Seeking singularity: The sublime aspect of unspace

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> "I walked down the half-lit stairwell whistling. The tune had died out to sporadic shrieks of high-pitched noise as I experienced my own echoes in the silence. Familiar beige walls, cracked and filled to hide decades of structural decay. Esoteric hieroglyphs which allow only those sacred, modern day masons a view into their significance orient themselves with indifference underneath the dust. There are no people here, no signals. The stairs lead further down, absence communes with disconnection, silence with age. What lay in this unremarkable stairwell was not any great art or object but a contemporary sublime. We may even call it the anti-sublime, for it is not the vastness which brings terror but the lack of access to vastness. With no connection to the *infinet*, the internet. I find only the immediate and the internal. These are the places we can begin to call the 'unspaces', somewhere on the border of space. Somewhere between perception and translation."

Steven Hall's *Raw Shark Texts* delves its characters into these forgotten passageways of modern city life. Connecting the world through a series of service tunnels and abandoned buildings the 'second Eric Sanderson' attempts to avoid the Ludovician, a denizen of conceptual streams. Sanderson's search takes him to meet a member of "a very *discreet* society, a school of logologists, linguists and calligraphers...called Group27" (227), a man called Dr. Trey Fidorous. Fidorous' hermetic lifestyle leads Sanderson down primarily through the unspace. The Ludovician being a creature that travels through the interconnectivity of concepts has a harder time navigating the sparse and stagnant unspace. In short, an unspace is somewhere without saturation. It is not filled. We may escape the overwhelming mediascapes submersing us with an overload of information by retreating down into these peaceful enclosures. The constant desire to perpetually and hyperactively divert our attentions can be forgotten temporarily, as a shift in perceptions moves from micro to macro. Sanderson highlights "labeless carparks, access tunnels and buried places" as potential sites (72). He began recovering the hidden palaeontology of Trey Fidorous in places like a recently exposed area of Leeds Central station, Arundel Way underpass in Sheffield, the Sheffield interchange and a lay-by in the Broomhill area (75-78). Mapping and exploring these places plays an important part of the narrative in the *Raw Shark Texts* as they offers refuge and sanctuary from the Ludovician.

The ludovician represents something pervasive about media, the shark is created in the book by the typography and some pages are dedicated to representing its movement. Its stalking nature is somewhat similar to the algorithms that trawl through our memories and conversations looking for information to consume into a conceptual reproduction of ourselves. So it is that the ludovician

thrives in areas of connectivity and abstraction and ironically, may be seen as a 'concrete' poem. I remember a lecturer once posed that theatre is in search of the elusive nature of truth, and to carry on her supposition, I may suggest that poetry seeks out the essential or the essence. As much as the ludovician behaves in a manner befitting sharks, it also adopts the physical characteristics that for a general audience signify 'shark' (fin, teeth, black eyes). We may refer to the internet as the world-wide web but this implies something static, something that only reacts to information. What exists now is more akin to an ocean, something amorphous and decentred through which information is passed with little resistance. The recent 'scandal' involving Cambridge Analytica and Facebook demonstrates that these data sharks are already populating the internet and that each time we visit places a little of ourselves is eaten away. However, this is a two-way street. We gorge upon the ocean and demand control and immediate satisfaction. So, they bait us, and tempt us to where they can feed on our left over information that which falls out from our devouring. The unspace offers a break from this relentless quest to be nourished by media, and what media exists there exists both functionally and in a strange way aesthetically. It has begun to become a delicacy, an acquired taste in contemporary culture.

Exploration of domestic-industrial and virtual environments has become an important mode of escapism for contemporary media audiences. Popularity of 'Urban exploration' has forced companies and landlords the world over to take expensive counter measures to prevent intrusions from 'roofers' or Urbex-ers. Red Bull's series *Urb-Ex* (2016) provides a documentary style view into the lives of some of the more prominent cyber-celebrity urban explorers in the world. This wanderlust has become ubiquitous in the creation of mass produced digital entertainment. Indie titles like *Sunless Sea* capitalise on rich narratives, putting together stories through the Unterzee a foreboding shadowed sea into which a ruinous Fallen London has plunged. Mainstream games like Bethseda's *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* franchises often lead the player to experience and explore areas that are under the duress of the rampant growth of kipple and entropy. Over the face of the globe millions of virtual unspaces are being explored daily. The attraction towards spaces that are disconnected or singular perhaps resides in our desire to enjoy an out-of-self-experience similar to vertigo.

Our encapsulation in advertising media forces us to try and shut out the world, to retreat inwards and away from the external space. However, the unspaces juxtapose this effect; we begin to lose sight of the constant interactions driving our thoughts internally into negotiations of desire and economy and become drawn out into the world of searching for sensory feedback. We look for the stories behind our new physical context, we look to decipher media once more. Though one may encounter many forms of media within abandoned or derelict buildings, the essential property of

the medium has transitioned from commercial-industrial to natural and environmental (a holistic consistency within the genesis of kipple). Those numbers scrawled in pencil are figures some real person was making note of, it isn't staged or photoshopped. It is not even particularly always intended to have an audience. Without the inclination to sell or harvest information from the individual, media loses its perversions, the content of the media ceases to be the main context. What begins to form is the media as part of a grander experience, one in which the impetus is on surroundings and not screens.

Ambientlit.com is a collation of works relevant to a joint research project centralised on "the emergent forms of literature that make use of novel technologies and social practices in order to create robust and evocative experiences for readers". Matt Hayler writing for the site speculates on the qualities ambient spaces reflect, he goes on to say "it's not something you can tease out, not really; the stories swirl around us, mix with one another to become the place. Elements overlap, distort, restructure, and mediate one another, sometimes seemingly destroying one another, sometimes simply changing each other forever" (*The voices of place*,). These sentiments are reminiscent of the streams stalked by the conceptual shark, eternal moments reified in history but only recount-able through flawed human simulation. The first Eric Sanderson's undoing was his belief that within the ludovician these memories remain intact, unforgotten and accessible, living on in some platonic conceptual form. The main form of ambient literature utilises audio recordings mapped with GPS sometimes in accordance with a text. Examples of this would-be things such as *It Must Have Been Dark by Then,* Duncan Speakman, *Too much information* by Blast Theory and *The writer on the train* by James Attlee. On the surface it may give the impression that the story is loitering in areas for the audience to discover, but this doesn't have the same mystique as a physical message in a bottle. It does not occupy the space and thus can never truly blend with its ambience, can never be a part of the immediate and the important. The combination of importance and immediacy is something that becomes paramount in understanding the affect that arises when we encounter unspace.

When Walter Benjamin talks about auras he treats them almost with a holistic approach, a deeply emotional and inherently spiritual ambience is tied in with a sense of place and of history. As we may take note, people are not just things surrounded other things in an objective sense but are instead subjects on which things have an impact. Bollnow highlights this important distinction in the work of Heidegger before going on to say "the way in which we are located in space is not a definition of the universe that surrounds us, but of an intentional space with reference to us as subjects" (254). We are all aware that red means danger and yellow means hazard, these intentional references are picked up in our space by an underlying hazard awareness or natural instinct. Yet

advertising media uses this response against us in a constant drive to force our attentions upon it. It is in this process that between our perception of an object and our recognition or translation of that object that there must exist a form of preconscious premediation. An anxiety in a constant process of recognising dangers and conceptualising futures. This anxiety, however, is still slave to the conscious directives and thus if we limit our perceptual capacities by immersing ourselves in music or screens then the capacity for affective premediation diminishes (If a man is tying his shoe he will not see the piano fall from the roof). So, it would appear if we are to take the reverse, that if we remove limitations or distractions from ourselves this premediation can become more pronounced. The eerie quality of a place isn't because it has anything particularly haunting about it, just that we are perceiving it with an increase of our capacity for hazard awareness. The unspace of service corridors and the like contains the environment and foundation necessary for eeriness but rather than being tied to the supernatural, it is better entwined with our concepts of time. You see, ghosts are bringing past things and giving them presence in the present, they occupy space; memories are about bringing the present back into the past, they occupy time. In formulating these ideas, the preconscious premediation of a haunted house is one where our anxieties are centred upon finding movement in space and thus we excitedly look and feel – external sensory information becomes paramount. In unspaces the reverse is true, because of the stillness our anxieties switch from conceiving of events appearing in space to exploring mysteries held in time.

To summate the aesthetic quality of unspace as one where the individual is anxious, aware, isolated, disconnected and rekindling (or discovering) and to situate it not just geographically but as a realm of interpretation that is abstract and unconscious within the individual. Refers us back to the term hodology in Bollnow's diction. The space that is being experienced has limitations that are not just physical but resultant of individual, societal and cultural paradigms. The disconnect from these constraints allows the subject to filter out into the world and begin to construct from their environment a message unique and personal. In this world of ubiquitous sharing, that which is personal is a conceptual delicacy, one which affirms wholeness and the singularity necessary to encounter the sublime. As such it may not be the loss of the vastness creating an anti-sublime but by removing our connectivity and once again making us singular. It allows us to reacquaint ourselves with a feeling of the sublime in physical space that is lost when we are hyper-connected subjects.

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