

✠ In GOD¹ We Trust the importance of the medical arts in paradise lost

“...beware the flag suckers. They will run you down and eat your flesh but not your heart or your brain, for they are unclean...”²

Prologue

When the angels crossed the desert they fell to earth with burnt wings.

They never rose up again because they believed their fall to be an emblematic defeat. Their flesh withered and they eventually slipped beneath the sand, only to return at night as dispossessed spirits drifting in the night.

Haunted by defeat, their shame poisoned the air wherever they passed. They sang songs of despair, lamenting the insoluble paradox of loss and redemption... “for ‘tis only in the caustic flame / the dead may learn to live again...”



Le soleil au zénith
Me surexcitent
Tes p'tits seins de la bakélite
Qui s'agitent
Sea, sex and sun
Toi petite
C'est sûr tu es un hit.³

When I arrived in LA, the heat hit me first, the oppressive flatness hit me second and the social theatricality hit me last. This place is a desert. The air is poison and normal living requires huge amounts of external stimulation and the unquestionable faith that true happiness may be purchased. We all know this and many of us have read Baudrillard, so what's the big deal? I am strong and I am intelligent. I can easily make the adjustment moving from small cold Wellington to big hot Los Angeles. I am doing really well. I am meeting lots of people who show genuine interest in my work. The winter rains have gone. The summer is coming on and I like the beach.

Then it started to happen. I slowly began to fall apart. It appeared as an unexplainable sense of disquiet, which I couldn't identify at first. It started down at Hermosa Beach. I didn't feel it at Venice Beach because there are too many homeless, too many crack dealers and too much going on; your senses get numbed there. But at Hermosa there is an exaggerated beach culture with a lot to take in. There are lots of cute women skating in bikinis and an aggressive beach volleyball culture. Cute mums in bikinis skate behind their strollers. They wear Oliver Peoples sunglasses. Hermosa is white, middle-class, youthful and energetic. There is almost no body fat to be seen. There are many slim, ample-bosomed women and well-built young men. But I became increasingly unsettled at Hermosa. I didn't want to go out. At home I became depressed and I stopped working. I didn't know what the problem was; that is, until I went to the dentist.

My health insurance covers all prophylactic dental care and hygiene. I had my teeth scraped and a deep enamel fluoride treatment – a straightforward procedure. I felt relaxed because my teeth were getting cleaned and polished and the hygienist was getting in where the brush will not go. Moreover, I would have no bill to walk out with and this made me feel particularly peaceful. When the hygienist had finished the dentist came in. He could find no visible evidence of caries and my gums were nice and healthy – but there was another issue. As a child I had suffered from the brutal Antipodean orthodontic practices of the sixties. As a result, according to my new dentist, my specular dental *presence* was poorly adjusted. My teeth were not perfect.

The dentist was adamant that, in America, you could buy what ever you need to be perfect and I was defiantly unwilling to accept that. I was preventing myself from feeling deep contentment of the inner me by ignoring the appearance of my outer self. My third-world NZ Anglican-Irish-Catholic-Calvinist attitude towards money and my place in the world was to fault. As a new California resident I would need to learn fiscal responsibility with respect to the appearance of my *own* body. Furthermore, I was not accepting the tacit American principle of debt before dishonour. My health insurance plan was pitifully modest, because it only covered dental hygiene. He outlined a treatment to get my teeth cosmetically corrected. It would only cost me about US\$5000 for an entry-level dental arts makeover. He also offered me the option of time payment with *generous* interest terms.

“But I floss. I have no caries and I have healthy gums,” I pathetically retorted. He would not listen. Since moving here I have tried so hard. Being polite and saying nice things to people. I thought that I was fitting in just swell. I understand the social importance of being really positive, but my body was exhibiting visible signs of cultural neglect. It was not just my teeth. I also had *visible* body hair. I felt shame.

As a quadruple Virgo (Asc ☾ ☽ ♀) I know how to research an issue. I used to teach at a university. I have read extensively and I have seen a lot of films. I read Bruce Wagner. I know how to fight a rearguard action from a defensive position.

George Clooney, as the character Miles Massey in the Coen brother's 2003 film *Intolerable Cruelty*, satirised his own cosmetically-enhanced smile. Through redemptive humour, Clooney was able to extenuate his release from the cruel clutches of superficiality. The satirical properties of the dental and medical arts are never acknowledged around Beverley Hills where the stars hang out, or over on mid-Wilshire where all the rich dealer galleries are. My defence is shaping up well. I am feeling more empowered.

French artist Orlan courageously offered her own body as cultural sacrifice by undergoing a series of cosmetic



operations. She bravely critiqued the ramifications of male gender politics by transforming herself into the female form most idealised by male artists throughout history. In 1996 I even had work in the same show as her in which both *our* works dealt with the cruel ratifications of body politics. I feel a bond with this bold remarkable woman. I recognise a precedent here and a communion of brave souls. I can logically and intelligently work my way out of any neurotic social confusion, in which I may have inadvertently found myself. Though the strength and determined reasoning I can defend any cultural assault coming out of the highly evolved social practices of Beverly Hills. I don't want a show on Wilshire Boulevard or at any boring up-start dealer gallery at Bergamot Station. Chinatown is dead. I'll show out in Orange County with the other marginal artists who work with tough issues. I mean, this is not new for me. I am brave and I am determined. And then it hit me... My tummy, oh God, my tummy.

Terrence Handscomb, *Space Invaders – black satire and the BBS* (1997) (detail) interactive computer installation.

Notes

“Sea, sex and sun” [click for audio sample]

1. Acronym for “Good ol’ Democracy”.
2. Hunter S. Thompson. Written as an inscription by Thompson in a copy of his 2003 book *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century* – a gift to Marilyn Manson. Quoted by Manson in *Rolling Stone*, issue 970, March 2005.
3. Second verse of Serge Gainsbourg’s 1978 seven-inch vinyl hit single, *Sea, sex and sun* (Phillips 6172147). Patrice Leconte also used the song in his 1978 film “Les bronzés”. The verse roughly translates to “...Sea, sex and sun. The full sun (is above). I’m over-stimulated (by) your little bakelite breasts shaking themselves about. Sea, sex and sun. You sure are small (but) you are a (big) hit (to me)...” However, I don’t know much French. I’m much better with German.