

Beauty: A Logistical Imaginary (1)

The theme of this year's Liverpool Biennial – 'Beautiful world, where are you?' – suggests that questions of beauty are questions of location: where does one find beauty, what is the logistical infrastructure for beauty as location? If one were to ask Google, the answer would be easy: beauty is locatable at the addresses providing services for the maintenance of beauty, from skin care to nails. It's amusing to a freelancing philosopher of aesthetics to find a parallel history of philosophy on the web pages that a search for 'beauty', 'aesthetics', or 'truth' produces, but questions of beauty are not entirely resolvable through the corporate data services of search.

Schiller's poem, and the line 'Beautiful world, where are you?' that gave the focus for the Liverpool Biennial 2018, begs the question as to what sort of framework or philosophy can provide the necessary breadth to respond to our concerns regarding the location of aesthetics. Here, we can move from Romantic poetry to the less romantic field of political economy and nod to the usefulness of Marx's work as the scaffolding for a longer-term political question that starts to refashion the question. As Jonathan Crary has pointed out,[2] by the latter half of the nineteenth century, classical theories of apperception, sensation and aesthetics were gradually turning into the mediated forms of packaging these phenomena that became discreet units of production and consumption and would later be called the 'culture industry'. Aesthetics then turned into a media industry by way not only of classical and early modern theories of beauty, but also the technical work of pioneers such as Thomas Alva Edison.



Unknown Fields, *Unravelled* (film still), 2017

This line of thought also leads to the prescient answers found in Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's theses on the culture industry.[3] Fredric Jameson develops these ideas in relation to what he coined the 'postmodern' sphere of commodities, or: 'what Benjamin still called the "aestheticization" of reality (he thought it meant fascism, but we know it's only fun: a prodigious exhilaration with the new order of things, a commodity rush, our "representations" of things tending to arouse an enthusiasm and a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves)'. [4] Jameson specifies, however, that the postmodern is not merely a replication of the notion of the culture industry: 'any sophisticated theory of the postmodern ought to bear something of the same relationship to Horkheimer and Adorno's old "Culture Industry" concept as MTV or fractal ads bear to fifties television series.' [5] In the context of

contemporary global industries of media and aesthetics, we can raise the stakes of this parallel: contemporary forms of theorisation of aesthetics and beauty should bear the same relationship to Jameson's ideas as advanced planetary systems of data extraction and delivery (Google, Facebook, Amazon) bear to 1980s science-fiction cyberpunk.

Questions of location persist as a central dilemma of theory and politics throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and cultural geographers have been at the forefront of critical voices articulating the link between capital and location (or, well, space). In David Harvey's words: 'Capital strives to produce a geographical landscape favourable to its own reproduction and subsequent evolution.' [6] As Harvey narrates, and as history of science and technology backs up, this has meant 'innovations in transport and communications technologies' and the subsequent 'profit opportunities' that can be distributed across the planetary space. Or in other words, it has meant relocations – relocations according to the availability of raw materials or cheap labour, the sort of intensive search that capital performs as part of its primary dynamic – something that over the past years has been discussed in multiple ways in theory, including using terms such as 'capitalocene'.



Unknown Fields, *Unravelled* (film still), 2017

Art and design projects have played their own part in this theorisation and visualisation. The speculative design studio Unknown Fields Division's project *Unravelled* (2017) is an expression of the location, relocation and movement of contemporary goods of beauty. *Unravelled*'s focus on the trade of textiles, garments and fashion resonates with some other recent audiovisual work including documentaries such as Rahul Jain's *Machines* (2016), which also addresses an Indian textile factory. *Unravelled*, however, produces its own audiovisual version of the 'planetary conveyor belt' (to use Unknown Fields Division's Liam Young's words). [7]

The project began with a 2017 expedition led by Young and Kate Davies:

For our 2017 Expedition we pick at a loose thread on the garment we are wearing and unravel it across continents from wardrobe to warehouse, from factory to field, in search of the landscapes behind the runway dreams and street blue jeans. Before we wear them, our clothes make journeys of tens of thousands of miles in their process of production, making textiles the most globalized industry on the planet. The garment trade has for a long time played a critical role in the evolution of developing nations. As labour costs rise in China we follow the threads and travel through the factory floors and fabric mills now manufacturing in India and Bangladesh. Here iconic rivers run with the colours of the season as chemicals used in the dye process are dumped untreated to poison the land along the rainbow banks that will mark our trail from mountains to the sea, as we embark on a waterborne journey down river from India

to the Ganges Delta in Bangladesh. We will visit the 'T-shirt cities' and 'textile valleys' that span from field to factory and will pick from vast cotton crops and silk-worm cocoons and draw yarns across deafening shuttles as rows and rows of automated looms weave the fashion fads of a distant world. Plain t-shirts, haute couture and throwaway high street chic all begin their lives in these landscapes.[8]



Unknown Fields, *Unravelled* (film still), 2017

The resulting four-screen video installation, *Unravelled*, was exhibited in the early half of 2018 in *After the End of the World* at the CCCB in Barcelona.[9] This group exhibition was thematically focused on the Anthropocene in theoretical and artistic contexts. It continued the studio's earlier work on planetary scales of design culture, this time honing in on fashion, especially in its extended sense. Beauty becomes understood as an administrative operation of logistics: labour, production, packaging, transport, marketing, sales, from the factory to the high street. *Unravelled* uses garments to approach planetary logistics and the postcolonial or neocolonial contexts of their production. The images speak of fabrics but also of the logistical imaginary,[10] including that of location – where, where to, where from.



Unknown Fields, *Unravelled* (film still), 2017

This focus on infrastructure, technological culture, and planetary production establishes the investigation of movement across borders while at the same time relying on specific locations and labouring bodies of colour. The video installation and its images raise the question: what sort of movement is this? The movement of the fabric as garment, the movement of bodies, movement of images and the movement of beauty as products across the geographical locations of the planet.

One can relate *Unravelled* to the broader infrastructural turn in critical design and media and film studies, which is relevant for our wider theme of location and relocation, and technologies that define such locations.[11] Unknown Fields Division's speculative architectural angle addresses non-urban infrastructures – the 'dislocated city' – including data-intensive ways of understanding planetary movement of goods and information, the governing role of logistics and the conditions of existence of technological culture. One can therefore locate these moving images amongst a bundle of works in recent art and design that aim to articulate the logistical imaginaries of industries of art, beauty, creativity – the relocated sites of labour that respond to the question, where is beauty made?

[1] Excerpt from the talk, *The Fabric of the Planetary Surface*, presented by Jussi Parikka as part of The Serving Library's programme during the Liverpool Biennial, September 2018. The research was supported by the AHRC funded project *Archaeology of Fashion Film* (AH/P004598/1).

[2] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception. Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).

[3] See: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944.

[4] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[5] Ibid.

[6] David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 146.

[7] *Unravelled* was made in collaboration with the Architectural Association. Textile designed by Unknown Fields and produced in collaboration with Shashi Kant/Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society. Film directed by Unknown Fields and Tushar Prakash, director of photography Ravi Kiran Ayyagari, starring Monica Jha.

[8] See: <http://www.unknownfieldsdivision.com/winter2017india+bangladesh-unravelled.html> (accessed November 2018).

[9] See: <http://www.cccb.org/en/exhibitions/file/after-the-end-of-the-world/224747> (accessed April 2018).

[10] See also Ned Rossiter, *Software, Logistics, Labor: A Media Theory of Logistical Nightmares* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

[11] See, for example, Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, eds., *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015). John Durham Peters defines infrastructuralism as follows: 'Its fascination is for the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes. It is a doctrine of environments and small differences, of strait gates and the needle's eye, of things not understood that stand under our worlds.' *Peters, Marvelous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 33.

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