

Ben Sadler

Ben Sadler presents two new narrative video works as part of 'Pleasure Gardens'. 'The Palace' and 'The Museum' are part of an as-yet incomplete trilogy, to also include 'The Library'. The motifs of the titles are starting points for re-imagining the ways in which knowledge and memory are organised. He relates each institution to the idea of 'memory theatres' developed by the Renaissance scholar Giulio Camillo. In the early 16th century, Camillo developed the idea that memory could be conceived of as a physical space. For Camillo, the imaginative process of recollection could be secured through a spatial mnemonic system: a set of prompts which plays upon our predisposition to remember things through the context of place. However, Camillo also intended to build real structures in which 'memory' could be housed: he created the image of knowledge as a majestic building full of allegorical sculptures and paintings which would encapsulate the sum totality of known thought, and which would be accessed simply by visiting it. Such a place is half-way between a universal museum and a physical manifestation of a 'total encyclopaedia'.

In both 'The Palace' and 'The Museum' Sadler adapts the cinematic form of the 'photo-roman' – the filmic essay – to original ends. This form, pioneered by Chris Marker and others in the post-war period, sequences still images against a narrative voiceover. Sadler's development of this mode of address in 'The Palace' and 'The Museum', however, sees the narrative freight driven forward through a tension between word and image. Each still, in its ambiguity, counterpoints and complicates, as much as complements the narrator's words. Rather than being presented with dramatic monochrome portraits as in Marker's 'La Jetée' or ethnographic studies as in his 'Sans Soleil', Sadler loops intentionally blurred, dreamily abstract, colour-saturated landscape images. In 'The Palace', their cumulative effect over the work's half-hour duration is to immerse the viewer slowly into a hypnotic state. In the museum, the constant rotation of images establishes a gentle yet insistent rhythm which the artist describes as "equivalent to that of an average human heartbeat". The narrators' intimate conversational / confessional tone makes it feel like the voice is like an internal monologue of our own more than that we are being addressed from an illusionary space behind the picture plane.

Sadler's unseen, unnamed but apparently omniscient narrator confronts us with a raft of inconsistencies, contradictions and lacunae, which forestall any easy interpretation: he appears exorbitantly unreliable. For one thing, the chronology of his account appears to map out the entire history of humanity from the origin of the species onwards. His early life is experienced prior to language, for example: "I did not know the words for such things". We suspect him to have changed from quadruped to biped: "my fur grew thinner and my body longer. I learned more fully the use of my fingers, which once seemed so inferior to claws... I decided to leave the branches." The narrator is cast as a god-like figure, or a phantom stalking the landscape, or an unknown creature with powers of immortality or reincarnation. The mystery of his identity drives the narrative forward, and only at the climax of the work are we able to fully appreciate the nature of the palace. The cosmological scope of the tale recalls Stanley Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey'; both stories seem to map the progress of the species from primates to technological mastery over the universe. (The infinite dimensions of the palace suggest that it is either set deep in the future or wholly imaginary, or that the narrator has descended into fantasy or madness, like HAL from '2001'). The artist's imaginary spaces might also recall another literary / sci-fi image. In JG Ballard 'Report on an Unidentified Space Station' of 1982, where astronauts discover a futuristic structure initially estimated to be 500 metres in length, but which upon exploration is "an estimated diameter [of] 15 million light years". In response to being explored the 'station' expands exponentially: like memory, it is infinitely elastic.

All three parts of Sadler's trilogy are in effect fables; they recall the more fabulous images of modern literature. Expanding upon Camillo's work, Jorge Luis Borges' 1941 story 'The Library of Babel' outlines an imaginary, infinite library containing every publication ever written or to be written. With regards to genre, Sadler's stories are in essence fables like Borges's. His narrative mode is, like Borges's, one of 'radical mistrust'. And their aims are equally to create what might be described as a 'cognitive sublime'. Like the author, Sadler gives a visual form to the idea of 'knowledge', even whilst it remains immeasurable. The narrator's descriptions of the boundless dimensions of the palace and the museum strongly recall Kant's formulation that "the sublime is to be found in a formless object, in so far as boundlessness is represented, and yet the object's totality is also present to thought." (The museum's entrance, for example is an "indiscernible size").

Sadler's abstracted visuals also offer indeterminate forms, suggesting that we are like infants whose eyes are beginning to focus and recognise the enormity of the world. Memory, in its very nature, is potentially infinite, immaterial and inaccessible to the senses, and unique to each individual. As such it might be described as unrepresentable. Camillo's project might be taken as an example of modernist aesthetics as defined by Jean-Francois Lyotard in 'The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge'. For Lyotard, artistic modernism lies in "representing the unrepresentable" – in a Kantian idea of rendering the invisible visible. In transforming the idea of a 'memory theatre' into literary-visual fiction, Sadler looks back at the history of attempts to map and measure every aspect of the world, with comedy, pathos and

empathy. At the very point in history where 'grand narratives' or 'grand unified theories' of existence seem risible Sadler re-examines the heroism and absurdity of our impulses to obtain universal knowledge, to overcome subjectivity, and to create a worldview of total mastery. Together, his trilogy might be described as constituting an elliptical 'report on knowledge'.

Supported by Arts Council England: West Midlands