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Gargantua: Landscapes of Today and Tomorrow

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“The planet is fine, it’s the people who are fucked.”
-George Carlin, *Jammin’ in New York*

I. Introduction

My master thesis work is based upon an interdisciplinary approach to the contemporary landscape, which focuses on one main aspect: the sociological factors and outcomes developing the landscape and their subsequent environmental consequences. David Harvey describes this sociological approach to the landscape as dialectical, as it analyzes more complex and indirect factors other than immediate appearances and physical conditions. A comprehensive study of space, as Harvey contends must take into account “the experience of space and time”¹ and “the dynamism of capitalism’s historical-geographical development and [the] complex process of cultural production and ideological transformation.”² Therefore, a more complex study of the landscape evaluates *relations and interactions* to focus on the consequences of these social-cultural and historical developments on environments and ecosystems. Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* describes this by analyzing capitalism in conjunction with the historical and natural processes of time and space, thus a type of study can be formed allowing us to see beyond the objectivity of space, and to rather encompass more wide-ranging consequences and outcomes of it.

In my work, ecology forms the basis of my engagement with the landscape. I focus primarily upon a crisis defined by scientists as the “sixth extinction,” and thus from here inquire further into this catastrophe to intertwine capitalism and consumption’s effects on ecosystems (homogenization of natural spaces, forests, wetlands, prairies, etc.) In my work this creates the central backdrop to my compositions, as they depict these interactions between capitalism and its consequences in desolate, barren and hostile conditions—essentially post-apocalyptic landscapes. From here, I utilize a variety of methods to portray these ecological consequences

through such visual devices as analogy, allegory and parody, all which offer a sort of eccentric realism in the depictions of the landscape.

The intent behind these visual devices is to disrupt one's presumed understandings of the landscape and nature through oppositional and contradictory depictions of it. My work aims to create a space of inquiry that reasserts the role and importance of the landscape from a mere backdrop into one challenging us to rethink our relationship and uses of it. This is accomplished in two distinct ways: in landscapes which parody society in a debasing manner, within the disfigured and the abject, as well as in ones that apply parody in a playful manner with more bizarre and lighthearted depictions. I believe these differing methods involve the viewer in two distinct ways. The dark and more unsettling compositions capture our attention by project the seriousness and gravity of these issues. While the more playful compositions support an examination into these issues and their connections with the absurd and the meaningless.

In the following paper, I will be breaking down the content of my thesis work into four key categories. The Evolving Modern Landscape, this section will analyze the ecological factors and their congruence with capitalism. The Medieval Carnival and the Rollercoaster, this section will analyze representations of capitalism in my work and their links to the carnivalesque. Gargantua and Parodies of Mass Consumption, this section will analyze the rollercoaster as a monstrosity of the landscape and society. And finally, Junk Food and Banquet Imagery, this section will analyze the role of food in my work as a method of representation citing more metaphorical relationships.

II. The Modern Landscape and Ecology

The underlying theme of my work, post-apocalyptic landscapes, is predicated first and foremost on a theoretical social-cultural framework, referencing specific evolving historical

factors. This theme stems forth from an analysis of the mergence of Western Christian beliefs and the humanist movement and how these factors are manifested today within the predominant view of humanity as nature's "shepherd"³ and "subduer."⁴ These approaches to the landscape combined with more recent developments such as property rights and ownership has been conventionalized among society as our predominant perspective of the natural world. Today, this perspective has impacted the manner in which we value, use, and perceive the landscape as one chiefly predicated on an entity for exchange or as a use-value in raw materials and minerals. Lefebvre, outlining the consequences to this point of view, contends by relegating space to one all-encompassing value, we both objectify it into a set of formal and quantitative identities as well as reduce and lessen it to a mere commodity for society.⁵ According to Lefebvre, this type of relationship with space creates landscapes that are simplified as we parcel them into grids and divisions rather than value them for their inherent worth.

Marine biologist and author Rachel Carson foregrounding a similar conclusion over fifty years ago in her seminal text *Silent Spring*, contends that "nature has introduced great variety into the landscape, but man has displayed a passion for simplifying it."⁶ Carson warns of the tragic effects to the landscape once a complex, intricate, interdependent and fragile "web of life,"⁷ is perceived as a mere object for society's wastes and needs. Carson's arguments challenged the mental framework instilled by humanity in its relentless plight to reconstruct a sort of 'Garden of Eden,' as she identified the fundamental necessities of humanity and all life, as dependent, contingent, and fragile. Today, the societal impacts on this perception and use of the landscape, has initiated an era in the ecological history of the planet never before seen in humanity's short history.

In *The Once and Future World* J.B. MacKinnon, describes the current ecological state of the planet today as a "ten percent world,"⁸ noting the species currently considered at a healthy

level such as birds, deer, squirrels, etc. exist today at about ten percent compared to their former capacities in pre-modern society. In addition, species lingering below this ten percent threshold as well as those species nearing extinction today compose about thirty-six percent of all species on the planet. The most alarming of these statistics is the remarkably rapid pace species are dying off, as they currently measure in at around 550 thousand species each year. At this rate ecologists believe by the year 2050 only about twenty four percent of animal and plant species in our “ten percent world” will remain.⁹ As MacKinnon states, “extinction is not mere death; it is the death of the cycle of life and death.”¹⁰ MacKinnon’s conjectures reverberate what many scientists have come to understand as the current and upcoming new epoch of the planet, one journalist and author Elizabeth Kolbert defines as the result of a reassessment of the planet’s past five epochs in comparison with today’s sizeable extinction rates.¹¹ Today, the scientific community is in agreement as they have redefined the current ecological state of the planet as the sixth epoch of the Holocene extinction. In other words, the planet today is undergoing a human imposed mass extinction, prompted by our own careless and ignorant meddling into ecosystems and the resultant effects pollutants, toxins, and overdevelopment inflict upon habitats and wildlife. Carson contends, “To have risked so much in our efforts to mold nature to our satisfaction and yet have failed in achieving our goal would indeed be the final irony. Yet this, it seems, is our situation.”¹² Today, Carson’s conjecture is becoming a realization within the scientific community; as the popular phrase today goes, “we are the asteroid.”

This array of scientific evidence alongside these historical social and cultural formations, construct the overall foundation to my compositions as they merge this perception of space and the outcomes it has produced in the ecological state of the landscape today. Specifically speaking, this theme is noted in the portrayal of these simplified landscapes in my compositions, which are thus overlaid with repeated forms. The objective of these forms is to convey a sense of

occupation and dominance of humanity over the landscape, thus emphasizing the new values these relationships have on it, in predictable and homogenized appearances. Thus, nature has been reduced to a series of differentiations over its former inherent diversity and thus it is depicted in a subjugated and commoditized space of use and exchange-values.

III. The Medieval Carnival and the Rollercoaster

Today the predominant characteristics associated with the “carnival,” has evolved from its historical Medieval and Renaissance origins in the “feast of the fools,” a festival most noted for its appeal to demonic values and behaviors and its resultant culmination in one grand spectacle of a sort of ‘hell on earth.’ This ‘hell on earth’ is a unique practice to the medieval era as it was a day of relief and release from the all-encumbering nature of the feudal order, religious piety and oppressive power.¹³ In this era, the carnival was established as a festival predicated on the fulfillment of the self with the aim in replacing for one day these moral and spiritual orders with recklessness, impulsiveness, gluttony and hedonism. As Mikhail Bakhtin contends in *Rabelais and His World*, the carnival “was the defeat of human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than earth itself...carnival was the set called hell.”¹⁴ The realization of this hell on earth, allowed for the production of the fantastic from the drudgery of everyday life, whereas for one day this weary existence was replaced with the satisfaction of the self outside of these dominant orders. In the medieval era, a historical practice emerged founded in this use of celebration and leisure to encompass new social practices outside of everyday life.

The carnival today remains a popular cultural festival in the pre-lent season, however within the secular world it has manifested into the theme park, a lucrative economic form of tourism, centralizing rest, fun, thrill- seeking, illusion, fantasy and horror. These functions of the

theme park are all forms of leisure similar to the carnival as they are predicated on self-satisfaction, leisure, and decadence. And just as the fool was the trademark attraction of this medieval “festival of the fool,” today’s secular festival is also marked by a signature attraction—the rollercoaster. The rollercoaster, today is as much of a signifier of the theme park as Mickey Mouse is to Disney World, and with it comes a trove of analogies all related to this historical lineage it maintains with the carnival. In my work the rollercoaster is a central thematic device as it is utilized to associate the medieval carnival with the capitalist system. Here the carnivalesque manifests itself through both the experience that the rollercoaster provides and the many visual associations linked with its curves, loop-de-loops and drops.

In my work one specific application of the rollercoaster is its use as a link between the carnivalesque and modern forms of illusion, thrill and self-fulfillment. These qualities of the rollercoaster are all signifiers for consumption as they are predicated on experiences based within the manufacturing of thrills and enjoyment and thus are hybrids of modern forms of consumption. In this respect, the rollercoaster is intended to exhibit new types of commodity fetishism, what Karl Marx defines as the commodity’s “supra-sensible”¹⁵ appeal and allure. In my work, the rollercoaster demonstrates modern forms of consumption as it is one based upon a simulation, and therefore, these traditional concepts of the commodity’s appeal as a use-value are depicted in their transcended states as an experience alone of consuming. Therefore, Marx’s version of commodity fetishism once infused with these contexts of the carnival satisfies what Jean Baudrillard describes as the modern form of the commodity’s value in the simulacrum. As Baudrillard describes, consumption today has surpassed its logical form in uses and needs, to embody super-social and sensible forms in one’s experiences of everyday life.¹⁶ In my work the rollercoaster draws a parallel to the modern simulacra, demonstrating newer and intensified forms of the carnivalesque in modern day consumption. The objective of this theme is to demonstrate

that these irrational values of the carnival, which were once a biannual or annual practice, today have come to occupy a great portion of our lives.

In addition this theme can be further explored in my work in the effects of this modern simulacra on the landscape. Therefore the rollercoaster is also an allegorical device as it presents a lesson within this display of consumption. Here, the coaster presents society as the passengers, an uncritical mass of consumers that points to the potential catastrophes once this simulation has surpassed its carrying capacity. The structural integrity of the coaster's scaffolding is fragile, especially if it is composed of wood, and if any aspect of this foundation is compromised, the whole track can collapse leaving the riders in a car that is going nowhere fast (death/extinction). In the landscape, this can be understood as the capitalist system's contradictory values of unlimited growth on a planet with finite resources and the potential extinction our own species faces because of this structural foundation society has built. Hence, the rollercoaster can be understood as a fusion between ecology, consumption and the carnival in order to dynamically and playfully demonstrate these larger and more systemic issues.

Moreover, one of the central attractions of the rollercoaster, the loop-de-loop also serves as an analogy to the cycles of the planet. The loop-de-loop, a design inspired by Newton's First Law harnesses two binary forces of motion and energy in order to successfully and safely create one cohesive experience. Based upon the circle, the loop-de-loop is designed with both a decline and an incline, the decline generates energy in a kinetic form as gravity propels the car forward through the incline, completing the loop and thus transferring this former energy into a state of rest, or inertia. This transference of energy is symbolic to many other cyclical processes; within its ecological associations this can be understood as a signifier of the regenerative and degenerative cycle of life and death. The decline, signifying the energy rich processes of decay and the dynamism it brings to new life with this integration, also signifies the exertion of life, the

utilization of resources and its subsequent finality in death—a state of inertia for the next cycle of life. This analogy, juxtaposed with both the laws of physics and the application of the rollercoaster is also as an allegory of consumption as it constructs a layer of context that places humanity and civilization within a much larger framework of the planet’s cycles and epochs. Through this juxtaposition, capitalism and its deceptively all-encompassing power can be grounded in a much more humbling and realistic context as a momentary flash in a grander and greater cyclical planetary history.

IV: Gargantua: Parodies of Mass Consumptive Culture

One central theory of the carnival Bakhtin proposes in his text is its manifestation into popular form of humor, such as parody and satire. Bakhtin defines these forms of humor in association with “grotesque realism,” a prominent type of medieval festival amusement poking fun at power through the use of critique and commentary.¹⁷ In Bakhtin’s text a majority of his discussion focuses on the stories by the popular Renaissance writer, Francois Rabelais and his character of Gargantua, the behemoth son of Pantagruel. Gargantua, as Bakhtin contends is the fictional embodiment of “grotesque realism,” as the enormity of his body paired with both his physical deformities and behavioral transgressions created a character that constantly traversed the line between the silly and the profane. As a form of humor, Gargantua parodied the arrogance and conceit of sovereign medieval power, as the caricature debased it with the characteristics of the buffoon, fool and ignoramus, all references to debauchery, foolishness and precariousness. In addition, as a parody Gargantua was much more complex than that of the traditional nemesis, as his mischievousness and harmful actions were also juxtaposed with that of inherently sweet and obliviousness of his deeds. As Bakhtin contends Garagantua, was also a symbol for the “great generic body of the people,”¹⁸ thus his dualistic traits as a monstrous fool as well as a man of the

“common folk” created an allegorical character that reflected upon this transitional era of new institutional power and the rise of individuality (humanism). Furthermore, through this juxtaposition of the grotesque and the social-collective body of the people, all of these past conceits of power are infused into the character of Gargantua, as he is both a celebration of the power of the “masses” while at the same time he critiques and debases them. Gargantua presents the dual nature of these new social-economic institutions (monarchy and mercantile capital) in both the disbandment of old feudal orders as well as through new and more secularized “morals” (consumption). In essence, Rabelais understood the upcoming social revolution of power and found it as encouraging as he saw it to be troublesome.

“Grotesque realism” is central to my work as it infuses the subject matter of the rollercoaster with this historical tradition of satire and parody and thus creates a trove of associations with power, consumption and society. Bakhtin describes “grotesque realism” works in a multitude of ways, as a character such as Gargantua both represent a parody of society as well as critiques it through this debasing representation. In my work, the subject of debasement is the rollercoaster (coaster of consumption), and similar to “grotesque realism,” consumption is presented as a parody to “uncrown” the king, or in this case the capitalist system. According to Bakhtin, this “uncrowning” is a use of ridicule to “kill the old world (the old authority and truth), and at the same time give birth to a new.”¹⁹ Thus the rollercoaster’s scaffolding, railings and tracks are restructured into teeth and gums, creating quite literally a caricature of consumption. Therefore, the rollercoaster becomes a parody as well as a critique of consumption as it *confronts* the viewer with the “old word” or these reified uses of modern power in consumption, and presents it in a humiliated form. Parodies of consumption are crucial to my work as popular culture today is littered with many dystopian and apocalyptic genres all reveling in the futility of modern life. To humiliate power while simultaneously acknowledging it enables my

compositions to be straightforward and direct about my position on this issue. Without parody my work (which can be noted in the smaller roller-coaster landscape painting) may be confused with one that revels in the loss or the enormous power of capitalism and thus one which visually proliferates this mindset.

The monster and the gargantuan are also utilized in my work as an allegory of the contemporary landscape as it references the social-collective body and its relationship with nature. As predestined “shepherds” of the land the landscape exists as a vital entity to everyday life, this especially holds true in the contemporary period whereas capitalism is now realized on a global scale. Therefore in my work, this social collective body of consumption is also a depiction of the landscape, a reflection of the practices that created it, as a distorted, extracted use-value for capitalism. Thus, the landscape has been construed into a contradiction of its former self, conveying the ways in which the extraction and development of natural environments reconfigures them outside of their inherent and intrinsic state. The same way in which oil becomes toxic to the earth and the city sets itself in contrast with nature, the landscape is depicted in confrontation with its inherent identity—as “something else.” As Bakhtin contends, “Carnival’s hell represents the earth which swallows up and gives birth, it is often transformed into a cornucopia; the monster, death, becomes pregnant.”²⁰ The cornucopia situated within the girth of the rollercoaster’s belly, depicts this malformation of the landscape as a contradiction of itself. In my work the very contents of the earth have been turned inside out: earth becomes hell, life becomes death, fetish becomes whole, and nature becomes the irregular.

V. Banquet Imagery and Junk Food

“Banquet imagery” is a specific style of “grotesque realism” utilizing food and the body to construct analogies for the larger world. According to Bakhtin the central idea of “banquet

imagery” is to create associations with the microcosmic forces of the body with those of the cosmic forces of life.²¹ From here an array of complex visual symbols pertaining to the body, food, digestion and the mouth are deployed in order to reference the generative as well as degenerative cycles of life. In my work “banquet imagery” functions in two specific ways.

The first application of “Banquet imagery” is through the use of junk food as an analogy for the environment and pollution. At the most fundamental level, junk food constructs an analogy with artificial and synthetic materials that draws a parallel to similar industrial processes such as the extraction and harnessing of natural resources, that result in altered substances (processed food, chemicals, plastics, metals, etc.). These products are often the outcomes of a few chemical reactions, which produce completely new and different substances. For example, a form of nourishment in its original state such as a grain of wheat is easily transformed into a completely different substance through an array of different uses of flour. Similarly, when a natural or organic compound undergoes a simple chemical change this substance too, is easily transformed from the ‘natural’ to the inorganic or toxic (pesticides, chemicals, plastics, etc.). This transformation is relayed in my work through popular junk food items such as candy (high fructuous syrup), donuts and fast food. On a macrocosmic level these transformations work in a figurative manner as they refer to similar processes altering ecosystems from the pristine to that of the sterile, barren, and contaminated. On a microcosmic level these visual themes can work in a very literal way as it draws a parallel to the processes of digestion and the consequences occurring when a temporary and quick form of energy (such as sugars or carbohydrates) is introduced. And additionally, this also creates an analogy with the degenerative properties of junk food as one, referring to the processes of decomposition, decay, and synthesis at both a microcosmic level in the body and at a macrocosmic level in the ecosystems.

These microcosmic and macrocosmic analogies all enable me to further the conversation about the landscape when they are placed within the larger context of my work. Here, junk food is often juxtaposed with the allegory of the mouth generating a cornucopia-like appearance. Hence, this juxtaposition enables a reference to the earth and the body with the resultant harms that contaminates produce when placed within them. In addition, junk food juxtaposed with the rollercoaster also reinforces the carnivalesque, which further strengthens these references to consumption and capitalism and the values it supports in the cheap, quick and the artificial. Furthermore, junk food enables all of these references to generate new and different atmospheric conditions in my compositions, as it constructs landscapes both existing in the external world as well as the internal world of the body. The merging of these two spaces allows my work both visually and conceptually to form new and unique ways of understanding the world in its alignment with one's own body to that of the broader body of the planet. It was after all Carl Sagan who famously stated that "the nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff."²²

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, my work is concerned with analyzing and examining the landscape in a critical theoretical manner. It is my objective to create a more dynamic understanding of the changes the planet is undergoing through the themes and subject matters in my compositions. Today, humanity has created a paradox with nature and everyday life stemming forth from the values, practices and manner in which we view the landscape.

In my work I attempt to address these issues as my compositions depict landscapes that are desolate and post-apocalyptic superimposed by various sociological framing devices. By

applying an integrated methodological approach to these environmental crises my work examines the complex social relations that have transformed the landscape. The carnival is a central method to conveying these ideas, as the visual device of the rollercoaster forms an allegory of capitalism, as well as the culture of precariousness it fosters. In addition, “grotesque realism” is another central method to my work as it compounds these allegories in its infusing of the rollercoaster with parody and thus transforming it into a critique. The allegory of Gargantua constructs a monstrosity of the mouth and in doing so critiques capitalism and the societal values it constructs in the greater mass of the social-collective body. Thus Gargantua additionally represents an allegory of the landscape as a reflection of these societal values. “Grotesque realism” is further complemented by the application of “Banquet imagery” as my work utilizes junk food as an analogous device drawing parallels to the body, unhealthy food and harmful pollutants in the landscape.

My MFA work, has been an exploration into what I consider one of the central crisis facing humanity today. In this regard, this study has been a practice of reconciliation with my own fears, anger and anxieties with the rapid transformations occurring in some of the most beautiful and pristine places on this planet. Analyzing these environmental, social and cultural issues in no way have resolved my trepidations, but it has rather offered me a constructive lens to channel these anxieties in an imaginative and creative manner. In this aspect, by making creative use of my fears I hope that these compositions can offer others a new way of thinking about the landscape, and if not, simply provide a space where one’s fears can be mutually met with my own.

Notes

- 1 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Blackwell: Cambridge and Oxford, 1990) 9.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 3 *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*. Zacheriah 11:16.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 11:16.
- 5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991) 4.
- 6 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, first Marnier Books ed. (New York: Mariner Books, 2002) 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 8 J.B. MacKinnon, *The Once and Future World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013) 34.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 11 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2014) 10.
- 12 Carson, *Silent Spring*, 245.
- 13 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984) 63.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 90-91.
- 15 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990) 164
- 16 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, translated by Ian Hamilton Grant (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 50-51.
- 17 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 90-93.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 88
- 19 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 20 *Ibid.* 91.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 22 Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*, (New York, Random House, 1980).

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