

The Dentist, Andre Breton, and My Wife

by Paul O’Kane 2009

Since many people feel compelled to broadcast one finds oneself
in a state of permanent receptivity.
Siegfried Kracauer *Boredom* 1924

The waiting room is sealed and overheated. It’s only upon entering this first floor space that I acknowledge its familiarity. I came to this same dentist myself, more than fifteen years ago. The fake pine floor, steel-legged chairs, white walls, all carve a modern clinical institution out of a 150 year-old, typical London terrace of the kind who’s ground floor is a retail space and who’s upper floors are usually rented out as cheap flats.

Here, the shop-front gives the dentist a welcoming but business-like interface with the busy high-street while the rooms above and beyond this waiting room accommodate a suite of presumably profitable surgeries. Once, this same building must have looked over a busy green and crossroads clattering with the sound of horses shoes and falling manure. Back when everything was sepia-toned, even trees and sky.

It’s hard to bear the airlessness of the room, and so, as my wife sits quietly- hiding her nervousness- I pace around, trying to distract both of us from the almost inhuman act of simply waiting.

One window faces the rear of the building and there you witness a genuine history that

gives the lie to the interior's slick conversion. There are hopelessly crammed, rain-sodden yards, neglected by the shopkeepers who have little care or use for them other than as dumping grounds for out-of-date point-of-sale paraphernalia rapidly acquiring a patina of moss and rust to obscure whatever dazzling new product it was originally meant to promote. Still, there's little for me to comment upon that might change the atmosphere. Curiously, near the window on the floor lies a discarded mechanical arm, its white, powder-coated steel, sharp-angled joints and wires impart just enough information to make it recognisable as a disused and dis-embodied extension arm from one of the dentist's chairs upstairs. I call it a 'robot' and we both laugh, but, having laughed, realise that is precisely what it is, in one of those moments when the 21st Century slows down enough to let you catch up to speed.

I've been teaching a lot lately, always too much and never enough it seems. Teaching a course on 'The Subject' –the 'I', the 'Self', the 'Me', 'Identity' etc. aiming, not to give my students answers but rather to start them asking what I think might still be profound questions lying in that direction. Keeping mysteries ajar seems to be my role in life, or at least, that's what I'm paid for. I've also been teaching on 'The Uses of History - for Contemporary Art' and certain references from an enthusiastic week of preparing, lecturing and discussing, seem to get lodged in my head, shaping and tinting everything I see. Barthes, Breton, Benjamin, these are a few of the culprits. The author is dead –yes! The Subject 'slips away' –I agree! The flaneur sees the world through historically tinted spectacles –OK! Meanwhile Reality is merely a bourgeois bastion, requiring constant revolutionary subversion by means of 'profane illuminations' through which another

reality might be glimpsed arriving at any moment like a modern messiah. Then there's Proust too of course, joining the dots of this sensuous historical matrix, steeping the subject in the magical medium of 'MEMORY!'

Thankfully our wait is not long and soon we are called up to the surgery. I watch as my wife is laid on a magnificent, mechanical couch, carefully coloured a soft shade of turquoise. The dentist presses a button and, as she sinks down gracefully before me, stretched out horizontally, the words 'Venus' and 'Olympia' come to mind as art history momentarily hi-jacks my vision. And as she sinks, the previously obscured window of this, front-facing room comes into view, framing a grim sky, wet branches of a tall tree, and ubiquitous rows of pitched tiled roofs. This room, which might once have housed a struggling 1930s family or that of the original Victorian shopkeeper perhaps, has also been transformed into a quasi-hospital. Technology and design everywhere work hand-in-hand to promote an air of safe efficiency. Everything looks state-of-the-art and clinically clean. Colours are chosen from a pastel range so as to avoid any sense of drama or alarm.

The dentist and his assistant wear similar hues, all of which seem reminiscent of a muted coral reef where gentle undulations tousle the tender tips of sedentary species lazily reaching out feathery fronds to gather energy from dappled light. My wife acquires a bright Orange Perspex mask as the robotic arm – a close cousin of the decommissioned example we'd found awaiting termination below – swings a bright light into place and directly into her face. I follow her gaze upward, and see, suspended from the ceiling, one

of the few objects in the room that is not some kind of scientific tool. There, suspended on thin thread, hang a school of brightly coloured and naively carved tropical fish. Their intention is clearly to soothe and distract those undergoing this necessary but in a way inhuman experience –but particularly children. But today the barely mobile toy compounds my sense of inhabiting some kind of second floor underworld, an inadvertently marine environment. As my wife reclines, gazing up through golden glasses at the fish swimming high above her, the dentist's gentle manners approximate slow-motion as if he is carrying out his trade in and around some outcrop of the ocean floor. Appropriate then that all should wear masks and goggles, and that the room should be ornamented with soft-edged, pale-coloured devices, many of which are cleverly designed to allow light, but no air, germs or moisture in.

Outside the window hangs the kind of sky that tries to impart a tangible sense of dread to every stoic citizen. Another assistant arrives and switches on a radio, quickly adjusting the volume to bare audibility. The station is called 'Magic' and it only plays the hits of 20-30 years ago, songs which, like everything else in the room have become pale and harmless, The carefully crafted productions have lost any edge they ever had by which to cut their way to forming the popular soundtrack of their day. Now they merely serve the same purpose as those dumb fish, hung from the ceiling, there to soothe and divert the childish impulse to fear the unfamiliar. The radio show is called 'Test of Time' and Peter Pan is invoked by a jingle or by a presenter, suggesting that a timeless youthfulness is characteristic of the show's melodic offerings. For me it is more a challenge to the modern sense of Proustian time-slips or Benjamin's admiration for the fact that Breton

was the first to discern the ‘revolutionary force’ in ‘the dresses of five years ago’, and of all that has recently slipped out of vogue.

Borne up into this carefully contrived sensual and prosthetic fantasy my wife lies prone and patient as the masked operatives dive, in and out of her open mouth, skilfully negotiating the threshold between one human and another. They enter armed with needles, primed with pacifying drugs and elegantly angled to escape her sight, then act upon the pearls she offers up in rows. Occasionally something is discovered and retrieved and the dentist examines and evaluates it between fine pincers before laying it carefully down on a clean square of tissue. As he leans out his assistant leans in, ensuring sufficient water is softly sprayed in then noisily sucked out. My wife, my wife, where are you now, how far away the other side of this sub-aquatic room seems now, detached by soporific *muzak* and the gentle dance of activities conducted in another mode of time, my wife, my wife, that is half of me, other than yet so much part, here having parts removed, some added, some replaced, contesting any sense of any whole or real subject any ‘one’ who might confidently address themselves as such.

In my relative isolation as a bystander to the main event I turn to peruse the desk adjacent to my seat. Here, the computer’s screen proudly displays the glories of 21st Century technology, capable of mapping, in crystal colourful graphics, the detailed history of my partner’s teeth. Besides, a few books, papers, pencils and other desk-bound paraphernalia are scattered at an acceptable level of disorder that looks slightly staged, as if to give the important impression that human activities also take place occasionally here. And here,

one more object also proclaims itself as non-utilitarian, like the fish –mobile, we could also call it ‘art’ without worrying unduly about the application of the term. In a small, robust, but somehow authentic and elegant frame, a well-made reproduction of a Byzantine angel treads a golden sphere that must be Earth. The apparently shrunken planet curves beneath his solidly planted feet, his body is robed in golden folds, and on his back a thick wing jerks down to touch the surface of the world, simultaneously pulling back his head to gaze involuntarily, and perhaps eternally at a scratched silver heaven.

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