

**FOLLOWING THE PSYCHOPATH:
BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ERRORS
AND CULTURAL PATTERNS**

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BA, Concordia University, 2003

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

In the
School of
Communication

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Summer 2005

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A B S T R A C T

Experience and theory form a textual symbiosis in this thesis, which traces patterns of a cultural pathology enveloping individual and social existence. The experiential narrative follows one year in the author's life as he comes to share an apartment with a charming stranger who turns out to be a psychopath with a criminal past, resulting in dramatic changes in the author's environment. The theoretical narrative provides a critical analysis of those events through Sigmund Freud's account of the narcissistic wounds of our civilization and Gregory Bateson's theory of mental systems in order to connect the author's experience to larger psychopathic patterns of our culture. The thesis argues that in a period of imminent disaster, we need to recognize and understand ourselves as organisms within a larger cultural ecology and demystify the deeply political relations by which we are connected to, and embedded in, our social world.

*To Sean,
you motherfucker,
wherever you are*

*for you are
everywhere*

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Like any self-proclaimed creative and independent experiment, this thesis was utterly dependent on a healthy, structured and nourishing mental environment.

I am indebted to Dr. Gary McCarron for the deeply necessary trust, freedom and inspiration he always provided like a true mentor. Dr. Shane Gunster tackled the project with conscientious enthusiasm and insightful, critical questions that had a formative impact on my thinking. Outside my committee, Dr. Catherine Murray's lively support was warmly felt and appreciated in the final stages of the writing process. And I am grateful for Dr. Jerry Zaslove's time in engaging with a work that was always meant to challenge the reader as well as the writer.

Among my friends, Matthew Powers was indispensable in pushing the project past its conceptual infancy and considering central characters, including my own, in increasingly fictional terms. Without Rob Prey at the delivery stage, I fear that many things could have gone seriously wrong. Roy Bendor provided highly appreciated support in ways he may not be aware of. And then there's Kelsey, my muse – you remain the true heroine of this work.

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PROLOG

We must pass through the threat of that chaos where thought becomes impossible.

Gregory Bateson¹

What I am about to tell you is a true story.² It really happened and revealed itself in all its ostensible insanity within a calendar year that thoroughly changed my life.

However, making sense of truths and falsehoods in the events I went through has been anything but a straightforward exercise – rather one of spiraling movements through a web of possible reflections. I have come to appreciate truth as a rather fragmentary condition, with precarious edges of uncertainty. As a trope of departure for this thesis, then, I'd like to consider truth, in the form of the story that follows, as a broken mirror. Truth as shattered pieces of glass has the potential to offer insightful reflections when it is gradually, painstakingly reassembled, piece by piece, in a new sense of coherency.³ So this is in one sense the story of minds and madness as they become gradually revealed through new kinds of reflections.

¹ See Bateson, 1979, p. 143.

² Names other than factual sources, however, have been changed to protect anonymity throughout.

³ Why such an unoriginal, clichéd, yes even modernist metaphor to begin this thesis? The world, after all, is already awash in mirror analogies. In a sense, we ought to be a post-mirror generation by now, in search of more creative tropes. I can only offer my humble apologies for insulting your intellect from the outset. However, I have yielded to two important points of justification. First, the broken mirror implies both a sense of narcissism and wounding danger, which are crucial aspects of my story. Second, the broken mirror further suggests a possible reflection on the relationship between what is tenuously touted as the difference between a modernist and a postmodernist world. That is, the mirror may in itself pose some modernist ideal, but in the sheer dizziness of the broken mirror experience lies, in my opinion, both the continuity and the disjuncture between these two different worlds. The broken mirror, in other words, entails both fragmentation and unity and may as such be a useful point of departure.

Some of these reflections, as I have made central here, come provided by the greatest thinkers and theorists through history – whose contributions towards mapping our environment stand as textual mirrors in which we may constantly review ourselves. But some of these reflections also contribute to a crucial and widespread misunderstanding of ourselves and our relation to the world around us, leading to imminent threats of political and ecological catastrophe. It is these misunderstandings, these ‘epistemological errors,’ and their infinite replications on all levels of our social world that form the theoretical basis of this thesis.

The ensuing text can largely be considered a two-faced narrative. On one level, the thesis describes, chronologically, my personal encounter with what I will for now just refer to as a stranger in a strange place. On another level, I explore theory that forms a larger picture of these personal events and tries to reveal the social, political and cultural implications of both the experience and the theory involved. I insist that these levels must not be read merely as parallel tracks, or as one level directly reflecting or illustrating another. In the course of the story, the interplay between theory and experience becomes more intricate, to the point where the traditional distinction between these two realms itself falls under scrutiny. Whether this interplay succeeds or fails depends to a large extent on the reader’s engagement with the text and willingness to extend the conventional academic leash for critical inquiry. If my approach here can be characterized as original, I have not done so simply for the sake of originality itself, but because I believe it opens up to different angles of thought that may challenge both our understanding of, and our relationship to, the world around us – and in this relationship, the interpretation of experience becomes part of the experience. In less obtuse terms, perhaps, I realized at an early stage of writing that a thesis concerning itself with relational thinking had better make the relationship between the author and his subject matter more open – and it is in large part for this reason that I have placed myself, not altogether comfortably, at the narrative center here.

My greatest challenge in conveying some of these relatively complex ideas has been to navigate meaningfully between what I could call an ‘open’ and a ‘closed’ text.

Whereas an open text is ready for interpretation, for thought and reflection, a closed text offers its own interpretation of itself and forecloses further speculation. A fictional text is predominantly leaning towards the former, while an academic text traditionally strives towards the latter. Thus, inevitably, this text is the result of a kind of compromise whereby a set of reflective paths are inclined towards a sense of closure, while most others, several of them interrelated in some way, have been kept deliberately open to interpretations and reflections.

Some of this closure in traditional academic literature is attained through discussing the text within the text, or before the text, as I am currently doing. And while I hesitate to foreshadow the story that follows, I will offer you a little piece of my broken mirror as a prism for what you are about to read.

The main character of the theoretical narrative is Gregory Bateson, who devoted himself in large part to contemplating what he called, with some incendiary flare, the epistemological errors of our culture.⁴ The term may seem curious, given the many types of errors and miscalculations that have surely occurred throughout history – and as Bateson also points out, the very process of evolution is itself based on trial and error. However, in this context, an epistemological error can be understood as the kind of fundamental misunderstanding that threatens life itself and consequently any form of epistemology – a meta-mistake of sorts, if you will. And this

⁴ In an attempt to mitigate a philosophical short-circuit at this point, I will clarify what I take to be epistemology in the context of this thesis through Bateson's own definition. "Philosophers have recognized and separated two sorts of problem," he writes. "There are first the problems of how things are, what is a person, and what sort of a world this is. These are the problems of ontology. Second, there are the problems of how we know anything, or more specifically, how we know what sort of a world it is and what sort of creatures we are that can know something (or perhaps nothing) of this matter. These are the problems of epistemology." For the living human being in natural history, Bateson argues, ontology and epistemology cannot be separated. "His [sic] (commonly unconscious) beliefs about what sort of world it is will determine how he sees it and acts within it, and his ways of perceiving and acting will determine his beliefs about its nature. The living man is thus bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises, which – regardless of ultimate truth or falsity – become partially self-validating for him. It is awkward to refer constantly to both epistemology and ontology and incorrect to suggest that they are separable in human natural history. There seems to be no convenient word to cover the combination of these two concepts. The nearest approximations are 'cognitive structure' or 'character structure,' but these terms fail to suggest that what is important is a body of habitual assumptions or premises implicit in the relationship between man and environment, and that these premises may be true or false. I shall therefore use the single term 'epistemology' [...] to cover both aspects of the net of premises which govern adaptation (or maladaptation) to the human and physical environment. In George Kelly's vocabulary, these are the rules by which an individual 'construes' his experience." See Bateson, 1972, pp. 313-4.

mistake concerns a neglected and severed relationship between humans and their environment.

I have chosen to rub Bateson's reflections against some of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, especially his account of the narcissistic wounds of Western civilization. As a kind of prophet of modernity, Freud's tale of human consciousness implicitly lays bare some of the epistemological errors that Bateson attempts to theorize and whose direct and indirect ramifications I try to expose in this thesis. It is, however, important for me to note that in tying the idea of epistemological errors to the history of abstraction and modernity, I don't wish to suggest a kind of nostalgic yearning for some idealized pre-modern state of being. To put it simply, if we find ourselves in epistemological error in a way that threatens our existence, progressive epistemological change, not abandonment, is our only hope. Our conceptual ability for abstraction, which in my account is portrayed as fuel for the complex problems we face, is also what we must rely on, and certainly what I have relied on in this thesis, for inching closer to a position from which we may be able to solve these overwhelming problems.

Bateson suggests, I believe, a few key coordinates for staking out this new course. Following his path, I will navigate through many of his key theoretical contributions on the mind as an ecosystem, in which he expands the concept of mind outwards to include social and political structures as well as nature itself. In a sense, this is a journey through the immanence of mind. Notable stops along the way include his concept of the *double bind*, which I posit as a kind of existential matrix for how the human mind meets and engages with its cultural environment. Within this matrix, I argue that any mental system operates according to a spiraling tension between two antagonistic forces or tendencies— what Bateson calls *schismogenesis*, the progressive differentiation of relationships towards possible conflict, and *homeostasis*, the innate inclination towards self-correction and unification. In this process, there is a delicate line between *adaptation* and *addiction*, or pathology, which may ensue when the self-corrective functions of the mental system are disrupted or suppressed.

While this is highly theoretical and dense, it is by following some striking cultural symptoms that I will approach a reflection on our current political, social and cultural condition, in which the epistemological error keeps replicating itself in everyday life. Epistemology doesn't exist in a philosophical vacuum. It is inextricably tied to language and experience itself, and this is one of the principal reasons I have chosen to weave my theoretical reflections on this issue around the narrative of a lived experience, which has both engendered and delimited the scope of my theoretical reflections.

A year of reading and writing in the aftermath – a year of assembling pieces of the broken mirror – has led me to focus on the kinds of larger patterns and connections that tend to fall between academic disciplines and philosophical traditions. In following the epistemological error, both in theory and its real-life embodiments, we cross over areas of biology, psychology and sociology into the sphere of communication. My general argument holds that tracing and retracing such patterns and relations is crucial to any viable political and social understanding. In this sense, my spotlight on Bateson and Freud can also be seen as an attempt to foreground the importance of understanding the human mind in its environment before we can begin to comprehend the social and political processes enveloping our mental life. Quite crudely, before we can have a theory of technology or of politics or of culture, we need a theory of the mind and of mental relations. And I would argue that it is precisely the prevailing yet erroneous view of our minds that most acutely needs to be corrected in a world facing ever-growing social and environmental problems.

However, I must also admit that painting such a broad interdisciplinary picture comes at the sacrifice of some important in-depth details and historical nuance. A more comprehensive and complex analysis of the issues I raise in this thesis would necessarily need to extend much beyond the reflections of my main characters here – and beyond the narrative structure as well.

Ideas, like signs, tend to circulate and travel through many intellectual streams without certain origins. Many of the thoughts outlined here have in many cases crossed the minds of thinkers other than Bateson as well, and by restricting my

theoretical scope, I don't wish to suggest that Bateson's ideas were uniquely his own. Rather, I think Bateson's theories are well-suited as a fulcrum for related ideas by thinkers from different disciplines.

Many significant and possibly relevant intellectual voices remain muted in my narrative. However, I believe the spirit of many great influences have seeped into my writing somehow – including such 20th century intellectual apparitions as Theodor Adorno, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Zygmunt Bauman. Moreover, perspectives such as political economy, critical theory, and semiotics, though not necessarily articulated within the text itself, also form a tacit part of my scope. While there are clearly significant differences between such frames of inquiry, I will suggest they are largely complementary to the kind of picture I paint here. For instance, I would not want my particular perspective on particular patterns of mental illness in this thesis to be read as necessarily refuting the significance of psychiatric theory and practice – any more than I would want my limited analysis of capitalism to be taken as my rejecting the importance of such analysis.⁵

My sincere hope is that the reader will find throughout the text several complementary points of connection from prior knowledge and understanding – points that I for some reason or another could not make or address directly in the process of writing. I encourage the reader's active use of 'abduction' – a mode of reasoning that also permeates my task of discerning larger patterns of relationships. Whereas the established logics of deduction and induction imply a kind of scientific abstraction from the world – a Platonian distinction between the universal world of ideas and the particular world of matter – abductive reasoning lies closer to a more holistic or organic scope. Coined by the American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce, abduction describes the creative process of reasoning, where new hypotheses are generated in order to explain surprising facts. Sherlock Holmes, in this sense, did not as much deduce as abduce his way from the clues in front of him.

⁵ Moreover, my emphasis on epistemology is not meant to privilege, in the Marxian sense, superstructure over infrastructure, or necessarily to suggest that ideas precede reality. Causality and purpose serve their own kind of philosophical function, which sometimes must be circumvented in order to obtain a different perspective. Thus, the issue for me here is to better understand the relationship between these abstracted realms – the patterns that connect the world of ideas and theory to the world of social realities.

In fact, the detective may be the most relevant representation of the abducting subject. As interpreters of clues, both the reader and the writer are detectives within this narrative. Whereas I have abducted from my personal experience, the reader can, hopefully, make abductions from the text and the interplay between theoretical and experiential narratives within the text. Sometimes, the clues will seem obvious and direct, while sometimes, a more open-ended interpretative approach is perhaps necessary.

To Peirce, the abductive method lies close to guesswork and speculation, which forms the epistemological basis for most human endeavors to understand ourselves and our environment. In this sense, abduction and the role of theory become a kind of pincer movement on our experience of the world. Bateson took a more general approach to abduction that may have differed substantially from Peirce and other logicians.⁶ To Bateson, abduction was principally about pattern detection in its widest sense and he contended that the possibility of abduction was a unique feature we as humans tend to take for granted.

Metaphor, dream, parable, allegory, the whole of art, the whole of science, the whole of religion, the whole of poetry, totemism, the organization of facts in comparative anatomy – all these are instances or aggregates of instances of abduction, within the human mental sphere.

But obviously, the possibility of abduction extends to the very roots also of physical science, Newton's analysis of the solar system and the periodic table of the elements being historic examples. Conversely, all thought would be totally impossible in a universe in which abduction was not expectable.⁷

Ultimately, this thesis concerns itself with the importance of epistemological change. And any concern with change in epistemology must also involve a shift in our entire system of abductions. We must abduce anew from the new premises, from the

⁶ It is also worth noting that the use of the term abduction varies from discipline to discipline. For example, computer logicians, perhaps not surprisingly, have a much narrower definition of abductive reasoning than tends to emanate from the social sciences and humanities.

⁷ See Bateson, p. 143.

new pieces of reflection in front of us. This becomes particularly important in a thinking process concerned with discovering interrelated dimensions and patterns of experience. Muses Bateson:

Every abduction may be seen as a double or multiple description of some object or event or sequence. If I examine the social organization of an Australian tribe and the sketch of natural relations upon which the totemism is based, I can see these two bodies of knowledge as related abductively, as both falling under the same rules. In each case, it is assumed that certain formal characteristics of one component will be mirrored in the other.

This repetition has certain very effective implications. It carries injunctions, for the people concerned. Their ideas about nature, however fantastic, are supported by their social system; conversely, the social system is supported by their ideas of nature. It thus becomes very difficult for the people, doubly guided, to change their view either of nature or of the social system. For the benefits of stability, they pay the price of rigidity, living, as all human beings must, in an enormously complex network of mutually supporting presuppositions.⁸

And so we are back to the mirror analogy – the reflection that supports our epistemological presuppositions. Only by shattering the mirror up front could I draw attention to the reflection upon which we have come to depend. And only by piecing the mirror together in abductive fashion could I hope to generate some new reflections, however rudimentary. As an organic structure, the ideas supporting this thesis grow out of the text as it progresses through the account of my personal experience. That is why I hesitate to provide more of an overview, a brief look through the prism, than I already have. To begin with a broken mirror is, after all, to begin from dizziness, confusion – and opacity.

But just as the blackest piece of coal with enough time and pressure can turn into the brightest diamond, I promise that everything will eventually become clear.

⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

S U M M E R

C a t

As usual, it begins and ends with laughter.

“And it all comes together...” Cat was doing her mock-spiritual, new-agey voice again – the one I always found so excruciatingly funny – her arms gracefully completing a wide circle in the air– “...in one big granola moment!”

We laughed – as loud as we could, as though we were defying someone, something, somewhere – at once heartily, viciously and uneasily. Another hour-long conversation had led us off in all kinds of directions, from tangent to tangent, then somehow bringing us full circle back to where we began. A circuit of mundane perfection.

I admit to taking an intense, almost perverse satisfaction – in a somewhat obsessive-compulsive kind of way, perhaps – from things that fit into other things, patterns that connect to other patterns. Sitting here in our dusty apartment in Montreal, we found a near-spiritual thrill from being part of something greater than ourselves, from immersing ourselves in a conversational stream that seemed to lead us farther outside our minds than we had ever intended. Our talking, our hour-long welding of minds, had formed a misty cloud around us, a pattern which, for a brief moment – a granola moment – connected us to our surroundings and made us one with our shared living room.

Inside this dimly lit, cluttered space, on the creaking top floor of a century-old three-storey apartment building with a lugubrious neighborhood pub below, Cat and I were like fish in water. Both of us Pisces, restless in spirit. Like the two fish of the astrological sign, swimming in circles, endlessly connected. Or so we liked to think.

Now our time was up. Our year as roommates, beginning as strangers, ending as best friends, had come to an end and the currents that had brought us together were about to carry us in opposite directions. Her journey that had begun in California would take her further eastwards to the Atlantic coast, to Halifax. My compass was set the other way. Coming from the other side of the Atlantic, from Norway, I had let myself drift westwards from family and friends in pursuit of knowledge. And now, after five years in Montreal, the stream was intensifying, becoming ferocious, intent to carry me along like manifest destiny, quelling my insistence on free will, through Canada, towards the Pacific, towards graduate school in Vancouver. Our steamy waterhole in Montreal was evaporating.

We would have to seek oneness in some other way. There had to be some meaning, we thought, some greater significance, to our opposite trajectories. At some point, there would be an existential granola moment for us both, in which it would all come together and make perfect sense, as though our lives were really outside our own control even though we didn't really think they were. Not really. And that's why I was sitting here on our last night together in our living room, laughing confidently yet anxiously through the candle-lit cloud of incense. As much as we could appreciate the mythical idea of oneness, of connectedness – of the 'oceanic feeling,' as Freud called it⁹ – we wouldn't be truly young if we didn't pass the idea through some ironic, irreverent filter. We weren't ready to be humble just yet – though we did like the concept of humility as its own form of abstract pattern hovering around us, reeling us in, but never really drenching us and imposing itself as necessity. No, not just yet. For now, west coast spirituality, encapsulated in the derogatory use of the word granola, was merely a vaguely alluring point of ridicule. But soon enough, I thought, I would find myself hugging fir trees, wearing hemp yoga pants, praising tofu – and it would all come together, in one big granola moment, far, far away from our living room.

We had stopped laughing. There was an awkward pause where we just looked at each other, realizing that if we were in a movie – which we tended to think from

⁹ See Freud, 1961, p. 11.

time to time – the director would have already cut to another scene several seconds ago. The echo of a moment, left in the editing bin.

Cat touched my newly shaved head, my self-produced signifier of confidence and masculinity. A few years before, traveling through Thailand, a local academic told me that every Buddhist adolescent had to become a monk for a few years, much like other countries have mandatory military service. As monks, they committed to a path of spiritual enlightenment like a form of higher education, which in turn was socially reinforced as a signifier of status. No proper Thai girl, the man told me, would ever marry a man who had not devoted some time to his own enlightenment. I had no idea how true it was, nor did I particularly care for the patriarchal implications of such a system. Nonetheless, as I was watching young, smooth-scalped men in orange capes walk by, I found the idea oddly compelling. In Western consumerist fashion, I appropriated the symbol of the shaved head to complement my own symbolic yearning for peace with a look of distinct masculine aggression required to succeed in a brawling, competitive world. By baring my vulnerable skull, I poised myself for a will to knowledge and spiritual enlightenment, like a good Buddhist monk. Just without the commitment and the material sacrifice, of course.

As Cat placed her palm on my crown, I felt a tingling radiation, a restless electricity. Then at some point which I cannot remember we hugged and said goodbye, not knowing when we would see each other again.

The rest of the summer passed in fleeting, disjointed moments of traveling and transition.

H a s s e l b l a d

That sound.

[crack.]

I closed my eyes, breathed deeply and lived through the brief moment of a flashing vision. In this strange, uncanny sight, I was holding on to my Hasselblad studio camera – my technological extension; my perspectival prosthesis – peering

through the viewfinder, looking for a motif in my surroundings. But all I could see were reflections – reflections of the same pattern, infinitely replicated – reflections of myself. I turned around, frantically, but wherever I gazed, there was only repetition. I was in a hall of mirrors. And for a moment, I was overwhelmed with nausea, wanting to support myself on something but finding nothing around me but reflections, and reflections of reflections, of further reflections – leaving me incapable of discerning my own body from the reverberating vision of myself. It was a vertiginous moment of absolute narcissism. A tinge of panic crept through my forearms into my knuckles. My camera lens could find no focal point, no object to measure itself against. I wanted to scream, but the sight of myself opening my mouth from all angles diffused the burst of air from my lungs into a nearly inaudible sigh. My fingers turned numb. There was a loud but dull sound playing on loop around me, again and again.

[crack.]

And then I opened my eyes and I realized that I was no longer in a dream. In fact, it was more like a nightmare: a shoe store in an enormous shopping mall somewhere in the middle of America. And on the tile floor was the camera I had dropped. For what I imagine must have been quite some time, at least to the baffled store clerk watching me, my mind was frozen in contemplation on whether my moment of panic had caused me to drop the camera or whether my dropping the camera had caused the moment of panic. Which event was a reflection of which? The sound was my only recollection.

[crack.]

By now, more people had gathered to watch the poor white nerd with the glasses staring helplessly at his own camera. They kept a distance; no one said a word, leaving the echo of the crashing sound only muffled by faint muzak.

I had found it in a used camera store in New York City years ago. It was thirty years old, in mint condition, and it came with the exact wide-angle lens I wanted. The old man behind the counter had passed it to me with reverence. To any professional photographer, a Hasselblad is a Rolls Royce of cameras, gracefully shaped like a mechanistic ode to modernist beauty, a square black box with the most supreme

quality optical lens attached at the front. The lens alone cost me two thousand dollars – the camera house plus film magazine an additional thousand. It was my biggest investment, digging deep into my savings, but I was determined to make it part of my life, a sacred object, one to be passed on to future generations, perhaps – untainted by electronics and battery power – a machine of mechanical art.

I kneeled to examine the damage. The front coating of the lens was banged up. The viewfinder mirror was splintered, leaving only bizarre, kaleidoscopic images to the retina.

Frazzled but expression-less, I packed my injured prosthesis back in the bag, nestled it in with the unexposed rolls of film, patted it affectionately. Somehow I didn't feel like taking any more pictures. Not for some time. I felt shell-shocked. I nodded to the wide-eyed clerk and the group of people gathered around him. He nodded back. Nothing was uttered; nothing was understood.

I scuttled out of the store, blending in with scores of hypnotized suburban families, contemplating my strange dream-like vision and the splintered mirror of my camera. My mind wandered associatively towards French thinker Michel Foucault. Before leaving Montreal, I had just read his cogent little essay called "Nietzsche, Freud and Marx" where the mirror metaphor was instrumental. In the text, Foucault reflects on how to interpret whom he sees as the three major interpreters of late Western history.

Freud says somewhere that there are three great narcissistic wounds in Western culture: the wound inflicted by Copernicus; the one made by Darwin, when he discovered that man descended from the ape; and the wound made by Freud himself, when he in turn discovered that consciousness rests on the unconscious. I wonder whether one could not say that Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, by involving us in a task of interpretation that always reflects back on itself, have not constituted around us, and for us, these mirrors in which we are given back images whose perennial wounds form our narcissism today.¹⁰

As I was spinning around inside the vast cathedral of consumption, I felt like Foucault's dizzying argument was becoming much clearer. I sensed a point of

¹⁰ See Foucault, p. 272.

departure for my westwards adventure. History's great thinkers, I mused, could be seen as cultural mirror holders, providing us with infinitely new angles of reflection, new splintered pieces, within a conceptual hall, demarcated by the elusive bounds of knowledge itself. Like our natural surroundings, we tend to take for granted the conceptual world of abstract concepts which we continually apply to our experience. We are, Foucault suggests, all living in a hall of mirrors but we are neither shocked nor nauseated by our experience, because we have gradually become used to it, naturalized it, smuggled it across the detecting borders of our mind and placed it in that dubious domain we call 'common sense.'

In the midst of Foucault's reflection on the reflection on Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, their reflections, and the nature of reflection itself – oh my – could there be space for my own – albeit much less significant – reflections?

The hall of mirrors, however, was clearly not without peril. What Freud implies, in Foucault's reflection, is that we as a civilization have deeply wounded ourselves in our upbringing. With limited sensory and motor skills, perhaps, we have inevitably crashed into and broken mirrors along the way, like a reckless child on a tricycle. And to Freud, there are these three pivotal wounds, cutting deep into the flesh of our civilizational ego. Traumatizing, agonizing, paralyzing – we can analyze them in detail – and many people certainly have – how would we even know if they ever healed? Could they not have become the locus of invisible viral proliferations? Foucault's prism elucidates not only the general terrain of reflections but suggests an overarching theme behind the broken mirror trope: madness. If we, as a culture, are lost in a hall of mirrors, navigating only through infinite reflections whose origins are obscured, how could we possibly reflect on these signs, let alone begin to understand ourselves? When we look into these broken mirrors, what is there for us to see? What are the signs of our infected wounds?

Perhaps it was the gravity of the questions that pulled me down, making me nauseated, in the face of the mirroring images. I wanted further reflections – follow the beams of light, see where they would lead me – but I felt like they were going to drive me crazy. So I was content, intermittently, to look around for some new clothes,

something to purchase, some materiality to place in the shopping bag, and then keep myself moving through this landscape I would still, somewhat apprehensively, consider reality.

Self

Sweeping past my windshield, across vast prairie lands, was nothing but clouds and inexorable distance. Now, I thought, this land was my land, my new homeland. Its greatness would be frightening if I could not retain some sense of control, overview, of my own existence. Or perhaps I could just control it by driving faster?

In the novel *Slowness*, Milan Kundera postulates an inverse correlation between speed and memory. The faster we go, the less we remember, he argues. Existential algebra. Have you noticed how, he asks, when you try to recollect a specific memory you tend to slow down? A culture hooked on speed, on fastness, then, is perhaps on the road to collective amnesia. A convenient forgetting of our own afflictions?

I had finished a university bachelor's degree and in a flash, four years of painstaking process – of thought patterns, learning and social adaptation – was reduced to a piece of paper, an acronym on my curriculum vitae. Education suddenly seemed as conveniently packaged as my favorite breakfast cereal, a mere commodity, bereft of contextual meaning. That particular view, admittedly, was in itself somewhat conditioned by my educational training. Wherever I went, all I could see were fragments held together by the illusory glue of language, myth, ideology – by invisible mirrors and reflections. Four years of mental unpacking of the world, piece by piece – insatiable questioning, bracketing, quotation marks. The relentless logic of deconstruction and fragmentation had permeated my mind and turned on itself. Quite literally, in fact. I had become increasingly convinced that the self was a convenient fiction. That is, the "I", the singular identity – the supposedly unified voice of this narrative – was merely a short-cut, a *compromise*, a conceptual reference point to an

aggregate of overlapping identities – a somewhat schizoid constellation of constantly developing, disconnected mental pathways.

I began making abstract theoretical models for re-conceptualizing identity and mind – for thinking about the self in a way that could move us beyond what I perceived, with a tinge of paranoia, as a kind of cultural tyranny: an incessant discourse imploring me – through the mouths of mass media, advertising, friends, family – to stay ‘true to myself,’ to ‘find myself,’ to ‘love myself,’ to ‘take care of myself.’

Once again, I was – to the extent that I was an I, of course – oh, the insatiable confusion – stranded in the hall of mirrors.

Finding myself? Listen, I said, I’m trying, I’m looking – it’s not exactly easy, let me tell you, but why is this so important to you, anyway, that I find myself? What’s your agenda? What do you gain from it? While I am busy taking care of and thinking about “myself,” aren’t you in fact free to kill and plunder, call foreign people evil, to destroy others the way you are destroying me? Isn’t that what’s really going on?

But the TV set ignored me as usual and kept repeating its exhortations. It stayed on message. ‘Treat yourself,’ it said. Treat yourself to some shopping.

And then the process of refuting my self invariably turned on itself, questioning the assumptions behind questioning assumptions – the purpose of critical doubt. I felt lost and most nights, I couldn’t sleep in the face of my own reflections. Gradually, I began to abstract this never-ending process from the rest of my mental space as a dissociative tactic. Yes, it was like a ceaseless inquisition¹¹, facing me with glaring contradictions. And then followed the hollow laughter of apathy.

Must. Stop. Thinking.

Must. Fall. Asleep.

Cut.

¹¹ Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition! Thus Monty Python has taught us. But for Cat and me, inquisition was encapsulated in her favorite haunt of a phrase: *whatever you need to tell yourself?* We laughed uneasily every time we uttered it since we both knew that through the veil of apathy and skepticism lay the catalyst of profound inner disturbance and radical relativism. Abruptly – violently – in one damning phrase, uncertainty was once again revealed, the world deconstructed, naked, vulnerable. Behind the words lay the question: do you dare to trust your own thought? Brace yourself for the Postmodern Inquisition! Its weapons are *surprise, fear, ruthless efficiency*. And neurotic scrutiny for all. All equally unexpected every time.

Bitch

I met Bitch in Calgary and somewhere on a warehouse dance floor on our first night together, we became best friends. He proudly wore his nickname as a badge among his inner circle of friends and that's how I first knew that I was now among local nobility.

"You can call me Bitch," he said, his voice nasally shrill, hissing with laughter – yes, a truly bitchy laughter.

I took the moment as a ceremonial event.

"Thanks Bitch!" I said, with almost no hint of irony. I felt honored and protected by the exclusive permission to use his polarizing social trademark. For if you tried to invoke the name without his approval, without belonging to his inner circle, you would soon discover just how much Bitch deserves his name.

"I have made lots of people cry," he professed with shameless smugness. We were resting on a couch, watching people dance under flashing spotlights. Women were passing by, acknowledging him, waving, looking him in the eye, smiling. They all seemed to know this 30 year old, slightly chubby perfection of a high school drama queen. Most people chose, wisely, to defer to His Bitchiness, to accept him purely on a surface level.

And that was all he could ever want.

Bitch's parents had emigrated from the Philippines and brought with them a market-induced ideal of material wealth and family legacy. They raised their children for capitalist success – to adapt, to achieve, to accumulate – and to ensure that their project was passed on to the next generation. Growing up as the eldest son, Bitch's deeply conditioned ambitions were only superseded by his desire for paternal approval. So you can probably imagine things went a little awry when Bitch's father found out that his 18-year-old designated carrier of the generational torch was in fact gay.

Yes, there would be no bitch for Bitch, no son of Bitch. The rumors were true: his son was a Bitch. And so, all of a sudden, was life.

Well, Bitch's father didn't revel in the obvious irony. He was not amused. Not at all. One evening, when Bitch stopped by the house to change clothes, in eager anticipation of a party night, in which he could temporarily flee the misery of his domestic charade, his father pulled out a gun and put it to Bitch's head, threatening to pull the trigger. In that snap second, while a mother's frantic screams dominated the kitchen soundscape – hysterical pleas for her husband to let go – Bitch's distraughtly pulsating heart, desperate for comfort, for reassurance and relief, abruptly split in two. It began pumping blood in two different directions of his body, fueling two different temperatures of Bitch: a cold-blooded, hard exterior of fake smiles and phony banter, fiercely protecting the warm-blooded, turtling remains of a really frightened boy hiding, longing for approval but somehow knowing that he might never again dare to peek his head out.

Bitch didn't cry. He didn't break down. His father had taught him not to lose face and he was not about to show his weakness. No, he calmly talked his father into putting the gun down, then walked out to his friends who were idly waiting in the car, reassured them that everything was fine and went out to have fun, to get away. And then he defied his father the only way left possible to him: by dropping out of school, abandoning his education.

He never moved out, never formally broke ranks with his parents. The incident – what incident? – was never talked about again. Bitch kept treating his family much like those people nodding at him that night on the dance floor: with perfected appeasement, ceaseless fakeness, invoked with the fervor of sportsmanship. You would think he was the nicest guy in the world. Only we who knew him, we entrusted few, we who now were allowed to call him Bitch to his face, could see that he was really being a big bitch, a bigger bitch than anyone could imagine, playing you like a game. But in him we saw a true human being in desperate need of adoration and admiration. And together we would escape our families, jobs, lives – the burdens of the past extending into the future. All for the high of the present.

The DJ is changing beats. He stands on a small podium, raises his fist – he is our leader. We are his herd. People around us are shouting with fascist enthusiasm. It's a Friday night.

Bitch looks at me fondly. I recognize the look and decide to clarify my position. I'm used to this by now. So I say to his right ear,

“I'm not gay; I'm European.”

Bitch looks at me for a brief moment, then laughs sneeringly, partly through his nose. It seems like a genuine laughter, but I can't quite tell. He shouts.

“That's awesome.”

And then the affirmation.

“You are tier one,” he says. Tier one.

Bitch's cognitive split made him precious game for the service industry. As reservation manager for a downtown hotel, he had been slowly climbing the hierarchic ladder, position by position, armored with unsurpassed loyalty and an overdetermined passion to please. He absorbed his job like a dried out sponge falling into a spill of water. Once permeated, the corporate spirit brought him solace and newfound meaning. He went on crusading rants of self-righteousness against the epidemic of bad service. When an underpaid coffee shop employee once displayed a crack in the corporately conditioned facade – failing to smile, to defer unconditionally to the customer, failing to understand that whatever He says is rule, that when He wants extra foam on His grande non-fat decaf latte He must have it because He has to keep believing in the tacit rules of the service game in order to willingly part with His money – well, Bitch wrote a long letter of complaint to the franchise manager. A week later, he received a letter of pleasingly fake apologies – as fake as Bitch could make them himself – along with coupons for free beverages while the employee got a firm slap on his wrist. Bitch would show up again, gloating, and the humbled worker would apologize for his lack of tact, for his failure to abide by the holy principles of customer satisfaction above all and without exclusion – and Bitch would go back to his office, sip his latte with content and feel like justice had been served.

It's 4 am. A girl comes up to talk. She has recognized Bitch – now she glances over at me, smiles, she's pretty, she's having a good time, then shouts in his left ear. I only hear loud music, beats, noise. They chat, Bitch laughs, no, he guffaws, he must like her, he touches her bare shoulder as he speaks, compliments her top. Then she leaves, smiles at me again, so cute, waves at him, goes back to dance.

"Who was that?" I ask.

"Oh, she's this total fag-hag from work who totally loves me," Bitch says. "I'm only nice to her because I work with her. She's *tier three*."

After a few dazed years of wrestling with his father's violent disappointment, Bitch came to regain his mental equilibrium through corporate cognitive frames. The whole world passed by his indoctrinated filter of service industry ideology. It became tiered. For a short while, I – a student, removed from the entitlement of the traveling elite, a back-seat passenger – felt the glory of honor, of distinction. With tier one status, I was like a gold card executive, of utmost importance, among a select few. Along came an infinite pandering, pampering, a professing of unique privileges – and, inevitably, heavy responsibility to fulfill my emotional investment obligations. If I were to discredit my status, neglect him, choose another supplier of friendliness, I would suffer the humility of downgrading, like all of his friends who left town while he stayed behind, who stopped calling, who got their own lives, new friends – fine, they would now be tier two, tier three – or if they really played their cards poorly – the fourth level, the vast category of unspeakable ordinariness: *un-tiered*.

We walk through the streets as dawn is a few hours away, the sky slightly pink, our ears still ringing. It's a clear, starry night with much promise for the coming morning. We have never been higher, more satisfied. Bitch takes me back to the hotel, where he has fixed me up with a fabulous corner suite at the top of the building, panoramic city views and all.

"Room 1919," Bitch says. "This is where all my tier one friends stay." It's an incredible deal. Peak season, all hotels full – you couldn't get a janitor closet for less than two hundred dollars – and Bitch is fixing me up with a room almost for free. I look at him. He's a sorcerer.

“I moved this old American couple into a smaller room on the third floor and charged them 400 bucks for it,” he tells me, laughing heartily, viciously. *Such a Bitch!* I laugh with him, feeling special, appreciated, approved – alone in this big country, perhaps, but not without friends, or a place to stay.

Bitch drives home to his parents’ suburban home so he will be back before they wake up, ready for Sunday mass. A 29-year-old on a curfew. He is happy to consent, even to God, if it gets him out of conflict, gets his family to stay together, to go along with their pre-established narrative of pride and success. Sure, there may have been disruption – what disruption? – but nothing to talk about, nothing to worry about. From the glaring lacks in his own life, Bitch has understood the pleasing, comforting, disarming nature of reassurance.

“It’s all good, my friend,” Bitch tells me as he’s getting in the car. “It’s all good.”

I think: he is my brother.

I wave goodbye and crawl back towards the large duvet covers of room 1919, feeling pleased, comforted, disarmed. Exhausted. My mind is still churning, as though it refuses to leave the present tense.

The Uncanny

It’s early Saturday morning in room 1919 and I’m out of bed already, unable to sleep as usual, but ready to cheat.

While I’m perfectly happy to let the summer pass by in linear time, I’m going to jump. Not out of the hotel room window – those stupid panes don’t even open – but out of time. I have decided, with the power invested in me as a narrator, to indulge in an out-of-chronology experience while I spend an eternal, timeless moment watching the sunrise over the prairies. The rosy glow streaking through the immaculate glass promises a spectacular moment of experiencing myself as my own double.

I’m feeling warm and friendly still. Such a great morning chronological cheating, I think, quite comfortable with my newfound existence in the present tense. I’m in the bathroom now, apparently, looking in the mirror, wondering why there

seems to be mirrors everywhere these days, admiring that strange golden spiraling pattern around my pupils, adjusting my hair, picking a zit, eew, scratching my head and smelling my fingers, thinking I should probably have a quick shower. Then I turn away and forget the previous thought as easily as it came – such is the glory of the absolute present – walking back into the room, only to discover a book on the coffee table.

Perfect, I think to myself. Perfect like the number 1919 and the reunification of space and time occurring in front of me. It was in 1919 that Freud published his curious reflection on “The Uncanny.” In the volumes of his complete psychological works, it stands out as a unique inquiry into the aesthetics and psychology of what frightens and haunts yet somehow allures us in our everyday life. Like ‘*dejà vu*,’ the uncanny resists rational explanation. Yet Freud, whose mind perhaps constituted the greatest blitz of rationalist fervor to ever engage with the forces of irrationality – his texts, I believe, represent the modernist heights of the 20th century – makes a bold attempt. What confronts us as uncanny, Freud argues, is nothing new or alien but something familiar and established in the mind, which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.¹² “An uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”¹³ (249) Something that ought to have remained hidden has come to light.

The uncanny, in other words, reminds us, in ever elusive fashions, of our primitive past – it unleashes residual tensions of human narcissism, in both the history of human civilization and the human being.

And now we find ourselves on familiar ground. Our analysis of the uncanny has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe. This was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject’s narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that

¹² A cornerstone of Freud’s thought, not limited to the uncanny.

¹³ See Freud, 1964, p. 249.

belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers, or 'mana'; as well as by all the other creations with the help of which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality. It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as 'uncanny' fulfills the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression.¹⁴

So what occurs to me, as I am taking in Freud's reflection, is not to analyze it further along his own lines of rationalist inquiry – to attempt a reasoned disclosure of what belies the forms of reason at our disposal. No, to me the uncanny is significant primarily because it opens us up to a suggestive and speculative space – a cognitive dimension that we may have tried to eclipse, but which forces itself upon us with such intensity that we simply cannot afford to dismiss it as insignificant to the human condition. In between the cracks of the many mirrors that surround us, in other words, there is something else worth reflecting on – at least in order to realize the limitations of our present reflections – the limitations of our own knowledge.

I put the open-faced volume on the table for a moment to admire the warm shine of light through the windows. The pages suddenly flip, revealing another text that Freud published two years earlier, in 1917, and which concerns precisely the history of the narcissism that he considers so central to our understanding of ourselves. Herein, before me, lie the 'wounds of civilization,' in their original reflections, as told by a man who proclaimed himself one of its inflictors. It is all so, well, uncanny.

The short essay, "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis," provides a succinct introduction to 'libido theory' – the basis for understanding the concept of narcissism and the role of the ego in the world. In concerning itself with 'the instinctual life of the mind,' Freudian psycho-analysis makes a fairly clear distinction

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 240-41.

between self-preservative ego-instincts, such as hunger, on the one hand, and sexual instincts, including love, on the other. “The force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind we call ‘libido’ – sexual desire – and we regard it as something analogous to hunger, the will to power, and so on, where the ego-instincts are concerned.” And he continues:

We have been driven to assume that at the beginning of the development of the individual all his libido (all his erotic tendencies, all his capacity for love) is tied to himself – that as we say, it cathects his own ego. It is only later that, being attached to the satisfaction of the major vital needs, the libido flows over from the ego on to external objects. Not till then are we able to recognize the libidinal instincts as such and distinguish them from the ego-instincts. It is possible for the libido to become detached from these objects and withdrawn again into the ego. The condition in which the ego retains the libido is called by us ‘narcissism,’ in reference to the Greek legend of the youth Narcissus who was in love with his own reflection. Thus in our view the individual advances from narcissism to object-love. But we do not believe that the *whole* of the libido ever passes over from the ego to objects. A certain quantity of libido is always retained in the ego; even when object-love is highly developed, a certain amount of narcissism persists.”¹⁵

From here Freud goes on to discuss the three narcissistic wounds of civilization. And right here, in the very uncanny of 1919, I decide to carve out a conceptual space for theoretical reflection. Free to follow the reflective light from prism to prism, I can begin to contemplate the larger narcissistic wound in which I live, in which we all live, but above all me, me, me, me, because such is perhaps also the effect of the narcissistic wound–

The sun provides me with a warm reading glow, only tempered by the slightly tinted windows behind my reading chair. It is in this moment that text becomes alive and that I can enter into it. Somewhere over the Rocky Mountains, however, my life of the past keeps moving on towards its inevitable future.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 137-9.

Orca Place

I arrived in Vancouver at the height of summer, eager for a new and *exciting* life. I would meet *exciting* new people! Learn *exciting* new things! With a recent scholarship windfall, I was drawn towards renting a brand new *exciting* apartment: condominium-style, downtown, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, all appliances, grand view of the mountains – view of the sunset – an *exciting* new lifestyle! It was all so, well, *exciting!*

The building was called 'Orca Place' and the logo above the door sported a motif of two whales swimming in a circle, much like the Piscean sign. I liked it.

Looking out from my new balcony for the first time, I took in the sounds of the city, of the harbor, sucked up the sea breeze and wondered about the many granola moments I would surely have standing right here. It was the warmest summer in years – my naked skull was perspiring from lack of breeze – and I could hardly wait for what lay ahead.

Cat, my dearest soul mate, where were you now? Where was your laugh? Could you feel my happiness, my joy? Could you share my horizon of possibilities?

...and it all comes together...

First thing on the list: a new roommate.

...in one big granola moment...

This time, with the world twenty stories below, my lonely laughter resonated without a hollow echo.

F A L L

The first wound

In the early stages of his researches, man believed at first that his dwelling-place, the earth, was the stationary centre of the universe, with the sun, moon and planets circling round it. In this he was naively following the dictates of his sense-perceptions, for he felt no movement of the earth, and wherever he had an unimpeded view he found himself in the centre of a circle that enclosed the external world. The central position of the earth, moreover, was a token to him of the dominating part played by it in the universe and appeared to fit in very well with his inclination to regard himself as lord of the world.

The destruction of this narcissistic illusion is associated in our minds with the name and work of Copernicus in the sixteenth century. But long before his day the Pythagoreans had already cast doubts on the privileged position of the earth, and in the third century B.C. Aristarchus of Samos had declared that the earth was much smaller than the sun and moved round that celestial body. Even the great discovery of Copernicus, therefore, had already been made before him. When this discovery achieved general recognition, the self-love of mankind suffered its first blow, the *cosmological* one.¹⁶

Virtual Sean

From: "sean lake" <lakesean@hotmail.com>¹⁷
Date: Sat Aug 23, 2003 19:27:23 America/Vancouver
To: bjorn@mobilpost.no
Subject: Apartment

Hi Bjorn,

¹⁶ See Freud, 1964, pp. 139-40.

¹⁷ All quoted emails in this text are actual personal communication, unedited except for a few spelling corrections. Names, other than mine, and usernames have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Thank you for returning my call. You caught me off guard, I was doing a million and one things and had the delivery boy from the local deli at my doorstep so if I sounded distracted (or plain stupid) my apologies, I'm not normally like that.

I'm more than interested in sharing an apartment with you. Living in Manhattan, I'm sure you can relate that I've lived with a roommate for many years. To be honest, I'm not even sure if I told you a little about myself. I'm 30. Born in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, raised on the West Island of Montreal and moved to NYC when I was sixteen. I put myself through school by working in nightclubs. Working at some of the best clubs and venues this city has had to offer, I went to New York University, got my juris doctorate in law, however, I never put it to use. I write for a living. I'm currently working on a story about two Cuban drug dealers from Miami who were accused of smuggling 1000 tons of cocaine into the States during the early 80s. They were acquitted only to be retried again after the US Attorney's office found out they bought the entire jury.

I have a place in Miami Beach which I share with my best friend – a fashion designer specializing in Haute Couture – and I have access to a studio in Honolulu. (Up until just recently, I was living and working in Honolulu, Hawaii for eight months working as a dolphin companion and being a professional beach bum.) I'm pretty down to earth, neat, but not to the point it becomes manic, I drink socially, glass of wine at dinner... I don't smoke but don't care if you do. I'm definitely not the type of person to keep my crap under lock and key or argue when it comes to you eating MY cereal – I'm very generous – it's a trait I learned while growing up. If it wasn't for the people who gave me the opportunity to get where I am now – well, maybe I'd be just another lost soul in a very big city.

I have a great social circle of friends – and it kills me up inside to know that I'll be leaving them. I'm nervous moving back to a country I know very little about and the only two people I know in Vancouver are my two sisters and how lame is that???

I don't know what else to tell you, except that paying \$750.00 a month will not be a problem, and I could even pay you in American bucks to boot.

If you have any questions, feel free to ask me. I'm an email junkie. I curse the day Al Gore invented the internet!!! I check up like every hour...

Sean

From: Bjorn Ekeberg <bjorn@mobilpost.no>
Date: Tue, 25 Aug 2003 01:32:28 -0700
To: "sean lake" <lakesean@hotmail.com>
Subject: Re: Apartment

Hey Sean,

thanks for your email and the very interesting intro to yourself. I'll return the favor with a few words about me:

I'm originally from Oslo, Norway, but I've been living in Montreal for the last five years, working on a BA in Communication Studies. Squeezing the most out of my grants and my time I've taken semesters off to travel around the world and to work in Oslo as a journalist. I decided against taking up permanent employment in Norway, however (too young, too much to explore), and now I'm happy to begin grad school – though I don't have a clue what to write my MA thesis on...

I'd like to stay put in Canada for now – I've put my most restless years behind me, I think (though I'm always itching to travel) – and it sure helps to have a small network of really close friends spread around the country. I'm "only" 25 so I've always been the youngest among my friends.

About the apartment: I've had some people over that seem to be looking for a place where they can keep everything they have, including themselves, behind a locked door at all times and then just occasionally venture out to make food or something. Anyhow, neither of the bedrooms are big enough for that kind of (dysfunctional) living arrangement. I'm basically looking for someone with a similar mindset to share the living space with.

I just moved in Aug 1 and I sold most of my furniture before leaving Montreal so it's still empty – or full of possibilities, to force a positive spin on it. I wanted to find out who I'd be living with – by far the most important piece of the puzzle, after all –

before going out to buy furniture. The ideal thing, I think, would be if we furnished it together in some way. There's mostly basic stuff lacking - a couch, a bookshelf, a coffee table - as the apartment is very well equipped.

Oh, and the rent is \$775, by the way, not \$750, as you wrote. (And Canadian money should work just fine...) But it's a pretty good deal, especially by NYC standards.

That's about it. Did I just answer a personals ad or something? Oh well, it's probably the best way of communicating for now. Feel free to keep corresponding if there's anything more you'd like to know.

Enjoy your trip out here and I look forward to meeting you.

Bjorn

R e a l S e a n

Black Gucci belt. Black Gucci shoes. Blue Donna Karan jeans. Orange Hermes shirt with cufflinks. Black Prada shoulder bag. Light sweat on his forehead. Slight inconsistency in his eyes.

He had prepared. He was nervous. But so was I.

"Hi, Sean Lake," he said – nasal voice – and passed the handshake test – firm but not too firm, calculated, correct. And then I let him in.

"Hopefully, this apartment is an okay standard for you. It's pretty modern—"

"My New York apartment was brand new. The newest Trump Tower, midtown."

"Oh. Well, at least here you have a pretty nice view: mountains, Lions Gate bridge—"

"I was on the 91st floor. Highest apartment building on Manhattan."

"Oh."

I showed him around. Ohmigod, what if he doesn't want it?

"The bedroom is really small, as I warned you, but it has its own bathroom here."

“Yeah, this is small...”

Ohmigod, I knew it! It's too small! I'm screwed!

“...but I like it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It totally fits my needs. So if you would want me as your roommate, I'll take it.”

Wow. That was easy.

“Well, there's been some people calling, wanting to see it—” lying through my teeth, not very good at it “—but as I wrote you, I'd hold it off until you made it into the city. So, eh—” moment of apprehension, expectation “—yeah, sure, I feel comfortable—” was that the right word? “—living with you.”

We shook hands.

“So what do you need from me?” he asked.

“Well, a \$375 security deposit.”

“I need a few days to get a bank account set up here and I don't have that much cash on me.”

“Oh sure. Any chance you could put down a part of it now? As a token of good faith, I mean.”

“A token of good faith?” He grinned.

“Yeah—” feeling awkward now “—I mean, I'm going to call off my roommate hunt and all, and—”

“Sure, here's one hundred American, will that do for now?”

“Yeah, that's fine.”

“Good.”

“Oh, and I have this basic sublet form. Just for legal purposes—”

“That won't be a problem. As I told you, I'm good for it.”

“It's just a formality, so we can get it out of the way. I know it may be ridiculous, but I had a roommate once who got screwed over, so I prefer to do it this way—”

“Let’s go eat! Any good restaurants around here? My treat. And, yeah, sure, whatever, I’ll sign your little form.”

As we were waiting for food, chatting, eating, an overwhelming relief kept me from paying much attention to our conversation. He seemed equally distracted. For about a week, I had been alone in my empty apartment, roaming the streets by myself, waiting, hoping for a phone call, for response to my ads. This was, after all, so easy back in Montreal. Once, Cat and I had more than fifty people coming to check our place in just a day, leaving us giddy with power. And now... Sure the rent was high, but when you split it two ways, people would be crazy not to see what a fantastic deal this was – someone would come along and see that – great value for money, an awesome living experience, an adventure, just two strangers sharing one common space, one lifestyle, becoming friends, sharing granola moments, yeah.

Yeah, and then practically nobody called and those who came to see it found it too small or too expensive or just weren’t into it or they were weird, one guy, this big construction worker, totally freaked me out, and this other woman, who was very nice, she liked it but didn’t want to live with a man – not even a European man – and I started worrying about my finances, about having to fork out double rent for another month, still unsure if I would ever find a decent roommate, and ohmigod, this great apartment that was exactly like how I dreamt about living was just turning into a nightmare, and the summer days were just endlessly warm and clear and it was oh so beautiful everywhere, I should be out enjoying this gorgeous city, revel in it, tell myself how lucky I am and how great my life is going to be and how *exciting* this all is and how I have to see this as just another challenge, I have overcome worse, I can do this, totally, I can for sure, even my mom told me on the phone to have “ice in my stomach,” that was her expression for keeping it cool, and I really wish I could sense some ice in my stomach but instead all I could feel was a swollen knot of pain, warm pain that refused to go away and that seemed to have built a highway to my mind, encroaching me, running me over with big trucks of anxiety.

Phew. And now, here he was, a 30-year-old gay Inuit. Tall, lanky, probably six foot four, short dark hair, his front teeth a little apart, eyebrows arched – and a wide grin revealing his high cheekbones with slight acne scars. He had a striking, yet unimposing presence – an innocuous look. Strange guy, eccentric for sure – but clearly interesting. He even said so himself. “I’m a pretty interesting person,” he wrote in one of his emails. That’s a little forward, isn’t it? Or was it just because he had lived in New York where everyone elbows their way forward to survive whereas I was used to Norwegians and Canadians who have social welfare systems and feel bad about speaking loudly in public?

“So you’re writing a novel?”

“Yeah, I have a contract with St. Martin’s Press. They have been good to me. I just got my 50 000 dollar advance.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of money!”

“Pretty standard deal, really. My agent takes a cut of that.”

“And you already published one book with them?”

“Yeah, I think I told you, it was called *Clubland*. A murder mystery based on my own experience at New York nightclubs. I worked at the biggest nightclubs there for years, doing PR, partying. All the fucked up celebrities on coke, let me tell you, it was not right. He-he.”

“Uh-hum. I was trying to find your book in St. Martin’s catalogue online...”

“He-he, you wouldn’t find it under my name. I write under a different name, Scott Kirkman.”

“Oh, so that’s your pseudonym?”

“It’s my second identity, actually. I had the name officially approved by a federal court. One of the benefits of my law degree. So I have credit cards and everything under Scott Kirkman as well as Sean Lake.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I use both names. But Sean among friends.”

“Well, anyway, on the website I found one book called *Clubland*, but it was written by a Frank Owen—”

“That’s right. Frank is a good friend of mine, actually. He wrote a kind of sequel to my book, it was a test project for him. It was good, he’s a great writer. Very talented.”

“Well, I’d love to read your book some time.”

“Sure, my copies are still in storage back in New York, though. But you can probably find it at the library here. If not, I’ll make sure to get you a copy soon.”

The Orca Place Show 2003

These days, we all seem to be on some kind of reality show.

Cat and I were. One giddy winter night we decided that our living space really was an elaborate stage for our own TV show, albeit one without cameras. The ‘1859 Laurier Show’ became a pivotal metaphor for an entire season’s worth of shared experience. We had a regular cast: us. Frequent guest stars: visiting friends. And continuous episodes of mundane entertainment: Cat goes on a whirlwind diet and throws all her food in the trash. Bjorn falls for a girl who thinks he’s gay. That kind of stuff. Overall, The 1859 Laurier Show was about as exciting as the reality show plotlines we followed on TV, and having our own show helped us achieve further ironic distance to both the television set and our everyday lives. Around us, the fence between reality and representation seemed to be collapsing. If people on TV were suddenly ‘real’ – I mean, wasn’t the reason why we watched them precisely that they weren’t real? Or did we get this completely wrong from the start? – then what did that say about mediated, represented experience? If theirs was reality, what was ours but a kind of hyper-reality, in which the model worlds of television began to precede and engender our own sense of reality? Through our own reality show, then, we exacerbated the confusion for a long, ironic laugh that temporarily absolved the contradictions staring us in the face. It was a strategy of cognitive defense, which ensured that among survivors, bachelors, extreme makeovers and apprentices, ours was always the ultimate of realities.

So when I left Montreal, I decided that I in a sense wasn't as much moving away into the great unknown as leaving the show because, well, my contract was up and I could launch a spin-off show on the west coast instead, you know, greener pastures, testing my luck and so on. It's not like it hadn't been done before.

And there is, after all, no business like show business.

And then, as I came back that night to my new building with a signed contract between me and my new cast member, I flicked the light switch. Behold apartment number 2003! Such a sign! 2003 was my year. I was living in the now. I was contemporary. 1859 belonged to the primitives, 1919 in the dustbin of history. This place was going to be my bedrock of progress. Yes, a quantum leap. *Growth! Profits!*

The space was decidedly smaller, to be sure, but flashy and new and full of possibilities, of potential, aching to form the spatial lay-out of a new mental reality. There was a large, rectangular living room, which led to a balcony on its short end and to an enclosed solarium along the side, all glass from floor to ceiling. The solarium was connected to the kitchen, which made an angle back to the living room. At the other end of the living room, a corridor to the bedrooms. The master bedroom at the end of the corridor was mine – first come first serve – and had its own en-suite bathroom. Sean's bedroom, slightly smaller, was on one side of the corridor, his bathroom on the other.

I rolled around on the newly carpeted floor, reveled in the natural light, walked around the living room in circles. Facing west, the sunset would be spectacular from here. Facing east, only a block away, was Vancouver's financial district – the nodal point for the global capitalist system. I felt a sense of centrality, like I was near the epicenter of a spiral that would bring me upwards – higher and higher. This was the stage of *The Orca Place Show. 2003*. A show about moving up in the world, about perspective. About grand views of the real world from far above, through large window panes.

Mind / Body

In the Freudian staging of our civilizational childhood, Nicolaus Copernicus plays the role of the first iconoclastic perpetrator. With the 1543 publication of *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, fresh from the printer to his own death bed, Copernicus effectively broke one of the predominant mirrors of his time: the Ptolemaian geocentric universe, upheld by the teachings of the church. As with most mind-shattering discoveries, however, the Copernican universe with the sun rather than the earth near the center would take quite some time, and many frenetic arguments, before gaining acceptance. But the inflicted pain of this first wound of civilization would keep tormenting the Western world.

What was Copernicus' legacy if not a fundamental decentering of the human universe? For German philosopher Edmund Husserl, father of phenomenology, the Copernican wound was foremost a brutal subjugation of bodily *percept* to mental *concept*, of sensory to intellectual convictions. To the human body experiencing nature, the proposition that the earth moves around the sun remains counter-intuitive and, perceptually speaking, nonsensical. Our sense of movement, in Husserl's view, is primordially visceral. Only with a dramatic conceptual leap and a subsequent suppression of our bodily percepts can we again make sense of the world we experience – only now our 'common sense' has become predominantly cerebral and conceptual. According to phenomenologists like Husserl, there is a profound instability in the scientific world-view, where intellectual convictions constantly clash with our spontaneous experience¹⁸. The once unified human subject, then, in a kind of civil war with itself.¹⁹

Thus, the cosmological first wound of civilization was mirrored in the scientific slaying of mind from body – a diagnostic process in which René Descartes' philosophical meditations became instrumental. Just as Copernicus had decentered the earth from the sun in the universe, Descartes' reflection decentered the mind from

¹⁸ For an excellent account of Husserl's texts, see Abram, pp 31-44.

¹⁹ Simultaneously, we are left to wonder about the possible idealist overtones in these kinds of depictions of the pre-Enlightenment era. To me, speaking of a decentering of the human universe is not meant as a lament for the impact of modernity as much as an attempt to trace some key historical patterns.

the body. And with perceptual knowledge stabbed in the back, conceptual thinking, now more liberated from its bodily constraints, began to flourish in new and unprecedented ways. New sets of conceptual mirrors were popping up everywhere, shattering old ones in the process. *De revolutionibus*, then, could perhaps be seen as the first battle cry, a manifesto, for the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, reflected all the way through Freud's own mirror of analysis.²⁰

Furniture

"Girl, who gave you those earrings, they're *gorgeous!*"

The young woman behind the counter looked up at Sean's innocuous grin, his tall, flamboyant apparition.

"Let me tell you, if you lined up to get into my New York nightclub, I'd let you in because of those earrings alone. Bjorn, aren't they great?"

I peeked my head out of the shadow.

"Oh yeah, they're nice," I mumbled, unconvincingly. She was cute. Why didn't I wear contacts today?

Her name tag said Amber. She looked like the kind of person who would pronounce her name with a high-pitch emphasis on the first syllable, as though she was singing her name with shallow joy. AAA-mber. She smiled shyly, *thanks*, now finally a fun customer, I could see her thinking – not the geek with the glasses, of course – and as soon as she touched her ears gently to affirm her last-minute choice from the jewelry box this morning, a flush of warm confidence swirled across her face.

"Are you from New York?" she said, enthusiastically, becoming more upbeat by the second. "My best friend got these earrings for me there last summer! I really want to go some day."

Sean's grin widened.

²⁰ It is worth noting that both Husserl and Freud refer to Copernicus' discovery as a pivotal historical event, but their accounts are almost diametrically opposed. Whereas Husserl privileges the repressed perceptual knowledge, Freud attempts to liberate this unconscious by privileging scientific, conceptual knowledge.

“Honey, let me tell you, this city is nothing for you. I haven’t seen one stylish person here since I came two weeks ago – I really don’t know how I’m going to last. How can you have any fun in this little town?”

“Yeah, I know,” she concurred, “Vancouver is *soooo boring*. I’m like *sooo ready* to get out of here.”

“You know,” Sean continued in his typically digressive way, “in New York, someone has set up a dump line number. If you want to get rid of someone who asks for your number, you just give them that number instead of your real one and when they call they get an automated voice telling them that they have been dumped.”

“No way,” Amber said, amused. “That is, like, *soooo cool*.” She was smitten. I wanted to join in and laugh somehow, be part of the discussion. I cleared my throat.

“This store is pretty cool too,” I said.

There was an awkward pause.

She looked coldly at my glasses.

“Yeah, sure, it’s nice, whatever,” she said, abruptly switching to business mode. After all, that’s why we were here. That is, Sean was throwing his money east and west on funky, fashionable furniture that could really set the tone for The Orca Place Show. On our way here, we had already taken care of the couch, a desk, a fabulous chaise-longue... And now we had found the showpiece – a dark chestnut console to nicely accent the living room. It would fit most of my nerdy collection of books – Sean refused to get a regular bookshelf – and it would look good. No, it would look great.

“So you want to pay with a money order?” she said, hesitating a little. She clearly needed to make an executive decision and her boss was nowhere to be seen.

“It’s for a thousand dollars US. With the exchange rate, you’ll get more than what this thing costs. I just don’t want the hassle of going to a bank, you know?”

She nodded.

“Banks are like *sooo lame*,” she said, filling the moment while she was trying to make up her mind. What would her boss say? It’s not like he would turn down that extra money – it’s not like the store was exactly raking in money these days, with all

the competition, plus they could use some really cool customers, like these gay guys, at least the guy without the glasses, to pick up the trend–

“Certainly,” Amber said, a little surprised at the professional and convincing tone of her own voice.

“Delivery is not going to be until next week, though,” she added.

“Oh, we can just get a taxi van right now, I’m sure it will fit. I just want to get it in my living room right away! Bjorn, will you call us a cab?”

“Oh, I’ll do that, don’t worry,” she said, maintaining her newfound professional attitude.

I went to examine the console.

I had picked it out as soon as we entered the store, pointed it out to Sean and now he was buying it, just like that, almost fourteen-hundred dollars– Could I not tolerate my own social clumsiness in his presence for this, all this stuff he was buying, all his cash advance he was throwing my way, our way, for the trendiest apartment in town – a furnished testament to my own unique status among those other hippie granola students– Yeah, I could go along with this. But how could I make up for his graciousness, his generosity – debts of gratitude, so asymmetrical... – but I mean, if he really insisted he was going to pay for it and not expect anything in return, as long as I had made that explicit, it was really his choice, then, yeah, how could I not accept it? If I had all that money, wouldn’t I do the same thing as him? I mean, I probably wouldn’t, at least not spend all my money on things, pretty things... But I guess it was not in my place to judge how he should spend his money– Besides, I already helped him out last week when he was buying a bed and his credit card had been frozen and he had to call the bank in front of the store clerk – so awkward – and then I cashed out for him, 700 bucks – the biggest advance I had given anyone before, but he paid me back less than a week later, when he got another bank account set up – so that I felt like I was helping him out as well, like a good roommate, aiding each other when necessary, even if I couldn’t match his generosity in pure, quantitative terms... Weird guy, for sure, eccentric, never met anyone like him – so different – but that was so great, really, that I could be friends with someone like this and that he really seemed to like me too and

wanted to be my friend, even though he was clearly used to higher circles— Last night, he had shown me his black book of addresses and phone numbers of Hollywood stars, which he got while doing PR for some fancy New York nightclubs; Al Pacino, Madonna, Sharon Stone – they were all in there— Perhaps he saw a future success in me, perhaps this console – and the couch – and the designer lamps – and those expensive landscape paintings – and the chrome bar stool set – perhaps they were all his weird way of investing in me, supporting me because he truly believed that I was different and that I would be outstanding and successful and that I was really just doing this academic thing as a way to move on. Yeah. Sure. I could live with that.

The taxi arrived. The money order was signed, along with the invoice. Sean was entertaining our store clerk, who laughed at all his outrageous jokes, his coy references to drugs, jet-set lifestyle, another world.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Sean asked.

“Eh, no,” Amber said, smiling shyly.

“Hear that, Bjorn?” he grinned.

Oh, so awkward.

I faked a smile. So did she. Or did she give me a look?

As I helped the cabbie haul our new console out the door, I decided to wear contacts more often.

A b s t r a c t i o n

To pronounce Copernicus as the first great mirror-breaker within our cultural hall of mirrors is of course to say little about the origins of this conceptual space within which he operated. How is this metaphorical hall of mirrors structured and how did it come about?

Part of the answer, I believe, has to lie somewhere in the nature and evolution of language itself. Following the reflections of Foucault and Freud has led me towards David Abram’s vivid account of phenomenological history, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. To Abram, before humans were narcissists of the kind Freud describes, they

considered themselves part of a living, breathing, spiritual world. The body and the mind were one unit of perceptual knowledge and the world was deeply, fundamentally animistic, participatory – it spoke. But ever so gradually, it was rendered silent to our senses. The development of the alphabet and written language, Abram argues, provided humans with a new cultural locus of participation. Animism, quite literally, was transfused into the written text, making itself felt through the process of reading, which produces voices, visions and mediated experiences, much like in my own sheltered existence here in room 1919.

As nonhuman animals, plants, and even ‘inanimate’ rivers once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so the ‘inert’ letters on the page now speak to us! This is a form of animism that we take for granted – but it is animism nonetheless – as mysterious as a talking stone.²¹

When a culture shifts its participation to printed letters, Abram argues, a new form of consciousness – a reflexive, analytical, conceptual consciousness – develops. Participation is abstracted from nature, from the basis of our senses. Written signs become referents to an outside world to which they no longer claim to be part, implicitly encouraging the readers of those signs to remove themselves from that world, to delve into a new and emerging conceptual realm.

A literary universe.

A world of text.

A grand hall of mirrors.

And the process evolves, infinitely. Abram’s reflection points squarely back to Foucault. In a highly modern era of reproduction and simulation, the credibility of an ‘objective’ reality, itself product of the conceptual turn fostered by the alphabet, increasingly falls into doubt.²²

²¹ See Abram, p. 131, emphasis removed.

²² There is a world of poststructuralist thought converging on this point, in which not only Foucault but his contemporaries Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, among several, have contributed with significant insight into the tenuous relationship between language, knowledge and reality – charting the gradual disappearance of a clear-cut distinction between reality and its representation. The Baudrillardian simulacrum, where the origin of the sign can no longer be determined, is in this sense strongly linked to what Foucault relates as the reawakened suspicions inherent in written language. Where this leaves us philosophically is an interesting debate that sadly falls outside the immediate scope of this text and its footnotes.

As Foucault muses, the development of language in Indo-European cultures has given birth to two kinds of suspicions: that language does not mean exactly what it says, and that language exceeds its verbal form – that there are, as Abram would surely agree, other things in the world that aren't language but nonetheless speak. To Foucault, these suspicions are the seeds of infinite interpretations – the hunt for meaning in and beyond language. And that hunt is deeply entangled in itself. We are, in a sense, lost in interpretation and perennial reflection – constantly seeing ourselves reflected in infinite loops of vertigo. As Abram puts it,

(...) today we are simply unable to discern with any clarity the manner in which our own perceptions and thoughts are being shifted by our sensory involvement with electronic technologies, since any thinking that seeks to discern such a shift is itself subject to the very effect that it strives to thematize.²³

Or in Foucault's words:

(...) if interpretation can never be completed, this is quite simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, for after all everything is already interpretation, each sign is in itself not the thing that offers itself to interpretation but an interpretation of other signs.²⁴

A general, broad narrative thread emerges. The history of the alphabet, the written language, the sign, can be seen as foremost a history of *abstraction*, of continual bifurcations that envelop and infuse our existence: mind versus body, time versus space, signifier versus signified, culture versus nature, capitalism versus communism, past versus future, certainty versus uncertainty... Everything gains meaning, and thus a sense of certainty, through its relation to what is different from itself. The history of Western thought – in its own abstracted way, admittedly – can be seen as a constant process of differentiating things from each other, bracketing them, setting them apart, like subatomic particles, like pixels, infinitely more minute, more refined, until there is, quite literally nothing.

²³ See Abram, p. 115.

²⁴ See Foucault, p. 275.

As I glance out at the sun rising on my horizon, I imagine that, since its early Copernican days, the scientific mind has simultaneously zoomed in and zoomed out on the world, from the vantage point of the human eye in nature to the widest of wide shots of the universe as well as to the extremest of extreme close-ups, until both scopes evaporate in front of the lens – until quantum and chaos theory force us to question our initial assumptions about the world we thought we could control with our minds.

We have, then, abstracted ourselves from the world we inhabit.

K

“Here,” I said, handing him another plastic cup of vodka cranberry, leaning toward his ear, whispering.

“This party is so *fucking lame!*”

He grinned.

“I know. Look at how these poor people are dressed! And all these *lesbians* everywhere. Hey, that girl looks exactly like Rosie O’Donnell, look.”

I snickered loudly, the alcohol quelling my shame.

“Sean, she’s in my class.”

“Look at her, do you think she knows who she looks like? I’m going to call her Rosie O’Lesbian.”

I could hardly contain my laughter, a new kind of laughter in my repertoire – thrilled, outraged, incredulous, yet somehow conniving, callous at the fringes. It felt strangely liberating.

“Not so loud, Sean, these people could hear you.”

He didn’t listen – he never did.

“Let’s go talk to Rosie. I’m dying to hear where she found that hideous, big sweater! Look at her!”

“Sean,” I protested meekly, “these are the people I’m studying with!” But I was clearly having more fun than these people, fun at their expense, the only possible fun

for us hip downtowners surrounded by all these scrawny students standing nervously around with their hands pocketed, asking each other about study areas, whether they had read any other books of that political economy dude from last class, what's his name again–

So lame!

So curbing my visible glee, I introduced Sean to his new source of amusement, Rosie O'Lesbian. To my astonishment – well, I guess nothing really astonished me anymore about Sean – she seemed to like him and soon they were engaged in a stream of his endless one-line stories. Her friends gathered round, enthusiastically. Just like Bitch, they had no idea he was secretly mocking them. He was the star of the night. And he wasn't even a student, didn't know a thing about grad school, but he, of course, couldn't care less, just like me, yeah that's right, me who brought him along to liven things up a little, some companionship among all these *lame* first-year students meeting for the first time, scratching their zits, clearing their throats–

I had another sip of my drink.

Hey everyone, I brought someone much cooler than you'll ever be, someone who will make you wonder about that European guy, now without glasses, who must be gay or something – they wouldn't know that but they were going to assume – perhaps he's not gay, just European – not that there's anything wrong with that, of course. How sweet, the girls would be saying, he brought his partner along – both of them looking so swank, so stylish–

I looked at Rosie O'Lesbian's wide-open mouth, laughing like a horse – she was laughing at *my* roommate's jokes.

“Those Palestinians are so lucky! At least they get to be on TV!”

Sean cackled.

He was outrageous.

I was outrageous by proxy. Alive. Why would I want anything to do with these boring people anyway? *So lame!* Too lame for me and my reality show, for me and my co-star.

As I went to mooch some more vodka from the freezer, one of the women Sean and I had been entertaining with our flamboyant wit lured me outside, in front of the house, to smoke up.

“Sure,” I said, already in the fast lane towards amnesia, “anything to make this night more memorable.”

“I’m K,” she said, peering at me from behind sleek, thick-framed glasses.

“K?”

“Yeah.”

“I like it. K is a good letter.”

“It is a good letter.”

“Sounds like a Kafka character, you know. And Kafka happens to be one of my favorite authors. Though hopefully your world view is not quite as gloomy.”

Her laugh was deep and genuine, as though it came gushing out of her soul, and it made her entire face sparkle.

“I guess you can call me B,” I said.

“Nice,” she acknowledged. “Are you having a good time?” K asked, before inhaling with a curious smile and passing her little pipe over to me.

“Well, it’s not really my kind of crowd—”

“What is your kind of crowd?”

“Hmm, I don’t know... Perhaps a little more outgoing – less boring than people who are here tonight.” The pot was making me feel warm; I wanted to moderate my claim. “But there are clearly some nice people here too,” I said, consciously smiling, staring her briefly in the eyes.

“Well, there are exceptions to every rule,” she said and packed her pipe back into its case.

“True,” I said.

“But sometimes they’re difficult to find.”

“Worth the effort, though?”

“I like to think so,” she said, her face dead serious.

Pause.

“K, I have no idea what we’re talking about.”

She guffawed, crunching her torso.

“Me neither,” she said through her gasps. “I’m stoned. I should get back to my friends.”

I stayed out on the lawn for a while, looking with deep curiosity at the clear sky, thinking that my inner space at the moment probably looked exactly like the outer space outside my eyes. Lights, constellations, patterns – but predominantly, randomness and dark matter.

At some point I went in to get another drink. I don’t remember how many people I insulted that night or how I made it home.

Space / Time

In the history of abstraction, which of course is in itself a kind of abstraction, few dichotomies have been as essential and dictatorial as the split between space and time. Herein lies, Abram argues, perhaps the most significant rupture with the perceptual life-world – a break reinforced through the very structure of language, in which time is perceived as a linear path from past towards future, independent of a three-dimensional, geometrical space. Through ethnographies of storytelling in native, oral-based cultures, Abram tries to demonstrate that the spread of the alphabet – and its concomitant conceptual consciousness – was instrumental in understanding time and space as separate dimensions.

Both linear time and Euclidean space are imposing mental constructs that, like Freud’s first wound of civilization, make little sense to the perceiving body in nature. Instead, Abram contends, time and space in a pre-alphabetical culture are but one unified fabric that comes alive through bodily experience of the natural elements. Thus, walking through space also becomes a walk through time. In this sense, he suggests, the horizon of space, towards which we are constantly moving, embodies what we could call future in a perceptual sense. The future horizon: it is a cliché for good reason. Moreover, the ground upon which we walk, Abram contends, represents

the past, that which has been sedimented, covered and worn down by the presence of our lives. Our past, then, is quite literally our grounding. And what about the now? The air through which we navigate and breathe, he muses, fully represents the invisible, ephemeral yet sensible experience of the present. This experience is what Western culture tends to take for granted, Abram argues, by treating air as sheer emptiness. The forgetting of the air is evidenced by a culture which pollutes and toxifies the source of its own survival.

The smog that surrounds us, the pollution we inhale, is in a sense a kind of abstractional residue. Not merely a dangerous agglomeration of particles but also leftovers from a conceptual feast – a pattern of abuse and neglect. Linear trash that was never intended for recycling.

By the windowsill of room 1919, I am basking in the gleaming sunrise over the prairies, at once the horizon of the future and the end of perceptual space. Below my feet rests a silent history – of construction, of labor, of struggle and agony, of power – which provides me with a precarious sense of grounding. The grounding of civilization. I look down at the beige industrial carpet, at its cracks in the corners, and in a flash, I catch a glimpse of myself standing on people, people standing on me, naked people, like I'm in the middle of a giant human pyramid, forced to step on others to make it higher, towards an elusive point everyone is trying to reach, and I wonder for a second if not what we perceive as reality – streets, houses, social structures, institutions, networks – are the abstractions that keep us from seeing how we really are just compiled flesh, on top of one another, trying to cope, to advance our own position, forming alliances of friendships and families and finding ourselves perennially stepped on by others in constant suffering²⁵. There, under the carpet are all these people – I hear them screaming, I smell their sweat, feel their trembling – and yet, here I am, feeling absolutely alone and incarcerated, as though I came to be here all by myself. The room guards its secret. The floor and the walls don't speak about their experience. I see the future as a rosy glow and as a visible space, but the glass

²⁵ A most spectacular public display of this vision is Gustav Vigeland's massive sculpture, *The Monolith*, the centerpiece of the park named after him in Oslo, Norway.

pane stands between the rays and the warming sensation on my skin. The air that I breathe is carefully filtered and conditioned, regulating my present tense into a sense of control and overview.

So here, in the uncanny, in room 1919, is my space-time continuum. But I wish I were not so alone.

F u c k e d .

His eyes are big and black. No, in fact, they are not, I knew that. They were small, peering and dark brown. Just not right now. Down here, in the gloom of our favorite basement night club, you may forgive me my lack of precise description, my incongruous use of tenses, because everything is kind of floating around me. All I know is that I am happy, absolutely, immediately happy, jittering with excitement, in fact, feeling a soothing rush through my body, looking over at my roommate, my strange but oh so wonderful roommate, and the large black designer shades that cover his eyes. As usual. His prescription Gucci sunglasses had become his latest identity marker. Dismissing my warning that dark glasses may ruin his eyesight, he watched TV with them, walked around the city with them, even wore them to this dark, dingy hole of a place, because without his shield he was lost.

The man lacked friends, I had thought to myself. There was Billy, a man with a computer-like voice calling four times a day from New York City, and there were some email contacts – but mostly, Sean was a loner. Like me, I thought, but at least I was not entirely new to this country, so I could help him feel included, welcomed. I wanted to take him out, have fun, block the world out and just revel in the moment with him, share an experience or two like my friends back east had done with me – passing on the love, as they would say – disclosing the empathy inherent in this brash, beautiful world.

So we had gone out again, yearning for the music, the beats, the anonymity, the friendliness of the group dancing in unison, people smiling, yes grinning, ecstatically, around us. Here, Sean had just told me he was happy to be my friend, that I was

special, a unique person, unlike anyone he had ever met. It was a rare moment, for it was usually I who did the talking, rambled on about my love and curiosity for the world, letting encroached thoughts roam free. I had looked at him with fondness. I wanted him to know how much it meant to have someone to share my experience as a stranger to a different society, the feeling of being connected—

Then I had gone dancing for a while, I think. It was that part of the night where space and time disappeared into a vacuum. It was pleasurable, but not quite as much as before – not as much as with Cat– Or Bitch– Not quite as high– Now I was back behind the speakers, sitting on a bench along the wall, feeling the rhythm bouncing off the walls, down my spine, feeling nervous, and he was coming towards me again, his shades almost sliding off his sweaty nose but not enough to reveal his dilated pupils.

He opened his mouth, said something. All I could hear was a roaring bass. The DJ had introduced a sudden change in our world and it was greeted with exhilarated cheers from the dance floor. The leader in control was the horizon of our future and we were technologically inculcated to love the scenario.

“What?” I screamed.

He took my hand and placed it on his forehead, which was covered in misty sweat, then moved it down to his jaw. It shivered. Almost mechanically. Like a vibrator with no off-button.

“Dude,” I said, “how many?”

He had a sip of water, spilling over his chin, his dark Prada jacket. He held three fingers up.

“Three?” I said.

He was crazy.

“You’re crazy!”

Sean nodded, grinned, shook his head, tried to say something again. The same sentence. This time I could hear him.

“I’m so fucked.”

I nodded and placed my hand on his upper back.

“Me too, dude. Me too.”

He took another sip.
“We’re fucked,” he said.
Then we laughed, and no one could hear us.
No one in the whole universe.
An almost perfect night.

H a l l o w e e n

It must have been before midnight. I was sitting in a corner sofa, overlooking a crowd of over one hundred costumed people below me – ghosts, cowboys, monsters, vampires – dancing vigorously, giving themselves over to the piper at the DJ booth.

They were having fun; I was trying. But something was amiss.

Sean came out from the washroom, walking towards me. He was dressed as a jaded newyorker. As himself, in other words. Sean was above costumes. He sat down next to me, his forehead sweating lightly.

“So Bjorn, how do you think it’s going with us as roommates?”

We didn’t often talk about this, so it took me a few seconds, a few lethal seconds, to reply.

“I think it’s going well... I mean, I have no complaints. You know, I like the process of getting to know someone – and you’re a very interesting person.”

Pause.

Sean looked away. A small white powdered crust was hanging out of his left nostril.

“How do *you* think it’s going?”

“Oh, good, good.”

Another pause. I had an uncanny feeling.

“I’m still trying to figure you out, Bjorn.”

I was a little drunk, it was hard to hear through the music.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I still haven’t figured you out. But I will.”

Pause.

“Wanna go dance?”

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s go.”

A n c h o r i n g

There were only a few weeks left of my first semester and I was practically drowning in my own thinking – trying to spit out a reasonably succinct term paper amidst a marking ocean of undergraduate papers and exams. And I still had no sense of direction for the thesis I was supposed to produce in my second year. No sense of direction, no anchoring point. If I was going to devote a year on writing about something, this elusive anchoring point needed to fascinate, encapsulate and thoroughly spellbind me. The problem, of course, was that most things around me these days were so *fucking lame*.

One day, I stopped by the office of my professor, Gary McCarron, to discuss a paper I had written for his class and the possibility of studying with him next semester. There was a line-up. Ostensibly, Gary was run down every day by students who thought that he could answer all their questions about everything – most likely because, in fact, he could. Which is why they kept coming back, never leaving him alone.

It was my turn. We exchanged pleasantries. I asked him about next semester.

“Sure, I’ll do a reading course with you,” he told me, leaning on his swivel chair with his arms comfortably placed behind his neck, “but only if you’ll take some direction.”

I looked at him. I wondered for a split second if it would be inappropriate to spring up from my chair and give his bearded face a big hug, but a stern voice in the back of my mind answered my question. I remained seated.

“Hmmm,” I said, trying to suppress my elation, pretending to consider the proposal rationally. “Okay, I think I can do that.”

Deal.

He suggested I start out with a work by one Gregory Bateson. Fine, I said. As I left Gary's office and a couple of other students were on their way in with new lists of questions – 'say, Mr. Professor, what is the meaning of life? And how could such knowledge help me get a better mark, better access to fame and fortune?' – I decided, content with a new sense of purpose, that I would devote next semester to finding my anchoring point.

Until then, let the waves rule.

A Lake run dry

One morning in late November, as the frost was gently nipping at the ground for the first time of the year and I was getting ready for a trip to the library, Sean told me he had spent all his money.

"What, you mean you have nothing left?"

"Only enough to hold me over for a few more days."

"50 000 dollars? In three months?"

Looking around me, I had to concede to the incontrovertible, material evidence of his spending, which had made The Orca Place Show a veritable altar of commodity fetishism. And during the semester, while I was digging my nose into books, Sean had been bored – jaded with his jaded lifestyle. So his shopping sprees had continued. And recently, for another few thousand dollars, he had even bought himself a life companion – a dog. A wrinkly-faced little pug that Sean decided to name Grampa, thinking that it would be funny, in his outrageous kind of way, to exclaim in front of unsuspecting listeners that 'I have to take Grampa for a walk,' or 'Grampa shat on the carpet again.' Well, Grampa had indeed been shitting on the carpet, quite extensively, and that had cost Sean another thousand dollars to pay off the landlords. It all amounted to an unsustainable frenzy. But still, to think that he had lost control over all his money–

"I just need to finish my second draft and then I'll get my next installment."

“But you haven’t worked on your book at all while you have lived here, Sean.”

Grampa was whimpering. Sean picked him up and kissed his wrinkled fur.

“I know. But I have all my previous notes, from this summer, on disks. If I work hard every day for the next few weeks, I can get it done and get my money. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Where are you going to work? You don’t even have a computer. And I’m going to be using my laptop all day for the next few weeks.”

“Oh, I know, no big deal. I’ll just go to an internet cafe – there’s a cheap one up the street from here. I’ll just store my script on a hotmail account.”

“That does sound awfully complicated. And those accounts have pretty limited capacity–”

“Oh, that’s no problem. I have, like, over ten different email accounts.”

“But how are you going to pay rent?”

“If you can cover for me until I get my second installment, I promise I will make it up to you.”

“So when are you going to have money again?”

“Bjorn, have I not always paid you back when you have cashed out in the past, like when I bought my bed and the stupid bank had accidentally frozen my card? Trust me. I’ll have the money soon. If you want, I’ll sign you a release document saying you have ownership rights to my furniture.”

“And until then, what are you going to do? How are you going to take care of Grampa?”

“I’ll get by somehow.”

And so, covering his rent, bills and pocket money – I wasn’t about to let him and the dog go around without food – I lent him a thousand dollars. A little reluctantly, for sure, but I knew that he would do the same for me. I turned down his offer for rights to the furniture – it just felt too petty. We were friends, after all.

He had taken a job for a few weeks, out of boredom, ostensibly, at a kitchenware store on the west side, but he didn’t manage to handle it for very long and handed in his resignation just after a few weeks. His boss was apparently annoyed,

thinking that Sean would at least stay through the Christmas rush. So he put a stop payment on Sean's last pay cheque, which Sean had already cashed at one of those cash advance places that were now stuck with the bill and angrily called for him while he pretended to have disappeared from the city.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "Don't worry."

Meanwhile, his unpaid cell phone bill under the name Scott Kirkman went to collection. It seemed Sean's fiscal recklessness was catching up with him. Then again, I wanted nothing to do with it. My loan to him served as procurement for some vital peace of mind. See, I was going back to Montreal for Christmas – yep, back to The 1859 Laurier Show and Cat – and by the time I'd be back he should have finished that fucking draft and gotten his money–

"Bjornie?"

He called me that sometimes. It irritated me.

"Eh, yeah, what?"

"Did you talk to your friend and ask if I could stay with you guys for Christmas? I need to hammer out my travel plans."

I sighed. Such a mess!

I had planned my Montreal trip for a while and then Sean had climbed on board too, saying that he would visit his parents there. But his parents apparently had no space for him – which seemed strange to me. Sean thought so too, but explained his parents' overt favoritism of their biological daughter, Sean's youngest sister, Candice. She was treated like a princess while the two adopted children, Sean and his other sister Dawn, were playing second fiddle. Dawn, whom I met when Sean first came to town, had a strained relationship to her adopted parents and trouble keeping her life together. Unemployed, she began dating a 45-year-old alcoholic in the fall and moved in with him quickly thereafter. By comparison, Sean seemed to have lucked out of the two. One intoxicated night back when he and I were having a good time together, I invited him along. Sure, I said, it shouldn't be a problem, you can stay with us – it will be like The 1859 Laurier Show meeting The Orca Place Show, like full reunion, live, sweeps season special, ratings through the roof!

It seemed like such a good idea at the time – isn't that how all regret begins? – and a good way to keep playing the open-faced game of generosity that he had initiated with his lavish expenditures. I forgot to ask Cat and probably repressed the whole invitation. I found myself feeling defensive, like the game was suddenly enforcing obligation and guilt instead of endless streams of gift exchange. And now my vacation would include him as well.

I phoned Cat. Surely, she could help me out, letting Sean stay there for a few days – we could all be together like one big happy family--

“Dude, I just don't think that's a very good idea.”

“Really?” I said, with more than a tinge of frustration.

“I mean, honestly, I'm sure Sean is a great guy and all but I have never met him and it's all a little awkward, you know? It's Christmas. My sister is going to be there, and my friend Dan and you... There's not that much space here. And my sister has been very ill, you know, I told you, she's bi-polar and on medication and I just don't think it's a very good idea for her to have strangers around.”

“Okay, sure, I understand,” I said. I really did understand. Just not how to solve my growing problem.

Well, Sean would have to understand, be humble, realize that it's a bit intrusive to just come stay with strangers for Christmas when there's no space for him and there's people around who are mentally ill. He would have to understand.

He didn't. He listened, nodded, gave off some humming noises, as in

“Uh-hum.”

“Sean, you understand, don't you?”

“Uh-hum.”

“Are you okay?”

“Uh-hum.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm *fine!*”

And then he just kept watching TV – he always watched TV, whenever he wasn't surfing the internet on my computer – and didn't talk to me the rest of the

evening and I was wondering why I found myself back in a situation that reminded me of my ex-girlfriend – this seething passive aggression, ‘are you upset?’, ‘no, I’m *fine*’ – or like my mom, sighing loudly while cleaning the house: ‘I’m *fine*, I’ll do it myself,’ while every inch of her body was screaming for help, yelling in irritation, howling with discontent. ‘I’m *fine!*’

Fine!!!

Double bind

Haunted by the reverberating contradiction inside my living space, I felt forced to venture outdoors. On my way out, I grabbed the Bateson book that my professor had prescribed and walked into the elevator. I felt hunched, as though a conceptual weight was pulling me down. There were several people in both the elevator and the lobby – all of whom were strangers, living in the same building. I feigned a smile to a skinny Japanese woman in a pink sweat suit passing by with her meticulously groomed poodle. Above us loomed the panopticon of closed-circuit security cameras broadcasting to an open channel on our cable television, which I knew that Sean was watching. I felt his eyes piercing my neck as I barged through the front doors of Orca Place.

It was drizzling. Cars were zooming by. Tourists were hiding under umbrellas. But the salty sea breeze beckoned me. I soon found myself a bench and, somewhat absent-mindedly, began flipping through the dusty, old red library book I had brought along: *Steps Towards An Ecology of Mind*, with the rather curious subtitle, *A revolutionary approach to man’s understanding of himself*. It was the original edition from 1972, eight years before Bateson’s death. Gary had briefly described Bateson to me as a cultural anthropologist turned holistic thinker – a communication scholar concerned with systems theory and cybernetics. It was all quite new to me. From the table of contents, a particular essay caught my attention: “Double Bind.”

A double bind situation is a kind of ‘damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t’ scenario where, in its worst form, no response is possible without the imminent threat

of catastrophe. To Bateson, a double bind is constituted by three elements: a primary injunction (body signals of distinct dissatisfaction); a secondary injunction that distorts the context of the first injunction and effectively contradicts it (“I’m fine!”); and, an inability for the victim to leave the field.²⁶ In a phenomenological sense, then, the double bind tends to replay itself along a Copernican fault line – between the perceptual, bodily signals on the one hand, and the conceptual form of language and consciousness on the other, as though in constant tension or conflict.

Through his extensive research on communication patterns in nuclear families, Bateson was able to conclude that consistent and repeated exposure to double bind patterns may result in schizoid tendencies. When the double bind pattern becomes deeply engrained, the victim, in this sense, gradually develops defensive forms of response, blurring different logical levels of meaning in an attempt to neutralize the contradictory experience and withstand the cognitive impossibility with which he or she is faced.

Although the clinical diagnosis of schizophrenia, like any form of mental illness, depends on several complex variables – several of them outside the scope of his research – Bateson’s study was nonetheless highly significant for a few reasons. First, he forged a strong empirical link between mental illness and communicative

²⁶ R.D. Laing summed up the double bind predicament this way: “Rule A: Don’t. Rule A.1: Rule A does not exist. Rule A.2: Do not discuss the existence or nonexistence of Rules A, A.1, or A.2.” Quoted in Berman, p. 228.

contexts²⁷. A crucial source of mental problems, in other words, is found in our mental environment.²⁸

Moreover, the double bind may be seen as something of a meta-pattern within which we all find ourselves situated. As I got up from the bench, craving a dry place to sit, I was wondering if not the deeper double bind pattern, beyond the specific manifestations within nuclear families that Bateson researched, could be rediscovered in much wider contexts as well. Cultural critic Jean Kilbourne, for example, has argued that young women in North America, surrounded by media and advertising messages as surrogate parents, grow up in a kind of double bind pattern where they are encouraged to be 'empowered' and 'submissive' at the same time – to heighten their subjectivity by accepting their roles as objects of gaze.²⁹ This would pave the way for, if not schizophrenia in a clinically psychiatric sense – that would require subject isolation of a kind that would simply be impossible – at least a kind of widespread identity confusion.

And in a larger scope, what about the contemporary predicament of our entire culture, the phenomenological double bind? In this first fateful narcissistic wound of civilization, the implication is precisely encapsulated in a double bind pattern – mind and body from time to time pulling in different directions, contradicting one another, creating schizoid tensions from which there is truly no escape, only temporary remedies.

²⁷ Herein Bateson's research is aligned with what is often known as the 'radical psychiatry' movement, spearheaded by figures such as R.D. Laing, who vehemently argued against the pharmacological treatment of mental illness.

²⁸ Without going too much further in detail on the current scientific paradigm – which remains outside the scope of this thesis – it is clear that, seen through Bateson's glasses, the push towards identifying isolated neurological symptoms seems quite puzzlingly reductionist. How can mental illness be 'caused' by a 'malfunction' in the brain? If anything, this 'malfunction' could equally well be merely a physiological response to the particular environment within which the human organism navigates, instead of a root cause. Why would an individual symptom necessarily signify an individual cause? Bateson's insight, as will become clear, drove him toward a deeper understanding of this problem. Abram puts the problem this way: "Subatomic quanta are now taken to be more primordial and 'real' than the world we experience with our unaided senses. The living, feeling, and thinking organism is assumed to derive, somehow, from the mechanical body whose reflexes and 'systems' have been measured and mapped, the living person now an epiphenomenon of the anatomized corpse. That it takes living, sensing subjects, complete with their enigmatic emotions and unpredictable passions, to conceive of those subatomic fields, or to dissect and anatomize the body, is readily overlooked, or brushed aside as inconsequential." See Abram, p. 34.

²⁹ See Kilbourne, p. 130.

Navigating through a contemporary, postmodern world, I had come to find myself in something of a political double bind as well. While an increasing number of people realize, in some way or another, that unfettered capitalism makes for an unviable long-term future, many hesitate to commit themselves to an alternative that does not even exist and that may pose its own unknown risks and threats. In defense, new means of justification for the status quo are demanded – and supplied – like the commodities that help sustain the system itself.

Consequently, when I become aware of my complicity with a system that works against much of what I believe in, it forces me to repress a part of myself. To some extent, I am damned by my inner moral voice of integrity for partaking, but simultaneously damned if I don't, because not partaking is, typically, not an option. A civilizational double bind, in other words, playing itself out in our minds, mostly under the radar screen of consciousness, perhaps, as well as in social behavior.

It would be a mistake, I cautioned myself, to conclude that we, as members of this culture, are therefore necessarily all schizophrenics in any clinical or medical sense – a kind of diagnosis which relies on more than merely existential variables. But the complexity of particular situations should not preclude us from taking note of relevant patterns and relations which unite both people with or without an unfortunate medical label. It was becoming clearer to me that we all embody the potential for madness – perhaps because we live in it, in its structural grasp. And the double bind forms something like our phenomenological matrix – processing contradictory signals of perception and conception in a constant, relentless schizoid tension – even before more exacerbating factors come into play, like the cracked mirror that splits our image in two.

Walking back to Orca Place, I noticed how the cold glass high-rises welded effortlessly with the sky, foregrounded by hibernating trees. I looked up at the balcony twenty floors above, from which I had just a few months ago felt like the king of the world. Now I felt wounded. A growing, festering knot in my stomach was slowly attaching itself to some kind of invisible, simmering anxiety in the landscape around me. And in front of me lay only the promise of darkness.

W I N T E R

The second wound

In the course of development of civilization man acquired a dominating position over his fellow creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with this supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs. He denied the possession of reason to them, and to himself he attributed an immortal soul, and made claims to a divine descent which permitted him to break the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom. Curiously enough, this piece of arrogance is still foreign to children, just as it is to primitive and primeval man. It is the result of a later, more pretentious stage of development. At the level of totemism primitive man had no repugnance to tracing his descent from an animal ancestor. In myths, which contain the precipitate of this ancient attitude of mind, the gods take animal shapes, and in the act of earliest times they are portrayed with animals' heads. A child can see no difference between his own nature and that of animals. He is not astonished at animals thinking and talking in fairy-tales; he will transfer an emotion of fear which he feels for his human father onto a dog or a horse, without intending any derogation of his father by it. Not until he is grown up does he become so far estranged from animals as to use their names in vilification of human beings.

We all know that [...] the researches of Charles Darwin and his collaborators and forerunners put an end to this presumption on the part of man. Man is not a being different from animals or superior to them; he himself is of animal descent, being more closely related to some species and more distantly to others. The acquisitions he has subsequently made have not succeeded in effacing the evidences, both in his physical structure and in his mental dispositions, of his parity with them. This was the second, the *biological* blow to human narcissism.³⁰

³⁰ See Freud, 1964, pp. 140-1.

Escalation

Early morning. I had been lying awake all night again, wondering whether my exposure to double bind situations had been extensive enough to instill in me a kind of schizophrenia that I never before had realized. Perhaps my entire life was merely a *hallucination*, my entire world view a defense mechanism? I had fleeting moments in a twilight world where I was running, running away from all the books on my bookshelf that were now forming an angry mob with torches, chasing me alongside a cliff until I suddenly found myself in mid-air, betrayed by the ground, a surge going through my stomach, turquoise water below, far below, a kilometer at least, panic yet relief—

And then I was back at Orca Place and I felt an odd lack of comfort as I crawled out of bed to the howling of Grampa locked in Sean's bathroom. Sean had left the house early. There was a classifieds section of the local newspaper on the living room table, opened on the apartment rental page, and a long email in my inbox with the ominous subject heading, "About last night."

I had a flash of The Orca Place Show turning into a gay soap opera.

From: "sean lake" <lakesean@hotmail.com>
Date: Thu Dec 4, 2003 01:57:29 America/Vancouver
To: bjorn@mobilpost.no
Subject: About last night.

Bjorn.

I think after the three months that we've known each other and have lived together, you'd probably know me well enough by now to know that there's very few things, if any, that truly gets under my skin or causes me to lose my cool. I think I explained in a conversation some time ago that it was not worth it for me to lose my patience or get angry at something I have no control over. Why stress myself out over simple things? I try to base my personal philosophy on this rule. And no matter how my patience is tried, I solve the problem, remain calm and move on.

So last night I was really mad at you and, if anything disappointed. This whole incident involving this trip to Montreal has been one big let down. You extended the invitation a while back saying that I should come to Montreal with you for the holidays (something that was already in the works being that it was my first holiday back in Canada in a long time) and then instead of paying for a hotel like I originally planned, you then offered to stay with you at your friend's house.

Then the story got more detailed and you couldn't provide me with dates as the plans between the two of you kept changing, and then one too many guests and lastly a rather feeble excuse (and I mean feeble) about her 'bi-polar sheltered sister' who'd go off the deep end because of strangers in the house. This story is along the lines of me telling a friend I can't meet up with him because I'm too busy washing my hair. It's lame and anyone with some semblance of brain matter can tell that they are being blown off.

After booking my ticket this afternoon I started to analyze our living arrangement and even more our friendship. What bothers me is that you had to use your friend's sister to get yourself out of an awkward situation. That you didn't have the decency to tell me to my face that you wanted to be alone with your friends or more importantly, that you wanted your space.

You know for all my unique eccentricities, I have never taken the low road when confronting you with a problem regarding our relationship in these living quarters. I always faced a problem we may have had head on – like the garbage, which I'm always the one emptying, it seems.

You don't have to respond to this email, and I've resolved how I'm going to spend my holidays and what I plan to do – I'm only going for 2-3 days – but if you want to salvage any part of our 'friendship' I need you to be upfront and honest and tell me what, if any problems you have with me, because if there is a problem you need to tell me about it so we (or I) can work it out or I'll need to move. I don't want to wake up today knowing that you're going through your life unhappy because you don't know how to be confrontational about a perceived problem concerning the apartment.

And I certainly don't want that either in my life. I'd rather move out and remain friends than live together and have problems with each other.

Anyways, have a good day at school.

Sean

I was trying to wrap my head around this. While I had confronted Sean with Cat's no the night before, he told me he was fine and then proceeded to write me an angry response the following day, in which he lambasted me for not being confrontational about issues that bothered me, even though I–

This made no sense!

This was not how the show was supposed to develop.

Cut! Cut! Cut!

S c h i s m o g e n e s i s

In the 1930s, Bateson conducted an anthropological study of a tribal society in New Guinea, called the Iatmul. In his observations, he was struck by the ways in which conflict among members seemed to erupt and escalate in relationships. These interactions seemed to be of two distinctly different types.

Bateson observed that relations between men in this highly patriarchal tribe typically built to a climax through progressive competition. Ridicule on one end was countered by more ridicule on the other end, irony by irony, boasting by boasting and so on, until one remark would pass the threshold for starting a brawl. There was a universal pattern here: this relation functioned much like the rivalry among bidders at an auction, the neighborly competition of 'keeping up with the Joneses' or nation-states engaged in an armament race. Bateson called such interactions *symmetrical*, as a given behavior leads to the same behavior in the other, which in turn becomes a signal for increased amounts of triggering behavior in the first and so on.

Relations between men and women among the Iatmul, on the other hand, followed a very different pattern – one of submission to male dominance, passivity and

admiring spectatorship in response to the histrionic and theatrical dynamic of the men. In a broader sense, this was to Bateson much like cultural patterns of racial oppression or class relations, in which more dominance from one side can cause more submission on the other and vice versa. Such interactions Bateson called *complementary*, as the behavior of one actor evokes a reciprocal behavior in the other, reinforcing or complementing the asymmetrical distribution of power.

From this, Bateson reasoned that entire societies are teeming with symmetrical and complementary relationships – in fact, all relations between everything and everyone could be viewed as a mix of these two types. Many such relations are institutionalized, from the inherent symmetry of two sports teams competing, to the typical complementarity of customer service. While one man struggling to contain his own sexual urges in a particular situation is engaged in a kind of symmetrical battle with himself – mind versus body – another devoutly religious woman places herself in a complementary relationship to God. In his theory of alcoholism, for example, Bateson tried to show how drinking in Western culture is typically staged along symmetrical lines. Between drinking partners who match each other's intake or, in the case of the lonesome alcoholic, between the drinker and the 'bottle,' the alcohol itself becomes reified as an 'other' and the tension keeps increasing. A mental civil war looms between free will and physical cravings, between conceptual, moral strength and perceptual, bodily weakness. The alcoholic is staged in an existential play of Cartesian dualism – a paranoid and unpleasant state. In all such situations, there is a process of progressive differentiation at work – and in a more general sense, ever-growing abstraction and fragmentation.

Eventually, all symmetrical and complementary tension may spiral out of control until some form of relief or correction, however devastating, occurs – be it nation-states engaging in a large-scale war, the dysfunctional marriage that ends with the abused wife leaving, committing suicide or killing her husband – or the alcoholic once again becoming drunk. And then it continues, relentlessly, in different forms, different contexts, different narratives, on different levels – but always following the same pattern.

Bateson named this overall process *schismogenesis*. As a concept, it denotes the birth or becoming of a schism, a splitting in two – the unraveling of abstraction. And in its purest form, schismogenesis drives a spiraling tendency towards abstraction and possible conflict.

Nevertheless, schismogenesis does not necessarily entail full breakdown. Bateson contended that schismogenic tensions were commonly mitigated by an *admixture* of symmetrical and complementary interactions. Just as schismogenesis describes an inclination, a gravitational pull of sorts, symmetrical and complementary interactions are perhaps best understood as *tendencies* that may balance each other. Most relationships are most correctly described as a complex admixture of both tendencies, where very few, if any, are purely symmetrical or purely complementary. Symmetry and complementarity, then, constitute an oscillating spectrum, which determines the intensity of schismogenesis. The higher the degree of admixture or balance between the two sides, the lower the degree of schismogenic tension, and vice versa.

Morris Berman writes, reflecting on Bateson's work,

medieval principalities sometimes had one day a year in which serfs became kings and the king a subject – a single brief role reversal that was often enough to keep the whole system going. The traditional marriage has been feasible up to recent times because the wife could at least be mistress of the kitchen, even if subservient everywhere else. Internal rivalries tear at industrial societies between wars, only to be resolved at a stroke by the appearance of a common enemy, which switches the internal symmetrical tensions into a complementary mode and provides a target on which to focus symmetrical schismogenesis.³¹

Schismogenesis, Bateson notes, finds comparable patterns in orgasm, in that tensions do not simply rise as exponential curves but always seek intermittent release. Tensions, however, are never fully dissolved. They may be transferred, displaced, condensed onto other relations within the larger system. The manifold expressions and manifestations of schismogenesis may dissipate, even disappear at first glance, but

³¹ See Berman, pp. 211-2.

the underlying pattern always remains. And the sexual analogy persists. Bateson muses that falling in love is very much like schismogenesis in reverse.

The obvious relationship of these interactive phenomena to climax and orgasm very much strengthens the case for regarding schismogenesis and those cumulative sequences of interaction which lead to love as often psychologically equivalent. (Witness the curious confusions between fighting and lovemaking, the symbolic identifications of orgasm with death, the recurrent use by mammals of organs of offense as ornaments of sexual attraction, etc.)³²

While it may be tempting to view schismogenesis as an inescapable, universal pattern of social organization, Bateson falsified that hypothesis through his later study of Bali, where rivalry and competition are – or at least were, until the onslaught of Westerners, from Bateson to backpackers³³ – conspicuously absent. Save for certain aspects of sexual interaction, no research in Bali could locate schismogenic sequences within a largely hierarchical culture which was governed by an understanding of what we would call the ‘self’ as part of a larger cultural and natural environment. Balinese culture, Bateson found, was characterized by fundamental balance in every aspect of life, as opposed to the dialectical pattern of perennial tension and release in the Western tradition.³⁴

Berman writes, “Life itself is seen as a work of art. The best metaphor for the Balinese way of life might be a tightrope walker constantly adjusting his balancing pole so as to turn out a graceful and pleasurable performance.”³⁵ A recipe for boredom, we would say, and impatiently flip to the next channel. That same tightrope walker in our culture is a reality television contender who competes against time plus the fear of elimination and immediate disgrace in order to win material reward. As Berman points out, “we are trapped in the notion that schismogenic situations, which are in fact profoundly neurotic, are exciting, and that anything else must be dull.”³⁶

³² See Bateson, 1972, pp. 111-2.

³³ “The ordinary Balinese term for the period before the coming of the white man is ‘when the world was steady’ (*doegas goemine enteg*).” See Bateson, 1972, p. 121.

³⁴ For more detailed analysis, see Bateson’s essay “Bali: The Value System of a Steady State” in Bateson, 1972, pp. 107-127.

³⁵ See Berman, p. 213.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

As a civilization as well as individual human beings, we are pervaded by the viral form of schismogenesis – a nurtured pattern, reinforced through a myriad of aggravating social factors. As a process of governing roles of dominance and submission, a patterned power game of sorts, we could speculate that schismogenic tensions would be more prevalent in cultures predicated on abstraction, on a split between perceptual and conceptual knowledge – a wounded, narcissistic civilization – with a social system thriving on such tension. Thrown out of its self-prescribed cosmological center, Western civilization has in a sense been searching for ways to differentiate itself from its surroundings, placing nature in a complementary relationship to itself – imposing tiers on it.

Within the matrix of the double bind, then, schismogenesis is one of our operating logics – the logic of abstraction.

Complementary surrender

I was mired in thoughts about spirals again, relentless spirals, as Sean walked in. This was one battle I did not want to wage, so I offered my line of complementary concessions, apologizing for my wavering, reassuring him that we were still friends, that he should come to Montreal and meet me there right around Christmas Eve, that I perhaps could get Bitch to book us a cheap hotel room to make up for the loss of promised accommodation. Yeah, that's it, Bitch – he could help me out.

Ring. Ring.

“Hello.”

“Bitch! I need a favor.”

“Oh, now what?”

I called him on my tier one status – cashed in my bonus points. I hate pushing favors from friends, but I just needed an immediate return to status quo, in order to get back to my school work. There you go, Sean – there's your rent, your reassurances, your admixture of schismogenic tension – now, no more distractions. Please.

Just over a week until I could get away, see Cat again, feel at home for Christmas – even if my family would be an entire ocean away. I hadn't experienced any granola moments in a while. It was about time.

Christmas alienation

From: Bjorn Ekeberg <bjorn@mobilpost.no>
Date: Wed Dec 17, 2003 07:35:26 -0700
To: "sean lake" <lakesean@hotmail.com>
Subject: Greetings from a frozen hell hole

Hey dude, how's it going over there? Here, the weather seriously sucks. 6-8 inches of snow blocking everything -- today it's raining -- and then overnight it will start snowing again. No weather for bringing a puppy.

I've had a weird feeling in my stomach the last couple of days – serious pain – but it seems to have subsided for now. So apart from that, I'm enjoying myself with Cat and her friends.

Are you still set on coming out here? And did you get things settled with your ex-boss?

Bjorn

From: "sean lake" <lakesean@hotmail.com>
Date: Wed Dec 17, 2003 11:38:57 America/Vancouver
To: bjorn@mobilpost.no
Subject: Re: Greetings from a frozen hell hole

It's a nice day here. I'm at the cafe writing. I spent all day yesterday writing till nine. Got the cable bill, will take care of it before I leave. No, I still haven't resolved the situation with my boss. I have an appointment this afternoon with Bolton and Muldoon, the attorney who helped me with my frozen bank account. I will have them intercede on my behalf, since Money Mart is involved and they want their money back plus interest. Anyways, I don't even want to think about this now. HEADACHE!!!

I have some things to take care of here, not 100% sure about going yet. Can you give me the confirmation number for the hotel reservation or Bitch's number?

Have a good day.

Sean

T h e L a k e s

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright

We were not going to stay long. Sean didn't want to stay long. It would be boring. We were just going to have Christmas dinner with his parents out in the burbs, then go back to the city and catch a movie.

One of Cat's friends drove me out there.

Sean's parents lived somewhere off the highway on West Island, amidst an endless row of snow-covered houses with plastic Rudolfs on the front lawns and Wal-Mart frost bulbs in the windows. This was miles away from conspicuous consumption. Their home was small and gloomy yet warm, an entire basement devoted to a piano and other instruments. Sean's mom was a retired elementary school teacher, now singing in a band with her husband, a full-time musician. On the walls were photos from their local performances, only interspersed by photos of Sean's younger sister, Candice. She had come to stay for Christmas too, occupying the only guest bed, upstairs. Next to her room was an office where I found the only two pictures of Sean and his adopted native sister, Dawn.

The parents were friendly in a reserved sort of way. We ate dinner in the dimly lit living room. A clock was ticking loudly in the background. They asked questions about me. I listened to the conversation about their band and their music. After dinner, Candice lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling while Sean leafed through a photo album of his mom's childhood. She had grown up in an Austrian diplomat family stationed in Singapore and China. Sean had not been home in over ten years,

and now she was showing him some signs of his adopted ancestry. They had taken him into their home when he was four and he only stayed until sixteen, then jumped on a bus to New York City with two suitcases and one hundred dollars in his pocket, determined to make it on his own. Details were hazy. I looked around for more signs of Sean's childhood history but found none. Now, fourteen years later, he was a fashion-clad stranger in their lower middle-class home, abstracted from his formative context.

The mom looked at me.

"You know, you're the first friend of Sean we have ever met since he moved away," she said.

"Really," I said, not knowing what else to utter.

Then it was time for Sean and I to exchange gifts.

He tore the wrapping off my present to him. I had bought him two books. One was an exposé of a New York fashion house and the other an historical account of cocaine – a find I was quite proud of, though in my glee I had not anticipated the gift-opening taking place in front of his parents. I laughed awkwardly and murmured some excuse about it being highly recommended by someone who mumble mumble, so anyway, he-he, what have you got for me there, Sean?

He handed me a card with a drawing of a dog wearing a Santa hat. Inside, his hand writing read: "My Christmas present for you is to have your Hasselblad camera fixed. You will get it back in January. xxx, Sean."

My camera? My broken prosthesis? I was dumbfounded.

He grinned slightly.

His mom stared vacuously at us both.

"I wanted it to be a surprise, so I had to wait until you were gone to have your camera sent to my friend in New York who's a professional photographer. Don't worry, it's in safe hands."

"Oh."

"You wanted it fixed, didn't you? You told me you couldn't afford it."

"Right."

“So I thought it would be a nice thing to do for you, to get my friend to fix it for you without costs.”

His mom was looking at me now. Was she questioning my apprehension to her son’s gift? In her own home?

“Yeah...” I said, “and it is, Sean. Don’t get me wrong. I’m just a little... uncomfortable, you know... with the idea that you sent it away without my permission.”

“But then it wouldn’t be a surprise. Don’t worry, I was very careful in packing it up in bubble wrap. And you’ll have it back soon, all fixed.”

“Well, thanks, Sean.”

“Merry Christmas, Bjorn.”

Round yon Virgin Mother and Child

Holy infant so tender and mild

We had watched a movie, something laughably meaningless that was largely forgotten by the time we found a cab that could take us back to the hotel.

“It was interesting meeting your parents tonight,” I said.

“Yeah.” Sean was staring out the window, at city lights flickering by.

“It must have been weird for you too, seeing them again after so many years.”

“I think they were surprised. I live such a different life from them, I don’t feel like we have much in common.”

“But they’re still your family. I imagine they must be excited to hear about everything you have been doing.”

“I haven’t told them that much, really.”

“No?”

“It’s easier that way. It’s better that they don’t know.”

“I guess so.”

“Sometimes I feel like my entire life is a lie.”

“Well, we all feel like that sometimes. But I’m sure they’re quite proud of you.”

“Yeah, well, anyway... I’m tired.”

The rain was turning the Montreal streets into skating rinks and the snow into toxin-coated slush. Out of the cab, we slid our way towards the empty hotel lobby on our unstable leather shoe soles.

For the sake of appeasement, I had decided to stay with Sean for the few nights he was in town. At least I was getting a better sense of where the guy was coming from, who he was, I was telling myself, standing by the hotel room window, glancing at the dark concrete walls outside. There were no people in sight. No sunrise or sunset. Just vast expanses of cement-colored surface.

Tomorrow was Boxing Day – the day where Christianity meets capitalism in a shameless ode to commodification and packaging – the real highlight of Christmas to oh so many people. But we weren’t going shopping, oh no – we were one big crew – Cat, Cat’s friend Dan, his younger brother James, James’ girlfriend Caitlin, Sean and I – we were all going to a large, warehouse-style locale in the middle of the night for a veritable Christmas blow-out. The holy mother of all blow-outs.

Roll over, Jesus.

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace

Adaptation / Addiction

“Powdered fire in a capsule,” Cat offered, musingly, as she put the pill in her mouth and smiled over at me.

Here we were again, playing with fire – not fully certain that its immediate purpose wasn’t going to give us second-degree burns. We could only trust our experience.

As we were waiting for what we had just swallowed to take effect we were once again bracing ourselves for the familiar schismogenic world of intoxication. Beyond the point of no return, we knew that the initial uncomfortable nervousness of our

sober state always belies the ultimate pleasure of intoxication. Like Bateson's alcoholic fighting a symmetrical battle with his own cravings, we had opted for the complementary surrender of the drug in order to affect a welcome temporary change in our epistemology. Soon, anxieties would vanish as the physiological warmth in our bodies would find its corollary psychological warmth toward the people around us – enabling a deep complementarity in the relationships that surround us.³⁷ We were seeking to become one with the world again. We were seeking a way to temporarily correct or alleviate an epistemology, a particular sense of reality, that we increasingly perceived as a threatening schismogenic tension, spiraling towards conflict³⁸. We were seeking, in Freud's terms, a basic palliative measure for our mental system³⁹.

Underneath the inebriation, though – underneath our playing with fire – we thought we could perceive a deeply polarizing process. We were taking part in a larger pattern. On the one hand, a night of intoxication could very well alleviate schismogenic tension to ensure the status quo of the system – as a kind of necessary measure of *adaptation*. On the other hand, the excitement and ostensible freedom from intolerable demands could easily slip further and further away from the fading allure of soberness and rational control and turn into a spiral of *addiction* – understood in a wider sense, as similar to pathology. Gradually, the short-term gains of the intoxicating experience threaten its long-term sustainability.

By a process of addiction, the innovator becomes hooked into the business of trying to hold constant some rate of change. The social addiction to armaments races is not fundamentally different from individual addiction to drugs. Common sense urges the addict always to get another fix. And so on.⁴⁰

³⁷ See Bateson, 1972, pp. 328-9.

³⁸ Incidentally, Bateson's study of alcoholism pivots on an analysis of Alcoholic Anonymous, whose success in Bateson's view is largely predicated on its relinquishing of symmetrical struggles. From the very first AA meeting, the alcoholic is forced to admit to being in a complementary relationship with drinking. See Bateson, 1972, pp. 309-337.

³⁹ "There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it. Something of the kind is indispensable." See Freud, 1964, pp. 23-4.

⁴⁰ See Bateson, 1979, p. 174.

For Bateson, who tended to view such patterns across the biological, social and psychological spectrum, the upward spiral of adaptation lies mysteriously close to the downward spiral of addiction. “The fascinating cases of adaptation which make nature appear so clever, so ingenious, may also be early steps toward pathology and overspecialization,” he writes.⁴¹ Adaptation and addiction, in other words, both derive from the same basic process – they are two drastically different stories from the same premise. That is, what leads into a deeply addictive or pathological spiral is always the outcome of an early form of adaptation. By recognizing this relation, Bateson sought to demystify the process of evolution, in which adaptation is commonly glorified as a positive end in and of itself.

But exactly how certain cases become adaptive whereas others become addictive – how the difference is created – can only be explained, somewhat dauntingly, as contingent on a complexity of factors and variables. The larger pattern that arises is a schismogenically enforced growing polarization between the most and the least resourceful. Like the sudden change we voluntarily inflicted on our mental system, the rapid and much less voluntary changes in the world outside our warehouse location that night were exacerbating the polarization between adaptation and addiction.

Who spirals up and who spirals down in the matrix of double binds, I wondered as I hugged Cat and looked over at our companions for the night. We were feeling warm now. The fire had begun. And it was our time to play.

G o i n g u p

“HOW’S IT GOING?”

“WHAT?”

“HOW! IS! IT! GOING?”

“SILENT NIGHT...”

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 173.

“WHAT?”

“...HOLY NIGHT...”

“YOU’RE FUCKED.”

“...ALL IS CALM...”

“YOU’RE SO FUCKED.”

“...ALL IS BRIGHT...”

“WE’RE ALL FUCKED.”

“...HEAVENLY PEACE...”

Going down

Let’s just say that the flight back was long. Very long. And uncomfortable. Not so much because of the scruffy airplane or the lack of leg room, or the stone-faced flight attendant informing me that they were out of fish for dinner, or the colossal panting flesh heap in the aisle seat next to me – no, I could put up with most of that – even the screaming, howling, hysterical baby two rows behind – if it wasn’t for my head being threatened by sudden implosion, yes, severe breakdown, I would be doing quite fine up in the metallic air tube, breathing recycled air and snacking from a fabulous plastic tray of assorted industrial packaging methods.

We were flying into the new year, which was waiting somewhere on the horizon, over the Rocky Mountains. A new year, a new number, that would make The Orca Place Show 2003 so, like, last year. A new year. A new beginning. A new cliché.

I felt, again, like a nomad. A restless traveler for whom there could be no central base, no irreducible origin, no unequivocal self– There was a home for me, of course, where I grew up, hours and hours in the opposite direction, where my mom was sitting at home, thinking about her youngest son, shedding a tear or two over the absence. “Your mom misses you,” my dad would tell me, steering clear of his own emotions. She was like a kangaroo mom who wakes up with her pouch empty, only the morning and the mourning last for six years, and counting, the pain dulling slowly from its own overwhelming presence. But I was determined to make it on my own, to

adapt. As I kept seeing myself as independent from my environment, something didn't quite feel right. But with the adoption of image comes commitment to consistency. So above my compulsion right now to curl up in fetal position and dream of affection, tender strokes along my spine, my neck, this was a time to be strong, to incorporate pain into experience as a necessary schismogenic tension – yes, mom, we would both have to stay strong, for these are the crude lessons of life, though we may not understand them very well – and little children are crying in despair– Little, annoying, so goddamn annoying, my head is going to burst, children–

Man, are those prairies ever relentless. I wondered if any of the people driving down there, on the trans-Canadian highway, were going all the way across to the west coast for the first time, in search of adventure, a new life in a new country, perhaps, not knowing what the next six months would bring– Which would be exciting, of course– So many possibilities and opportunities and eccentric roommates and late nights underground–

We flew over Calgary, right over downtown – right over Room 1919, where I would be sitting comfortably in the present, still gazing at the sunrise that onboard this plane already passed me by before the soporific Hollywood movie had begun flickering over the five-inch screens. I wondered what would happen if I pulled the red handle, pushed the emergency exit open, threw myself out. Would the cold air freeze-dry my brain? Eliminate my headache? Would anyone care?

Cybernetics

Meanwhile, back at Room 1919, as I am watching a plane in the sky, a new reflection appears through my window. On the table, a little red book has found its way next to Freud's text. Gregory Bateson has arrived in the present tense.

I flip the book open and it provides me with a new piece of textual mirror, reflecting Freud's reflective surface, expanding my perspective on the second, biological wound of civilization. Writes Bateson:

Russel Wallace sent a famous essay to Darwin from Indonesia. In it he announced his discovery of natural selection, which coincided with Darwin's. Part of his description of the struggle for existence is interesting:

“The action of this principle [the struggle for existence] is exactly like that of the steam engine, which checks and corrects any irregularities almost before they become evident; and in like manner no unbalanced deficiency in the animal kingdom can ever reach any conspicuous magnitude, because it would make itself felt at the very first step, by rendering existence difficult and extinction almost sure to follow.”

The steam engine with a governor is simply a circular train of causal events, with somewhere a link in that chain such that the more of something, the less of the next thing in the circuit. The *wider* the balls of the governor diverge, the *less* the fuel supply. If causal chains with that general characteristic are provided with energy, the result will be (if you are lucky and things balance out) a self-corrective system.

Wallace, in fact, proposed the first cybernetic model.

Nowadays cybernetics deals with much more complex systems of this general kind; and we know that when we talk about the processes of civilization, or evaluate human behavior, human organization, or any biological system, we are concerned with self-corrective systems. Basically these systems are always *conservative* of something. As in the engine with a governor, the fuel supply is changed to conserve – to keep constant – the speed of the flywheel, so always in such systems changes occur to conserve the truth of some descriptive statement, some component of the *status quo*. Wallace saw the matter correctly, and natural selection acts primarily to keep the species unvarying; but it may act at higher levels to keep constant that complex variable which we call ‘survival.’⁴²

I put the book down again. Once again, I was struck by the dated references and assumptions emanating from my textual mirrors. Bateson's allusion to the steam engine, a hydraulic model, for explaining the mind evokes Freud's occasional mechanistic language in his scientific approach to the brain. The notion of cybernetics – a general term for communication systems within machines as well as living things –

⁴² See Bateson, 1972, pp. 428-9.

has incurred some fairly negative connotations and largely fallen out of academic fashion since Bateson's days.⁴³ Its development around World War II was primarily linked to warfare technology, with the aim to make soldiers integrally linked with their weapons, endowing the discipline with an ethically questionable aftertaste. A general apprehension towards cybernetic models could stem from the seeming oversimplification of highly complex human behavior that such systems – or any systems theory, for that matter – implies.

Nevertheless, the point of the steam engine analogy is not that the human mind is reducible to its different components and mechanisms. The crux of cybernetics is not to consider individual properties, like any atomistic science, but systemic functions and relations. In this sense, the steam engine describes a fundamental relationship between interactive components, whose characteristics illustrate an essential feature of any mental system: its inherent capacity for self-correction. In the steam engine, as in the mind, no part or component, including the governor function, can have unilateral control over the remainder or over any other part but work to form an integrated, complex whole. The mental characteristics, in other words, are *immanent* in the ensemble as a whole – a point that is easily missed by reducing the system to individual parts abstracted from their totality.⁴⁴ According to Bateson's definition – and this is perhaps the most influential point of his theory – social and political structures, oceans and lakes, cities and forests are all alive – that is,

⁴³ Overall, I won't concern myself with cybernetics as science or discipline as with some of the key ideas to emanate from those endeavors – be they fashionable or not.

⁴⁴ See Bateson, 1972, p. 315.

they possess mind. All the phenomena we call thought, learning, evolution, ecology, and life occur only in systems with mental characteristics.⁴⁵

From this idea Bateson asserts that all mental systems exhibit one of three possible types of behavior: 1) self-correction; 2) oscillation, or 3) runaway. When the system maintains its steady or self-corrective state, it engages in a relationship with its variables, its environment, based on *optimization*. However, if the system is set up only for positive gain, for increased but not decreased speed in relation to its variables, it will exhibit an increasing oscillation. That is, the system at this point is set up for *maximization* of its variables, and this mode of operation occurs because any kind of governor function has been suppressed and the system is defined in some way as outside of its own environment. Thus, the second and the third type of behavior are intimately linked. With increasing oscillation and no self-corrective function, inevitably “the machine will go into *runaway*, operating exponentially faster and faster, until either some part breaks or perhaps the fuel duct can deliver fuel at no greater rate.”⁴⁶ The end result is quite simply the death of the system, or *minimization*. With the loss of self-corrective capacity, the system has ceased its mental characteristics. Like any mental system that knows how to grow and how to take care of itself, it also knows how to die, if its life processes should fail.⁴⁷ Like adaptation and addiction, the difference between life and death becomes a matter of relationship – relationship to surrounding variables. All mental systems in which the governor function is suppressed or disturbed, will reveal a similar tendency: the adaptive spiral will begin spinning in the other direction, down the pathological path of addiction.

⁴⁵ In his penultimate work, *Mind and Nature*, Bateson outlined what he considered the formal criteria for mental process, which are too complex to consider in this particular context. Berman has simplified Bateson’s theory into four general criteria: “(1) There is an aggregate of interacting parts, and the interaction is triggered by differences. (2) These differences are not ones of substance, space, or time. They are non-locatable. (3) The differences and transforms (coded versions) of differences are transmitted along closed loops, or networks of pathways; the system is circular or more complex. (4) Many events within the system have their own sources of energy, that is, they are energized by the respondent part, not by impact from the part that triggers the response.” See Berman, p. 246, also for further elaboration. The purpose of these criteria was to establish as scientifically as possible the ways in which the human mind, society and nature can be considered mental systems. This is the central presupposition in Bateson’s work, and my thoughts will proceed from this base to consider some of its implications. See also Bateson, 1979, pp. 91-128.

⁴⁶ See Bateson, 1979, p. 105.

⁴⁷ See Berman, p. 246.

As I stare through the glaze covering my eyes, perceiving only a diffused warm color in my general direction. I wonder what a mental system about to crash would look like. What kinds of forms would it take, how would it be aware, if at all, about its own condition? And then I look up at the plane in the sky and wish myself a happy new year. But I can't be sure if my message is properly transmitted. For on the horizon, distinct clouds have begun to form.

Gray

In Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*, the two lead characters are trapped in a room with only one tiny window, high up on the wall. The blind, wheel-chaired protagonist, Hamm, asks his servant, Clov, to climb up and look at the world outside, through the telescope.

HAMM: Is it night already then?

CLOV: (Looking.) No.

HAMM: Then what is it?

CLOV: (Looking.) Gray.

(Lowering towards the telescope, turning towards HAMM, louder.)

Gray!

(Pause. Still louder.)

GRRAY!⁴⁸

Indeed.

Today, my windows from floor to ceiling had nothing to offer. Vanished were the mountains, the water, the park, the seaplanes. The skyscrapers of finance were humming out of sight.

Bitch had just left from a quick weekend visit – a paid conference trip for him; a short thrill for us; an important mitigation for me. We had gone skiing with his

⁴⁸ See Beckett in Worthen, p. 1064.

rental car and barely avoided dragging Sean along with us. Sean had, as usual, made things awkward. Apparently, some hot-shot New York DJ was in town, some old acquaintance whom Sean had promised to pick up at the airport, ostensibly in an effort to impress. The only problem was, Sean had neither a car nor a driver's license – nor any money. Before Bitch had showed up to drive us away, Sean asked to borrow the car.

“We’re using the car, Sean – we’re going to Whistler.”

“Yeah, but you won’t be using it while you’re skiing.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s really simple. Here’s my plan: I’ll drive up with you, then you hit the slopes, I’ll drive back to Vancouver, pick up Victor, drive him up to Whistler, where he’s playing, then I’ll drive down with you and Bitch when you’re done skiing.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“How so?”

“Sean, you don’t even have a driver’s license.”

“Bjorn, I know how to drive.”

“These are not New York streets; they’re curvy winter roads. What if something happens? If you get into an accident, Bitch will be screwed. What if your friend’s flight is delayed? Are we going to be stranded without a car?”

“I’ll make sure I’m back in time to pick you up – trust me.”

“Well, it’s Bitch’s car so it’s ultimately his decision. But I don’t think it’s a good idea. You’ll just have to figure something else out. Sorry.” For once, I found it necessary to reinforce my complementary position over him.

“Okay,” he replied, coolly. “I will.”

And then Bitch came to pick me up and we cruised off to the mountains, having a veritable blast on the road, laughing, bitching about Sean, letting off steam.

Bitch didn’t like Sean. But then again, Bitch was a bitch. A day earlier, the three of us had been walking through downtown together. Sean asked me if he could borrow cash for some fast food. I don’t really know why, but in an instant of a second, I decided to lie. I told him I didn’t have any on me. He then turned to Bitch, who

reluctantly handed him a ten dollar bill. Sean never paid him back and Bitch's self-righteous bone once again became erect. He was infuriated.

"Tell him after I'm gone that he still owes me ten dollars!"

I laughed uneasily and decided not to mention how much money Sean owed me: 2500 dollars. But supposedly, his second installment was just around the corner and he had promised to cut me a cheque next week. And then there was the camera that seemed to be delayed in shipping... Oh well. I just wanted some diversion, skiing at maximum speed down a mountainside...

Now, I was once again alone. Trapped in gray. GRRRAY!

Disappeared were the surrounding high-rises, the windows I used to watch, spotting couples making love, fighting, getting dressed – peering into their encased lives from afar. It was our tacit high-rise neighbor contract. I usually kept my end of the deal – leaving my curtains open while walking around my bedroom naked, demonstrably, standing by the window, symbolically trading exhibitionism with my unknown neighbors. I dared them, in symmetrical fashion, to pick up my challenge. Not that anyone was ever playing my game. Perhaps it was more like the imaginary interaction of a lonely, alienated soul in the big city. I would never know them; they would never know me – but we were always on display. We were all on a reality show.

But today, it was all a monochromatic ensconcing. We had lost our insight into other people's lives. We were no longer above society. We were no longer colorful.

Cut.

Epistemological error

Now we begin to see some of the epistemological fallacies of Occidental civilization. In accordance with the general climate of thinking in the mid-nineteenth-century England, Darwin proposed a theory of natural selection and evolution in which the unit of survival was either the family line or the species or subspecies or something of the sort. But today it is quite obvious that this is not the unit of survival in the real

biological world. The unit of survival is *organism plus environment*.⁴⁹ We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself.

If, now, we correct the Darwinian unit of survival to include the environment and the interaction between organism and environment, a very strange and surprising identity emerges: *the unit of evolutionary survival turns out to be identical with the unit of mind*.⁵⁰

Serendipity

“My favorite word...” K thought for a second.

“Serendipity.”

“I like that,” I said and clinked her glass in a toast.

With a satisfied sound, she sipped from the cocktail I just made her.

Sean was watching a movie with some friend he had met on the internet; we had the place and the view to ourselves.

It felt strangely relaxing. I had almost forgotten about K, until Sean had bumped into her on the seawall, recognizing her from the grad student party last fall, giving her my email address. And here we were.

Serendipity.

We both laughed at the romantic overtones of the moment, which placed us uncomfortably on the set of a scripted drama – a soap opera. Reality meeting soap.

Her laughter perfectly harmonized her cadence. We had a few more drinks, a joint, conversations about life, love, future, music. Our conversation seemed to find a pleasant admixture of symmetrical and complementary interactions, spiraling effortlessly between topics.

“What are you doing on Valentine’s?” I asked.

She gave me a coy smile.

⁴⁹ A noteworthy model emanating from the same general insight is ‘autopoiesis’ – the self-becoming organism, as theorized by Maturana and Varela.

⁵⁰ See Bateson, 1972, p. 483.

“Oh, Valentine’s – such humbug,” she said.

“I know. It’s such a North American day to me, in which romance, like everything else in this society, is revealed to be a pre-packaged format for another capitalist ritual.”

“I hate it!”

“I agree. But I’m asking because there’s this great DJ coming into town that night, if you’re up for a good night of dancing. I’m going to Toronto this week for a conference—“

“Nice.”

“—sounds important, doesn’t it? Anyway, I’ll be flying back on the 14th, in the evening, and go straight to the party.”

“Great, I’m in.”

“Good. I think it will be fun.”

“So do I.”

A little later, I was on the sidewalk and watched K wave at me from inside the cab. I went back upstairs, wondering why I couldn’t quite articulate my thoughts or conceptualize my feelings.

H o m e o s t a s i s

Back at room 1919, I am beginning to perceive the opposing tendencies of adaptive and addictive spirals. I’m drawing it out in front of me as two semi-circular arrows, one going upwards and the other going downwards, almost like the Piscean sign. The upwards arrow towards optimization is in ostensible tension with the downwards arrow towards maximization. But what are the operating principles underneath these spiraling tendencies?

Bateson refers to the inclination towards a self-corrective state, towards optimization, as *homeostasis*. It denotes the movement towards equilibrium between the interdependent parts of the overall system. All mental systems, Bateson contends, are underpinned by the homeostatic principle. It is an innate human characteristic; the

pattern which connects the steam engine, the human mind, its social system, nature – all defined by its relation to the environment, not merely as self-contained organisms. In all cases, the function of the governor – be it an integral part of the steam engine or consciousness within the human mind – is bound by the same limitations, controlled by information from the system and must adapt actions to the effects of its own past actions. Homeostasis, in other words, could be seen as a kind of instinctual tendency, a will towards adaptation, a part of the evolutionary learning curve.

I inscribe ‘homeostasis’ alongside the upwards arrow, leading towards optimization and a self-corrective state. A state of unification. Then, I muse, logically speaking, the antagonistic force of this unification would be a tendency towards abstraction, towards splitting. I write alongside the downwards arrow: ‘schismogenesis.’ In the concept of schismogenesis, in other words, we would find the regressive logic of homeostasis. Whereas homeostasis is the mental tendency towards unification, schismogenesis is the opposing tendency towards bifurcation, towards abstraction.⁵¹ Moreover, whereas homeostasis works towards self-correction, a schismogenic situation is one without a governor, always threatening to slip the system into runaway.⁵² These two tendencies would relate to each other in continual tension, forcing the mental system to constantly spiral upwards and downwards. Although this could hardly be conceived as a purely mathematical schema, the Batesonian system seems to suggest a certain correlation. The higher the degree of schismogenesis, the lower the degree of homeostasis. For steady state to occur, schismogenesis would have to be mitigated, dissolved, temporarily. But as schismogenic tensions escalate and dominate, the functioning of the mental system rapidly degrades into runaway mode, running at a constantly higher risk of crashing.

The feeling of uncanniness returns. Not the mysterious astrological connection that seems to be haunting me – no, in the Batesonian mental system, I can see Freud’s

⁵¹ Note the philosophical relationship between the idea of ‘stasis’ and ‘genesis’ in such a model. For Bateson as for Freud, the essence of the human organism was conservative and homeostasis signifies above all this unifying tendency towards ‘stasis.’ This inherent conservatism can only be opposed by the sense of unraveling and becoming that schismogenesis denotes. Abstraction, then, like the splitting of cells, is what brings things in movement.

⁵² See also Berman, p. 243.

shadow. Towards the end of his life, Freud increasingly began to reflect on the psychological dimensions of the world we think we know.⁵³ In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, first published in 1930, Freud advances his structural theory of the life and death instincts – Eros and Thanatos⁵⁴ – which bears some significant similarities with Bateson’s mental system.

...civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. (...) These collections of men are to be libidinally bound to one another. Necessity alone, the advantages of work in common, will not hold them together. But man’s natural aggressive instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this programme of civilization. This aggressive instinct is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world-dominion with it. And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species.⁵⁵

Life and death, homeostasis and schismogenesis, adaptation and addiction – here we have different sets of ideas that exhibit similar structural relationships – linked in perpetually spiraling tension. Herein lies perhaps the inherent conflict of a wounded civilization – the largely perceptual compulsion towards unification and healing, towards life, contradicted by a perhaps more conceptually bound world of schismogenesis and aggression.

What is lacking in this patterned and overly simplistic relation is a more in-depth sense of how the tension between homeostasis and schismogenesis plays itself out and, above all, how it is reinforced through the social system. It doesn’t take much to see that capitalism thrives on schismogenic tension and relies on keeping itself in a

⁵³ The application of psychoanalysis onto society was in the earlier days of Freud’s career the cause of a major split within his movement. While his ‘crown prince’ Carl Jung proposed such ideas, Freud insisted on keeping his newly founded ‘science’ clean of such political readings.

⁵⁴ In this edition, Thanatos is referred to as ‘Death.’

⁵⁵ See Freud, 1961, p. 82.

mode of maximization – abstracted from any optimum relationship with its environment. There is, in other words, a distinct schismogenic quality to the way in which we as humans have organized ourselves that precludes us from achieving a kind of unity we seek – although this preclusion may be the structural foundation for civilization itself.

As with most systems, there is a certain abstract beauty to such a model – an almost fascist ideal – that is potentially dangerous when carried to its extreme. The complexity of mental systems can easily be invoked in the name of highly questionable politics, where some people's suffering is justified as necessary, or even integral, to maintain some larger balance of the system as perceived by more powerful interests. While Bateson's theory entails a tacit critique of our current mode of organization, a concept like homeostasis could also easily be read out of context as a defense of the status quo – as a deterrent against actively sought change.

There is much at stake here, and from my confined space I can only trace the silhouettes of where further research and discussion would be warranted. On the one hand, the biological conservatism implicit in the homeostatic principle provides a different angle from which to understand notions like ideology and hegemony. But the conflation of political and biological conservatism strikes me as particularly perilous. For a system that is in or near runaway, most forms of conservatism will only serve to reinforce the errors that threaten the existence of the entire system. In this sense, the macro systemic view could yield a kind of determinism that impedes any meaningful and sustainable change.

And while we ponder the complexity inherent in such questions, and the confusion that is sure to ensue, very little happens besides a barely perceptible trajectory towards decay.

V a l e n t i n e

I don't really know what's going on anymore.

I was on my way back from Toronto, talked to K on the phone, boarded the plane and was ready to see my carefully planned itinerary translate into perceptual existence. I was ready to make the flight path into a moment in the comfortable overview of the past tense and embrace the future horizon of my swirling emotions. All I had to do, after all, was to get from one place to another.

And then everything started going wrong.

The plane was sitting by the gate for an hour, just waiting, deviously poking at my fragile state of mind. Yeah, they claimed to be waiting for some luggage to be securely placed on board but I looked around me and saw the confirmation of my suspicion in the eyes of everyone around me. We were here to toy with me, with my inflated sense of control. To make me sweat.

Nothing was moving, except the dial on my watch, in close analogy to the ticking upheaval of panic fear. Let it go, I told myself, let it go – placing myself in the highly uncomfortable matrix of the double bind, my perceiving body in a soft seat, physically relaxed; my conceiving mind in hard agony. I felt like I was in a symmetrical battle with myself. *Relax, it's out of your reach– But I need to know, need to understand, need to control–* And we were going nowhere. For a while, I thought my being was finally going to split into two. I could feel it ripping at the seams of my brain; my corpus callosum at the brink of collapse.

Suddenly we taxied away, took off and a recycled wind of mental restoration breezed through the cabin. We were going to be late, but not too late, just barely dipping into the contingency fund of temporality. I looked at my watch again, with the slight anxiety that I might have stared a hole through the glass surface. But it was okay. I would perhaps not have time to change and relax, but I could make it there for the party – in time to dance, to have fun. To see K...

We were well over the prairies in the middle of the night. I thought I could see lights below from a distant past – yeah, I thought I could see myself sitting in room 1919 still, watching from below as I flew by. And I was just about to experience that sense of wholeness – that granola moment – of the past gliding into the present tense,

meeting up and conjoining homeostatically – unifying! self-correcting! *I am one!* – when the crackling speakers above my head decided to weigh in on the situation.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are currently [crackle] experiencing very strong headwinds for which we lack sufficient [crackle] fuel supply. It is therefore necessary for us to go back to the nearest airport to refuel. Hopefully, this shouldn’t delay [crackle] more than about an hour and a half.”

All I can say is that I don’t know what’s going on. My watch bursts open. Flowing through the cabin, irritation, disbelief, disappointment. There is a sneeze behind me. I lose track. Or have I already lost track? What tense would I be in? Someone is laughing. At me. I think. The pressure drops. We are going down. I scratch my scalp. We are down. I think I breathe but I’m not sure. We were waiting now; suspended. A stewardess tells us to keep cell phones turned off. Another person is laughing. I turn my phone on. We look out the window, at the darkness. I call Sean. The electric airport lights and the snowy winds, I noticed, make for shivering grayness. Grrray. I tell him I am late. People are yelling. At me? An old woman screams that we are going to die, that my cell phone will cause the entire plane to blow up. She is gray too. I think I am squeezing my forehead, but I’m not sure. If anything was exploding, it would be me. I don’t know what’s going on. Fragments remain.

The metallic voice returns. “We are going through [crackle] some turbulence. Please fasten your seatbelts.”

The only thing I truly remember is this: somewhere back up in the sky, I was no longer homeostatically one, but again schismogenically split in two. And somewhere underneath me, on the ground, looking up at the sky, I could see myself in yearning for the lost utopian chance at mental unity. There was interference.

At which point I found myself, just like that, like a breath in the clouds, back in the past, flying over the Rocky Mountains yet again, still looking at my watch, which again seemed to be fully functioning in linear time. Conceptual clarity had been restored. I was just terribly, terribly late.

All I could hope for was that she was still waiting.

Moment of craziness

In the present of room 1919, I see further historical links through my textual reflections around me. That uncanny year of 1919 is perhaps best remembered for the infamous Treaty of Versailles, setting the stage for another world war, a new schismogenic climax in human history. Nineteen-nineteen, in other words, heralded the pinnacle and collapse of an historical epoch, after which civilization could never again look at itself without being ravaged by doubt and repressed memories. Like Freud's uncanny, 1919, by way of the Versailles Treaty, still haunts our culture. Bateson describes it this way:

We are, in fact, like members of the house of Atreus in Greek tragedy. First there was Thyestes' adultery, then Atreus' killing of Thyestes' three children, whom he served to Thyestes at a peace-making feast. Then the murder of Atreus' son, Agamemnon, by Thyestes' son, Aegistheus; and finally the murder of Aegistheus and Clytemnestra by Orestes.

It goes on and on. The tragedy of oscillating and self-propagating distrust, hate, and destruction down the generations.

I want you to imagine that you come into the middle of one of these sequences of tragedy. How is it for the middle generation of the house of Atreus? They are living in a crazy universe. From the point of view of the people who started the mess, it's not so crazy; they know what happened and how they got there. But the people down the line, who were not there at the beginning, find themselves living in a crazy universe, and find themselves crazy, precisely because they do not know how they got that way.⁵⁶

Perhaps the craziest thing is that we do not fully realize just how crazy we are. Our homeostatic tendency, after all, is to naturalize our environment. Slowly, then, craziness is rendered into the status quo. It becomes the way of the world and the yardsticks gradually disappear.

⁵⁶ See Bateson, 1972, pp. 472-3.

I'm in love.

Did I mention that I'm in love? Well, I'm not sure, but I think so – that is, I think I'm in love, not that I think that I mentioned it already – though I may very well have – did I? – because my memory is overflowing with fuzz and scented existence and faded memories, because my mind is operating at high speed, and I feel like I'm out of time, like I suddenly live in present tense, though I'm not sure about that either – I can't think, therefore I can't be – nor can I know – because my presence is fading in direct correlation to her absence, and I don't know what to do right now because I want to bathe in this feeling, but the sun is rising again soon, and I am inevitably, fatefully – I can feel it! – slipping back into the inquisitive, narrative horror of the past tense – fleeting moments of telling a cab driver to break the speed limits while changing t-shirts in the car – even though, when you think about it, the rising sun ought to be a symbol of the future and all, but things don't always work out the way you want – or maybe they do? – oh why did she have to leave me here looking at the sunset by myself and what am I to do and how am I ever going to find sleep? I'm in love (I think) and I won't find sleep ever again. I never find sleep when my mind is going as fast as this...

Oh, but this time I did.

The mental ecosystem

As with Freud's uncanny, Bateson's reflections open up a suggestive, speculative space – an opening through the cracks. The study of communication was to Bateson a step towards holistic thinking and a realm where biological, anthropological and psychological forms of inquiry came together. In the hall of mirrors, I would argue, Bateson's contribution isn't merely another pane of reflection. In a sense, he tips some of the most central mirrors over, opening up a new perspectival field, letting our conventional subject-object gaze give way to reflections

of ourselves from below and above – letting us see ourselves and our relations to mirrors around us in systemic view.

Beyond the world that we so eagerly deconstruct, bracket and reduce into individual units and particles – infused by a dominant scientific mindset – there is also a world of relations, a world of infinite mental systems inherent in one another. Whereas scientific logic and language may force me to conceive of my mind as an independent entity, as somehow conflated with the physical entity of the brain, it is always already in contact with other mental systems that constitute and enact it. Close relationships, like good friends, roommates or lovers, form their own mental systems. My friends become part of ‘my’ mind as much as ‘my’ mind is part of theirs, like overlapping rings in a conceptual landscape. The closer the relationship, the more significant this shared mind becomes. Thus, a broken relationship can be like a bulldozer through a forest – a traumatic slaying of a common mental space. There is perhaps a palpable irony in that we have to think of our minds in conceptual terms, because we have, in the phenomenological sense, as Abram reminds us, forgotten the bodily, perceptual dimension of the mind. From what I can conceive as my mind, there are infinite pathways, thick and thin, depending on the extent of the relation, to other people, to other organisms, to other systems of self-organization around me.

The mental ecosystem, then, is perhaps the most significant trope for Bateson’s thought. Viewed as an ecosystem, the mind is fundamentally about relations and co-existence, for we are always connected to a mental system larger than ourselves – subcultures, cities, nations, societies, civilizations – mediated through social structures and institutions – all within the grandest ecosystem of nature itself.

The cybernetic epistemology which I have offered you would suggest a new approach. The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what

some people mean by “God,” but it is still immanent⁵⁷ in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology.⁵⁸

The uncanny, in other words, is in a sense the revelation, by way of subtle reminders in our everyday life, of our own historical repression – that the world that we think we know, the reflections around us we trust, are fundamentally part of something greater than ourselves to which we are infinitely connected. Something that ought *not* to remain hidden, in fact – but something we are not prepared to let into view.

Not yet, that is.

Birthday surprise

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” Sean said.

“What?”

“For your birthday. But Bitch thought I had to tell you in advance.”

“What?”

“My birthday present to you is to fly you to New York for a weekend. All expenses paid!”

“What!?”

“I’ve been planning it with him. The two of you are going to fly out on your birthday and I will join you the next day. I’ve got everything set up: Broadway tickets, a meeting for you with my photographer friend...”

“What!?”

“Yeah, I know you’ve been annoyed with not getting your camera back, but I wanted to give it back to you this way instead. He has set aside a day for you to show you his tricks in the studio with your newly fixed Hasselblad. We’re going to meet all my friends, take you around, go clubbing. It will be fun. What do you say?”

⁵⁷ It is worth noting in passing, at the risk of igniting a debate that cannot fit within the scope of this text that Bateson’s epistemology implies immanence rather than transcendence as existential platforms.

⁵⁸ See Bateson, 1972, p. 461.

“What?”

“What?”

“I mean... what?”

Sean was clearly a master of the awkward gift. At first, I was once again overwhelmed by the generosity, by the exciting prospect of a surprise trip to one of my favorite cities, which made me, as usual, feel guilty for not instantly displaying heartfelt gratitude. There was a familiar pattern of dysfunctional exchange here, of impossible reciprocity. But this time, my doubts seemed to overshadow my guilt. I was still recovering from my last tormenting flight experience, which afforded me no desire to revisit the skies once again. And then there was K...

“I don’t know, Sean,” I began.

“What?” It was his turn to don a bewildered expression.

“I’m just so behind on school work and I’ve got so much stuff to do – books to read, papers to write. It’s really bad timing.”

“What?” Bemusement was turning into resentment.

“Any chance we could postpone? I’d love to go, but I can’t go just now. I just can’t. No, I can’t.”

The rest of the morning passed in Sean’s passive-aggressive TV watching. Once again, I found the schismogenic tension intolerable. So I picked up another library book from my desk and scuttled out of Orca Place.

The psychopathy of everyday life

The trajectory of Bateson’s reflections had led me towards a set of essays spun around some of his theoretical contributions. Sitting on the bench where I first opened my eyes to his ‘mental ecology,’ seagulls screaming in anticipation of spring around me, signifying their place in an ecosystem larger than their own experience, I eagerly flipped through the pages. I was struck by a particular essay, “The Psychopathy of Everyday Life” – the title a reflection of Freud’s famous 1901 study, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* – in which the authors, Robert W. Rieber and

Maurice Green, outline what they consider the underlying principles of the mysterious condition currently referred to as ‘antisocial personality disorder’ in clinical circles – more commonly known as ‘psychopathy’ or ‘sociopathy’ – and its relations to our society.

“Although it has long been recognized,” Rieber and Green write, “that each of us possesses an innate capacity for momentary dissociation vis-à-vis the accepted value systems of society, and thus in that degree is potentially psychopathic, true psychopaths, with their consistently antisocial behavior, present the average observer with a phenomenon so spectacularly alien that it seems almost incredible that such people can exist. And, granted that psychopaths do indeed exist, it is perplexing how they can manage to appear superficially sane, how they are able to wear, as one observer put it, the ‘mask of sanity’.”⁵⁹

Psychopathy, in other words, would seem to entail a kind of Janus face – perhaps, I thought, as a way to navigate the existential double bind. Although Rieber and Green are careful in keeping conventional psychiatric discourse at an arm’s length, in an attempt to discuss the phenomenon of psychopathy in a wider context, their reference to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*– known as the DSM – of the American Psychiatric Association nonetheless proved particularly illuminating. The paragraph of diagnostic criteria needed to merit the diagnosis read as an uncanny checklist: inability to sustain consistent work; inability to function as a responsible parent; failure to respect the law; inability to maintain an enduring attachment to a sexual partner; failure to honor financial obligations; failure to plan ahead (impulsive traveling without prearranged job, destination, or time limit); aggressiveness; disregard for the truth (aliases, conning); recklessness.⁶⁰

We have here a catalog of human evil; it takes the presence of at least four out of nine criteria over a sustained period of time to merit the diagnosis, *plus* an onset before the age of 15 as manifested by a

⁵⁹ See Rieber and Green, p. 48.

⁶⁰ Rieber and Green are here relying on the third edition of the DSM. In the most current edition, DSM-IV, the wording of the clinical definition for ‘antisocial personality disorder’ is slightly altered, but not in any way significant to my purpose here.

childhood history marked by such behavior as persistent lying, vandalism, theft, chronic fighting, truancy, repeated substance abuse, poor educational achievement, and so forth. (...) although such antisocial individuals may present a stereotypically normal mental status, most frequently there are signs of personal distress – including complaints of tension and depression, an inability to tolerate boredom, and the conviction of the hostility of others (which to be sure is a predictable consequence of their own behavior).⁶¹

My phone rang. It was Sean. I let it ring twice before pressing the talk button.

“Hey, Bjornie, what are you doing? I’m bored out of my mind. Wanna have lunch?”

“Eh... no, sorry, I just ate... kinda busy...” I muttered.

“Oh...” he said. “Okay, see you later, then.”

“See you later.”

A r r e s t e d

I must have been sleeping, because I awoke to a loud knocking on the front door. Grampa was weeping. Sean had left him locked in the bathroom again while going out. Another knock. I could hear the door open; Sean must have left it unlocked.

“Hello?”

I crawled out of bed where I had fallen asleep with my clothes on – I had no idea for how long.

“Hello!?” The voice grew more irritated.

“This is the police!”

My eyes widened. I was not prepared for this.

A police constable, hauling his bike through the front door, looked at me with seeming irritation. I still hadn’t said a word.

“How well do you know your roommate?” he shouted.

“Excuse me, what?”

⁶¹ See Rieber and Green, p. 54.

“How well do you know your roommate?”

For a brief moment, I resented my obligation to answer the man in the uniform, to my immediate placement in a complementary relationship. But I answered him nonetheless.

“Somewhat well, I guess...”

“How long have you known him for?”

“I met him last fall. He responded to an ad I put out...”

The constable held up a plastic bag and emptied it on my desk. There were several plastic identity cards, pieces of mail, a chequebook.

“We arrested him half an hour ago in a bank near here for possible identity theft. Do you know if Sean Lake in fact is his real name?”

I didn’t say anything at first – I was busy looking at the ID cards on the desk, from fitness club memberships to library cards, all with Sean’s photo but not all under the same name.

“This one I know,” I said, pointing to the bank card for Scott Kirkman. “That’s his pseudonym – he writes under that name.”

“And you know this for a fact?”

I stopped for a second.

“He told me he got a federal judge in the States to grant him a second name.”

“Uh-huh.” The constable took some notes.

“But this one,” I continued, “I’ve never seen. Jean-Francois Roy?”

“We have a report of some recently stolen passports that we’re trying to link to this name,” the constable said. His attitude was brash and I felt uncomfortable saying more about Sean. Clearly, something was wrong – I knew that much – but this guy who just barged into my apartment didn’t exactly instill much trust either. I answered his questions somewhat evasively and then showed him out. My mind felt like it, again, was ensconced in gray.

The constable had told me that they most likely would let Sean go the following morning, until their investigation could lead them further. Later that night, though, as

I was planning to leave for a long, brisk walk along the seawall to clear my head, the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“It’s Sean.”

“Sean?”

“I’m out. Fuck, that was nasty!”

“What the hell happened?”

“Did you talk to the police?”

“They were here, yes.”

“What did they say? What did you tell them?”

“Never mind that, I want to hear your story.”

“Don’t worry; I can explain everything.”

So I was sitting alone at the set of The Orca Place Show for a while, looking out the window, contemplating the convoluted events of the last few months, wondering what on earth I had gotten myself into. The timing was awful. My birthday was three days away and Bitch was again making a celebratory visit. Although the living arrangement had become unsustainable, our shared ecosystem depleted, I had hoped to keep peace alive in the apartment for just a few more months. Just until my semester was done and I could hand in my final paper in May and then leave for Norway, where I could spend the summer by myself, contemplating what to write my thesis on— Sean had finally paid off his debt to me too; we were in the clear. I had a job set up as a journalist for the summer. It would be a perfect get-away. There was budding love in my life; an acute sense of spring around the corner. Cherry blossoms were popping out. And now this. I just couldn’t take more tension.

He arrived, shifty-eyed, sweating nervously, like on our first meeting. I was nervous too, somehow hopeful there could be, as Sean had suggested on the phone, a perfectly reasonable explanation for this sudden turn of events. Well, a perfectly reasonable explanation that didn’t disturb my own plans too much.

Sean was flipping through the cards on the desk.

“So what did the policeman have to say?”

“I’ll tell you after you tell me what the hell is going on, Sean.”

He sighed and sank himself down into a chair, striking a pretty reluctant pose.

“Okay... I guess I have no choice but to tell you, although you may get into trouble for knowing this...”

“What?”

“Only very few people know about this...”

Having had my whole day ruined in a waiting game, I was impatient.

“What, Sean?”

“I’m a Secret Service agent, Bjorn.”

“What!?”

“Yeah, everything I’ve told you about myself – about being a writer, about coming here to go to university – has all been a cover story. I have worked for the FBI for ten years.”

His eyes didn’t blink. Mine did.

“So what are you doing in Vancouver, then?”

“I was placed here because my identity is too well-known on the East Coast. I’ve been involved in several major drug busts there and so my bosses decided to relocate me here. I’m working with CSIS – Canadian Security Intelligence Service – on a mission here. Which I obviously can’t talk about. I can show you some results of my previous assignments online, though.” He paused for a second, gauging my response. I was speechless.

“But you don’t need to worry about your own safety – I never take my work home with me and you’ve never been in a position of possible danger. My boss knows all about you – they had to do a background search on you before I moved in – and he will probably need to meet with you since my cover now has been blown.”

I was ransacking my mind for possible rational questions.

“Why would an FBI agent want a roommate?”

“Oh, we’re actually encouraged to live with people, because it makes our activity less suspicious. You have actually helped establish my cover here. But it’s important that you don’t tell anyone else about this...”

Ideology of disturbance

Dr. Laing noted that the obvious can be very difficult for people to see. That is because people are self-corrective systems. They are self-corrective against disturbance, and if the obvious is not of a kind that they can easily assimilate without internal disturbance, their self-corrective mechanisms work to sidetrack it, to hide it, even to the extent of shutting the eyes if necessary, or shutting off various parts of the process of perception. Disturbing information can be framed like a pearl so that it doesn't make a nuisance of itself; and this will be done, according to the understanding of the system itself of what would be a nuisance. This too – the premise regarding what would cause disturbance – is something which is learned and then becomes perpetuated or conserved.⁶²

Disconnect

Cat's voice was crackling through the poor connection. I looked over at Bitch, eager to go out, to forget about the world, to bond – to fly high over the world, to connect to the absolute present – but simultaneously trying to pay attention to my conversation. My god, did we ever need this night–

“Bjorn, tell me what happened!”

“There isn't that much to tell, really.”

“But what [...] did he say? How [...] explain [...] arrested?”

“Cat, your voice is fading.”

“What?”

“I can't hear you.”

“Can [...] hear [...] now?”

“Not really.”

“But [...] tonight!”

⁶² See Bateson, 1972, p. 429.

“I’ve got to go, Cat. Happy birthday!”

“[...] birthday to you too!”

Just as well, I thought to myself as I hung up. Just as well. I sent Bitch an unsettling look. He surrounded me with his open arms. It was a warm and soft hug.

“Ready to go, my friend?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I don’t know.”

We never went out that night. At some level, we both knew that we could never again reach the blissful highs of last summer – the peaks of innocent ignorance. It was like the world would never quite look the same again.

SPRING

The third wound

The third blow, which is psychological in nature, is probably the most wounding.

Although thus humbled in his external relations, man feels himself to be supreme within his own mind. Somewhere in the core of his ego he had developed an organ of observation to keep a watch on his impulses and actions and see whether they harmonize with its demands. If they do not, they are ruthlessly inhibited and withdrawn. His internal perception, consciousness, gives the ego news of all the important occurrences in the mind's working, and the will, directed by these reports, carries out what the ego orders and modifies anything that seeks to accomplish itself spontaneously. For this mind is not a simple thing; on the contrary, it is a hierarchy of superordinated and subordinated agencies, a labyrinth of impulses striving independently of one another towards action, corresponding with the multiplicity of instincts and of relations with the external world, many of which are antagonistic to one another and incompatible. For proper functioning it is necessary that the highest of these agencies should have knowledge of all that is going forward and that its will should penetrate everywhere, so as to exert its influence. And in fact the ego feels secure both as to the completeness and trustworthiness of the reports it receives and as to the openness of the channels through which it enforces its commands.

In certain diseases – including the very neuroses of which we have made special study – things are different. The ego feels uneasy; it comes up against limits to its power in its own house, the mind. Thoughts emerge suddenly without one's knowing where they came from, nor can one do anything to drive them away. These alien guests even seem to be more powerful than those which are at the ego's command. They resist all the well-proved measures of enforcement used by the will, remain unmoved by logical refutation, and are unaffected by the contradictory assertions of reality. Or else impulses appear which seem like those of a stranger, so that the ego disowns them; yet it has to fear them and take

precautions against them. The ego says to itself: 'This is an illness, a foreign invasion.' It increases its vigilance, but cannot understand why it feels so strangely paralyzed. (...)

These two discoveries – that the life of our sexual instincts cannot be wholly tamed, and that the mental processes are in themselves unconscious and only reach the ego and come under its control through incomplete and untrustworthy perceptions – these two discoveries amount to a statement that *the ego is not master in its own house*. Together they represent the third blow to man's self-love, what I may call the *psychological* one. No wonder, then, that the ego does not look favorably upon psycho-analysis and obstinately refuses to believe in it.⁶³

Deadlocked

Bitch stayed in town for another week after my birthday. Though he lived with his aunt and uncle south of downtown, we saw each other nearly every day. It helped pass time and I don't know what I would have done without him. Sure, there was K, but I felt uncomfortable about dragging her into the mess that was my increasingly cataclysmic reality show. K was a different kind of drama, airing in a different slot to preclude it from schismogenic contamination. To operate homeostatically in a crazy universe, a certain degree of dissociative behavior appeared necessary. It was where to draw the line that seemed most difficult.

I didn't talk much about Sean these days – not to anyone. Sean was just there, living in my apartment, FBI agent or not FBI agent, not to be discussed further. I didn't know what to think and I didn't want to think, so for about a week, there was a disturbing sense of contrived status quo on The Orca Place Show. But we probably both felt somehow that we were headed for a season finale sooner than we'd want.

He talked willingly the night following his arrest, about how he was trained to lie.

⁶³ See Freud, 1964, pp. 141-3.

“The clue is to stick to the true story as much as possible,” he told me with whiffs of pride. He could fool anybody, he asserted. It was his job to fool people. And he let me know, in response to my question, that it was indeed hard for him sometimes to live like that. Very hard.

There was a strong compulsion in me to believe Sean’s explanation. He had provided ample details about his job, his missions previous to Vancouver, and promised me a meeting with his boss, ‘Ken Hosey,’ who would want to brief me on my new situation. Of course, the story was quite ingenious in that it would be impossible to verify. I couldn’t really call the FBI headquarters and ask for information about one of their secret agents. We were in a verification deadlock. And even if his story was true, I was no longer able to trust him, which now became my key concern. I was feeling a sense of betrayal, but didn’t know how to articulate it.

A few days later, in early March, I wanted to talk, to let him know about how it had become impossible for me to live with him any longer. I had found myself leaving the apartment every night, hanging out with K, walking along the seawall by myself, seeking distractions in any possible way – anything but staying in Orca Place with him, watching other reality shows on TV. I hated reality. I hated the TV. I hated his dog. I hated that I was being shut out of my own living space. I hated myself for somehow ending up in this situation. So I tried to talk to him, but he remained elusive.

“Maybe later,” he said.

“I want to talk now,” I said.

“I don’t care. I don’t want to deal with this right now.”

And so we went in a loop, two days in a row, repeating the same interchange. I thought I was going out of my mind, more so than ever before.

“Sean, this is serious,” I said. I was getting angry. But so was he.

“Look Bjorn, you can talk all you want, but it isn’t going to solve anything. Your talking is useless. I’m upset with you for this whole New York thing, which was my personal gift to you, which you keep putting off with your excuses.”

“Sean, I told you...”

“I know, school work, school work. I’ve seen you, going out at night with that girl, talking to her on the phone. If you really were so behind on school work, you’d be studying a lot more.

“That’s not true.”

“Whatever, Bjorn. I’ve decided to make the trip to New York myself this weekend. You can go whenever you want – the ticket is still there in your name. And when you leave for Norway in the summer, I’ll find a place on my own. Until then, you’ll have to put up with me here.”

It was eminently frustrating. It felt like I had eaten a piece of burning coal; my stomach was not giving me reprieve. But the prospect of Sean finally leaving town for a while cast a rosier light on my upcoming weekend.

C h e q u i n g o u t

The teller was young, a recent, chipper graduate. Her name tag said Amber. She seemed familiar somehow, but then again, a lot of people looked the same in this town and my mind was elsewhere. Amber fumbled her way through the computer interface, crackling her fingers on the keyboard while smiling nervously at me. A fan above our heads contributed to an eerie room tone, only occasionally interrupted by a coffee slurp from an older man behind another computer. A large poster on the back wall extolled the virtues of letting the bank into your life.

The night before, withdrawing cash from an ATM, I had noticed my account balance was strangely low. On my way to university, I had decided to stop by my branch to inquire.

“Well, Sir, it seems a couple of cheques you deposited have been returned.”

“What?”

My voice pierced through the room; the man with the coffee cast a glance in my direction.

Amber pointed to a list of transactions. Sean’s two cheques, one for 2500 dollars that he gave me a few weeks before for all he owed me since Christmas, and

another for 775 dollars for March rent, had bounced. 'Account closed,' the annotation read. I was incredulous.

"Why wasn't I notified?"

"The latest one is probably in the mail right now. But the first one, you should have received in a letter a while ago, Sir."

Giving up on attending class, I rushed back to my apartment. Sean was out for the day, preparing for his New York trip, ostensibly, and for once I got to the mailbox before him. Sure enough, his last cheque was waiting for me. I remembered that when he was arrested, Sean had several pieces of mail on him; he was usually well in tune with the mailman's daily routine. He must have removed the first returned cheque before I could find it. And now he was about to leave town—

I needed a witness to confront Sean. I called Bitch, who was predictably outraged.

"I knew he was a crook! I knew it all along!"

"Thanks," I said. "That really helps."

"I want to kick his ass! He owes me ten dollars!"

A few minutes later, Sean called me again, as usual, to ask if I would meet him for lunch. I arranged to meet him at a nearby cafe and then proceeded to stake out the place with Bitch.

We waited for a while; Sean was late. I was fraught with suspense and agony, hovering precariously over a maelstrom of anxiety. My broken trust with Sean had spun into vertigo. Walking around in circles outside the cafe, I no longer trusted the ground to keep me from falling straight through the sidewalk. Stupid string theory—

But eventually, he showed up.

He looked at me and then noticed Bitch.

"What's up?" he said.

"Your rent cheques bounced," I said.

He seemed unflustered, his eyes just subtly moving from side to side, as though they needed to refocus.

"Do you have any proof?"

“Yes,” I said. Bitch leaned forward.

“And you’d better pay up right now, Sean!”

Sean grinned, then looked back at me.

“What? Did you bring a bodyguard?”

Here we were: a blond, blue-eyed Norwegian and a short, chubby Filipino against a tall, skinny Inuit dressed in Armani Jeans. A most unlikely constellation for the kind of criminal drama we had become involved in. We hardly looked like gangsters. But we made Sean walk along with us.

He acted evasively, asking first to see the bounced cheque and then to make a lunch stop at McDonald’s. Bitch and I were not hungry but we couldn’t see a way to stop him, so we followed him inside.

Sitting amidst the stench of fast food cooking grease, watching Sean stuff his face with a burger and fries without a trace of nervousness was without a doubt one of the most repulsive moments I have ever experienced. As he loudly chewed through the ground meat, I felt as though he was eating away at my flesh, like E. coli, with nothing but a big grin on his face. It was not boding well. I realized that I might have to wave goodbye to my scholarship money.

Back at Orca Place, Sean demanded to place a phone call and pretended to call his FBI boss, Ken Hosey, to transfer the money he owed me. While he was on the phone, I briefly explained to Bitch the story Sean had told me about a week before. Bitch laughed dismissively.

“Yeah, right – a secret agent who writes bad cheques! Come on!”

I felt a big flush of shame through my body. I had been such an idiot. A complete moron. I looked over at Sean who was engaged in a conversation with someone, god knows who – a friend? The operator? The ring tone?– desperately sticking to his script.

“Can I speak to special agent Johnson, please,” he said, loudly, while looking around for a pen. Bitch and I looked at each other with a deep sigh. What sort of bizarre creature was this?

Sean ended his phone conversation and proceeded to assure me that the money would be wired over by tomorrow morning.

“You’re just going to have to wait until then,” he said.

While I felt inhibited by the onslaught of my own embarrassment, Bitch was getting angry.

“No way! We want money now,” he yelled. And Sean responded laconically – with sheer arrogance. He was in charge of this game now, playing us like little schoolboy sissies. Lies, fraud, crime – why would he stress himself out over simple things? This was, after all, his stated life philosophy.

He brought out the dog – the poor, whimpering, helpless sucker, just like me – and said he wanted to show us something. He was taking us to the bookstore, he said. Bitch protested, but I knew we had nowhere to go, nothing to do. We could only follow.

Outside the bookstore, Sean handed Grampa to Bitch and told him to watch after the dog while he insisted he take me inside alone. As I followed him up the escalators, there was a manic sheen over his face, as though his mind was churning at a dangerously high speed, but otherwise, he seemed thoroughly unaffected. He located the section called ‘true crime’ and fetched a book from the shelf. It was *Clubland*, by Frank Owen – the book that Sean claimed to have written.

“Sean, what are we doing here?”

He was quickly flipping through the pages, looking for something.

“Hang on, you’ll see. In a second, you’ll understand everything.”

“I don’t see how...”

“Here! Read this section!”

He pointed to a passage, in which his name occurred.

“Sean, what does this have to do with anything?”

“See, here it talks about me, FBI agent Sean Lake, busting a Russian mafia drug cartel. See?”

My patience with his insistent FBI story had long since waned. I attempted a symmetrical retort to his arrogance.

“Sean, I don’t care if you are the emperor of China – I just want my money.”

“You’ll get your money, don’t worry.”

“I want it now, Sean.”

His slight grin gave way to a sinister look. Our interaction was escalating.

“Bjorn, think about it: if I have managed to infiltrate the Russian mob, one of the most dangerous organizations in the world, risking my own life, *you are nothing to me*. So don’t try to push me around – or you’ll be deeply sorry.”

I think there must have been a few second pause in the wake of his threat – the first overt sign of active aggression I had ever seen in him.

“So what are you saying?”

“We can settle this in two ways: amicably, by you waiting until nine a.m. tomorrow morning when my boss has wired over the money. Or through the courts, which will drag on forever and which you will lose anyway, because I know the legal system better than you – trust me. It’s late in the afternoon – there’s nothing more you can do today.”

I could not believe the turn of events. His culpability was not about to let him into any complementary position but dominance.

“So you will have the money tomorrow morning?”

“Nine a.m.”

He reached out his hand. I looked at it for a few seconds, considering my options and realizing that once again, I could only follow. Reluctantly, I shook his hand. It felt like agreeing to being screwed.

“Nine a.m. tomorrow morning.”

U n r a v e l i n g

I knew I ought to keep watch over Sean to make sure he didn’t attempt to flee. But at this point, deeply exhausted with the attempt to grasp the situation in front of me, I couldn’t care less. I packed up my laptop and spent the evening with Bitch at his uncle’s house.

For a while, I browsed the internet, searching for possible links that could tell me anything about Sean. There were people with similar names involved in all sorts of inane endeavors, from company athletics to publishing cookbook recipes. And then I hit a link to a court document from New York's Eastern District.

"Oh my god!" I said.

"What?" Bitch was busy flipping through TV channels, looking for his favorite reality show.

"Check it out!"

He got up and peered at the computer over my shoulder.

"Oh. My. God!"

And again.

"Oh! My! God!!!"

As it turned out, Sean's alleged affiliation with the FBI was indeed well-founded – though he had conveniently flipped the roles around. The heading of the document in front of me read, "United States of America vs. Sean Lake." It was an appeal hearing in a bizarre and complicated case from the seething underbelly of American culture. Much of the case background was elaborated upon, I would later come to find out, in *Clubland* – the book Sean had just showed me. The textual mirrors in front of me were opening up new reflections on this mysterious stranger in my life.

As I later read through the book chapter called "Slim and Shady," in its entirety devoted to Sean's sketchy dealings before arriving in Vancouver, I imagined the sick thrill he must have had during our very first meeting, openly pointing me towards a book that directly undermined the story he had just told me about himself. Between the words, his grin was glowing.

In *Clubland*, journalist Frank Owen charts the pinnacle and demise of club culture in New York City and Miami in the late 1990s. As federal agencies under increasing political pressure from a 'war on drugs' policy were looking for ways to bring down night club barons suspected of heavy drug peddling, their case increasingly relied on paid informers. Enter Sean Lake. As I continued reading, I envisioned the invisible tentacles of American politics, of policy goals and institutional structures,

creating webs of repercussion all the way to The Orca Place Show. Politics was suddenly coming alive in front of me.

From 1994, Sean apparently worked with officers from various local and federal agencies in South Beach, busting some night clubs engaged in drug dealing and taking bribes from others that wanted their activities to go unreported. He worked both sides of the fence as long as he could profit. In early 1996, he began working with a couple of DEA agents in New York City, whose big target was Canadian-born night club owner Peter Gatien. Owen writes that the agents trained Sean for months – how to present himself without arousing suspicion, how to blend facts and fiction, how to pay attention to small details – all the while pampering him with clothing allowances and high-end restaurant meals. In the late summer of 96, as the DEA began to wrap up its investigation, Sean was becoming paranoid with his own safety – a growing number of his nightclub acquaintances were suspecting his alliance with the feds – and worried that his deal with the DEA was going to be a lot less lucrative for him than first imagined. So he began secretly tape-recording conversations he had with the agents. One day, he contacted Gatien’s lawyer, offering to sell a tape on which a DEA agent, according to Sean, admitted to lying about one of the government’s accusations against Gatien. Sean’s price for the tape was \$10,000. When asked how he got the tapes, Sean claimed that he was having a secret affair with the DEA agent. For a few weeks, Owen writes, Sean played a high stakes game, convinced he would come out on top with enough cash to blast through the nearest designer store. Not surprisingly, though, his plan backfired. Somehow, the feds caught wind of Sean’s maneuver. His meeting with Gatien’s private investigators turned out to be an FBI sting operation and Sean was now charged with lying to a federal agent and obstructing justice. At first, he cut himself a deal where he would not serve time. But the following year, as he was supposed to meet for a sentencing hearing in July, Sean fled the US, to Vancouver. In October that year, according to the court documents, he turned himself in. In May, 1998, he was sentenced to a total of 57 months in prison, with three years of supervised release.

In the original court document, Judge Sterling Johnson stated that

[i]n this particular instance the allegations made by this defendant [were] outside the heartland of the normal false statement case. It was atypical. His statements, if believed, fraternizing with a prosecutor and illegal acts by DEA agents was unethical conduct and if believed, would be a career ending move. I also think that the statements that the defendant made were egregious, malicious and vicious and they were intentional.⁶⁴

With plenty of time to dig into the finer points of the law books, Sean claimed his sentencing was wrongfully calculated and appealed. In November 1999, the judges sided with his plea and remanded his original sentence. But in the re-sentencing hearing in early 2000, where Sean showed up, confident that he was close to freedom, he was burnt again. According to Owen, the prosecutor of the Gatien case and the DEA agent with whom Sean had claimed to be having a romantic affair, were both deeply disappointed with the collapse of their case – thanks in part to the unreliability of their key witness. Their additional testimony at Sean’s hearing led the judge to increase his time behind bars. He was re-sentenced to the original 57 months for failure to appear at his first hearing plus an additional 33 months for lying to a federal agent.

That, Bitch and I somberly concluded, would most likely have made his border crossing to Canada last fall a violation of parole. It suddenly began to make sense why Sean’s many planned trips to the US never ended up happening.

He was a fugitive – the excrement of a failed political project. Living in my apartment. And now I had to go back there for the night.

The mask of sanity

The psychopath may indeed be the perverted and dangerous frontrunner of a new kind of personality which could become the

⁶⁴ Court document available through <https://www.tourolaw.edu/FTP/SecondCircuit/November99/98-1262.rtf>

central expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over.⁶⁵

With this citation from Norman Mailer, Rieber and Green begin their sociological inquiry into the grotesque condition of psychopathy – or as they call it, ‘the Mephisto syndrome.’ There is perhaps little wonder that early accounts of psychopathic behavior were considered closely tied to ideas of human evil – a kind of madness described in the 19th century as ‘moral insanity.’ The psychopathic condition, they write, represents

more than a tendency to care about others only as a means to one’s own self-centered aims; it indicates a lack of capacity to do otherwise. The true psychopath is lost to humanity, utterly incapable of human concern and involvement with others except at the most superficial and exploitative level.⁶⁶

Back at Orca Place that night, it was a familiar insomnia. I had been lying awake for hours, listening for sounds from Sean’s room. But he was sleeping quietly as usual. I could not shake the feeling that I was trapped in someone’s crazy screenplay – as though our reality show had been transformed into a bad Hollywood psycho-thriller that one day would be replayed as in-flight entertainment – as temporary diversion for a culture hooked on its own speed of forgetting. A psychopath thriller. It was happening to me. I continued reading the article with an acute sense of horror chilling my spine.

A wide range of disparate classifications exist to cover the spectrum of ‘antisocial behavior,’ whereof only the most extreme cases involving murder and violence come to be depicted in popular culture, through famous serial killers such as Ted Bundy or fictional figures such as Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. The majority of psychopaths, however, are not mass murderers, but rather petty swindlers and conmen or, at the opposite end, successful players in the business world – and the vast majority are male. Estimates on frequency differ enormously, from studies suggesting that ‘clinical’ psychopaths make up around three percent of the adult North

⁶⁵ From “The White Negro”, *Voices of Dissent*. Quoted in Rieber and Green, p. 48.

⁶⁶ See Rieber and Green, p. 53.

American population, to therapists who postulate that as many as 10-15 percent of men have deeply psychopathic character traits. As a particularly precarious diagnosis, the psychopath is an elusive character, often shrouded in tales of horror and mystery.⁶⁷

Rieber and Green argue that, beyond a psychiatric diagnosis, the true psychopath is distinguished by four salient characteristics: thrill seeking; pathological glibness; antisocial pursuit of power; and, absence of guilt.

As I was reading their analysis, half-delirious from my lack of sleep, a haunting picture was being painted in my mind – a motif borrowed from the last six months of my life. Fragments of their text kept reverberating through the flimsy seconds of my disengaged consciousness.

...Psychopaths invariably speak well, colorfully, persuasively, and volubly about themselves and their past (though only minimally about their future). What is said, however, has no discernible relation to facts...

...psychopaths do not want to win; they want to cheat – and get away with it. That is, they want to turn the game into a new game, where they make the rules...

...they are skilled in evasion and rationalization. Some, gifted histrionically, can even feign remorse...

...They are not social, only superficially gregarious; not considerate, just polite; not self-respecting, only vain; not loyal, only servile – and deep down they are really quite shallow...

...It is as though, for psychopaths, power can be experienced only in the context of victimization: if they are to be strong, someone else must pay. There is no such thing, in the psychopathic universe, as the merely weak; whoever is weak is also a sucker; that is, someone who demands to be exploited...⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Indeed, I would like to make a conceptual distinction between the term psychopath and the now preferred clinical term, 'antisocial personality disorder.' While I remain convinced from extensive reading on this 'disorder' that Sean embodies most defining traits of this category, I am neither a clinical psychiatrist nor is my point here in any way directly related to precision of diagnosis. Rather, my concern, like Rieber and Green, is a more sociological dimension of this condition, for which psychopathy is, I believe, a much more widely applicable and useful term.

⁶⁸ See Rieber and Green, pp. 58-60.

I don't know if I had actually dozed off, but abruptly, I jumped out of bed – only to discover that my nightmare was in fact still my reality. The book was on the floor, flipped over. I could still sense the text yelling at me, its loud surface muffled only by the petrochemical cocktail constituting the carpet. I wandered around my bedroom, looking out the window at empty illuminated streets and the occasional lit room in nearby high-rises. The skies were clear; visibility near infinite. I felt trapped.

Soon, I found myself in the bathroom, entranced by my own reflection in the mirror. For a while, I couldn't even recognize my own image. I examined the bloodshot redness around my pulsating pupils. These were the eyes of a moron – a narcissistic weakling.

Whoever is weak is also a sucker.

9 1 1

I got up before Sean. He pretended to make a few more phone calls, which yielded the rather unsurprising result that the money transfer supposedly had been delayed by a few hours.

“It will be here by noon. I promise,” he said.

Eventually, he left the apartment, claiming to need a coffee, and I couldn't see myself stopping him – nor did I want to follow him around anymore. This was, after all, purely for show.

After he left, I went to the provincial tenancy office, inquiring about my rights, and went on to the police, where I reported my stolen Hasselblad camera. I felt like it was necessary to take drastic measures and I was invigorated by a sense of purpose fueling my actions.

When I came home to leave a formal eviction notice on his desk, Sean had just returned before me. He looked extraordinarily upbeat, his voice almost singing in content as he was tripping on the carpet.

“Oh, I had a busy morning, let me tell you,” he began, handing me a piece of paper. “First, I filed a small claims suit against you for stealing my watch. Here, consider yourself served.”

“Your watch? I have never even seen your watch!”

“Oh, spare it for the hearing, Bjorn. Too bad you didn’t file your papers before me – that won’t look too good. Oh, and by the way, I filed a harassment charge against you and Bitch for yesterday.”

“What?”

His face turned sinister again.

“Don’t fuck with me, Bjorn! You’ll be paying! And what is this – an eviction notice? So petty, Bjorn! So petty.”

A small part of me wanted to leap forward and push him into the wall, to see his spine crumble against the brick, to see the vicious grin on his face wiped out – but I curled my lips and left the apartment without saying a word. I needed to breathe less contaminated, less schismogenic air. Out, out, out – to the exhaust-filled asphalt streets.

I walked a few blocks away and dialed 911 for the first time in my life. Once again, I found myself cursing the writer of this grotesque screenplay that I had been thrown into. The 911 operator told me there was a police car outside Orca Place already, waiting to talk to me. I was confused. What was this? I ran back. And there they were: two uniformed officers standing on the curb, staring at me as I approached them.

“Are you–” one of the officers asked, looking down at his notes, “–Bjorn?”

“Yes.”

“We are here to investigate an emergency call. Your roommate claims you threatened to kill him.”

Oh now, how could I possibly still be standing upright, how could the pavement hold my weight, this crazy, heavy weight, when we know that there really is nothing in between those atoms, only a void strung together in between chaos–

I thought I was going to cry in despair. But instead, some other voice inside me kicked in and within a few rambling seconds, I found myself talking quite coherently. I was amazed at how incredulously my incredulity was conveyed. The officers listened, politely took notes, then asked to come upstairs.

Sean was gone. The constable who was doing most of the talking, a short Latino with thick, curly hair, was unimpressed.

“I’d have to say your roommate’s story isn’t looking so good right now. 99 percent of people who say they fear for their life stay until the police arrive. And,” he said, looking over at his partner, “I’d have to say you don’t seem like a very threatening guy.”

The other constable nodded.

“Thank you,” I said with heartfelt warmth. I told them about the recent turn of events and they were empathic, signaling a willingness to help me. Eventually, after confirming with the provincial office for residential tenancy issues, they suggested it was in my legal right to lock Sean out of the apartment, considering that he owed me four months worth of rent. I was elated. After a few quick phone calls to the landlord and the building manager, Sean’s keycard was rendered void.

“When he tries to come back in here, call us and don’t let him in until we have arrived. We want to have a word with him.”

I wanted to give them both a big hug, to hold onto them like they were big rocks sheltering me from wind, but I imagine the relief in my eyes was enough to make them feel content with their work. I had been granted a break – a tiny shelter from turbulence.

Schismogenic games

While thrill seeking, glibness and absence of guilt may be the psychopath’s defining character traits, antisocial pursuit of power remains his primary driving force. A psychopath is, essentially, a power maximizer. But this power is perhaps best understood in Batesonian terms. As Rieber and Green argue,

if we ask what exactly constitutes power in this frame of reference, it is immediately clear that power resides not in the individual but in the system of complementary interactions that identify that individual as dominant within the group. The power of the dominant individual resides in the group. Power, in short, is an abstraction pertaining to complex group processes.⁶⁹

The psychopath, in their view, typically situates himself in a complementary situation towards any group process, not identifying as part of the group but instead acting as though he has been given a right to dominate and usurp the power for himself. A whole ecosystem – a Lake – unto himself.

However, describing psychopathic power relations in schismogenic terms leads us into troubling territory – all the way back, in fact, to the matrix of the double bind, our phenomenological schism. For there is clearly in the psychopath a significant distinction between the kinds of power relations he pursues and the ones he appears to pursue. Whereas Sean at first seemed to initiate a symmetrical relationship with me through developing a friendship on equal terms, according to the Rieber and Green's analysis, he would have maintained a clandestine pursuit of dominance over me – a deliberate schism that would in fact have fueled his thrill seeking behavior. Like telling me he had written a book where in fact the real story of himself was embedded. Like stealing my camera while pretending to do me a favor. Like filing a fictitious suit against me for stealing his possessions, which, for all I knew, were stolen by him in the first place.

New pieces of the puzzle – pieces so easily forgotten in the speedy haze of the last few months – were coming together in my mind. ... *psychopaths do not want to win; they want to cheat – and get away with it...* Like my favorite jacket that disappeared from coat check in December after I thought I had left my receipt with him. Like the 900 dollars that were withdrawn on my credit card last month, for which he denied any involvement when I asked him– Like the time I opened my email program and discovered that for some reason, the last email to be read was one that I sent to Cat months ago and that I could not recall reading– Like the sixty dollars of

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

cash I thought I had lost at the gym that one time— *whoever is weak is also a sucker who demands to be exploited...*

If we try to qualify the idea of complementary interactions, we can call it a positive complementary relationship from the viewpoint of the person in dominance, and a negative complementary relationship from the viewpoint of the person in a submissive position. Thus, while a psychopath's antisocial personality seems to stem from his quest for a positive complementary relationship, for a position of dominance, his 'mask of sanity' towards his surroundings works to feign symmetrical interactions – or if necessary, even negative complementary interactions to some degree – *some, gifted histrionically, can even feign remorse...* – In other words, psychopaths tend to be two-faced in their relations, pursuing a dramatically different agenda than they want to disclose.

This process, which is essentially schizoid, begins to develop from early childhood. From their research, Rieber and Green suggest that while schizophrenia may develop more often in childhood contexts of pampering, psychopathy is more frequently linked to a repeated pattern of neglect. Moreover, physical and sexual abuse, as violent expressions of a complementary relationship, often serve to heighten a child's capacity for, and reliance on, dissociative mental mechanisms.⁷⁰

Freud characterizes children's development of self-governance as largely a two-step process. In the first phase, the misbehaving child fears the paternal authority that threatens it with loss of love. The bad conscience at this stage is merely a social anxiety: they will "habitually allow themselves to do any bad thing which promises them enjoyment, so long as they are sure that the authority will not know anything about it or cannot blame them for it; they are afraid only of being found out."⁷¹ In the second phase, however, the authority is internalized into the mental surveillance organ that Freud famously calls the superego. Only at this stage does a child develop what we could call moral conscience or guilt – a continual and dynamic conflict between the instinctual demands of the id and the conscientious objection of the superego. The

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

⁷¹ See Freud, 1961, pp. 85-6.

result is typically an inward-facing aggression, where the ego is kept in check by a mental panopticon – essentially, a kind of self-corrective process. However, as Freud argues, “in delinquent children, who have been brought up without love, the tension between ego and superego is lacking, and the whole of their aggressiveness can be directed outwards.”⁷² The ‘moral imbecility’ of the psychopath, then, can in Freudian terms be attributed to an absent or an undeveloped superego.⁷³ The only plausible anxiety persistent in the psychopath would relate to being placed in a negative complementary position – subjugated to an external authority. He fears only being found out. Without self-corrective functioning, however, seeking only maximization of his own variables, this is a fear that inevitably becomes reality.

In this sense, the psychopath’s primary motivation for maximizing power can be understood as a deeply defensive act: to avoid negative complementary relationships at all costs. And this compulsion traps him in a twisted power game. His only chance of avoiding a negative complementary relationship – of being dominated and hence possibly abused – is to develop a positive complementary relationship where he can dominate and profit. But this essential survival strategy requires him from an early age to dissociate his intentions from his social behavior. He learns at an early stage that a symmetrical relationship of reciprocal tensions involves a far greater risk of escalating towards a conflict that again will bring him into a position of negative complementarity. The most effective way for him to achieve a positive complementary position, then, is through feigning a symmetrical or even a negative complementary position. Consequently, as Rieber and Green argue, the psychopath has lost the ability not to con people. He is a slave to his own schismogenic power game. What would appear as the ultimate freedom – to violate any established social code of conduct, to externalize responsibility – is in fact his ultimate bondage.⁷⁴

Managing such dissociative behavior in all of life’s situations would most certainly create an inner tension in the psychopath that only works to fuel his inflated ego and delusions of grandeur further. His antisocial behavior is profoundly self-

⁷² Ibid., p. 93f.

⁷³ These are general terms that do not apply exclusively to a psychopathic condition.

⁷⁴ See Rieber and Green, p. 65.

reinforcing. Conning people into trusting him – into believing his story – becomes at once a thrill seeking exercise and a constant power pursuit that leaves him utterly restless. The more thrill and power he seeks, the higher the stakes – the higher the demands to maintain his maximizing behavior – and the higher the chances of going into runaway.

Spring cleaning

Later that evening, the doorbell rang. I watched Sean's face on the TV monitor; he knew he was being watched, so he kept his cool. Why, after all, stress himself out over simple things? As I had been instructed, I called 911 again. Eventually, the police showed up – to my vindictive delight, the same crew as before – and brought him upstairs. In their presence, he was allowed to pack a small bag of essential items and would have to leave the rest of his belongings for pick-up at a mutually agreed-upon time.

I had seen him walk through the front door hundreds of times before, suavely, confidently, like a world-class burgher. But this time, he was changed: he was a wounded animal. His brown oval-shaped and shifty eyes had turned wide, circular and maniacally intense. His apparition had become a trembling shell; his forehead was sweating. He walked unsteadily forward with the policemen, glanced at me without seeming recognition and soon scrambled around the apartment in search for papers, agendas and other documents he clearly would want nobody to see. Underneath his constant, loud heckling with the policemen was a faint scream of despair in having the enforcement of law, whose language he had learned to manipulate so well in so many situations, used against him yet again. The prospect of eviction was clearly an unexpected turn of events and he would resist until the last shred of store-bought dignity had been torn off his two-thousand dollar jacket. He wrote down the names of the officers, pretended to be an indignant citizen, threatening legal action and complaints to the police commissioner.

“You have no idea what you’re doing – you will hear from your boss about this!” he yelled.

The officers shrugged.

“Don’t you have squatter’s rights in this city?” I heard Sean shriek from inside his room.

The constable was becoming exasperated.

“Wow, hold on! Hold on! Look around you for a moment! Look at where you are right now! Are you honestly trying to tell me you are going to claim squatter’s rights in this place?”

The other policeman looked at me and shook his head in sad disbelief.

They escorted him out. He vowed to be back. And he was right. In fact, he would show up every single day for the next week, trying different stories with different policemen who grew increasingly irritated with the frequency of 911 calls from Orca Place. I had no intention of letting him in. As long as he owed me money, I would try to hold on to his expensive furniture as collateral.

Over the phone, my mother implored me, in panic fear, to give Sean everything just to get him out of my life. But I felt like I had already made too many complementary surrenders. Within the tidal pool of frustration, I was beginning to notice a strange sense of thrill that offset my tension. A faint bubble of self-righteous, symmetrical vindication.

That night, K came for her first sleep-over.

Spring cleaning: Trash out. Love in.

It was a necessary schismogenic reversion to brace myself for the following week.

M o n d a y

Ring, ring.

“Bjorn!”

“Bitch! What’s up?”

“Not much. Where are you?”

“Oh, at Small Claims court. I just filed my claim against Sean for the rent he owes me.”

“Cool!”

“Well, not really. According to the clerk here, when I eventually win my claim, I have no way of enforcing it. If Sean really doesn’t want to pay me, I will never get any money. It’s useless.”

“What about the camera?”

“Well, according to the law, that’s a criminal case, so I had to report that to the police. But because it’s worth less than five grand, they essentially told me it was unlikely the Crown would ever press charges. And even if they did, they would probably never have a big enough case to keep him in jail.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No. These are the loop holes he fits through. It’s pretty fucking frustrating, I can assure you. But how about you? Did your trip back go alright?”

“Yeah, except I just got my credit card statement.”

“Oh, you shopping whore – did you max out again?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I knew it.”

“But it wasn’t me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someone has charged almost five thousand dollars to my credit card.”

“Shut up!”

“Yeah. It’s all here. Limousine service from Vancouver airport to Whistler and back, the same weekend we went there, remember, when Sean wanted to borrow my car—?”

“Shut! Up!”

“And guess what else.”

“What?”

“Remember his birthday present to you?”

“Oh no, he didn’t...”

“Oh yeah, turns out it was *my* present to you instead.”

“No way!”

“Yup. Two return flights to New York City. Broadway tickets. Hotel reservations. All charged to my credit card.”

“Dude, I am so sorry.”

“Well, what can I say? Happy birthday, my friend. And tell Sean he still owes me ten dollars!”

T u e s d a y

“Are you Bjorn?”

A stranger in front of the entrance to Orca Place. I looked at him warily. He was short, a little chubby and fair-skinned – in his early 30s. Behind him stood a bespectacled, stern-looking man with bushy eyebrows.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Bjorn in 2003?”

“Yeah... Why?”

“I’m Peter.”

“Peter,” I repeated. I had no idea where this was going. I looked around to see if anyone else was watching. Something was going on.

“Do you still live here?” he asked.

“Why do you want to know?” I said, with an angry inflection.

“I’m the new tenant. I’ve been waiting to move in.”

“New tenant?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you move out already?”

I sighed. This could not be good.

The guy with the bushy eyebrows took a step forward.

“Look,” he said, “Peter here has rented suite number 2003 from Mr. Lake and he would like to move in immediately.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

Peter looked a little baffled and began to flip through some papers he was carrying.

“No. I signed a contract with Sean weeks ago and I was supposed to move in on March 1. Here.” He pointed to a printed document.

Another sigh.

“Did you give him any money?” I asked.

Peter looked worried now.

“Only a security deposit and rent for the first month. He gave me these keys and an access card but I can’t seem to get in.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m sorry to be telling you this, but I think you have been conned.” I felt oddly like a show host that had just told a contestant he was voted off. Peter leaned back against the wall, defeated. His friend furrowed his eyebrows into a wild stare.

“I knew it!” he shouted. “I knew this deal was too good to be true! I told you something was up!”

“Thanks,” Peter said, “that’s really helpful.” He had just been inaugurated into an increasingly inclusive club – a club of gullible fools.

“How did you meet Sean?” I asked.

“Through a mutual acquaintance online. I just moved to Vancouver and was looking around for a place. Sean said he was looking for someone to rent the place while he was out of town. He showed me around the place–“

“When was this?”

“Mid-February, I guess.”

“That was probably while I was in Toronto.”

“Yeah, he told me that. And he said that your lease with him was up and that you would be gone by the end of the month.”

“Well, if his plan had worked, I would have been lost in New York City. But eventually, I would have come back here to find you living in my apartment and probably all my stuff gone.”

Peter's stare was going blank.

"So he pretended to actually own the suite?" I continued.

"Yeah."

"Unbelievable. Go on."

"He even sold me his furniture, saying that he had no way of moving it out of town. He offered me a really good deal too. He was asking 1100 dollars per month for the whole place."

"How much are you paying," the guy with the bushy eyebrows asked me.

"1650."

"I knew it! I knew it! There's no way this could be legitimate!"

"But," I said, "at least you have the contract, right? That's evidence of his scam."

"Well..." Peter began, "...he never actually signed the document. He was going to give me a signed copy when I moved in."

A third sigh. It actually sounded more like a groan.

Peter was shaking his head.

"How could this have happened?" he uttered, meekly.

"I can tell you how," I said. Both Peter and his comrade looked at me, waiting for me to reveal my insight. I leaned in, as if to whisper:

"Whoever is weak, is also a sucker, who demands to be exploited."

W e d n e s d a y

"Mrs. Lake," I said, introducing myself, "I don't know if you remember me from Christmas."

"I do," she replied coldly. "What do you want?"

"Well, I was wondering if you know what's been going on with your son lately."

"I heard that the two of you had a falling out."

"I guess you can put it that way..."

"What do you want from me?"

I wasn't quite prepared for the animosity.

“I wanted to know if you could shed some light on his behavior.”

“And how would I do that?”

I was beginning to regret the entire phone call, but at this point, I thought, I had nothing to lose.

“Does Sean have a history of mental illness by any chance?”

“Even if he did, why would I tell you about it?”

“Eh... Because it might help me understand—“

“You’re a stranger and you’re asking me to tell you personal things about my own son? What kind of mother do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry to hear that the two of you aren’t getting along, but I have nothing more to say to you.”

“Okay,” I said before hanging up, wondering what the hell I had just done.

T h u r s d a y

The gallery owner looked at me with astonishment.

“Are you telling me you have our painting hanging in your apartment right now?”

“Yes, and I was just wondering how Sean paid for it.”

“Well, he didn’t.”

“He didn’t?”

“No, we had sort of written it off, to be honest, because of his accident and all.”

“What do you mean, his accident?”

He began browsing through his email program.

“Look, Sean brought the painting home last fall – we usually let our clients take it home for a few days so they can make sure they like it on the wall – it’s a policy our clientele appreciates – but when we never heard from him again, we tried calling and emailing him. And last month, we got this reply.”

He pointed to the screen.

From: "scott alan kirkman" <kirkmanscottalan@hotmail.com>
Date: Monday, February 16, 2004, 9:33 PM
Subject: RE: painting

Dear Mr. Hanson;

my name is Scott Kirkman, and I have been appointed as the legal guardian for Sean Lake. Sean was in a car accident in early November and has been in a coma since then. He is in a private hospital in Rochester, NY. I'm unfamiliar with this matter, if you can briefly state what the urgency in this matter is, perhaps I can help. If the painting has been purchased by Sean or a deposit has been made on it, I ask that you please hold on to it until I contact his parents. The best way to get in touch with me is via email. I will be in the Vancouver area in March.

Sincerely,

Scott Kirkman, Esq.

I laughed – a deeply relieving burst piercing through the tense cage of my consciousness. My brotherhood was expanding every day. There was solace to be found in shared stupidity.

F r i d a y

"How may I help you?" the store clerk asked.

"I'm here in connection with a police investigation of one of your former employees," I began, trying to sound professional. She had that instantly wary look on her face. Like Peter. My lawyer. The gallery owner. And my own mirror reflection. It was the look of a sucker.

"Who?" she said.

"Sean Lake."

It was the answer she was suspecting.

"What do you want to know?"

“All I know is that he had some issue with your store and that he quit after a few weeks last November. Could you fill me in on what happened?”

“Look, everything is in the police report,” she said.

“Police report?”

“Yeah. He worked here for a few weeks until we discovered that he was stealing credit card numbers and cheques from our customers. So we fired him, put a stop payment on his pay cheque, and filed a report with the police. That’s all.”

“Okay...”

“Now if you excuse me, I have to work,” she said and abruptly walked away.

Like everyone else the psychopath left in his wake, she did not want her superego to be reminded of her ego’s weakness.

T h e t r i a l

Friday afternoon. As the judge assumed his position and shuffled through some papers, silence prevailed in the dimly lit courtroom. A clerk standing nearby coughed three times. I observed nervously, with vicious, inexorable flames raging through my belly. The smell of burning coal infused my breath.

I found myself thinking about K. But not my sweet love K, now patiently sipping on her morning coffee on her way to work after another night at Orca Place. No, Josef K. Franz Kafka’s K – the unfortunate character who is put on trial without knowing what crime he has committed. Looking at the judge again, I was beginning to perceive spores of Kafka’s sentiment in my mind.

“And the defendant–,” the judge looked down at his papers again, “–Bjorn Ekeberg?”

A suit, size extra-extra large, rose in front of the judge with an anxiously tinged reply.

“Represented by me, Milord.” The lawyer stated his name while wiping sweat off his forehead with a grimy-looking handkerchief. It was his first time in a provincial supreme court.

Sean glanced over at him. His usual grin was replaced by a carefully rehearsed startled look; his thousand-dollar Helmut Lang pants substituted for scruffy jeans with holes around the knees. He began his scripted testimony, professing his innocence and victimhood, accusing me of unlawfully kicking him out of my apartment. I learnt that I had destroyed his belongings and put his life at risk. Sean was on fire. He was avenging his last court appearance that sent him straight to prison. If he had battled the FBI on the stand, I was *nothing* to him. My lawyer was dead meat.

I closed my eyes, sighed and tried to understand what the hell I was doing in this room. But it made no sense. No one had been able to tell me how a civil tenancy dispute could be brought in front of a supreme court judge on two days' notice. It seemed like the judge was somewhat bemused as well. But until he could attend to the next hearing of the day, he was legally bound to consider Sean's demand for renewed access to Orca Place. And I had to endure a creeping sense of Kafkaesque justice.

Sean continued his allegations. Apparently, I had threatened to kill him. When he had picked up a bag of belongings under police escort earlier in the week, he had found his eyeglasses smashed, preventing him from seeing properly. People who were waiting for the next hearings were listening intently. Whoever this Bjorn character was, he was clearly a heartless villain. My lawyer was unprepared for Sean's allegations and resorted to stuttering. "Eh, Milord, eh..." he began. 160 dollars an hour. It was not looking good.

The judge was losing his patience; he had no concern for details or character assessments. In the eyes of the law, the matter was quite simple: Sean was entitled to his possessions. So he put an end to my lawyer's misery by issuing a court order stating that Sean must be granted access to the apartment in order to obtain his belongings. Sean's grin was quietly resurfacing. He moved in for the kill.

"Milord, the police have already been engaged unnecessarily in this matter. I suggest you instead appoint Mr. Ekeberg's lawyer to supervise the moving process."

"That is an excellent idea," the judge said, eager to move on to the next case. He looked over at the shivering suit next to Sean. "Any objections?"

"No, Milord."

I sighed again, this time audibly, and left the courtroom.

My lawyer eventually came out, his cheeks red from the anxiety that had flushed through his body. I imagined he had never anticipated this day when he steered towards the safe realm of residential tenancy law.

“I think that went pretty well,” he said.

“Sure,” I said. “I’m sure Kafka would agree.”

“Excuse me?” he said.

“Oh, never mind. Never mind.”

C o n s c i o u s p u r p o s e / N a t u r e

If the ego is not master in its own house, as Freud so modestly claims to have discovered, then what function does the ego have in the larger mental system? Or to phrase it differently, how are conscious and unconscious processes related within the mental ecosystem?

For Bateson, consciousness can be considered a kind of mental screen. At any given moment, our consciousness, he argues, forms only a fraction of our greater mind, of our cognitive process – acting as a screen upon which mere frames of totality are constantly projected in a selective process. My conscious understanding of myself, in other words, will always be only a part of my whole self – it’s like Bjorn the Movie – *now playing on my mental screen*. In other words, consciousness is expressed as a part-whole relationship – it is metonymic, as some linguists would say – where only partial views can find expression, where totality is impossible. And, as Bateson points out, each additional step towards increased consciousness – more reporting on the events of the mind – will actually take the system farther away from the illusory goal of total consciousness. From a cybernetic perspective, for any additional report to consciousness on events in the mental circuit, more circuitry would be needed, inevitably decreasing the percentage of total events reported. The metonymic structure of the mind, then, cannot be overcome.

We therefore have to settle for very limited consciousness, and the question arises: How is the selecting done? On what principles does your mind select that which 'you' will be aware of? And, while not much is known of these principles, something is known, though the principles at work are often not themselves accessible to consciousness. First of all, much of the input is consciously scanned, but only after it has been processed by the totally unconscious process of perception. The sensory events are packaged into images and these images are then 'conscious'.⁷⁵

The editing of perceptual knowledge – of unconscious processes – is, Bateson points out, fundamentally guided by *purposes*. The sampling of events and processes of the body and the total mind – your perceptual knowledge – are strung together in consciousness along conceptual pathways largely devoted to purposive thinking.

It is a short-cut device to enable you to get quickly at what you want; not to act with maximum wisdom in order to live, but to follow the shortest logical or causal path to get what you want next, which may be dinner; it may be a Beethoven sonata; it may be sex. Above all, it may be money and power.⁷⁶

This insight has serious implications for how we understand the world. What happens, Bateson asks, when the picture of a mental system – be it defined as the human mind, as society or as nature – is selectively drawn to answer only questions of purpose?

Consider the state of medicine today. It's called medical science. What happens is that doctors think it would be nice to get rid of polio, or typhoid, or cancer. So they devote research money and effort to focusing on these 'problems,' or purposes. At a certain point Dr. Salk and other 'solve' the problem of polio. They discover a solution of bugs which you can give to children so that they don't get polio. This is the solution to the problem of polio. At this point, they stop putting large quantities of effort and money into the problem of polio and go on to the problem of cancer, or whatever it may be.

Medicine ends up, therefore, as a total science, whose structure is essentially that of a bag of tricks. Within this science there is extraordinarily little knowledge of the sort of things I'm talking about; that is, of the body as a systemically cybernetically organized self-

⁷⁵ See Bateson, 1972, p. 432.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 433-4.

corrective system. Its internal interdependencies are minimally understood. What has happened is that purpose has determined what will come under the inspection or consciousness of medical science.

If you allow purpose to organize that which comes under your conscious inspection, what you will get is a bag of tricks – some of them very valuable tricks. It is an extraordinary achievement that these tricks have been discovered; all that I don't argue. But still we do not know two-penn'orth, really, about the total network system. Cannon wrote a book on *The Wisdom of the Body*, but nobody has written a book on the wisdom of medical science, because wisdom is precisely the thing which it lacks. Wisdom I take to be the knowledge of the larger interactive system – that system which, if disturbed, is likely to generate exponential curves of change.⁷⁷

So it is not purpose itself that poses a potential problem – it is the suppression of other modes of mental organization.⁷⁸ A partiality that disguises itself as totality: this is the mask of sanity – the sheep's clothes of purpose – the mannerism of abstraction.

Phenomenologically speaking, purposive thinking is what seeps out of all three wounds of civilization. If written language, as Abram argues, could be considered the abstraction of so-called conceptual thinking from bodily, perceptual knowledge, Freud's three narcissistic wounds are primarily a narrative about purpose. In this account, our civilization, guided by its increasingly scientific and purpose-driven consciousness, has made three big discoveries about itself – about its purpose, or lack thereof. And for each wound, the propensity towards further purposiveness – and towards further mistaking of partiality for totality – has been reinforced rather than relaxed.

Perhaps this is why Freud's narrative has to end with himself. After the mental journey from cosmology through biology and psychology – from outer to inner space – the leitmotif of purpose has somehow collapsed onto itself. At some point in the wake of Freud we are forced to grapple with the answers our purposive quest has

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 433.

⁷⁸ For Aristotle, for example, this kind of purposive organization, or telos, was only one of four types.

yielded. The wounds of civilization, in other words, are not merely surface scratches but deep flesh wounds in danger of infection, of viral proliferation.

Now, you may wonder, what could possibly constitute signs of such infection?

M o v i n g d a y

We were in the elevator, like so many times before, but this time, we didn't exchange a word. Between floors 12 and 16, I looked at him; he looked away, before I returned my gaze towards the steel doors. It was eerily quiet.

I noticed that he was making a faint and transparent attempt at suppressing the triumphant glow in his eyes. To him, it had all been a game. And according to the rules of his universe, he was again the unquestionable winner. Sure, there was some resistance and bickering – a few trips to Supreme Court, several fruitless meetings with police officers, threatening emails, agony, pain – but in the end, he prevailed. He was here to collect his furniture and remove any valuable trace of himself before some legal institution would grant me a symbolic victory, by which time he would be gone. Yes, his smirk was there for good reason. He had cheated and gotten away with it.

The elevator doors opened once again on the 20th floor. I went first, followed by my lawyer, Sean, the landlord, and the building manager. Through my lawyer, we had drafted up what belonged to whom. There were no disputes. Sean had no further need for disputes.

As we stood quietly by and watched him pack up his boxes, all of us deeply uncomfortable with the situation, I was again struck by how easy this seemed to Sean. Over the last few days, as I tried to stall his entry into the apartment for as long as I legally could – trying to play his game, as it were – he had sent me thinly veiled threats by email, all from his various email accounts under false names. One was sent in my father's name, telling me in stilted Norwegian – the kind you get from an internet-based translating service – that I'd better watch out, that he was not done with me. In a particular exchange, he purported to be a girl from Vancouver, Caitlin, that we both had met at our Christmas party in Montreal. It was a great cover. In the first

innocuous email she wrote that she had just bumped into Sean on the bus and that he had passed on my email address. I wrote her back with a stern warning to watch out for Sean, telling her briefly about the latest events, that he was under investigation by the police. Only with her subsequent reply a few hours later did I realize that I again had been exposed as a sucker. 'Caitlin' claimed to have noticed that Sean was

with these three guys in suits. I saw them sitting at a Starbucks. They looked pretty official to me. Now that you mention it, I would say from watching enough movies they looked like Special Agents!!! I was standing at the bus stop and watched as they all stood up shook hands, he ran across the street and the three men got into a car and drove off.

Well, gee, thanks, Sean. I replied that it would be better to discuss the matter over the phone, to which I got no response. I later learnt that he had also sent an email to several people in the administration of my university, pretending to be Caitlin, a female student who claimed that I was dealing drugs out of my undergraduate tutorials. Though briefly investigated, the allegations were later dismissed when 'Caitlin' refused to meet or talk on the phone with anyone from my university.

Now I was watching him effortlessly throw his clothes into a suitcase and direct his hired movers around the apartment without a hint of shame, guilt or any kind of torment that would keep him from proceeding along his self-aggrandizing path. I had no ability to reduce myself to his sick and twisted game, so I could only throw symbolic obstacles in his way. Even though the moving process was supposed to take place without police back-up, I had called to request their presence. And eventually, two plain-clothes constables showed up. Sean was in the lobby, guiding the movers, when he saw them arrive and flash badges to the building manager. Knowing that he might be wanted, he didn't take any chances. As quietly as he came, he fled the scene. And I never saw him again.

That is, he never really disappeared. His words from another email, under a different name, kept ringing through my mind: "I have a feeling you will remember me for a long, long time." I had a feeling he was right. And it was probably because my experience with Sean seemed truly uncanny. I had begun to perceive how this character, the psychopath, is one who has found his way out of the existential double

bind that holds the rest of us captive. He approaches schismogenic interactions as a game in pursuit of self-maximization. Purpose is his only operating principle. The whole of the psychopath is an embodiment of our partial self – the partial self we see reflected in the rationalizing, purposive systems around us.

He might have disappeared. But I was seeing him everywhere.

P a r t s a n d w h o l e s

(...) a peculiar sociological phenomenon has arisen in the last one hundred years which perhaps threatens to isolate conscious purpose from many corrective processes which might come out of less conscious parts of the mind. The social scene is nowadays characterized by the existence of a large number of self-maximizing entities which, in law, have something like the status of 'persons' – trusts, companies, political parties, unions, commercial and financial agencies, nations, and the like. In biological fact, these entities are precisely *not* persons and are not even aggregates of whole persons. They are aggregates of parts of persons. When Mr. Smith enters the board room of his company, he is expected to limit his thinking narrowly to the specific purposes of the company or to those of that part of the company which he 'represents.' Mercifully it is not entirely possible for him to do this and some company decisions are influenced by considerations which spring from wider and wiser parts of the mind. But ideally, Mr. Smith is expected to act as a pure, uncorrected consciousness – a dehumanized creature.⁷⁹

T h e c o r p o r a t i o n

Law professor Joel Bakan's recent study of the corporation as a legal entity is a chilling insight into the devastating logic of maximization. The corporation, Bakan argues, has become society's most powerful institution and is in principle pathological. In fact, since the corporation is by law granted the same limited liability as a person – a limitation which has been the cornerstone of its success – its behavior clearly conforms to the diagnostic criteria of psychopathy or antisocial personality disorder.

⁷⁹ See Bateson, 1972, p. 446.

Like a psychopath, the corporation's mandate is to pursue relentlessly and without exception its own economic self-interest with reckless disregard for the consequences its actions may have on others – that is, of course, unless these consequences impede on its profit motive.

In an interview with expert on psychopathy, Robert Hare, Bakan, establishes the more detailed psychiatric criteria of assessment.

The corporation is *irresponsible*, Dr. Hare said, because 'in an attempt to satisfy the corporate goal, everybody else is put at risk.' Corporations try to *manipulate* everything, including public opinion,' and they are *grandiose*, always insisting 'that we're number one, we're the best.' A *lack of empathy* and *asocial tendencies* are also key characteristics of the corporation, says Hare – 'their behavior indicates they don't really concern themselves with their victims'; and corporations often *refuse to accept responsibility for their own actions* and are *unable to feel remorse*: 'if [corporations] get caught [breaking the law], they pay big fines and they ... continue doing what they did before anyway. And in fact in many cases the fines and the penalties paid by the organization are trivial compared to the profits they rake in.' Finally, according to Dr. Hare, corporations relate to others *superficially* – 'their whole goal is to present themselves to the public in a way that is appealing to the public [but] in fact may not be representative of what the organization is really like.'⁸⁰

This superficiality, Bakan contends, comes across in trends like 'corporate social responsibility' which, while possibly yielding favorable outcomes in particular cases, can structurally only be understood as window dressing for the corporation, because such behaviors fall outside its legal mandate.

The law forbids any other motivation for their actions, whether to assist workers, improve the environment, or help consumers save money. They can do these things with their own money, as private citizens. As corporate officials, however, stewards of other people's money, they have no legal authority to pursue such goals as ends in themselves – only as means to serve the corporation's own interests, which generally means to maximize the wealth of its shareholders. Corporate social responsibility is thus illegal – at least when it is genuine.⁸¹

⁸⁰ See Bakan, p. 57, original emphases.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

And the irony of it all, as Bakan points out, “is that the corporation’s mandate to pursue its own self-interest, itself a product of the law, actually propels corporations to break the law.”⁸² This is arguably the contradictory nature of the capitalist system engendering the corporation as a self-maximizing structure. Any deeper analysis of this pattern would need to grapple with these underlying contradictory properties, in which the social system that predicates itself on freedom ultimately finds itself in bondage. Just like its social and individual articulations, the capitalist system, however we choose to conceptualize it, constitutes, and is constituted by, the logic of maximization. The freedom of self-maximization leads to bondage by the environment from which the psychopathic actor has abstracted and externalized itself.

We begin to see how the epistemological errors of our civilization keep replicating themselves in ever new symptomatic forms. The true character of the corporation, in other words, is a partial mandate of self-maximization, while advertising and public relations efforts render a public image of a totality – a mask of sanity that portrays it as caring, considerate, friendly and benign. Faced with the tremendous power of the corporation, what are we as consumers and citizens but weak – but suckers who demand to be exploited?

W r a p - u p

“Okay, I’m done,” K said.

“Already? The whole kitchen?” I replied, mesmerized.

“Yup, it’s all in here.”

I looked at the perfectly packed box, in which everything seemed to fit into everything else. I smiled at her with deep affection. It was a little granola moment in the midst of grand melancholy.

⁸² Ibid., p. 80.

I wished I could take a picture of K's work, of her, of the entire scene around me. But my camera was gone, along with the money I would need to replace it. I would have to rely on the volatility of my memory from now on.

The apartment was again empty, just like I had first seen it. Once more, it was an empty stage. And the imaginary cameras and microphones that were so instrumental to the narcissistic drama were all gone. In the end, I thought to myself, The Orca Place Show was cancelled after its first season because one of its main characters attempted to usurp the entire concept and transform it fully into a show about himself. In a sense, with his insatiable cravings for fame and attention, the psychopath lives his life as though he truly is on his own reality TV show – his own solipsistic Truman⁸³ universe. The constant drama and terror the psychopath relentlessly creates in his wake ensures that his show goes on, season after season.

In the meantime, the hyperreality Cat and I had shared through our ironic filter of distance to a truly crazy world had at last cracked and given way to an overwhelmingly new sense of reality. It seemed like the world that for so long had formed an aesthetic backdrop to our existence once again came alive. We were all minds, infinitely interconnected.

I went into my bedroom and unscrewed the last round mirror from the wall. Holding it up in front of me with both hands, I looked at my reflection one last time, it was no longer just the weak sucker who was staring back at me. It was the face of shame. Ever since I discovered Sean's true character, I had been plagued by social guilt. Not only had I let this man into my own life – I had introduced him to my friends, passed him off, vouched for him with my utmost Scandinavian gullibility. I had been the weak switch, the nodal sucker, that expanded the network to include a cell of terror.

The spiraling pattern around my pupils was slowly contracting, taking in the sight of humiliation. I heard the sound of K's faint humming from the living room and my knuckles turned frail for a split second.

I saw it slip.

⁸³ Perhaps most aptly encapsulated by the 1998 movie, *The Truman Show*.

Out of my hand.

I knew that it would.

I think.

Maybe I wanted it to slip, maybe not.

But as the glass hit the ground again, there were no more unifying reflections, no more visible disturbance, no more weakness, no more madness.

Just that sound.

[crack.]

In the air

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” I said. I was staring out the window, over the wing. We had passed by the mountains – the terrain now was merely flat. I had a sense that I could see myself down there somewhere. It was uncanny. I had been here before. But as always the linear flight path lured me into a sense of flying away from the past, towards the future.

K and I had scraped together enough money for our last Spring adventure: a trip to Montreal. From there, I would return to Norway for the summer. I sorely needed to make money. Six months of double rent, stolen possessions, credit card fraud, lawyer’s fees – it was all adding up to thousands of dollars and a drained savings account. But somehow I felt oddly enriched by my experience.

K’s hand touched my head. Where there was once only a naked skull, there was now a thick layer of hair sheltering my brain from the outer world. The tingling sensation from her hand, however, was stronger than ever.

The sunrise lent our faces a rosy glow. We didn’t laugh. We just smiled. And I had a brief vision of someone staring at us from below with the exact same smile on his mouth.

S U M M E R

After the wounds

Freudian psychology expanded the concept of mind inwards to include the whole communication system within the body – the automatic, the habitual, and the vast range of unconscious process. What I am saying expands mind outwards. And both of these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger. A part – if you will – of God.

If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your folks or conspecifics against the environment of other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables.

If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic by-products of your own hate, or, simply, of overpopulation and overgrazing. The raw materials of the world are finite.⁸⁴

The threat of chaos

I am somewhere else now. Somewhere else in space and time, still searching, still yearning for granola moments, but with a safe distance to the grayness of my

⁸⁴ See Bateson, pp. 461-2.

recent past. It has become the ground upon which I walk – the colorless yet vivid earth. I no longer have a window to a glorious sunrise or sunset, but I am content to study the reflections in the broken mirror that I have been carrying in my suitcase for a while.

Everything begins with abstraction. And in the theoretical journey now behind me, the history of abstraction has been revealed – abstracted, if you will – as a path from the origins of language through a modernity with certainty in the value of its own project, toward a postmodernity of increasing uncertainty, doubt and confusion. Sigmund Freud's account of the three narcissistic wounds of our civilization is an inwards journey: from cosmology to biology to psychology. His story of himself as the final – and in his own version, the greatest – inflictor is perhaps poignantly prophetic insofar as Freud signifies the very pinnacle and collapse of modernist certainty. As a cultural mirror holder, in other words, everything in our culture pivots on Freud. While laying bare the new configuration of distrust in ourselves which would foreshadow the postmodern era, he clung on to his scientific belief in the ultimate triumph of reason and rationality.⁸⁵ So with Freud, the enlightenment gaze retreats from its previous aspirations of universal domination into the human mind, where it is muffled by the roaring mess of the newly discovered unconscious and faced with its own impossibility.

Yet, the post-Freudian world struggles with its shattered narcissism. Freud's enlightenment-inspired admonition to negotiate with the unconscious forces within us and uncover the limits of our own knowledge, the psycho-analytic model, has yielded to a more drastic, purposive and lucrative form of enlightenment rationality: a scientific and market-driven quest for pharmacological suppressors. The reinforced postmodern consciousness finds amidst a celebratory field of symptoms a steady

⁸⁵ A particularly poignant rendition of this era comes across in Manfred Becker's 2003 documentary, *Neighbours: Freud and Hitler in Vienna*. Through archival footage and narration, we are invited to contemplate the unconscious forces lying in between Freud and Hitler – one as the discoverer, the other as the exploiter – and the drastically different versions of rationality that arose. Similarly, the recent German movie *Downfall*, depicting Hitler's last weeks in the Berlin bunker reads simultaneously as the downfall of a particularly pathological form of rationality, making a compelling case for the argument that the idea of postmodernism, at least in a European context, is deeply connected to World War II.

stream of remedial solutions to the gaping modernist wounds that still paralyze its optimizing potential. The epistemological error, then, spirals further.

So from the last vestiges of Freud's inward retreat begins Gregory Bateson's outward journey to conceive of the mind in relational terms, as an ecosystem, rather than according to the scientific reductionism of Freud's enlightenment tradition. Bateson's preoccupation with the erroneous assumptions of his predecessors' navigational efforts ties him in many ways closer to his continental, postmodernist contemporaries. But at the same time, his focus on new models of understanding, which eclipsed his inclination for trenchant critique, would seem to emanate from his somewhat more empiricist anthropological background. His later work, which transpired in the 1960s and 70s, entails several subtle philosophical links to the era of structuralism and post-structuralism – primarily in its attempt to uncover a more structural epistemology in which relationships between things foreground the things themselves. This was to Bateson where the world of communication, a world of relationships and meta-relationships, differed from the Newtonian, modernist world which tended to ascribe reality to objects without considering their context. Both these views are partial and achieve their simplicity from excluding the view of the other. But while the latter prevails as hegemonic epistemology in our social system, the former represents an unprivileged or repressed form of knowledge. Like Bateson, I would justify my partial scope here as an attempt to retrace some of this lost realm, while remaining aware of both the limitations and potential usefulness of scientific epistemology. Thus, by focusing on the mistaken enlightenment assumptions borne out of the history of abstraction, I do not intend to discard the enlightenment project itself or the potential importance of scientific knowledge. We can only hope to have reached a moment in time where our capacity for understanding nuance has ventured beyond the kinds of clear-cut and simple dichotomies that have proved so instrumental in Western history.

The relationship between self and world or self and other is particularly crucial in this regard. For example, while the Darwinian theory of evolution defined its unit of survival as the individual organism, Bateson vociferously argued that such a definition

must include the environment to which the organism is related. And this unit of survival in the biological world is identical to what Bateson calls the unit of mind: not merely the 'internal' workings of the brain, but the brain plus its relations to the environment. Evolution itself is, as Bateson points out, not a predetermined path but a process of trial and error⁸⁶ – and in principle, errors are part of any developing process. In a general sense, the capacity for correcting errors determines the adaptive quality of any mental system. But the severing of the relationship between the mental system and its environment presents us with a kind of error that over time becomes pathological, as it threatens the survival of the entire system itself. Any organism that considers itself apart from its environment is quite simply in epistemological error. Now, where such an error originates is a question open to philosophical speculation outside the scope of this thesis. I have offered here as a general pattern the links between this error and the genesis of written language, abstraction, and conceptual consciousness, but in doing so, we soon find ourselves in a world of mutually supporting presuppositions, where epistemology is embedded in established social processes and forms of organization. The physical world provides the explanation for the metaphysical world and vice versa. Beyond the causal scope, in other words, we notice how the error is doubly bound, and that its impact will only multiply and rise exponentially over time. This is as true for the social as for the biological world, since, in the Batesonian view, both are interconnected systems with mental characteristics – mental systems to which we are all connected.

Inherently, Bateson argues, mental systems are self-corrective – their homeostatic tendency favors a constant *optimization* of its variables. But if their self-corrective functions are suppressed in favor of *maximization*, they will increase schismogenic tension and inevitably go into runaway mode; a pathological spiral, running exponentially faster until an inevitable crash. What began as a form of adaptation has become a deeply addictive pattern, where short-term gains belie long-term disaster. Whereas Freud sees a history of blows to the civilizational ego, Bateson sees a growing pathology resulting from these inflictions – a psychotic reinforcement

⁸⁶ Also known as a 'stochastic' process. See Bateson, 1979.

and amplification of erroneous assumptions, which aptly dissociates any concerns for its own sustainability. Bateson's legacy, in this sense, was to advance the humble beginnings of a more holistic epistemology: an ecological systems theory of mind and communication, in which the human mind shares the same fundamental organizational pattern as societies, cultures and nature itself. This general epistemological project is by no means complete but in desperate need of further thinking and research, as the stakes are steadily rising to the brink of catastrophe.

Ronald Wright has recently advanced a similar, cogent argument about what he calls 'progress traps.' His tales of previous civilizations, from Sumerians to Mayans and Easter Island, reveal an uncanny pattern of social systems that all exhibited distinct polarization between the rich and the poor – a tell-tale sign of high levels of schismogenic tension. Although their history unfolded in different ways, all these civilizations became caught in a spiral of addiction, undermining their dependence on the natural environment. As Wright points out, rule number one for parasites is not to kill your host.⁸⁷ Considered this way, the epistemological errors of our civilization, in which the human mind has, by way of abstraction, defined itself as outside the host of nature, the host of the body, ensure our persistent perpetration of perhaps the most important rule of life.

The civilization that attempts to maximize its variables in opposition to its environment finds in the self-aggrandizing psychopath its grotesque contemporary apotheosis. And this character is further mirrored in our social environment through corporations and other forms of self-maximizing entities, whose underlying philosophy is built on abstracting itself from the world and exploiting the basis of its own survival.

To see a clear picture of this psychopathy as it plays itself out as a cultural pattern requires sophisticated vision. In the introduction to his analysis of the corporation, Bakan notes that the very idea of the corporation as an institution is in a sense difficult to convey. As consumers, we are conditioned – through the naturalizing effect of our homeostatic tendency, I might add – to perceive corporations simply in

⁸⁷ See Wright, 2004.

plural, and we may see these corporations, along with the people working for them, as degrees of good or bad, as a vast field of differentiation. What is crucial in this context is understanding the logical distinction between the particularities of people connected to the corporation – who may or not be psychopathic – and the universality of the corporate structure. It is this structure, the very epistemology embedded in its legal form, that we can plausibly call psychopathic in this context, and we can witness the inevitable psychopathic behavior through much of its devastating impact on individuals and the natural environment.

Yet the corporation does not grow out of itself. Like the individual psychopath, it is above all the symptom of a larger and complex condition built on the same philosophical operating principle. As ideological defenders of the corporation and capitalism typically argue, the self-interest of the corporate entity is in our self-interest as a society. They will point to obvious signs of corporate wealth accumulation that also benefit members of society, at least in absolute terms, who do not hold direct stakes in the corporation. The corporation is viewed as the relentless engine of progress, whose many detrimental side effects can be simply explained as inevitable flaws in an otherwise benign machinery. Consequently, most political debates about corporate power tend to fall along familiar ideological fault lines, in which the ethical and political concerns of certain groups are drowned out by the forces of economic rationality that favor the status quo.⁸⁸ The epistemological error replicated in the liberalist advocacy of the market is found in the very concept of self-interest, where the self is abstracted from the world of common resources that keeps the self alive. Capitalism in a globalizing world is in its essence a maximizing system with few, if any, self-corrective functions external to its narrow economic imperative. And as the system progresses at the cost of its deeply related yet neglected context, it fosters a psychopathic logic that permeates all forms of interconnected mental system in various ways, playing itself out as an uncanny, recurring drama on all levels of our social world: in the charming facade of the individual psychopath, in the marketing of

⁸⁸ An important aspect of systems theory which I cannot get into here is that ethics is perhaps best understood in a larger sense as an expression of the system and its epistemology, not as its own set of universal criteria.

the corporation, in the conniving rhetoric of the politician, in the inflated egos of wannabe superstars, in the ostensible reality of reality shows...

As a culture, then, we are following the psychopath. Following an error and its consequences as they manifest themselves in our everyday life. Following the idealized articulation of our social structure. Following the path, the psycho-path, down the spiral of addiction and consequent denial. And then, in the wake of the psychopath, what follows?

My life goes on without Sean – or at least so I hope – but my experience with him remains in all its proliferated forms. I have tried to tell my story as more than merely the fateful encounter of two people disconnected from a larger togetherness that remains, admittedly, mostly clandestine and mystified in our society. In the course of my thinking process, I have come to appreciate the precarious subtleties involved in what public and scientific discourse so easily labels mental illness and the systemic properties of such all too easily individualized problems. I feel privileged and lucky for managing, in my own idiosyncratic ways, perhaps, to navigate the existential double bind generated within our social system – the tension that we all perceive, express and respond to in highly different ways.

We are always already caught in an abductive web of mutually supporting presuppositions, where the madness of a social system recapitulates itself on the individual level. Bateson's exploration of this mental environment leads us to acknowledge the ways in which madness can be defined and constituted in relation to its communicative context. From a systemic point of view, then, we can describe a kind of circuitry of the pathological spiral: the greater the rate of change, the greater the schismogenic tension, the greater the polarization within the system, the more people are unable to cope, and the greater the rate of change to reinforce the addictive properties of the system. As Bateson showed in his research, schizophrenia as a mental illness can be considered an almost logical response to a double bind context. Broadly considered, Freud reached similar conclusions about hysteria, a more prevalent condition in the Victorian era. And we may speculate that widespread contemporary

afflictions like depression or so-called attention deficit disorder are partly responses to the kind of contradictory, schizoid tension that underpins our socio-political order.⁸⁹

In this view, the psychopath represents a very different and more progressive form of mental illness – a new historical moment of madness, perhaps – because he is able to circumvent the entire problem of systemic tension. To the psychopath, the double bind situation doesn't exist; he does not perceive it as a contradictory form of experience. He does not need to stress himself out over what to him are simple matters. Unburdened by an inner surveillance organ he is liberated from tormenting mental conflicts and free to prey upon the weak suckers who find themselves enslaved by moral conscience. The psychopath, in other words, is a pure encapsulation of a maximizing logic: he is capitalism raw and naked. And at the same time, he represents an engrained and desperate survival strategy within the context of capitalism.

Above all, though, the psychopath remains a part of ourselves. And I strongly believe that for all the vilification of the psychopath – much of it understandable, from my own experience – we must seek to grasp the extent to which he is a part of our own minds, a part of the larger mental systems that surround us, and a part that is reflected in our everyday life. It is not the psychopath himself but his embodiment of a deeper, pathological pattern that is of significance to us here. Only from this understanding can we begin to realize that we live in a society with deeply psychopathic characteristics, based on psychopathic principles, reinforced by psychopathic institutions. Our culture, in other words, is caught in a pathological spiral, in a progress trap, from which the psychopath emerges as the most profound – yet in his own right, the shallowest – index of our own historical condition.

And this is where the mirror begins and ends, where its limitations become apparent. For Freud, the 'difficulty' in the path of psychoanalysis, through which he recounts the three narcissistic wounds, is not an intellectual but an affective difficulty. It is the difficulty of reaching through the cognitive defenses of the ego with information that threatens the ego's hegemonic position. The homeostatic tendency to

⁸⁹ Such speculations are, of course, exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to prove by scientific means – which is why they tend to remain absent from public discourse.

naturalize our environment and to insulate ourselves from possible disturbance creates a kind of plastic film around our cognition: we can see through it, but we can't breathe its impact on our present. Or perhaps the problem is better encapsulated in Bateson's science experiment analogy of the frog in the saucepan: if you heat up the saucepan slowly and imperceptibly enough for the frog not to change its behavior, it will die.⁹⁰ This affective difficulty prevails to some extent with Bateson, whose thought commands us to relinquish the cultivated social narrative of our individual control and significance in the face of more holistic understanding of the complex world in which we all play part.

A salient trait shared by both Freud and Bateson was their reluctance to engage directly with political issues in their thinking. Bateson was known to be weary of short-sighted political tinkering with the infinite complexity of mental systems. Although it would be easy to read a certain conservatism into such a stance, there is little doubt in my mind that his work expounds the need for a new and radical politics based on the most pressing of all possible political concerns in the 21st century: the sustainability of our shared world. And this sustainability is predicated on understanding how political being and political thinking is inherently about relationships – relationships between people, between systems, between humans and nature. In this sense, politics doesn't begin with parties, organizations and institutions. It begins with perceiving the infinite and invisible relations between ourselves and the world. And it is this relationship that needs to be reconsidered as we find ourselves and our current politics caught in the psychopathic spiral of our epistemological errors.

The work has begun, from many angles, whereby Bateson provides us with the beginning of a larger, conceptual roadmap that has grabbed the attention of several contemporary scholars. To Morris Berman, for example, Bateson's work stakes out a possible path towards 're-enchantment' of the world, a crucial paradigmatic turn from the disenchantment of the enlightenment tradition. And in N. Katherine Hayles'

⁹⁰ This is, incidentally, because, as Bateson famously puts it, a unit of information is a difference that makes a difference.

reflections on 'post-humanism', Bateson represents a kind of second wave of cybernetic thought, which leads to a possible redefinition of the boundaries of the self. Theorizing the mind in relation to, rather than abstracted from, its environment is, I would argue, the point of departure for reconfiguring our understanding of crucial political issues, from social structures to technology. In our broken reflections, in other words, lie new and important answers.

If the mirror can be conceived as a modernist metaphor and the broken mirror its postmodern equivalent, I would argue that we are today faced with the struggle to resist the lethargic response of disappointment that follows a shattered self-image. Piecing our fragmented reflections together has perhaps never been a more precarious and more important exercise. While we must remain vigilant and aware of our own limitations and possibilities, we must also strive to affect deeply necessary change in order to mitigate what increasingly seems like an imminent disaster. This requires us to be both self-reflexive and purposive at the same time – to not lose sight of the larger scope. As the world reveals its complexity to us, our minds are also responding with greater capacity for complex thought. If we can admit to our own fallacies, we may also be able to correct them before it's too late – to proceed with just enough caution and anxiety to keep ourselves in check.

It's both a very simple and a very complex idea. But it's one we cannot afford to reject. As Bateson puts it, "we must pass through that threat of that chaos where thought becomes impossible."⁹¹

Bateson's last words

Finally, it is appropriate to mention some of the factors which may act as correctives – areas of human action which are not limited by the narrow distortions of coupling through conscious purpose and where wisdom can obtain.

⁹¹ See Bateson, 1979, p. 143.

(a) Of these, undoubtedly the most important is love. Martin Buber has classified interpersonal relationships in a relevant manner. He differentiates 'I-Thou' relations from 'I-It' relations, defining the latter as the normal pattern of interaction between man and inanimate objects. The 'I-It' relationship he also regards as characteristic of human relations wherever purpose is more important than love. But if the complex cybernetic structure of societies and ecosystems is in some degree analogous to animation, then it would follow that an 'I-Thou' relationship is conceivable between man and his society or ecosystem. In this connection, the formation of 'sensitivity groups' in many depersonalized organizations is of special interest.

(b) The arts, poetry, music, and the humanities similarly are areas in which more of the mind is active than mere consciousness would admit. *'Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.'*

(c) Contact between man and animals and between man and the natural world breeds, perhaps – sometimes – wisdom.

(d) There is religion.⁹²

⁹² See Bateson, 1972, pp. 446-7.

EPILOG

From: "sean lake" <lakesean@hotmail.com>
Date: December 15, 2004 8:28:10 AM PST
Subject: Hello from Montreal!

Hey Bjorn,

Did I tell you this cold sucks??? It's -17 degree's here, even my new beaver fur coat is not keeping me warm!!!

I flew back from Europe (present location undisclosed) for a few days. Was wondering how life in Vancouver has treated you this past year. Myself? Well, nothing new to report. Spent part of the summer basking in the Greek Isles and then sailed to Capri where I sat in the club scene sniffing massive white lines with the filthy rich and famous!!! What fun!!! Reminded me of my New York Halcyon Days...

I did make it to Norway, was thinking of looking you up. Worked for a nice Norwegian couple in the Greek Islands and went to visit them in Bergen. Came away with a beautiful Rolex with a diamond bezel. Spent a few days in Oslo. You're quite lucky I can't make head or tails of your language, otherwise I would have found my way to your parents' house or your sister's to pay my respects!

Instead I hot-tailed it to Denmark to visit my friend Danny. I was telling him about you, that you are Norwegian and they are a weak people... After all, the Norwegians were surprised and unprepared when Nazi Germany, with its superior military might, attacked Norway on 9 April 1940... Caught with their pants down, so to speak.

Speaking of reminders, you know I was compelled to burn down Urban Puppy, but then, my better sense got to me. The store, after you paid them a visit, decided to give away GRAMPA!

After returning in July to deal with the disposal of the furniture I left in storage, and make arrangements to ship the rest overseas, I went back to my home in Europe and invested in GRAMPA 2! He's a bright German shepherd. I was originally going to call him Blondie but then again I'm not sure my European brethren would have understood the irony...

I also have made several runs to South America. Been to a neat country called Suriname. And to French Guinea, and of course to Brazil, where I learnt how to dance the forbidden dance. No silly, not the Macarena!

Well, I am in Canada for another two days or so. Hope you have a wonderful Holiday and Santa gives you a bunch of goodies. Me? I have been naughty this year, and expect a lump of coal. But hey, if you squeeze that coal hard enough, don't you get a diamond???

Best regards,

Sean

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