

Theater of the World and Will of the Abyss

by

Samuel Hamish Horgan

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UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA

270 River Road
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-1511
www.art.uga.edu

Franklin College of Arts and Sciences

Lamar Dodd School of Art

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To Whom it May Concern:

On behalf of my colleagues in the School of Art, we propose that Samuel Hamish Horgan be granted the honor of graduating from the MFA program at the University of Georgia with distinction.

It is the unanimous view of his committee that his thesis reflects an extraordinary degree of ambition, creativity, and erudition and is thus a fitting capstone to three years of unflagging, meritorious labor toward the MFA degree.

Sincerely, and with admiration,

Isabelle Wallace

Isabelle Loring Wallace

Professor of Contemporary Art

Martijn

Martijn Van Wagendonk

Associate Professor of Contemporary Art

Major Professors

Dr. Isabelle Loring Wallace
Martijn van Wagtenonk

Committee Members

James Enos
Jon Swindler
Andrew Zawacki

I.

Inconsequential Wonders

In 1803, before departing with the Corps of Discovery, Meriwether Lewis was dispatched by Thomas Jefferson to The American Museum of Charles Willson Peale in Philadelphia. Peale, a noted painter and naturalist, had assembled a wide-ranging collection of artifacts inside the long gallery of Independence Hall comprising his collection of natural specimens alongside his paintings. The most renowned exhibit, and what Lewis was there to see, was the complete skeleton of an ancient mastodon which Peale had excavated and mounted as the museum's massive main attraction. Lewis would have had to pay an extra fifty cents to view the reconstructed skeleton in an adjoining room. If he had some extra petty cash, he might have exited through the gift shop and paid to have his silhouette-likeness made by Peale's enslaved studio assistant, Moses Williams, operating a physiognotrace machine. By the time of Lewis's visit, Peale's son Rembrandt had re-mounted the tusks of the creature to curve downward like massive curled fangs. The supposition at the time, based on the sharp ridges of the beast's molars, was that it had been a gigantic predator; thus it seemed natural to style the display of its remains to emphasize a putative ferocity. To this end, the Peales had issued colorful advertisements claiming, "Forests were laid waste at a meal, the groans of expiring animals were everywhere heard; and whole villages, inhabited by men, were destroyed in a moment."¹ The president wanted Lewis to meet the curious remains of this unearthed thing, known as the

¹ Paul Semonin, *American Monster: How the Nation's First Prehistoric Creature Became a Symbol of National Identity*(New York: New York University Press, 2000)

American Incognitum, before his journey westward toward *America Incognita*. It was Jefferson's long-held hope that somewhere in the newly purchased Louisiana Territory, perhaps walking the Great Plains or hiding behind the Rockies, a living specimen remained.

The hunt for the Incognitum, as practiced by Jefferson and Peale, sought dispositive proofs of an independent American destiny, as well as North American natural history. Jefferson had been engaged for decades in disputation with European scientists led by the French scientist George Louis Leclerc de Buffon, who theorized the inferior conditions of the American continent led to a stunted, degenerate ecology. By the time of Lewis's visit, the discovery and study of these bones had become a discourse intertwined with the ideological development of the nation's self-identity. Pieced together, the fragments of the erstwhile behemoth stood in for a historical ontology of the new American Republic. In their delicate arrangement, the dusty remains brought to life speculative elements of the national project.

American creation myths imagined huge antediluvian monsters extant on the westward frontier. The vast landscape itself allowed the possibility to reencounter the raw meaning of creation, a wilderness where God might be reached or a paradise regained. The Bible promises the faithful that there were "giants on the earth in those days and also after."² The skeleton in Peale's museum suggested that giants might be met again by the civilized and virtuous of the new nation. While the gigantic bones might have biblical evocations, the details of their exhumation also made tangible more secular notions: biological extinction and geologic time outside the attestations of Genesis. At once, the exhibit revealed the possibility of an American antiquity as well as decline, destruction, and decay occurring on the same continent.

² Genesis 6:4 (New International Version)

It is important to note Peale's role as an artist in his proprietorship of the mastodon. In his 1822 self-portrait "The Artist in His Museum," the stately and black-frosted Peale lifts a velvet curtain, beckoning the viewer to enter a long hall of vitrines. At his right elbow is his palette above a loose mastodon femur and jaw. His stockinged left-toe points toward a turkey. He paints his own image as a showman, a master of ceremonies rather than a bespectacled scholar. He stands between the viewer and his specimens as stately intermediary, tour-guide of American splendor. Going by the painting, it makes sense that the better part of Peale's collection would be inherited by P.T. Barnum for his own American Museum in Manhattan. As such, it is easy to play the cynic and to assess the Peale Mastodon as a version of Natural History refigured as carnival gimmick. Peale's mastodon exhibit is indeed a cousin of the roadside oddity and tourist trap, big tops and tent-revivals, Disneyland and the World's Fair. In a creative sense, Peale's curation represents a synthetic ambition which emerges as an undercurrent within the liberal enlightenment, art which outdoes the limits of the natural. Peale's painterly European contemporaries, Zoffany or Hubert Robert, were embarked on similar synthesis in their pictorial exercise, composing imaginary vistas where neoclassical edifices were left in ruin as a distinctly antiquarian strain of apocalypticism. The bones are not merely static objects but theatricalized in such a way which evokes a "natural supernaturalism".

It bears mention as well that Peale did maintain a socio-political eminence during his lifetime that cannot be disregarded. He had been an active participant in the War of Independence and cultivated a clientele who shared his Whiggish ambitions. Washington sat for Peale's portraits many times, along with Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton and the flower of Philadelphia society. By the time the Mastodon had been dug up and put together, Peale had already been a

member of the American Philosophical Society for years. Over the last decades of the eighteenth century, he had cultivated an influential position in producing national iconography.

Peale's collection occupied the same spot where both the Constitution and Declaration of independence had been drafted and signed. Two decades after the founding of the country, Peale erected a pachyderm as a monument. Thronging visitors were informed it had once eaten human flesh and perhaps still thrived somewhere out west. In the meantime, of course, the attendant expected two quarters in exchange for a peek at its remains. Gazing past the ungainly assembly, the arcs of ancient tusk, the prospect of meat-eating elephants terrorizing the prairie, we can see clanking machinery of desire. Ghosts are called up from the bones of the earth to give testimony, to offer at the same instance retellings of the past as well as prophetic utterances of the future.

The salience of this episode, the elephant in the room as it were, is the way it represents a theme-park urge contiguous with the nation's constitutional origins. The course of human events is immediately recapitulated to produce exhibition value. The bargained-for and stolen spoils of the Lewis and Clark expedition take pride of place among the Jefferson's curios displayed in the foyer of Monticello. At the other end of the nineteenth century, ensuing westward progress underwrote the necessity of vast railway networks whose largesse guaranteed the rollercoaster and World's Fair. From this vantage, Peale's Museum is the germinal site of the grand exercise of world-building which will populate the continent with miniature scenery, animatronic figures, and carousels of progress. To pursue this phenomenon is not to regurgitate an American history exemplified by the kitsch of a souvenir-view, but rather to excavate a subterranean romance of American history itself as a type of speculative fiction.

Writing relative to the American proliferation of “wax statues, automata, collections of inconsequential wonders,” the critic Umberto Eco observes that these sites attempt to reify a sense of continuity, working out tourist-trap metaphysics of a country with no frontier. The resulting cultural production is that of frantic renovation, modeling competing stories of the land, its people, and whatever it all might mean in the end. Finding himself among the haphazard curios of the LBJ presidential library, Eco writes:

The Lyndon B. Johnson Library is a true Fortress of Solitude: a Wunderkammer, an ingenious example of narrative art, wax museum, cave of robots. And it suggests that there is a constant in the average American imagination and taste, for which the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy; a philosophy of immortality as duplication. It dominates the relation with the self, with the past, not infrequently with the present, always with History and, even, with the European tradition.

[...]

This is the reason for this journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of "fullness," of horror vacui.³

Eco’s diagnosis offers that the orgy of simulations satisfies an American libidinal drive toward a testimony of the real, the fullness offered by the experience of the historical. The result is something almost alchemical: complex allegorical images, refinement of base matter, audio-animatronic homunculi and the like.

³ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986),

In its conclusions Eco's critique resembles Alexandre Kojève's vision of post-historical experience in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. In a lengthy footnote Kojève muses that post-war American society demonstrated its ahistorical conditions in a quality of animality without the struggle of the real.⁴ Kojève's articulation of the post-historical society is, in short, one which sees man revert to animal contentments in post-natural ecologies. The tourist-hyperreal encountered by Eco, the pilgrim's progress of roadside shrines and their trappings, are formed not according to creaturely tastes but rather the trappings of a culture turning inward toward its own drives. The atavism of post-historical subject is not material impoverishment, but instead a retreat into a fervent imaginary.

Yet, as Byung-Chul Han has observed, the atopia of the Other is the utopia of Eros, which gives a tragic essence to these places.⁵ The object of desire always retreats from view. In their detail and ardent desire for verisimilitude, the production of a historical vision and that of alterity itself remains elusive. Apparent physical plentitude obscures the yearning experience of loss which compels reassurance in lively stand-ins. The drive to create immersive attractions and experiences buttress against the loss of experience itself. Such simulacra defer the threat of death with synthetic vitality, becoming a closed world of preserved specimens. But, such foreclosure threatens to collapse, catch alight, melt away at any moment. Indeed, this may be the context that initiates the Grand Guignol genealogy of wax museum horror, the subtext of Michael Curtiz's *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933), Andre de Toth's *House of Wax* (1953). The gothic subtext of

⁴ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 159–162n.

⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017)

the tableau vivant is orgiastic death itself, dramatizing Bataillean eroticism which is “assent to life to the point of death itself.”⁶

In the opening section of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, a brief plotline plays out between the novel's academic characters and vividly dramatizes scenarios intimated by Eco and Kojève. Jack Gladney, the neurotic protagonist and professor of Hitler studies, takes his colleague Murray Jay Siskind to visit “The Most Photographed Barn in America.” Surveying the crowds engaged in orgiastic-snapshot rites, the delighted pop-culture-scholar Siskind begins a sustained monologue on the proceedings:

We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies. {...} “Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.”⁷

Gladney, for his part, remains silent. But a few chapters later, visiting Siskind's seminar, he offers a sort of response as part of a protracted aside about Hitlerian-tourist-kitsch:

Crowds came to hear him speak, crowds erotically charged, the masses he once called his only bride. [...] But wait. How familiar this all seems, how close to ordinary. Crowds come, get worked up, touch and press—people eager to be transported. Isn't this ordinary? We *know* all this. There must have been something different about those crowds. What was it? Let me whisper the terrible word, from the Old English, from the Old German, from the Old Norse. *Death*. Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitations of the names of the dead. They were there to see pyres and flaming wheels, thousands of flags dipped in salute, thousands of

⁶ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986),

⁷ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985)

uniformed mourners. There were ranks and squadrons, elaborate backdrops, blood banners and black dress uniforms. Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd.⁸

From Gladney's podium, that of the death-obsessive, he annotates his colleague's earlier lecture. The tourist experience of inconsequential wonders is not only enlisted to produce a lively image, but to also encounter the certainty of death.

In the American Museum, the postmodern novel, the semiotician's travelogue, in the bureaucrat's introduction to Hegel we find evidence of an ongoing theme. The production of a synthetic totality and the promethean ambition of Faustian civilization is itself a deferral of the organic totality of death. An American desire to immanentize eschaton is ultimately to achieve totality without the negation of a divine grace. It proclaims Salvation can be at hand and the end can be near. Put your finger on the trigger, on the launch button, on the quarter deposited into a machine which whirs to life and moves with spiritual force.⁹ Matters of spirit carry us forward from here.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ I follow from Agamben and Benjamin's interpolations of Carl Schmitt, in understanding political concepts as secularized notions of the theological.

II.

The Will of the Abyss

In the history of vital proofs, a critical moment of reflexivity occurs in the Gospel of John. After Christ's resurrection, the apostles gather to meet up with the risen-corpse in person:

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."¹⁰

Despite the admonition, Thomas raises a reasonable objection to the possibility of his boss rising from the dead and imposes some sensible empirical conditions. Thus, he pops his finger in the wound and is reassured that the resurrection isn't just a matter of spirit. Whatever his hygienic impropriety, we might credit Thomas for taking very seriously the fleshly premise of the Incarnation, an ad hoc materialism circa 33 A.D. It can be read that Christ's appearance and examination is the instrument of proof, providing the evidence of his own body. He readily accommodates Thomas's apparent doubt. But in Christ's words, there is a recourse back to absence, chastising his followers that the coherence of the divine is beyond what is knowable through the visible. In any case, Thomas finds himself in a position of epistemic humility which is rather more complex than simple incredulity.

¹⁰ John 20:24-31 (New International Version)

The gesture of Thomas's manicule finger and Christ's words of precaution help instantiate a type of negative epistemology within the core of Christian Theology. Even when hands reach to touch the body of the risen savior, he remains out of reach. "Do not cling to me," he says.¹¹ The story tells us that the desire *to know* will always be an experience of lack, chasing after the sublime object of non-knowledge. The circumstances of the Resurrection instruct that experience of God and experience of the world itself will remain one of non-totality.

The story of Eden tells the prehistory of this state. The critical utility of original sin is the way it calls the self, and all the matter of a fallen world into crisis, as a precondition of existence. We need not to be Christians to read this as an instance of ontological self-reflection. This status asks not solely for inward examination, but demands a type of piety that is in contention with all that is. Fall from Eden is not simply the genesis of human mortality, but the basis of subjectivity as the experience of rupture and lack. God's judgement is levied upon the very ground from which man emerges, and the following imperative is to work over that soil ceaselessly to recover any germ of grace.¹² Shamed by their own nakedness, the condemned Adam and Eve come know themselves in the forbidding gaze of the creator, his omniscient eye at once a providential mirror. Textually, The Fall of Man is not only the origin of labor and agriculture but the realization of a self-consciously human identity that must contend with its own differentiation from the fullness of union with the divine.

¹¹ John 20:17 (New International Version)

¹² Genesis 3:17-19 (New International Version)

The practices of penitence and piety aim to address the wages of sin, but tend to handle the problem only obliquely. Mundane self-recrimination only cuts down the philosophical weight of this problem to a manageable size, promising a type of self-actualization while avoiding the truly existential. The God of Adam, the God of Abraham, God the Father is truly a reservoir of negativity which provides a reflecting pool for all else. This implicit guarantee of this figure is the deep insufficiency of human agency and desire. But from these same depths there is a promise of solvency in the flowing dispensation of grace.

Within the Catholic tradition, and pre-modern European thought to some extent, the mechanics of grace remain an aspect of the divine mystery, an ambiguity which goes along with an abiding mysticism that attends the metaphysical. The quest for a universal solvent remains elusive. But the Reformation, and with it the emergence of Capitalism and Rational philosophy, exerts pressure to resolve contradictory discourses within Christendom. Social and economic progress in early modern Europe required the pursuit of a positivist revolution in thought. A regime change had been nurtured within the structure of the Church, its tentative science developed by a scholastic tradition attached to monasteries and universities employing ambitious clerics of various ideological vestments. The humanist impulse affirms the hope of the faithful that their faith in itself is enough to effect salvation, that the divine can be comprehended as an economical transaction. The worthy may now enjoy the fruits of salvation, in the same way they might season their meat with the spices of the Indies. Merchant custodians of ledgerbooks gladly give credit to *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* doctrinal-manifests. Christ's erotic power is

maintained, but his love no longer necessitates an enigmatic other in the autoerotic fantasies of would-be Lutherans, Calvinists, etc.

But at the same time and grown from the same ferment, the Lutheran cobbler and mystic Jacob Boehme attempted to re-institute a redemptive negativity by devising a theology with a distinctly dialectical flavor. In Boehme's conception, the Creator must rise from the abyss, the *Ungrund*, all being and divinity proceeding from a vast alterity which is its foundation. For a voice to cry out, "Let there be light!," it must first find itself in darkness. Substance is synthesized from the primal anti-matter of eternity. In his 1623 exegesis of Genesis, *Mysterium Magnum*, Boehme writes:

When I consider what God is, then I say, He is the One; in reference to the creature, as an eternal Nothing; he has neither foundation, beginning, nor abode; he possesses nothing, save only himself; he is the will of the abyss; he is in himself only one; he needs neither space, nor place; he begets himself in himself; from eternity to eternity; he is neither like nor resembles anything; and has no peculiar place where he dwells; the eternal wisdom or understanding is his dwelling; he is the will of the wisdom; the wisdom is his manifestation.¹³

God's non-being is what he arises from, "the will of the abyss." Boehme's idea of a God and his creation, is one which posits an unconscious for all reality. In this way, God exists as a perpetual relation.

¹³ Jacob Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, trans. John Sparrow (London: John M. Watkins, 1924),

III.

For The Want of Intermediation

How do we traverse the perilous Desert of the Real while enduring the enigmatic silence of God? How do we learn to traverse our conditions of physical and spiritual lack? What do we ask of ourselves in these conditions? A curious aspect of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is frequent reference to “thauma.” “Thauma” or “thaumata” are wonders, miracles which compel such metaphysical inquiry. Aristotle suggests that philosophy itself begins with these instances of astonishment which provoke curiosity.¹⁴ Thaumaturgy is miracle-working, or rather the reverent way of describing magic tricks performed by the saints and mystics. But Aristotle, seems to distinctly inflect this concept with a theatrical valence; making associations with marionettes, shadow puppets, and the various SFX devised by ancient dramaturgy.¹⁵ In *Poetics* the production of this wonder is prescribed as one of the necessary aims of the tragedian and epic poet.¹⁶ The correlation makes the thauma both the exercise of the supernatural and the theatrical gimmick which stands in for the same effect. Thinking derives from contact with these theatrical intermediaries, activations which draw the philosopher into an awareness of their relation to the world.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 982b12–18.

¹⁵ Bove, G. S. “*THAUMATA IN ARISTOTLE’S METAPHYSICS A.*” *Acta Classica* 60 (2017): 50–72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26347121>.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1452a1–11.

In her recent text *Immediacy: Or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism*, the scholar Anna Kornbluh characterizes immediacy as the aesthetic and economic condition of the present moment:

Immediacy crushes mediation. It is what it is. Self-identity without representation, ferment with "no words." The prefix "im-" connotes that negation-in the middle without intermediary, #NoFilter-as well as a prepositionality: the inness or oneness of immersion, intensity, and identity. An estate of direct presence, always on, continuous, abundant, sui generis. Immediacy's pulsing effulgence purveys itself as spontaneous and free, pure vibe. Let it flow, let it flow! But in this imperative lies a grind¹⁷

If immediacy can be understood as a symptomatic style of contemporaneity, whose powers work toward immersion and disintermediation, techniques of *intermediacy* seem to reclaim a type of distance, one where the audience might again discern their own significance within a Duchampian system of art-artwork-audience. In this paradigm, enlisting the audience to complete the work creates the open-endedness of polysemic potential while also extending its ability to circulate as concept-commodity.¹⁸ But this flexibility comes along with an anxiety of inauthenticity, irony, incoherence. Open-ended construction is a problem for the value-form, going along to fuel a sneaking suspicion of objects whose meaning and character remains both arbitrary and unfixed. In a world of simulated simulations, PoMo subjects still demand the affirming caresses of "the real thing." Technological, social, and politically ordained experiences of fragmentation are met by regimes that persist in pursuit of positive inputs and visible data. The vivarium of digital media depends on these visibilities, moving feeds of clear and vivid detail which maintain the semblance of a real world occurring on the screen.

¹⁷ Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2024)

¹⁸ Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996)

However, a dominant mode of urgency creates opportunities on its margins. Changes in speed, strategy, and scale pursue the dissatisfactions of seamless illusion, shifting reality into a different register. A kind of re-emphasis on the intermediary, makes apparent the active process of relation. The model, the puppet, the autofictional narrative give theatrical cover to variable distance, speed, and reliability. The reflexivity of these forms allows mediation itself to surface as content. A fragment of real presence arrives in trappings which cannot deny their mediation: “I can see your mouth moving.” The trick, an evincing of affect, comes without the pretense of disguise but manages to remain convincing. Fictional relations are made real. Apprehension of this fictitious production is eased in the assurances of first-person address.

Borrowing from Jameson, a waning of affect under the conditions of postmodernism is met by a demand for vulnerability, disclosure, social behavior toward affirmative transparency.¹⁹ But in the fragmentary form of theatricalized mediation, we can make out that the increase of disclosable detail, of positive identification, of representative images is also the acceleration of abstractions, of virtuality, of simulacra. As ever, we come to discern inauthenticity through the authentic. Per Andre Bazin’s concept of cinematic ontology, realism comes out of artifice.²⁰

Moreover, a theatrical anamorphosis, production of skewed-views which offer perspectival lines of flight, makes feasible access to a type of negative epistemology that is crucial to contending with the critical questions of human presence in the 21st century, the

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991)

²⁰ André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967)

experience of its fragmentations, and the absence of totality. The question here is: how best to structure experience of insufficiency to serve as a form of illumination rather than alienation? Ardent pursuit of the reassurances of an immediate-real serve to hide a fervent imaginary, “Construction plays the role of the subconscious.”²¹ A fear of metaphor, fright at ambiguity, suspicions of deception all mask a deep sensitivity and psychic investment in the exhilarations of negation.

At the end of Kafka’s *Amerika*, the novel breaks off with its protagonist employed by “The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma,” a vast enterprise of avant-garde living-theater which merges the activities of art and life. His role is to play the role of the worker hammering away, “real hammering and at the same time nothing.”²² Unfinished, the novel does not elaborate on the outcome of this performance. But the loose thread seductively suggests a happy ending, renewal by means of a re-theatricalized reality. For his part, Walter Benjamin sees Kafka’s vision here as messianic:

Kafka's world is a world theater. For him, man is on the stage from the very beginning. The proof of the pudding is the fact that everyone is accepted by the Nature Theater of Oklahoma. [...] Actors have to catch their cues in a flash, and they resemble those assiduous people in other ways as well. Truly, for them "hammering is real hammering and at the same time nothing"-provided that this is part of their role. They study this role, and only a bad actor would forget a word or a movement. For the members of the Oklahoma troupe, however, the role is their earlier life; hence the "nature" in this Nature Theater. Its actors have been redeemed.²³

²¹ Walter Benjamin, "Expose of 1935," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

²² Franz Kafka, *Amerika*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: New Directions, 2002),

²³ Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969)

A return to theatricality remediates the actor's gestures, offering the relief of action which is sincere and contrived simultaneously. Held at arm's length, tool in hand, there is space at last to assess the situation.

IV. Post Scriptum

For some time now, I have been a collector of postcards. The best of these, the ones I prize the most, are found in antique stores or online auctions and can be purchased for between fifty cents and a dollar. The very low price is usually because the card has the residues of use: creased edges, a wrinkled surface, a faded stamp hanging on the corner. Best of all are used postcards which have been addressed and with a few lines of text written on the reverse. After examining this type of correspondence, it becomes clear that the relationship between the image on the front and the message on the back is usually arbitrary. Presuming that the postcard has been acquired in the progress of some sort of travel, one might think that the correspondent would see fit to write some description of the place or thing that they are visiting. "I wish you were here." However, this is seldom the case. Scrawled sentences are usually reserved for banalities, itinerary details, or apparent non sequiturs. The text has no necessity to accord with its visible circumstances in an immediate, obvious way.

A postcard tends to assume a type of self-evidence, modest proof that you were present in a particular place at a particular time. A protracted written travelogue is unnecessary, because, after all, it's only a four-by-six card and the pleasant little scene on the front will surely suffice. It will neatly fulfill its purpose traveling through the mail without even the protective propriety of

an envelope. For me, looking at postcards is a way to encounter the strange friction between communication and its context, seeing places I have never been and reading the handwriting of people I will never meet.

Still though, the deconstruction that is invited by the proliferation of printed-postcard-ephemera animates me toward a perverse aim: a desire for reconstruction. In the faded images I can't help but perform reckless acts of correlation, fool-hardy free associations, dubious inference and speculation. Insufficient evidence still maintains a potent allure. The clipped prose and faded images make for dim constellations, but I'll be damned if I don't squint to make out their light. Dispatches from turnpike exits, trading posts, roadside oddities, tourist marginalia chart a map that I am making out by dead reckoning.

To this end, I find myself returning again and again to a place that I never will have a chance to visit, shuffling its epistolary fragments. Bit by bit I have acquired a collection of postcards purchased at Roadside America, an indoor miniature village and tourist trap located on I-78 in Shartlesville, Pennsylvania. Between 1935 and 2020, the attraction displayed the pleasant and hallucinatory railway layout of its designer and first proprietor, Laurence Gieringer. Tiny, old-timey citizens went about their business in pastoral scenes, animated by mechanical gimmickry and lighting effects. The 1/48th scale model occupied 8000 square feet. Unable to remain open, Roadside America was stripped for parts and auctioned off. As a result, its souvenir postcards now provide one of the only sources of useful documentation.

These postcards generally fall into three categories. First are photographs which amount to detail-shots of particular scenes, i.e. a miniature main street, a horse and buggy, a

quant local church. In these images, any aspect of scale is elided in a close-up view. The second type of card are those which depict Laurence Gieringer or various members of his family situated on the model's surface, posing or performing routine maintenance. The main theme of these images is an incongruity between the tiny environs and the size of its attendants, who tower over the roofs and hilltops like friendly gods. The third type of picture-postcard depicts the strange margins of the entire enterprise. One card shows a Catholic priest kneeling in a replica Lourdes grotto and chapel occupying an annex building. Another presents the smiling visage of a colossal fiberglass Amish farmer, standing on the roadside and inviting travelers to make a detour. All these images are underwritten by a peculiar idiom of advertising prose. "Who enters here will be taken by surprises" and "Be prepared to see more than you expected!"

From a distance, I don't have much to go on here. In the absence of its creator, in the absence of its physical existence I am relying on second-hand testimony to get a sense of place. As a creative project, as a monument, and as a mass experience, my access to Roadside America is only through intermediaries. This kind of tenuously mediated experience of presence may simply be the nature of phenomenal experience itself. But in an awkward way, in the anxious space of relation, there is room for me to think.

Here I find a reflection of my own art. My task is carried out at a distance, visible to those observing from afar. I cry out, but my voice can't quite carry and words fade in echoes. I push set-pieces across the stage, but from a distant vantage they all seem so very small. I can move things into view, and usher things back into the shadows. I can pantomime the grip of ardor or

the pain of tragedy. Yet anything I might hope to convey is fleeting, and its meaning mostly not up to me. Despite this, I bear the duty of intermediary to draw my interlocutor over the distance between us. I can draw back the curtain, my arms outstretched and beckoning them to follow. I know they shall never quite reach me, and I fear I shall never reach them. But moving in the space between us, hope promises it will prove worthwhile.