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# **Documentary Photography and the Fantasy of the Real**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the epistemological shift in my photographic practice from an ethnographic position to that of surrealist documentary. In charting this shift I have consider the use of documentary photography by the historical Surrealist movement ,and, the synthesis of surrealism and ethnography found in the English group Mass-Observation. The photograph's oscillation between indexical record and mystical emanation forms a key position in understanding these two groups belief in the found images ability to describe a repressed reality located in the mass unconscious.

Drawing on the Lacanian model of the Real used by Slavoj Zizek as a tool of cultural critique I suggest a new framework for a surrealist documentary practice. In bringing the methodology of the early Surrealists into a contemporary context I consider the position of suburbia as a new terrain vague in relationship to the fantasy of the Real.

## **Part One: From Nayau to Newlands: “Le Pacifique Fantome”**

*Journal entry*

*February 2 2008 Manukau Medieval Market, Levin*

*The call goes out for children aged 7-9 to make their way onto the battlefield. Two sides are formed and named Hawks and Dragons respectively. Paper swords are waved in the air as the MC for the battle fires up the young warriors in front of their hot dog-wielding parents. A horn sounds and the two sides converge forming a single seething mass of swinging limbs. Children start to drop to the ground convulsing in imitation of death rattles. One boy lies prone playing a tortured requiem on an inflatable purple guitar. Over the PA system the MC repeats: “Every kid must die. Prizes awarded for the best death”.*

In 2008 I photographed a group of men dressed as Native Americans<sup>1</sup> selling CDs of indigenous music while standing next to a P.A system and an anachronistic caravan at a medieval-themed market in the rural town of Levin, New Zealand. The day-long event’s strange mix of elements included: knights in polished armour licking ice creams, laughing kids playing at being corpses, and an over-abundance of bad lace and exposed cleavage. Of course this was all of great interest to me in terms of a wider project I had recently started: photographing aspects of contemporary New Zealand society. This project had come about as part of an epistemological shift in my own practice in response to a series of works I had produced a couple of years earlier. It is this shift in position and the attempt to define a new practice that forms the central theme of this thesis. Particularly for this reason, it would be useful to return briefly to my earlier work of 2004 - 2006.

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<sup>1</sup> Figure 1

The image of these seemingly dislocated American Indians from 2008 reminded me of an photo I had taken in Fiji four years earlier. In the picture a group of rather bored-looking teenagers stand idly in a bleak underground carpark<sup>2</sup>. Their faces blackened with charcoal and carrying war clubs, these young men of Nayau<sup>3</sup> take up a traditional role guarding the body of the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara outside the morgue of the Suva Private Hospital. This series of photos documenting the funeral commemorations was followed in 2006 by a second photo essay following the fractious election campaign trail. In both cases the methodology underpinning these photographic essays fits into an issue-driven documentary model, merged with what could be described as an ethnographic approach to representing the Other (read: Native). On reflection although the work was intended to be self-reflexive of my own position as a half-Fijian/ English New Zealander the approach and methods used brought it firmly into a discourse on the relative positions of power within documentary between photographer and subject.

A comment I repeatedly encountered during early showings of this work shot in Fiji was that it was ‘too National Geographic’. This phrase I took as shorthand for a critique of documentary photography that had emerged in the 1970s as part of a discourse that sought to reveal the distribution of power within the societal structures and institutions of representation. Clearly elucidated by Susan Sontag<sup>4</sup>, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Marth Rosler and Alan Sekula, these readings collectively took the established genre of documentary photography to task charging its practitioners with

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<sup>2</sup> figure 2

<sup>3</sup> Nayau is the Fijian island of my mothers family

<sup>4</sup> (Sontag, 1979) “The act of taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape.”

creating nothing more than victim pornography and declaring the entire genre's claim to be engaged in social transformation as a self-aggrandizing ruse aimed more at assuaging the latent guilt of a liberal middle-class than alleviating the inequalities it sought to expose.

This critique of the power relations embedded in photographic representation has drawn heavily on Foucault's theoretical model of the panopticon. Based on this interpretation, the photograph's status as a direct transcription of reality to some extent always conceals an imbalance of power between photographer/ viewer and subject. It was from this theoretical point of departure, I believe, that the mode of documentary and ethnographic representation produced in my work from 2004-06 was being criticised as 'too National Geographic'. My attempts at a form of reflexive ethnography based on a familial connection to Fiji could not seem to escape being viewed within the established tropes of the genre or the post-colonial critique of it as an institutionalised tool of power and exploitation. The result of this has been a revised analysis of my own practice and an attempt to redefine its documentary and ethnographic basis as a means for representation.

In considering what interested me in photographing the "Native Americans" hawking their case of CDs at a Levin fair, I was reminded of an anecdote about the famous anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss being troubled by the sight of a feathered Indian with a Parker pen in the New York public library.<sup>5</sup> As Rey Chow states in relation to the ethnographic study of the Other, "What confronts the Western scholar is the discomfiting fact that the natives are no longer staying in their frames."<sup>6</sup> My two

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford, (1988)

<sup>6</sup> Chow, (1994)

images, one from Levin the other from Fiji, are linked not simply by the dissonance between figure and location within them, but more importantly by their confrontation of the photographer/ viewer's desire for the "authentic native".

Ethnography's inception during the expansion of colonial empire was an innate expression of the collision between the rationalised technology of Modernity and the chaotic, 'irrational', primitive civilisations beyond it. During the era of colonialism the holy grail of ethnography, so to speak, was found in the first contact scenario through which the 'native' was to be encountered and described in their authentic state, therefore isolated and unpolluted by the acquisitive melange of a nascent consumer culture. This desire for an authenticity located within the native Other was formed within an epistemological structure that sought to both explain and justify the dominance of colonising nations. Modernity's progress was measured in relation to its mirror image: the colonised native. Implicit in the colonial study of the authentic native then was the assumption that the social Other provides a form of one-way Eurocentric window into a model of one's own society at a more primitive stage. The panopticon model of scopic power here seems to offer a reductive reading of the rational use of photography as a tool of domination. This model rests upon the assumption that control of representation functions solely as the rational expression of power. The construct of the 'native' within modernity appears to serve a purpose beyond delineating the boundaries between ethnic groups, or between savage and civilisation. At its core is the desire on the part of the viewer/ photographer for an authenticity in and of itself embodied within the 'native' as the fully complete subject, the Rousseuvian noble savage.

Ethnography's drive to uncover earlier forms of social structures emerged concurrently with a new form of study into human subjectivity, psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud's publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899 presented the first systematic attempt to research the realm of the unconscious. Through both observation and the therapeutic 'talking cure' Freud theorised that the individual's true repressed desires could be uncovered beneath the socially-constraining conscious self. These dual and contiguous fields of inquiry, ethnography with its study of the 'primitive' social group and psychoanalysis with its investigation of the individual, mirrored one another in their shared belief that the 'true nature of man' could be uncovered through a positivist mode of enquiry.

The links joining ethnography and psychoanalysis were made more explicit in Freud's 1913 publication *Totem and Taboo*. Here Freud equates the 'primitive' with an earlier stage of individual development. The amalgam of these two fields becomes evident in texts such as, *L'Afrique Fantome*.<sup>7</sup> In this work the author Michel Leiris presents his account of an ethnographic mission across Northern Africa from Dakar to Djibouti in which he places equal emphasis on the effects of the journey upon himself as he does the observations of local cultures, recounting dreams in the same empirical manner as observations of tribal customs.

The title of this chapter *Le Pacifique Fantome: From Nayau to Newlands*<sup>8</sup> references Leiris's journey in regard to the shift in my own photography toward a synthesis between ethnography and psychoanalysis. From the autobiographical ethnography of Fiji with its crude attempt to discover a 'true' nature of my own identity my

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<sup>7</sup> Leiris (1933)

<sup>8</sup> Newlands is the banal suburb of Wellington in which I spent my childhood

photography has turned around to direct the camera on contemporary New Zealand culture. In doing so I have adopted certain elements of Surrealist methodology as a means of reframing photography's relationship to reality exterior to the panoptic model of power which has dominated the discourse on the genre. This thesis is an exploration of how the positivist basis of photography as utilised in a documentary form can engage an external reality as a means of uncovering the metaphysical real of the social unconscious.

In considering how the methods of Surrealism and documentary can coexist within a unified practice, I will explore the methodologies used by photographers aligned to the French Surrealist movement of the 1920s and their impact on early work of the British group Mass Observation. Following this I will ask how the ideas of these two revolutionary groups can be referenced to create a Surrealistic documentary practice that draws upon a renewed interest in psychoanalytic theory as a means of accessing 'the Real' in contemporary culture.

## Part two: The Pastor of Muppets

*Journal entry*

*Friday October 26, 2007*

*The pastor's sermon finishes as the machine-generated ectoplasm disperses into the open maws of the multi-function centre's air-conditioner. A crowd of perhaps a thousand believers are gathered in front of the now-empty stage as the house lights go up and colour coded 'commitment counsellors' move into the throng. Red badges are ushers, yellow distribute religious texts and green lead small prayer groups with forms for confirming one's commitment to Christ through an ordained 16-digit space at the bottom for credit card numbers. A disembodied voice begins repeating instructions over the PA system: "Counsellors please ensure everyone has filled in a form". Suddenly thinking of Jim Jones' People's Temple I turn Slayer up on my iPod and keep photographing.*

The accomplished ornithologist turned ethnographer Tom Harrisson once stated that the most under-utilised piece of equipment in anthropology was a set of earplugs as an aid to simple observation.<sup>9</sup> Harrisson had returned from a major expedition to New Guinea and published an ethnographic study of highland life titled *Savage Civilisation*.<sup>10</sup> In the same year this text was produced there occurred the chance pairing in the *New Statesmen and Nation*<sup>11</sup> of a poem by Harrisson titled Coconut Moon, with a letter by a Charles Madge calling for a form of "anthropology at home". This coincidental placement of Surrealist poetry alongside the call for a new anthropology was to lead to the formation of the group Mass Observation.

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<sup>9</sup> Heimann, 2002

<sup>10</sup> Harrisson, 1937

<sup>11</sup> Walker 2007

Formed in 1937 by Charles Madge, Tom Harrisson, and Humphrey Jennings Mass Observation's (M-O) aim was to conduct a detailed study of the British people. Harrisson's background in anthropology was joined by Madge's literary abilities as a poet, and the photographer/ filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. All three had been influenced by the work of the European Surrealist movements emerging on the continent during the 1920's. This Surrealist influence was to prove central to how the early M-O developed a methodology for its study of British society as the "science of ourselves".

In combining ethnography and surrealism Mass Observation shifted from the exploration of the individual psyche to the study of a collective unconscious. In so doing, the positivist and empirical methods that lent credence to ethnography's claim as a science were being melded with the highly subjective theories of psychoanalysis. Applied to such an inherently metaphysical subject matter as the collective unconscious M-O sought to provide a scientifically-based account of the meta-narratives underlying their own culture, or what Charles Madge referred to as the "mass wish".

The principle form used by Mass Observation – befitting the group's title – was the detailed observation of the social. However, its primary means of collecting this information differed from the standard ethnographic model by recruiting untrained participant observers from the general population. Observations of everyday life were recorded in diaries and sent monthly to M-O headquarters as raw data intended for further analysis. In collecting observations from a wide range of sources it was

thought possible to maintain some form of scientific objectivity by making the subjectivity of the observer one of the facts under observation<sup>12</sup> and thereby bringing about a reflexive nature to their ethnographic practice. As has been pointed out by MacClancey, this form of methodology is a precursor to Postmodern practices that have embraced collaboration and multiple authorship.<sup>13</sup>

It was in this context that Humphrey Jennings produced his photographs for M-O's first publication, entitled *May the Twelfth, Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937*. The book is an account of the coronation of King George following the abdication of Edward VIII mentioned in *The New Statesman* letter from earlier that year. However, unlike the newspaper accounts of the actual event, the day is described from the reports of forty-three participants and their observations of people's behavior. It was theorized that the highly focused nature of such public events allowed for a much less haphazard view of the social unconscious.<sup>14</sup> Jennings' photographs from the day feature none of the pomp and grandeur associated with a major royal event, instead they focus on the behavior of the crowds away from the action. This use of "straight photography" to explore and reveal a reality beyond what is commonly represented was central to both an emerging documentary genre and the work of the French Surrealist movement. In its direct recording through text and image, the work of Jennings and M-O locates a Surrealism within the everyday. Furthermore, through the use of various techniques it attempted to unlock the real motivations underlying mass culture. This approach to a surrealist form of documentary photography underpins the shift in my own work from an ethnographic model to that of a Surrealist documentary.

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<sup>12</sup> Walker 2007

<sup>13</sup> MacClancey 1995

<sup>14</sup> MacClancey 1995

As such it would be most useful to discuss certain techniques employed within this practice.

“Photography is the only art that is natively surreal.”<sup>15</sup> Susan Sontag’s appraisal of the French Surrealists’ legacy consigns much of their most well-known work to the art historical scrapheap of Modernity. The manipulated imagery of artists such as Man Ray and Hans Bellmer have been so readily assimilated into consumer culture that any revolutionary potential to critique bourgeois tastes it once possessed has been lost altogether. Like Salvador Dali’s melting clocks this particular representation of Surrealist ideas has become a trope suffering from its over literal character that, in effect, allows the viewer no room to move. In Sontag’s terms, photography’s Surrealist potential is most narrowly conveyed through the manipulated image. Yet within popular culture it is the overly constructed and stage-managed imagery of photographers such as Gregory Crewdson with his banal join-the-dots list of suburban neuroses that attracts the now throwaway tag: “Surrealist”.

By contrast, within the historical Surrealist movement there existed a firm understanding that the found indexical photograph was a natural interface “for capturing the delicate osmoses which exist between reality and surreality.”<sup>16</sup> What we are presented with in the straight photographic approach of Eugene Atget, Jacques-André Boiffard and Brassai are pictures that function simultaneously as both evidential documents and phantasmic emanations. The dual nature of photography as both an objective transcription of reality and quasi-mystical apparatus has been

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<sup>15</sup> Sontag, 1979

<sup>16</sup> Dali as cited in Walker, 2002

inherent in the medium since its creation.<sup>17</sup> Within the historical Surrealist movement, the straight photograph's objective/subjective dichotomy aligned it with the related use of automatic writing as a means for transcribing truths unmediated by interventions of the conscious mind. André Bazin summed up photography's quasi-mystical duality by describing it as "a hallucination that is also a fact."<sup>18</sup>

The photographs of Paris produced by Atget, Boiffard and Brassai featured prominently in the publications *La Revolution Surrealist*, *Minotaure*, *Documents* and in Breton's novel *Nadja*. Their flat, indexical depiction of subject matter: empty city streets, shop windows and vacant lots rejected both the pictorialist aesthetic of the time and the constructed imagery of other Surrealists such as Man Ray. In presenting the viewer with no formal narrative content or aesthetic rationale these photographs confront the viewer with a surplus of detail and a deficit of meaning forcing the viewer to project their unconscious interpretation onto the image screen. What is at once an objective document of external reality is also the site of subjective interpretation. This belief in the medium's inherent surrealness was also taken up in the photography/film work of Jennings and M-O collaborator Humphrey Spender. Described by one critic as "a dumb photography" the "voluntary banality"<sup>19</sup> of this anti-aesthetic has predictably been transformed into its own stylistic trope manifesting itself in a range of contemporary photographers<sup>20</sup> and in New Zealand most notably by Fiona Amundsen. However, discussion of this contemporary work rarely references a Surrealist reading.

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<sup>17</sup> Marsh, 2005

<sup>18</sup> Bazin, 1967

<sup>19</sup> Micael Beaujour cited in Walker 2002

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Shore, Frank Brauer etc

Concerned with locating the surreal within the reality of the everyday the photographs of the early French Surrealists were guided by a thematic framework in which certain sites and events were regarded as offering a greater opportunity for the revelation of unconscious facts. A number of these have become central to my own practice and provide a context in which to read the work of others. A central meta-theme for the early Surrealists methodology was the perception of the city of Paris as the physical manifestation of the collective unconscious. Baudelaire's 19<sup>th</sup> Century depiction of the flaneur wandering the streets as a detached observer provides the template for how Atget, Boiffard and Brassai approached the urban environment as a text constructed through the automatic writing of a collective unconscious. The camera with its ability to record and isolate details was seen as analogous to the psychiatrist's notes on patient dreams, or the spiritualist's communication with the other world. From this it was thought that the surface reality of the city could be interpreted to reveal the true repressed desires of the masses.

Within the city of Paris certain locations held a particular significance for their status as hybrid sites. These areas were viewed as inherently dialectical in being formed out of the interpenetration of two physical states, with the positions of nature and civilization providing the primary dichotomy. In pre-War Paris the area known as 'the Zone'<sup>21</sup>, a strip of vacant land that separated the city centre from the sprawling suburbs, embodied this hybrid status in what the Surrealists termed a *terrain vague*. Other examples of hybrid sites were found in such places as the abattoir and flea market. In bringing together opposing elements these sites created chance juxtapositions and coincidence outside of conscious design and were therefore seen as

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<sup>21</sup> fig 3

possessing a high potential for surrealist revelation. The concept of the terrain vague was also of interest for the English photographers Jennings, Humphrey Spender and Julian Trevelyan, attached to Mass Observation in the 1930s. As a physical and theoretical space representing the interpenetration between nature and culture, unconscious and conscious, the non-specific function of the terrain vague was seen to create an environment possessing its own peculiar form of rules and codes of behaviour.

This interaction between space, collective unconscious and surface reality underpins Humphrey Jennings first documentary film after leaving Mass Observation. Titled *Spare Time* (1939) the film presents a study of workers from three industrial towns occupying their leisure time around the performance of music. Abandoning the prevailing documentary model of narrative voice-over the short films montage of shots never strays beyond a deadpan recording that runs counter to that era's predominant theme of the heroic worker. The film's most controversial sequence features a kazoo band with a Rule Britannia float performing in the desolate wasteland (terrain vague) of an industrial town. In its ethnographic desire to represent an aspect of British leisure *Spare Time's* matter of fact portrayal conveys a sense of collective working class solidarity at a time of intense uncertainty and speculation with regards to the growing conflagration in Europe.

### On the Beach

Like 'the Zone' of old Paris the liminal space of the English seaside represents both a physical and psychic boundary viewable as the quintessential hybrid site. However, rather than being populated by gypsies the seaside is inhabited by another transient

population, the holidaying tourist. Instead of the bricolage of makeshift shacks the terrain vague of the beach has given rise to the phantasmagoria of resort towns. These clearly defined leisure spaces are seen to manifest collective desires in the enactment of fantasy and have become a commonly returned to site for a documentary photography of the English people.

Jenning's focus on popular leisure in *Spare Time* as a means of exploring the collective unconscious formed a big influence on Lindsay Anderson's first self-produced film *O'Dreamland* (1953). The 12 min short is an exploration of an amusement park in the seaside town of Margate. Filmed in a straight documentary style with no voice-over, the camera follows the crowd as they enter the phantasmagoric world of fun-park rides and the macabre diorama *Torture through the Ages*. This life-size display features animated mannequins inflicting an eternal death by a thousand cuts, Joan of Arc writhes defiantly at a burning stake, and most disturbingly, an effigy of the "Atom spy" Julius Rosenberg being repeatedly executed on the electric chair only months after his corporeal incarnation met the real fate. All of this takes place to the disembodied sounds of maniacal laughter, accompanied by shots of gut-wrenching rides and stomach-turning fast food. *O'Dreamland's* focus on mass society's leisure time reveals an underlying desire for death and excess enacted in the surface fantasy world of popular culture. Notable amongst the immediate post-war generation of photographers was the work of Tony Ray-Jones whose project *The English Seen*<sup>22</sup> photographed between 1966-70 turned repeatedly to the beach resort as a site of revelation through its status as "a world unto itself with its own moral code and set of values, where the behaviour of the vacationers is far less inhibited than in

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<sup>22</sup> fig 5. Jones 1990

their town life.”<sup>23</sup>

The possible synthesis of Surrealism and documentary in the contemporary context is largely misunderstood due in part to the documentary genre being yoked to a social reformist agenda, while the Surrealists revolutionary critique of bourgeois society has been disarmed through an assimilation of its most literal forms. The idea of a rational positivist surrealism based within reality runs counter to a contemporary model of the surreal obsessed with the trite reproduction of the ‘uncanny’ as offering some deep form of psychological in-site.

The use of a surrealist documentary practice to explore the role of fantasy and imagination within popular culture is a direct influence on my own work in *The Rise and Fall*. In this I have sort to transplant the Surrealist’s concept of hybridity relocating the terrain vague within suburban New Zealand and focusing a documentary realist approach on the enactment of fantasy within this zone. In order to relocate my own practice in this shift from a documentary/ ethnographic position to one involving a form of reflexivity I have reconsidered certain Surrealist methodology in relation to the contemporary return of Freudian psychoanalysis as a tool of cultural critique as discussed in the writings of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek.

As stated in *O’Dreamlands*’ closing shot of a diorama sign: “The dreams I dream are yours to see. Over there in reality.”

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<sup>23</sup> Tony Ray Jones cited in Walker 2007

### **Part 3: I've Confused Me With Myself**

*Journal entry*

*May 8, 2007, Combat Zone: The Practice of Otherness*

*Once a week a dozen or so men gather in the abandoned structure of the former Daily Freight warehouse. Dressed in a pick-and-mix assortment of combat fatigues, webbing, firearms and body armour this homogeneous social zygote bifurcates along an arbitrary line into two mirror image cells each defining the other in terms of Us vs Them. The two groups disperse to opposite ends of the building and at a given signal proceed towards a central point where upon 'contact' is made to the sound of screams and discharging guns. After approximately 15 minutes there is silence. An "all clear" is called and the bodies lying in the corridors, the empty boardroom and the ruined canteen 're-spawn' to be absorbed back into the single homogeneous cell.*

To return to the title of this thesis, *Documentary Photography and the Fantasy of the Real*, the primary question relates to where photography might locate the Real within reality. Photography's inherent duality, the split between objectivity and subjectivity, conceals the desire of the photographer, subject and viewer within the passivity of the medium. According to Anne Marsh<sup>24</sup> a critique of documentary photography's representation of reality based around Foucault's panopticon model of scopic power leads to a deterministic reading of the camera as simply a tool of various ideologies. Marsh contends that this model is based on the mediums' roots in Enlightenment perspective where the viewer/camera assumes a rationalised point-of-view in relationship to the image plane. Although the critique of ideology embedded in the use of photographs reveals an underlying structure that may determine the

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<sup>24</sup> Marsh (2003)

relationship between representation and reality it does not hold that this representation is formed solely through the photographers rational consideration of their position to that of the subject. Marsh theorises the camera as a site of fantasy and draws upon the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan to reconsider the role of desire on the part of the photographer, subject and viewer in the mediums relationship to the Real.

In turning to Lacan as a means of reading the image the work of both the historical Surrealists, with their interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis, and the combination of ethnography and surrealism found in Mass Observation, acquires a new contemporary relevance. Lacan's return to Freud in the 1960's provides a model for reading the latent desires embedded within mass unconsciousness and forms the basis of philosopher Slavoj Zizek's expanded form of cultural analysis. This chapter seeks to draw a link between the historical surrealists, Mass Observation, the Lacanian triadic model of reality and the use of documentary photography as a means of uncovering the Real within contemporary culture.

#### Lacan's Return to Freud

Freud viewed slips-of-the-tongue as the action of the unconscious mind on conscious expression, where what is said in error contains a truth of the subject's repressed desires. The subject is therefore always viewed as incomplete in that they can never fully express what they desire. Lacan extends this model of the incomplete subject as constituted through the repression of internal desire by the external symbolization of language. The Lacanian triadic model of reality is based upon a union of Saussurian structural linguistics with Freud's triadic model of individual subjectivity. In Lacan's famous dictum "The unconscious is structured like a language"<sup>25</sup>, the action of

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<sup>25</sup> Lacan *Écrits* 2006

Freudian latent desire, the Id, is repressed by its interaction with the external structural forces of language which Lacan conceived as the Symbolic real and analogous to Freud's controlling Super-Ego. The Id, as Freud's location of the true self's desires, therefore becomes Lacan's site of the Real, this being everything beyond symbolic representation. The physical manifestation arising out of the interaction between *jouissance*/ desire and these two spheres forms Lacan's 3<sup>rd</sup> triadic element, the Imaginary Real that in Freudian terms relates to the conscious realm of the ego.

Lacan originally applied this model to an analysis of literary texts as a way of uncovering their Real meaning *inter-dit* or in the space between words. Post-Lacan this model of the Real is foundational to the work of Zizek in his analysis of the ideologies, meta-narratives and drives embedded within contemporary culture. A considerable amount of Zizek's writing has analysed the role of movies in the representation of fantasy as a performative space in which the underlying presence of the Real emerges in a visible if somewhat concealed form.

The turn to Lacan in my own work therefore seeks to redefine the indexical relationship of photography to an external reality within the triadic model of the Real. In doing so it aims to validate the use of straight documentary photography to function as a tool for the revelation of collective unconscious desire. Drawing upon the surrealists' attempts to uncover the individual unconscious this photographic approach seeks to meld a Lacanian model of the Real with an ethnographic study of the masses. Central to this approach is an understanding of the Real as visible in the rupturing of the symbolic order.

## RIP the Real

The development of psychoanalysis as the *talking cure* and with it the surrealists' understanding of the unconscious arose in part from the treatment of soldiers traumatised in action during World War 1. Freud theorised that the horrors of industrialised slaughter could not be easily rationalised within the conscious psyche and were therefore repressed, manifested at a later date in seemingly irrational behaviour. For Lacan this desire repressed within the unconscious can be observed through the analysis of the surface text. Zizek's position fuses Lacan's psychoanalytical concept of a repressed unconscious with a Marxist analysis of ideology. Within the classical Marxist model, ideology serves to justify the status quo distribution of power within society by suppressing class-consciousness. Zizek extends the concept of ideology shifting away from the perception of it as a facade concealing a true reality and instead perceiving it as the generating matrix within which the relationship of inter-subjective positions is created.<sup>26</sup>

For Zizek ideology functions as the discursive limits within which the subject is formed. These limits direct libidinal energy/ *jouissance* (onto the object cause of desire/ object *petit a*) but in doing so they always leave a surplus of enjoyment within the subject. According to Zizek fantasy plays an important role within this space of excess *jouissance* by teaching us how to desire. Fantasy's organization of our desires manifests itself materially as the symptom (Lacan's *sinthome*), first theorised by Marx as the role of commodity fetishism within capitalism.

In turning to the writings of Lacan and Zizek I have sought to provide a framework in

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<sup>26</sup> Zizek 1989

which the synthesis of documentary and surrealism, first suggested in the 1920's, might operate as a contemporary means of cultural analysis. As in the practice of these preceding groups the underlying assumption of my own photographic practice has been that society and therefore the individual subjects form is governed by mass unconscious desires. These desires by definition are unobservable in and of themselves as they are located in the pre-discursive Real. However their presence manifests itself in the Imaginary realm as the symptom through an interaction between the Real and the Symbolic. Within the Imaginary realm the Real of desire is given shape in the interweaving of fantasy and ideology. For Žižek then fantasy becomes the point at which the mass unconscious becomes observable in the same way that Freud saw the interpretation of dreams as a window into the subjective unconscious. It is my contention then that an ethnographic practice reflexive of its own position in relation to the Lacanian triadic model is able to utilise straight documentary photography's indexical relationship to the imaginary real as a means to unlock the underlying desires of the social unconscious located beyond perception in the Real.

## **Part Four: The Rise and Fall of Western Civilisation**

Journal entry

July 28, 2007

*First Contact made with the Dirt Gang*<sup>27</sup>

### The Paradigm Shift

The purpose of this thesis has been to chart the epistemological shift in my own practice from an ethnographically based photography of an Other (the authentic native located in Fiji) to a form of surrealist documentary based in New Zealand.

Underlining this change in approach has been a reappraisal of the photographic mediums' inherently surreal qualities and their use as a means of uncovering a metaphysical Real located in the social unconscious. This form of documentary practice has a clear historical precedence in the work of the French Surrealists and the group Mass Observation. Drawing on certain techniques from these two groups my own work has attempted to reframe a documentary practice along surrealist lines influenced by a model of cultural critique based on philosopher Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of the Lacanian triadic model of the Real. In this chapter I will outline the role this shift has played in a new body of work titled *The Rise and Fall of Western Civilisation: Part One*.

The Indexical Image

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<sup>27</sup> Fig 8

The shift in my practice from the ethnography of natives in Fiji to the detached observation of ‘natives’ at a Levin medieval market has maintained a belief in the medium’s positivist capacity for revelation within the found documentary image. Unlike the constructed image, which may contain references to surrealism, the element of chance and coincidence in the found image allows for a Surrealist interaction with reality. The camera with its ability to create an indexical representation that is also an abstract emanation<sup>28</sup> represents the natural interface between the Imaginary Real of our perceptions and the Real of our desires. My epistemological shift has therefore maintained a documentary/ ethnographic practice while redefining the camera’s role within the structure of reality. Sontag’s description of photography’s mimetic ability as being like a ‘death mask’ provides an apt model in that while we can photograph the surface of the mask we remain blind to the underlying structure that determines its shape. The nature of this underlying Real within society is therefore the object of a Surrealist documentary.

In Lacanian terms the Real becomes visible through a breakdown of the Symbolic and Imaginary Real’s internal coherence. This rupture within the Imaginary Real, typically seen as arising from some form of trauma, allows the underlying Real to emerge, though of course in doing so it is automatically brought into symbolization. The Surrealist’s therefore viewed the action of the subconscious on the conscious world as observable through an awareness of certain methods. My own work has sought to explore the presence of the Real within the framework of an ethnographic observation of popular culture. Adapting techniques from the surrealist’s use of straight photography *The Rise and Fall* seeks to explore the underlying themes, desires and meta-narratives present in the collective unconscious and observable as meaning

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<sup>28</sup> Barthes – Camera Lucida

located *interdit* (between the lines). These techniques will now be discussed individually.

### The Flaneur

Baudelaire's 19<sup>th</sup> century description of the urban flaneur occupying a position within the crowd but apart from it serves as a model for a reflexive observation of one's own culture. The flaneur operates in an oscillating space between 'objective' observation and subjective experience, walking with the crowd but to their own pace. As a model for my own photography the flaneur suggests both a reflexive familiarity with one's own culture, and, a self-imposed distance that allows the wider perspective of an outsiders viewpoint. In providing a form of lyrical ethnography the wandering gaze of the flaneur was adopted by the Surrealists as a template for the observation of the everyday. The fractured collage of the modern urban environment and its people could be read as the surface text of an underlying mass unconscious. The model of the flaneur was also central to Mass Observation's study of public events and was reformulated in the 1960's by the Situationists as *derive*, interlinking the physical world and the unconscious in the concept of psychogeography.

The position of flaneur has been fundamental to *Rise and Fall's* shift from a traditional ethnographic form of outsider observation to a surrealist documentary practice. In turning the lens onto my own society the aim has been to record the surface reality of everyday events within popular culture as a means of accessing the real desires and drives embedded within the social milieu. A major component of this shift has been a change of camera format from 35mm SLR to the more cumbersome 120 roll in 6x6 and 6x7cm ratios. This change created a methodological shift slowing

down the photographic process and focussing attention on observation while providing a greater amount of image detail. The relatively awkward nature of this technology creates a distance by imposing limits on the types of shots possible. Rejecting the dynamic close-up perspective, favoured by Nat Geographic for example, for a detached middle distance view of the crowd away from the action. It is the subtle creation of distance between self and subject through the photographic medium that has become crucial to my position as flaneur within *Rise and Fall*.

### The Reality of Fantasy

Eschewing the established format of nation-building coffee table books<sup>29</sup> with their desire to locate the distinctive character of authentic New Zealand I have followed Mass Observation's belief that the 'mass wish' is more easily observable in moments of wider symbolic importance. The ethnography of *Rise and Fall's* social observation therefore turns to the hyper-real fantasy world of the carnival. Drawing on Zizek, this observation of mass social events regards their phantasmagoric character not as an escape from reality but the point at which the repressed Real of desire materialises on the surface. Medieval themed fairs, cowboy costumed shooting competitions, the glamour of a yearly racing day. These events give structure and form to unconscious desire through the enactment of fantasy. However, it is not so much the documentation of their unreal content which gives rise to a surrealist interpretation but the camera's ability to focus on the slippage (glissement)<sup>30</sup> between the imaginary and symbolic Real evidenced within them.

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<sup>29</sup> Eg: *New Zealand in Colour* (1961). *Heartland* (1994).

<sup>30</sup> Zizek (1995)

## Terrain Vague / Hybrid Sites

The type of location in *Rise and Fall's* photography differs from the Surrealists' obsession with the modern city, or the English photographers' fetish for the seaside, instead relocating the contemporary *terrain vague* within the everywhere and nowhere of suburbia. The generic nature of this space runs counter to the themes of geographical and cultural distinctiveness upon which an ideological construct of the real New Zealand is founded. In the *terrain vague* of the Parisian Zone, the vacant land between the old City and the housing of the *banlieue*, was occupied by gypsies and ragpickers. The sometimes chaotic ordering of elements within this space gave rise to chance juxtapositions bearing a high potential for unconscious revelation. For the surrealists the Zone represented the discomfiting hybridisation resulting from the interpenetration of the natural and urban environments.<sup>31</sup>

The Rise and Fall relocates the *terrain vague* of contemporary Western culture within suburbia. As a product of post-war development the suburbs now constitute the border between the urban and rural and embodying the interpenetration of civilisation and nature. To traverse the psycho-geography of this space as a flaneur, wandering the tree-lined streets and manicured lawns, is to investigate a location already well established within popular consciousness as that of repressed libidinal energy. From *Blue Velvet* to *Angel Mine* and *Desperate Housewives* the image of suburbia as presenting a façade of normalcy is an established and perhaps overused trope. The photography in *Rise and Fall* therefore turns to the *terrain vague* of suburban Hutt Valley, birthplace of the state house and home of its own native (the Bogan) as the

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<sup>31</sup> Walker (2002)

location of the Real New Zealand. The search however is not for the real of an ethnographically authentic culture but for the Lacanian Real of mass unconscious desires. As the Real is by definition outside of symbolization it is only through its effect that it can be observed in the chance juxtaposition of elements that rupture the plane of suburbia's imaginary Real.

Drawing on the methodology of Mass Observation the *Rise and Fall* frequently utilised abstract lists of themes to look out for:

Pretty in Pink: Lost girls

Boys roaming in packs: Lord of the Flies

The lair of the Goonies

Tattooed trees

Modernist entropy

These lists draw on the role of fantasy within popular culture as a means of shaping desire. In doing so the camera seeks to record the external reality of peoples' performative leisure time as the manifestation of the underlying themes that run through society while avoiding the path of humanist essentialism that reduces a metaphysical concept of drive to a form of universal symbolism.

'I've Confused Me With My Self'

The Rise and Fall of Western Civilization: Part One is presented as a single body of work made up from a range of public events with a performative fantasy element.

These documentary photos are interspersed with location shots from the terrain vague of suburban Hutt Valley. Prints vary in size from 10x15 cm to 100x140 cm and are

hung in clusters across the entire length and height of wall space. The seemingly random method of hanging is intended to break up a linear reading of narrative allowing a commonality of theme to emanate from the passive ordering. Interspersed with these intuitively hung images are a series of more directed image pairings the central example of which is *I've Confused Me with My Self*<sup>32</sup>. This diptych embodies the Surrealist method of juxtaposition combining the casual depiction of fantasy violence with the discomfiting interpenetration of nature and civilisation within the suburban terrain vague. The use of juxtaposition as a dialectical tool allows for the creation of what Barthes termed the "third meaning". In combining these two images their objective indexical character leads to a form of confusion arising from the interpenetration both across and within the frame of opposing elements: nature vs culture, internal vs. external, fantasy vs. reality. It is through this use of juxtaposition and hybridity that a surrealist documentary may formulate a rupturing of reality and an engagement with the Real. It is within this gap between two opposed poles that Žizek locates the presence of the Real. The confusion/ trauma of this shifting middle ground, the parallax view, can be found in the Surrealists obsession with hybridity and is the basis for my conception of a Surrealist Documentary.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has outlined the theoretical basis for the epistemological shift in my own photography based on a melding of ethnography, documentary and Surrealist theory. This realignment of my own practice has been haphazard due to a dominant perception of documentary as existing exclusively within a positivist framework while Surrealism is viewed as exclusively metaphysical. This perception of surrealism and documentary as two opposing positions has limited the discourse on

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<sup>32</sup> Fig 9

the use of straight photography by the historical Surrealist movement. Other attempts at combining surrealist theory with an ethnographic/ documentary methodology, as in the group Mass Observation, have been ignored by contemporary histories of both anthropology and photography, despite popular appeal within their own era and the acknowledged later influence of its individual members.

In recent years a resurgent interest in psychoanalysis as a form of cultural critique has been accompanied by a reappraisal of the Surrealists use of straight documentary photography. Here it is the found indexical image as opposed to the constructed photograph that is viewed as inherently surreal. The model of the Lacanian Real as utilised by Žižek allows for a re-conceptualisation of photography's indexical relationship to reality. It is my position that the current stale definitions of documentary and surrealism suffer from an over rigid emphasis of their most literal aspects. Updating the Surrealist's concepts of the terrain vague, hybridity, automatic writing, and, an understanding of the mass unconscious creates a new space for the documentary photograph to operate in locating the surreal within the fantasy of the Real.

## **Illustrations**

1. John Lake, *Untitled, Medieval Markets*, 2008
2. John Lake, *Untitled*, from the series *Kuli ni Tabua*, 2004
3. Eugene Atget, *House of a ragpicker, Montreuil Gate, Fortifications Zone, c.1910*
4. Julian Trevelyan *Teapot Café*, c.1937-8
5. Tony Ray Jones, *Isle of Man*, 1967
6. John Lake, *Angel Lust*, 2007
7. John Lake, *Counter Ops*, 2007
8. John Lake, *The Dirt Gang*, 2007
9. John Lake, *I've Confused Me with Myself*, 2007

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fig 1.



fig 2.



fig 3.



fig 4.



fig 5.



fig 6.



fig 8.



fig 9.