

Casual  
Encounters:  
The  
Untroubled  
Mind  
and Nervous  
Translation

**Casual Encounters:  
The Untroubled Mind and Nervous Translation**  
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I have never played Fumito Ueda's classic PlayStation 2 game *Shadow of the Colossus* but have long been fascinated by its central concept. You play a character called Wander who has to navigate a series of isolated, forbidding landscapes that are seemingly bereft of life in order to destroy sixteen massive beings known as the colossi. These beings are so enormous that it eventually becomes apparent that they are the terrain itself: the hills are their arched back, the rock face their biceps, the woodland their hair. Within these massive territories, a shift occurs as the wandering player comes to realise the thing they are looking for is the thing they have been in all the time. This shift in scale introduces us to another understanding of the world. In my fantasy of this game, I can't imagine wanting to vanquish the colossi once I had discovered them.

Throughout Manon de Boer's *The Untroubled Mind* (2016), we are presented with a series of unaccompanied assemblages which reshape the domestic terrain with an invisible hand; they are flatly materialist but point to magical encounters. A sword hangs gently from a cord by a window, coins are carefully piled up at the feet of two chair legs, wooden blocks are stacked in the crude form of a figure whose head becomes a table for a further structure, a spoon makes a bridge between two red bowls, one filled with slices of kiwi fruit, the other empty. What are we to make of these assemblages? Are they sculptures or offerings? What nature of being formed them? And for what purpose? Without seeing any hands or uses we are introduced to these sculptural fragments and must imagine ourselves what these encounters between objects mean. They bring to mind the games played by Merricat Blackwood, the child protagonist in Shirley Jackson's last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, who seeks to fortify herself against a hostile environment through an elaborate series of talismans. As she recounts:

On Sunday mornings I examined my safeguards, the box of silver dollars I had buried by the creek, and the doll buried in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods; so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us. I had always buried things, even when I was small; I remember that once I quartered the long field and buried something in each quarter to make the grass grow higher as I grew taller, so I would always be able to hide there. I once buried six blue marbles in the creek bed to make the river beyond run dry.<sup>1</sup>

Like the best films, *The Untroubled Mind* invites us into a world and allows us to imagine for ourselves its contours. The title gives the work layers of inference, pointing in various directions. One we can follow to Herbert J. Hall's classic 1915 text on mental health, which sought to identify the duality of illness: what it is and what the patient thinks it is. 'The remedy for the mental unrest, which is in itself an illness,' Hall argues in *The Untroubled Mind*, 'lies not in an enlightened knowledge of the harmfulness and ineffectiveness of worry, not even in the acquirement of an unconscious conscience, but in the living of a life so full and good that worry cannot find place in it.'<sup>2</sup>

Parallel to the advent of psychoanalysis, the early twentieth century saw various thinkers attempt to

understand the relationship between inner and outer worlds. Nowhere is this more vividly and dynamically rendered than in the lives of children, where these realms seem to operate with the greatest freedom and propensity for encounter, leakage, accidents and magic. A second reading of the title points us to the great painter Agnes Martin, who used it as title for a text in 1972. In the late 1960s, Martin abruptly left New York and after a period of itinerant travel settled on a ranch in New Mexico. During this time, she did not make art as she struggled to find a balance between her artistic work and her mental health.<sup>3</sup> The text is drawn from a lecture she gave when she began returning to art-making. Among other things, it addresses inspiration and the 'work' of art.

Of course we know that an untroubled state of mind cannot last so we say that inspiration comes and goes but really it is there all the time waiting for us to be untroubled again. We can therefore say that it is pervasive. Young children are more untroubled than adults and have many more inspirations.<sup>4</sup>

Through these loci we can see how the sculptures encountered in de Boer's film point to an unseen colossus; they are made by a child whose untroubled inspiration describes a landscape of accidental and magical encounters that is in front of us all the time.

I am fascinated by how films can function as portals connecting us to other ways of being and other possible encounters between people, objects and worlds. This reminds me of an accidental encounter that occurred in footage I shot in Chile while working on a film there. After I returned to London, I received a message from the Kodak film lab that there was a big problem with one of the rolls of film I had dropped off. There was trouble in the image. They described it as a disaster. When shooting on film, there is always a small margin for error, always 'problems'. But maybe this time I had pushed my luck too far.

As we scanned the footage at the lab, everything seemed fine until half-way through, when the rupture occurred. I had been filming with filmmakers Niles Atallah and Cristóbal León in an old taverna called the Wonder Bar in central Santiago. The first images appeared fine: the dark tabletops and neon bar sign were vivid. But then everything started to collapse. As the camera panned across the old bar with its western paraphernalia, another layer of images appeared underneath the first, yet upside down and running in the opposite direction. This hidden layer of images showed the white interior of a house, two figures in sat by a computer looking at the image of a young girl, and a fan purring in the corner. Outside, a man opened an old gray gate and we glimpse a chandelier hanging in a courtyard beside a large mirror. Amidst the upside-down images, it was still possible to make the superimposed images of a hand-painted menu offering *pino*, *empanadas*, *queso*, and *fritas*. The two figures then reappeared, this time immediately recognizable. It was here that I realised that this disaster, as the lab had called it, was rather a fortuitous encounter. The figures in the white room were the filmmakers Shireen Seno and John Torres. These were lost images I had filmed when I visited them a few months before. I must have not labeled the can, rendering them as stowaways hidden in the emulsion of the unexposed film and bringing them with me to Chile. Now, upside-down and backwards, they met fellow filmmakers on the other side of the Pacific.

Far from being a disaster, these entangled images provided a bridge between worlds of image-making; they comprised a translocal mode of cinematic sociability. The film *Shireen* was editing with John in their white studio in Quezon City was her second feature, *Nervous Translation* (2017). I wrote the following about this visit in my diary:

*Saturday, 7 October 2017, Manila*

*I spent the weekend in Manila en route from Taipei to Jakarta. Third time I have visited and stayed with John and Shireen in Quezon City. Arrive to find everyone I know either making a baby or making a movie. Or in the case of Shireen and Kiri Dalena, doing both at once. Making new realities through all avenues, refusing the nihilism and death of the new political regime. Shireen and John are editing together in their house. Kiri, back in Kidlat's flat where we stayed on our first visit to Manila, is surrounded by friends, feverishly editing while preparing for upcoming trips despite her heavy pregnancy.*

*Merv, teased by John about his love life, looks handsome with a black bandage on his arm from a bike accident. Kiri is further on in her pregnancy but in typical fashion she didn't know she was pregnant till after Shireen. She is about to fly to USA and then Colombia to work in solidarity with anti-Duterte and anti-narco war protestors before retuning via Jakarta for the biennial. I'm reminded of Kiri's excellent exhibition on Lumod tribe in the south,<sup>5</sup> now mixed in my mind with Jessica Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle that I just finished: the fabrication of authenticity as political tool, the manipulation and betrayals of cinema, and the real people, real lives and real deaths behind them. John had a film about the Angel's Breath flower, which one can drink in order to forget.**

*Get airplane back to Jakarta. Few days in Manila full of energy, makes me feel lazy despite my busy summer. I made few films but no babies.*

Chance encounters, community building and worldmaking are central to Shireen Seno's work, from her early photographic projects such as the zine *Jeans Don't Lie*, made of photos of informal assemblages around various homes (echoing the offerings of *The Untroubled Mind*), to her collective work as part of Tito and Tita, an informal family of filmmakers and artists based in and around Manila. Her installation projects – such as *Cloudy with a Chance of Coconuts* (2019), made with her partner John Torres – seek to create an environment in which their films and the multiple stories they contain can breathe and in which new encounters can occur. Through Shireen and John, I had come to understand a communal mode of practice open to magical accidents and the importance of working at different scales. As Kidlat Tahimik would put it, the power of the independent comes 'when you work with the cosmos.'<sup>6</sup>

I shot my lost images in their home, a space that is also a base for their production company Los Otros, was when Shireen was heavily pregnant and editing *Nervous Translation*, a film that delves into the recent past of the Philippines and the interior world of the eight-year-old protagonist Yael (beguilingly and subtly played by Jana Agoncillo). As Shireen describes, the film emerged after she 'had a dream one night that I was told to go to my relatives and find a pen for nervous translation. When I

woke up, I thought, "How perfect that would be — to have a pen for nervous translation, as opposed to having a nervous breakdown!" I think we grow up brainwashed by modern society to think that there are products to solve our problems, when in fact our problems lie disjointed between the world around us and the world within.'<sup>7</sup>

Shireen wasn't able to attend the international premiere of the film in Rotterdam, having just given birth to her first daughter. Since then, she's also had a son. Her way of working and living with and through cinema, fluidly interpolating inner and outer worlds, is one that filters through the work of many of the artists I most admire. Since working and living with Shireen and John in Manila, as well as visiting Kidlat Tahimik in Baguio and Gym Lumbea in Lake Taal, I have continued to live with images from this time, including the film *Director's Cat* (2013), which has kept me company through an itinerant series of screenings in Zagreb, Montreal, London, Buenos Aires and Taichung. The film, an outtake from *Anak Araw* (Gym Lumbea, 2012) is credited to the group Tito and Tita, an artist collective Shireen has described as 'mostly Gym Lumbea, Timmy Harn, Jacyn Esquillon, Jippy Pascua, Charles Salazar, and myself, although this varies depending on our individual schedules and points in our lives. At other times, the collective has also included Raya Martin, Pam Miras, Malay Javier, Mikey Red and John Torres, among others.'<sup>8</sup>

This is a collective model built on friendship and family. The name Tito and Tita, which means 'uncle' and 'aunt' in Tagalog, is used to refer to elders and became a term of humorous affection between artists friends after Gym Lumbea became a young father. Together the group had developed various projects, working in fluid ways between cinema, performance and exhibitions. An early project with Green Papaya art space was called *Casual Encounters* (2013); led by photographic processes and the alchemical magic of the darkroom, it was an ode to missed romantic connections and the possibilities of darkness. While these projects might seem distinct from the beautifully rendered child's world in *Nervous Translation*, these modes of practice and the fluid communities that take shape around them provide the undercurrent to this rich and media-saturated exploration of the recent past. Indeed, many of the members of Tito and Tita make guest appearances in the film or were part of the crew, populating Yael's world and working to recreate fragments of Shireen's memories of her early childhood. Set in 1987, the film is marked by Yael's vivid interior life and the various fortifications she creates against an overwhelming exterior reality in which patriarchal figures are crumbling, from her absent father to the broader looming presence of Ferdinand Marcos. The film is filled with reverberations from the world of adults, whether intimations of the lingering corruption of the recently overthrown dictatorship or the unbearable fragility of marital intimacy. This elusive grown-up world seeps in through overheard conversations, glimpsed flirtations and especially in recorded voices transmitted through audio cassette, a central means of connection for migrant workers to their families and lovers at home.

Yael's world is held together by the personal rituals she performs to fortify her against these colossal domains, such as cleaning of the soles of her shoes or preparing miniature meals in her toy kitchen. As we follow Yael, we encounter a world of shifting power, the challenges

and pressures of diasporic family life, and not-so-distant colonial phantoms. When her cousins return from overseas, they perform for the adults' attention and approval, displaying a foreign competitiveness and confidence alien to her inhibited shyness. The worlds of former colonisers, the United States and Japan, continue to seduce through products and advertisements, from the hum of a new television, to the magical power of a cassette to overcome space and time, or an advertisement for a wondrous pen sold with the utopian tagline 'for beautiful human life'. These signs and symbols, phantoms and giants, build throughout the film as a brewing storm that threatens to overwhelm and obliterate Yael's world. In depicting these looming colossi, Shireen points to the rupture between inner and outer space; as she has stated, 'My work is an effort to connect personal myths with larger cultural-historical ones.'<sup>9</sup>

It is telling that in her only completed foray into film, Agnes Martin chose to follow the wanderings of a child, attempting to see the world through untroubled eyes. Her feature-length film *Gabriel* was shot on colour 16mm film in New Mexico and completed in 1976. 'I thought my movie was going to be about happiness,' Martin reflected, 'but when I saw it finished, it turned out to be about joy – the same things my paintings are about.'<sup>10</sup> In these two works by Shireen Seno and Manon de Boer we encounter remarkable interior worlds. Both artists are sensitive to the entanglement of the everyday with the fantastic, providing insights into fragile assemblages, giving us other ways of understanding the world around us and how we can navigate and make sense of its terrain, both interior and exterior. We encounter interior worlds that describe vast terrains, which give the outlines to sleeping giants and point to looming colossi. Yet these works also invite us to look at the minutiae of existence, tenderly showing the importance of nervous ways of being, the beauty of fragility and vulnerability. Through the cinematic possibility of worldmaking, each work opens up routes to joy – not as a negation of the exterior world but as a reconditioning of our relation between inner and outer space.

## Endnotes

1. Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. London: Penguin, 2009, p.41.

2. Herbert J. Hall, *The Untroubled Mind*. Freiburg: Outlook Verlag, 2020, p.3. Herbert J. Hall (1870–1923) was a physician and occupational therapist who incorporated the Arts and Crafts movement ideology with medicine. Drawing on his interests in crafts he pioneered what he called 'work cure' developing a model for arts based occupational therapy for persons with nervous and mental disorders. *The Untroubled Mind*, originally published in 1915, is his most well known work.

3. During her time in New York from 1957 to 1967, Martin was frequently hospitalised to control symptoms of schizophrenia including aural hallucinations and periods of catatonia. Her struggle with this was largely private and was undocumented until 1962.

4. Agnes Martin, 'The Untroubled Mind', *Flash Art* 41, June 1973, p. 6–8. Reprinted in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.137.

5. *There is Another Sky*, curated by Kiri Delena, 1335MABINI, Manila, April 23 – June 24 2016.

6. Aily Nash, 'Kidlat Tahimik', *Speaking Directly: Oral Histories of the Moving Image*, ed. Federico Windhausen, San Francisco: San Francisco Cinematheque, 2013, p. 82

7. Andrew Northrop, 'The Spaces That Inhabit Us: Shireen Seno on *Nervous Translation*,' *Kinoscope*, Dec 7, 2018, <https://read.kinoscope.org/2018/12/07/the-spaces-that-inhabit-us-shireen-seno-on-nervous-translation/>

8. *The Crying Game #2: A Conversation with Tito and Tita*, 10 July 2017, <https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2017/07/10/the-crying-game-2-a-conversation-with-tito-tita/>

9. Northrop, *op. cit.*

10. Agnes Martin, 'After Completing *Gabriel*,' *Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances*, London: Phaidon, 2012, p..88