

A blizzard of ashes

Notes on CANWEYE { }

Ellen Greig

“It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches, and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape. – Whereas I want to say: Here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it.)”¹

*The film pre-empted itself...*²

From a canvas-backed director’s chair bearing his name, a newly-thin man of Italian-American descent, recently recovered from a nervous breakdown brought on by his shoot running way over schedule, an ever-inflating budget, and a script still in development surveys a field of concealed explosive devices.

It is 1977, and the final scenes of the film are being shot on a hot, humid late afternoon in the Philippines. One by one, the constructed sets scattered across the area are being dismantled. Responding to pressures to dispose of a particularly large, central compound, entitled *Camp Kurtz*, home to the film’s main antagonist, Colonel Walter E. Kurtz,³ numerous crewmembers scramble onto the construction, rigging it with more explosives. Under swaying palms, cast against the backdrop of a weathered film set, a crew of cinematographers busy themselves with cameras that circle the site, ready to capture the imminent decimation from numerous vantage points.

Night falls; the cameras roll and the explosives are ignited. What is captured is a dazzling, violent and powerful scene of destruction. Multiple viewpoints of blinding flare – yellow, orange, deep red and bright white haze from several mini mushroom-clouded explosions, stark against the silhouettes of falling palm trees and debris from the crumbling set.

On reviewing the film rushes, the director – now back in the comfort of his Los Angeles editing suite – considers the material’s status: a possible ending, a void, a cinematic extra left for the viewer to construct

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, (1980)

² Frances Scott, script for *CANWEYE* { }, (2016)

³ Colonel Walter E. Kurtz, portrayed by Marlon Brando, is a fictional character in Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Colonel Kurtz is based on the character of a nineteenth-century ivory trader, also called Kurtz, from the novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad.

an alternate ending? He concludes that the very material of film is forever reconstructed, existing on multiple registers, in multiple formats. It is a never-ending loop of possible outcomes.⁴

But this is not our set.

*We orbit that other film, circling the back hole of its existence.*⁵

A woman sits in a community library in North London. She is staring at a pen drawing, encased in a scratched aluminium frame and perched upon an archival display case. The lighting is low so not to damage the delicate image, and in the right hand corner of the drawing there are small, scribbled letters which read: *Plague Street, Loudon*. Until the late 1990s this modest drawing, by a pioneering UK artist,⁶ was available for public loan from the library: along with your fortnightly reading list, you could also take home the artwork, to host in your living room for up to three-months at a time.

Now 2016, this work is no longer available for public loan. Unlike its many previous admirers, the woman studying the drawing understands the work's inherent value. *Plague Street* (1972) is considered to be a rare work that depicts a time in the artist's career when he was developing the physical, material foundation for film's narrative – the set design. In fact, she understands that this particular scene of shaded arches hugging a row of near-identical buildings is a detailed anamorphic study towards a film set, designed by the young artist for Ken Russell's feature film, *The Devils* (1971).⁷

*It catalogued its future before its present could be fully realised.*⁸

Three years later, *The Devils* was shown at the Elgin Cinema in New York City. Sitting in the audience, within a row of velvet-clad seats, the artist re-shoots parts of the film on his hand-held Super 8 camera.

⁴To this day there are many footnotes to this film; one of which is an apocalyptic ending depicting a horrific 'air strike', which fuels the colonial violence outlined in the original source, *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

⁵Frances Scott, script for *CANWEYE* { }, (2016)

⁶Derek Jarman (1942 - 1994) was a pioneering artist and filmmaker.

⁷*The Devils* (1971) was shot on the back-lot of Pinewood studios, London. It was based on Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun* (1952), a work of non-fiction centered around the mass possession and witchcraft in a fortified town, Loudun, in 17th century Northern France. The novel was later adapted for the stage by John Whiting, *The Devils: A Play* (1961).

⁸Frances Scott, script for *CANWEYE* { }, (2016)

Later, he cuts this footage of the film to better suit his original vision for the set design. The film concludes in a dazzling, violent and powerful scene of destruction⁹ as the walls of the provincial city of Loudun – *a set of many dimensions and compositions*¹⁰ – crumble to rubble.

*Sets within sets, designs within designs.*¹¹

From one object, multiple fragments accumulate and expand. The woman continues to sit and look at the drawing. She thinks about how this small sketch represents an important component of the subsequent films that continue their life, elsewhere. The drawing acts here as an indistinguishable code.

*Sorry, I just have to start again. Fully. OK.*¹²

Reflections in water.¹³ A title appears across the cinema screen: CANWEYE { }. A soft, eerily seductive music score – one speculates that it may have been written and composed by Gustav von Aschenbach¹⁴ – introduces a scene of a water locked construction: Canweye, Canefe, KaneweYe, KaneveYe or KoneveYe.¹⁵

*Canweye is a script unto itself, a flat page of landscape that could be read.*¹⁶

This place of many names was once a backdrop to a utopian dreamscape, a blank canvas for a possible set with numerous unfinished acts, and subsequent untold stories. In the early 20th century a well-liked entrepreneurial property developer¹⁷ established an ambitious proposal for a duplicate Venice to be built on Canweye, just off the southern coast of Essex. In his elaborate plans he proposed that the island would construct its own Grand Canal and Essex Rialto Bridge. His intention was to build a modern, cosmopolitan, New World holiday resort along the Thames Estuary.

⁹ Derek Jarman described the ending as “a blizzard of ashes”.

¹⁰ Frances Scott, script for CANWEYE { }, (2016)

¹¹ Frances Scott, script for CANWEYE { }, (2016)

¹² Frances Scott, script for CANWEYE { }, (2016)

¹³ Based on a short story by Daphne Du Maurier, the film *Don't Look Now* (1973), places a moving study of a couple in the throes of grief, against the canals and passageways of Venice. The director, Nicolas Roeg's style makes leaps in chronology – adopting a 'fluid' editorial approach, where the past, present and future exist in the same timeframe. His structure follows a symbolic code, employing numerous recurring motifs, such as reflections in water.

¹⁴ Gustav von Aschenbach is the fictional protagonist of the Italian-French film directed by Luchino Visconti, *Death In Venice* (1971). While the character Aschenbach in the original novella by Thomas Mann, is an author, the profession of Visconti's character in the film is changed from writer to composer. This allows the musical score, in particular the Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony by Gustav Mahler, and sections from Mahler's Third Symphony, to represent Aschenbach's writing.

¹⁵ One of many names previously given to Canvey Island, Essex, UK

¹⁶ Frances Scott, script for CANWEYE { } (2016)

¹⁷ Frederick Hester was born in London in 1853. Commonly known as ‘the father of Canvey Island’ he was an entrepreneur with a finger on the pulse of his time. His dream was to develop Canvey Island into a vibrant holiday resort, however his elaborate plans were halted in 1904 after suffering from severe bankruptcy.

*Construction of the set began, first in the western limits and then stretching out to the east. Eventually, the project completely inhabited Canweye at six miles long and four miles at its greatest width. The four thousand acres of set were entirely encircled by a high sea wall, constructed especially for the film. Apart from some natural undulations, this was the only fabrication above sea level and prevented the scenery from being flooded every springtide.*¹⁸

¹⁸Frances Scott, script for *CANWEYE* { }, (2016)

She is surrounded by water. Her film camera traces the boats as they slowly move in and out of frame. She looks down at her abstracted reflection in the murky, weed-heavy waters. The air is thick with the haze of early summer sun melting into the polluted atmosphere. As she gasps for more air she is reminded that she is below sea level. Venice dissolves into the sinking marshlands of Essex.

*The set was finally returned to a set of no dimensions, so that only the thinness of its incomplete image was left.*¹⁹

¹⁹Frances Scott, script for *CANWEYE* { }, (2016)

She remembers reading somewhere that the experience of film was once localised in time and space, in the infinite unreeling of a narrative, in a particular theatre on a particular day.²⁰ She thinks back to her own images, her reels of 16mm film – and the process of digital transfer – the imagined, expanding phantasmagorias conjured via metonymic²¹ fragments and their physical ruins. Through her own approach to filmmaking, she unravels the experience of a single space, using the very traditional mechanisms by which these localised ways of seeing were once measured.

²⁰Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film*, (2004)

²¹Metonymy is a figure of speech in which a thing or concept is called not by its own name, but rather by the name of something associated in meaning with that thing or concept.

Experienced through multiple registers and through multiple lenses, the work moves from the trailer to the film that was previously developed – yet not seen – to a poster advertising its release to the masses, though only ever witnessed in real life in the town centre of

Southend-on-Sea – as evidenced by a single photograph – to a reference drawing encased in a scratched aluminium frame. She wonders if images can become as trustworthy as realistic witness?

*Props became artefacts.*²²

We leave the set to walk into the next, where we find ourselves surrounded by a near-identical atmosphere embellished with a few variations from the last. From our perspective, right at the top of the central construction, we can envisage how she chose these wide shots, aerial views and consequent edits and, most importantly, how the now prominent void made its way so elegantly into the affective and immersive.

Observing the image within the image – falling into an infinite cyclical arrangement – the dissolution between truth-value and essential doubt becomes apparent. Here, on the apex of the fabricated construction we can see how she challenges the relation between representation and the represented, and in doing so abstracts a distinction between fact and fiction, undermining the paradigmatic claim for objectiveness and authenticity in the mechanical arts – perspective, photography or film.²³ Like her,²⁴ we cannot tell the difference between the real thing and the “real thing”. We are caught in a *mise-en-abîme*.²⁵

*The symbol encircles the film that is missing.*²⁶

Night falls; the cameras roll and the explosives are ignited. What is captured is a dazzling, violent and powerful scene of destruction. Canweye is reduced to a blizzard of ashes.²⁷

²² Frances Scott, script for *CANWEYE { }*, (2016)

²³ As Andre Bazin points out in his commentary on Italian Neorealist cinema: ‘One must beware of contrasting aesthetic refinement and certain crudeness, a certain instant effectiveness of realism which is satisfied just to present reality. In my view, one merit of the Italian film will be that it has demonstrated that every realism in art was first profoundly aesthetic. One always felt it was so, but in the reverberations of the accusations of witchcraft that some people today are making against actors suspected of a pact with the demon of art for art’s sake, one has tended to forget it. [...] The flesh and blood of reality are no easier to capture in the net of literature and cinema that are gracious flights of imagination’. Andre Bazin, *What is cinema?*, vol. 2, (1971)

²⁴ Laura is the main female protagonist, played by Julie Christie, in the independent British-Italian film directed by Nicolas Roeg, *Don’t Look Now* (1973)

²⁵ *Mise-en-abîme* is a French term derived from heraldry and means: “placed into the abyss”.

²⁶ Frances Scott, script for *CANWEYE { }*, (2016)

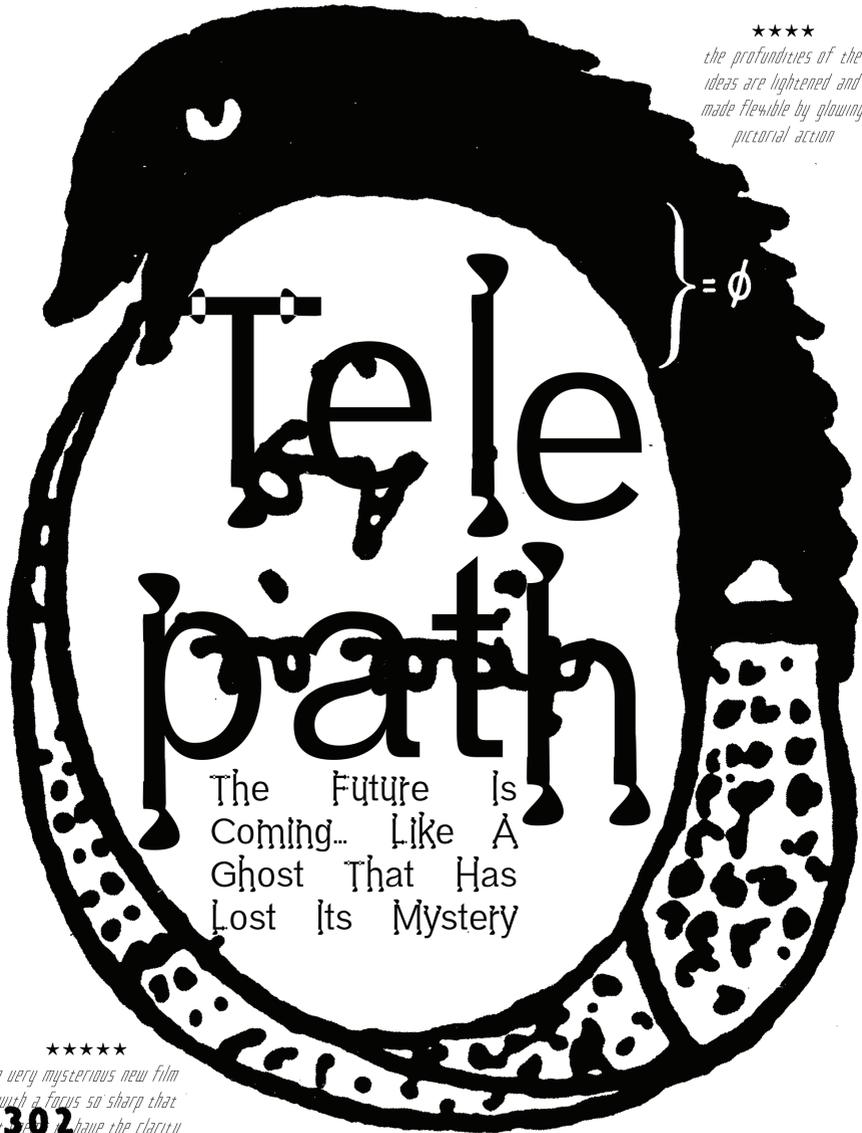
²⁷ *A blizzard of ashes* is written by Ellen Grieg. She is a curator living in London where she is Exhibitions and Events, Curator at Chisenhale Gallery.

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★★★★

*the profundities of the
ideas are lightened and
made flexible by glowing
pictorial action*



★★★★★

*a very mysterious new film
with a focus so sharp that
it has the clarity
of something seen through
the medium of fever*

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