

Fowler, Martin ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0128-4231> and McCall, Billy (2024) In The Dark Times. [Show/Exhibition] In: In The Dark Times, 18 October - 1 November 2024, Vallum Gallery, University of Cumbria, Carlisle, UK.

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IN THE DARK TIMES

Exhibition 21.10 - 1.11.24

Martin Fowler
Billy McCall

Fun & Games: 'Seascapes' of modern Britain

'Alas, we who wanted kindness, could not be kind ourselves'
(Brecht)

Comprising images of a contemporary St. Andrew, his identity concealed behind a welding-mask, crucified on an x-shaped cross; a lone palm tree; rising sea-levels; the conning towers of nuclear subs - replete with engorged phalluses (a reference to both the experience of women serving in the British Navy's submarine service and Ukania as willing dupe to American hegemony); and the façade of an (un)welcoming citadel (in reality the façade of the Tower Amusements in Portobello, Edinburgh) - *Fun & Games* offers an anti-illusionistic counter to a morally corrupt governmental aristocracy and an intellectually debased avant-garde in service to bourgeois ideas and interests.

With Ensor's scathing critiques of the Belgian Establishment circa 1890, Beckmann's *Bird Hell*, Nolan's *Ned Kelly*, and the small paintings of late-career Guston in its backlight, *Fun & Games* offers a painful vision of a so-called modern Britain defined, in reality, by vandalism, sadism and violence. Taking aim at the petro-chemical industry, the military-industrial complex, the British 'deep-state' and the possessive-individualism of the professional managerial class (PMC), these critical realist images seek to counter bourgeois ways of seeing, knowing and telling.

So defined, these political modernist paintings, challenge liberal humanism's potentially catastrophic belief in the pernicious myth of progress, whilst attacking the formalism of a 'new Right' in thrall to the residual traces of Thatcherism's vulgar philistinism.



Sheep-Walk: Dissident Montages Against The Capitalist Common Sense

'Those who don't know the truth are dummies, but those who know the truth, and call it a lie are criminals'
(Brecht)

Taking its title from Karl Marx's description of the large-scale industrial farming which resulted in the forced clearance of thousands of Highland Scots from their ancestral lands circa 1820, these stop motion animations challenge, amongst other things, emergent ethno-nationalism, the reductive binarism of the nationalist-unionist / unionist-nationalist discourse (memora-

bly described during the 2014 Independence Referendum by George Galloway as 'Two cheeks of the same arse') and the 'narrowness', 'subjective illusion' and 'romantic nonsense' of so-called modern Scotia.

Grounded in the estrangement techniques of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, Esther Leslie's *Hollywood Flatlands* and the nihilistic performances of Paul McCarthy, *Sheep-Walk* offers a dissident counter to the invented traditions which underpin prevailing notions of Scottishness. Epitomised by the supposedly eternal symbols of 'ben and glen' such as the sporran (invented by Tory Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger for his Highland battalions aka the 'shock-troops of Empire'), the kilt (invented by Lancastrian businessman Thomas Rawlinson for his Scottish mill-workers), and tartan (the made-up textile designs of the Anglo-Welsh Allan brothers *Vestiarium Scoticum* of 1842) - these crudely made truth-to-materials montages challenge the self-delusions of a Scotland, or North Britain, defined by its continuing fealty to militarism, monetarism and monarchism.

Martin Fowler
October 2024

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Billy McCall's work is a visual essay which rewards careful reading. His is an art of appropriation. Taking photos of classic animation cels from auction websites that sell the drawings to collectors, McCall re-animates these dead cels so that they can tell new stories. Themes of trauma, environmental catastrophe and class politics are woven together in a way which appears oblique but on examination is always precisely researched and carefully focussed.

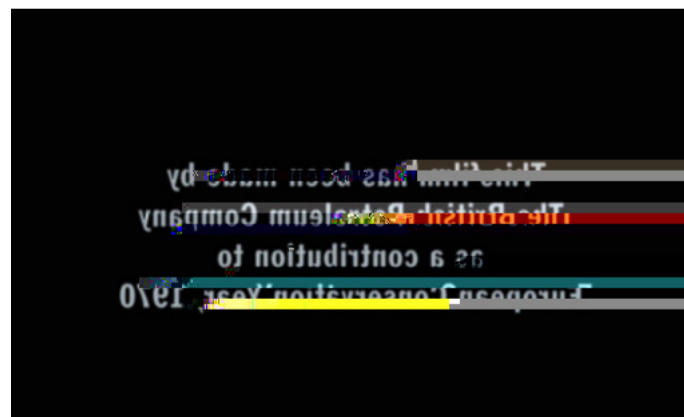
A framed drawing of Mickey Mouse, taken from from the adjacent video, is half-caked in salt. In 'The Zombie Managerialist Revolution.gif' the video is a hand-made copy of a Disney pencil-test originally made as a study for The Sorcerer's Apprentice.

Having ordered the brooms to fetch water, Mickey finds himself powerless to stop them. Inundated and desperate he attacks the blindly obedient brooms but while he eventually manages to halt the activity of these automatons, it is too late - the room is flooded and Mickey is unable to reverse the spell.

A large-scale photograph of the grounds around Achnacarry Castle displays further evidence of water damage. In 1928 three oil barons met at the castle in the Scottish Highlands to create a secret price-fixing agreement which would secure their profits for years to come. On the reverse side of the wall their water damaged portraits hang below the waterline.

In 'Floreat Etona' an animation cel of Captain Hook and the Croc is copied from the original. McCall displays the image reversed so we see it from the back, its ill-defined and lumpy backside revealed. The mirror allows us to glimpse the front but we are mostly thwarted from seeing Hook in his last moments. In J.M. Barrie's play Hook's last words are Floreat Etona - Let Eton flourish. Nostalgic for an imperial past, James Goldsmith, 'entrepreneur' and alumni of Eton often spoke of British business in piratical terms, referring to it as 'buccaneering' and 'swashbuckling'.

For the European Year of Conservation in 1970 BP commissioned a film is about environmental damage caused by the misuse of the planets resources.

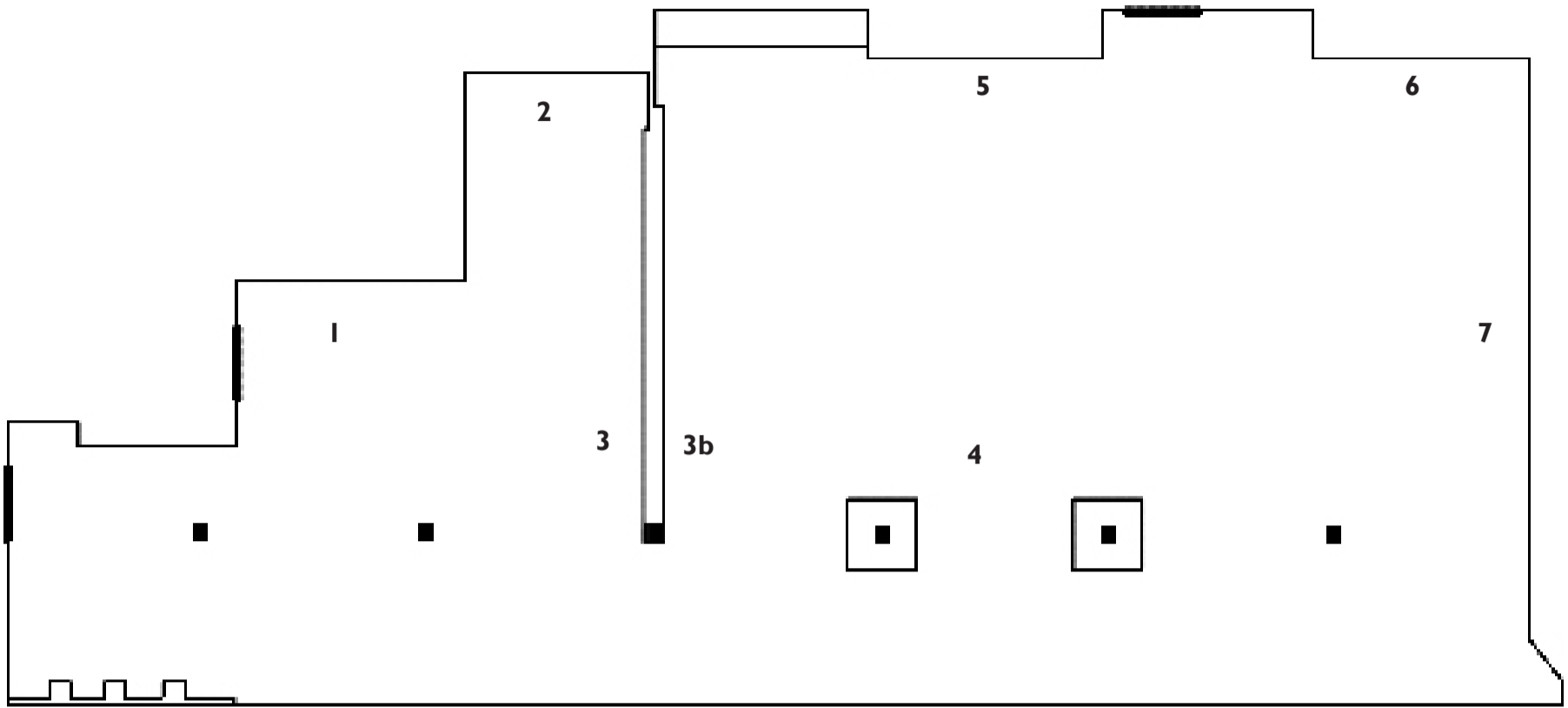


The film suggests that the pursuit of technological progress and it's costs is a responsibility we all share. That some bear more responsibility than others is not something the film addresses.

In 'Valley of the Kings' McCall makes use of this documentary. When a showing of the film on network TV was listed in the Radio Times, McCall discovered that an episode of the cartoon Scooby Doo was listed on the reverse side of the page in the same location so that the Scooby Doo episode literally became the flipside of the BP film. In an ominous coincidence that particular Scooby Doo episode involved an environmental disaster.

Chad McCail
October 2024

IN THE DARK TIMES



1. Fun & Games. MF
2. The Zombie Managerialist Revolution.gf. BM
3. Achnacarry Agreement. (Achnacarry Castle) BM
- 3b. Achnacarry Agreement (Walter C. Teagle of Standard Oil, John Cadman of Anglo-Persia Oil Company and Sir Henri Deterding of Royal Dutch Shell.)
4. Valley of the Kings. (featuring John Beagles) BM
5. Sheep-Walk: Dissident Montages Against The Capitalist Common Sense. MF
6. Floreat Etona. BM
7. Fun & Games. MF

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