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**Home Symposium, University of Gloucestershire - July 1, 2022**

Notes:

*For context these notes were further annotated for presentation at the symposium. My notes will be written up into publishable form this autumn for publication with Routledge.*

**AMCREAMER - Bittersweet Longing: the impossible return – ver2.**

Approx. 30 mins content – to allow for 15 mins video = approx. 3,000 words

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**1/. Intro:**

**STORY 1 - The sick bed as place story**

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In the summer and autumn of 2018, I spent a lot of time in bed – a sick bed.

I had undergone a frightening diagnosis and the past few weeks, after a year of pain, had felt like falling into a hole.

Those weeks in the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, Stanmore, with its walled gardens, ironically located near to parts of suburban London I was a teenager in was strangely reassuring. Mr Anwar - or Hanny, as I will call him with great affection soon, a leading spinal neurosurgeon, had told me I was in the “in the centre of confusion” regarding their ability to name what is happening to me.

But each night I escaped, sending my mind away to spend time in an imaginary forest that seemed very like the paintings of Henri Rousseau, helped by morphine and steroids.

My obsession with Rousseau had started in an MRI scanner two weeks before as they wheeled me inside the machine again, I had to quickly invent somewhere ‘far away’ I could send my mind to stop myself from vomiting when I saw how suddenly anxious the staff were. I built a valley lined with lavender with a nearby forest and to my surprise within 10 minutes I recognised I was some-how inside Rousseau’s painting, The Snake Charmer. I kept returning to this place adding new details each night as I roamed around Rousseau’s world. Being inside this ….forest, helped keep me still during medical procedures. During all that was happening, having my very own forest became a private delight. One place I could control. It had a silvery moonlight, fetid. Animals were small, almost clockwork. There were baboons, who I felt especially drawn to. As I wandered through this forest I would encounter animals in states of shock, a small lion with his teeth perpetually around the neck of a bird. Each night I see these terrible tableaus, always a kind of frozen assault.

 The counterpoint to this was this bed – my daytime. Here, everything around me was white, ceramic, lined with thin blue curtains. It was 35 steps to the little garden where I can feel the sun or air for once. And 29 steps to the washroom that had daylight.

But - I grew to love that bed.

SLIDE - And more so my own bed at home as I lay there for ages,

Bed as place – refuge…Started thinking about place of the bed, in art.

Scottish artist sent me **Alec Finley book of his work** **a far-off land** – (​ 2017, a book of place-awareness and companion to illness for the Macmillan Day Unit, Arbroath Infirmary).

The bed became an imaginative landscape – a place of healing, but far away from ‘life’.

The implications of my horizontally, being at a remove, vulnerability, need for safety.

SLIDE

AMC writing emails, started email signature locating the bed as my place in the world

**Diagram, from Perec species of spaces, pillow/ bed/ room/ stairs/ house/ street…..universe.**

Home the centre of one’s space But there is ambivalence here…the ‘life’ out there and the body / me in here…

2 **Talking more about this complicated longing for home.**

In Bell Hooks, (2008). Belonging, (far worse now than in 2008 – on land, ownership, poc!)

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“The idea of place, where we belong, is a constant subject for many of us. We want to know whether it is possible to live on the earth peacefully. Is it possible to sustain life? ….Again, and again as I travel around, I am stunned by how many citizens in our nation feel lost, feel bereft of a sense of direction, feel as though they cannot see where our journeys lead, that they cannot know where they are going. Many folks feel no sense of place. What they know, what they have, is a sense of crisis, of impending doom…..”

**Obviously - We see here Home as a restless concept -** As a country we have gone/ are going through Brexit / huge, unsettling anxieties about migration…. Home, for all its immediate and more traditional associations, is a multi-faceted, problematic notion.

**As Canadian geographer Edward Relph – known for his work on** *Place and Placelessness* -

**observes,:**

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“Home is the point of departure from which we orient ourselves and take possession of the world. He describes here a process of becoming grounded and moving forth—not to conquer the world but to deal with its complexities and assert oneself as an effective and productive self, a self who is an agent, a distinctive being-in-the-world. We all have a basic need for some sort of emplacement or situatedness that gives stability and satisfaction to our lives. If we are lucky enough to find it or be able to create it for ourselves, we will have reached an ideal situation, which can have an important formative influence on the direction our lives take and on our conception of home. We will have found the place where we were meant to be—or at least a place where it is good to be, that feels right, and where we can settle. “

‘one of the ways—a necessary one—by which we come at last into full possession of a place … [is] in the imagination’, and this is where the work of writers, painters, photographers, filmmakers, and our own creative powers takes over.

**Austerlitz and the painting in Mala Strana –**

**(Flying Through Amber: the last wish of Vladimir Šlapeta**. 12 minutes. 2006)

I once set up an entire project, with a small grant from the AHRC and ACE, to take one of WG Sebald’s characters in Austerlitz and produce an animation on a lost room of the characters family, devastatingly lost in WWII. I wanted a collaborator, who I decided would be the painter Andrew Grassie, to paint this room for me – and wrote him a letter, from a fictional old man telling him of how much he would love to see this painting of the room again and that it would be the last thing the world see at night and the first thing he would see in the morning… I went to Prague, as a guest of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague and started an enduring relationship with that city and its histories. Using the novel, I tracked down the building Sebald proposed (with a photo) was the family home in Mala Strana - to find it was there. And tracked the journey of the character to Theresienstadt as he looked for traces – long gone – of his mother. To find the same shops.

Sebald’s kind of nostalgia always begins in the tangible, in people and places like this. It is doggedly human writing, characterised by uncanny feeling, accompanied by sickness, subtle nausea, adrift-ness, vertigo, and an uncertainty about perspective.

The unredeemable loss of exile, characters lost in the grim abyss of time (especially Jewish) with fragile memories. Sebald’s protagonists live in places like post-industrial/ post empire , like Manchester, where overlapping migration produced by successive empires is never ending, while the empires themselves are always ending, sinking into a twilight.

**This kind of longing/ yearning – interests me. And makes me think-**

What if home isn’t a place at all, but – as Sebald shows us - is a set of structural contradictions that set-in motion forms of productive, sometimes destructive, longing that have a complicated but generative place in creativity?

What if the return ‘home’ does not end in euphoric unity or static attainment, but always was a bittersweet longing, with tendencies to poignancy and sorrow? I view this longing as driven by the elemental interplay between the responsibilities of remembering and forgetting, darkness and light, beauty and sorrow, mortality and meaning- this is a bittersweet longing that takes on the momentum of force as we transmute it into meaning in our acts of creation.

**3/. Nostalgia – as a medical condition.**

SLIDE

**STORY;**

For a moment, continuing this twilight zone of nostalgia, Sebald has set up for us…

In 1688 ambitious Swiss Doctor Johannes Hofer – wrote his medical dissertation on nostalgia. He believed it was possible “from the force of the sound Nostalgia to define the sad mood originating from the desires to return to one’s ‘native land’. Nostalgia came from medicine, not from poetry or politics. Among the first victims of this new disease were various displaced people of the 17th century, freedom loving students from the Republic of Berne studying in Basel, domestic help and servants working in France and Germany, and Swiss soldiers fighting abroad. Russian soldiers later too, who were threatened with being buried alive to stop the nostalgic virus (a literalisation of what nostalgia is…)

Nostalgia was said to produce "erroneous representations" that causes the affected to lose touch with the present. Patients acquired "a lifeless and haggard countenance," and "indifference towards everything," confusing past and present real and imaginary events one of the earliest symptoms of nostalgia was the ability to hear voices or see ghosts. Early symptoms were described as "the sensation of hearing the voice of a person that one loves in the voice of another with whom one is conversing, or to see one's family again in dreams." - There is a kind of haunting at work here – There are recollections of taste, touch, as a common feature. This was soon became a widespread European phenomenon, with a perceived epidemic of nostalgia.

(Patronism….)

For Robert Burton, melancholia had a philosophical dimension. The melancholic saw the world as a theatre ruled by capricious fate and demonic play - the melancholic was in fact a utopian dreamer who had higher hopes for humanity. In this respect, melancholia was an affect and an element of intellectuals, a side-effect of critical reason; in melancholia, thinking and feeling, spirit and matter, soul and body are perpetually in conflict. Nostalgia was more "democratic disease that threatens to affect soldiers and sailors displaced far from home as well as many country people who began to move to the cities. Nostalgia was not merely an individual anxiety but a public threat that revealed in the contradictions of modernity and acquired a greater political importance.

Notice the relationship in those medical accounts of nostalgia rising in tandem with political and social crisis, technological change, war, displacement through industrialisation, migration!

SLIDE

We continue along these ambiguous paths of nostalgia, mindful of Robert Burton’s melancholic high minded intellectual;

4 **STORY: The story of Sir John Soane and lost-locked room of Eliza, his dead wife.**

In 1833 famed Georgian architect Sir John Soane opened the bedchamber of his much-cherished long dead wife, Eliza, which had been preserved as she had left it when she died in 1815 (19 years), and decided the time had come for him to finally empty Eliza’s room. This was also the moment when his now famous House was to be made, upon his death, into Britain’s first Museum by an act of Parliament. He was 83 years old, perhaps burdened by thoughts of legacy, especially his two sons had decided not to follow him into architecture, (no dynasty). But this moment must surly have wretched. He had worn his grief – staunch melancholy - of Eliza’s sudden death publicly, to the extent that younger students privately mocked him. That Museum persists in Lincoln’s Inns Fields, is still preserved as it was on his death in 1837.

SLIDE

Roll on to 2016-17 – AMC decides to somehow recreate that lost room again and consider what it had meant to Soane.

Using photogrammetry / working with CG artists, we slowly recreated the room.

I wrote a libretto to counterpoint an imagined journey around Eliza’s bedchamber, so you hear on the soundtrack fragments from the diaries and letters of John Soane and two-family friends, in the hours, days, weeks and months after Eliza’s sudden death.

SLIDE

I called it **Dear Friend, I can no longer hear your voice.**

The film / exhibition title refers to an inscription hidden on the canopy of a model of the Soane family tomb, which is in the library-Dining Room at the Museum. It refers to a passage from a now largely forgotten novel, Corinne, ou l'Italie by Madame de Staël, first published in 1807, where in addressing a portrait of his dead father a young man declares -

*“Dear Friend, I can no longer hear your voice, but tell me by your mute gaze, still so powerful to my soul, tell me what I must do to give you in heaven some satisfaction….”*

SLIDE

Considerable detective work – sitting in archives, deducing, reading diaries, shopping lists, the traces of objects and material culture of Eliza mapped onto the museum’s collection.

SLIDE/ SLIDE/ SLIDE/ SLIDE/

**The conjuring of the lost room** – **and via this, a lost person** – is grounded in the yearning to hear the voice and presence of lost beloved. Suggesting absence – embodied in the abstractions of:

* Wallpaper and disappearance
* Light, shadow, silhouette, and statues
* Room as tomb for absent body
* Fracturing and splitting

SLIDE

Play Extract. 1 min 50

**Total running time: 10 minutes 30.**

SLIDE – exhibition shots at Soane…

5/.

SLIDE –

**Returning home - The impossible return**

STORY: Of loss, longing for time and labour at Novali station, Puglia, 2014

I had sat for hours in a café outside Novali station in Salento, Puglia, talking to the train Keepers. I was there to somehow mark the moment that automatism, decades late, was coming to the region, and the role of the train keeper, who since the 19th century had lived in little houses by the train tracks going out to wind the crank to move / lift a barrier and rail tracks. Puglia is far south, in the heel of Italy, an area considered poorer and more rural, marked by decades of internal migration to the wealthier industrial north, to Milan and Turin. But the train keepers had stayed. Already some of them had been reassigned: Novali station had 12 staff, far more than anyone knew what to do with. I was there as part of the 'Moving Landscape' project. I had met some of the Keepers.

I caried out a series of audio interviews with the train Keepers, developing from this a speech, a form of public collective declaration, to be directed at the passing trains and passengers and was intended as a form of temporary monument to the role of the Keepers as it fell into obsolescence. Of course, a futile, absurd gesture but also a poetic one in which the Keepers role would be publicly acknowledged and the intensity and complexity of the Keepers response to their situation would be given space.

I passed the draft declaration back to one of them and back and forth we went until they were happy. Final filming took place on Friday November 28th, 2014, mainly at Noveli station, Puglia, with the declaration read over the public address system. This event was documented to make a short film.

SLIDE –

Play Extract.

5 mins extract from 15 min film.

Notice the deep ambivalence of about ‘returning’ home, here in time to retrieve a place that is being lost.

Notice the mention of waiting –

**Here I want to point to waiting’ as a metaphor - Waiting and anger.**

American writer critic **Susan Sontag** also detected the presence of homelessness as a dominant theme and message in contemporary literature and the arts generally. In a 1961 essay, she argued that most serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness. The felt unreliability of human experience brought about by the inhuman acceleration of historical change has led every sensitive modern mind to the recording of nausea, of intellectual vertigo. A raft of cultural figures fit in here, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, author of the novel Nausea; Albert Camus, whose enduring character is ‘the outsider’; Samuel Beckett, who offered **‘waiting’ as a metaphor** for the human condition (as in Waiting for Godot); and Martin Heidegger, whose Letter on Humanism describes how humanity has lost its way in the contemporary world.

SLIDE –

**7/. Pirandello**

**I am bringing us back to another kind of waiting and anger again…**

**This time a kind of longing, my own too, for a lost object of a sort.**

An unrealised project, and so a lost future. Another artist/ writer failed attempts to make a film in the late 1920’s/ 30’s – Italian writer - Luigi Pirandello.

Pirandello is still famous for his seminal modernist play, Six Characters in Search of an Author, (1921).

Made during a Scholarship at the [British School at Rome](http://www.bsr.ac.uk/) I adapted a 1935 text by [Pirandello](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1934/pirandello-bio.html) called *Treatment for Six Characters.* Written over 10 years this was intended to be a precursor to Pirandello’s [*Six Characters…*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_Characters_in_Search_of_an_Author)*;* had it been realised the film was to feature a fictional version of the development ofhis play, allowing Pirandello to explore the ethics of the creative process.

It presents a famous author - clearly based on Pirandello himself – who meets a family who become unwitting catalysts for his imagination. He behaves destructively with tragic consequences. Tantalisingly Pirandello's text concludes with the historical premier of *Six Characters* at [Teatro Valle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teatro_Valle), Rome’s oldest working theatre. Together the play and the film form an innovative temporal loop precisely united in place by the complex presence of the stage at Teatro Valle.

Apart from one sequence the locations of my film were lit and filmed without actors, part of a deliberately oblique approach intended to propose a ‘cinema of the mind’: I considered Pirandello’s film a kind of ruin and not intending to make his film in its entirety I set out to construct my work around the paradoxical lures and failures of another, absent film.

The film is narrated by veteran Italian actor Norman Mozzato, also featuring Pirandello’s home in Rome, and iconic Italian fashion.

At the time of production the influential [Teatro Valle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teatro_Valle) was under political occupation, by [Fondazione Teatro Valle Occupato](http://www.teatrovalleoccupato.it/) who collaborated with me, and gave me on-going access to the theatre - newly intense social and political space

SLIDE –

Extract: 5 mins, full version 33 minutes.

**TREATMENT FOR SIX CHARACTERS, AN UNREALISED FILM BY LUIGI PIRANDELLO, 2015**.

Will finish by coming full circle – to that ill body, me in bed, which I started with:

Retrieval / unrealised future/ of an object/ project/ as embedded social and political histories.

SLIDE –

**9/. STORY: What is means to ‘dwell’ in a body, and how this is revealed by being in an ill body.** Our bodies are the ultimate place within which ‘we’ are embedded. A complicated sentence to unpack…

In 2018 I ended up in hospital suddenly with life threatening compression of the spinal cord, Cauda Equina Syndrome – hours away from paralysis. Later, after numerous tests I was moved to a specialist hospital and found to have a large very rare primary bone tumour at the base of my spine, in the sacrum.

It is considered too dangerous to remove – as we would have to remove my sacrum – but luckily, I have been put onto a novel drug, and even more luckily, I have responded well to that drug. I have made the decision to live with ‘it’, given my options, and it is quite something to live with a part of your body that has turned against you.

Illness – especially sudden illness- gives you a lot to adapt to. Bodily doubt, suddenly seeing things through the parameter of the ill body. You get used to witnessing your body monitored – as I am for life – under that medical gaze, and this creates all sorts of forms of estrangement.

SLIDE –

**The Trembling …. a series I call the Trembling…**

Beginning in calamity this is a project that takes as its starting point a shocked trembling provoked by sudden death or illness - but it stubbornly moves outwards, slyly ironic and resourceful, to reach towards a metaphysical dignity.

**The Trembling** will have interlocking, intersecting chapters. Considered together each chapter forms a complex depiction of vulnerability, identified here as a prolonged trembling that can also be seen as a form of strength. A defence of the self – as my imaginary Rousseau forest was.

My tumour is still wrapped around the nerves at S1&2, a bit into L5 ,in my spine, and so I live with some numbness. Initially this was like a ball of numbness inside, which was confusing as it felt like rocks or entire large objects. I always feel ‘it’ – I still don’t have a name for it – it is part of me…

I am interested in neuro anatomy – as through our nerves, and so sensation, we feel and are ‘placed’ in the world > implications of numbness/ lack of feeling….

I am slowly teaching myself the history of the way the spine has been thought of,

Spine as early precursor as a place of the unconscious

Spine as carrier/ scaffolding/ - what happens when this doesn’t hold you up/ hold you in the world….There is a lot in this area – the ways our body’s house ‘us’. This conflation between body: House goes far back in time, as Jung has shown us, it is a dream representation of self, with profound roots of meaning in the human psyche. I do of course still belong in/ to my body – but think this kind of estrangement is fascinating

….**Another time I would have more thing to say about dwelling.** Especially the differing perspectives of Martin Heidegger, and more recently Tim Ingold….

**Conclusion:**

**One way or another, we have always been** wanderers. We are like turtles, snails, and crustaceans— the meanings and associations of home are always with us in space and time, and how we negotiate our way through the world.

The anthropologist, and writer Michael Jackson: Has spent decades studying the ways in which people in various parts of the world live and establish themselves somewhere that is meaningful to them. - Jackson states that the central question guiding his research is –

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"How… People transform **‘givenness’** into choice so that the world into which they are thrown/ throwing becomes a world that they can call their own"

He continues: "this existential project, I believe, a universal human imperative…

“We often say that we feel at home in the world when what we do has some effect and what we say carries some weight.… In this sense, at-homeness suggests an elusive balance which people try to strike between being acted upon and acting, between acquiescing in the given and choosing their own fate. "

**Finishing… mindful of my current interest, currently working through of the relation between bodies-nerves and trees/ forest….**

About instructions to someone feeling lost in a forest:

**Lost - David Waggoner** (1971)

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you

Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,

**And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,**

Must ask permission to know it and be known.

The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,

I have made this place around you,

If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.

No two trees are the same to Raven.

No two branches are the same to Wren.

If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,

You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows

Where you are. You must let it find you.

I leave you with that line especially:

Wherever you are is called Here,

**And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,**