

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER



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→ see pages 7-16

We see two figures, MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER and ALEXANDRE, trekking through the cavernous basements underneath the Palais de Tokyo, home to the museum's sprawling archives. Every so often the pair come across surveyors in bright orange windbreakers, some inspecting the walls with electric torches, others wrapping long strands of measuring tape around individual columns, as if preparing for a complex building project. The svelte figure of the Director bounds ahead into the deep darkness followed by a more cautious ALEXANDRE who treads carefully, his hands held outstretched lest he should walk into anything. As his eyes gradually adjust he begins to make out around him piles of posters and books and the hulking forms of gigantic crates. Large black letters are stamped across each one. A group of workers balanced aloft tall ladders are adding the finishing touches to a giant letter E. Stopping for a moment, ALEXANDRE strains in the darkness to make out the rest of the sign. It reads: "SUPERDOME." The massive crate stands open. ALEXANDRE gawks as a group of art handlers hoists a heavy black monolith onto one of the container's many levels.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (*beckoning him to follow*) We've been thinking a lot about the Palais de Tokyo's programme. We're going to take a single room in the building and see how it develops, how it is influenced by the construction work that will be taking place here as the Palais de Tokyo expands over the next twelve months.

ALEXANDRE — We?

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (*coughing*) We? Did I say we? I meant to say I, of course. I, myself.

ALEXANDRE — (*taking out his notebook and eagerly jotting down their conversation*) So the Palais is being transformed?

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — You see, Alexandre, this idea of transformation is part of a thought process I've been developing ever since my inaugural exhibition, "Cinq Millions d'Années,"[†] in 2006. The overarching motto of this programme has been: "If there are no fixed points in space then, by

consequence, there can be no fixed points in an exhibition."[‡] And if this is the case, then is even the exhibition itself located at a fixed point in space or time?

They come to a wide avenue formed by crates butted up against one another. ALEXANDRE cranes his neck to read the labels as they walk past: "SPY NUMBERS;" "GAKONA;" "M̄, NOUVELLES DU MONDE RENVERSEÉ"...[§]

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (*gesticulating to each container as they pass by*) And so I moved from one exhibition to the next, each forming a link in a chain that led me to this very point, to this very moment when I wish to examine the very notion of what can be seen.

They arrive at the end of the corridor where an elevator waits for them. They step inside and MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER presses a button labelled "Ground Floor: Exhibitions." The lift ascends quickly, pressing the two men's feet deeply into their shoes.

When a visitor arrives in an exhibition space, they expect to see works of art on display. (He turns to face ALEXANDRE, revealing a mischievous smile.) Now what would happen if we arrived in a space where the objects on display had passed out of the spectrum of visible light entirely?

The elevator doors open out directly into the Palais de Tokyo's exhibition space, an enormous cathedral-like hall whose ceiling is held up by massive white plasterboard walls. Dotted across its floor are dozens upon dozens of near-identical white museum plinths. Stepping out of the elevator, MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER is immediately joined by one of his curators. Together they walk straight over to the nearest plinth. MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER examines it and, nodding his approval to the curator, moves on to the next pedestal; the YOUNG CURATOR ticks it off his checklist. ALEXANDRE scurries along behind them, but each pedestal he comes to confounds him. On top of each and every one there is... Well, nothing at all.

ALEXANDRE — (*squinting at the top of a plinth*) But there's nothing here!"

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — We've been testing the limits of what can be seen, of what can be photographed. I'm talking about artworks that operate outside of the realm of the visible.

ALEXANDRE leans in to one of the plinths to take a closer look. As his face approaches the empty pedestal an itchy sensation begins to prick his nose and then his cheeks. A sharp buzzing noise fills his ears and all of a sudden

his tongue tastes—absolutely and undoubtedly—neon green. Startled, he pulls back his fingers which brush against the top of the plinth, sending a jolting sensation of sweetness right up his arm and into his shoulder. A low vibration hums. MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out his BlackBerry. As he glances at the screen, an image of a parrot appears. He silences it.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (continuing)
At any given moment, that which isn't visible still exists. Though objects may not be in the ocular spectrum, they can still exist elsewhere. (He waves his BlackBerry in the air to emphasise his point.) Take radio waves, for example. Many of the artists with whom I have worked—such as Micol Assaël or Ceal Floyer^{††}—have attempted to work in this region outside the visible. After curating the show “Chasing Napoleon,” I said to myself: “Marc-Olivier, for three years now you've been moving into the realm of disappearance. But what are we going to do once everything has disappeared?” Well, whenever something is made to disappear, there will inevitably be a moment when it reappears. And that is the starting point from which we're launching our newest inquiries.

¶

A little later. A group of benefactors—impeccably dressed ladies, some middle-aged, but mostly older and accompanied by a small coterie of grandchildren—are touring the Palais de Tokyo. MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER is guiding them through the exhibits. In room after cavernous room, he leads them past immense invisible sculptures. They mill around them, squinting with effort to see their imperceptible titanic forms. Almost skipping as he walks, MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER points out the beautifully ornate and unseeable paintings that hang on the walls of the Palais' galleries. With great gusto, he acts out the delightful and pointedly satirical videos that, to their eyes, will forever remain out of sight. Eventually coming to a large empty space, they find a group of guards jabbing a long pole at the ceiling. From up in the rafters we hear fluttering and the occasional bad-tempered squawk of protestation.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (to one of the guards) Birds?

FIRST GUARD — Oh no, just one. A pigeon must 'ave got in.

SECOND GUARD — A pigeon? I don't think so, mate. Take a look at this.

He picks up a bright red feather from the ground.

FIRST GUARD — Give us a look. 'Ere! That's a bloody parrot feather, innit!

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — Don't you think it would be better to let it come down of its own accord? Come now, ladies and gentlemen, why don't we wait?

At his signal, the benefactors fold their skirts and, taking great care, seat themselves on the floor. A hand shoots up at the back.

Yes?

ALEXANDRE — (looking through his notes) You said your exhibitions have been moving into this “realm of disappearance”—that you want to—is this right?—make things reappear that have disappeared?

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — Uh-huh.

ALEXANDRE — But what you're suggesting... That sounds to me more like magic than art.

OLD LADY — (nodding) But, at the end of the day, isn't all art a form of illusion? I think that's what he's getting at—aren't you, dearie? It's about... Oh, what's the word I'm looking for? Belief! Yes, that's it! Belief.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — Alexandre, when we're contemplating a work of art—even though we may not realise it—we are constantly oscillating between considering the work from a materialist and an idealistic point of view. We shift back and forth between these two philosophical schemas—between seeing some pigments thrown onto a canvas or seeing a bowl of sunflowers, between beholding a vein of marble or the mother of God. (He pauses and turns to the old lady.) And Madam, if you'll permit me, the word I think you're looking for is: “expectation.”

OLD LADY — Oh yes! Even better! Of course. Expectation.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (warming to his role as teacher) Not long ago, I went to London to interview the writer Christopher Priest.^{‡‡} “Look, Mister Wahler,” he told me, “if I produced a rabbit from inside my coat, right here and now, it would be peculiar but not extraordinary. I mean, anyone can hide a rabbit in his coat. On the other hand, if I convinced you it was impossible for me to take a rabbit out of my coat but then did it all the same, I bet you'd be pretty amazed.”

As he says this, he takes a bar of Swiss chocolate out of his pocket and, breaking off a few pieces, places them on the palm of his hand and extends his arm.

You see, if a trick is too good, people won't believe it. They'll think it's *actually* magic. They must think they've figured it out, that they've worked out the solution to the trick.

A scrabbling sound echoes down from the rafters and a shadow dislodges itself. The Director remains standing, his hand outstretched, as a dark shape swoops down in a low arc towards him. The children point up to the small bird like figure fluttering down. It circles around the Director a few times before alighting on his wrist.

The job of the magician is to convince the audience they've uncovered the key to the trick when, in fact, they have not.

The parrot cocks its head from side to side, as if examining the group of humans, before, relaxed, it pecks at the small crumbs of chocolate in MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER'S hand.

Take, for example, this little bird listening to our conversation. (Two white-gloved art handlers appear out of nowhere and set down a small wooden desk in front of the Director. He taps the surface of the table with his free hand.) This table, it has no holes, no false bottom. And now I place... ah-hem... (He reaches into his top pocket.) this little handkerchief over the bird. As you can all see, its outline is still visible. We ask a member of the audience to touch it...

A LITTLE GIRL approaches the desk and places both her hands over the silhouette. The form inside coos at her touch. She nods in approval and steps back.

And so now... I will make it disappear.

Closing his eyes, he inhales deeply before beginning to mutter under his breath, his outstretched digits wiggling vigorously over the shrouded bird. Lightning fast, he brings down his index finger on the form.

I tap on the bird and... (He whips away the handkerchief.) Hey presto! It's gone!

LITTLE GIRL — (as one of the visitors begins to applaud) It's disappeared! (She looks under the table.) But where did it go?

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (pointedly displaying his empty sleeves) Now that's a very interesting philosophical question, young lady. Where *does* an object go when it disappears?

The group follows the Director into the adjoining gallery that, like all the others, is seemingly empty. This one, however, is different. Every few seconds, all the fluorescents

in the room turn off, plunging the room into almost total darkness. Before the old ladies have had time to adjust to these new circumstances, the lights flicker back to life. MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER approaches a recessed door in the wall. After knocking, he pulls it open to reveal a tall man folded into a space no larger than a broom cupboard. The stranger is crouched on the floor, holding in his hand an electrical cord and, at the end of it, a switch. His eyes fixed on his watch, he mutters to himself.

MARTIN — A one, a two, a three, a four. (Click. The lights switch off.) A five, a six, a seven...

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — How's it going, Martin?

MARTIN — (in a thick Scottish accent) Aiee, no bad, no bad, Mister Director... An eight, a nine, a ten...

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (turning to face his audience) When we switch off the lights, the object disappears.

(Click. Everything goes black.)

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (unseen in the darkness) And when we switch the lights back on, the object is back again, exactly where it was before.

Click. The lights come on.

Nothing special about that. But how about if we switch the lights off, switch them on again, and the object is now in a different place?

Click. Darkness.

Well, then things start to get interesting.

Click. The lights switch on again, revealing MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER a dozen feet away from where he was previously standing. The audience mutters appreciatively.

Now we have this transformation—this translation, as it were—that I've been talking about. We're experimenting with it every single time we contemplate a work of art. (He places his finger in the air and smiles broadly.) Now even more impressive is the famous magic illusion "The Transported Man."

Click. Total darkness envelops the group. Each individual listens to the Director's voice as he speaks. Bereft of sight, they struggle to locate the origin of this melodious discourse. Yet each member of the audience, when interrogated after, will swear the voice came from just behind their own ear.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (unseen but still heard) A man disappears under our very eyes, and then the very same man appears a little further away. The difference in time is a matter of moments, but the difference in space is significant. And the bigger the difference, the more impressive the effect!

The lights switch on again, revealing an empty room. The group looks about in bewilderment. There is no sign of the Director. A phone begins to vibrate.

YOUNG CURATOR — (patting his pockets with embarrassment) Oh, wait a minute, that's me. (He answers his phone.) Hello? Ah, Monsieur le Directeur! Yes... No... Ah, of course. Right away.

The YOUNG CURATOR indicates for the group to follow him as he ducks into a passageway that leads out to a colonnade flanked by immense cement pillars. He turns and points up to the glass and steel box perched on top of the roof of the Palais de Tokyo. The visitors look up to see MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER standing in his office, his BlackBerry pressed to his ear. He gives them a wave; they all wave back.

¶

Shortly after. The group is up in the Director's office.

ALEXANDRE — (sceptical) So if I understand this correctly, you're saying these philosophical oscillations that take place when you look at a work of art are similar to the misdirections, translations, and transformations of a magic trick? But obviously it's more pronounced in an illusion than in a mere work of art—

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (interrupting) Ah, no. Now, in art it's even more potent. Visually, the artwork is the same object. But it's observed in the immediate, in the here and now. If, in a magic trick, a man disappears and then instantly reappears in exactly the same place, what would people say?

LITTLE GIRL — They'd say the magician was taking the piss.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER laughs as the girl's mother scolds her for using such language.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (chuckling) In art, what's incredible is that we're able to shift from one viewpoint to another—just like that!—and yet we still believe. No magician could ever achieve that. It's beyond magic. It's a structure of thought, one that is moved by historical radiations, by philosophical emanations, (He smacks his hands

together.) by spiritual prognostications, by extraterrestrial visitations, by—

ALEXANDRE — (jabbing his Biro against his notepad) Come now, Mister Director. With all this talk about art and magic, you have to admit that what you're really talking about is misdirection. Be it writers, artists, philosophers, magicians—it's about how they lie to us, isn't it?

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — A lie insinuates deception. Whereas, with a work of art, the viewer convinces himself, deceives himself. It's far beyond the notion of a simple lie.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER turns to face the glass window with its stunning view of Paris laid out before him and, addressing the city as much as the small group behind him, speaks with force and verve.

For a long time now everyone has expressed themselves using the same preformatted language, the same readymade notions. What I'm trying to do with my exhibitions is to point outside of the world of art. Science fiction, quantum mechanics, string theory—these all offer structural grids we can apply to the world of art; grids that shed a new light on what is being questioned in art. Take the most classic example: ontology. For over a century, philosophers have been banging their heads together trying to solve this one. Each philosopher advances his own theory, but none can agree on the solution.

Turning to face the group, MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER smiles and addresses the LITTLE GIRL.

Whereas, in science fiction, any kid can understand the essential difference between a human being and an alien that has taken the form of a human being. Quite often in science-fiction films, what we had considered throughout the movie to be a human being is revealed to be a replicant of some kind. Nothing has changed visually, the replicant still has the same appearance. But, in the viewer's imagination, he's completely transformed: In a millisecond he's gone from a human being to an entirely alien creature.⁵⁵

LITTLE GIRL — (frowning) Wait a minute. Something's not right here.

MOTHER — Shhhh! Be quiet while the Director's talking.

LITTLE GIRL — No, it's not right. He doesn't sound right.

MOTHER — I'm warning you! Let the gentleman speak.

LITTLE GIRL — (*petulantly*) But Mummy, it's not right! He sounded different before.

MOTHER — What do you mean?

LITTLE GIRL — Well, earlier he was speaking French with a Swiss-French accent.

MOTHER — Well, he is Swiss my dear. Isn't that right, Monsieur le Directeur?

LITTLE GIRL — (*whispering in her mother's ear*) Yeah, but now... Now he's speaking Swiss-French... (*She eyes MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER suspiciously.*) with a French accent!

MOTHER — (*apologetically*) I'm so sorry, Monsieur le Directeur. Sometimes my daughter's head fills with the most fanciful ideas.

She cuffs the LITTLE GIRL over the head.

LITTLE GIRL — Ow!

MOTHER — She reads too many books. It can't be good for her. What were you saying?

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — (*a little shocked*) What was I saying? Um... Er... Oh yes. Science fiction. Why is this transformation possible in science fiction? Well, because it is a belief system in which anything is possible. If we can come to understand this filter—this system of thought that is at play in science fiction—and apply it to the world of art, it could induce new behaviours, new languages, new perspectives, even. We'd be able to see things in a completely new way. Olivier Mosset said: "If we can see a work of art as a work of art, then the rest of the world can stay the way it is." If we can come to see a monochromatic painting as just a monochrome, then perhaps we can come to see things for what they actually are. Perhaps reality can stay as it is—that is to say, unencumbered by all these filters. If you will permit me, I'd like to show you a little example of how we might do this.

He runs his finger along the spines of the catalogues piled up on the floor of his office. Finding the volume he's looking for, he leafs through it and tears out first one page and then another. He holds up an image in either hand. One of the ladies at the front of the group takes out her glasses and peers at the pictures.

SECOND OLD LADY — Why, this one's a photograph of a parrot perched on a branch. And the second one—bring it a little closer, would you?—oh yes, I see, it's a drawing of a parrot. Its wings are all outstretched. Very pretty. (*To her granddaughter.*) Isn't that pretty, my love?

The Director clicks his fingers and the YOUNG CURATOR, again as if appearing out of nowhere, immediately brings over a small tube of glue. Together they stick the images to one another and then slide a thin wooden pole between the two. MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER lifts up the sign, showing the photograph of the parrot perched on its branch. With a flick of his wrist the page reverses, showing instead the drawing of the parrot, wings wide.

MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER — You see, every work of art is ultimately an object of belief. If we don't believe in it, we remain outside of it, observing it simply from a materialist standpoint.

Placing the pole between his two palms, with a quick motion he flips the image back to the photograph. Flip. Now back to the drawing.

Works of art are fascinating because we're constantly obliged to undergo this back and forth between the idealistic (*Flip.*) and the materialistic (*Flip.*)

As he speaks, he begins rubbing his hands together, the two images changing more and more quickly.

This constant transfer between (*Flip.*) one of two (*Flip.*) philosophical (*Flip.*) sides... (*His voice begins to rise.*) This (*Flip.*) constant (*Flip.*) oscillation!

Sweat beading on his brow, he twirls the stick faster and faster, switching between the image of the bird at rest and the bird with wings outstretched. A floating form appears, flapping its wings, a parrot seemingly flying in the paper.

(*Voice bellowing.*) It's neither this (*Flip.*) nor that (*Flip.*) nor this (*Flip.*) nor that (*Flip.*) nor—

All of a sudden the image of the parrot seems to break out of the paper. The MOTHER screams as now, a live parrot, its wings beating furiously, ricochets off the glass walls of the office and falls into an old lady's lap. Panic ensues. Chairs are knocked over as the cawing creature is batted away with hats and umbrellas. It flaps about the room, desperately looking for an escape. There! A window, just half open, a gap. It makes a beeline for it. And there it goes, already now little more than a speck on the horizon, pumping its wings to get height. A little dot heading towards the Seine. The group presses up against the window, watching the little flapping shape, their fingers leaving grubby marks on the glass. The LITTLE GIRL speaks, her breath leaving a damp foggy patch on the window pane.

LITTLE GIRL — So that's where the bird was!

Down below the Director's office, another figure with a remarkably similar appearance to Marc-Olivier Wahler leaves the building. He greets one of the guards as he steps out the door. We note that he speaks French with a heavy Swiss-French accent.

* An exhibition programme of the Palais de Tokyo (May 29th–August 24th 2008).

† Translator's note: "Five Billion Years."

‡ See Isaac Newton (1643–1727): "The Unmoved Mover;" Albert Einstein (1879–1955): Special Theory of Relativity.

§ Exhibitions programme held at the Palais de Tokyo. "Spy Numbers" (May 28th–September 20th 2009); "Gakona" (February 12th–May 3rd 2009); "M, Nouvelles du Monde Renversé" (February 1st–May 6th 2007).

** See Tom Friedman, *Untitled (A Curse)*, 1992.

†† Micol Assaël (born 1979), Italian artist; Ceal Floyer (born 1968), British artist.

‡‡ See Christopher Priest, *The Prestige*, London: Touchstone (Simon & Schuster), 1995.

§§ See *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009): an English-Canadian-American science fiction TV series developed by Ronald D. Moore and David Eick in which a cybernetic race known as the Cylons, created by mankind, are nearly indistinguishable from human beings.

LEAH KELLY



We see Alexandre's taxi pull up outside of The Rockefeller Institute. Stepping out onto the treacherous ice, ALEXANDRE steadies himself against the cab's yellow door, staring up at the impressive edifice. As his breath hangs in the air, his eyes run over the motley collection of brutal modernist housing blocks topped by romantic towers, endless walkways, and sky-paths, that make up the institute. A little later, he is being led through Leah Kelly's laboratory, a vast messy place full of bubbling potions and vials. In a large hall we see enormous glass tanks in which the brains of elephants float, held in perfect equilibrium by the liquid. There are stacks upon stacks of cages filled with scurrying creatures that let off little trumpets and squeaks as he walks past. In some cages, the laboratory mice have grown to preternatural sizes. In others, we spy miniature elephants no more than a few inches high, stampeding across the metal floor of their cages.

ALEXANDRE

Do you think that consciousness might be beyond rational explanation?

LEAH KELLY

Well, some people do believe that and in fact some scientists too. But I don't agree with them and it actually irritates me when people say, "Oh the world is amazing and some things aren't meant to be understood."

ALEXANDRE

Some people say the same thing about art, that it operates somewhere beyond language. Can't anything that we experience be contemplated using language?

LEAH KELLY

I don't think I agree with that either. Something that interests me for example is a phenomenon termed non-conscious perception. There's research going on right now that seems to indicate that there are things that we perceive that are clearly beyond language. And so—if there are phenomena that we aren't even aware we're perceiving, then how can we articulate them? How can we discuss them? And I think intentionally or not, art really taps into and exploits that.

ALEXANDRE

But then maybe consciousness itself is an illusion? Perhaps we're more like a jolly man sitting on an elephant thinking he's controlling the animal but in reality he's simply being led about by its questing trunk? For example, if I pick up this oyster and start eating it, even though it's not mine, (*He takes out a salt and pepper shaker and starts tapping some out onto a slimy grey mass sitting on a plate on a trolley.*) I'd say that it means I'm not actively deciding to steal it, rather that my unconscious mind really wants it, or more accurately (*He gazes at it lovingly and smacks his lips appreciatively.*)—mmm...—my tongue decides that I must at all costs taste it and

then my consciousness informs me later that that's what I intended to do all along.

ALEXANDRE brings the slimy mass up to his mouth and is about to swallow it when LEAH KELLY knocks it away from his mouth.

LEAH KELLY

Alex! Stop it! That's not an oyster!

ALEXANDRE

Yuck! (*He wipes his mouth with his sleeve.*) Horrid thing must have been off.



LEAH KELLY picks it off the floor with a pair of tweezers, placing it onto a tray marked "Mouse Brains."

LEAH KELLY

I think that consciousness is different from free will or decision-making. I think in the future we might come to be aware of the fact that we're not making these decisions, and yet that that's still a form of consciousness. I remember at school the day they showed us the periodic table for the first time. All those elements lined up so perfectly, it was utterly magic to me. And I very naively thought that, if I can understand these things, then I can also understand what constitutes me. After all, at the end of the day, I'm just made up of these bits of carbon

and sodium and hydrogen. But at the same time what confused me as a kid was why could I hold my breath? You hear about all these actions that the body does, and it perplexes me to this day why some are voluntary and some are involuntary. There's anecdotal evidence of Indian mystics who through some mechanism that we don't yet understand are able, at will, to almost stop their own hearts. I wonder if at some distant point in the future we might discover a way to unlock the controls for these kinds of actions. Imagine one day I wake up and think to myself, "Leah, you're not feeling so great today, why don't you just release some serotonin, that'll perk you up!"

ALEXANDRE

Oh right. I understand. It's as if the brain already controls the body but it just doesn't realize it yet.

LEAH KELLY

I don't think it's going to be as simple as the brain controlling the body in terms of behavioural output and the body controlling the brain in terms of sensory input. I think we'll see more and more how intertwined these things are. For instance, one thing that's fascinating is the manner in which we read other people's facial expressions. There's this experiment by Andreas Hennenlotter* where people were shown photos of various facial expressions and they were asked to guess what that face was feeling. And depending on the expression shown, people are amazingly good at guessing correctly. We know that the area of the brain that is important for emotion, face-processing, and fear-conditioning is the amygdala. And people that have damage to this part here, (*She moves close to one of the giant elephant brains floating in a tank and points to the creature's amygdala.*) have great difficulty reading people's facial expressions. Now in this experiment they videoed the subjects as they were performing this task. And looking at the slowed down video footage they could see that the subjects' own faces were very quickly mimicking the expression of the people in the photographs. Now—and this is the fascinating part— are you listening?

ALEXANDRE

(distractedly)

What? Oh yes! (*He presses his face up against one of the vitrines.*) These elephant brains are really strange.

LEAH KELLY *switches off the lights in the laboratory and puts a torch under her face.*

LEAH KELLY

A lot of people in the greater Los Angeles area have had Botox injections to their face. This means that they can't move all of the muscles in their face. (*She pulls her features into a gruesome expression.*) So when they did the

experiment with the photographs and the emotions, the Botox people had great difficulty in correctly predicting the emotion in another person's face.

ALEXANDRE

How frightening.

LEAH KELLY

In fact, what's interesting is that their own ability to feel many of these emotions was also muted. Including being frightened.

ALEXANDRE

So when they saw themselves in the mirror, their natural inclination to be terrified by their own grotesquely twisted visages was muted. Do you think all that might be related to the fact that, say, (*He reaches into his pocket and takes out a tennis ball and starts throwing it up in the air and catching it.*) when you observe someone else throwing a ball, or playing tennis—

At this point ALEXANDRE tries to catch the ball, but it slips from his fingers and bounces away. There's the sound of breaking glass, and a small group of white laboratory mice scurry past on the floor.

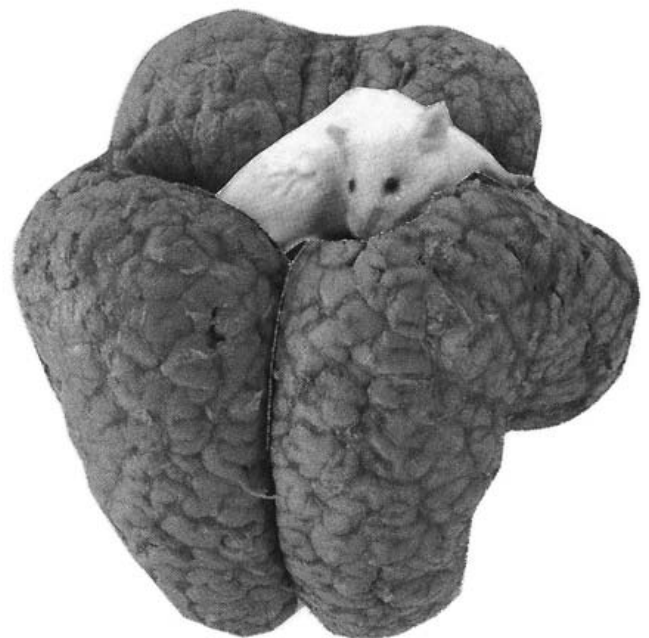
Your brain is stimulated in the same region as if you were doing that action yourself?

A TECHNICIAN runs up.

TECHNICIAN

(out of breath)

You haven't... You haven't seen any mice come this way?



ALEXANDRE *shrugs his shoulders to the TECHNICIAN as LEAH KELLY drags him by his sleeve, hurrying them off to another part of the laboratory.*

LEAH KELLY

You're talking about the mirror neurones.

ALEXANDRE

Yeah. Did you know that the same part of the brain that would tell your arm to move is activated when you see someone else do it? It's as if—

LEAH KELLY

(interrupting)

Yes, yes. As if you understand the external world by observing your fellow human beings. Vilayanyur Ramachandran[†] is a big fan of this—you see, maybe evolution was more Lamarckian[‡] than we thought, because the rate at which we acquire skills through mimicry is so much quicker than we would do so by learning it ourselves. We progress as a species because of these mirror neurones. Something that is incredibly relevant to this—and we're kind of thrown into the question yet again of what is consciousness—is the condition of people in comas or with locked-in syndrome. They can't speak, they don't respond to stimuli, and yet when you say to them "Imagine you're playing tennis," then you can look at their brain and their motor cortex lights up. And it's as if they're actually playing tennis, as if they were really... conscious.

ALEXANDRE

So in their minds, they're playing tennis. Even if they're not moving around in the bed and they're not really conscious.

At this point ALEXANDRE lies on the floor imitating a catatonic patient. Then gripping an imaginary racquet, still keeping his eyes squeezed shut, he thrashes about in his metaphorical bed, first serving, and then parrying a volley. To each imaginary cut and thrust of the match he adds a loud primal grunt. Before long a group of scientists has gathered about him, each one drawn by curiosity to the source of the commotion. One of them takes out a clipboard and begins to jot down some notes. He writhes about for some time, muttering such things as "forty love" and "are you serious!?" before miraculously cured, he leaps up from his imaginary bed. To a round of applause from the watchers he takes his bows, holding aloft one of the laboratory flasks as if it were a trophy. Turning to LEAH KELLY he continues.

ALEXANDRE

You see what I'd like to know is this: Where are they playing tennis? Is it maybe somewhere else? Is it perhaps in some metaphysical heaven, is it for example the same place where golf balls go when they go in the hole, or

where my left-hand socks disappear to when I can only find the rights? Or—wait a minute—is it the place between places where coins exist before the magician makes them come out again from your ear-hole?

¶



A little while later, LEAH KELLY is sat in front of a machine, looking through a microscope as she measures the current passing through a neurone. ALEXANDRE is looking about the laboratory, picking up books and sticking his fingers in test tubes.

ALEXANDRE

Leah.

LEAH KELLY

Yeah?

ALEXANDRE

(lifting up a vial and peering through it, his eye hugely distorted by the glass)

Do you think the brain makes assumptions about the external world that it shouldn't?

LEAH KELLY

(still looking through her microscope)

I guess the brain does make assumptions about the information it's receiving. A lot of people—especially in psychology—are looking into this right now; deciphering what is really there and what your brain tells you is there, and what you're paying attention to, and how you colour what you see all the time. The human mind is there to help us live our lives. It's very good at making calculations, helping us to do things efficiently, and sometimes that means it's got the law of physics right, but sometimes it doesn't get them right, but usually that error benefits us in a way that relates to our environment.

ALEXANDRE

I don't understand, how can the brain getting things wrong be good?

LEAH KELLY

Take for example birds of prey. When a bird is hunting over a body of water and it sees a fish, as it's diving, its brain automatically makes a calculation based on the refractive index of the water. You know if you place a stick in a glass of water—

A technician arrives with a step ladder. He climbs up it and starts fishing around in the elephant brain tank for a tennis ball that bobs on the surface.

The stick appears to bend. Well the bird of prey is able to calculate where the fish really is despite the optical illusion. It doesn't even see the illusion; it simply knows where the fish really is rather than where it appears to be. We on the other hand wouldn't be able to do that.

ALEXANDRE

I don't think that's quite right, Leah. After all, we can think about it abstractedly. I mean if we had a piece of paper on us we could scribble down some calculations—

LEAH KELLY

As you're diving through the air?

ALEXANDRE

No, I mean. Well the paper would flap about a lot in the wind—granted, and it'd get pretty soggy very quickly. But... But I think you'll find what I'm saying here is fascinating. The mind by seeing the optical illusion correctly is actually fooled. The fish is at a different place in time and space than it appears to be. You know

what? I think it might be a little like in an illusion. *(He puts out his hands and starts waggling the ends of his fingers in front of LEAH KELLY's eyes.)* When you're watching a magic trick, most of the time, it appears that the laws of causality, or the laws of motion, have been broken.

LEAH KELLY

(slapping his hands away)

I don't think it's to do with the laws of physics. I think when it comes to illusions, you don't want to be talking about the laws of physics, or calculations, or anything like your brain is being challenged in that way. It's really more about attention. What is it that your brain chooses to pay attention to? Think of everything that your brain could be paying attention to right now and chooses not to *(She gestures to the myriads of bubbling vials and flasks and the glorious view of Manhattan through the window.)* I don't think illusionists try to convince the brain that the laws of physics have changed. Instead, they just shield certain things that would explain how the dove came to reappear in the cage.

ALEXANDRE

Wait a minute. I don't follow. Earlier you were talking about unconscious perception and you said the brain sees everything but isn't consciously aware of it.

LEAH KELLY

Well not necessarily just the brain, I think the body does too, and your senses as well.

ALEXANDRE

So, if I'm watching an illusionist, my brain might actually see the sleight of hand, but it chooses not to tell me? Is my brain allowed to lie to me? I don't know about that. I'm pretty sure that I'm the boss of my own brain. *(He lifts up his finger and starts jabbing it at his forehead.)* Or that my brain is my own brain's boss. Wait—I'm confused. Or no! I should say rather, my brain is confused, because I for one know for certain that that's rubbish.

LEAH KELLY

(laughing)

Alex. Listen, there's a very famous study that took place at Harvard⁸ in which the participants were asked to watch a video and they were given a task. It was a basketball match, and they were asked to count how many passes were made between the members of the team. And so they're fixed to the screen counting the passes, "23... 24... 32... 54...", when right in the middle of this, a man in a gorilla suit walks onto the centre of the court, beats his chest and walks off.

ALEXANDRE

Does that usually happen in a basketball game?

LEAH KELLY

No, of course not.

ALEXANDRE

Well I don't know, Americans and their sports. I saw an ice-hockey match once—

LEAH KELLY

Listen. When the researchers asked the participants afterwards, none of them had seen the man in the gorilla suit. When they watched the same tape afterwards, they were gobsmacked. There he was walking right across the screen. So I think this is what illusionists are playing on. My friend Hakwan Lau who's a colleague of mine at Columbia studies this using imaging. He's looking at attention: How you perceive something, and then how sure you are that you actually perceived it. And now the reverse: being sure you saw something you didn't, which is a hallucination right? People in the late stages of Parkinson's actually begin to hallucinate and it's thought to be because of the medication they're given. Now with the people who are schizophrenic it's because they have very high dopamine levels. But the people who have Parkinson's, they themselves know that they're not crazy. So the question is: Does the brain behave differently when it knows it's hallucinating? So I think that yes, you are complicit when you watch a magic trick, but not in the same way that you're complicit for example when you're watching a film or a play or a—

ALEXANDRE

Wait a minute.

LEAH KELLY

Yeah, because I think that when you're in the middle of a trick, you're genuinely shocked.

ALEXANDRE

But imagine this situation—I know you're a theatre sceptic—but imagine you're in a cold, clammy theatre in the Lower East Side. That you've been taken along by Alex to endure *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—a play you've seen a million times. You're stifling a cough and the woman you're sat next to has just farted and it smells awful. You're completely outside of the imaginative experience, and then suddenly for a moment, you're completely transported and you don't see the real world, and it becomes this other imaginative reality.

LEAH KELLY

No, but I don't think I do! I think sometimes when I'm watching these things that there's something different going on to an illusion. When a trick is really good—I've seen some in New York actually—I'm genuinely flummoxed, the surprise is genuine. Just as in life, when someone's telling a joke, the amusement is genuine.

With tricks, the spectator knows something fishy is going on, but it's still playing on their assumptions.

ALEXANDRE

Is it like how, if you take a ball from a small child and place it behind a cushion, they lose interest because they don't understand that the ball still exists? **

LEAH KELLY

Personally, I think it's probably easier to do a trick in a situation that you've seen lots of times because the viewer is going to make assumptions based on what they know about the world already. When you remove the ball from the kid, the kid doesn't think it exists anymore because it hasn't been in that situation many times. But you're going to use situations and objects and laws that your audience is really familiar with because it's the brain's job to fill in the gaps. So if the illusionist leaves a gap, the brain will do the filling in for it. Perhaps it's a little like when you're telling a story. Even if you deviate from the conventional formula, the listener tends to piece together the fragmented parts into a coherent whole, and they inevitably make assumptions about the bits you leave out.

* Andreas Hennenlotter, Christian Dresel, Florian Castrop, Andres O. Ceballos-Baumann, Afra M. Wohlschläger, and Bernhard Haslinger, "The Link between Facial Feedback and Neural Activity within Central Circuitries of Emotion—New Insights from Botulinum Toxin-Induced Denervation of Frown Muscles", *Cerebral Cortex*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, 2009, pp. 537-542.

† Indian neuroscientist (born 1951).

‡ Jean-Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet, Chevalier de la Marck (1744-1829): Inheritance of acquired characteristics.

§ Daniel J. Simons, Christopher F. Chabris, "Gorillas in our Midst: Sustained Inattentional Blindness for Dynamic Events", *Perception*, Vol. 28, 1999, pp. 1059-1074.

** Jeanne L. Shinsky, "The Sound of Darkness: Why Do Auditory Cues Aid Infants' Search for Objects Hidden by Darkness but Not by Visible Occluders?", *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2008, p. 1715-1725.



MICHEL GONDRY



MICHEL GONDRY

→ see pages 25-35

The TGV carriage rocks gently back and forth, the French countryside streaming past the window. ALEXANDRE draws a sleeping-mask down over his brow and shifts about in his seat in a vain attempt to make himself comfortable. An awful hacking sound, however, keeps him from sleeping. Raising his mask he glares at the passenger seated across from him. A short bald old man, he is reading a Spanish magazine and clutching a handkerchief. The man wheezes and begins another coughing fit, burying his mouth in the white fabric. ALEXANDRE twists and turns in his seat and, despite his discomfort, somehow manages to doze off for just a moment. He jolts awake as a hand taps his shoulder.

MICHEL GONDRY — Tickets, please. Do you have your ticket, sir?

ALEXANDRE fumbles in his pocket for his ticket and hands it over to the inspector. The man is wearing an SNCF[†] uniform but it doesn't fit him properly. He looks very familiar.

ALEXANDRE — Excuse me... Are you Michel Gondry?

MICHEL GONDRY — No. (*He points to the old bald man.*) That's Michel Gondry.

PABLO PICASSO[‡] — (*handing his ticket to the inspector*) That's right.

ALEXANDRE looks at the old man. He doesn't look anything like Michel Gondry though his resemblance to Pablo Picasso is uncanny. MICHEL GONDRY takes ALEXANDRE and PABLO PICASSO's tickets.

MICHEL GONDRY — Would you like to see a magic trick?

ALEXANDRE — (*confused*) A magic trick? I... Er... OK.

MICHEL GONDRY — Do you know, Alexandre, that a magic trick consists of three parts?

ALEXANDRE — Yes, that's true. Actually, I know all about this. You see, the first part of a trick is called "the pledge." It's when

you present the situation, or a person, or an object.

MICHEL GONDRY — OK. So now I will present the objects.

MICHEL GONDRY holds up a train ticket in each hand, turning them over so all the passengers can see both sides.

You can see that these are real tickets. Totally authentic. (*He bites one.*) Solid tickets. They taste very real.

ALEXANDRE — Yes! That's right. Now the second part is called "the turn." It's when you do the magic bit, like making them vanish in a clever way.

MICHEL GONDRY — Exactly! Now I will make them vanish in a very clever way.

He takes out his inspector's hole punch and begins punching little squares of paper out of the tickets.

Look, I'm making them vanish! Abracadabra! Kazam!

MICHEL GONDRY punches the tickets furiously until all that's left are a few threadbare strands.

ALEXANDRE — (*annoyed*) You just cut them up! That's just stupid.

MICHEL GONDRY — You're right. (*He takes off his cap and looks into it soulfully, as if all his troubles might be found inside.*) I'm no good at being a ticket inspector. I never wanted to be one. I always dreamt I would do something else, something creative. (*He waves his hand.*) Not this.

MICHEL GONDRY slumps down into the seat next to PABLO PICASSO and stares disconsolately out the TGV's window. The sky is a strange, brooding purple. Between the trees flickering past, we catch glimpses of a helicopter flying over the forest carrying some kind of statue suspended below it from a chain.

So what about this third part of the magic trick?

ALEXANDRE — Oh yes, "the prestige." It's the part where the magician makes the dove reappear. Or—

PABLO PICASSO begins to cough uncontrollably.

Are you OK? (*Continuing.*) Or he puts the woman he sawed in half back together again...

MICHEL GONDRY — (*offering PABLO PICASSO a bottle*) Here, have some water.

The grateful man takes a sip and then lets out an almighty cough. From his mouth splutters a fountain of little bits of paper, cascading all over the table. ALEXANDRE peels a piece off his face and inspects it closely.

ALEXANDRE — (*excitedly*) Hey, this is my ticket! How did you...?

MICHEL GONDRY, smiling, reaches over, takes the little piece of paper, and hands it to PABLO PICASSO. Silently, the old man accepts it and puts it back with all the other little pieces that he's coughed up. PABLO PICASSO starts arranging them into groupings on the table. One of the shapes looks like a guitar. ALEXANDRE and MICHEL GONDRY watch the great master as he works.

MICHEL GONDRY — I think the three parts of a magic trick are a little like the formula for a narrative, "the prestige" being the epilogue where we end up coming back to some kind of normality. Both a story and a magic trick are a little like our journey on this train; by the end we feel like we've been through a certain number of stages—a certain number of stations, as it were—before finally arriving at a place similar to the one from which we departed, but also one that has been changed.

ALEXANDRE — But what if we don't understand what just happened? I mean, I didn't really get how you did your trick just now—

MICHEL GONDRY — It's like how we recall a dream. We always turn dreams into stories so that they can make sense.

He leans over the table to help PABLO PICASSO arrange the little bits of ticket. His fingers move swiftly, dragging fragments together into the shape of a parrot. The paper creature begins to move in a jerky manner, plucking at the strings of the paper guitar with its beak. We hear the sound of bluegrass music.

In reality, neither magic tricks or dreams are logical experiences, so we tend to try and piece them together as if they were a film. The brain interprets only fragments of reality and uses them to construct a continuity, and magic plays on that. Our physical senses perceive things continuously. But the brain only stores fragments.

ALEXANDRE — Why's that?

MICHEL GONDRY — (*smiling*) Because otherwise it would never have enough room to record everything! (*He knocks on PABLO*

PICASSO's skull with his knuckles and it makes a hollow wooden sound.) So the brain concentrates on the changes—on the things that might affect us. (He points out the window.) Things that are moving away from us, for example, are treated differently from things that are moving towards us.

The train is passing over a valley dominated by a green river. Hovering above the water is the helicopter. Bobbing up and down midstream is a little boat containing two figures. Reaching his arm out toward the window, MICHEL GONDRY closes his fingers around the shape of the helicopter. Carefully grasping it between thumb and forefinger, he plucks it out of the sky and brings it into the train carriage.

ALEXANDRE — (leaning in with wonder) Can I see that?

MICHEL GONDRY hands ALEXANDRE the little helicopter which is making a pathetic whiny sound. Dangling below the tiny machine on a silver thread is a spider.

MICHEL GONDRY — The brain goes to enormous effort to create a continuity within the world of sensations and feelings around us. To help it do that, it blurs certain inputs—and that's what magic plays with. Take optical illusions, for example. If we analyze what's going on in our heads even just a little, we might find that illusion is, in fact, the normal state, and what we perceive as reality is the fabrication.

ALEXANDRE brings the small helicopter up to his eye to inspect it more closely but it slips from his fingers and falls under the table.

ALEXANDRE — Shit!

He ducks under the table to look for it.

ALEXANDRE — (muttering from beneath the table) I can't find it.

ALEXANDRE lifts his head to find himself in a film studio, sitting in a small rowing boat with MICHEL GONDRY. Behind them, a large blue bedsheet is stretched across a frame; facing them, a film camera on a tripod. PABLO PICASSO stands behind it, his eye pressed against the viewfinder. He motions for them both to lean in closer.

MICHEL GONDRY — When we claim to show the eye nothing out of the ordinary, it doesn't perceive any trickery and everything seems normal. But if there's then some kind of transformation, it will feel like something's aberrant. What I like to do in my films and videos is to flip it—to make the thing that feels like an aberration seem real. So I go

back a step and make a transformation towards the original state, which is not at all aberrant. The brain doesn't question the point of departure, even though that's where the real optical trick is.

ALEXANDRE — I'm sorry, you've totally lost me there.

MICHEL GONDRY — (to the cameraman) Are we both in the frame?

PABLO PICASSO — (grinning) Yes, very nice!

MICHEL GONDRY — (turning to ALEXANDRE) For example, if I wanted to transport you to a different room, I'd film you in front of a blue screen and use it to insert a new background. When the shot begins, nobody's wondering if the image has been manipulated because we're looking at a totally ordinary situation. Go take a look in the camera and see for yourself.

ALEXANDRE gets up out of the boat and strides over to where PABLO PICASSO is standing. He closes one eye and looks through the camera. He sees MICHEL GONDRY sitting in the rowboat, who waves to him. Behind the French director, where before there had been just a blue screen, is an outdoor sporting goods shop. Kayaks are mounted on racks; shoppers try on life-jackets. ALEXANDRE opens his other eye. MICHEL GONDRY is still sitting there in a rowboat in front of the blue screen. He looks again through the camera at the scene in the shop. A SALES ASSISTANT with a ponytail wearing a fleece top approaches MICHEL GONDRY sitting in the boat.

SALES ASSISTANT — I'm sorry sir, you're not allowed to sit in the boat. I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

MICHEL GONDRY — But we are just shooting a little film. We will be very quick.

SALES ASSISTANT — If you don't get out sir, I will call security.

MICHEL GONDRY makes to get up and step out of the boat. But he suddenly springs to a rack, grabs an oar and jumps back in the little boat.

MICHEL GONDRY — Quick, Alexandre! Run!

SALES ASSISTANT — (angry) Hey!

ALEXANDRE sprints toward the boat and jumps in. PABLO PICASSO tugs on a rope and the blue screen falls into the water of a large river. The blue sheet drifts away from the boat, carried away by the strong current. They are right in the centre of a large surge,

far from either bank. MICHEL GONDRY hands ALEXANDRE an oar.

ALEXANDRE — What on earth just happened?

MICHEL GONDRY — We tricked the guy in the shop and stole his boat! Also: We transformed from the aberrant state to the real one.

ALEXANDRE dips his hand into the water and lifts it out, gazing at the droplets running down his fingers.

MICHEL GONDRY — You're looking for the details that ring false, but you're not going to find any because there's no trickery here. This is all real. It's the shop that was fake.

Another boat pulls up alongside them with PABLO PICASSO on board, standing behind a large film camera. He's wearing a fleece and a ponytail wig. He gives them a thumbs-up and grins. All of a sudden his wig is carried off by the gust of an up-draft. ALEXANDRE looks up to see a giant staircase flying through the air, carried along on the end of a long chain by a helicopter.

MICHEL GONDRY — (shouting to make himself heard over the helicopter) In one of the scenes in a film I'm preparing for at the moment, firemen hose so much water through a window that everyone in the building is carried away in a river that floods the staircase. Instead of throwing tons of water down a stairwell, which would be very expensive, I had the idea to build a staircase in a river. (He points to the helicopter that is lowering the stairwell into the flowing river.) So we'd have a real flood of water to which we'd add little bits of staircase.

ALEXANDRE makes out the small shapes of actors running up and down the steps. PABLO PICASSO drifts closer. MICHEL GONDRY stands up in the boat, lifts a bullhorn to his mouth, and shouts.

MICHEL GONDRY — Action! (To ALEXANDRE.)

The viewer, he's going to think the staircase is actually there. He's not going to question the reality of the stairs. The element that's disturbing, that's not normal, is the river. He's going to pay more attention to the river even though it's the only element that's actually real. He will be looking straight at the element that's been tampered with—but he won't see any flaws. And that's my relationship to magic.

He snaps his fingers. ALEXANDRE, MICHEL GONDRY, and PABLO PICASSO are sat in the first-class compartment of an old-fashioned train carriage. River water drips from their

soaking clothes. MICHEL GONDRY wrings out the bottom of his T-shirt. The compartment is small and our three adventurers are pressed up close to the other passengers: two robots—a bushy-bearded STANLEY KUBRICK⁵ and a long-haired CHRIS CUNNINGHAM.⁶ With little plaintive whines, one of the robots edges away from ALEXANDRE as water spools from his suit onto the seat between them.

ALEXANDRE — Illusionists consider performing the deception right in front of the viewer's eyes, without using any misdirection, to be the most elegant form of magic. Do you think it's also more elegant to create a visual effect using analogue rather than digital means?

MICHEL GONDRY — In general, yes. Digital is usually used because it's safer. But the bigger problem I have with it is that it's often used to imitate things that already exist in analog. Digital could be used to do really incredible things, to create images we can barely comprehend—images that feel like they come from another world.

STANLEY KUBRICK — (*stroking his beard thoughtfully*) Hm. And what kind of images would these be?

MICHEL GONDRY — Recently I've been reading novels by an American mathematician and computer scientist called Rudy Rucker⁷. His novel, *Spaceland*⁸ is science fiction but funny at the same time. Riffing off Edwin Abbott's book from 1884, *Flatland*⁹—which is all about a three-dimensional sphere that visits a completely two-dimensional world—, Rucker has spun out a theory about how an object from the fourth dimension would appear if it entered our dimension. Rucker describes how it would be similar to seeing a living being cut into slices, except the slices would be in three dimensions, with volume. These pieces would suddenly evolve from thin air into a super weird shape with hairs coming out of everywhere and guts spiraling around, before disappearing again when the dimension had gone away. Now that is something digital technology could be used to try and create.

PABLO PICASSO has his eyes closed, dreamily imagining this sight. He licks his lips appreciatively. We hear the sound of wind rushing through trees. ALEXANDRE is sat at one of a dozen school desks arranged in a forest clearing. MICHEL GONDRY stands at a large chalkboard, drawing a picture of a brain. Leaves swirl about over the empty desks. The only other pupil is the grinning PABLO PICASSO, who scrunches up a piece of paper and bounces it off the back of MICHEL GONDRY'S head.

MICHEL GONDRY — (*scribbling excitedly on the board with a piece of chalk*) Let's go back to my idea of the brain attempting to create sense from more-or-less coherent fragments. (*He draws two big eyes in front of the brain with images of everyday objects floating down them into the head.*) Throughout the course of the day, we see things that are coherent since they're all part of the same world in which we all participate. But, at night, we dream of a world in which there is only one player—ourselves. (*MICHEL GONDRY sketches a little figure jumping around inside the brain.*) At night, the brain performs some unbelievable gymnastics. I think that it's these mental gymnastics that we perform whilst asleep that allow us to enjoy films, and stories, and books.

ALEXANDRE — (*arm raised to ask a question*) Is this like Freud?¹⁰

MICHEL GONDRY — (*tutting*) Oh no no no no no. It's the opposite of psychoanalytic theory, in fact. We human beings make sense from things that are inherently absurd. Throughout the day, your thoughts will wander, drawing connections between the things you see. (*He draws ALEXANDRE walking along a street in Paris. Behind him is an advert for the DIY shop Bricorama.*) For example, you pass in front of a billboard without even reading it but, still, a single word from the ad will stick with you.

The drawing of the billboard advertises a black, cubic shelf that looks somewhat like a monolith. MICHEL GONDRY circles the words "Cube" and "Bric-" and draws an arrow pointing to the monolith.

You'll keep thinking about this word without even realising it. Anything and everything might trigger a forgotten memory. I truly believe that it's these pieces of reactivated memories that direct our dreams.

ALEXANDRE — In your work you often confuse the world of reality and the world of dreams. Is that a universe better understood by children?

MICHEL GONDRY spins the blackboard over to reveal a fresh side.

MICHEL GONDRY — When we're young, our beliefs are less deeply-rooted than when we're adults. Everything we come across in the world, we're discovering for the very first time. (*He quickly draws the head of an elephant, a mouse, and a child.*) Animals are, to a great extent, already preprogrammed. Most of the things they do, they do without thinking. (*He scribbles respectively 70%, 98%, 62.83185307179586%.*) Us humans, we also

have a certain percentage of our brains pre-programmed so that we can anticipate things and understand certain things about the world; our senses tell us whether something is hard, not hard, that some things are luminous—

ALEXANDRE shifts uncomfortably in his seat, his knees jammed up between the chair and desk.

ALEXANDRE — (*interrupting*) But, in your own work, are you evoking the sense of wonder that Michel Gondry had as a child, or are you revisiting this lost world from the perspective of Michel Gondry the adult?

MICHEL GONDRY — A little of both. What motivates me, Alexandre, is that feeling of discovery we have when we're small. We think everything is possible, that time has no limit. When I was little, I definitely had this feeling of discovering the world for the first time, of looking at everything really closely. But, as one goes through life, the brain becomes encumbered with memories and we begin to see the world as if through a long tunnel. We see only that which is different from what we've already known.

The TGV roars as it speeds through a tunnel. A huge gust of wind lifts a wave of gold and brown leaves that wash over the school desks and blackboard, burying ALEXANDRE, MICHEL GONDRY, and PABLO PICASSO. For just a moment, a few of the leaves dance along the ground before they're caught up in a long sweep. The street cleaner leans on his broom to catch his breath and watches the traffic on the Carrefour de l'Odéon. ALEXANDRE and MICHEL GONDRY sit outside a cafe on the other side of the street. The wind tries to lift the pages of ALEXANDRE'S notes. He quickly puts a cup on top of them to stop them flying off, dripping coffee on his papers as he does.

But now, having grown up a little, I have a desire to talk about ideas—the things I think are right—through my films, through my work.

ALEXANDRE — (*dabbing at the growing stain with a napkin*) What kind of ideas?

MICHEL GONDRY — The universal experiences of being a human being: mortality, love—

ALEXANDRE — (*interrupting*) Are you a romantic?

MICHEL GONDRY — Yes... (*He hesitates a moment.*) I think I am a romantic. Romanticism is a way of being naïve about love. My father always used to call me the "perverted

romantic.” (*He laughs.*) Perhaps it was actually the “naïve pervert...” But to be a romantic involves inhabiting a world that is quite far from reality.

He motions to the people walking along the pavement. A woman on a bicycle passes in front of two adjacent billboards advertising: “Bricorama: Bonnes Affaires, Nouveaux Cubes en Acier Noir” and “Expo Picasso: Le Grand Palais^{†††}, Paris.”

But the romantic’s imagination gives him the impression he’s actually inhabiting the real world. Naïvety is the inability to comprehend the difference between something you’ve imagined and reality. And, perhaps, also believing other people will want to join you in this confusion.

ALEXANDRE — So to be creative is to be naïve?

MICHEL GONDRY — Yes, in a manner of speaking. It’s my way of being creative, at least. But some people’s creativity lies in imagining very complicated concepts—perhaps even *more* complicated than the real world.

ALEXANDRE — Here’s something about which I’ve always been curious. You said, some years ago that “Quantity lasts; quality doesn’t.”

MICHEL GONDRY — (*laughing*) Obviously I can’t be Kubrick... So I have to make up for it in quantity. (*He stirs his coffee thoughtfully.*) But honestly, that statement was more of a provocation than anything else. At the time I was being grouped with directors like Spike Jonze^{†††} and Chris Cunningham. Chris spent some time observing Kubrick towards the end of his life, when he was working on the robots for *A.I.*^{§§§} I think what Chris took away from that was this obsession with perfection...

The sound of coughing... ALEXANDRE leans in closer to better hear MICHEL GONDRY’s words.

But perfection isn’t just superficial: it’s embodied in the quality of the research, in the multiplication of possibilities. For example, in Henri-Georges Clouzot’s^{****} film about Picasso, *Le Mystère Picasso*^{††††}, we see Picasso painting and re-painting the same image fifty times. The final work might give the initial impression it was made in five minutes—(*Again that coughing sound.*)—but, in reality, the incredible effort that is all there in the details... (*A long pause.*) In the accumulations of layers...

ALEXANDRE jolts awake, feeling something brush against his face. Blinking in the strong light, he sees a woman reaching up to grab a bag from the overhead rack. She hands it to the short balding man who thanks her in Spanish before going back to coughing into his handkerchief. ALEXANDRE looks through the window to see the train has arrived at its destination: Paris, Gare de l’Est. Alarmed, he pats his pocket, looking for his train ticket. The Spanish man picks up something off the floor and hands it to him. ALEXANDRE looks at the piece of paper. It’s his ticket. Glancing over it, ALEXANDRE is drawn to the little hole the inspector has punched in the ticket. The perforated hole forms a tiny silhouette. It kind of looks like a parrot. ALEXANDRE holds it up to the light to get a better look. Through the hole he sees the Spanish man perfectly framed, grinning.

* “Train à Grande Vitesse.” French high-speed train service, introduced in 1981.

† French national railway company (SNCF), founded in 1938.

‡ Pablo Ruiz Picasso (1881-1973), Spanish painter, sculptor and draughtsman.

§ 1928-1999. American film director. Lived and worked in the UK.

** Born 1970. British music video and commercials director. Known for his special-effect driven work.

†† Born 1946. Rudolf von Bitter Rucker, known as Ruddy Rucker, is a mathematician, computer programmer and American author of science fiction novels and short-stories.

‡‡ Science fiction novel by Rudy Rucker (New York: Tor Books, 2002).

§§ See *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, an allegorical novel written in 1884 by Edwin Abbott (1838-1926), in which geometrical objects such as the point, the line and two-dimensional shapes are brought to life, and where a lowly square is visited by a sphere from the mysterious third dimension.

*** 1856-1939. Born Sigmund Schlomo Freud. Austrian doctor and neurologist. Founder of the school of psychoanalysis.

††† Well-known Parisian building situated on the Champs-Élysées, in front of the Petit Palais in the 8th arrondissement. With an available exhibition surface of over 77,000 sqm, it regularly hosts important art shows and trade fairs.

‡‡‡ Born 1969. Film, commercials and music video director, and television producer.

§§§ *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), American science fiction film directed by Steven Spielberg, adapted from a novel by Brian Aldis and developed by Stanley Kubrick.

**** 1907-1977. French film-director, screen-writer, and producer.

†††† Documentary by Henri-Georges Clouzot filmed in 1955.

DANNY RUBIN



ALEXANDRE

(rubbing his hands to keep warm)

So, Danny, tell me—what is it that happens at the very beginning of a film—

A PASSERBY *waves to them.*

PASSERBY

Hey, Danny! How you doing?

DANNY RUBIN

Great! How's it going, Gus?

ALEXANDRE

What do you want to establish in the first couple of minutes of a screenplay? What is the audience picking up on, either consciously or unconsciously?

DANNY RUBIN

Well, Alexandre, first of all the audience needs a character to identify with, and then they need to know where this character stands. What is home for them? *(He motions to the streets and shops.)* What's their state of being? What's their idea of normal? That might be an agitated state but, if so—well then, that's where they're at. The story begins when something forces them out of their familiar state. That's when their struggle begins.

OLD LADY

Oh, Mr. Rubin, how wonderful to see you back! And who might this be?

DANNY RUBIN

This is Alexandre. He's a journalist here to do a story on the town.

OLD LADY

Isn't that marvelous? Will you be staying long in Punxsutawney?

ALEXANDRE

No, no, I have to leave this evening.

OLD LADY

(concerned)

But what about the weather, the snowstorm? *(To DANNY RUBIN.)* You're not going to let him drive tonight? They say—

ALEXANDRE

I'll be fine. Journalists love to blow these things out of proportion. It's how we sell papers. I should know.

DANNY RUBIN

Listen, if you have time, I know a great little diner. We could get a coffee before you go.

ALEXANDRE

(looking at his watch)

Ok. Why not?

The Tip Top Cafe. A friendly-looking neighborhood joint. DANNY RUBIN opens the door for ALEXANDRE. Inside, porcelain plates and kitschy memorabilia adorn the walls, and the benches are upholstered in turquoise pleather. The place is heaving with customers.

ALEXANDRE

(stepping through the door)

So this moment when a character finds himself in a changed world—when he realizes he's actually living in a reality-TV show,[†] or that he's been transported back to 1955,[‡] or that he's living the same day over and over again...

DANNY RUBIN

A film presents reality as the character sees it. But that moment of change gives us, the audience, a glimpse of what the character's real needs are—something the character himself doesn't even know yet. *(He points to an empty table.)* Shall we?

They sit down at a booth. ALEXANDRE studies the menu.

DANNY RUBIN

Since we're talking about beginnings, you know how *Groundhog Day*[§] starts in the weather station in Pittsburgh—Phil's normal, or real, world? That's not how I originally wrote it.

ALEXANDRE

It's not?

DANNY RUBIN

I thought that was a not-very-interesting, too conventional place to begin a movie. What I wanted it to start with was something magical! *(His eyes light up.)* Originally the screenplay began with Bill Murray's** character Phil Connors waking up in the bed-and-breakfast as the radio alarm turns on. Phil starts mouthing along perfectly to what the guys on the radio show are saying, and you're thinking—

ALEXANDRE

How does he know what they're about to say?

DANNY RUBIN

Exactly. And he goes downstairs and anticipates what the chubby guy's going to say, what Mrs. Lancaster's going to say. But, Alexandre, I need to ask you a serious question. Do you like waffles?

ALEXANDRE

(thrown off by the sudden turn of the conversation)
Uh... I mean, yes. Absolutely.

A waitress appears.

DORIS THE WAITRESS

What can I do you gentlemen for? Coffee?

ALEXANDRE

Yep.

DORIS THE WAITRESS

Oh, by the way, today's special is—

DANNY RUBIN

Blueberry waffles. I'll take that, and he'll have the same.

DORIS THE WAITRESS

(surprised)

Er... Alright, then!

DANNY RUBIN

(continuing)

So Phil heads outside and he's in a good mood, pulling off his glove as a guy comes up to him, asking, "Phil? Phil?" And Phil slugs him and goes on about his day as if nothing had happened. He plays out the entire day like this, wakes up the next morning and we see it's exactly the same day repeated. Instead of beginning in his normal state, the first act began with him already in the loop, repeating the same day over and over.

ALEXANDRE

So you begin the story in the middle?

DANNY RUBIN

Yep. By starting in the middle, I didn't have to explain the set-up. I didn't have to invent some weird science thing—

ALEXANDRE

(excitedly)

Ooh, ooh! How about a rift in the space-time continuum? Or maybe a gypsy curse, or—

DANNY RUBIN

(wagging his finger)

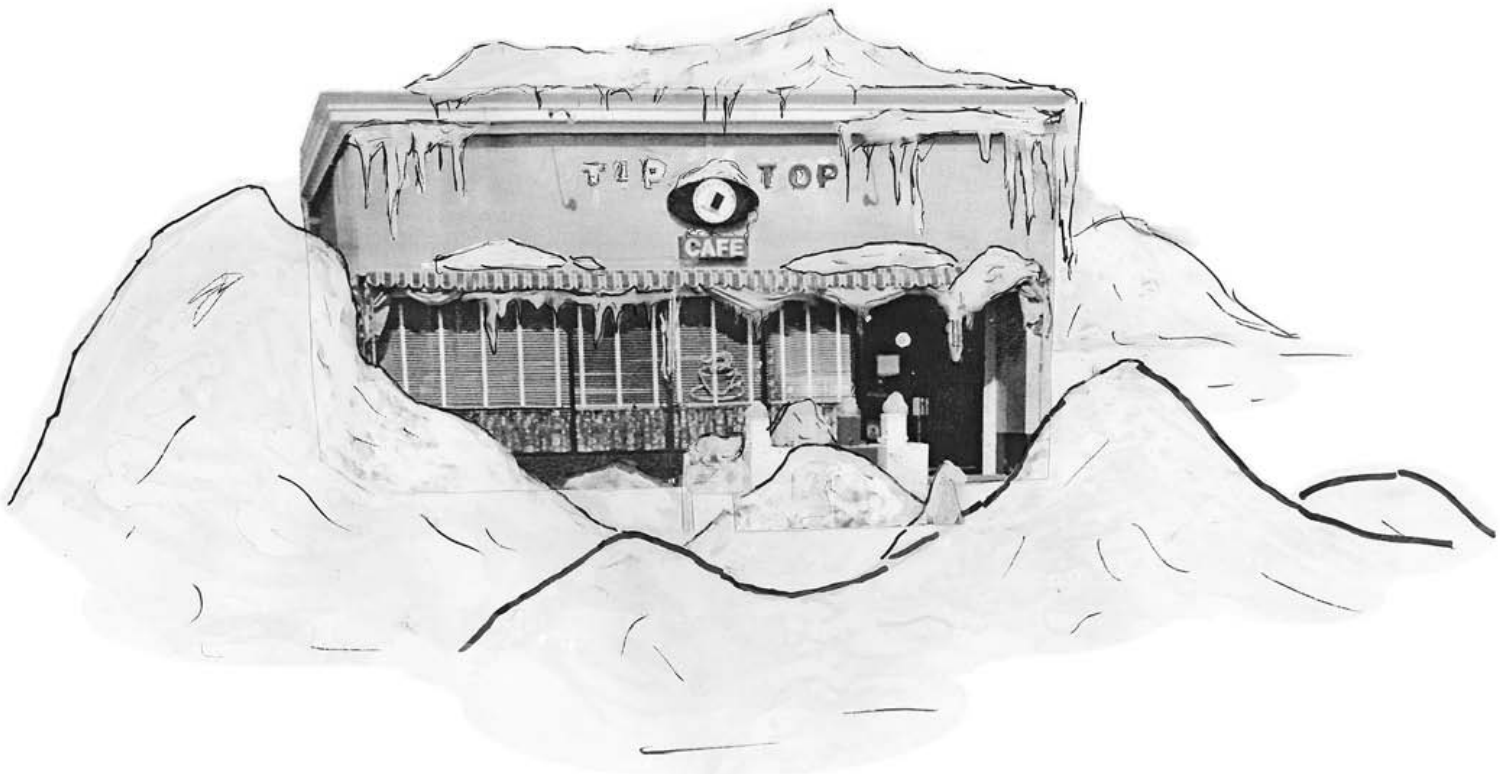
No, no, no. Every single one of those things makes the concept less interesting. Then the story becomes: How does Phil undo the curse? How does he find the machine and outwit the blah-blah-blah and rebuild the whatchamawhosits? And that just seemed so boring. Everything otherwise was so wonderfully existential.

ALEXANDRE

But then how come the film *doesn't* start in the middle?

DANNY RUBIN

Both the studio and the director, Harold Ramis,⁺⁺ said, "You know, Danny, we kind of miss the catharsis of seeing Phil Connors realise, 'Oh my god, I'm stuck in the same day.'" And I was like, "OK, I get that. That's a pleasure, I get it."



DORIS THE WAITRESS *appears with their blueberry waffles. There's a tinkling sound as the door opens. We see people streaming into the diner. The wind is picking up and whipping at the trees. A garbage can rolls down the street past the window. The few flakes of snow from earlier have turned into a thick flurry.*

DORIS THE WAITRESS
(putting down their plates)

Hey, close that door! It's meant to snow out there, not in here.

ALEXANDRE *points at a figure stumbling into the warm cafe. He shakes his jacket, snow cascading off.*

ALEXANDRE
Isn't that...? That man, I recognise him.

DORIS THE WAITRESS
Oh, you mean Dr. Spengler.

ALEXANDRE
(excitedly)
That's Harold Ramis! Hey, Danny! It's Harold Ramis!

DANNY RUBIN
(whispering)

No it's not. That's the neurologist.

ALEXANDRE *looks puzzled. He watches the doctor sit down at a table and order pancakes. ALEXANDRE surveys the other customers coming in through the door. It seems half the town is in the diner, taking refuge from the growing blizzard. There's something very familiar about all of them. And then it hits ALEXANDRE. The ordinary townsfolk chatting away, gulping down smoothies, pointing at the snow piling up in the street—they're the characters from Groundhog Day, living, and breathing, and in the flesh. The diner is already pretty full by the time a television news van pulls up and RITA, LARRY and PHIL CONNORS hurry in from the snowstorm.*

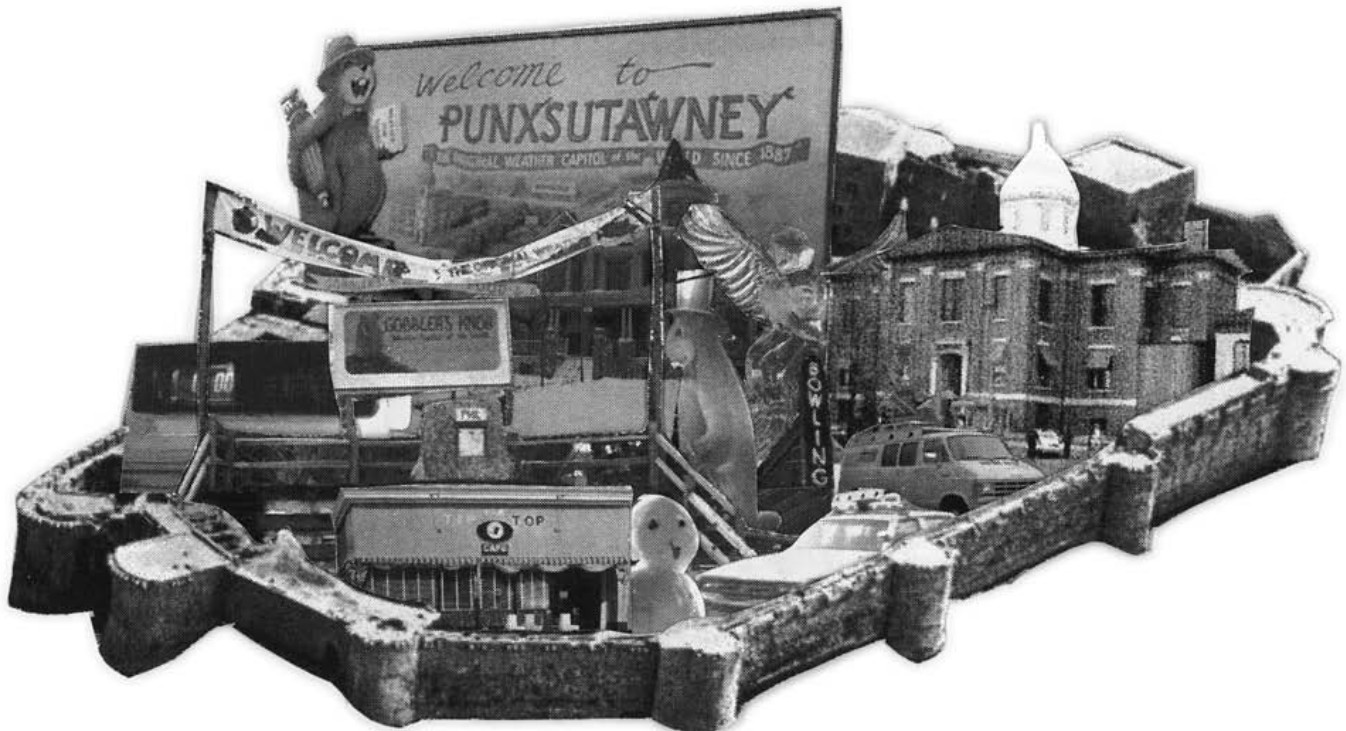
ALEXANDRE
(awestruck)

Danny, what is all this? Are you some kind of god?

DANNY RUBIN
(shrugging his shoulders)

I like to think I'm something even better: I'm a writer.

A little later. ALEXANDRE and DANNY RUBIN have their faces pressed up against the glass windows. Outside,



the town is buried in huge drifts of snow that have already engulfed parked cars and mailboxes. Night is falling and the storm shows no sign of letting up.

DANNY RUBIN

Doesn't look like you'll be getting out of here anytime soon, amigo!

ALEXANDRE

So your original idea for the story was a man who lived forever but you decided that, instead of living through eternity, he'd keep reliving the same day?

DANNY RUBIN

Yep. *(He turns from the window.)* But then I had to choose which day that would be. It happened to be the end of January, so I looked at my calendar and saw Groundhog Day. It turned out to be an incredibly fortuitous choice because of all the reinforcing events that happen on that day.

ALEXANDRE

But why set the story in a small town like this? *(He looks around with disdain etched on his face.)* It's so... I hate to say it but, well... Dull.

DANNY RUBIN

But that's exactly why! Imagine if the movie were set in New York City. There are eight million people. A person could totally live forever there! Punxsutawney, however, would get old fast. And who comes to Punxsutawney? Weathermen come, that's who. And which guys think they know what the future holds? It's perfect! What should I call him? The groundhog's name is Phil—

We hear a radio being tuned.

RALPH

Hey, you guys, quiet!

VOICE OF RADIO ANNOUNCER

...Governor has announced a state of emergency... Interstate shut down... Record snowfall... Advice not to travel, stay inside...

The crowd in the diner groans.

ALEXANDRE

Not only did you place your character in a small town, but he also can't stray very far because of the snowstorm.

DANNY RUBIN

It took me a while to realise how important it was to have him boundaried. In an earlier version of the script I had him trying a lot harder to leave. With every failure, he'd get a little farther. But no matter how much he tried, every day he'd wake up in the B&B at 6:00 am.

ALEXANDRE

So often in the final movie his actions are implied, not seen. In one scene, Phil Connors and Rita, who's played by Andie MacDowell,^{††} are throwing cards into a hat, and she says, "I'm terrible at this. How come you're so good?" To which he replies, "Six months, four or five hours a day."

DANNY RUBIN

It's amazing how little it takes to get information across in a screenplay.

ALEXANDRE

Do you think that perhaps the most elegant form of filmmaking is to say as little as possible? So that the audience imagines more of the story than they see?

¶

Days later. Drifts of snow press up against the windows. Wrapped in blankets and coats, customers are sprawled out on benches and chairs, dozing. PHIL CONNORS, RITA and LARRY are clutching cups of coffee, huddled together in a semicircle around a stubbled, tired-looking DANNY RUBIN.

DANNY RUBIN

They say the more you cut, the better things get. It's very depressing to think that if you cut everything it would be perfect! It's hard to attribute any value to the writer in that scenario. Then again, if you're forever trying to trim the story down, where do you even begin?

RITA

My mother always used to say, "Start at the beginning."

DANNY RUBIN

But what constitutes a beginning? Everything that happens to us is just a little point somewhere along the line of a bigger story. Perhaps my proverb is, "Don't start at the beginning, start in the middle."

A figure emerges from a pile of blankets next to DANNY RUBIN.

ALEXANDRE

(rubbing his eyes and yawning)

Maybe there are only two types of film: ones where you want to know *what* will happen, and the other ones where you want to know *how* it happened?

DANNY RUBIN

Those are the only two ? *(Laughs.)* I have my students do a character exercise in which they must divide the world into two types, because how many times have we heard that? "There's only two kinds of people in the world..."

RITA

Foxes and squirrels!

LARRY

(raising his eyebrow)

Men and women.

ALEXANDRE

(teeth chattering)

People who are cold and people who are freezing.

DANNY RUBIN

Exactly! And then they have to ask themselves, how did the liberal become a conservative? How did the person who believed, "It's all about me," come to believe, "It's all about you"? And that's a character transformation story.

ALEXANDRE

With every repeated day, Phil works on improving himself. Initially it's just to get the girl but, over time, he starts doing it for the pleasure being a nicer guy brings himself and others. And he becomes a better person for it. It's an almost Socratic transformation?

DANNY RUBIN

He's in this existential situation, living day after day with nobody telling him what to do or why or what it's all about. It strips him of who he thought he was, of all of his fears and anxieties, and the vessel starts to refill with who he truly is stripped of all his craziness and neuroses.

There's a commotion by the door as people start to whoop and cheer. Through the glass windows we see state troopers and firemen shovelling away the mountain of snow blocking the door. The townsfolk emerge outside to a transformed landscape. Apart from the red fire truck outside, everything is completely white. As far as the eye can see, it looks like a new world. DANNY RUBIN and ALEXANDRE emerge, blinking. The bright morning sun shimmers off the ice and snow.

ALEXANDRE

Did you spend a lot of time thinking about what would free him, how the film would end?

DANNY RUBIN

I always knew what would release him. (*He reaches into his pockets and dons a pair of sunglasses.*) I like this idea of what we do and don't see—our blindness. Everything we actually want and need in life is right in front of us. We just can't see it.

We see PHIL CONNORS and RITA stumble out into the snow. She steadies herself on his arm as they walk down the middle of the street. Laughing together, they couldn't be happier.

Fade to black.

* A borough in Jefferson County, Pennsylvania, United States, 84 miles (135 km) northeast of Pittsburgh. On February 2 of each year (Groundhog Day), the town of Punxsutawney celebrates the beloved groundhog with a festive atmosphere of music and food.

† See *The Truman Show*, a 1998 American comedy-drama film directed by Peter Weir and written by Andrew Niccol.

‡ See *Back to the Future*, a 1985 American science-fiction film directed by Robert Zemeckis, written by Zemeckis and Bob Gale, and produced by Steven Spielberg; the first film of a trilogy.

§ *Groundhog Day*, a 1993 American comedy film directed by Harold Ramis, starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. It was written by Ramis and Danny Rubin, based on a story by Rubin.

** Born 1950. William James "Bill" Murray is an American actor and comedian.

†† Born 1944. Harold Allen Ramis is an American actor, director, and writer, specialising in comedy.

‡‡ Born 1958. Rosalie Anderson "Andie" MacDowell is an American model and actress.

→ Traduction voir page 83



DONATIEN GRAU



DONATIEN GRAU

→ see pages 45-54

We are inside the Hotel George V, Paris. A sumptuous tea room. Little islands of diners sat in chairs are clustered like archipelagoes strewn over a vast ocean of carpet. The walls are so distant that the ornate tapestries that decorate them are barely discernible. Battalions of waiters ferry carts of teas and pastries from the various kitchens across this vast ornate sea to the isolated clientele. From above they resemble files of ants processing from out of their colony and returning with finished plates and empty glasses. We slip into the flow of waiters as they meet at various junctions, splitting off at others, until the traffic peters out as we reach a particular group of tables and sofas. ALEXANDRE sits in a deep armchair. Brow furrowed in concentration, he studies the first few pages of a thick volume. We see the cover: it reads "Remembrance of Things Past, Marcel Proust." So deeply is he absorbed in his reading that he entirely fails to notice a figure in a long black trench coat and glasses standing beside him, reading over his shoulder. Feeling a presence ALEXANDRE turns in his chair to face the young man.

DONATIEN GRAU — Tell me, what do you think so far?

ALEXANDRE turns the weighty book over in his hands considering it.

ALEXANDRE — Well, I don't know really. I've just started it. I mean, I'm still only at the beginning.

DONATIEN GRAU — Yes, but you know you're also already halfway through.

ALEXANDRE — No, I'm pretty sure... (*He takes out his bookmark and shows the book to DONATIEN GRAU.*) Look, I'm only on the fifth page.

DONATIEN GRAU takes off his coat and hat. ALEXANDRE indicates for him to sit down in a chair next to him.

DONATIEN GRAU — No, no, no. I mean metaphorically speaking. Homer, for example, begins *in media res*—in the middle of things. The only stories that start at the beginning are fairytales and theology. But the tragedies, they always begin *in media res*.

ALEXANDRE — Like... *Oedipus*?[†]

DONATIEN GRAU — Exactly! Or consider *Phaedra* by Racine. It begins with a problem. A big problem. Phaedra admits to her nurse Oenone that she does not love her husband, Theseus. No indeed. In fact, she desires her own son-in-law, Hippolytus. The same goes for *Berenice*.[‡] In the very first scene we have Antiochus wishing to leave Rome; when pressed as to why by Berenice, he reveals he is infatuated with her and cannot bear to remain in Rome and watch her marry her fiancé, the emperor Titus. We have only just begun and we are already in crisis. I'd say it's part and parcel of the storyteller's duty not to bore his audience. If he began with, "In the beginning everything was wonderful and there was peace in the kingdom"—well then, it'd be a children's story.

ALEXANDRE — That's one way of looking at it. (*He takes his notebook out and starts to jot down Donatien Grau's words.*) But, personally, I prefer children's stories to ones where they just drop you in at the deep end.

DONATIEN GRAU — Before beginning any book, we have no idea what the story will be about. That's part of the mechanism of reading. Only once we are immersed in the characters' world can we then become sympathetic towards them.

One of the waiters from a nearby waiter-trail, sensing the two customers, breaks off from his column of traffic and approaches their table.

WAITER — Gentlemen, would you care for a little *apéritif* with which to start off this exciting and wonderful New Year?

DONATIEN GRAU and ALEXANDRE look at one another, hesitating.

DONATIEN GRAU — If you like hot chocolate... Though, of course, there's no reason you should...

ALEXANDRE — (*affronted*) Hot chocolate? Of course I like hot chocolate! I am a veritable hot chocolate aficionado.

DONATIEN GRAU — (*laughing*) Well, good. Then have a hot chocolate. They're excellent here. I myself will have a fruit cocktail as I'm only just waking up.

WAITER — Very good.

The WAITER gathers the menus and leaves.

ALEXANDRE — Did you work all night?

DONATIEN GRAU — (*covering his mouth to stifle a yawn*) I did. I had so many emails to reply to, and then there's the talk I'm organizing with Hans Ulrich Obrist[§] which is this coming Friday. And I have an article to finish on Gauguin and Courbet.^{**} And on top of all of that I'm supposed to be teaching students and writing my thesis—

WAITER — Gentlemen.

The WAITER arrives bearing a tray overflowing with ornate ceramics filled with macaroons, sweets, cream, chocolates. He lifts up a ruby red glass brimming with berries.

DONATIEN GRAU — That's for me, and—

The WAITER sets down a large porcelain pitcher with a wooden handle. Tilting it carefully, he pours out a viscous brown fluid that pools into ALEXANDRE'S cup.

ALEXANDRE — Mmm!

DONATIEN GRAU — Oh, by the way, my name is Donatien Grau.^{††}

They shake hands.

ALEXANDRE — Alexandre Singh. Tell me, Donatien, what was it we were just talking about? I can't quite remember. I think I was asking you something about—

DONATIEN GRAU — Ah, yes! I was explaining that before we can feel sympathetic toward the characters of a story, we must first be immersed in their world. Only once we are there can we then feel sympathetic.

ALEXANDRE lifts his face from the cup, revealing a chocolate mustache. DONATIEN GRAU points delicately to his lips. Embarrassed, ALEXANDRE wipes his mouth on a napkin.

But, when I said you were already halfway through your book earlier, I wasn't being entirely truthful.

ALEXANDRE — Aha! I knew you were talking rubbish!

DONATIEN GRAU — Because you are, in fact, already at the end. You see, *Remembrance of Things Past* begins at the end. It's a circular novel. In the words of T. S. Eliot^{‡‡}: "In my end is my beginning." The end of Proust's novel is the moment when the writing starts. At the beginning of the book he is just starting the process that will lead him to writing—even if we understand it as a fiction or an illusion.

ALEXANDRE — (*opening the cover and beginning to read aloud*) "For a long time, I used to

go to bed early. Sometimes when I put out my candle my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say, 'I'm going to sleep.'"

DONATIEN GRAU — Starting this way immediately creates a horizon of expectation. At the beginning everything is present, everything is already there. And anything not yet present is already approaching, in the distance, lying just below this horizon of expectation. (*He pauses, looking over to his dining partner.*) Hm. You look confused, Alexandre. Let me show you.

DONATIEN GRAU rises from the table, indicating for ALEXANDRE to follow. They walk away from their island of chairs to an empty space in the sea of carpet. In the distance, a train of waiters pushing cake trolleys processes past.

DONATIEN GRAU — Look around you. What do you see?

ALEXANDRE — (*turning on his heel to examine the horizon*) Well, nothing.

DONATIEN GRAU — (*pointing to the ground*) No, I mean here.

ALEXANDRE gets down onto his hands and knees and begins to inspect the carpet. Worked into the graphic patterns is an elaborate network of friezes containing people and animals, text and numbers rendered in beautifully coloured illustrations. His eyes trail off into the distance, following the repeating characters and motifs.

ALEXANDRE — Wow. It's almost as if it were a story.

DONATIEN GRAU — But it is all part of the same story! This carpet was created to illustrate and encode all the events in the seven volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*. Every single scene that Proust describes in the book also exists here, knotted into the very fabric of the carpet.

DONATIEN GRAU walks over and points to a figure lying in a bed.

Here we are on the fifth page of the novel.

ALEXANDRE — (*peering at the image*) He's in a bed in a room in a house surrounded by trees. And who's this lady here?

DONATIEN GRAU — This is the moment when the narrator first mentions Madame de Saint-Loup. He explains: It's evening at Madame de Saint-Loup's. The narrator hasn't woken up yet from his siesta, and he *should* wake up. But we, the readers, don't

know who Madame de Saint-Loup is. And we will not find out who she is, not in a couple of pages' time, nor even a few hundred. (*Spinning around, he sweeps his hand over to a point on the horizon.*) But for over two thousand pages!

They walk along following the frieze as it meanders through the landscape of the carpet. Every so often, signs inscribed into the fabric indicate the names of the roads they are journeying upon. This one reads: "Swann's Way,"⁵⁵

ALEXANDRE — So who is Madame de Saint-Loup, then?

DONATIEN GRAU — Ah! Well, there we have part of our horizon of expectation. You see, there are two things we must consider. On the one hand, we must think of the plot as a typical novelistic structure with which Proust expects people to become, in a way, impatient; much as they might with a detective novel. On the other hand, we also have the concept of *L'Amphisbène*.⁵⁶

ALEXANDRE — A young sheep urinating around the corner?

DONATIEN GRAU — No, no, no. It's nothing of the sort. It's a novel written in the early 1900s by the French symbolist Henri de Régnier. *L'Amphisbène* is about his notion of something that turns around on itself. That is to say—it starts at the end and it ends at the beginning. These together create a whole entity, a world in itself, a complete world the reader will want to follow you into.

ALEXANDRE — Well, that's great. But you still haven't explained who this Madame de Saint-Loup is!

¶

A little later. ALEXANDRE and DONATIEN GRAU are still strolling across the savannah of the tea room. Occasionally they come across small herds of diners scattered about. The clients slowly chew their food, keeping their wary eyes tracked on the pair as they walk past. Coming across a waiter with a trolley, they stop for a tea break. It's been a long walk, after all. Cups of tea in hand, they sit in silence, munching on raspberry scones.

ALEXANDRE — (*pointing to one of the illustrations in the carpet*) Tell me, Donatien, which part of the book is this?

DONATIEN GRAU — Ah, yes. This is where I have a long discussion with Nathalie Mauriac,⁵⁷ a Proust specialist at the CNRS.

ALEXANDRE — (*spluttering tea*) Wh-what? Surely you're not actually in the *Remembrance of Things Past*?

DONATIEN GRAU — (*laughing*) No, of course not! We're simply discussing it. Look, there I am.

He points to a little figure in a black trench coat and spectacles.

ALEXANDRE — So you are.

DONATIEN GRAU — See how I'm pointing to these two books, and then to three? Well, the question at hand was whether Proust's thinking is binary or ternary. I thought the narrator's three encounters with Gilberte⁵⁸ were the key to understanding the novel's structure. So it all comes back to three, you see.

ALEXANDRE — But there are seven volumes. I mean, everyone knows that.

DONATIEN GRAU — True. But originally Proust had planned to write only two: volume one, *Swann's Way*, and volume seven, *Time Regained*.

ALEXANDRE — But how could he write volume seven if he didn't yet know what had happened in volume six?

DONATIEN GRAU — I think you already know the answer to that, Alexandre.

ALEXANDRE stands immobile, his head resting on his fist. His eyes scrunch shut with the sheer effort of concentration.

ALEXANDRE — Is it... Is it because he wrote the beginning and the end at the same time?

DONATIEN GRAU — (*stepping over to the cake trolley and sticking his finger deep into the icing of a pink cake*) You have it entirely, my friend! The complete work is like this delicious strawberry cake here. (*He sucks frosting from the end of his finger.*) Mmmm. Proust began with both the top and the bottom of the cake. Writing the rest was simply a matter of adding more and more layers in between. As Nathalie Mauriac told me: The key was two, and then five, and then seven.

ALEXANDRE peers down at the weave of the carpet. From Nathalie Mauriac's stitched fingers emerge two leather-bound books that divide into five then seven winged tomes that flutter about the frieze like a flock of birds.

ALEXANDRE — But you just told me *three* was the key!!!

DONATIEN GRAU — Yes, well let me explain. When *Swann's Way* was first published, it was advertised as the first tome of a three-volume work. And, using that as my starting point, I began considering the narrator's three encounters with Gilberte as a metaphor for Proust's three encounters with literature. Consider this: The name Gilberte contains both the Latin words *liber*, book, and *libertas*, freedom. Freedom can be achieved through the book. Gilberte, the narrator's first love, may be a kind of metaphor for literature. You know, Alexandre, that Proust's novel is a metaphysical adventure. It tells the story of someone who discovers that, in order to save the world in which he lives, in order to save it for himself, he has to take from the real that which can be transformed into art and, according to Proust's phrase from *Time Regained*, enfold it into the "necessary rings of a beautiful style." This idea of the "necessary rings of a beautiful style" isn't a theme visible from the very beginning, but all of its elements are present at the final Assumption, the final conflagration in which he becomes aware that the world in which he used to live no longer exists. At the end, everything has disappeared; all the most elegant characters are dead or have fallen into contempt, the most vulgar characters have risen to power. And at the moment when this world exists no more he has to rediscover it.

ALEXANDRE — And he does that by remembering it?

DONATIEN GRAU — More than that: He must learn how to write about it. From the moment we know how to write, we have a style, a manner. And if we have this manner, then we can bring this lost world back to life. It ties into this Baudelairean idea that we find in these unpublished lines of *The Flowers of Evil*⁵⁹ that say: "You all, be witness that I did do my duty, / Like a perfect chemist and like a blessed soul, / For from each thing I did extract its quintessence, / Thou hast given me mud and I have made of it gold." To take the disorder of the world and realize that, from this chaos, a work of art can be made... It's very Proustian.

There's a loud crash as ALEXANDRE, concentrating intently on Donatien Grau's words and lost in reverie, backs into a table, almost upsetting a large carafe of hot chocolate. The society lady to whom it belongs scowls at him.

DONATIEN GRAU — (*mockingly*) Sir, you're going to break everything.

WAITER — Is everything alright here?

DONATIEN GRAU — Yes, thank you. We narrowly avoided a major disaster. (*He addresses*

ALEXANDRE.) You see, on the one hand Proust has to save this world by remembering it, and to do that he must write it down, and then (*He points his finger at ALEXANDRE's chest.*) you have to read it. Proust placed a great emphasis on the role of the reader. He said that every reader is the reader of himself.

ALEXANDRE's lips move as he repeats the phrase to himself, confused.

ALEXANDRE — Which means?

DONATIEN GRAU — That both the text and the reader working together create the work. That the act of reading itself reveals as much about the reader's own life as it does about the lives of the characters on the page.^{****} The fact is, in many works of literature—in many plays, even—there is a connection between the text and the reader-spectator-audience. The French scholar Florence Dupont^{†††} has written extensively about this metatheatricality. It's a concept that is absolutely key to many of the Latin plays. Sentences will contain a carefully worded expression that carries meaning both with regard to the plot and yet also at the same time to the theatrical world that contains it. Consider, for instance... (*He snaps his fingers as he tries to recall.*) Oh yes: *Agamemnon*, the first play of *The Oresteia*.^{††††} The first character says (*He sweeps his arms to address the diners and bellows in a tragic register.*): “αὐτός τ' ἐγὼγε φροῖμιον χορεύσομαι.”

The diners applaud.

Which literally means two different things: "I am going to dance forwards"; and, "I am going to be the first to dance." It is possible, it being the prologue, that Aeschylus is intentionally fracturing the illusion of theatrical reality.

ALEXANDRE — Perhaps it is like the very carpet of this tea room that includes scenes from *Remembrance of Things Past*, and yet also includes scenes in which you discuss the scenes in Proust's work. (*His trembling finger points up to an image on the wall.*) Or... Or that terrible tapestry up there. The one depicting me pointing up at a terrible tapestry and talking to you about it! Look, Donatien, you're up there, right next to me!

DONATIEN GRAU — (*concernedly putting his arm around ALEXANDRE and leading him away*) Alexandre, that's not a tapestry. It's a mirror.

ALEXANDRE — Really? Are you sure? Still, it's not right.

DONATIEN GRAU — You know, if you're interested in this notion of theatre within theatre you should read Corneille's play *L'Illusion Comique*.^{§§§§} Do you know it?

ALEXANDRE *shakes his head.*

I think you'd find it an inspirational read, Alexandre. It blurs the distinction between illusion and reality.

ALEXANDRE — Between what has happened and what was imagined?

DONATIEN GRAU — Exactly. Just as interviews do. You know, so much in interviews is conjecture, interpretation, simply made up. Most interviews are pure fiction.

ALEXANDRE — They are?

* Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* [*À La Recherche du temps perdu*, first published 1913-1927]. Trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Stephen Hudson. London: Chatto & Windus, 1922-1931.

† Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 429 BC.

‡ *Phaedra*, 1677, and *Berenice*, 1670; two plays by French tragedian Jean-Baptiste Racine (1639-1699).

§ Born 1968. Swiss curator, writer and art historian. Donatien Grau co-organized with him "Dialogues entre artistes et écrivains," a series of talks. A first session took place at École Normale Supérieure (Paris) in January 2011.

** Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin (1848-1903): French Post-Impressionist artist; Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet (1819-1877); French Realist painter.

†† Born 1987. Teacher at University Paris-Sorbonne and member of the Proust team at ITEM-CNRS [Institute for Modern Texts and Manuscripts-National Center of Scientific Research].

†† Thomas Stearns Eliot a.k.a. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965): American-British poet, dramatist, critic.

§§ *Swann's Way* [*Du côté de chez Swann*, first published 1913]. First volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1922.

*** A novel by French symbolist poet Henri de Régnier (1864-1936), published in 1912.

††† French writer and Proust specialist.

†††† Gilberte Swann, the narrator's first love whom he encounters at Combray in *Swann's Way*.

§§§ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* [*Les Fleurs du mal*, first published 1857]. Trans. Cyril Scott. London: Elkin Mathews, 1909.

§§§§ See Marcel Proust, introduction to his translation of John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lillies* [*Sésame et les lys*, 1906].

††††† French Latinist and scholar.

†††††† *The Oresteia*, 458BC; a cycle of four plays written by the Greek tragedian Aeschylus (525/4BC-456BC): *Agamemnon*; *The Libation Bearers*; *The Eumenides*; *Proteus*.

§§§§ *L'Illusion Comique*, 1636; a comedy by the French playwright Pierre Corneille (1606-1684).

SIMON FUJIWARA



Sometime in the future, an industrial building just outside the centre of Berlin. The warehouse is divided into spacious workshops in which we observe apparently ancient artifacts being painstakingly crafted from giant slabs of polystyrene. We see a long line of rooms under construction, each one almost identical to the next. In the last we find assistants on hands and knees, putting the final touches to an exact historical reproduction of the studio of the artist Simon Fujiwara as it would have appeared in the early 21st century. In one corner, dust is being carefully sprinkled over a bookcase. A young man with a fashionable mustache crumples up then folds out again newly printed pieces of paper before carefully arranging them on the desk to look like they have fallen there by chance. OLD SIMON FUJIWARA enters and observes the scene in front of him. He brushes a strand of ash-white hair from his now ancient and wrinkled face as he watches the two young men who will reenact this scene, playing Simon Fujiwara and Alexandre Singh. Both are pacing back and forth reading from their printed scripts. One stops, mouthing a phrase to himself and gesticulating with his hand. The two men look over to the old artist who, nodding for them to begin, settles down into his armchair to watch.

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

(leaning back into a chair and crossing his hands behind his head)

“Which parts of my performances are real and which parts are made up?” I find that question so hard to answer. I tell people in the course of my performances about how I constructed the story. I tell my audience when it’s invented and when it’s not. But sometimes the audience gets seduced by the fact that I am the one telling it. *(He runs his fingers along the desk and smiles.)* They let themselves forget that I’ve actually presented them with a very clear system.

ALEXANDRE'S DOUBLE

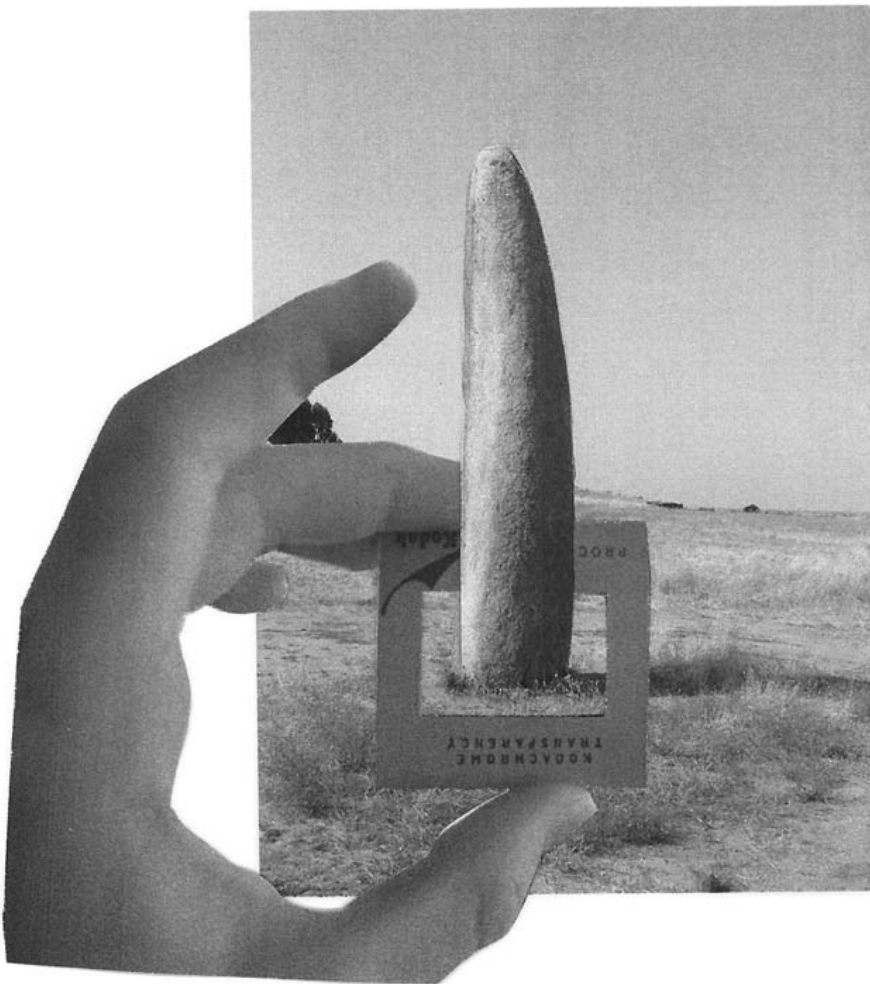
Still, Mr. Fujiwara, if you could be more forthcoming. Our readers would love to know.

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

(pausing to consider)

They’re all documentaries, in a way. I call the one I did for Manifesta 8 in 2010—*Phallusies*—a “cockumentary”!

OLD SIMON FUJIWARA *laughs, a dry rasping sound.*



OLD SIMON FUJIWARA

Sorry... Do continue.

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

(continuing)

Ah, yes. Well... They're all pretty much documentaries in that they follow the unfolding of a series of events that really happened to me. *(Pointing up at an old map of the Middle East pinned to the wall.)* And, of course, that region where *Phallusies*, takes place has a long tradition of mystery. Take the *Arabian Nights** for example. It's one of the largest epic-storytelling texts we have.

ALEXANDRE'S DOUBLE

(getting up to examine the map)

Stories about flying carpets and magic lamps?

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

True. But there's a lot more to it—erotica, detective stories... It compiles countless tales that have been told again and again. Nobody knows all its sources.

ALEXANDRE'S DOUBLE

They say, Mr. Fujiwara, that the *Arabian Nights* was a big influence on Marcel Proust[†], so I imagine people must ask you this often: Have you read Proust? Is he an influence?

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

(laughing)

I've tried! I was really excited at the prospect. I thought it was going to be really juicy, erotic, sensual writing[‡] but... Me, I prefer the American writers. I love American mid-century bombastic, macho writing. Henry Miller, all that shit!

ALEXANDRE'S DOUBLE

You do?

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

Oh yes. There's just such a rhythm to the language. *(He lights a cigarette and takes a drag.)* It moves so fast, you don't really know what's being said, what's subconscious, when it's slipping into an alcohol-induced dream state. That genre is written in such a personal voice, and the characters are just so bloody awful, talking about screwing this person and that, so macho and politically incorrect and lost. You can never take the author at his word.

ALEXANDRE'S DOUBLE *pulls a book from a shelf—Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five[§]—meaning to flick through it but realises only as he paws at the cover that it's not a real book. Hoping nobody notices, he carefully puts it back on the shelf.*

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

Kurt Vonnegut is a big hero of mine. Americans read him when they're in their teens but I hadn't even heard of him until I was in my mid-twenties. When teaching creative writing, Vonnegut always told his students: "Tell your audience everything you know about the book in the first chapter, if not the first page. Then you'll go on a journey with the book as you're writing it."

ALEXANDRE'S DOUBLE

What's wrong with a little mystery, hey? *(He begins to whistle an annoying little melody.)* I say lead them down the garden path.

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

But, as Vonnegut warns, if you hold information it's going to end up very pose-y.

There is the sound of an awful hacking as OLD SIMON FUJIWARA begins to cough uncontrollably. Gradually it subsides. He sips from a glass of water.

OLD SIMON FUJIWARA

(waving his hand)

Yes, very good. Please continue.

SIMON FUJIWARA'S DOUBLE

Right. Of course.



ALEXANDRE'S DOUBLE

And me? I'm doing OK?

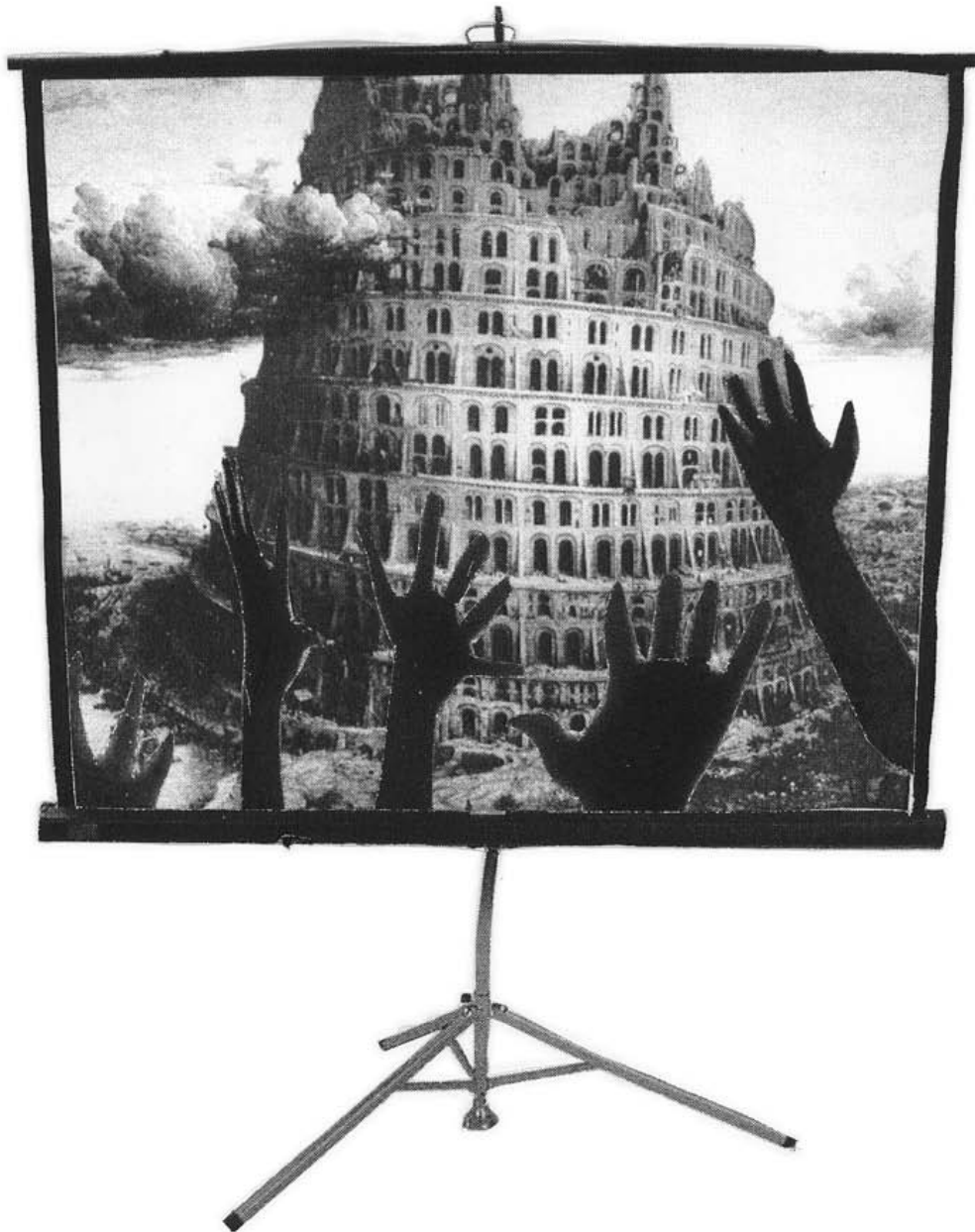
OLD SIMON FUJIWARA

Oh, yes indeed! (*He shakes his head and chuckles.*) You're just as I remember him.

¶

A little later. The interior of the warehouse. We see a score of freestanding rooms set out in a long row, resembling an enormous soundstage. The door of the last room opens and OLD SIMON FUJIWARA shuffles out, leaning on his cane. He walks down an aisle past the many sets. Stopping at one, he opens the door and enters a minutely observed reproduction of a classroom at the Frankfurt Städelschule complete with all the expected accoutrements: whiteboard,

*AV cart with slide projector, polypropylene chairs. On a wall hangs a poster advertising DOCUMENTA 5**. A dozen children, none older than ten—legs crossed, attentive but bored, serious yet flippant—fill the classroom chairs. They are dressed in the garb of young graduate students, the boys sockless in leather moccasins, suit pants, and button-up shirts; the girls in black polo necks, paint-spattered jeans, with a cigarette tucked behind one ear. At the front of the room, CHILD SIMON stands behind the teacher's desk, straightening a pile of papers and looking nervously over his notes. CHILD ALEXANDRE enters, late. He looks for a chair but there are none to hand. The children titter until the ART PROFESSOR, the only role played by an actual adult, upturns a paper bin and makes him sit on it. OLD SIMON FUJIWARA stands at the back of the classroom nonchalantly cleaning his glasses. They all wait for him, heads craned back, expectant. He props them back on his nose and nods.*



CHILD SIMON

I think...*(He looks down at his notes.)* I think, with performance especially, it's really important for me to make people feel comfortable in the first five minutes. So I like to state—just as Vonnegut does with his books—absolutely everything about the project at the very beginning. So, for example, in *The Museum of Incest*^{††} I start with, “In 2008 I went to Africa, and I decided to build a museum dedicated to incest.” Similarly, in *Welcome to the Hotel Munber*^{‡‡}, I begin with, *(He clears his throat.)* “I’ve been trying to write a novel for the last few years, an erotic novel set in my parents’ hotel in Franco’s Spain.” *(He addresses the ART PROFESSOR.)* and, as you know, sir, the performance medium relies completely on this complicity between myself, as an actor, and the spectator. There’s a compulsion on the audience’s part to believe in what I’m doing. At the end of a performance, people often come up and ask me, “Were those real tears?”

ART PROFESSOR

Have you considered people less likely to question your sincerity when a performance has its basis in your own biography?

CHILD SIMON

It didn’t start off as a conscious strategy, sir. It was just something I realized through doing it. That said, I always felt there was a lack of personality in art, especially when I was studying in Frankfurt. People played a lot of formal games; there was almost a template to it. The students’ work often ended up being as reticent as possible, never revealing a personal position.

CHILD ESTHER

(whining)

Sir! You can’t let him say that, sir!

The ART PROFESSOR waves at her to be silent.

CHILD SIMON

So on the one hand I felt there was this gaping lack of personal work. But, on the other, I realized by looking at other artists—Sophie Calle^{§§}, for example—that there are a lot of traps to making autobiographical work. It easily becomes indulgent or therapeutic.

ART PROFESSOR

The two most important qualities are imagination and a sense of humor. I think Esther would do well to take that on board, too.

CHILD SIMON

Absolutely. And also that, as individuals, we’re made up of everything around us. My stories are always about these grand themes we all think about whether we’re watching the news, or in a museum, or just walking down the street. The question that will suddenly pop into your head: How did we get here?

*Click. The slide projector throws up an image of Bruegel’s The Tower of Babel^{***}. The shadows of many hands shoot up in front of the image. The child-graduate students strain eagerly, their arms outstretched, fingers reaching straight up in the air. CHILD SIMON chooses one in the front row.*

CHILD ALEXANDRE

(bringing his arm down)

But why talk about buildings as you do in *The Museum of Incest*? What’s the grand theme there?

CHILD SIMON

I had been giving building presentations in architecture school for years. *The Museum of Incest*’s completely deadpan delivery apes the tone I learned from my professors at Cambridge. I really wanted to undermine being forced to sit through three years of that.

Hands shoot up all over the classroom.

But if I can return to your question for a moment?

ART PROFESSOR

Go ahead.



CHILD SIMON

Architectural presentation is a framework in which I can cover a great many ideas. When I'm performing I like to skip through themes—to touch on many, many things. In *The Museum of Incest*, for example, I talk about (*Clicking his fingers as he reels them off.*) Sodom and Gomorrah as a performance piece; lettuce as an aphrodisiac; the economy of museum cafés... Covering so many different subjects requires a pace I can really control—which is very true of the building presentation format.

CHILD SIMON *presses a button and a series of slides begin to slip by: cross sections, axonometric projections, and floor plans. As they are thrown up one by one, we begin to make out that they are all architectural plans for the same building, the one we had seen on the first slide: The Tower of Babel.*

The architectural lecture, like the novel, is an open-ended format. I can talk about something that hasn't yet been built. With a novel I can explore themes, the kind of language I would like to use—even read excerpts—without having finished it. But people know it's unfinished.

CHILD VOLKER

(with a German accent)

I am thinking there is a problematic though. Are you ever considering that it is not better to make the real building? (*He snorts, trying to get the other students to join in.*) Or maybe you should really be finishing your book first, before you come here and bore us with your silly stories?

CHILD SIMON

Well, Volker, that's a good suggestion. But I also think it's interesting when the material and the form *don't* really work together. For example. (*He points to the slide projection.*) This should be a building but I'm talking about it. (*Holding up the piece of paper from which he's reading.*) This should be a text being read to you in a classroom but it's being presented as a series of images and also an interview in the Palais de Tokyo's magazine. Conflict between form and product creates a pathway that allows people in. It invites people to think about ways they'd resolve that conflict themselves.

CHILD ANNA

(raising her arm to ask a question)

So wait a second. Everything you're reading out loud is actually part of a magazine interview? Is this all made up, then? Are we even really here in this classroom?

A grinning CHILD VOLKER bounces an eraser off the back of CHILD ANNA's head.

Ouch!

CHILD SIMON

(picking up the eraser off the floor)

I think it's necessary to slip the carpet out from underneath your audience from time to time, to completely shift the tone. My audience is constantly grappling with this question of whether my work is sincere. And that's difficult terrain because I bombard people with so much information while they're being led down a certain road... All of a sudden they have to stop and think, "Wait, hang on. What's going on here?"

CHILD ANNA

Yes! That's exactly what I wanted to say.

CHILD SIMON

But the bigger question you could ask is, "What am I doing listening to this?" Right now all of you are looking at this image. (*He turns to face the projection of a large expanse of land and sky. Snaking up from the horizon into the clouds is a slender tower. Just discernible in the wisps at the very top is a giant hand, it seems as if it is about to strike the building.*) I'm pretty sure most people fade out when they see an image. I know I do when I attend a lecture. Sometimes you're listening to the person talking, sometimes you're totally distracted and thinking about something completely different. I love that space that a lecture gives, of being in a dark room with a very bright projection and the lulling tone of somebody talking.

CHILD ALEXANDRE

But if they're not always listening to you, how do you control your audience?

CHILD SIMON

Honestly, I don't know what's going on in their minds. That said, I often finish my performances in a highly theatrical manner. *The Personal Effects of Theo Grünberg* is a story about a 136-year-old man. In the lecture I talk about his life and my journeys trying to find him in the Amazon and in Berlin and in history books. At the very end of the performance, the phone rings and I ask the audience, "Can you please hold on a minute?" I then add, "Now, obviously this isn't a real phone conversation. I'm doing this to illustrate what happened in my telephone conversation." There's that moment as I'm picking up the phone that I imagine the audience thinking, "Ugh, this is gross! This is the worst kind of children's theatre." And you give them that for a minute. It's this high-camp, super-theatrical moment. When I'm planning a performance, I'll often think, "God,

that would be fun to do. But, Simon, you can't do that, it's just too camp." But then I think, (*He puts his fingers to his lips and looks off into the distance.*) "Well, there must be a way..."

ART PROFESSOR

(*checking his watch*)

OK, I think we have time for one last question.

All the children throw up their hands and strain eagerly to attract the ART PROFESSOR's attention.

Ah, yes, you at the back. We haven't heard anything from you yet. Do you have a question for young Fujiwara here?

OLD SIMON FUJIWARA

Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. (*He licks his finger and shuffles through the pages of the dialogue.*) Do you mind if we try it again from the beginning? Top of page 56. "Which parts of my performances are real, and which parts—"

CHILD SIMON

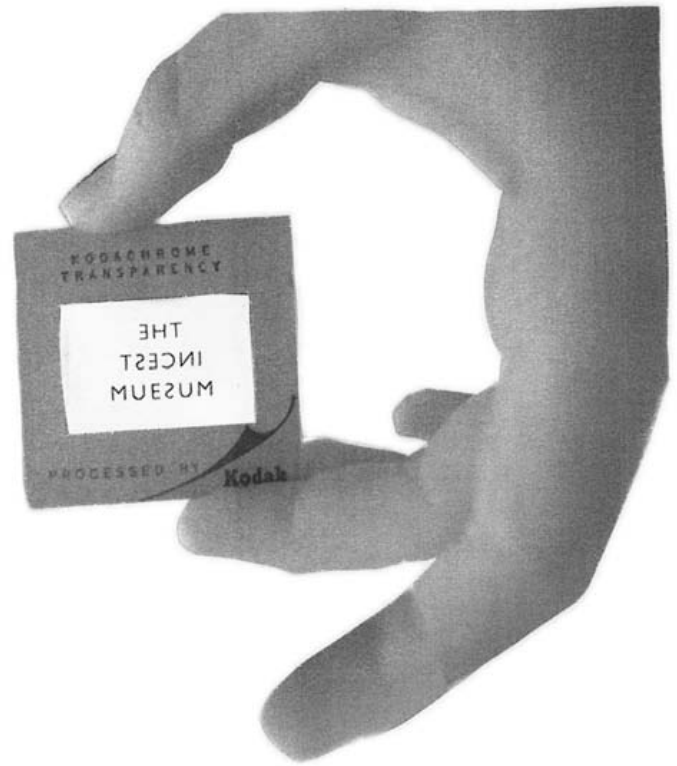
"—are made up?"

OLD SIMON FUJIWARA

Yep. That's it.

CHILD SIMON

I find that question so hard to answer.



- * *Arabian Nights* is a collection of Middle Eastern and South Asian stories and folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age and first compiled in French in 1704 by Antoine Galland. The first English language edition was published in 1706.
- † 1871-1922. French novelist, critic, and essayist best known for his monumental *Remembrance of Things Past*.
- ‡ See *Sodom & Gomorrah*, 1921-1922. 4th volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust.
- § Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, New York: Dell Publishing, 1969.
- ** DOCUMENTA is an exhibition of modern and contemporary art which takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany. DOCUMENTA 5 staged in 1972 and was organized by the visionary Swiss curator Harald Szeemann (1933-2005).
- †† Simon Fujiwara, *The Museum of Incest*, 2007-ongoing. A multipart project encompassing formats such as performance lectures, published fiction, and collections of various articles and artifacts.
- ‡‡ Simon Fujiwara, *Welcome to the Hotel Munber*, 2010-ongoing. Recreation of the bar in his parents' hotel in Spain during General Franco's dictatorship in the 1970s.
- §§ Born 1953. French writer, photographer, installation and conceptual artist.
- *** Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel*, c. 1563.

ALFREDO ARIAS



ALFREDO ARIAS

→ see pages 64-72

We see ALEXANDRE walking down a street in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of Paris. He looks up from the piece of paper in his hand, checking the numbers over the doors as he passes. Stopping in front of one, his finger presses the buzzer. The door opens and he enters an inner courtyard overflowing with plants and flowers. Fronting onto the garden is a small one-story house. Through its picture windows we see a room, every available inch of which is crammed full of furniture, paintings, books, trinkets, and knick-knacks. The door stands half open. Through it drift the sounds of crockery clattering, and someone speaking Spanish. Knocking, ALEXANDRE steps in. ALFREDO ARIAS greets ALEXANDRE and leads him to the back of the apartment where they both sink into large antique sofas. Apologizing for the noise, ALFREDO ARIAS leans over and turns down the volume on a large black-and-white television set. On the flickering screen a woman is beating eggs into a meringue.

ALFREDO ARIAS — I'm in the middle of writing a text for the exhibition I was telling you about, the one in Buenos Aires. I'm transcribing Doña Petrona's' cooking recipes from YouTube.

He nods to the woman on the television, who is now basting some croissants. ALEXANDRE takes out a digital recorder and sets it on the table.

ALEXANDRE — But is it the cooking or this Doña Petrona you're interested in?

ALFREDO ARIAS — Both, the whole thing. Just the other day I was asked in an interview why I like so much to use these icons from popular culture in my plays.

ALEXANDRE — Well, I was going to ask...

ALFREDO ARIAS — People stupidly believe I use personalities like Karl Lagerfeld[†] because I want to comment on them or pay homage to them. When I work with a character, I'm usually saying more about myself than about that person. It's a psychoanalytic space I enter in order to create an imaginative one. (*He sets out two porcelain cups and begins to fill them with tea.*) It's hard to

convince people of that because they assume I've become attached to these personalities in a folkloric way. They think of these characters as flat images that can't be used to create something with depth. But it comes back to asking: How have these famous personalities become inscribed in our imagination? How is it that they make up this landscape in which I will tell my story?

ALEXANDRE — I guess that makes sense. I mean, famous people have always appeared in books and films and television shows. Like Julius Caesar in Shakespeare or—or—or—Hillary Clinton in *South Park*.[‡]

ALFREDO ARIAS — We can go back even further than that, to the ancient theatre of Aristophanes or Aeschylus,[§] for instance. Their texts were deeply infused with the imaginary—that is, the essence of a human being. I believe that these characters such as Oedipus and Clytemnestra are metaphors for really profound things—parricide, incest, all the darkest things that can trouble a man. But what to do nowadays? How do we blend these two things—the contemporary and the mythic—together? On a trip I took to the island of Delos in Greece, our guide recounted to us the ancient myths as if they were actually true. “And over there was where the girl was born, and then the father, he took her and then he threw her, and she ended up on the next island over. So then she turned into a centaur and her daughters too; so now her daughters are completely and utterly hatless!” He told us all this as if it had really, physically taken place.

ALEXANDRE — (*snorting*) That's a stupid story! (*He realises he might have given offense.*) What I meant to say was that the man was silly to believe that.

ALFREDO ARIAS — But that's exactly the marvelous thing about this kind of literature: We have real characters and situations, but the story plunges us into the fantastical essence of their being. I think that comedy—Aristophanes', for example—also takes place in this imaginative space. However, comedy must constantly negotiate with reality, and that's what's fascinating. It's still inscribed into Greek culture to this day.

Their tea finished, ALFREDO ARIAS picks up the tray to take it back into the kitchen. ALEXANDRE makes to follow him down the corridor. He is, however, so engrossed in the floral wallpaper and myriads of small portraits and photos that decorate the walls that he almost goes flying as he trips upon a black theatrical sandbag sitting inexplicably in the middle of the floor. Clutching his foot in pain, he limps down the passageway after ALFREDO ARIAS

who has disappeared behind the bead curtain of the kitchen. ALEXANDRE brushes past the beads and emerges into a tremendously bright room. He shields his eyes from the glare with his hand. It's so very hot—

ALFREDO ARIAS — (his voice seemingly far off) I also once visited the Little Theatre of Epidaurus with a Greek friend. It's in an almost deserted area, so much so that a farmer had built his house on the stage complete with fig tree and farmyard animals—chickens, sheep, goats, a horse tied up outside the house...

As his eyes adjust, ALEXANDRE begins to make out the room he's stepped into. But it's not a room. Somehow he's outside. It's a hot, bright summer day. Cicadas buzz in the tinder-dry undergrowth. ALEXANDRE stands in the middle of a small dusty circle surrounded by rows upon rows of stone seats forming an amphitheatre. Scattered about the pews, clothed in togas and tunics, sit isolated watchers, the midday sun beats down mercilessly on their uncovered heads. Turning around, ALEXANDRE looks back to where he emerged. Sitting on the stage of the Little Theatre of Epidaurus is Alfredo Arias' house, or at least a crude reproduction of it. It's really nothing more than a shack made from painted sacking and wooden panels. Sheep and goats and chickens mill about the stage. A ewe begins to nibble at the sleeve of ALEXANDRE's jacket while, from her other end, a cascade of small brown droppings patters softly into the powdery dust. ALEXANDRE spots ALFREDO ARIAS sitting on a bench in the first rung of the theatre. ALFREDO ARIAS motions for him to join him. As ALEXANDRE sits down, ALFREDO ARIAS pours him a fresh cup of tea from the newly filled pot.

ALFREDO ARIAS — (gesturing with his hands to the little house on the stage) You see, I find this just so wonderful because it's exactly the answer to the problem we were just discussing. Here there's no transition, no frontier between the real and the imaginary. Everything can fuse together. In this theatre, in this land, in this time, we can even portray the gods as tangible beings, as entities with whom we share our lives.

As he says this, the door of ALFREDO ARIAS' house is kicked open and two leering figures lurch out. The small audience laughs and hoots as the two players waddle onto the stage, scattering sheep in all directions. Both have large pads stuffed in their clothing, giving them monstrous paunches and behinds. Between their legs we glimpse long leather phalli swinging. Each figure's face is covered with a grotesque mask. Their features are twisted and exaggerated but instantly recognisable.

ALEXANDRE — (pointing) Hey! That one looks just like you!

ALFREDO ARIAS — (laughing) True enough, though they haven't forgotten you, either.

The second figure is dressed in the style of a Hellenistic comic actor but the costume he sports is a crude imitation of a contemporary black-and-white suit and tie. Wrapped around his feet are white leather boots with three stripes painted on each. The actor seems to be mocking ALEXANDRE as he limps onto the stage clutching his foot and muttering something about a sandbag. On each character's shoulder sits a stuffed bird. The two actors begin performing the opening scene from Aristophanes' *The Birds*.*

ACTOR ALFREDO — (listening to his crow) What's that you say? OK, right, but then which way do we go?

ACTOR ALEXANDRE — (pretending to be bitten by his parrot) Ouch! It's useless. They just lead us this way and that. We're never going to get there.

ALFREDO ARIAS — (speaking quietly so as not to disturb the performance) If Greek tragedy forms the basis of psychoanalysis, then perhaps Aristophanes' comedies form the basis of social critique. He very pointedly understands that which underlies the whole history of humanity—man's relationship to the mechanisms of power and how power truly operates within society. Simply put, Aristophanes tells us what will become of society.

ACTOR ALFREDO — (addressing the ancient Greek audience) It's ironic, isn't it, that in this day and age so many barbarian immigrants spend all their time trying to find a way into the country while we respectable citizens—born, as you know, of the purest French stock—(He pauses to allow the laughter this joke elicits to wash over.) are trying to get the hell out of Paris.

ALFREDO ARIAS — When I directed *The Birds* at the Comédie-Française,^{††} I wanted to place the play in the public sphere. And to do so, I introduced external, present-day elements. That can generate a certain wariness in some. People wanted to know if these elements really came out of Aristophanes' writing or if they were ideas I'd thrown in to make Aristophanes more contemporary. I'd say that by cleaning up certain aspects of the text—a little like archaeologists—we begin to uncover the fundamental knowledge within the play, the truths that give the text its vitality.

Fanning himself, ALEXANDRE loosens his tie and settles down to watch the performance. We see the two characters: ACTOR ALFREDO and ACTOR ALEXANDRE, dissatisfied with life in Paris go off in search of the birds to propose to them a marvelous new scheme. We find them in conversation with a HOOPOE, who listens attentively to their big idea.

ACTOR ALEXANDRE — (hopping about enthusiastically) Well, first off, there should be one single city for all the birds of the world. We should build huge walls of baked bricks, just like Babylon, except they should extend across the sky, stretching down towards the Earth and reaching right up to the heavens.

HOOPOE CHARACTER — Bitterns and Bustards. That sounds like a fearsome city indeed! Much-Cuckoo-in-the-Clouds we shall name it.^{‡‡} I say we get right down to building it now.

ALFREDO ARIAS — I've often thought that theatre is like the floating city in *The Birds*. Theatre, you see, is at the heart of man's relationship with other men. The mechanisms of theatre are an act of mirroring. To stage a scene is to create the illusion that it's ourselves embodied up there on stage. People believe what they see on stage because what they see is themselves. (He raises his eyebrow.) If not, why would people keep quiet at the theatre?

ALEXANDRE laughs loudly until he feels something poking him in his shoulder. He turns around to see a gruff man, his finger to his lips, shushing him.

ALFREDO ARIAS — (continuing) Borges says the image we see in the mirror is, in fact, an army that has been trained to imitate us. An army trained to imitate us? Well that's what actors are. Actors embody the possibility of operating in a frontier space between the human world and another, spiritual one.

Meanwhile, on stage, the two protagonists are visited by a succession of interlopers from the city of Paris, each one hoping to join their wonderful new utopia. The action is frenetic as the actors playing Alfredo Arias and Alexandre must not only portray themselves, but every other part as well. With each new character that appears on the scene, the actors must don yet another mask over their own as they layer one role over another.

ALEXANDRE — But does the spectator really identify with the character or with the famous actor? I mean, when you watch *Groundhog Day*, you're not just watching the story of the character Phil Connors;

you're also watching the actor Bill Murray playing himself, playing Phil Connors.

ALFREDO ARIAS — The spectator, I believe, is hoping to blend those different elements into one: the actor, the role he plays, and eventually the fusion of the actor and his part. If, for whatever reason, the audience member wishes to create a critical or poetic distance he can do so by separating out the individual elements. As an actor, we're always weaving together the conscious, the unconscious, and the mythic. Theatre is a form of alchemy that speeds along at a destructive pace. The difficulty is that one has to be both emotionally and intellectually agile to hit the right notes in a particular passage, to interpret it well, but even then one is invariably working at a certain remove. That distance adds another disruptive element, but one that must be mastered. Sometimes that fracture can even be used creatively to question the basis of the very text being performed.

As he says this, ALFREDO ARIAS gets up from his bench and claps his hands. Up on the proscenium, the action suddenly stops. The two doppelgängers freeze, mid-argument, then turn to the side and waddle off the stage. ALFREDO ARIAS whistles and from behind the small house emerges an army of stagehands, dressed head to foot in black. Immediately they set to work removing the props and scenery from the stage. But that is not all that's being packed up. ALEXANDRE is startled as the stone bench he's sitting upon jolts to life. Leaping off, he watches as the stagehands begin to dismantle the stone theatre itself. The solid scenery of the theatre and Greek landscape comes apart and is wheeled off. The people ALEXANDRE had taken for an ancient Greek audience are now making their way down the theatre, pulling off fake beards and wigs. One clutches at his back, complaining of stiffness.

LIGHTING TECHNICIAN — Heads up! Watch out, she's hot.

Up above in the sky, the sun itself starts falling to the ground, getting bigger and bigger. As it approaches, we see it is in fact a huge theatre-light. The sky begins to ripple and fold in on itself. The hills cascade to the ground, showing themselves to be nothing more than enormous painted backdrops. ALEXANDRE stares in wonder as the world around him is pulled down and packed away, revealing behind it a vast hall. Towering over them are rows upon rows of seats filled with expectant faces. A giant theatre full of spectators, all watching with fascination the action below. By now the pastoral scene is all but gone, revealing a large black empty stage.

ALFREDO ARIAS — To sum up, I'd say the audience member has a tendency to fuse everything together. If he becomes bored, it's because those elements have separated. And so if, as a theatre director, one wants to separate those elements, it must be done in magnificent ways. One can delve into the text itself, breaking it down and making it disintegrate, in order to see it in an entirely new light.

ALFREDO ARIAS leads ALEXANDRE to the edge of the stage where two seats wait for them in the front row.

ALFREDO ARIAS — (*looking out over the dark, empty stage*) The problem in Theatre is that its material has no real existence. For example, I've been witness to some very bad productions of Shakespeare and to some excellent ones. Even if Shakespeare's writings are powerful, in the miracle that is the condensation of his words, a particular production inevitably modifies them to a version that is sometimes disappointing or that doesn't correspond to the text. In Theatre, we're led to believe that by immersing ourselves in the original text, he, that is the text himself, lets us know which interventions are acceptable to him and which aren't. Especially since the latter will actually cause the text to disintegrate and fall apart. And so sometimes we are never able to really give the text its true form. But—

He lifts his hand and a spotlight illuminates a large circle in the centre of the stage.

We entrust the text into the hands of the actors and the director, and it's always from that same core that they will attempt to create something else.

Drifting down from the rafters is a small house. We recognise it as the same reconstruction of Alfredo Arias' home from earlier. The little house is picked out by the theatrical light, spinning slowly on its axis, before settling down in the very centre of the stage. A quiet expectant hush fills the theatre.

So perhaps there's something dizzying in the theatre, because we start from absolutely nothing. In the theatre we begin with silence. Everyone becomes quiet, someone turns a page and begins to read.

Walking onto the stage is the actor who had portrayed Alexandre. He carefully removes his mask revealing a face that, from afar, looks uncannily like Alexandre himself. He walks over to the little house in the middle of the scene. A little island of light in a sea of darkness.

And from that point of departure is born the chance to bring this text to life.

As the actor approaches the door we hear the sounds of crockery clattering, and someone speaking Spanish. Knocking, ALEXANDRE steps in.

* 1896-1992. Argentinian radio and television cooker. Appeared from the 1940s onwards on the Argentinian television show *Buenas Tardes, Mucho Gusto*.

† Born 1933. German fashion designer. Since 1983 head designer of fashion house Chanel. He appears as a character in Alfredo Arias' version of *The Birds*.

‡ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, 1599. *South Park*, 1997-present, American animated television show created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone.

§ Aristophanes (446BC-386BC), Athenian comic playwright. Aeschylus (525/524BC-455/456BC), Athenian tragedian.

** Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 414BC.

†† *Les Oiseaux* directed by Alfredo Arias, April 10th–July 18th 2010 at la Comédie-Française [Parisian Acting troupe and theatre. Founded in 1680 by Louis XIV].

‡‡ Νεφέλοκοκκυγία, which has become an English idiomatic expression through mistranslation as Cloud Cuckoo Land.