

**Crossing Out The Boundary. Paul O’Kane September 2009**



Switching on my computer in the morning Yahoo news presents me with an image of a rescue helicopter hovering between land and sea, earth and sky, the magic of its whirling, crossed blades conspire with the peculiar stillness of photography to fix it in time and space, as if excused those two great human burdens. The image has of course been chosen to arrest the attention of the fluttering, twittering online audience as millions of similar Yahoo users pass through the newsfeeds on the way to their morning mailbox. It works, but in my case, not so much because it seduces me into being interested in the tragedy of another English child ‘staycationer’ lost off the unpredictable coast but more because its misty light, stark composition, and juxtaposition of modern technology with sublime landscape all looks to me like a potential artwork, a 21<sup>st</sup> century painting perhaps? Saving and printing the image on standard paper stock only confirms this idea. The quality is not high, like so many of the digital images we have now grown used to

using, and the colours and forms further distort in the printing so as to remove the image farther from the history of photography and associate it more with that of painting, English watercolour perhaps?

But who is lost? Which family is unimaginably tortured and grieving this summer? I can't tell you, only the image and its implications for art and thought have really grabbed me. It's a terrible shame but the speed of technologised news encourages me to pass quickly over it and on to other concerns of the day waiting in my virtual mailbox. Two of my pillars of strength, Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin -respectively 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century heroes of modern life- *would* perhaps excuse my apparent cold-heartedness. In his essay for the Salon of 1846 Baudelaire famously called upon artists to attend to events drawn from daily news as a means of forging a truly modern art, asking them to turn their backs on the 'dogma of the studios' and the enduring taste for neoclassicism. Baudelaire's call was precisely to the local and empirical, rejecting the overarching academic idealism of art, and in this single movement he effectively inaugurates the entire project of a modern art.

Benjamin equally famously asserted that mechanical reproduction had fundamentally transformed the nature and purpose of art by politicising all aesthetics as the proliferation and ubiquity of modern images awarded them a new aura of political value. But the absorption and redeployment of media images by artists from Dada to pop and postmodernism can also be seen as an extension of Baudelaire's original assertion. While Baudelaire spoke of newsworthy events, he also implicated the quotidian in a way that

inspired Impressionists to paint steaming railway stations and dishwater-dull suburbs with post-Romantic horizons on which church spires and poplar trees were joined by factory chimneys.

Modernism nevertheless emerges from Romanticism and Baudelaire also maintained a decadent Symbolism in his poetry which might seem contradictory to the appeal in his salon essays to elevate everyday matters of fact. In his poem 'Correspondences' he invites the modern city to lose itself in its 'forest of symbols', and *post*-Impressionist journeys might be read as inspired more by this aspect of Baudelaire's work, quickly leading artists into dark and foreign territories as if the modern city and modernity itself had quickly revealed something crucial lacking at its heart, provoking risqué voyages into primitivisms, expressionisms and other extremes of subjectivity.

While Walter Benjamin drew and grew on *both* these Baudelairean responses to modernity –one radically empirical, the other sensually symbolic, he was nevertheless born at a time which gave him responsibility for representing modernity - not at its birth but in its wilful and careless adolescence. While Baudelaire could comment on the modern love affair of strangers passing in a city, Benjamin had access to truly modern technologies –such as those which enabled man to pass-over a city or landscape- from which to build his own symbols and metaphors. In the following image from Benjamin's 'One Way Street' we find such an image that seems typically 20<sup>th</sup> century, drawing upon the experience of a man in flight.

‘The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns the power it commands and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is the unfurled plain, [the road] calls forth distances, [...] clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front ...’

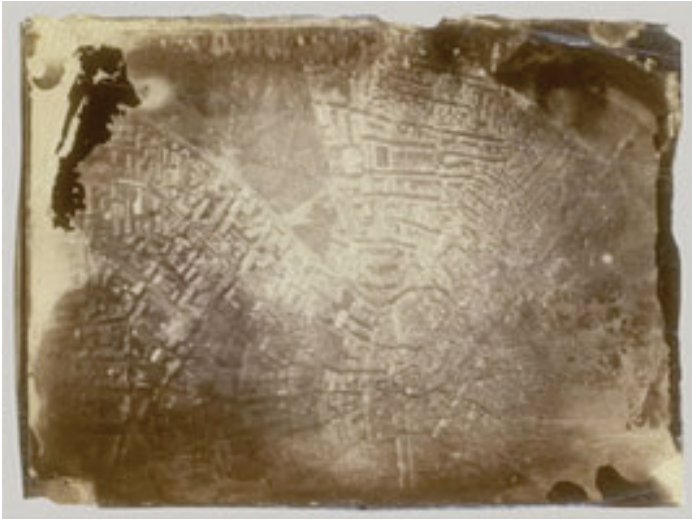
It’s worth noting here that Proust is also very useful in this respect, purposefully describing in his novel, an early experience of witnessing an airplane as well as an early experience of using a telephone to magically reduce the distance and cross the boundary between himself and his grandmother by way of the disembodied telephone operators, whom he describes as angelic. But to return to Benjamin’s text, it’s impossible not to notice the militarism creeping into every line as both the text and the country road are awarded ‘power’ and, while the airplane’s relentlessly linear progress may now invoke the sinister image of a bomber to us, the walker and his path both ‘command’ like a general.

Secondly, the airplane passenger sees the road ‘unfold according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it’ and here a sense of an overarching knowledge is implicated, ‘laws’ in fact, like those available to the scientist who proceeds by established knowledge and

precedent. This perspective is contrasted with the walker, who's undulating, twisting and turning passage 'calls forth distances', 'clearings' and 'prospects' -all of which are graced with a more endearing human hopefulness arising precisely from a *lack* of certainty and modestly contained by an individual point of view that is unaided by technology.

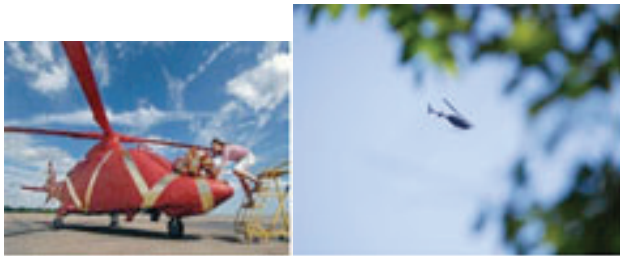
Finally, it's also hard to read this short text without thinking of Benjamin himself, some years later, struggling to cross the mountainous boundary between France and Spain as he walked with fading hopes of escaping the national and ideological conflict rapidly growing into a conflagration around him, on one last passage that would result in his suicidal death.

Despite being renowned for articulating and perhaps championing mechanical reproduction, Benjamin's purpose in this text might appear to us today -in our age of scanners, photocopiers, cut & paste etc. - rather un- or anti- modern, calling, as it does, upon scholars to not merely read or skim their texts but to copy them out by hand, according to an ancient Chinese tradition of scholarship, and in *this* way to become like that walker who engages intimately with every turn, every rise and fall of the words on a page as if walking in the shoes of the original author (Benjamin is right, and I recommend taking his advice). The airplane passenger, or mere reader, on the other hand, moves far more rapidly but relatively carelessly as he glosses over the text as if were a familiar and established unity.



Though Baudelaire might have been unable to envision Benjamin's airplane passenger he would have been familiar with Romantic and picturesque traditions wherein an elevated viewpoint affords a special new satisfying sense of humanity. He would also have been familiar with the balloon-aided flights of early photographers like Nadar, as were those Impressionists who's elevated perspectives emulated the camera's new portability by viewing the boulevards from racy, jauntily modern angles. Thus modern technologies, cameras, telephones, airplanes, automobiles and trains produce new experiences and

corresponding images, which, in turn afford new nuances of older dialectical debates concerning e.g. the priority given to Empiricism and/or Idealism. New technologies invite, not only poetic symbols and metaphors but new models with which to think both scientifically and creatively. Thus Proust uses photography to explain his process of memory, Bergson describes the common image of time as ‘cinematographic’ and Einstein will use images of trains to explain Relativity. Similarly Deleuze will champion cinema as providing new possibilities for philosophy.



But to return to our original image, the particular and peculiar contribution made by the invention of the helicopter to these layered analogies of perspective and technology is the ability to take-off, land and hover without the necessity of a forward trajectory. The helicopter ‘flies’ while nevertheless arrested, something that even few birds (hawks, larks and hummingbirds among them) can achieve. By flying without forward motion, transcending without apparent momentum, the helicopter might offer us yet another image of, or way of interpreting modernity or postmodernity. Unfortunately Benjamin didn’t live to utilise this particular technological image though he might perhaps have used the helicopter or other hovering phenomena, to colour his assertion of the possibility of ‘dialectics at a standstill’.

If we compare the hovering helicopter rather than the airplane with Benjamin's skimming reader, it invokes only those sad moments of fatigued or distracted study wherein we find ourselves re-reading the same sentence repeatedly having lost reading's most rewarding sense of productive momentum through fatigue or distraction, thus reducing the word to a vacuous chant which never impresses its meaning on the mind. Reading without passage is meaningless, we must make progress to make sense.



In terms of militarism, the helicopter has become closely associated with a series of increasingly ignoble late 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century wars. It is more clearly symbolic of the American-Vietnam war than the relatively invisible or uncelebrated bombers that pitilessly reduced that country's vegetation to molten wasteland, and today the helicopter plays a key, and very visible part in current conflicts in the middle-East, Afghanistan etc. In Hitchcock's paranoid postmodern movie classic 'North by North West' Cary Grant is famously assaulted at a barren crossroads by a crop-spraying bi-plane, which he outwits, using only a good suit and a pair of long legs, leading the plane to destroy itself, but had his assailant been piloting the more manoeuvrable helicopter it seems less likely that Grant would have survived. For our purposes we can assert that a means of flight by which man can now hover, remaining threateningly still in the sky, matching pace with or accurately trailing and observing even a walking target from above, could also be a symbol of a post WW2 and post modern era in which a certain hesitation overcomes the

proud and relentless futural momentum of modern dreams, a period in which arrest and reflection come to supplant all self-assured forward motion.

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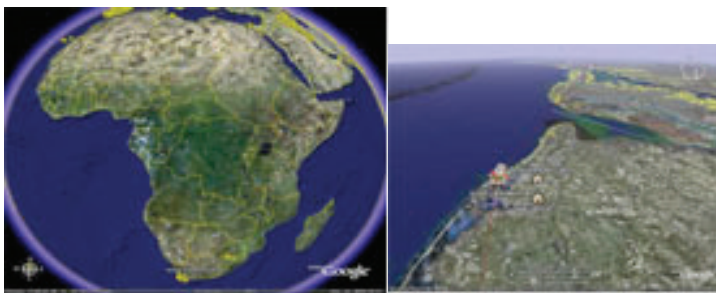
Amid the settling smoke of post-Napoleonic France Baudelaire was anti-militarist, even urging salon-goers to confront the huge battle scenes of conservative painter Horace Vernet (now available to view at NG) by going up to them and singing gay revolutionary songs. This anti-nationalism emerges as part of his call ‘To The bourgeoisie’ to celebrate the modernity of their Haussmanisation as a sign that the bourgeois paradise constructed for them in Paris is in fact a supra-national agency, a model and a license which will

burgeon into global consumerism. So, while 1870s Italy and Germany are cooling and forming into the modern nation states we know them today France seems to have already cultivated the potential force to surpass such passé 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns as nationhood, but it would take an entire, incredibly destructive 20<sup>th</sup> century -with France never far from its centre- to begin to recognise the imminent redundancy of the nation state which is today becoming little more than a symbol, logo, or brand among brands, while a higher and more voracious form of capitalism and consumerism desires as little obstacle as possible to unfettered, universal trade.



From Benjamin's imagery we can glean a contradiction between modern national borders and the flight of the airplane which effortlessly dismisses such obstacles of all-too-human scale by using technologies which free men from the gravity which heretofore defined them as a species distant from the birds, the stars and the gods. The notoriously inhuman, technologically fuelled and unprecedented destruction of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century -which Walter

Benjamin sensed, predicted and described by means of his special conflation of philosophical and literary images- might appear today as a conflagration arising from the conflict of these two very modern inventions (1) the notion of the nation state defined by topographic or merely official boundaries, and (2) the invention of manned powered flight capable of transcending those very boundaries.



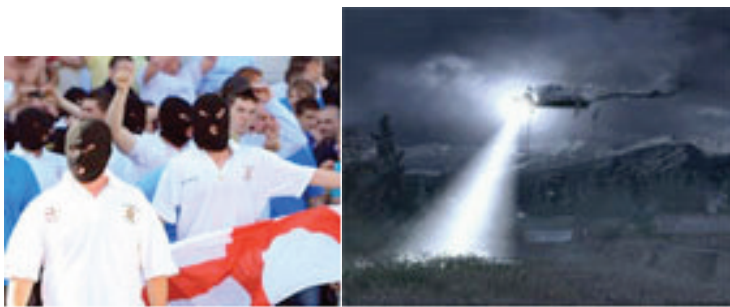
Modernity, fuelled by its inventions (aviation, photography, cinema, the telephone etc.) celebrates the possibilities of its inherent inter- or supra-nationality as potential global bourgeois-paradise to which all national, cultural or religious difference should not be allowed to present any obstacle. And yet the 20<sup>th</sup> Century seems to have folded and creased in fatal spasms of contradiction upon encountering its own conflicting desires, consuming and destroying itself in a tantrum of frustrated possibilities. Modernity's scream is a rage both for and against its own freedom - and who or what would rescue it from that?



From Guernica to the world Trade Centre the terrorisation of the land from the sky via the transgression of all physical and moral boundaries might be said to 'bracket-off' a modernity that has now blown itself out and exhausted its credibility. The 21<sup>st</sup> century attempts to escape those parentheses by way of invisible, spiritual, perhaps less modern, yet more truly supra-national ideas and images, as the boundary between bomb, bomber and bombed dissolves in the figure of the suicidal assailant who sacrifices himself, and in doing so defeats the expensive militarist technologies of the 'first world' which, for its part is fighting to expand and maintain its market dominance, and export -by force if necessary- its waning ideal of democracy. As Slavoj Zizek recently said of Sylvio Berlusconi, the national state model is today selling-itself-out, willing to detach itself from democracy, the better to serve a purer and more omnipotent form of capitalism and consumerism that has little or no investment in national interests or boundaries. While Euro-American forces fight for the freedom of global markets the suicide bombing terrorist also sacrifices himself, not for nation-ality but for a supra-national religious idea and community.



Back at my desktop, now looking like the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of a religious painting, a holy image of a helicopter, powered by cruciform blades, powered by middle-eastern oil, sustains itself mechanico-miraculously between heaven and earth, land and sea. It searches for a child who, at this stage, remains somewhere between life and death, a benign force from above, offering the possibility of rescue, clad in the fluorescent chic of our now-permanent state of emergency, hovering at the edge of what was once a nation but is now sometimes referred to as an archipelago.



Another click of the mouse and the Yahoo news shows me rioting anti-Islamist English nationalists who seem more hopelessly and absurdly anachronistic than ever, and yet all the more likely to become entrenched and vicious as they make a last stand to uphold a pointless boundary. Then the news that in Afghanistan the British army, haunted by yet another impending bloody surrender, destroy their own downed Chinook helicopters to save them from the hands of the Taliban, news that only makes me wonder what use the anti-modernist Taliban might have for such old-fashioned technology, evolved to fight lost wars between redundant nations and wholly unsuited to the newly invisible territories between and across which we fight and communicate today.

**END**