



BEAT THE DUST

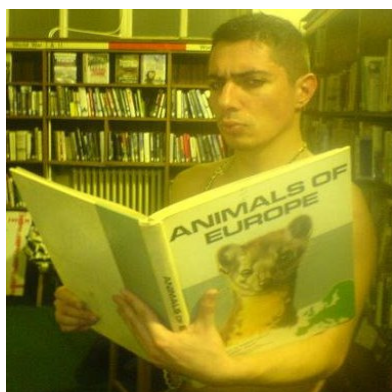
MAY 2010

THE VIEW ISSUE

Introduction

The View edition of BTD (the third of six this year) is devoted to interviews, previews of new work and instead of reviews – which would have been the obvious route to go down given the theme – we’ve plumped for lit crit-type opinion pieces cos they tend to have more substance and are a bit more interesting, we reckon.

Ben Myers interviewed by Mike Frankel of Dead Kids



Ben Myers is a novelist and journalist. Mike Frankel has been the raucous frontman of bands including Dead Kids and Sona Fariq and has published his fiction. The pair have been friends for over a decade, after Ben first interviewed Mike for a magazine.

Ben’s new novel, *Richard*, about the life and disappearance of Manic Street Preachers’ guitarist, Richey Edwards will be published later in 2010 by Picador. Dead Kids’ debut album *Dark Party* is available to download for free here:
<http://deadkids.bandcamp.com/album/dark-party>

Beat the Dust decided to reverse the roles of interviewer and interviewee and asked Mike to interview Ben.

Mike Frankel: Now then. The shoe is on the other foot, Ben. It's a clown's shoe and it's uncomfortable. So, why write a novel about Richey Edwards? Did you think that you would have a ready-made fan base to read the book? And were you ever tempted to change the names to protect the innocent?

Ben Myers: The idea of a novel about Richey Edwards wasn't really about pandering to or tapping into an existing fan base – I think that would be a mistake because automatically you are then tailoring the content. I wrote this book for people who have never heard of Richey Edwards, and I thought his story was one that had not been told in a manner befitting his life. He always came across to me as someone who was playful, mischievous, provocative, funny, yet if you read any music press or newspaper accounts today all you hear about is self-harm and depression. Read the early interviews though and some of them are hilarious – really inspiring and life-affirming.

I think to get where they wanted to be the Manics – and especially Richey - constructed a mythical persona, possibly as an armour of sorts. But since his disappearance all that side of him seems to have been forgotten and the press and some fans have reverted to type by branding him as this doomed Rimbaud or Thomas Chatterton-type figure. I wanted to get beyond that false perception and tell the story of an intelligent young academic from a good home with good friends around him who became the most engaging British rock star of his era. To do that I felt that fiction was the best medium. I don't purport *Richard* to be the absolute truth, but rather a version of it.

The interesting thing is though I never met him I share / shared many mutual friends or acquaintances with him. Many of them have subsequently told me anecdotes about Richey that would shatter the mythical perceptions. For example, a lot of people probably don't know that not long before he disappeared he went to see East 17 live in concert – not because he was being ironic, but because he simply loved their music. History has it that he was up in his room with the vodka and razorblades, but actually he was in Hammersmith having a little dance to *House of Love*. I suppose the point I'm trying to make is, darkness is always punctuated by light, and I wanted to depict both sides of Richey Edwards' life.

I have changed the odd name to protect the innocent, but there are no guilty parties in this story anyway. I hope the book is sensitively handled. I also spent months researching it too, so factually it's pretty tight, I think.

MF: I personally think they were a terrible band. Their first singles were like a crap Guns N Roses and then they altered their style accordingly. Their substance was questioned from the start. What band do you think *meant it* more than any other band did?

BM: I'm not sure I understand what 'meaning it' actually means any more. I liked the Manics because right from the outset they admitted to being contrived and that their ultimate goal was widespread success, both critically and fiscally – and by any means necessary.

The idea of a band from small town Wales sitting down and more or less strategically planning a band that would be a cross between Guns N Roses, The Clash and Public Enemy was both tenacious and ridiculous. In that sense they were possibly doomed to fail – they were never as good as any of them – but what came out of it was an interesting amalgamation of their influences. I still love their early singles, but it was when they started being themselves on *The Holy Bible* that they got really good, I think.

The Manics also made no bones about their preferred desire to be in the pages of *The Sun* than the *NME*, because “builders read The Sun”. In other words, they didn’t want to preach to the already-converted. In a time of earnest, low-ambition indie bands – this would be around 1990-1991 - that was almost revolutionary. So as you say their substance may have been questionable, but their singular vision was definitely heartfelt. The Manics displayed a working class ambitious streak to elevate themselves above their surroundings that’s far less prevalent in bands today. Indie rock in 2010 is inherently middle class. You can tell just by listening - few bands sound hungry or desperate. The Manics sounded pretty desperate, but in an alluring way.

As for other bands who have ‘meant it’, I’m not sure. There are bands who follow their own self-imposed political doctrines, and there are others who pursue pure hedonism. I think both are valid. I don’t necessarily think Fugazi are/were any more believable than Motley Crue or Iggy Pop necessarily any less contrived than Lady GaGa. I know which artists I *prefer*, but I think 99% of people who strap on a guitar or step onto a stage are falling foul of the tried and tested clichés of ‘rock ‘n’ roll’. To me, there is nothing more boring than the conceit of ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ because it suggests conformity to a realized set of preconceived ideas. Rock ‘n’ roll exists to sell hair care products and mobile phones; that’s the reality of it these days. I’m waiting for someone to come along and subvert all that. I still hold a little hope.

MF: If at fashion parties you get judged instantly by your demeanour and appearance, and at music industry parties you get judged by who you are with and what drugs you have, what is it like at literary parties?

BM: I think if you substitute Jack Daniels or cheap lager for a nice white wine, you pretty much have a literary party. There’s less swearing and you’re more likely to be discussing Roberto Bolaño than you are [insert latest hip recording artist here], but the literary world is as hedonistic as the fashion and music worlds in its own slightly politer way. Music business parties are boring anyway – it’s just a lot of self-satisfied people whooping and talking at once. No dignity. I’d rather stay at home.

MF: Do you write best hungover, stoned or after a brisk morning’s walk?

BM: I definitely went through a phase of thinking that alcohol and drugs somehow enhanced the creative process. I think a lot of writers do when they’re grown up reading people like Charles Bukowski or Brendan Behan or whoever. It might work in the short term, but not if you’re in it for the long haul. I don’t drink alcohol so hangovers are out of the question anyway. If I was hungover I couldn’t even look at a computer screen. I found getting stoned could be quite good for relaxing or

switching off, but it is not really conducive to creating and committing to something as complex as a novel. Writing a book you have to create storylines and characters and you have to develop them every day over many months, or maybe years. If you're stoned I think you're prone to go off on tangents or lose focus. Recreational drugs are no bad thing, but they have to be recreational. So the answer is: a brisk morning's walk. Which I do every day actually.

MF: After living in Peckham, South London for years you moved to the Yorkshire countryside in 2009. What do you miss most about London?

BM: I miss the odd person and the widespread availability of all the foods of the world, but not a great deal else.

MF: Is there such a thing as climate change?

BM: Yes, I'd say so. It's not an opinion based on cold winters or hot summers though – climate change takes place over hundreds or thousands of years, doesn't it? I'm amazed at the people who passionately oppose the idea of climate change. It's like, what's the worst that can happen if climate change is proven not to exist? Jesus. Find another cause to get passionate about. These climate change deniers are, I think, as insidious and misguided as Holocaust deniers.

MF: Do you think it's impossible to shock anymore?

BM: I think it's hard to shock within the art world, whether that's visual art, literature, music, performance or whatever. But real life never fails to shock. I've recently been working on a new novel loosely set around the fringes of a northern town so most days I go onto the BBC website and trawl the regional news sections for local stories to get a greater sense of (or maybe feel for) England today. More often than not I find something that shocks me. It's usually related to gratuitous or inexplicable violence. You know when you hear stories about, say, a man who has fathered ten kids by his own daughters, or a family who have kept someone captive in their house for years? That type of thing. Or when I found out that Britain's most prolific and long-running serial rapist lived in the next street to me. That stuff can be quite shocking, though possibly less so than it should be. We're definitely becoming desensitized to real life horror stories and, as a result, probably less compassionate.

MF: Why do I have a soft spot for Simply Red?

BM: That's a strange question. I couldn't really say, but as a singer and frontman I think there are elements of the court jester in your performance, Mike – the tragic clown. A desire to entertain but somehow shock at the same time. Maybe it's because in sticking rigidly to the blue-eyed white boy soul singer shtick that has clearly paid him huge financial dividends, Mick Hucknall has neatly avoided controversy and forged the kind of career that you are just too non-conformist to ever achieve. When I've seen Dead Kids play, you have this destructive streak – that's why bouncers always beat you up – and there's something within you that wants to turn a room upside down. Mick Hucknall just wants to woo the ladies through the medium of bland song. I'm guessing that's why you have a soft spot for him? Because he is what you are not.

MF: What's your guilty pleasure?

BM: The cinematic output of Danny Dyer.

MF: Do you hope one of your books gets made into a film and that you get a new nickname like 'Hollywood'?

BM: One of my novels is currently in the early stages of development actually. A screenplay has been adapted by a director and writer, and a producer is interested. It's all 'under discussion'. I think 'Hollywood' would be an inappropriate nickname for someone who lives in the middle of nowhere and now spends his days tramping through sheep shit in horizontal rain. So, yes, why not?

MF: What was your nickname at school?

BM: Little Ben was the closest I had to a nickname.

MF: Who's the biggest cunt you ever interviewed?

BM: Cunt is still quite a harsh word and I'm not sure I could apply it to many people. If I'm completely honest I've not interviewed that many who qualify. I've interviewed a few musicians and celebrities who turn out to be boring or disinterested or *really thick*. That's the biggest disappointment. I've interviewed many who are funny, engaging and intelligent too. Goldie was a dickhead, though that was less an interview and more one long prolonged death threat on his behalf. Whatever they are like as people, individuals who lead interesting lives are generally good in interview.

Mainly though the villains of the music industry are always just hovering out of shot, clutching clipboards and looking at their watches. These are the people who suck the joy out of it all, the people who blow smoke up the artists' arses; those who make you sign bullshit confidentiality contracts about artists you know will be gone in a year's time, people who live by the clock, run the focus groups and always tow the party line.

You know this even better than me, Mike – you were signed to Warner Brothers for a while weren't you? I mean, you can never have a conversation with some of these people about music or art or literature because they have no understanding or interest in it. That's why they always end up running things – because while you or I were reading John Fante and Knut Hamsun and writing poetry, they were looking at spreadsheets. I have to say though, it's not like that in book publishing. People who work in publishing actually like literature whereas the music business is just a racket of endless regurgitation.

Simon Crump on Emile Zola



Simon Crump (author of *Neverland: The Unreal Michael Jackson Stories*, *My Elvis Blackout* and *Twilight Time*) has been obsessed with Zola since his dad gave him a copy of *Germinal* to read when he was a kid. Simon's now writing a book about his obsession. Here's a taste of what we can look forward to...

Zola and Me

When I tell my mates down the pub that I'm writing a book about Zola they always seem a bit surprised. And then they ask me how long I've supported West Ham, or if I have ever been even vaguely interested in football.

Over the past four years I've been re-reading Emile Zola's magnificent series of interlinked Rougon-Macquart novels and I have to tell you folks, that they really are one hell of a piece of work.

With this cycle of novels, Zola's bold and entirely successful plan was to document the fortunes and miss-fortunes of one extended and deeply flawed French family during the Second Empire, thus documenting France itself in what Havelock Ellis¹ has described as 'a study in social mathematics'.

The twenty novels which comprise the Rougon-Macquart cycle are written in a wonderful panoramic, all-describing, 'naturalistic' style which upset a few folk at the time. As Jack would say, they just couldn't handle the truth.

They couldn't cope with Zola's depictions of the urban working/drinking classes in *L'Assommoir*, they cringed at his descriptions of the not-so-gentle middle classes in *Pot-Bouille*, they rejected his accounts of the industrial poor in *Germinal*, of the rural poor in *The Earth* and they were furious with his icily accurate portrayal of the failure of French military leadership in *The Debacle*.

Contemporary cartoons depict Zola as a flower sprouting from a chamber-pot or as a bespectacled, bearded midget carefully examining a prostitute's bottom with his magnifying glass. Zola's writing frightened his readership and made them feel uncomfortable about their heritage, their nation and their lives. But Monsieur Emile Zola kept right on telling the truth anyway, and he made them have it.

Zola was banned in Britain, vilified by the Vatican and condemned by all and sundry as a pornographer. But the quality, voracity and unquestionable integrity of his

writing shone through, and eventually the public came to love his work. And then there was the Dreyfus affair which transformed Zola into a hero. But that really is another story.

By all accounts Emile Zola was a humourless, supercilious and self-important little man, well-impressed with himself a long while before he had demonstrated his talents. If I could travel back in time and meet just one person it would always be him. And I already know he would have hated me for my half-arsed work ethic, my sloppiness and my 'made-up' stuff.

Zola's widescreen cinematic style of writing always gives me goose bumps. This lad could write, and Zola's eye really *was* his camera. He could pan across a crowd and capture a dozen little moments, or focus right in and describe in far too much detail the way a drowned man's face slowly falls to pieces.

Get any group of published writers together and the second thing they will talk about is how they write. The first thing they'll talk about will always be money, a subject very close to Zola's cold and calculating heart.

I'm always fascinated to know how other writers write, when they write and why they write. And I always want to know the gory details. Do they write long hand? Do they make notes? Do they write in the kitchen, down the pub or in a garden shed? Do they get insensibly pissed and then crouch in the corner wearing a rubber rabbit costume, muttering to themselves and clawing at their faces?

Or do they write as I did, for the months preceding the sad and unexplained death of next door's Alsatian, on a laptop in the car in Tesco's car park?

I've been obsessed by Zola's writing since I was 13 years old. I still remember the Penguin Classic editions of his books, the ones with the black spines which cracked white as you read them, jammed onto the shelves of my dad's study, between his books about tomatoes, bee-keeping and the joy of sex.

Zola's books were the first 'real' books I ever read and they weren't easy. But I was a lonely teenager with not much else to do. I began with *Germinal*, and still remember being absolutely transfixed by the desperation in that book and above all, its grinding panoramic feel. As a 13-year-old, *Germinal* really was a glimpse into another world for me. It felt like growing up as a reader, leaving behind stories with 'hopeful' or 'meaningful' endings and acquiring a taste for the real stuff, for the tart and bitter experience of degradation and failure. Which pretty much has been how my own life has turned out.

So it was natural for me to want to know how Zola wrote, how he actually did it. It's an old chestnut, but you really do have to write about what you know. So it's a great relief for writers such as myself who endured dull childhoods followed by uneventful lives to learn that if you do enough research you can write about anything.

This is exactly what Zola did. He was obsessed by research. When he was planning *Germinal*, arguably his finest book, Zola visited the coal-fields of Northern France, where a strike was in progress, posing as the secretary of Alfred Giard, an elected

representative of the mining constituency of Valenciennes. Zola didn't want to be recognised and he certainly didn't want to be told stuff he could put in his next book.

And we all know that one don't we...

'So you're a writer eh? Maybe you could put me in your next book?'

'Only as a corpse.' I always say.

Zola's anonymity allowed him to talk to the miners without arousing suspicion; he attended union meetings, visited miners' cottages and went underground with the men. And then he wrote it all up. Zola made a thousand pages of handwritten notes before he embarked upon *Germinal* and some years after its publication, Sherard, (an early biographer of Zola) met an old foreman from the same Valenciennes mining district who recalled talking to a man fitting Zola's description. He said that he had never met a man who asked so many questions.

Research for Zola was much more than a basic desire to get the facts right. He did have to get his facts right though, and not just to please himself. Zola was often attacked for 'distorting' the facts, usually by those critics who could not face the unpalatable truths his naturalism revealed. So Zola had to cover his back. In a sense, since he was writing about every aspect of life in the second empire, Zola was already writing novels of recent history, so that all had to be right as well. This was particularly so in the case of his novel *The Debacle*, a very close and brilliant account of the events and incidents of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and the subsequent Paris commune, a violent and life-changing upheaval still very much in the minds of his readers when the book was published in 1892. Research for Zola was also a kind of comfort blanket, just as it is for me, a way to bolster confidence, a means of steeping yourself in a subject before setting off on your own fictions.

When he was really busy, Zola sent other people out to make notes for him. I think he would have loved the internet, as he did all things scientific and technical. The internet has made research, at least of the superficial kind, a lot easier. You can go onto Street View now and have a look around town, something I did with Paris when I re-read Zola's *The Ladies Paradise*, *The Belly of Paris* and *The Kill*. Incidentally. I went to Crump Tennessee yesterday. It's dull. But at least I know that now.

I've done Zola's kind of research twice, once by reading extensively about Elvis Presley and a second time by immersing myself in everything to do with Michael Jackson. It doesn't give you ideas for fiction as such, but it does at least ensure that when you have an idea you can just crack on with it and make stuff up which might have been, or at least rings true.

Zola wrote three pages a day. Every single day.

"This is how I do it. In fact I can hardly be said to 'do it' – rather, it does itself. I can't invent facts, as I completely lack imagination. If I sit down at my table to think

out the plot of a story, I remain sitting for three days, racking my brains, and finding nothing. Consequently I have given up troubling myself about the subject of my stories. I begin to work on my novel without knowing what events will be described, nor what characters will take part in the action...I only know my principal character - my Rougon or my Macquart, male or female, always an old acquaintance. I occupy myself with him alone; I reflect on his character, I think of the family in which he was born, on his first impressions, and on the class in which I have decided to place his life. That is my most important occupation... After spending two or three months in this study, I am master of this particular kind of life; I see it, I feel it, I live it in my imagination and I am certain of being able to give my novel the special colour and fragrance of that class of people... I have in my head a quantity of types, of scenes, of fragments of dialogue, of episodes, of occurrences, which form a confused story made up of a thousand unconnected pieces. Then there remains the most difficult task of all - to attach a single thread, as best I can, to all these reminiscences and scattered impressions. It is almost always a lengthy task. But I set to work on it phlegmatically, and instead of using my imagination, I use my reasoning facilities... I write a little every day, three pages of print, not a line more and I only work in the morning. I write almost without having to make any corrections because for months I have been thinking it all over, and as soon as I have written them, I put the pages aside and do not see them again until they are in print. I can calculate infallibly the date when my book will be finished."²

This may seem a pragmatic, almost anti-artistic approach to writing, but the end results do not completely reflect the process which Zola describes. Zola was no social scientist; he was a novelist, who despite his claims to the contrary, was in possession of vivid and far-reaching imagination. Zola makes his process sound like some kind of elaborate admin job. Maybe that's how he really saw it... but I doubt it. There's a lot more going on than that.

Sitting at his large and cluttered desk at Medan, Zola did something much more to the 'facts' and with the 'facts' than merely marshal them. There is a slippery magic to his writing, a real gift which I cannot even begin to understand. Zola's writing is relentless and perfect in its description, inspired in its grandeur, cold and precise and incisive in its turn of phrase.

He's the bollocks, this lad. The absolute bollocks.

There's such a lot to take in with Zola; the research, the detail, the crowds, the weather... basically what everybody says when they say nice things about Zola. But for me... it's how he does it all that holds me to his work, how he controls it all, how he takes down all that scaffolding of research and painstaking observation and how he leaves us with those towering edifices of *Germinal*, *The Earth* and *L'Assommoir*. Anybody could have made 1200 pages of notes about the French railway system if they really wanted to. Only Zola could have done that and then turned them into the monster novel of *La Bête Humaine*.

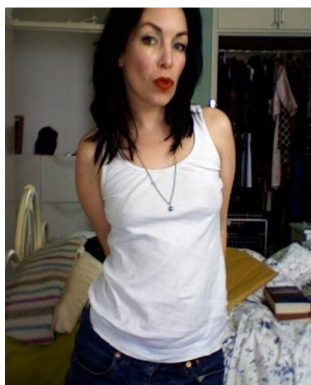
Emile Zola is the main man for me. Always has been, always will be. But then again I'm reading the works of my very favourite writer in translation.

And I must confess to only getting a C for O' level French back in 1976.

Which is really fucking annoying.

Works cited: 1. Affirmations; Havelock Ellis (London 1893). 2. Emile Zola; A biography and critical study, Robert Sherard (London: Chatto and Windus, 1893)

Heidi James



Heidi James is the author of the novel, *Carbon*. Here's an exclusive extract from her forthcoming novel...

Wounding

The train doors slide back with a hiss. She has dropped the children off at their schools. She is alone. A press of other solitary people move her body into the train. She stands by the glass partition next to the seats, supported by the others travelling in to work. The comforting warmth of their bodies lulls her; she wants to sleep in this upright embrace. The train moves and she is rocked back and forth, closing her eyes. She hears the muffled sounds of music being channelled into other ears, the muted rustle of paper and the strut of the wheels on the tracks outside. Foetal, all the sounds must traverse the barrier of her solitude. She is suspended beyond the world around her, not yet alive.

The doors open and more people push onto the train. She is held tighter, constricted by their bodies. Her proximity to them gives her a new privacy, she is known to them only as mass, as material, anonymous. Someone behind her breathes; she feels the expansion of their chest and the warm air on her neck. She can't move her arms without disturbing the passengers around her. Her body is useless, nothing but fat, muscle and bone. Tissue poised to rot; she is perfectly impotent and unthinking.

It is nine thirty. She has called work and told them she won't be coming in. She is at home, with a headache. Cora is missing. She exists in two places and in neither.

She hopes her husband doesn't call her at the office. It isn't likely; he will be too busy, making the right impression in his new job. He will think of her though and the children, he will mention them fondly to his colleagues should the opportunity arise. They are always with him. He has photos in his wallet to keep them safe. The train pulls into the station. The doors open after a pause, the passengers move forwards, impatient, ready to brisk towards their next connection. Cora lingers, not wanting the chill of standing upright without them. She wants them to stay, pressed together. Like hibernating mammals, curled around one another in a blood warm den. Simplified, heartbeats slowed, neutralised; breathing in perfect time together.

The city clings to the earth. She walks out of the station into the street. She has no destination in mind, no plan, except to walk and walk. It is dry and warm. She carries a small black handbag. Wears flat shoes and a grey dress that hangs in folds around her body. She wraps her arms around herself, holding herself in, restraining herself from running ahead, from getting lost. She moves forward, in amongst all the bodies. The street is crowded, but less than it would have been only thirty minutes before. Others are in work. Making tea, typing, pushing information around, making visits to the stationery cupboard, to the toilet.

She waits to cross the street. Patience is key. Cars pass, taxis, a small crowd gathers behind her waiting for the machinery of the city to whirr into the next phase, to turn red, and hold back the traffic. The marvellous compliance of every one of them, maintaining order and safety, performing their role perfectly. The cars halt, the engines ticking. Cora crosses the street. She turns left, past a large church famous for its relics, then right into the next street. She passes a museum, also famous for its relics. She continues on. She doesn't rush, she doesn't linger. She walks. There are no children, unlike the suburbs where children proliferate. Children rule the outskirts of the city, but are not welcome here in the centre.

She remembers the histories of the place from her schooldays, the legends of fires and plagues, bombs and beheadings. Whole ranks of horses slaughtered. Babies dropped in gutters, old women buried alive. Lies, all lies. There is no speck of dust on Cora; she is untouched by the elements. She is entirely clean here in the perfect peace of the city. Completely anonymous, she is reduced to a female body that walks, that carries a bag, that wears shoes, that wears clothes. That is how she is defined, at that moment. She is nothing else. She turns her wrist towards her, checking her watch, she has six hours surplus. Six hours of peace. Six hours of being no one at all. If she is noticed by anyone else, it won't matter, because they will have no idea of what she is. Except the bag, the dress, the shoes, her flesh. A collection of materials amongst other materials: concrete, glass, stonework, wood, plastic. Solid.

Her steps are precise. She is well-practised. She is hungry, or rather, her body is hungry. Her stomach coils and flexes. She decides to ignore it. She does not want to be noticed by any one. She does not want to enter a café or restaurant and speak to a single other human. She passes shops with large plate glass windows, filled with treasures and people. She is immune. There is nothing she wants outside of her walking alone. A fear flashes through her mind – what if she walks out of the city, if she runs out of space? She'll turn and walk back, she reasons, but then she

might be noticed. She forgets that she will run out of time before she runs out of space. Silly fear. Silly thought. She reports back to herself. I won't run out of streets! I will run out of time!

She moves forwards, this street is more crowded. She is jostled occasionally, a shoulder catches hers, knocks her back a little. Other bodies recognise her shape, but they do not see her. She pushes on, felt but not seen, not looked at. Ushered on by the crowd and the traffic lights, the flow of movement, she floats along. She is a mark on the city. A blot. She is not bothered by the shoves and bumps from elbows, shoulders and carrier bags. She is grateful. Her arms hang by her side. She is unarmed, unguarded. She is a leaf floating on the surface, carried along in the currents, weightless and inconsequential. Doors open from the shops and the cafes into the street. Bodies join the crowd, bodies leave; cold air pumps out along with music. The doors shut. She is nearly at the end of the road. Ahead is the park. She moves towards it.

The grass has withered in the heat. The soil is compacted dust, easily kicked up by feet. She walks towards a tree. It reaches out overhead, its large branches braced. It is a picture book tree, an absolute tree. She sits under it and leans her back against the trunk. She is uncomfortable, the large roots protrude from the ground and push into her buttocks. She stays where she is. It isn't necessary to be comfortable. Her bag at her side containing her essential items; items deemed necessary for females. Picking up a fallen twig she picks at the end. It isn't solid, the wood is comprised of fibres, like threads twisted together, a matrix. She picks the twig apart, peeling back the filaments. She can't imagine solidity, what a comfort that would be, a solid mass instead of granulation and particles. Something rigid and defined, not reliant on anything else at all - completely differentiated from the world around it. Indestructible. Leaning back now on the tree she feels its fragility, a composite of parts, unrecognisable. Even a tree disappoints.

A woman walks past with a child in a pushchair. The child looks too large to still be in a buggy. They cross to a bench opposite Cora. The woman sits down and turns the buggy away from her. Reaching into a large bag she pulls out an orange. The dark-haired woman begins to peel the orange, taking care to remove the coarse white pith. All the while she is chatting to the child; Cora can hear her voice undulating across the still grass. She is singing a nursery rhyme. The child kicks its feet in time with the song. The woman hands the child a segment of the orange. It raises its small fist to its mouth. They are not aware that Cora is watching them. She is still picking at the shards of wood in her hand. She works at her nail. Unthinking, repetitive and soothing gestures. Prising the hard shell from its bed. Small miracles of pain.

The woman on the bench reaches to the child and undoes the strappings of the pushchair. The child is freed, and placed on its feet, toddles around, bending from its waist as if hinged, picking up dirt and filth from the floor. The woman follows it, still talking to the child, guarding the toddler from harm. Coming closer, the child walks in the direction of Cora and the tree, it bends to pick a daisy, its head too big for its fat little body. Cora can see the child clearly now. It is a monster, a genetic mishap. Its large tongue protrudes from its mouth like that on a hanged criminal.

Its disfigurements privilege it amongst other children. It is a marvel, a brilliant mistake, a one in a million. Cora feels a dull jolt of jealousy for the mother. For her damaged progeny.

Cora could love her children if they were deformed. She has always been moved by images of starving or disabled children. Her children, with their strutting perfection reject her, they don't need her attentions, they aren't endangered by the weight of oxygen or the movement of sleep. She could adore a damaged little baby, beholden only to mother love. A baby with the bones of a bird or an eggshell skull. A double-headed monster baby, fused in the womb with its dead twin. How much easier it would be to love the chaos of polluted limbs than the gurgling perfection of a normal baby. An ordinary baby wrapped in woollen clothing.

The splinter of wood is sharp under her nail. She rolls it back and forth, loosening the flesh from the nail, excavating the raw pink underneath. The succulent clam tight in its shell. She breathes, new filtered air rushes in. The mother tucks her contorted child away into its carriage. They saunter away, singing a new nursery rhyme. Blood bubbles up from the wooden spear Cora has dug into her finger. More people are gathering in the park. Lunchtime. Groups congregate around plastic bags filled with packets of sandwiches and cans of drink; they laugh and joke together. The summer is a carnival, life restates itself, they kid themselves they belong somewhere. One or two lone picnickers lay back with their eyes closed, or read a book. Music plays from a portable stereo. A single airplane coasts overhead, its engine sound muffled by distance. Closing her eyes, Cora tears the nail off her finger. Her hand takes shape in her mind. Her nerve endings contact her brain, information is exchanged.

She stands, dropping the nail on the grass. Wrapping her finger in a tissue from her handbag. Blood oozes through, and she is careful not to touch her dress. It would be no good stained. The nail lies on the grass, a monument to her presence. Her DNA scattered like seed on the soil. She imagines it taking root and producing small yellow fruits. Bitter tasting with withered flesh. She walks, this time in another direction. Stepping carefully over the reclining diners. Her bag over her shoulder. She walks towards the meld of modern and old buildings. Thrilling to the agony collected in her fingertip. She is unified by the pain: whole, newly named – baptized. She forgets what she was. What she failed to be. This is happiness. She has managed to arrive via a circuitous route. She is full to the brim. Cora overflows with pain and joy.

Steve Finbow on Blanchot



From a paragraph in Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster...*

Echoes & Reverberations

He wrote, whether this was possible or not, but he did not speak. Such is the silence of writing. Louis-Ferdinand Céline's use of the ellipsis, William S. Burroughs' use of the ellipsis, Ezra Pound's borrowing of the Old English caesura, Laurence Sterne's blank pages, Charles Olson's projective verse, and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. "I HATE SPEECH" speaking it. Using language, the prime material itself. The work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself. All writing is sacred in that it is the creation of a topical event, 'communication' experienced as nakedness. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, William S. Burroughs' (again) *Naked Lunch*. The question of whether psychic experience is structured like a language, or even whether the physical world may be regarded as a book, depends upon the nature of the dark precursors, so Arthur Rimbaud, Louis-Ferdinand Céline (again), Jean Genet. We are all alone, mute, naked in the glare of the mirror, of the page – Jean Cocteau, Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges – mirrors and copulation are abominable, since they both multiply the numbers of man. Language compensates us for the loss of immediate reality (the replacement of 'things' with 'words') with sense, which renders present the essence of things, that is, in which reality is preserved in its notion. Writing silences the real, replaces the real with language, swallows the real, strips it bare – Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* – a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork. They speak to me of words but this thing has nothing to do with words. Hence the pure nature of man is improbable, doomed to fiction and to artifice. When I was a little boy, they called me a liar, but now that I am grown up, they call me a writer. I know when you're lying, your mouth is open, your book is open. "I HATE SPEECH" thinking it. Screaming without a throat, without speech centres as the brain splits down the middle and the feedback sound shuts off in a blast of silence. There's only silence, so we have to speak. What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence. Tongues wagging, a world of babble, cannot move us to forget, it's to get a view of

it: no 'pre'-human unity, no (myth) is wanted: in the beginning was silence, no ear, nothing to hear, in here we hear. The words are the sense of our usness. Then and now. Hear and bare. Them and us. Words and silence = language. Any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is a silence there is a silence. The silence between two heartbeats.

Writing is not speech. Dialogue is not speech. "I HATE SPEECH" writing it. A certain silence, a certain beyond of speech, a certain possibility, a certain silent horizon of speech. Speech has within it all the possibilities and probabilities of silence. Silence has within it all the negation and necrosis of speech. A de-nomination speech: Desire is Silence. Let the insurrection be of unit value. Embodiment. A ghosted surface. Marquis de Sade, Antonin Artaud, Pierre Guyotat. All writing is palimpsestual. Is your silence the same as mine? The same sound? This saying without a said is thus like silence. But not an exact silence because things continue to drip. It is without words, but not with hands empty. Empty mirrors. Blank pages. Ink stains. Yes, I know they are words, there was a time I didn't, as I still don't know if they are mine. Speech is put in question since it is the locus of a face-to-face relation in which the Infinite reveals itself in its absolute difference. Don't believe in human speech as anything but a stuffer of time. The separating silence heard as "time," the beat, beat, of not-yet, not-yet – suddenly I saw, startling at each other, in me, without interchange. Silence. I can't speak so simply of whatever. Is particular, particulate? But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of terrified speech. "I HATE SPEECH" reading it. The period. Full stop. The dense core of closure. Primeval atom. First matter. End it. It begins. I was an infinitely hot and dense dot. Not I. All words, speech, silence sucked in to that awful mouth. Knot eye. The core. Where there's no one, where nothing happens, get something to happen here, someone to be here, then put an end to it, have silence get into silence, so Samuel Beckett, Paul Celan or James Joyce's fear of silence, Charles Bukowski's terror in the quiet nights, the muted days. Longing for the tinkling of ice, the suck and give of the refrigerator door, the hiss and rattle of bottle tops. Words are never the same again. Speech. And into words, brief ones, dense, accurate. They capture an experience that claims to enter into speech without passing through the psyche. Writing. If I skim a pebble across a surface, do I have a sentence? Spoken. It is because you are silent. Speak, if speech is not embarrassed by your attention to the scenery in languages more vivid than vomit. Speak up. Speak it up. Spew it forth. DH Lawrence, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Durrell. He then resorts once again to speech, but that speech is now rendered suspect by having replied only to the failure of his silence in the fact of the echo perceived from his own nothingness. I feel this because I feel nothing. I think this because this is nothing. Nothing, nothing, part of the night and the silence. The silence to say goodbye.

Maurice Blanchot, Robert Grenier, Allen Ginsberg, Michel Foucault, Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, Jorge Luis Borges, Slavoj Žižek, Bernard Stiegler, Isaac Bashevis Singer, William S. Burroughs, J.G. Ballard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Barrett Watten. Gertrude Stein, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Charles Bukowski, Bruce Andrews. Emmanuel Levinas, Kathy Acker, Laura (Riding) Jackson, Robert Creeley, Paul Celan,

Mark Leyner, Samuel Beckett, Julia Kristeva, Frank O'Hara, Fernando Pessoa, Jacques Lacan, & others.

Matthew Coleman and Nicole Hamilton



Photo of Matthew and Nicole by Jessica Long (<http://www.jessicalongphotography.com>)



"It's those little glimmers, shining out from the ordinary that one should be on the watch for."

This previously unpublished photograph comes from a new project entitled *Meditations on Nature*. It was created by the collaborative nicole&matthew, a new initiative involving Matthew Coleman and his fiancée, Nicole Hamilton. Matthew explains: "Both of us are deeply moved by nature, by those fleeting moments that reveal themselves in short yet beatific bursts. And so we are always on the watch, with eyes wide open, waiting patiently for them to crystallise in an instant."

nicole&matthew's first exhibition, *The Texture of Time* will be at Maxwell's in New York, June 14th - Sept 1st.

Zach Alapi on Hamsun



The Starving Artist Motif as a Life Philosophy: Literal and Psychological Starvation in Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*

In Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, the author's protagonist, who at least partially represents the author himself, reflects the *Dionysian* in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* through recognizing the intrinsic relation of suffering and joy in the creation of art in the quest for a unifying sense of *oneness*. The "Starving Artist" motif thus reflects not only a literal starved condition whereby art and the creation of it is privileged over satiating the body, but a life philosophy through which the protagonist in the novel seeks, through the attempt to create beautiful literature, to cope with and understand an ultimately unsatisfying phenomenal reality that threatens to thwart his pursuit of the *beautiful* in art. Ultimately, Hamsun's life philosophy has more to do with love and human relationships, as the works the protagonist attempts to write within the work we as readers read, are always supplanted by the longing and attempt to forge meaningful connections with others. It is the writing of these emotions and encounters that become the work itself, superseding the attempt of the protagonist to consciously produce a work of genius. The protagonist writes upon the canvas of his mind even when he does not literally write, constantly playing an internal game of creation that involves advocating a world view of unity and oneness through beauty, love, and art.

Knut Hamsun, the Nobel Prize winning Norwegian author of the late 19th and early 20th century, adhered to the principle that "Truth telling does not involve seeing both sides or objectivity; truth telling is unselfish inwardness" (Collins 126). This internal and psychological reflexivity characterizes Hamsun's revolutionary novel *Hunger*, whose project strives for "an attempt to describe the strange, peculiar life of the mind, the mysteries and nerves of the starving body." The internalized writing of Hamsun's nameless narrator, a struggling writer who lives in abject poverty and starvation, adheres to the Nietzschean principle that "the aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these pictures afford him an interpretation of life, and it is by these processes that he trains himself for life" (Nietzsche 2). The connectedness that the narrator of *Hunger* feels to his surroundings is palpable, though always tenuous because of the hallucinatory states that his hunger puts him in. Ever the observer who often fails to truly interact meaningfully with those around him, the narrator's internal writing, which reflects Hamsun's own philosophical outlook on the pitfalls and inadequacies of the modern world and its effect on an artist, demonstrates an attempt to recreate meaning and joy.

The narrator of *Hunger's* desire for human connection and love through creation is elicited through the mythical princess Ylajali, whom he falls in love with:

"I hold her hand in mine and feel the wild beauty of enchantment race through my blood; I put my arm around her and she whispers, Not here, come further still! And we enter the red hall where all is of rubies, a foaming splendor in which I swoon. Then I feel her arms around me, she breathes upon my face and whispers, Welcome, my love! Kiss me! Again... again [...]. From my bench I see stars before my eyes, and my thoughts are swept in a hurricane of light..." (Hamsun 58)

One is immediately drawn to the tactile nature of this physical description, serving as a means to reflect the narrator's dissatisfaction with the actual concrete world he has no place in. The narrator, upon waking from his musings, is immediately overcome by the magnitude of his creation through the dynamic description of being "swept up in a hurricane of light." Hamsun, however, ultimately shows the phenomenal world to be inadequate as "There I was, mercilessly called back to life and my misery" (Hamsun 58). Hamsun's life philosophy is further examined through the slips between a conscious and hallucinatory/psychological state. As the narrator, starving in his rooming house, utters, "There was no doubt that here I found myself before a special kind of darkness, a desperate element which no one had previously been aware of" as he imagines himself in a prison cell (Hamsun 65), the attempt to listen for signs of life, such as a patrolling policeman or pedestrian outside, suggests that a certain degree of comfort can potentially be found in the phenomenal world. Thus, "on the one hand, in the pictorial world of dreams, whose completeness is not dependent upon the intellectual attitude or the artistic culture of any single being; and, on the other hand, as drunken reality, which likewise does not heed the single unit, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of Oneness" (Nietzsche 5), is the struggle reflected in Hamsun's narrator. Just when he seems ready to reconnect with his surroundings in an attempt to seek comfort, he

reverts back into his mind through the act of creating a completely unique word, "Kuboa," which "stood out sharply against the darkness before me" (Hamsun 65). The act of creation, for Hamsun, stands as the potential force to mitigate internal and external suffering. The mind functions as a blank canvas upon which the meaningful can be created as "the word [Kuboa] was really suited to mean something *spiritual*, a feeling, a state of mind—couldn't I understand that? And I try to jog my memory to come up with something spiritual" (Hamsun 66). Hamsun cautions his reader, however, suggesting that the psychological trappings of the mind that can create the sublime and beautiful, can equally destroy, negate, and thwart. If "The lexicon of language, then, is a finite set of terms that by metaphor is able to stretch out over an infinite set of circumstances, even to creating new circumstances thereby" (Jaynes 52), the narrator's attempt to assign meaning to his word created in a moment of inspiration is futile. He negates meaning by saying everything it cannot mean, based on concepts inherent within him and their inferred connotations, yet cannot ascribe spiritual significance to his own creation.

It is at this impasse of the mind that Hamsun's life philosophy shines through. The narrator's desire to be loved and connect to someone provides the inspiration through which art can be created. After an unsuccessful attempt to borrow money from a stable boy, the narrator allows his thoughts to return to Ylajali: "The sun shone in through my window, downstairs I could hear the horses chomping their oats. I sat munching on my wood chip, in high spirits, happy as a child. I had been continually groping for my manuscript; it wasn't even in my thoughts, but my instinct told me it was there, my blood reminded me of it. I pulled it out" (Hamsun 72). Here, the narrator is inspired to create art in the phenomenal world through his psychological creation. The tenuous nature of this serving as a genuine expression of emotion is rendered moot through the awareness of tactile surroundings and the essential impetus to grasp for the manuscript. Thus, it is in the moments of profound connection and creation that art is born. Starving for these things in the phenomenal world, Hamsun's narrator privileges art by creating it vividly and "finds his highest pleasure in the process of a continuously successful unveiling effected through his own unaided efforts" (Nietzsche 52). It is through suffering that Hamsun's narrator is compelled to constantly create, searching for true essence and an end to the suffering that is paradoxically necessary for his brief moments of inspiration.

When Hamsun's narrator tries to assign Ylajali a phenomenal equivalent, the importance of the continued search for meaning and connection is furthered, despite its inevitable failure. The narrator meets a woman, Marie, whom he begins to refer to as "Ylajali." The excerpt,

"We started off; she walked on my right-hand side. A peculiar, lovely feeling took hold of me. The consciousness of being in the presence of a young girl. I didn't take my eyes off her throughout our walk. The perfume in her hair, the warmth radiating from her body, this fragrance of woman that surrounded her, that sweet breath every time she turned her face towards me—all this streamed in upon me, penetrating irresistibly all my senses" (Hamsun 116)

clearly mirrors the earlier, exclusively psychological and internal creation of Ylajali out of nothingness through the emphasis on joint movement and the tactile sensations of their surroundings. His feelings are overwhelming, much like the sensation of having created a new word. However, the problem for Hamsun and his narrator is grounded in the fact that "*Dionysian* art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them. We are to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end" (Nietzsche 60), and the destruction of phenomena is seen as a necessary thing. When physical intimacy with Ylajali presents itself she holds back, forcing the narrator to open up in an attempt to connect with her: "I seized the opportunity and told her everything, and I told nothing but the truth. I didn't make anything worse than it was, it wasn't my intention to arouse her compassion. I even said that I had walked off with five kroner one evening" (Hamsun 149). By attempting to explain and justify his condition of abject poverty and sorrow, the narrator attempts to forge a bond with Ylajali. Her disdain for him after his revelation is poignant and presents the inadequacy of Ylajali as Marie, who acts as her referent in the phenomenal world. Through this rejection and suffering, the narrator temporarily abandons his philosophy grounded in artistic creation because, as Heidegger suggests, "Thing concepts, whether *determinate* or *indeterminate*, obstruct the way toward the thingly character of the thing as well as toward the "equipmental character of equipment and all the more toward the workly character of the work" (660). Thus, the thing needs to rest upon its thingness so as to bring forth true essence. Ylajali's essence is in her creation by the narrator, not through her manifestation in Marie. The spontaneous creation of Ylajali, indicative of Hamsun's philosophy of connection and meaning through art, is rendered problematic because "consciousness is a witch beneath whose charms pure inspiration grasps and dies into invention... The Muses have become imaginary and invoked in their silence as part of man's nostalgia for the bicameral mind" (Jaynes 374), which does not reflect. The brief moment when the narrator is able to *be*, and as such create, are always in tension with his overactive consciousness trying to make sense of his surroundings. The only pure or essential aspect of Ylajali is her creation.

This creates a constant hunger, or starving, for human connection, resulting in constant seeking. The sting of rejection allows the narrator to come to his most profound realization: "The poor individual looks around at every step, listens suspiciously to every word he hears from the people he meets; thus, every step he takes presents a problem, a task, for his thoughts and feelings. He is alert and sensitive, he is experienced, his soul has been burned...." (Hamsun 153). It is in these moments of intense feeling and sorrow that the creative impulse is maximized. It is for this reason that the narrator cannot finish his medieval allegory called *The Sign of the Cross*. His subject matter being too far removed from his direct emotional experience causes him to lash out: "I break my pencil between my teeth, jump up, tear my manuscript to bits, every single sheet, toss my hat in the gutter and trample it. 'I'm lost!' I whisper to myself. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm lost!' I say nothing except these words as I stand there trampling my hat" (Hamsun 190). That this occurs after a final inability to connect with Ylajali is crucial. Only in moments of creation is the narrator temporarily relieved of his physical hunger and emotional

turmoil. Hamsun suggests that this occurs in the pursuit of love. Thus, there is nothing left to do but board a steamship out of Kristiania "that strange city which no one leaves before it has set its mark upon him..." (Hamsun 1).

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Mark SaFranko interviewed by Steve Hussy



With the impending launch (1st June 2010) of Mark SaFranko's third Max Zajack novel, *God Bless America*, a new issue of lit mag, *Savage Kick* and an updated Murder Slim Press (MSP) website, we asked head honcho of MSP, Steve Hussy to interview Mark SaFranko.

Steve Hussy: Tell us a little about the writing of *God Bless America*.

Mark SaFranko: *God Bless America* was actually written before both *Hating Olivia* and *Lounge Lizard*, so it's actually the first of the Max Zajack novels. And it fits there sequentially as well since it's a childhood novel. I began it in 1991. The original manuscript ran just a few pages short of a thousand pages. I worked on it on and off until just last year, mostly cutting it down to its present length. I felt I had to lay down a massive amount of experience, which accounted for its original length.

SH: Did you have any inspirations for the book?

MS: Well, there was my own life, of course, but at first I was unsure how I should go about it. What changed everything for me and gave me a direction was reading Celine's *Death On Credit*, or *Death On The Instalment Plan*, as we call it here in America. I read it back in 1980 or thereabouts, and within a few pages, I realized, "Aha – that's how I want to do it." Childhood, to me, was a time of psychic and physical chaos. Sprawling, inchoate chaos. As a kid you can't make sense of what's

happening to you - at least I couldn't. I wanted to try and capture a sense of that. Celine does it brilliantly, by the way.

SH: Any other childhood novels you admire?

MS: Well, Henry Miller's *Tropic Of Capricorn* was an influence. It's also a big teeming novel about youth. I like *Ham On Rye* a great deal. I actually think it has the most literary merit of Bukowski's novels, but people don't talk about it as much. Another great childhood novel is *Lord Of The Flies*. I don't know what's thought about Golding nowadays, but that book holds up, though for different reasons. I know I'm forgetting some others, but those few are a good start.

SH: What aspects of Max Zajack's character are established in *God Bless America*? Was your childhood the birth of that stubborn fighting spirit?

MS: I don't know that I see myself as a fighter so much as I do a survivor of sorts. If I'm a fighter, I'm a silent fighter, someone who endures. But maybe the book establishes Max as someone who collides with experience and tries to make sense of it, never with much success.

SH: Madness is another major theme in the book. Is it something you've been aware of yourself too? The ending of *Lounge Lizard* is a descent into psychosis... what got you out of that mindset?

MS: The analyst's couch! There's madness everywhere you look. None of us can escape it. The world is insane. It doesn't take much to see that. All you have to do is look at the morning headlines.

SH: Once again, Max has to endure a series of different jobs in *God Bless America*, from golf caddie to shop assistant etc...inevitably with terrible outcomes. Do you think you've ever had a pleasant day job, and - if you had your pick of any job - which do you think you would have liked most?

MS: When you're a kid you can do all kinds of things, anything, really, because you're young and you have endurance and you're easily duped. So you get used. You get all the shit jobs. But working all the time was normal to me. It was expected. And I have to say that it brought me into contact with lots of different people and gave me an enormous amount of experience with many different occupations in several different settings. My favourite job back then was working for Gino's, which was an East Coast fast food equivalent of McDonalds. You got to eat whatever you wanted and everybody on the payroll was certifiable. Every single day was a riot. We smoked dope behind the dumpsters before the workday began. You came out stinking of grease and exhausted, but you had a blast. Nowadays my ideal job would be...well, right now I can't think of one. Working with animals in some capacity would be good. Animals aren't people, after all.

SH: You have a young family yourself. How are you finding it? Do you think the lessons you learnt as a child have informed your parenting now?

MS: Having a family probably keeps you sane. It keeps you in touch with reality. If I mention "Hey, I'm famous in France" or some other such inanity, my kid says "Fine,

now can you fix my breakfast?" I think that to at least some extent we become our parents when we have children, which is probably a frightening thought for many, if not most people. So you have to be vigilant. And you have to learn to become a kid again yourself in some ways.

SH: What was it like to visit France? What did the promotion tour involve?

MS: Being in Paris is like being in Heaven, which is probably every visitor's reaction. You walk the streets endlessly fascinated. Hypnotized, even. You can feel the ghosts of past centuries drifting all around you like snow. Every square inch of the place is a work of art. If I could afford it, I'd live there right now. Since 13e Note, my French publisher, was just getting out of the gate when I visited, all I did was a reading for the booksellers, and I attended the Book Expo, which is one of the major European events. The rest of the time I enjoyed myself. The publisher, Eric Vieljeux, is a sophisticated man and knew enough to let me loose on the town. It was a wonderful experience. Can't wait to go back. I'm trying to figure out how right now.

SH: The reception in France to *Hating Olivia* and *Lounge Lizard* has been almost exclusively positive. Were you surprised by that response?

MS: I was somewhat, given how much difficulty I've had just getting my work into print over the years. And of course you don't know how you'll go over in another culture and much depends on the translator. Of course I wouldn't let my work see the light of day if I didn't think it had at least some value, but that's no guarantee of a positive critical response. But I'd keep going even if everyone hated the stuff simply because I have to.

SH: How do you respond to the rare negative review?

MS: Well, I've certainly had my share of those over the years in the form of rejection letters. And incidentally, they were rejections of some of the work that's being read now by a growing audience. So my perception is that the editors and publishers and agents are out to stop you, no question. Too many writers and not enough readers, for one thing. Unless they think you're going to sell millions of copies, you're shit out of luck, for another.

SH: You also talked to students at Marianapolis College. How did the reading go?

MS: I think okay, but I couldn't see beyond the stage lights so I'm just guessing. Zsolt Alapi, who teaches there and organized the event, is a great guy who uses my work in his classes. He tells me I have a growing cult following in Montreal, for better or worse.

SH: You were recently signed to Harper Collins. How is it going, and how did the signing come about?

MS: I just finished the proofs of *Hating Olivia*. The publication date is November 16 2010. This is the first time I'll become visible in a big way in the United States, so it will be interesting to see what the reaction will be. The Harper Perennial people are consummate professionals and they have tremendous resources. They'll make sure that the book gets around. Tony O'Neill brought *Hating Olivia* into Harper when his

novel *Down And Out On Murder Mile* was picked up. Apparently it sat around there for a while. Then they published a new novel by Dan Fante as well as his back catalogue. The Harper Perennial marketing director, Amy Baker, decided that I belonged out there too.

SH: You continue to release albums. What drives that? Is it your main passion?

MS: I've been a musician and composer all my life. I've continued to write songs over the years; it's something I can't seem to get out of my system. I'm a fan of all kinds of music, from Penderecki to Dylan. And so now that my bar musician days are over, I go on recording. The internet music stores have given me an outlet. My new album, just finished, is a CD of music that's intended for the movies based on my literary work that never got done. It's called *Music For An Unmade Movie*. If music isn't my main passion, she's a mistress I've never been able to throw over. But she's beautiful, so I don't want to.

SH: *The Favor* was recently optioned by Michael A Grimm, an Austrian filmmaker. How did the process go?

MS: Michael optioned the property and invited me to write a screenplay, which I did. He just got through translating it into German. Now he'll undertake the process of finding a producer or producers. And of course that's the tricky part, coming up with the money. The great majority of optioned properties never get into production. You know the old saying: "Many are optioned, few are made." This is the third piece of mine that's been optioned. Time will tell whether I get lucky this time around. My expectations are realistic though.

SH: I dug the screenplay to *The Favor* and, as a film, was a little baffled that it wasn't picked up as is. What are the problems of working in the movie industry? Would you ever write a screenplay again? And will you continue to act?

MS: Thanks. The biggest problem with the movie industry is that you need a shit-load of money to operate in it in any capacity. To insert a plug costs thirty grand – or more. And it gets worse from there. That said, I love film and would write more screenplays if the opportunity arises. My future as an actor is uncertain. Too much energy goes into hunting down parts that are even remotely interesting, at least for me. Anyway, I'd rather write.

SH: Let's finish on something positive... what would your perfect day entail?

MS: Since I only ghost-write a column a week, right now I'm rather close to my ideal. I still have to work a job to make ends meet, and that's time I'd love to have back, but I can't complain. It sure as hell beats breaking my ass full time and having no time to do anything else. What would make my day perfect though would be having enough time to paint. I love to paint, but lately it's been tough. So I guess my answer is that I need 48 hours in a day -- that would make it perfect.

Stephen Barber



Here's an extract from Stephen Barber's new book on film, memory and urban surfaces focused on Berlin. It's forthcoming in 2011 and called...

Walls of Berlin: Urban Surfaces - Film - Art

A trace of oblivious urban bliss had been hinged to a decrepit apartment building in Berlin's peripheral Pankow district, in the form of a blue star, bolted to that urban surface during the GDR era, and as immovably attached as the voided clock adjoining the Stralau glass-factory. The time of bliss signalled by that blue star, above the entrance to the tiny Blauer Stern Kino, opened in 1917 (then known as the Bismarck-Lichtspiel, and one of Berlin's oldest-surviving cinemas), was that of film, and the experience intimated by that blue star, as it enticed passers-by into the cinema's interior, was that of time miraculously 'regained', sliced-away from the habitual time of the city, and instilled back into the eyes and bodies of its inhabitants, precipitating urban bliss. But the iconic, glacial colour of that star - a world away from the enveloping, hot-hued marquees of such pre-eminently luxurious cinemas as those of Los Angeles' Broadway, and even those of the few enduring grand cinemas of Berlin's Charlottenburg district - intimated too that the time to be experienced, once passers-by had traversed the space beneath it to enter the cinema, as spectators, also possessed an element of 'blue' melancholy, through which memories could be conjured and unleashed within that cinematic space, but would simultaneously be frozen, as though that cinema comprised a no-escape zone of petrified memory, for its unwitting entrants. Within the dense historical strata of Berlin, that blue star also resonated with its visual proximity to the shape of the badges worn by concentration camp inmates of the Nazi era, in which an inverted blue triangle, denoting an immigrant forced labourer, when conjoined with (and overlaying) the yellow triangle worn by Jewish inmates, configured a blue star. As with the time-erased clock bolted to the Stralau factory, that blue star had been electrified, in order to illuminate the Berlin night, but unlike the clock, it had remained haphazardly wired, so that it erratically pulsed out its light after dark, the neon-tubes humming a sonic mantra of malfunction, and signalling the opening of a fissure of vision within the city's surfaces.

Blue stars form a multiple, constellating presence across many of Berlin's urban facades, often in the form of graffitied blue-stars inscribed upon surfaces ready-prepared for their manifestation, usually in the form of silver or golden backdrops which serve to launch them into the city. They recall Patti Smith's visualisation of her

companion Robert Mapplethorpe as a 'little blue star', whose unique eruption into the photographic and sexual terrains of 1980s New York City transformed the city, for an immediate and intensive interval, before mutating from the shape of an ascendant star into that of a polished death's-head skull, and vanishing. But in the domain of cinema projected by the insignia of the Blauer Stern Kino, the blue stars of Berlin are often those supernova figures whose seminal presences filmically incorporated the city, but whose traversals through it also generated calamities. The actor Heinrich George, who played Franz Biberkopf in the 1931 film of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, became widely viewed in the 1930s as embodying Berlin with his vocal outbursts and excessive corporeal volume, and allied himself to the Nazi regime during the era when many actors exiled themselves from Berlin. Hitler personally awarded him the title 'state actor' of the Nazi regime in 1937, along with medals and honours for his work in the Nazi film industry, and he was frequently photographed meeting Hitler and Goebbels; on 18 February 1943, as the destruction of Berlin by aerial bombing accelerated, George was filmed among the audience at the Berlin Sportpalast for Goebbels' most infamous speech, on the 'total war' which was now about to be unleashed. After the fall of Berlin to the Soviet Army, George's status abruptly inversed from that of grandeur to ignominy and danger, as the Soviet authorities titled him a 'prominent fascist' and dispatched him to the internment camp of Hohenschönhausen, on the north-eastern edge of Berlin, three months after the war's end; from there, he was eventually jettisoned from Berlin, beyond the city's northern boundary, to the former Nazi concentration camp of Sachsenhausen, whose barracks and execution-grounds had been obliviously requisitioned by the Soviet authorities and simply downgraded from those of a concentration camp to those of a 'special' internment camp, where over 10,000 prisoners, mostly Nazi bureaucrats and police, were kept in harsh conditions. George's health collapsed there, his excessive corporeal presence evanesced, and he died of exhaustion and pneumonia on 25 September 1946, his body initially buried anonymously in a mass-grave before being recovered in 1994 and returned to Berlin.

The most incandescent blue star of Berlin is Marlene Dietrich, born in the Schöneberg district of the city in 1901. During the 1930s, when she was at the zenith of her stardom in Hollywood, Goebbels and Hitler attempted to entice her back to Berlin to work in the Nazi film industry; while George had been engulfed by the Nazi regime, Dietrich repudiated it, responding to the cinema-obsessed Goebbels' pleas by applying for American citizenship in 1937 and swearing allegiance to the USA. During the final period of the war, she made anti-Nazi propaganda radio broadcasts and performed in uniform for US servicemen, making a long and dangerous journey with them through a succession of warzones, from North Africa to Europe, and finally to Berlin in 1945; after the fall of the city, her fury against Nazi power transferred itself to the power of the Soviet forces who had taken Berlin, and at a meeting of September 1945, with Marshall Zhukov, the Soviet Army's principal commander, at his headquarters in the Karlshorst district, she castigated him for his soldiers' frenzy of murder and rape in the aftermath of the city's fall, to Zhukov's own anger. Three years later, she returned to the devastated Berlin to shoot exterior sequences for Billy Wilder's film *A Foreign Affair*, in which her Nazi-aligned cabaret-singer character performs the song 'The Ruins of Berlin'. But Dietrich's wartime broadcasts and her perceived repudiation of Berlin led to new uproar when she

eventually returned to the city, twelve years later, on 3 May 1960, to perform her cabaret show at the vast and lavish Titania Palast cinema (architecturally the inverse of the minuscule Blauer Stern cinema, with a spectacular tower of light surmounting the foyer and an auditorium seating nearly two thousand spectators, but perversely lacking the Blauer Stern's endurance, since that palatial cinema's auditorium was abandoned in 1965, gutted, and converted into a supermarket); Dietrich's re-appearance in Berlin provoked intractable opposition, manifesting itself as bomb-threats and picketings of the cinema. And her final, celestial re-entry into the city also generated uproar, with street-protests against her funeral cortege as it entered the Schöneberg cemetery on 16 May 1992.

The blue star bolted to the facade of the Pankow-district cinema, projecting its glacial aura of filmic magnificence and calamity, also inflects the adjacent presence of Max Skladanowsky, who initiated the first-ever film screening in 1895, in the centre of Berlin, from his base at his magician's workshop in Pankow, twenty-two years before the opening of the Blauer Stern cinema, and after decades of oblivion, was eventually buried beneath a wreath from Goebbels, in the Pankow cemetery close to that cinema, in 1939. Film possesses an almost maleficent extrusion into the urban surfaces of Berlin, starred with its many legendary figures - above all, those of Heinrich George and Marlene Dietrich - who incorporated the city's sensory excesses but were also at the receiving-end of assaults from its power-formations and caprices. The surfaces of Berlin hold the capacity to be conjured from zero by film, in an infinity of ways - by Max Skladanowsky for the first time, in the 1890s, and also by film-makers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who recreated the teeming avenues of Berlin from scratch, in a Bavarian film studio, for his own thirteen-part version of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in 1980, with the actor Günter Lamprecht taking on Heinrich George's film-role of 1931. That immense lineage of uproar and mutation can only be momentarily annulled through the experience of film-spectators who, having passed beyond that illuminated blue star, feel the cinema's lights suddenly go down, and fall into entrancement.

Susan Tomaselli on Gil Scott-Heron



*Standing in the ruins
Of another Black Man's life
Or lying through the valley
They're separating day and night.
"I am death," cried the Vulture.*

"For people of the light."

It's a shame that Gil Scott-Heron is still best known for that track on his 1971 long-player *Pieces of a Man*: "You will not be able to stay home, brother / You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out. / You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and skip, / Skip out for beer during commercials, / Because the revolution will not be televised."

Referencing ad slogans, TV shows, Tom Jones and taking a swing at Nixon, make no mistake, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* is a great protest song. But there's more to 'Godfather' of hip-hop and 'black Bob Dylan' Gil Scott-Heron than this snappy, no-nonsense rap. From *Lady Day & John Coltrane* to *B Movie* ("As Wall Street goes, so goes the nation / And here's a look at the closing numbers - racism's up, human rights are down, peace is shaky, war items are hot") through to *Johannesburg* and *H2O Gate Blues*, Scott-Heron has a fine body of work.

Though he "skipped out" for more than a decade (lost to drugs, two spells in prison), this year's album, *I'm New Here*, alongside a welcome re-issue of his novel *The Vulture* (Canongate, 2010), is Gil Scott-Heron's walk out of the wilderness.

Written when he was a young man and at the time hailed as "a strong start for a writer with important things to say", *The Vulture* still holds its own as a thriller, despite Scott-Heron's own protestations ("I don't have anything new to say. It's a murder mystery, and the son of a bitch is still dead.")

Scott-Heron takes us through the drug-driven underworld of young black America, the "thousands of souls that clutter Lower Manhattan," on a quest to find out who killed John Lee, with the vulture – a recurring presence in Scott-Heron's work and totem of the evils that inhabit and destroy the ghetto - circling close overhead.

It's as poetical as Scott-Heron's hero Langston Hughes. It's both personal and political. More importantly, *The Vulture* remains as riveting and as on-message as ever: "Time. The word comes through the turnstiles of your mind, ringing that bell that attracts your attention like the warning bell near the end of a line on a typewriter. Time is here, then it is gone."