From Tall Story To Infinite Conversation:
Warren Garland's '*The Head Fountain'* at West Lane South gallery, London

Paul O'Kane, January 2014

sto·ry

[2][stawr-ee, stohr-ee] Show IPA
noun, plural sto·ries.
1. a complete horizontal section of a building, having one
continuous or practically continuous floor.
2. the set of rooms on the same floor or level of a building.
3. any major horizontal architectural division, as of a façade or the
wall of a nave.
4. a layer.

Also, especially British, **storey**.

Origin:
1350–1400; Middle English storie < Anglo-Latin historia picture
decorating a building, a part of the building so decorated, hence
floor, story < Latin historia history

If we are going to respond to and contextualize Warren Garland's reversal of the

sequence of edits that produce the logic/narrative of *The Fountainhead* perhaps

we should first consider the idea that a narrative has a form and a direction.

Tristram Shandy, the experimental farce contrived by Lawrence Sterne in the

18th century renders and muses over possible forms of a narrative in an explicit, concrete way. An undulating, twisting, folding line makes its way across the page, mapping some possible narrative journeys.
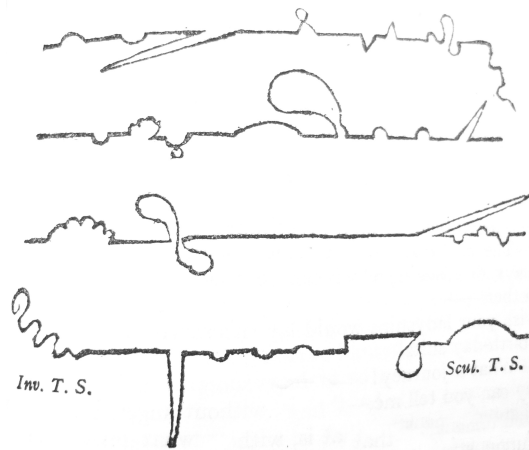
It may appear relatively brutal for an artist to deconstruct an established narrative. In Warren Garland's *The Head Fountain* a film isn't exactly reversed (in that playful way that can still delight viewers of this relative newcomer to visual representation, and which Michael Haneke deployed horrifically in his film's *Funny Games* and *Benny's Video*), rather the segments are laid out in reverse order, producing quite a different effect. The result is discomforting, and this, in turn makes us aware of the *comforting* effect of any smoothly ordered, coherent narrative; aware of narrative *per se* and of the particular way that cinema constructs narrative.

In Garland's version of King Vidor's 1949 film *The Fountainhead* we now seem to be going forward in brief bursts or 'clips' of narrative, only to ultimately go backwards through the original film. But are we even going 'backwards' or 'forwards?' These directions are only meaningful in relation to what we know of the established narrative i.e. the way the original novel was formed, the way in

which the film was originally edited and which we know was only one of a number of ways it could have been edited. We might start to think about the relationship between the novel on which the film was based, the script, screenplay or storyboard and the film, and about the way in which cinema and books have influenced the way we think of our own identities in terms of cinematic narratives. This might lead us, in turn to consider how meaning is structured for us, not only in terms of philosophy and psychology but in terms of technologies of representation, or, what I have recently, elsewhere called *Technologies of Romance* (*Romance* here implicating not so much amorousness as the way in which we view events and award them meaning as elements of some kind of story.)[1]

Is it coincidental that the 'skyscraper' –modernist architecture *par excellence* - is built and experienced as a series of 'stories'? The elevator of a tall building might offer us choices but won't allow us to encounter the various 'stories' of a skyscraper in any order other than that in which they were assembled (or its exact reversal). Re-editing a skyscraper would be more difficult than re-editing a film. In Garland's edit of *The Fountainhead* we encounter snippets of narrative, slices of meaning, rendered all but meaningless by the loss of their place in the order within which they were established and for which they were made.[2] Each displaced fragment now struggles and appeals for meaning and value. They have lost their place, but it might reassure them to know that they have lost their

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[1] *Technologies of Romance* is the title of an undergraduate seminar I am currently hosting at Central St Martins College, UAL.

[2] '… order… for which they were made ': Of course this is not always the case, a film editor may depart from the narrative order intended by the screenplay, led by problems or inspirations encountered in the particular technological and creative process of editing.

place in an order that has itself been lost. We are made aware of the relationship between a fragment and a whole (a Romanticist allusion) and the way in which any particular fragment is valued, not in and for itself but in relation to its context. A person who has been made redundant, for example suffers the significant mental challenge of reevaluating themselves once detached from the context that gave their work and their self identity, meaning and value. Emphasising context in this way invariably invokes the bomb dropped on art's habitual system of evaluation by Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century when, by proffering a signed urinal for evaluation as a work of art he invited us to think beyond the visible object bringing instead the importance of art's contextualizing mechanisms into view.

We caricature modernism - in art, design and philosophy – as a late grasping for a redemptive humanist and Enlightenment meaning amid a technologized society negotiating fallout from the combined forces of urbanised alienation, capitalized economy and mechanised warfare. Meanwhile we like to think of our own epoch or paradigm as gambling with meaninglessness and post-humanism. Today's highly technologized, yet disoriented and disenfranchised subjects dance on the brink of chaos and madness, communicating, linking, connecting and networking far more than ever before, and yet do so formlessly, rhizomatically, deprived of the narrative or teleology that might give our newly discovered and spectacular abilities some purpose. Can we exist, persist and endure in such a condition? We seem to be testing and pushing the boundaries of both humanity and reason. Are we willing to sacrifice our humanity in order to prioritise and enable maximal technological progress? On the internet we can

communicate across multiple time zones simultaneously, translate (approximately) from language to language at the click of a mouse, and wade through infinite archives even as we multi-task a range of other 21st century social duties.

But what is a 'society' once it is no longer limited, bounded and defined by such things as location, proximity, vernacular culture, shared history, local currencies, economies, time-zones and languages? Ayn Rand's 700-page novel, *The Fountainhead* is often claimed to be a Right wing, Conservative, Republican and/or Neoliberal text. Advocates of these political doctrines are said to admire it along with other Rand works – one of whose titles is *The Virtue of Selfishness.* You might begin to sense affinities here between British Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's infamous assertion that "there is no such thing as society" and wonder if Thatcher kept copies of Rand under her pillow. 'Society,' of course, like the order of a narrative, might be a concept by means of which we provide ourselves with meaning, context and a certain form of hope. Meanwhile, the 'market', lauded by the Right as their dominant image of, and replacement for the idea of 'society', may be fundamental in some sense to our survival - in that we need to trade and thus meet, exchange etc. – but while the market can supply basic needs, market transactions are not necessarily social or even meaningful. As we know, the trader who smiles while advertising their wares and convincing us to buy quickly may well dispense with their jolly grin once our money has passed from our hands into their own. So, not only is the marketplace potentially meaningless it also tends towards deceit (signposted by the constant battle to regulate markets, uphold standards, limit abuse, install consumer guidance,

watchdogs etc.) The market is thus only a limited, unimaginative, and false misrepresentation of the wider potential of any society.[3]

In Vidor's film of Rand's *The Fountainhead* – starring Gary Cooper, Patricia Neal and Raymond Massy- 'truth' is a concept bandied around by antagonistic and competing architects, journalists, critics and media barons. The film shows 1940s society as something already fragmented by modernity and technology into various institutions which manage to cultivate only fickle, brief, superficial and convenient 'truths,' none of which are resilient enough to approximate a meaningful philosophy nor offer a reliable social contract. The story's heavy-handed claim is that the only reliable truth is the wellspring or 'fountainhead' of greatness - in art, design or any form of empowering achievement- and that this emerges only from passionate individualism and uncompromising self-determination. While conceived by a woman the whole quasi-fascistic dogma is demonstratively phallic and masculinist. The male hero gradually turns himself, almost literally, into his own enduring monument through struggle against odds and rigid resilience in response to competitors and alternatives. In the process he reduces his once haughty female admirer to a willing slave who, having pleaded at one point in the narrative to scrub his floors, gleefully rides - in the film's final scenes and thus the first clips encountered in Garland's reversed edit-up his magnificent column, there to share the triumph of his rarified and exclusive 'philosophy.'

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[3] Furthermore, once the trader and the market are no-longer local, intrinsic parts of any society, but become faceless, alien, global multinationals, appeals to any traditional, meaningful association between market, market-place and society is spurious as any such link has been all but dissolved precisely by the *a*social capitalist game of competitiveness in search of monopoly.

The 2014 audience of *The Fountainhead* will not only see it through feminist-influenced eyes but will also notice certain values, in both art and society, in ethics and in aesthetics, fought over in what seems at first to be a confused, ugly, distorted and disoriented manner. Until, that is, we recognize, not only are they still being fought over today but that- in one way at least - Ayn Rand was right; not in her political beliefs but in (inadvertently) foreseeing and describing the damage that her kind of political beliefs (Conservative, Republican, Neoliberal and quasi-fascist) could do to hopes of building a society that provides a meaningful and reassuring context for a variety of mutually supportive and constructively interactive human lives. Placing ruthlessly competitive individualism and the exploitative, duplicitous market at the centre of, or in place of, society produces an environment determined by uncaring mutual exploitation. In such meaningless chaos words like 'truth' and 'freedom' - held onto and valued for their promise of guidance and survival by modernists - lose not only credibility but their very identity [4].

In *The Fountainhead,* 'truth' -sweeping aside all the ages and cultures that have meditated so variously on this concept- is reduced to the spirit guiding a masculine individualist. Meanwhile 'freedom' represents only the need for a man to do what he wants to do in exactly the way he wants to do it and without interruption from or consideration for others – all of whom should, in response, feel privileged to have received the benefit of his gifts (here, the figure of Hitler is surely not far away, and in a film made in America shortly after the end of World

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[4] N.B. Orson Wells, in his own cinematic critique of modern megalomania, *Citizen* Kane (1941), makes a similar observation about devaluation of language in fragmented society when he cuts quickly from a clip of one orator describing Kane as: "a Communist!" to a clip of another who accuses him (perhaps significantly *mis*pronouncing the word) of being "a Fachist!" [*sic.*]

War 2.) The less able, the weak, the bad guys and the interfering spoilsports in the film spout all kinds of half-baked social, political and philosophical theories of their own, including a twisted mish-mash in which lowest-common-denominator populism is conflated with 'robotic' and compliant socialism. What a mess! And yet today we must reluctantly concede that a rather Rand-y Neoliberal *weltanschaung* may well be the best description of the mess we are in. Any repulsion we might feel in response to ugly battles, battled over in ugly ways in *The Fountainhead* is, sadly, the repulsion we feel for our own recently and rapidly Neoliberalised society. The madness of *The Fountainhead* is, sadly, the madness we are living today, and this, I suspect, is what prompted Warren Garland to intuitively bring the film to our attention in the particular, deconstructive, *detourned* and questioning way that he has.

What exactly has Garland added, subtracted or changed by reversing the sequence of the edits that once made up the *The Fountainhead*? The contemporary artist's interruptions here deny us all the comforts of a smoothly transitioning narrative and instead make us aware of potential discontinuities hidden by the original editor's aim to present a smoothly transitioning and polished whole (phallic indeed.) [5]The artist's transgressive disruption might then make us think twice, think differently, opening up e.g. the ways of thinking worked through right here in the preceding paragraphs ways of thinking which might be closed down or squeezed-out by the polished completion of the original film as it contrives to limit alternative readings in a singular, consistent narrative

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[5] Steve Fletcher of Caroll/Fletcher has also noted a possibly Brechtian effect arising from the interruptive nature of Garland's approach.

and to deliver its intended ideological message. Garland thus draws our attention away from the thing, the object, away from the complete, phallic achievement of the original film and alerts us instead to its material content and contrived narrative. This process delivers us from object and objectification into context and contextualisation, from passive consumption into critical reflection freeing us from the spectacle of the constructed by means of a deconstruction - a way of making by unmaking - and an innately contradictory, open ended procedure.

Aside from this sophisticated approach we can also interpret the artist's act in a more bombastic, ritualistic manner harking back to ancient relationships between art and power. Looked at more simply Garland appears to be, not just *detourning* Rand and her proto-Neoliberalism but breaking it into pieces, kicking over the game, toppling its tower and fragmenting its phallic power.[6] There is a myth that sucking lemons in front of a brass band will render the musicians helpless to play their instruments and perhaps critical art, in our age of digital postproduction, operates like this, i.e. confronting an example of established value and spectacular accomplishment with what Nicolas Bourriaud calls 'counter-images' -that seek to undermine, delegitimise and disable the original - empowers the critical art and the critical artist at the expense of the original. Confronting the original *Fountainhead* with his disoriented, broken, alternative image -playfully titled *'The Head Fountain'*- Garland might thereby cast a *hex* or spell upon the original, protecting us from the long shadow its ideological message threatens to cast over us today.

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[6] Gustave Courbet's association with the toppling and fragmenting of the *Vendôme* Column during the Paris Commune of 1871 comes to mind.

In Rand's *Fountainhead* invention and productivity gushes from the individualist loins of a great and very singular man. Today, despite the recent, apparently indomitable triumphs of Neoliberalism as a comprehensively *a*social economic 'philosophy' all this is increasingly hard to swallow, particularly given diverse waves of new collective powers, rising and falling, striding and stumbling around the globe, increasingly convinced that the people are more than a market, increasingly convinced that they can, will be (and once were) their own media, their own 'democracy' and wanting to be architects of their own societies, thus making the age of the patriarch, of the genius, and of the monumental, singular figurehead a thing of the past, displaced and replaced by the multitudinous, ever-changing body of the people themselves. [7] A fluid, mercurial society is emerging, potentially ungovernable by current means of maintaining authority, order and control, and it evolves hand-in-hand with the new 'live' or immanent condition of our online identities and activities.

To all of this Rand's proto-Neoliberalism is anathema, inappropriate, incongruous and redundant. Today, we see our lives and our world, not as things conveniently quantified, given and declared like commodities but more than ever as fluid, rich, plural events through which we feel free and confident to interact, remixing, re-editing, reforming and re-launching ourselves into an unlimited

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[7] It might of course be argued –as Steve Fletcher of Carroll/Fletcher wished to interject at this point - that patriarchs are making a good job of dissolving themselves into anachronisms, while the state, the corporation and abuses of technology are all rapidly taking their place as the significant form of oppression and hegemony confronting and motivating us today. However in Rayn's narrative, in Vidor's cinematic representation and in Garland's response it is nevertheless that enduring, singular male figure who predominates, and given current examples of Putin, Assad, Mugabe et al, this remains a concern to be monitored, critiqued and reformed.

speculative discourse –perhaps what Maurice Blanchot once called "The Infinite Conversation." In 2014 'the people' are aware of themselves as a new, 'glocal' society, as real lives on which greedy global marketisers have thrived, fed and relied long enough. They sense that that their needs and their will can no-longer be represented or embodied in the anachronistic figure of a singular leader, one man (nor, for that matter, any two-headed coalition conspiring to a singular aim.) The people, in their multitudinous, complex becomings will never comfortably occupy any singular, simplistic or restrictive pedestal. They occupy instead, first, modern democracy's expansive squares and the side streets into which they overflow, multiplied to the power of the endless virtual space of technologised communications.

Given this, a time may be coming when no particular figurehead will be able to stand for very long, confident, tall, complacent and complete, on a pedestal of his own making. Turning Rand's narrative on its head, as Warren Garland has done, is thus a fitting, deconstructive, *un*monumental tribute to our new aspirations, helping us to perceive new possibilities and to promise ourselves deliverance from the fear and dejection we are currently forced to endure while our hopes for society are colonised and crushed by quasi-fascistic forces of rampant Neoliberalism.

End