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Nathaniel Mellors: Exile from E-Den

Let's begin with the slippery site of *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview* (also known as *TSNI*), the 'exterior of a large cave'¹. It provides the setting for an encounter between earnest amateur anthropologist Truson, a recurring character in Nathaniel Mellors' ongoing series *Ourhouse* (2010), and a grumpy Neanderthal who introduces himself as Voggen Heidelberg of the North, before remembering that he is in fact Voggen Williams, a southerner. As a genuine living Neanderthal, Voggen's age and origins are in flux, subject to scientific research and speculation. Truson, wielding a camera and measuring device, diligently attempts to gather information on Neanderthal biology, culture and art. But Voggen quickly gains the upper hand both physically and linguistically, dismissing Truson's theories of Neanderthal society with the revelation that cave art is controlled by a mysterious entity called Sporgo.

This interaction occurs in a treeless place bearing the name 'E-Den', hand-painted onto a rock, glimpsed in passing as Truson descends to the valley floor. Although we never see his vessel, Truson wears a costume associated with space-travel, a romper-like knitted suit apparently modelled after those worn by Soviet-era cosmonauts. As a time-traveller moving through a barren landscape, Truson's journey perhaps recalls that of Charlton Heston's character Taylor in the original version of *The Planet of the Apes* (1968). Although initially dressed in a bright white uniform, bearing the stars and stripes, Taylor is rapidly reduced to the rags that befit his membership of an enslaved human race. Truson, however, is not lost in time or space and instead he is literally following the signs to E-Den, hoping for an encounter with an authentic Neanderthal.

E-Den is also identified, in the exhibition press release, as the 'location of the original 1960s Batcave in Griffiths Park, Los Angeles'. Such a deliberate conjunction of TV interior and LA park exterior is, I think, integral to E-Den's operation as a 'metaphorical place, meant to represent the shift from the hunter-gatherer mode of human existence to the more knowledge-based Neolithic way of life, in which people began to rely on farming and ownership of land'. Far from signifying progress; this shift in existence is very explicitly presented as the starting point of a downward journey, described as a 'slide into ecological unsustainability'. Clearly, Mellors is exploring complex and expansive territory at the intersection of art, philosophy and science.² But how exactly does the site of *TSNI* function as a metaphorical place?

¹ Press release, *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview: Nathaniel Mellors*, Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, September 5-November 1, 2014.

² This territory is also explored, albeit from a different perspective in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's *dOCUMENTA (13)*, discussed in Maeve Connolly, 'Moss Piglets, Meteorites and Mind-Games', *Fugitive Papers* 3, Autumn 2012: 16-19.

It's useful perhaps to recall an earlier work, also exhibited at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, which explores the meaning of metaphor. McMahon's *Root* invokes the Greek etymology of this word and separates out its constituent components, *meta* (over, across) and *pherein* (to carry, bear), through the choreography of onscreen actions and the display of related kinetic sculptural objects in the gallery.³ Mellors' exhibitions similarly involve a kind of extension from screen into gallery, which I have described elsewhere as 'prosthetic'⁴ and he too is clearly interested in the properties of language.⁵ But, in place of etymology, Mellors tends to focus on the physical and symbolic properties of language, articulated in verbal and written word-play and through acts of ingestion and excretion. Mellors' *Ourhouse*, for example, derives its central drama from the transgression of boundaries between word, image and thing. *Episode 1: Games* (2010) features a strangely sexualised spelling lesson, in which 'Babydoll' (the glamorous wife or girlfriend of Truson's father) torments her Irish gardener Bobby, pushing her finger into his mouth while forcing him to pronounce the word 'mouth'. These dynamics are further complicated with the arrival of mysterious stranger, dressed in casual sportswear and played by the artist Brian Catling. Labelled by the family as 'The Object' or 'Thingy', the stranger's presence precipitates a breakdown in language. He is seen in *Ourhouse Episode 2: Class* (2010–11) surrounded by books, literally ingesting texts such as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and from this point on, the texts and images that he consumes dictate the course of the narrative.

Although not specifically concerned with Neanderthal-human interactions, *Ourhouse* incorporates several references to anthropology and prehistoric art, most obviously in the form of the 'Venus' object sourced by Truson on screen, and reconfigured as a sculptural installation within the gallery.⁶ Mellors' interest in language may also help to explain his fascination with the film *Quest for Fire* (1981), an important reference in the development of *TSNI*.⁷ Adapted from a novel published in 1911, it charts the journey of three Neanderthal men seeking to rekindle a fire extinguished in an attack on their cave-dwelling community. They eventually secure the help of humans, who dwell in hide-covered structures rather than caves, and demonstrate their superiority – or sophistication – through displays of humour and craft skill. Significantly, however, the human tribespeople speak an inaccurately adapted version of an existing Inuit language, while the Neanderthal community speak an entirely 'made' language, created for the film by the writer Anthony Burgess.⁸

In *TSNI*, Mellors appears to invert several aspects of the hierarchy established in *Quest for Fire*, most obviously by casting Truson as the straight man in Voggen's slightly malicious comedy, but also by exploring the physical and conceptual boundaries of the 'cave', which figures both as a found and made entity. *Quest for Fire*, for example, incorporates a pivotal scene (set in a cave) in which the humans teach the Neanderthal leader how to *make* fire. This scene is referenced in *TSNI*, when Truson shows Voggen how to burn a piece of kindling (made from extra-long matches glued together to resemble an old TV aerial) with a cigarette lighter in the shape of a tiny electric guitar. Yet by this point in the narrative Voggen has already demonstrated his ability to build a fire, primarily so that he can cook Truson's face.

The status of the cave as a found, rather than made, structure is also called into question in *TSNI*. As already noted, the location of E-Den conjoins a fictional TV cave interior with the actual cave exterior in Griffiths Park. Just like the fictional inhabitants of the TV Batcave, Voggen and Truson never actually cross the threshold between the 'real' (or found) exterior and the human-made interior; instead they are transported through editing. The TV Batcave, it is worth remembering, is itself an odd conjunction of the found and made, just as its superhero occupants derive their powers mainly from technical gadgetry (designed to be replicated and consumed in merchandising). As a space used for the storage, manipulation and display of gadgetry the late 1960s Batcave is a comedic counterpart to the everyday 'masculine' domestic leisure spaces (dens, sheds, studies) imaged in magazines and TV shows.⁹

3 Maeve Connolly, 'To Unfold Indefinitely', *Bea McMahon: Jesus and Chlorophyll*, Dublin: Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, 2012. http://www.templebargallery.com/content/files/MaeveConnolly_ToUnfoldIndefinitely_with_images_MC.pdf

4 Connolly, 'Televisual Objects: Props, Relics and Prosthetics', *Afterall* 33, summer 2013: 66-77.

5 See Mellors' *Book A/MEGACOLON/For and Against Language*, edited by Xander Karskens, with texts by Mellors, John C. Welchman and Mick Peters, Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2010.

6 Exhibited at Matt's Gallery, the title of the sculptural work is *Truson's Venus: Venus of Truson (prehistoric, photogrammic original)*, 2012.

7 A 70mm screening of this film was introduced by Mellors at the Irish Film Institute on September 3, 2014.

8 A linguist and translator as well as a writer, Burgess' best known work is *A Clockwork Orange*, 1962.

9 In this sense, the Batcave perhaps invites comparison with the less obviously gendered leisure environments that inform

Truson, *TSNI*'s intrepid explorer, is drawn toward the cave of the Sporgo and the Neanderthal 'arts' inside but Voggen instead suggests that he try to 'open the cave'¹⁰ in his own mind. He invites Truson to participate in his own artwork, titled 'Colours and Fat', which begins with the ingestion of a mind-altering substance. Distracted by visions of abstract shapes ('spirals! zigzags!') Truson is almost persuaded to roast his own fat-smearing face in the fire. At the last minute, however, he resists and heads toward the entrance of the cave, as Voggen warns: 'Don't go inside, you'll get Sporgo-ed!'. Suddenly, Voggen (holding a rock) has a moment of inspiration, proclaiming; 'I'll use these cavelike materials to build my own cave. I'll build it over ground. Let there be house!'

In the next shot, Truson and Voggen are both inside a cavelike space. This might be the famed cave of the Sporgo, which both seek to enter, albeit for different reasons. Equally, however, it might be the cave inside Truson's altered mind or the interior of the 'house' that Voggen wants to build. This indeterminacy is heightened by a grid-like projection that is particularly visible on Truson's blue onesie, recalling the Holodeck, a virtual leisure and learning environment deployed to dramatic and comedic effect in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The concept of 'generation' also seems useful in understanding the dialogue between Voggen and Truson, revolving around the confusion of biology and technology. As his human counterpart dances to inaudible music, the Neanderthal points to his own 'big head', explaining that it is 'high resolution'. Voggen also wields a weapon-like object that seems to incorporate a broken laser disk, evoking an earlier moment in an ongoing cycle of technological obsolescence.

Echoing aspects of Mellors' earlier work, the interactions between Truson and Voggen derives its logic from processes of ingestion and naming. Just as the Neanderthal seeks to eat his human visitor's face, possibly intending to draw power from this ritual act, Truson wants to consume the cave 'arts' and integrate them into his own knowledge and belief system. He seeks to understand the world from the vantage point of a Neanderthal, perhaps valuing it as an (Edenic) alternative to the Neolithic model of human existence critiqued by Mellors. Yet even though Truson seeks to fix Voggen in time and space, he can never fully enter into the prehistoric world. Consequently, E-Den is the name given to a place that is both metaphorical and paradoxical. Its naming articulates the desire for a way of being that is very clearly an object of knowledge, and yet is valued precisely because it is imagined to exist outside the conventionally (human) knowable world.



Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's 'Unique Sculptural Theaters', discussed in Connolly, 'Televisual Objects'. Interestingly, the 1960s also saw the proliferation of manmade yet cavelike structures serving as the headquarters of Sporgo-ish entities in spy thrillers and their spoofs, such as *Dr. No* (1962) and *Our Man Flint* (1966).

¹⁰ Mellors' cave also calls to mind the location of Plato's allegory (in *The Republic*) which describes how prisoners, who have spent their lives chained to a wall, mistake the shadows flickering upon it for reality.