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Conifers, Chaffinches and Gnomes

An incomplete anthology of recollections and associated thoughts on moments in time

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## **Conifers, Chaffinches and Gnomes**

An incomplete anthology of recollections and associated thoughts on moments in time

Alan Armstrong

MA

Oslo National Academy of the Arts

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***Wednesday***  
***7<sup>th</sup> January 2015***

**12:58**

I begin with a confession; to travel makes me nauseous. Apart from being inconvenient to others, for myself it's destabilizing when you're desperate to run. You can usually foresee its presence well in advance; unsteady, queasy and your mouth starts producing too much saliva. A muddling between what is seen and what is sensed causes me to spew in revolt to the confusion. The travel sickness was at its most prominent throughout my younger years climaxing in the spraying of my Fathers new white BMW on its maiden family trip. I tried to hold it in. Sick filling the lining of my mouth resulting in a short delay of what is inevitable. The interior was red leather, a seductive luxury space to present our alpha-road status to our fellow travellers and onlookers. The said cases usually happen when at the rear. If I'm 'up shotgun' everything is fine. There's no confusion. I'm in control of my own destination.

***Wednesday***  
***19<sup>th</sup> November 2014***

**15:03**

It's not when Marty plays future hit Jonny B. Goode overheard by Chuck Berry, its not when Doc is shot by the Libyan rebels, Old Biff taking the sports almanac to his younger self, or Doc Brown's realisation that he needs 1.21 gig watt's. It's not the lightening, the DeLorean, the loops, holes and paradoxes that intermittently swim in and out of Robert Zemeckis' 1986 cult classic *Back To The Future*. To me, the defining moment is the first time Marty McFly erringly travels backs to Valley Hill 1955. Here McFly splits from his former present; entering a reverse double-consciousness in which we view George through the eyes of Marty as he encounters his

younger father (to be) at the counter of Valley Hill diner. Whilst it's at this moment we are introduced to George through Marty's new found presence, it's Marty who's position holds our interest – mirroring our own continuity, forever in the 'middle of something' Marty finds himself caught in a moment, caught or suspended in a multiplicity of rhythms.

Speaking of potentiality in relation to time, and the absence of presence with his text *Comrades Of Time*; philosopher and media theorist Boris Groys states “*to be contemporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be “with time” rather than “in time.*”<sup>1</sup> Here, if we take Marty McFly as the *contemporary*, we can use Groys' proposal of what it means to be present to clearly identify this 'multiplicity of rhythms' that Marty finds himself in as we watch an onscreen metamorphosis, shifting from *in time* (a clear understanding of his own presence in 1986) to *with time* (his new unfamiliar presence in 1955). Here Marty comes to the realisation that he is no longer active in his own time in 1986 and instead finds himself floating precariously between times; having yet to achieve an active presence or indeed a sense of solidarity with time in 1955. This new found confusion causes a loss of his rooting - suspended – finding himself within neither the past nor present - a floating particle between the real and its sensual qualities. George's presence has caught Marty's tongue, a real knot in the moment.

***Sunday***  
***14<sup>th</sup> June 1996***

***10:15***

Here I am. The gnomes have taken up new positions; I know my Grandmother moves them every time prior to my visit, to see if I notice. I'm sure I know that she knows that I know. Whilst the gnomes settle into their new scenery its sense of familiarity feels timeless, recreational tools scatter the grass; floral blooms and ornate decorations flow across the

hanging baskets and flowerbeds. Its place feels warming and reassuring, as if forever identical to my last visit. An assortment of smells drift across the gnomes upturned noses, my Grandmothers cooking, the scent of Magnolias and Hydrangeas, and the heavy weight of the gardens earthly soil. A vertiginous sense of déjà vu.

A knee high brown wooden picket-style fence divides the garden in two. The gate is forever closed, held together with a thin rusty chain that drapes over its post. The gate is for authorised access only. Whilst my Grandmother's efforts of endless plodding, sowing and snipping creates a botanic paradise its efforts are overshadowed by the grey presence looming beyond the fence, all her efforts and seductive warming qualities wither away. Across the fence functionality dominates, for here performance is imperative. There is no joy to be had here.

...

My visits here are a weekly occurrence. My Father is here and his Father is here, as they always are when I am here. I am only here because my Father is here. My Father is here only because his Father is here. As a trio we enter through the gate and enact a procession of sorts in hierarchal order. Undertaken in almost total silence it's the chaffinches who make the most chatter whilst nesting in the conifers, conferring to try and understand this regular ritualistic occurrence. Armed with wellingtons and projecting a camouflaged solidarity we march through the raw dug trenches around the rows of raised mounds of earth, in which sit my Grandfathers beaming prize winning vegetables, the fruits of his labor, the objects of his affection.

I am an observer here. I play no real part in the proceedings other than my presence. Time, when passing through the gate, slows and slithers along at a snail's pace. We move in what feels like slow motion and perform our ritual in near silence. Whilst performing to the feathered audience as witnesses to our weekly procession, I forever play my role perfectly. Never

missing a step, I'm in line and in place. My only reward for my flawless performance is to depart as quickly as we arrived.

*Friday*  
*3<sup>rd</sup> January 2014*

*19:32*

It's red leather interior refuses to leave—travelling as a family when I was younger was always a two-stage event. “We're making good time!” was the call often trumpeted through the house by my mother; an optimistic shrill, buoyant, a hoping call before we had set-off. The crying call made only by the female of the household was always short lived, thwarted as quickly as it arose, her idealistic optimism was always squashed by some other eventual condition, the traffic, the weather, my sickness... her optimism is always followed with solid reasoning to explain our lateness. “We should have set off earlier...”

This loss of time is always inevitable. We were forever late. This inevitability I feel only makes my mother's continued optimism all the more admirable. Returning to *Comrades of Time* and Groys' argument that that to be present is to be rather 'with time' rather than 'in time'; Groys' in an attempt to understand how the present manifests itself in our everyday experience raises the prospect that the ideals of utopia are no longer believed and that the contemporary/present is a '*moment in time in which we decide to lower our expectations of the future*'. As '*an infinite future holding the results of our work has lost its plausibility*'.<sup>2</sup>

In line with Groys', to me the present is a terrifying prospect, only the 'now' raises the pressure of the consciousness to nauseating levels. I am forever failing to act on the possibilities that present themselves in the moment, where delaying the possibilities of action take hold over me. This realisation

that the 'now' no longer holds the possibility of an infinite future can maybe seen as a relief. But to retrace to the origins of this false dawn maybe its useful to try and think historically of how we have perceived the future; historically modernity tells us our future is infinite, a utopian vision in which we are sold the idea that what we produce and indeed consume will conjure a greater collective future. As endless repetition in which time always triumphs, it always gets its own way showing us that this utopia is forever coming, an elusive conundrum always just beyond my reach.

*Sunday*  
*14<sup>th</sup> April 2006*

*10:38*

I visit this place only when a family member dies. If you are ever up that way, take a look; you wouldn't assume it was a holy place. Lacking the aesthetics you associate with places of worship it presents no spire, pinnacles or buttress's instead it rather resembles a community hall, the exterior doesn't speak to you, nor does it want to; happy to let you go by unnoticed.

I find myself at its oak doors waiting for the signal to enter. I again find myself present in a procession of a somber affair. The six participants stand in silence and to pass the time I glance sideways across its modest car park to see those conifers that still line his garden. They are unruly now and quarrelling for space having grown to a considerable height after being left to grow at their own free will. Whilst neglected they are still a home for some as I stand and watch the chaffinches acrobatically swoop in and out of their foliage going about their merry way.

It's my Father's turn to lead the way now, to orchestrate proceedings propping up the head of the coffin. My view of him is obscured by the mahogany mass I carry, and I can see only his feet shuffling slowly as he sets the somber pace. Distributed equally across its carriers the mahogany

mass seems to float peacefully between us, yet the hard edge digs uncomfortably on my collarbone.

Many years have passed since I marched through that rickety garden gate, as my visits to my Farther became less frequent as I entered my teens, and thought I had better ways to spend my time. Yet as we make our way down between the wooden naves carrying my Grandfather upon our shoulders this is the only memory filling my thoughts. Passing those smirking gnomes... the smells flowing by.... marching through those trenches.... I wonder for the first time if my time spent there held more value than I realised during my youth - for we all find ourselves caught in the middle of something flowing and marching somewhere.

**Wednesday  
14<sup>th</sup> January 2015**

**15:04**

Everything was set up for me to take upon the baton and follow in both my Grandfather and Fathers footsteps. An unspoken expectation or continuation of what was expected. Boris Groys' identifies that *we live in a time of indecision, of delay* and tells us that in order to *pass through the narrow gate of the here and now* we are to acknowledge that *the present is a moment in time when we decide to lower our expectations of the future or abandon some of the dear traditions of the past.*<sup>3</sup> These lingering senses of indecision in these moments hover with me long since these memories have been relegated to my past. Each time I return to these moments, brings back this sense of possibility in which I decided to delay. A muddled sense of place clouds my thoughts when reflecting on these times. Thinking back to the procession, the funeral, the vegetables and my sickness when travelling, I've never felt in harmony to these places instead feeling a secluded sense of belonging, some sense of not being active when present in those moments. Reflecting on these times brings back those unsteady queasy sensations



induced by my travel sickness, of feeling sick in the confusion to what is seen and what I am sensing. Hovering on the periphery of the moment; a disjointed hierarchal order of things - these times hold over me a continual sense of being splintered between the experience of the moment and there adjacent sense of place.

Thinking about this detached sense of place in these times I wonder what does it means to retain a hold on these memories now? To be able to re-visit these moments at any time. This sense of delay caused by a sense of failing to act in the moment causes a knot in my metamemory, a clinging delay caused by a 'what if' moment that lingers within the nucleus of the memory. Thinking about these roving moments that are caught in a kind of catch of 'suspended time' I wonder if it's possible to achieve some sense of solidarity with these times that have so far eluded me?

Since my Grandfather passed and my visits to my Father became scarce events, I have somewhat *abandoned the dear traditions of the past* and in effect these 'what if' moments adopt new prominent positions – they are all that remains. For me, this continual delay in which I have retained the ability to hold and to revisit at any moment achieves a sense of solidarity. A new found sense of belonging that stems from a prolonged sense of ownership of these moments. They are forever mine. Here I think lies my lure to time travel; I'm an envious viewer, I'm re-imagining my fantasies through the fictional endeavours of others. My guilty pleasure. Whilst I am forever time travelling in a metaphorical sense, my solidarity with these times materialises in the realisation that it is OK to fail to act in the moment, its OK for the 'expected' to be overwhelming when faced with a fork in the road, because whatever route you choose produces this suspended sense of delay. Remaining with you these moments linger and ferment, they drift and amble. These delays cling to our past moments like treasure encrusted clams and in return we hold them close for they only open for the holder.

Notes

1 -3 Boris Groys, *Comrades of time*, ; e-flux journal, *What is Contemporary Art?* Sternberg Press, 2010