The De La Rey* is trompe l'oeil painting. While my objects physically protrude into space, an impression that trompe l'oeil creates through painted illusionism, they share an obsession with the believable surface. Trompe l'oeil glorifies resemblance. Jean Baudrillard suggests that the “pushing forward of a mirror of objects to encounter a subject that resembles them” (Baudrillard 1988: 56) undermines our very consciousness of reality:

*In trompe-l'oeil it is never a matter of confusion with the real: what is important is the production of a simulacrum in full consciousness of the game and of the artifice by miming the third dimension, throwing doubt on the reality of that third dimension in miming and outdoing the effect of the real, throwing radical doubt on the principle of reality.* (Baudrillard 1988:58)

As opposed to miming the third dimension, *The De La Rey* is a creation of surfaces, of patinas and wear. It mimics the effects of the fourth dimension – time. Too caught up in the creation of an alternative history to challenge the very nature of reality, there is yet an element of disquiet, an unsettling of the effects of time.

In an essay analyzing William Harnett's trompe l'oeil *The Faithful Colt* (1890) (pictured overleaf), Cecile Whiting (1997) considers how what seems to be a nostalgic memorial for the American Civil War is in fact highly ambiguous. The painting depicts a Colt handgun, poetically hung up against an old barn wall. Rather than showing the gun in action it evokes the idea that this object is the centre point of memories and stories. Whiting suggests that the function of trompe l'oeil in the post-Civil War period was to call in to question the fantasy of memorialisation. This was a relevant topic in the 1890s when the effects of the war and its subsequent mythologisation were being reexamined. The illusionism of trompe l'oeil created a tension between both past vs. present and real vs. representation that unsettled its meaning (Whiting 1997). By accentuating the nostalgia – the poetry of the composition – but imbuing it with ambiguity, *The Faithful Colt* calls into question how history is transformed into myth in its writing. Whiting's essay



Willem Claesz Heda *Still Life with Gilt Goblet* (1635)

suggests that the actual form of the painting, trompe l'oeil, points to an alternative interpretation, a more ambiguous memorial.

Hanneke Grootenboer's book, *The Rhetoric of Perspective* (2005), investigates the idea that the form of illusionism can unsettle meaning. In certain 17th century Dutch still lifes, intense illusionism used against flat backgrounds accentuates the use of perspective as a rhetorical device: rather than being a third dimension in painting, it convinces us that the third dimension is there. For example, in *Still Life with Gilt Goblet* (1635) (pictured overleaf) by Willem Claesz Heda, the plates, knife and lemon peel lying on the edge of the table seem to project forward out of the picture plane. However, this trick of perspective doesn't create an illusion of depth, as the space almost immediately stops at a blank bare wall. This accentuates the use of perspective to create an image of three-dimensionality, without allowing the eye to relax into a naturalized illusion of space. This, as Grootenboer proposes, suggests that perspective is rhetorical, that it is used to convince us of the reality of the scene. The laying bare of the rhetorical devices of the

painting reveals that the paintings aren't about the objects depicted, but about the act of painting itself. She is suggesting that the actual form of trompe l'oeil is itself allegorical, in that the content is pointing not to a meaning within itself, but to a parallel meaning about the nature of painting (Grootenboer 2005).

As posited earlier, the illusionism of *The De La Rey* isn't a creation in the third dimension, but a simulation of the fourth. Correspondingly, it isn't perspective that is rhetorical, but the aging of the surface. The provable unhistory of the South African zeppelin, like the blank wall of *Still Life with Gilt Goblet*, lays this rhetoric bare in that it shows the aging as a device, rather than an integral part of the objects. The illusionism, in this instance the illusion of aging, is allegorical. It isn't illusionism for its own sake (although there is a pleasure in the skill), but points to a meaning outside of itself. If the passing of time can be seemingly authenticated by illusion, then history is wobbly and uncertain; the certainty of our present moment is called into question.

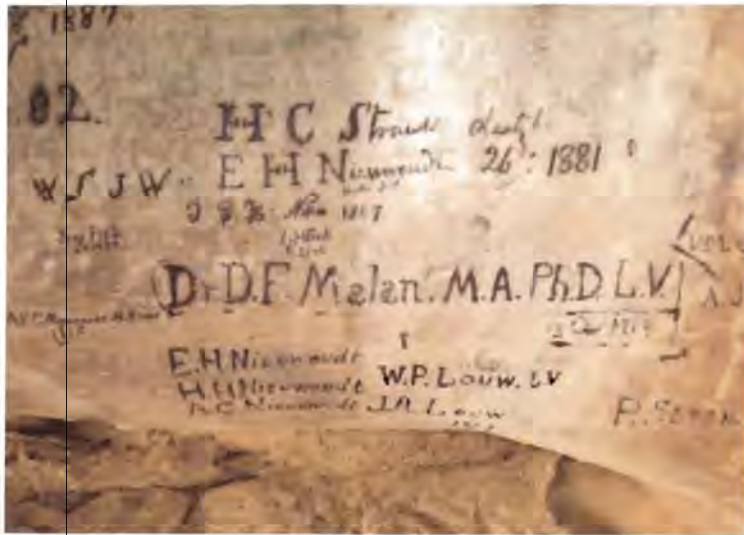
*The De La Rey* evokes two ideas besides an analysis of Deco in South Africa. The first is that an alternate history can unsettle deterministic thinking around history, and these fictional histories are validated through form. The second idea is that the form, illusionism, reveals itself as allegory, pointing to a parallel meaning outside of itself. I'll refine this idea of allegory further in the discussion of *Cenotaph*. For now, another aspect of alternate history is examined through *The Cleansing*.

## THE CLEANSING



*The Cleansing* consists of six photographs on various media, newspaper, photographic paper and a book cover. They are presented in a variety of ways, such as in old photographic albums, frames or shelves. Some of the images present dates, suggesting a passage of time from the first to last photograph. The first image, dated 1948, shows a group portrait of six men. Recognizable in the image are Jan Smuts and D.F. Malan, who at that date was the first National Party Prime Minister of South Africa, and had begun to institute the system of grand apartheid (the other four figures are less familiar). Each subsequent image shows the same photograph, the dates advancing in time, but with one figure removed – airbrushed or cropped out. The figures reduce from six to one. The final image is displayed on the cover of a book. It shows D.F. Malan alone. The backdrop has been replaced by a series of Roman columns. The book's title is 'n Lewe by Dr D.F. Malan M.A., Ph.D., L.V.

The work is a doubling of alternate histories, one nesting in the other. The first is inscribed, much like *The De La Rey*, into the surface of the objects. They appear to be both real and aged. This alternate history pictures an imagined Malan purging political enemies from the record. It tells the story of a fictional apartheid period, in which the power of the government becomes subsumed by one man. The images



D.F. Malan's name inscribed onto the wall of the Stadsaal, a cave in the Cederberg, Western Cape

become more idealized and the backgrounds are smoothed out, or they are hand-coloured in lively tones, until only Malan alone remains, equating his power with the glory of the Roman empire. This alternate history is validated by the aging of the objects, the detailed little folds and abrasions that signify the passing of real time. It is further authenticated by its imagined location: someone in an indistinct time has isolated this collection of objects for display (I discuss this mystery time in more detail later).

The second alternate history is inscribed in the photographs, and dependent on the first. If the D.F. Malan character were an actual historical subject (he is to a degree – his image is historically accurate, but his narrative in the work is mostly fictional), the photographs could signify his own rewriting of history. This history relies on the truth power of the photograph. Roland Barthes describes the photograph as indexical, a semiotic term meaning that there is a direct relationship between a signifier and its signified, like a pointing finger. The signified is “not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens,



Lord Byron's name inscribed onto the wall of the Chateau de Chillon, a castle in Montreux, Switzerland

without which there would be no photograph” (Barthes 2000: 76). A photograph convinces us of its truth: that what was in front of the lens existed. Even if we are skeptical of the use of the photograph, it maintains this truth function: “Photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing... never to its existence” (Barthes 2000: 87).

This is the rhetoric of the photograph, and it is hard to penetrate. Unlike the revelation of the rhetoric of perspective that Grootenboer points out in Dutch still life, the photograph itself is often invisible: it isn't seen as an object, or at least, as Barthes suggests, not immediately (2000: 5). Because of its indexical nature and the invisibility of the medium, the photograph is mostly taken as evidence of the past. It writes history.

Our faith in the photograph makes it a powerful political tool that can be radically manipulated. In a passage from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1999) author Milan Kundera describes a photograph from Czech history:





Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing close to him. It was snowing and cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. Bursting with solicitude, Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald's head [...] Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head. (Kundera 1999: 3-4)

In David King's excellent history of Soviet photographic falsification, *The Commissar Vanishes* (1997), he shows how Stalin used photographs to rewrite the past. Not only did Stalin literally remove political opponents from the visual record by airbrushing, cropping and amalgamating photographs, he also glorified himself by idealizing his image or even inserting it into important photographs. The physical manipulation of the photograph equates to a rewriting of history (King 1997: 9).

The two nested alternate histories here have cross-purposes. The first operates, much like *The De La Rey*, against historical determinism. It equates the radical nationalism of apartheid South Africa with a Soviet-style dictatorship. The first, a teleology of religion and pseudo-science, is compared with the second, a teleology of materialism.



The censorship and machinations of power that were at work in the South African state at the time are hyperbolized, but not that much. The apartheid state has become part of the narrative of the "new" South Africa, and to a degree has become habituated. This is especially true, perhaps, for someone like myself who was a child during the end of apartheid, but still lives in relative wealth. The counterfactual destabilizes one's desensitized notions of the history, to make it seem as horrific as it was, while revealing the contingency of our current moment. The second alternate history demonstrates how a lack of belief in the authority of history when used in the service of power is an act of deep cynicism and radical bad faith. The person in power is aware of the subterfuge, yet continues to manipulate history for the sake of that power. Rather than challenge the status quo, this alternate history falsely embeds itself as truth.

An inability to imagine a change in the status quo is described further in *Mars*.

## MARS

*Mars* is comprised of three plinths and a print. The print is a large photograph of a Martian landscape, red and cratered, with a glowing habitation dome on the horizon. The plinths are matte black, waist-height and inclined at the top and are placed in front of the print. On them, from left to right, are a complex, well-worn gun-like weapon, an open book and a rusted machete. The key to the work is the book, which is titled 'A New History of Mars.' The page it is opened to starts mid-sentence:

*these persistent visions.*

*In 2048, Reverend Enoch Nxele renamed his church The Church of Universal Kingdom of Christ and undertook the massive task of relocating the 8000 members of his congregation to the last frontier of human expansion, Mars.*

*Several hundred hand-picked specialists had undergone intensive training in structural engineering, bio-systems management and sentient-network design, and they constructed a polylaminate ultrathin environmental dome in the Helles Basin. The majority of his followers, however, were from traditionally rural backgrounds. Agriculture and prayer were the major activities in the dome.*



By 2063, The Church of Universal Kingdom of Christ had doubled in size and the Reverend Nxele began a course of expanding the dome. This led to a territory dispute with the mining transnational Exxaro, which had previously filed claims to the surrounding lands with the Co-operative Mars Administrative Body (COMAB).

This conflict led to several minor confrontations and a series of incidents of industrial sabotage in the contested zone. In order to protect its corporate investment on Mars, Exxaro began the construction of a wall and established a base for its private security subsidiary Excorp. Excorp's mandate was to control access to the contested zone and maintain a peacekeeping force around the dome's entrances. On the 43 day of Mars-September 2065, a church militia group, mostly bearing auto-scythes and pneumatic stonebreakers, clashed with a Lasblaster-equipped Excorp force. In the ensuing melee the dome was accidentally punctured, leading to a rapid expulsion of atmosphere. 7493 members of the Church suffocated.

COMAB's subsequent investigation into the incident exonerated Excorp from all blame.

The gun, the machete and the print, in light of this, can all be read as artefacts of this conflict. All the objects, including the book, are produced in a descriptive style, familiar from the previous two works. However, here they don't act as artificial evidence of the past, but more directly lend credibility to a narrative of the future. It recalls the idea presented during my discussion of *The Long Goodbye*, that scifi is representational in order for it to produce an oblique look at the present. Famed scifi writer Ursula K. Le Guin says that scifi operates as a thought experiment, the purpose of which, "as the term was used by Schrodinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future – indeed Schrodinger's most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the 'future,' on the quantum level, cannot be predicted – but to describe reality, the present world" (Le Guin 1976: Kindle edition). For Le Guin, scifi is an allegory of the present.

An irony becomes apparent. I've suggested in this essay that altering the past destabilizes our sense of the present. However, when the creation of a future reflects the present, I struggle to imagine a



Pieter Hugo Aissah Salifu 2011

change. The future as imagined in *Mars* seems to be a continuation of the kind of capitalist program that is already extant. The poor remain poor, while the rich become transplanetary. This allows very little hope for change in the present. In part, this apparent hopelessness is a product of the style of capitalism practiced in South Africa. Marxist scifi critic Evan Calder Williams, echoing Jean Baudrillard, proposes that the present itself has become a shell:

*The late capitalist present was necessarily staked on the capacity to realize and replicate itself by borrowing against the guaranteed promise of the future as the site of more of the same and of endlessness of reproduction without difference. (Williams 2010: Kindle edition)*



University of Cape Town



Michael MacGarry *Chinese iron ore frigates off the coast of Dar es Salaam, 2048 (2011)*

People have an inability to imagine a credible society without capitalism, because the notion of the present is located within its continuation. Film theorist Peter Y. Paik submits that the current taste for apocalyptic or catastrophic films reflect this inability. Paraphrasing Slavoj Žižek, he states that it is "easier at the present historical moment to imagine the destruction of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Paik 2010: Kindle edition).<sup>17</sup> It is more than plausible, however, that the capitalist apocalypse, in the sense of a massive revelatory destruction of the world, is already underway – just unevenly spread (Williams 2010: Kindle edition). In its gratuitous annihilation of people and environment, capitalism has already begun to reveal its flaws. An example of this would be multinational corporation Apple's shocking environmental and human rights record, while its recently deceased CEO Steve Jobs is deified in the media. This is a revelation of gross inequality and destructive capitalist practice (Davis 2011: online).<sup>18</sup>

The catastrophe that punctuates *Mars* is apocalyptic in the sense of being a destructive revelation, even though it is a located, incomplete act of violence. It serves as a critique of the present inability to imagine otherwise: our failure of imagination will result in tragedy. Another

<sup>17</sup> There are murmurs that the current world-wide economic recession signals the end of capitalism, though my (uneducated) sense is that capitalism will recoup this crisis. This suggests, however, that this possibility is being imagined – although it seems to stem mostly from an apocalyptic fear.

<sup>18</sup> This text was, ironically, produced on a Mac. Commodity fetishism  
1. Critique of.

element that pushes against the hopelessness inherent in the work is its chronological ambiguity. If the story in *Mars* happens in the future, yet the objects displayed exist in its past, then the viewer's present is ambiguously located, being equated to a future's past. It suggests that in some point in time this incident has been/is/will be memorialized. And the memorial is biased against the capitalist tide, as demonstrated by the stark opposition between the weapons on display and the idealized beauty of the dome. The imagined person who produced this memorial is sympathetic to the religious farmers. The display of a history book, in particular, implies disapproval in that not only artefacts from the incident, but also the way the incident was recorded and disseminated, are on display. *Mars* in fact imagines a future in which abusive capitalist practice – in particular the way in which monopolistic transnationals ignore human lives in favour of exploitation – as been put to rest.

This ambiguous time is further explored in *Cenotaph*.



## CENOTAPH

*Cenotaph* has the appearance of a stone memorial, a large carved pedestal with a fragment of a statue on top. It is rectangular, imposing and in a state of ruin. The statue is suggested by two broken legs; the pedestal is crumbling. The work as a whole is entirely *faux*, made of various woods and paint effects, and this artificiality is clearly evident.

On the front is an epitaph which reads:

*In Memoriam:*

*'Let all the souls here rest in peace, for we shall not repeat the evil'*

*For those who lost their lives in the explosion of the nuclear bomb*

*Johannesburg, 1971*

The word cenotaph literally means an empty tomb, but in common use it is a monument to people who died and were buried elsewhere. The alternate history in this work plays on apartheid South Africa's nuclear capabilities. It is a fact that the apartheid government built six nuclear bombs and more than likely that they were tested. Armscor was also engaged in the construction of both long range and medium



range delivery systems, so bombing the Russkies and dealing with the *swart gevaar* (literally "black danger") were both possible. The imagined incident hinges on two real stories. Fifty years before this imagined incident, President J.C. Smuts used the artillery to quell the 1922 miner's strike in Johannesburg. In 2007, armed men broke into Pelindaba, South Africa's uranium refining plant, in an attempt to steal highly enriched uranium, which could be used to create a dirty suitcase bomb, a portable bomb with low explosive force but a high yield of radioactivity.<sup>19</sup> In *Cenotaph*, either a nuclear weapon was used for a massacre, a psychotic twin to Sharpeville and the 1922 miner's strike, or it was an act of politically motivated terrorism. The incident and its memorial imagines a world in which it would be easier to hypothesise an apocalyptic end than a change to apartheid.

Like the other alternate histories in *A History of Failure*, *Cenotaph* emphasizes the contingency of the present moment. Perhaps more noticeably than in the other works it creates an ambiguous time for the viewer: not only is this a memorial to the ruin of Johannesburg, but it is also ruined. Enough time has passed to crack rock and bronze, or a second apocalypse is laid over the first like a palimpsest. It is manifestly

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed and informative discussion of the nuclear program see Al J. Venter's *How South Africa Built Six Atom Bombs* (2009).



looking at the objects; the viewer becomes completely displaced from the artwork. In *Cenotaph*, the perspectival illusionism of the obscured vanishing point is replicated by a temporal illusionism of an obscured present. The possibility exists that we are looking at empty time, a pure natural time, in the sense of Sebald's natural history, devoid of anthropocentrism. The effect is to unsettle the viewer temporally. It opens up the possibility, as I have mentioned before and will discuss shortly, that the work is about the viewer's present moment. As a form, the ruin itself has a similar function in that it "works both forward and backward in time" (Burgess 2006: 277).

The ruin has a complex relationship with temporality. In the Renaissance, the ruin was considered a coded and fragmentary, but legible, text of the past. The Renaissance reinvigorated the classical aesthetic and ruins became both mysterious and inspirational. An example of this is in the Renaissance text, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), a text whose narrative is strewn with classical ruins that the narrator attempts to piece together to attain knowledge. In the beginning of the modern age in the late 18th century, however, the ruin becomes tied up with the new concept of progressing time and in the notions of authorship and selfhood. The ruin became part of Romantic mythology, an object of melancholic contemplation of

artificial, but its state of ruin asks the viewer to imagine themselves cast out of the present here and now, into a present somewhere, sometime. Alternatively, it is "an empty point of view" (Grootenboer 2005: 79). Hanneke Grootenboer uses this term to describe the strangeness of a still life when the vanishing point is above or below our line of view and we are looking at a space that is



A statue of Enver Hoxha is pulled down in Tirana, Albania in 1991

artistic genius and the vagaries of time, like in Henry Fuseli's *The Artist Overwhelmed by the Grandeur of Antique Ruins* (Dillon 2005: online). Andreas Huyssen equates the development of this sense of the ruin to the rise of the desire for authenticity in the early modern era (Huyssen 2010: 18). Huyssen points to a constellation of ideas that accrete around this moment: genius, authorship and subjectivity in conflict with reproducibility, alienation and inauthenticity. The authentic ruin becomes emblematic of this tension (Huyssen 2010: 18). With early modernism, nationalism became a pursuable goal. Ruins and authenticity, much like nostalgia, point to a mythical origin, a collective past from which to build a collective nationality. This finds its apotheosis in Albert Speer's designs for Hitler's ideal city, which, rather than utilize readily available concrete and iron, used material which would decay into picturesque ruins. Speer developed a ruin theory of value for architecture, which imagined the Reich as the Roman empire of the future (Dillon 2010: online).

A famous Romantic poem, *Ozymandias* (1818), by Percy Bysshe Shelley, suggests a more complex reading of the ruin:



Nicolas Poussin *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1637-8)

*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

This poem points to a different understanding of the Romantic ruin. Not only is it melancholic and nostalgic, it is also simultaneously conscious of "the transitoriness of all greatness and power, the warning of imperial hubris, and the remembrance of nature in all culture" (Huyssen 2010: 21). This can be extended to humanity's pride in general, as it implies

a dust to dust process. The ruin becomes tripartite: a contemplation of the past, an emblem of the absent present in the nostalgia for past grandeur and an imagining of the future. This temporal shifting finds its perfect symbol in the image of the half-buried Statue of Liberty in the movie *Planet of the Apes* (1968), pointing to "apocalypse in the past and a foreshadowing of that same apocalypse in the future" (Burgess 2006: 277) and signaling a confused and anxious present.

The ruin is often associated with the allegorical, especially since Walter Benjamin's formulation that "[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (Benjamin 1977: 178). This is of particular significance to *A History of Failure*, where most of the works are in a state of ruinous decay or imminent collapse. Throughout the analysis of the various works I have suggested that representation of the future and the past are not simply about their own temporalities, but also point to the present moment. This relationship is allegorical. Allegory occurs, in part, when a narrative, or the objects and characters in a narrative, have a meaning outside of themselves. It is when a metaphor extends over a whole text, finding different correspondences and intersections with a second text. Craig Owens describes it as when "one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be" (Owens 1992: 54). Like leaves pressed up against frosted glass, allegory simultaneously is and isn't transparent to its signification. As such, allegory is incomplete and finds itself continuously attracted to the fragmentary (Owen 1992: 55).<sup>20</sup> These fragments could be described as fetishistic splinters (Leslie 2000: 199), in that allegory takes discrete objects and imbues them with the power of signification.

Visual, spatial and temporal cues, such as the empty point of view, overt illusionism and the oblique look, continually highlight the viewer or the present moment within the work. This highlighting is part of the rhetoric of the work, and it points to the fact that the complex visual and narrative forms of the work should be read not only in themselves, but also in relation to the present and to the self. This relationship

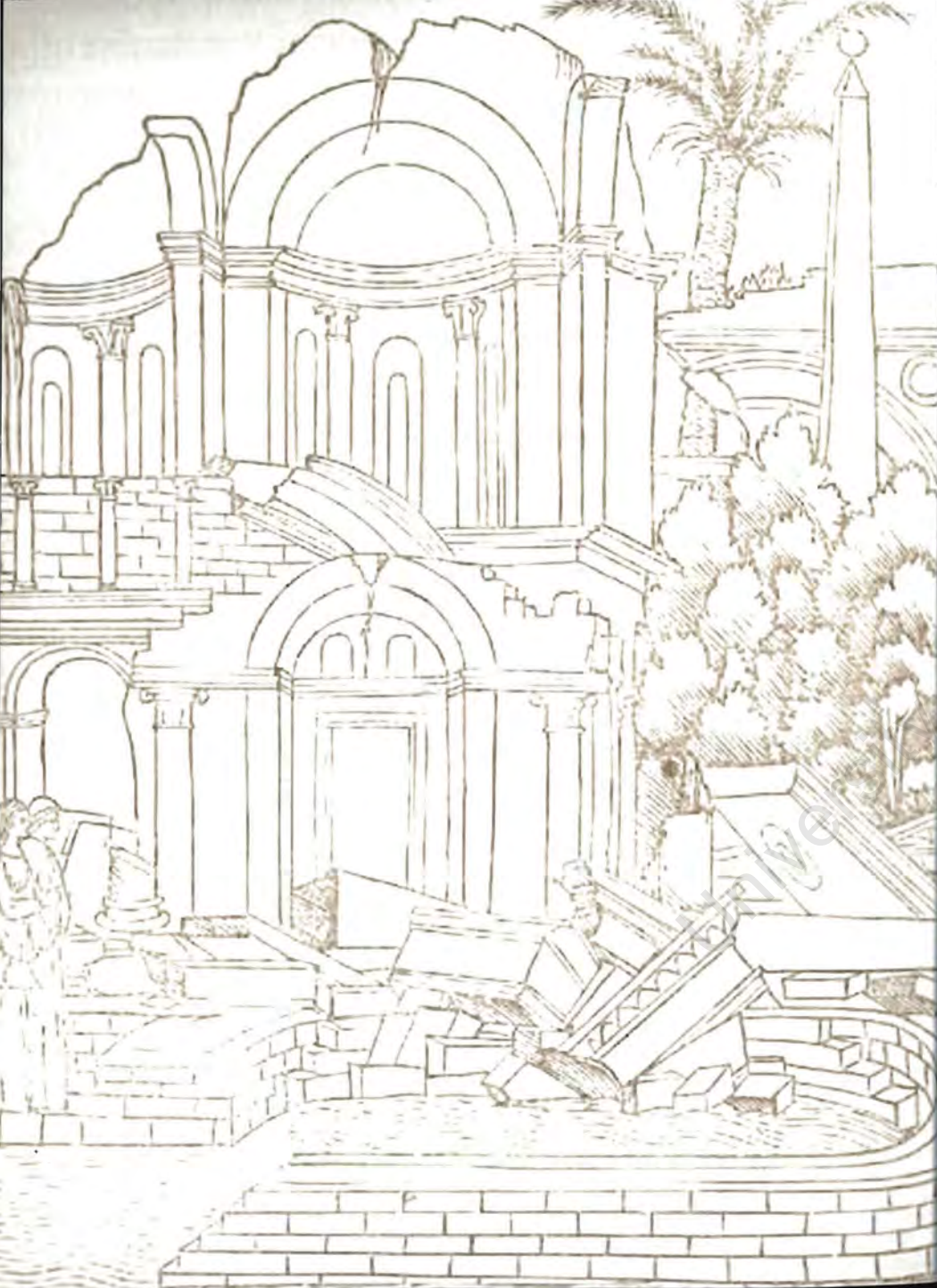
<sup>20</sup> Both Benjamin and Owens, although separated by a good half-decade, are interested in rescuing allegory as an aesthetic form. Benjamin sees allegory in history and Owens in postmodern art. The aesthetic and philosophical intricacies of this rescue are beyond the scope of this essay.



A painting of a ruined cathedral by my great-grandfather Thomas Cole

is allegorical, in that requires the present to be read through the narratives and forms of the work.

The disturbed chronology of *Cenotaph* and the imagining of the interminable present suggests a return to natural history outside of the destructive dreams of progress. In this apocalyptic work, though, time is gentle. Things change and evolve, but nothing ever ends.



NOV 1987

Near the conclusion of Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen* (1987), Adrian Veidt (formerly the costumed hero Ozymandias) has destroyed New York by teleporting an enormous but artificial alien blob into the city. Those not crushed die of fear. In response to this apparent extraterrestrial threat the rest of the world find unity against a common enemy. Veidt's apocalyptic act is apocalyptic in the true sense: a revelation, in this case of common humanity. In an uncharacteristic moment of self-doubt, he asks Dr Manhattan (a scientist turned omnipotent demigod through nuclear accident) to reassure him that the ends justified the means. Dr Manhattan responds: "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (Moore 1987: Chapter XII p 27).

Dr Manhattan, who has transcended humanity, points out that Veidt's interest in ends is a purely anthropocentric one (Paik 2010: Kindle edition). From his god-like perspective, Dr Manhattan can see that humans are just thermodynamic reactions not destined for greatness.

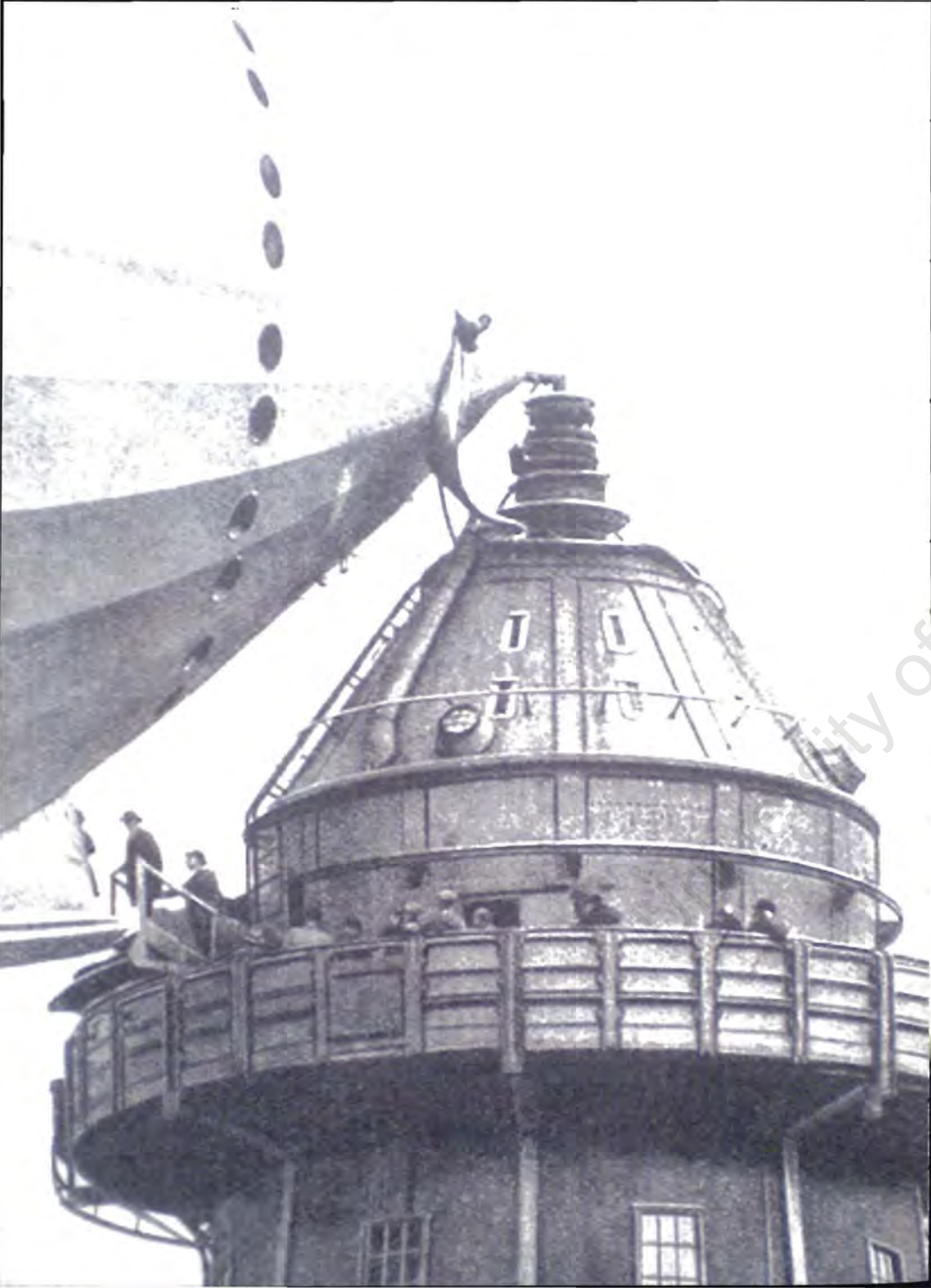
Many of *A History of Failure's* themes are encapsulated in this story, especially the idea of a natural conception of history. Natural history, history without a teleology of progress or an anthropocentric bias,

has been used in this body of work to pull apart the conflict between the old and the new, to disrupt the restorative impulse of nostalgia and deny the imagined transcendental view of the model. I suggested that this was achieved in part through an oblique look, carried by the work's illusionistic representation. I further suggested throughout this essay that illusionism acted as a rhetorical device in the service of allegory. The past and the future are used to draw attention to the current moment.

A similar aim has been achieved through the tropes of sci-fi, especially the alternate history. This fictional variety of the counterfactual serves to resist deterministic history. My alternate histories use an empty point of view that disrupts the viewer's location in time, pushing them outside the works' temporality. This isolates the viewer's present.

The work is thoroughly rooted in South Africa in terms of the types of narratives and objects used. This reflects my personal experiences of history as a neo-colonial South African. History here is an enfolding force, terrifying in its trauma and unrelenting in its presence. I cannot ignore this history, but I desire to unsettle it, escape it or perhaps feel less paralysed by it.

The historical aesthetics in the works point to the fact that we are not above history, nor in front of it. We are part of history's present moment. We must perceive ourselves as part of a continuum, not a nationalist teleology, but as pieces of the fabric of time. Natural history suggests that the only truly authentic moment is now.



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