

What was Sleeping Beauty dreaming before the Prince woke her up without so much as a cup of coffee or a slice of toast? Breakfast, perhaps, or her bull-dyke lover? One thing's for certain: the Prince didn't have a clue.

To interrupt the work of the dream with arrogant lips is cruel - or at least annoying.

Maggie Roberts has drawn on the popular genres most associated with the excessive disorder of dreams: horror, science-fiction, and their hybrid - the documentary about technology. This is the culture of spectres. Even though the unframed photos are distributed more or less on a grid pattern across the walls, they inhabit the space without any definite sense of purpose or structure. There are exceptions - such as a file of pictures of a young girl coming down after the exhilaration of Virtual Reality - but these remain singular events, rather than groups of images. These video stills are not the objects of aesthetic contemplation; they anticipate a drunken, ecstatic and unhinged response.

Filling the gallery with spectral, frozen shards of the representation of the longed for and the feared is going to be almost inevitably uncanny. The neurosis will have bite only if the tropes of otherness are allowed to mumble in their sleep, never quite expressing themselves. This much is achieved in these stolen images of lost bodies and drifting landscapes. Quite unaccountably, though, this cyberscape of somatic edginess has a vague Utopian yearning. I say vague, but I mean something more like 'cryptic', but without the connotations of stealth. For, the mesh of significations which is this tinted room with silver windows and ambient sound combines with the images to produce something not only strange, but quite opposed to



normalization. For instance, the representation of desire as android emotionality doesn't quite settle between the thrill of electric surges and the threat of automatic chaos. This imbalance is an opening. Utopia is in there somewhere.

In popular genres technology is imagined through two great tropes, appearing on the one hand as neutral and obedient, or on the other as threatening, assaulting and out of control. Funnily enough, the 'two sides' of technology match the myth of the dualism of woman: either asexual virgin-mother or prostitute-vamp. (See Andreas Huyssen's essay "Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's Metropolis".) Linger in the territories of anxiety, horror and science-fiction are well placed to re-sell the Law as the promises and nightmares of technology, for they specialize in the anthropomorphism of the sub-human. I'm not trying to give political credentials to this work - even less to identify its Utopian moment with feminist excess. Only that, if there is Utopia here, then it must be read against the grain.

Pictures taken from the TV always look diseased, their skin fractured by the grammar of transmission. As the unresolved collision of formats, the diseased image is a sign of difference, non-identity. Too often such inscribed difference is employed for the purposes of professional vanity - a sure sign of high-brow intertextuality - but it can also register the violent manufacture of subjectivities. Here, as the uncertain surface of images of floating existencies or of the panic of drowning, mediated photos of the mediafication of bodily intensities read the somatic disruptions of sex and drugs via their remote encoding in fantasy and myth. This isn't a matter of quotation, but contamination - a sort of technological expressionism. And, like expressionism, its Utopian impulse makes itself



felt in the refusal of all happy endings except one.

Psychically, the ultimate aim of Utopian thinking is the eradication of death. It is more interesting, however, to turn this around. Thus, the dream of everlasting life expresses a Utopian longing. Thin, remote and dimly conceived, no doubt, but, if coming to terms with death is not simply adapting to a bad situation then it is, cryptically, a Utopian encounter. Presumably the Prince regarded Sleeping Beauty as dead or not-quite-alive when he arrived. The dreamer may have had other ideas. The child coming down from the ruck of Virtual Reality resonates both for and against the dream. Does she long for death or stimulation? Does technology bring death or everlasting life? The same question can be asked of sexual and narcotic stimulation. Utopian thinking turns out to be unstable, reversible. The eradication of death is the settling of tension - that is, the achievement of nirvana, of death itself.

The Romantics loved vignettes because their edges must be uncertain and informal. One thing merges with another. Contamination. This is the ruling principle of the exhibition. Indeed, it is necessarily unclear with this edgelessness whether this is an exhibition of vignettes or the installation of one enormous vignette. The Romantics hoped the edgeless-edge of the vignette merged art and life; today, amidst a new call to order, it is one of our few hopes. For the Utopian, hope must always be 'out of order'.

Dave Beech 1995

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