

Marginalia: *graffiti, urban coding and the semiotics of the street*, by Kevan Manwaring

Affective Digital Histories: Re-creating De-Industrialised Places, 1970s to the Present - University of Leicester. Historical narrative non-fiction

## **The Map of Here**

I stare at the map set into the pavement: the stamp of approval on Cultural Quarter's status, criss-crossed daily by countless pedestrians, the nervous scratching of restless feet. Eczema marks the spot. I try to work out where I am. I fancy the city plan is like an abstract portrait of a local worthy. But the map is the topograph of his mind: we read its bumps and knots like a phrenologist reads for signs of his character. Each section of the skull is labelled and connected to a certain tick of personality, memory, or motor function. Here, tanning. There, the manufacture of boots and shoes. Over there, hosiery. Beyond, the temples of religion and charity. Nodes of music, of pictures. The art deco flea-pit, the Athena, where dreams flicker inside his skull. The noisome<sup>1</sup> tannery at Rowleys, his nose; the din of factories brimming with gossiping factory girls, his mouth.

I try to match what is at my feet with the multi-coloured tourist map from the Visitor Centre. These shadows and brightnesses are Leicester's brainscan, but they don't offer the full picture<sup>2</sup>, for the dragons always lurk at the edge of the map.

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1 Adj. Poetic/literary. Having an extremely offensive smell. Disagreeable; unpleasant. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2001)

2 Unlike the 'Deep Mapping' advocated by Farley/Roberts (2011) which I attempt here.

## **I Meet My Guide**

There is a strange, muted cough.

Startled, I looked up and he is there. The presiding spirit of this area, a Victorian ghost. A young child, a boy from what I can make out, dressed in ragged trousers and a tattered shirt. One hand is larger than the other. Yet his head is really grotesque, enlarged and mis-shapen, warts virtually obscuring any human features. From beneath loose folds of grey and mottled skin, two pitiful eyes stare out. I give a cry of horror.

The sunken eyes flinch at this reaction, although it's probably wearily familiar. Perhaps he was hoping for a better response from me, but I am only mortal. He shakes his head vigorously, as though in denial. It must take some effort with that gigantic head. I fear he's going to do himself an injury but before I can apologise, there's a flash of light and he morphs into something equally surreal.

Dazzled by the intensely vivid colours, I think it's Ganesha, the Hindu elephant god. I recognise him from a poster that a friend brought back from India. I turn away, shielding my eyes.

When I turn back, the figure is no longer psychedelic against the grey streets, but muted and wearing a scruffy hoody, baggy jeans that hang around his arse, and big expensive-looking trainers - worn by a healthy looking boy

with toffee-coloured, plump limbs. But he still has the head of a baby elephant. 'Is this better?' he asks, his voice clear in my head though I didn't see a mouth move, just his trunk curling like a question mark. There's a musicality to his voice, which is mingled with the prosaic burr of the East Midlands.

I nod, feeling guilty at my squeamishness. 'But ... you're ... you're...'

'A god. One of *them*.' He flaps his ears, waves his trunk and brandishes his tusks as though ready for a mock stampede. Then he bursts out laughing. 'Look around. There's Hermes and Athena over there, above HP Tyler Limited - appropriated as patrons of commerce. They still look down on us, the divine CCTV, but nobody notices.'

Above the doorway of a building on the corner I spot the busts. Winged helmeted Hermes, holding his caduceus in one hand, a ship in the other.

'But you're...'

'Alive and kicking. Yeah, well, who worships that Greek crew anymore?' He blew a raspberry with his trunk at the statues. 'There's a few Nesh-heads around here though. Indian takeaway, mate. We brought our pantheon over with us and there's no getting rid of us now. We're your national dish.'

I'm partial as anyone to a good curry.

'Let's start. Follow me.'

'Wait!'

He leaps onto a skateboard. A dog-eared copy of

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*<sup>3</sup> hangs from his back pocket. White earphone cables dangle from the flaps of his ears. I can just make out bhangra beats.

He pushes off, giving me little choice but to follow. Rather than taking me straight into the heart of the area, he leads me past the bargain basement shops of Charles Street, with its flurry of pedestrians, who part before him like the Red Sea.

### **Crusoe of Charles Street**

Faces like QR codes, but I lack the app to read them, to understand their worlds, their languages: unopen source to the outsider<sup>4</sup>. I'm the stranger here, tongue-tied, ignorant, getting lost. I glance at my foldout map, scratch my head, take photographs of random things: an extra-terrestrial tourist in my biker-leather spacesuit, lugging my life-support backpack. I wonder whether my liminal status on the edge might perhaps aid me. I stop and give some change to a homeless man, marooned by who knows what chancy seas, and wonder about his perspective of the streets. How does he see things? What could he tell us? But I have no time to linger. I have to keep up with the adolescent urgency of my guide. My own youth cult to follow.

### **Slumgod**

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<sup>3</sup> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, Penguin, 1996

<sup>4</sup> 'Untranslated landscapes', Farley/Roberts, Edgeland, Jonathan Cape, 2011, p5

It's only when we reach the bottom of crossroads that my diminutive guide stops to let me catch up. Nobody else seems to notice him. By-passers must presume I am talking to myself, or on blue-tooth. Here, my own 'Harvey' fills me in. Elephant Head, as I come to know him, offers an explanation

'I first appeared to you as Joseph Carey Merrick, born in the slums on the edge of St George's at the height of the Industrial Revolution: the deformed spirit of the age. Did you know that on his birth, the 5th of August, 1862, Joseph appeared to be a healthy young baby boy to his mother Mary? It was only when he turned five that he began to show signs of deformity. His hand began to swell and lumps began to appear on his head. And yet his mother and back then, his father, still loved him; and he received an education until the age of thirteen, when sadly his mother died. His father re-married and his new stepmother did not hide her dislike of this ill-formed child, and so he was sent out to work. His first job was rolling cigars, until his hands become too deformed to allow for skilled work. For a couple of years he was a hawker, walking these streets, trying to sell his wares from door-to-door, until Hackney Carriages removed his license after too many complaints from distressed housewives. Wherever he went; and walking was painful (he had been rendered lame due to a fall as a boy) he gathered crowds of horrified onlookers. After repeated beatings at home, Merrick took to the streets, joining the ranks of the city's homeless. He

eventually ended up in a workhouse at the age of seventeen. There he might have remained if he had not took it upon himself to write to a showman, who took him on. Merrick joined a 'Freakshow', first around Leicester and the Midlands, and then eventually in London, where he was billed as the 'Elephant Man'. The rest of his story is more widely known - yet his name is still erroneously recorded as John Merrick, that of his brother. He wasn't even given the dignity of his real name - but he did little to clarify things, preferring to keep his humble origins cloaked in mystery. He ended up on show in Whitechapel, in a shop which now sells saris. Ironic, don't you think, considering the current multi-cultural texture of his birthplace?'

I stare at the prismatic tide of pedestrians.

'And that is why my current form seems apt, don't you think? Ganesha, the Hindu god of learning, writing, and beginnings. I am the remover of obstacles: the ultimate hacker, though I say so myself. Elephants are renowned for their memory, so who better to be your guide?'

I can't argue with that, although the whole experience is bizarre and cartoon-like. And I couldn't get out of my head a youtube short by the graffiti-artist Banksy<sup>5</sup> which involved some 'insurgents' apparently shooting down a drone, which turns out to be Dumbo.

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Rebel Rocket Attack, Oct 6 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsF3HspQY6A>

Elephant Head continues: 'Did you know, Merrick maintained that his condition was the result of his mother being shocked by a fairground elephant whilst pregnant with him? The concept (or rather misconception) of the Maternal Impression, a theory popular in Victorian times. Merrick died on 11th April, 1890, in London, having become perhaps the most famous sideshow that ever existed: visited by Royalty and the charitable souls of Society, keen to be seen doing their bit, like the Pope kissing lepers. He was aged only twenty-seven, and so was an early member of the 27 Club along with James Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Keith Moon: another victim of the fame game. 'Scuse me, I just need to pop in here...'

### **Anti-social Behaviour**

My guide scoots off to a black doorway garnished with graffiti. I watch the High Street swirl by, reflecting on what he had said.

Just over the busy ring-road, Merrick emerged from the unhealthy slums of the age. I shudder. Elephant Head reappears on his skateboard wielding several cans of spraypaint: one in each hand, one in his trunk, and a couple in the pockets of his hoody. 'C'mon.'

He clatters into Humberstone Gate. I jog along. Ahead, I see him squirting something onto a pair of dark garage doors. No one seems to notice, though he is doing it in broad daylight.

'Hey!' I call after him, feeling somehow complicit.

He slams off on his board, and I survey the scene of the crime. A sign reads, 'Leicester Secular Society/garage in constant use/no parking.' By it, Elephant Head has sprayed an impressively artist tag, which at first looks like indecipherable Sanskrit (to me) but, on closer inspection, reads: 'Tusk Rules'.

### **Cowboys and Indians**

He is waiting by the bus-stop next to the old boarded up taxi-rank office. Across the traffic I can see the lurid facade of the Three Cranes. Out of breath, I sit down next to him on the bench - avoiding the dubious stains as best I can. I'm about to admonish him for anti-social behaviour when he points up Humberstone Road with his trunk. It leads to the margins of the city centre, an urban No Man's land.

'Did you know that at one point in late August 1891 Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Show<sup>6</sup> came and performed in the city, up at Belgrave Road Leicester Cricket and Bicycle grounds? Their troupe consisted of two hundred and fifty artists, eighty of which were what we used to call 'Red Indians', and Mexicans, along with cowboys, scouts, buck riders and riflemen, plus two hundred horses, mules, and twenty-two buffalo... imagine! They arrived by train from Nottingham and passed through here on parade - thousands thronged around the City Clock to see them.'

For a minute, I can almost hear the crack of

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<sup>6</sup> Buffalo Bill in Leicester,  
<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/LeicesterTheatres/BuffaloBillLeicester.htm> [accessed 26/03/14]



Winchesters, stampeding horses, and ullulating war cries of the 'Indians' over the traffic.

Elephant Head continues: 'Of course, what were generically called 'Indians' were specifically Sioux from the Ogallalla, Brule, Cheyenne, Minneconjou and Uncapapa tribes. Friendly and hostile alike. Some, like 'Kicking Bear', 'Short Bull', 'Black Heart', and 'No Neck' were hostages or POWs. Proud men turned into sideshows, their culture, a circus act.

We pause to contemplate this. Clearly, it's hit a nerve.

'Their show was billed as a 'Representation of Indian and Frontier Life', which they had toured all over Europe. What must they have thought of England? All those pale faces gawping at them from the grey streets.' Elephant Head gazed at the anonymous blur of traffic.

'How do you know all this stuff?' I ask.

'Look at me! I have a long memory...' He got up and circles on his skate board, brandishing his trunk. 'S'funny to think how the ghost of Buffalo Bill is now surrounded by us 'Indians'. Here, in Leicester at least, the West has not won. Or, at least it's a draw. The city is the ultimate mash-up. Halal meat, hair extensions and world foods. No High Street chains here. Here, on the fringes, difference flourishes.'

### **Voice in a Can**

My guide flaps his ears, lifts his board and does a flashy

trick on the benches. On his high horse. There's no stopping him now.

'And those marginalised voices can be glimpsed in the graffiti that defaces or decorates (depending on your point of view or talent of the artist) the urban environment. Where else can the voiceless be heard? Yes, some graffiti is puerile, racist or petty. And, yes, there's the thrill of masturbation in the illicit squirt of spray-paint on subway walls. It transgresses and it possesses. It's part territorial marking, part anal phase. Like hunger strikers defacing our prison with chemical faeces. It's protest. It's commentary. We're customizing our environment. Look at those walls over there.' Elephant Head gestures towards an impressive mural of Richard the Third in cricket whites.

'These city streets would be even drabber without our art. Graffiti transforms Legoland to *this* land. It adds colour and spice, like migrants. Our mongrel words jostle with billboard signs, corporate logos, civic signage, neon signs, traffic lights, road names, road works, vehicles, designer labels, shop windows, chuggers, Big Issue sellers and so on. Let me show you.'

'Wait!'

Before I can stop him, Elephant Head is off again, narrowly missing a double-decker bus as he shoots across Rutland Street. I wait for a gap in the traffic and take my chances.

### **Elephants' Graveyard**

The street is dominated by a Communist-looking tower block, mostly boarded up.

Without checking to see if I am in ear-shot, my diminutive guide continues: 'We are surrounded by the skeletons of old factories - like an industrial elephants' graveyard. This area used to be the beating heart of the city. Every one of these buildings tells a story.'

'Are you going to tell me about them?' I ask.

'Bugger off. Use the St George's app.<sup>7</sup> You can use a smartphone can't you? Or do you still have a granddad one?'

I give him a look.

'What I can tell you about is this building opposite. Check it out.'

I look across the road and spot an old sign, 'J. Herbert Marshall Music Depot' and, to the right, 'Helsinki's'.

'Ah, this used to be the place to come if you were on the lash.'

'How would you know? You look under-age!'

'You're pulling my trunk, right? I'm a Hindu god. So, do the maths. Under-age. Jeez!'

'Sorry. Go on.'

'It was built by JH's father, who was a bookseller. The family ink, as it were. But his son turned it into a music depot. They sold pianos. With ivory keys. It's a sore point.' His trunk encircles one of his tusks. 'Anyway, that finally went bust. It was turned into a notorious night club. Repetitive beats, in a built-up area! The authorities

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<sup>7</sup> <http://leicesterstgeorges.co.uk/>

weren't happy. Can't have people enjoying themselves, now can we?'

'But loud music can be as annoying as vandalism to those it's inadvertently inflicted on. Most graffiti seems like semi-literate scrawl. Daubings on the bog-wall of life.'

As if in response, Elephant Head sprays a quick quote on the wall of the old LEC building, its letters dripping like semen down the brick. I look closer: 'The concrete is most poetic<sup>8</sup>'.

Elephant Head skates on and I follow, hooked.

### **Smoke and Mirrors**

The skateboard clatters over a sign set into the pavement. It seems to be a 'star sign' with the name 'Englebert Humperdink' on it. A local 'celeb' perhaps? The initials are the same as Elephant Head's, but also English Heritage. Was this a semiotic conspiracy, or just the 'pun-ishment that fits the rhyme'?

'Watch this!' he calls back. My guide sweeps by the Curve's steel-rib cage, doing a victory loop past the cake-slice of The Exchange cafe, the gloomy Serbian church of St George's and the tatty snooker club, coming to a stop in front of the Athena. As he loops, Elephant Head sprays the air simultaneously with three colours. An aerosol *son et lumière*. Coffee-fuelled late nights at the Longship, soul

music pumping out from the jukebox. Down Rutland Street Afro-Caribbean gents click dominos to a reggae throb at LUCA. Nearby, from the B1 Centre, the beat and twang of a practice session drifts up. Drunken rude boys, mods, grebos, goths and townies spill from the Centre Bar at the International Hotel. Suddenly there's a blast of hot air and a clamour of fire engines, which douse the Church, up in flames jumping from Rowley's fire. There a reek of burning leather. Teenagers queue outside the Odeon dressed up in gaudy Seventies clothes. They're waiting for the Rolling Stones. Queuing for *Star Wars*, *Titanic*, *Tommy*, *Quadrophenia*, *Breaking Glass*, *Trainspotting*.

### **Caffeine Fix**

I'm getting high on spray-paint fumes. 'Wait! Slow down!'

Elephant Head spirals back to The Exchange, where we stop for a cuppa, although he has a Coke. He plugs in his i-pod without asking, to charge it up. John Martyn is playing on the sound system, and I relax among the chic clientele.

My guide slurps his coke through his trunk. He finishes it in one go and flashes the can's logo at me then crushes it and tosses it into the bin: 'That's my product placement for the day. Okay, look around. No, not in here you chump, outside. The world is made up of text. You have different scripts running down any street. Here you've got the smart tourist signs, fingerposts and pavement markings, showing us our designated 'desire path' to these Meccas of Culture,

jostling with the street names; the old factory names; the crumbling ghost signs; smart new businesses; not so smart old businesses (like 147 Snooke-r man over there); road-signs and markings. All telling us where to park, move on, consume. You can tell how they've tried to rebrand this place, and they've done pretty well, but you can see the high-tide mark where the money ran out, leaving the scum around the ring. Culture is here beyond the mundane chav-dragons squatting at the edge of our vision. England as Poundland.'

Elephant Head waves his trunk like a lecturer: 'It's all coding, training our eyes to access the urban space in a certain way<sup>9</sup>. The Civic Authorities control (or like to think they do) this coding. Their audio-guides tell us what they want us to see. They narrate a certain kind of history in anaesthetising tones with just enough truth for us to swallow it. We consume the info-tainment like gobbling Pacmen.'

Elephant Head pauses, and snaffles my biscotti with his trunk.

'Hey!'

### **Street-Hackers United**

He continues, warming to his theme, 'But the coding can be hacked by scallywags like the Radical Tank Terrorists<sup>10</sup>,

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<sup>9</sup> 'The tunnel vision one develops as a defence against the colossal sensory bombardment of a city street.' Richard Mabey, *The Unofficial Countryside*, Pimlico, 1999, p25

<sup>10</sup> a local graffiti gang, circa 1989

who were the 'robbers' to the Graffiti Squad 'cops', the Council's clean-up 'response unit'. At its best, graffiti can provide a counter-narrative to the consensus. Our scrawls are witty and ironic. They appropriate the cult of commerce. Though it has to be said that plenty of it is messy and unpleasant. Did you know Leicester set a shining example with its tackling of racist graffiti, from the late Seventies onwards? A piece of racist graffiti would be removed within twenty-four hours. For this kind of zero tolerance I applaud the Council.' Elephant Head flaps his ears. 'Post-War Leicester became a multi-cultural city, and the urban coding was re-written accordingly. Other colours were breaking through. In the texture of the urban environment you see element of Schwitters' sgraffitoll. Why were these acceptable within a gallery but not upon the walls of a building? Yet even the perception of graffiti changed over the decades, from being one of the myriad of social ills which dragged the Seventies down (the Long Disenchantment, my old hippy friend calls it), to something that was tackled, then, begrudgingly tolerated when Hip Hop and Rap culture took off and academics and art critics started to take an interest. It was a subculture, part of the 'anything goes' atmosphere of Postmodernism. The odd rising star even got Royal approval. One graffiti artist, Boyd Hill, set up his own business with support from the Prince's Trust. Now they have legal sites for a rolling

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lln. pl. *sgraffiti*. A form of decoration made by scratching through a surface to reveal a lower layer of a contrasting colour. *Oxford Concise* (2001)

exhibition of the best local graffiti<sup>12</sup>: all for free. This Outsider Art came in from the cold. Leicester forged its own style, purveyed by the likes of the Old Skool Aerosol Banditz. Suddenly folk were proud of it. It's become part of the city's DNA, grafted onto the double-helix to create the mutant hybrid<sup>13</sup> you see today.'

Elephant Head stops talking and unplugs his ipod from the wall. I had listened attentively to his mini-lecture, although no one else heard it. 'You should do a TED talk<sup>14</sup>,' I suggest, finishing my Americano. It's gone cold and I am left with grainy slops.

'C'mon.'

'Where are we going?'

'There's so much more to show you: the Cripples' Guild, the Leicester Mercury, Alexandra House, the Phoenix. You haven't seen the Hide Skin and Fat Company yet!'

'If you don't mind, I want to stay here a bit and make some notes.'

'Suit yourself, lard-arse. Seeya around...'

'Wait! How will I find you again?'

'Just find a mugging spot.'

'A what?'

'Y'know, one of those tourist markers set into the

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12 Legal graffiti sites in Leicester (Courtesy of Izzie Hoskins HQ, 14/03/14): Humberstone Park/other side, Goldhill Adventure Playground, Yeoman St/Clarence St, Churchgate/ Addict Dance walls, Morses - sewers by B&M + Sainsburys, Phoenix area, Braunstone Park

13 Heterosis. n. a technical term for Hybrid Vigour (*Concise Oxford*), in Genetics Theory. 'The tendency of a cross-bred individual to show qualities superior to those of both parents'. (*ibid*) The NGO Common Ground termed such localised diversity as 'Local Distinctiveness' (Clifford/King, 1985) <http://commonground.org.uk/>

14 <https://www.ted.com/talks/browse>



pavement. Then hold your nose, and stand on one leg.'

'Really?'

'No, but it'll make me laugh.' He stands in the doorway, silhouetted in a corona of light by a sudden break in the clouds. 'I'm a god - so I'm omniscient, like GCHQ15. I'm always watching. Just think of me, and I'll be there.'

And he vanishes in a flash, leaving a faint whiff of spray-fumes.

### **City-Zen & The Four Dimensional Pedestrian**

Finishing another coffee and a slab of 'rocky road', I extricate myself from the womb of The Exchange, and meander through the streets of the Cultural Quarter. Following my feet, I try to make sense of it all.

I fall into a contemplative reverie somewhere between architecture, local history, social history, sub-cultures, town planning, urban theory, psychogeography, the actuality of the street and its augmented reality, all the while trying not to get knocked down or tread in dog poo: what

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15      New Banksy? Mural near GCHQ depicts agents listening in on phone box *The guerrilla graffiti artist Banksy is believed to be behind an artwork which has appeared on the side of a house in Cheltenham. The [Gloucestershire Echo](#) reported* that the owner of the house, Karren Smith, 48, said she saw men packing a white tarpaulin into a van at about 7.30am on Sunday. She said: 'They were taking it down and putting it into the back of the van. I thought it might be something to do with the police, like when a crime happens. I saw these people looking and then saw the graffiti. It's pretty good. It livens up the street.' The work, on the corner of Fairview Road and Hewlett Road, surrounds a BT telephone box and is already drawing fans. The new artwork comes in the wake of the storm over [surveillance by GCHQ and the NSA](#) revealed by the whistleblower Edward Snowden.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2014/apr/14/new-banksy-mural-near-gchq-depicts-agents-listening-in-on-phone-box>

might be called 'city-Zen'.

I chewed over Solnit's reflection in her book *Wanderlust: a history of walking*<sup>16</sup>: 'Walking is only the beginning of citizenship, but through it the citizen knows his or her city and fellow citizens and truly inhabits the city rather than a small privatised part thereof.'

I found myself walking through the churchyard of St George's, the dolorous voices of Serbia on the air, past the toppling ranks of tombstones, epitaphs scumbled by time. Stepping from under the shadow of the Curve into this crumbling place, which co-exists side-by-side with the hotch-potch of industrial heritage and up-and-coming node-points of hipness such as the Phoenix and the LCB, crystallised my thoughts on what I could be termed: 'The Four Dimensional Pedestrian' (or time-travelling for urbanites, imagining a neat volume with a trendy subtitle).

The praxis I fancied being akin to 'free-running' (AKA 'Parkour', created by David Belle<sup>17</sup>): riffing off of the urban space in synaptic acrobatics, a Peter Parkour spinning webs of connection. Despite my fanciful conceit, I suspect the truth is more prosaic: pounding the streets, a literary gumshoe, wearing down shoe-leather amid the shells of boot and shoe factories. This seems an apt form of propitiation to the Cobbler God. The theory I imagine being that of the bricoleur (after Claude Levi-Strauss' theory of 'bricolage'<sup>18</sup>); or the 'Way of the Jackdaw', as

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<sup>16</sup> Solnit, R., *Wanderlust: a history of walking* (Viking, 2000)

<sup>17</sup> For a brief history visit <http://www.wfpf.com/history-parkour/>

<sup>18</sup> Middleton, Dr. R., *Bricolages of the Here and Not-Here: how poetic representations of local deities can engage with an interconnected world*, [paper, Haunted

Margaret Atwood calls it 19.

So, the Four Dimensional Pedestrian in their 'city-zen' adopts this parkour-bricolage approach<sup>20</sup>: the ultimate Google Glass way of seeing<sup>21</sup>, but without reliance upon the Ood-brain of the Cloud. They are an 'out of signal' Explorer (as top-feeder customers of Apple's new must-have product are called<sup>22</sup>), a free radical with a magpie mind and a reliance upon their own lateral thinking and cranial hard-drive. It is a low-tech revolution. As Iain Sinclair said: 'All it requires is open eyes and stout boots.'<sup>23</sup>

### **Writing on the Wall**

As I turn right down an alleyway leading out of the churchyard into Colton Street, and once more into the red-brick canyons of the former factories and warehouses I thought the notion of bricolage seemed apposite. Here were concrete metaphors for the taking.

My erstwhile guide might have ridiculed any such linguistic shenanigans. If anything, I imagine him decrying: 'The room was in the elephant.'

Then I spot a suspect piece of fresh graffiti on the

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Landscapes Symposium, Falmouth University, 8 March 2014]

19 Atwood, M., *Negotiating with the Dead*, Cambridge University Press, 2002

20 See also 'Edgenav' (Farley/Roberts, *Edgelands*, p15); and 'Groundtruthers' (Joe Moran, *On Road*, cited *ibid*, p17)

21 'It was a change in focus that was needed, a new perspective on the everyday.' Mabey, *ibid*, p26

22 Google Glass to go on sale for one day, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-26987972> [accessed 15/04/2104]

23 *Edge of the Orison*, Sinclair, London: Penguin, 2006

wall of the nearest building, the former 'Cripple's Guild', now used as a Sai Baba temple. The lame Merrick might have haunted this place; but now it seems that Elephant Head does, as the tell-tale tagging suggests. The tangled loops of letters at first look Tamil<sup>24</sup>, but I manage to decipher them: 'Name the World<sup>25</sup>'.

I thought how frequently the headlines used the cliché of Writing on the Wall during the graffiti wave of the late '70s and '80s. It's ironic (although perhaps not intentional): the phrase is of course recorded in the Book of Daniel, immortalised in Rembrandt's 1635 masterpiece 'Belshazzar's Feast'. The story goes that, during a particularly Bacchanalian banquet, King Belshazzar used the holy golden and silver vessels from Solomon's Temple (like using your mum's best dinner service for a piss-up with the lads), to praise "the gods of gold and silver, brass, iron, wood, and stone" (which could easily be the gods of the Industrial Revolution, a steampunk pantheon). While Belshazzar and his mates were digesting their sacrilegious feast, disembodied fingers appear and write on the wall of the royal palace the immortal words:

מנא , מנא , תקל , ופרסין

*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*

Naturally, the guests are astonished at this supernatural graffiti. The king's sagest advisers attempt

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<sup>24</sup> Ganesha is worshipped across the Indian diaspora. A prominent name for Ganesha in the [Tamil language](#) is *Pillai* ([Tamil](#): பிள்ளை) or *Pillaiyaar* (பிள்ளையார்) (Little Child)

<sup>25</sup> Freire, *ibid*, p69

to interpret the meaning and proclaim: 'two minas, a shekel and two parts'. The guests scratch their heads. These are forms of counting and currency, shining on the wall like an early form of Dow Jones index, but, to the non-cognoscenti, meaningless. Therefore, the King sends for Daniel, a hotshot former employee of a certain Nebuchadnezzar. Rejecting offers of reward, Daniel warns the king of the folly of his blasphemous dinner service before reading the text. It turns out Belshazzar's days are numbered, his soul weighed, and his kingdom soon to be divided. The Book of Daniel exegises it thus:

'This is the interpretation of the matter: *mina*, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; *shekel*, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; *half-mina*, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.'<sup>26</sup>

That night the city was over-run by the army of Darius the Mede and King Belshazzar was slain. And so, ever-after, the 'writing on the wall' has denoted ominous and imminent demise. So, an odd choice of phrase for the *Leicester Mercury*. Were the hacks seeing something Biblical in these anti-social acts of vandalism? Were they harbingers of the end of days? Or did was it lazy journalism, the slippage of the signifier?

## Calligraffiti

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Wondering why it was okay for a divine agency to write upon the wall, but not an artistically-inclined teenager, I think of the recent example of the thirty-five year old Tunisian artist Karim Jabbari, who mixes Arabic calligraphy with graffiti in what he terms 'calligraffiti'<sup>27</sup>. Working with disenfranchised youth in neighbouring towns like Kasserine, he encourages them to explore the stylistic possibilities of native ancient script (as opposed to merely imitating French or US styles). Blending North African history with urban art Jabbari has created a two hundred and fifty foot-long mural along the wall of a prison where his father, a critic of the government, was held for two years. In Jabbari's example the sacred and the secular blend, showing a remarkable middle way between these apparently mutually exclusive extremes.

The political graffiti of Athens, Cairo and Delhi shows how engaged the artform can be<sup>28</sup>. It can be sometimes the only way a disenfranchised populace can make itself be heard. Politicians ignore the 'writing on the wall' at their peril. Fat-bellied Belshazzars, watch out!

For a moment, I thought I hear the tell-tale clatter of Elephant Head's skateboard echoing amid the concrete canyons.

I spot a side-road called Northampton Street and slip

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<sup>27</sup> Mixing graffiti and calligraphy in Tunisia, BBC article  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-26515754>

<sup>28</sup> Egypt: Graffiti tells story of political turmoil,  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23394472>

& India's Election Graffiti, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-27100187>

down it, feeling the cosy pull of the familiar.<sup>29</sup>

### **Makeover for a Monarch**

I pass an unpromising doorway which serves as the entrance for the Guillain School of Theatre. Loitering there like an out-of-work actor was a shady figure in black tights, waving an unlit fag in his hand: 'A light? A light? My kingdom for a light...' Cadging a match was Laurence Olivier, hamming it up as Richard the Third.

I apologise for not having one.

He sighs, but attempts to look on the bright side: 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer...' he declaims in strangled tones, and I couldn't disagree. After all, he's Northamptonshire born, like me (though I started life in Far Cotton, not Fotheringhay).

'To Bosworth field, then.' Waving a shrivelled appendage, Olivier limps off in iambic pentameter.

The discovery in August 2012 of the mortal remains of the last Plantagent King in the Social Services carpark (incredibly, under a letter 'R' denoting a reserved parking space) has transformed not only the city as an exciting tourist destination but also, with the facial reconstruction, the reputation of this much maligned monarch.

Now, a major visitor attraction is about to open, and along with the audio trail, a Richard III tour linking

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29      It's my birth-town.

associated sites, books, biscuit tins and key-rings, the city hopes to flog a dead king for all his worth.

There is some dispute over the identity of the remains<sup>30</sup> - rival academic institutions trying to score points it seems - but, whatever the true identity of the bones, the hard truth is Medieval monks were prone to 'discover' saintly relics to boost their pulling power to pilgrims, and civic authorities in need of tourist revenue quite understandably will leap upon any USP to conjure coin (and film-makers in search of a big 'pay off' for their project will fashion the ending they need)<sup>31</sup>.

The Richard III discovery is almost too good to be true. Used to the disappointing narrative of the mundane, we are instinctively suspicious of anything that smacks of a Hollywood rewrite (perhaps at the risk of missing the truth, however outlandish).

It is such an extra-ordinary volteface, I wondered if a similar make-over could be possible for Joseph Carey Merrick. It seems unlikely. He's hardly the photogenic tourist attraction of the darkly handsome Richard III. Who would want the Elephant Man on a tea-towel? And yet, these famous dwellers of Leicester are connected through their real (or imagined) deformity. Richard's hunchback appearance and withered hand might have been more the result of Tudor spin-doctoring than a disfigurement of birth, but now the curvature of the spine of the found

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30 Richard III remains' found in Leicester car park have doubt cast upon them  
<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/mar/27/richard-iii-remains-leicester-doubt-car-park-academics> [accessed 27/03/14]

31 A Personal Message from Philippa Langley  
[http://www.richardiii.net/leicester\\_dig.php#](http://www.richardiii.net/leicester_dig.php#)



skeleton is seen as part of the proof of his identity. What was once perceived as a negative, has now become a positive value.

So, if not Merrick, what of the similarly demonised 'hoodies': the youth uniform of many graffiti artists, mirroring the Hip-Hop style of their American antecedents. When Merrick was forced to turn to showbusiness, he was made a cloak and hood to wear, to hide his grotesque appearance when out and about in the public eye, no doubt adding to his mystique (and the commercial pull of the Whitechapel 'Freak Show').

Could graffiti artists receive a similar makeover to Richard III in the public's perception?

Certainly, the art-form seems to have more kudos these days, thanks chiefly to the huge success of Bristol-based graffiti artist Banksy, who has turned the apparently uncommodifiable and provocative into something hip and lucrative; or at least the Art World has. The enigmatic artist has done his best to subvert this<sup>32</sup> - although recent guerilla actions have resulted in property price-hikes<sup>33</sup> and tussles over ownership<sup>34</sup>. Yet his continued anonymity maintains the mystique in the same way as

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32 *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (Banksy, 2010)

33 New 'Banksy' set to double the price of house and 'put Cheltenham on the tourist map' <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/new--banksy--set-to-double-the-price-of-house-and--put-cheltenham-on-the-tourist-map-110835278.html#ke0lsG7> [accessed 14/05/14]

34 Banksy confirms artwork is his, gives Bristol boys' club blessing to sell it, CNN, 8 May 2014 <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/08/business/uk-banksy-art-confirmed/> [accessed 14/05/14]

Merrick's hood.

Once again, I think I hear the skateboard, but it turns out to be the staccato of a flight-case along the pavement from some recently returned traveller.

### **Inked Up**

I turn onto Granby Street and am bombarded by sudden shifts of current: traffic, busy shoppers. I carefully cross the road and spot the white plaque of travel pioneer Thomas Cook<sup>35</sup>, who had his first business premises here. From here, the East Midlands connected to the world, and now the world, it seems, has come to Leicester.

I walk down this 'High Street' and reflect my journey. Hardly in the league of Mister Cook, it has taken me half a day (well, several, if you factor in my further speculative peregrinations, and the inky trail I have left in my wake).

Walking back to my bike on Yeoman Street I pass a tattoo parlour. Graffiti is perhaps cousin to this Polynesian art-form, customising buildings in the way ink does skin. Of course, graffiti is less permanent. Even the legal sites have rolling exhibitions. Yet there is something about it which makes it the tattoo art of the urban environment.

Tattoos have become the latest designer accessory, and

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35 Thomas Cook, travel pioneer, 1808-1892  
<http://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council-services/lc/growth-and-history/statuesandsculpture/thomascook/>

with even the likes of David Dimbleby and Cate Blanchette getting 'inked up', perhaps there's a chance that graffiti one day will gain respectability. But when that happens, no doubt the graffitistas will turn to something else that still has the allure of the transgressive in the blue flashing lights of social disapproval.

As I walk along the street words appear in my footprints like Michael Jackson's 'Billy Jean'<sup>36</sup> trainers in negative, my imprints in black, not white. I look back and am mortified to see a trail of words inked into the pavement.

No matter how fast I went, I cannot outrun my inky shadow. Perhaps I don't want to.

Maybe this trail of 'word-prints' is my own form of graffiti. And I thank Elephant Head, looking on no doubt from his 'hood, for that epiphany<sup>37</sup>.

Kevan Manwaring 2014

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Jackson, *Billy Jean*, 1983,  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=see\\_H45a13M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=see_H45a13M)

<sup>37</sup> 'Walking the streets is what links up reading the map with living one's life, the personal micocosm with the public macrocosm; it makes sense of the maze all around.' (Solnit, p176).

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