

Imagining the Real: Semiconductor Aslant

By Gareth Evans

“Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds me thought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

- Caliban, from *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare

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London; Sadlers Wells Theatre –

It is important to be precise; to note co-ordinates of place and time; and the reason...

So, the opening pitch, the prompt comes with *Puz/zle*, a dance performance; installed bodies in compelling flight towards rigorous beauty and grace (www.sadlerswells.com/show/Eastman-Sidi-Larbi-Cherkaou-Puzzle). The mind behind its movement and its meaning is choreographer/director Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Belgian-Moroccan, a maker on numerous thresholds, Cherkaoui's piece here (the latest in a prolific, spilling career – in the motive sense of controlled veer across numerous platforms – directed by fascination, opportunity and desire) is about matter, and what matters; about pattern and the random found, order and rupture, building and wreckage; about belonging and rejection, the herd and the unheard, the isolate soul in its torments and joy.

It is about actual things and how they are used and transformed: blocks and walls and rocks and limbs; about matter as a vessel of what cannot be held by hands but must always be handled, so that it might continue to exist, defined and discrete but nevertheless part of the whole. It is about air and what it carries – cries and grunts and drums (Japanese) and song. This is dense air, thick with signals that endure; air within and beneath which performers, characters writhe and reach and live. So, it is about sound and its purchase on the human; its rippling effect, how it reaches us and wrenches us, how it is as palpable as fists or sweet caress, how it crafts the felt and changes what we look upon.

It is about its artifice, how it revels in illusion, in calculated reverie and how it knows that, despite showing us the mechanism by which it makes its world, we shall still collude in its magnificent magic and allow ourselves the voyage, the port in as yet unknown harbours of the new.

It is about many people together, united in differences of skill but shared intent, bringing the best of what they are in benign collaboration towards the re/invention of this portion of the world. It is about the confidence this ability brings, allowing for a lightness of touch about the most pressing of concerns. And it is a puz/zle, a game, a *play*, an unfolding mysterious operation, the fact of which will always remain just beyond conscious grasp.

And it is about time, the variant clocks of content and performance and intention and attention. It is about the building and its history and all the ghosts who have walked the boards and all the audiences who have loved and loathed and moved through the high, walled halls.

Finally, however, and of course, it is not about these things. It *is* these things. It is object and implication, action and effect, frame and framed, gesture and the trust that it might be received, metaphor and its message, its threshold into all its fragile hope...

Bear with Me

The extraordinary 19th Century poet Emily Dickinson still resonates as a kind of unlikely prophet to all sorts of later human activity and, on the evidence of this iconic poem, not least to our concerns here...

Tell all the truth but tell it slant,
Success in circuit lies,
Too bright for our infirm delight
The truth's superb surprise;

As lightning to the children eased
With explanation kind,
The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.

Slant

So it goes. So I shall, out of will but also of requirement. Like the delivery of this anecdote above, because, in this encounter with an outstanding choreography – the human meeting with its need on and towards a planet in crisis – I find all the qualities of the duo under surveillance for this essay (this trying, this attempt, from the French); and these attributes constellate out from the title of the dance-work itself.

Problem (partly)

So, a slant –told puz/zle: in nearly two decades of writing across the arts, this writer has found the brief, while hugely welcome and a privilege to undertake, the most challenging; for several, linked reasons. To start, let us be clear, because its protagonists (a fiercely gifted pair) remain the most articulate commentators on their own production; and, close in pursuit, because the startling and revelatory artefacts of their making resist language - and interpretation even - in profound ways. Visceral, sensually predatory and completely self-confident creations (however much intellectual doubt, disciplined uncertainty and even sourced-data error they contentedly contain), they operate in and for realms where language is at most an occasionally assisting adornment, at least entirely irrelevant. If there is to be a script, it shall proclaim itself far more lucidly - and rewardingly - in diverse codes or kind equations, neither of which this writer can muster, in knowing or doing. Writing in the linguistic sense falls short again and again; but try always, we must; and, like Beckett's flailing heroes, 'fail again, fail better.'

In addition, the works *are* their own eloquence. This is a dynamic which has already been flagged and to which we shall return, this *is-ness* of the issues, their embodiment of their own intentions. We find ourselves in the territory of the extant and marvellous real everywhere that we wander in the *oeuvre* of Semiconductor. Things are immanent, numinous in this place.

And all of this before, of course, we have even declared the mystery of the work, the fathomless strangeness of what it looks upon; that enquiry itself, the abilities of the scientists and the artists involved; the resulting outcome, its precisely calibrated beauty, its crystalline poetry (from where did it come, from what unknowable wells of data); the questions it generates, that can only multiply...

Second Problem (not entirely)

And so it is surely apparent by now that this writer is dispatching this assemblage of thoughts to all intents *from the past*, from an old country, a landscape where writing itself - along with a lack of primary practical tools and skillsets and even a degree of technological fear - walks hand in hand through its own simple meadow of not-at-grips... This past, therefore, has little to do with any calendar sluggishness, any *delay* inevitable in reporting (at least as practiced *here*, far from the tweet and handheld image circulation simultaneous with the unfolding event each seeks to relay) and much more with a condition of being both constitutionally *other* and yes, to a degree resistant to the path-breaking *new and now* evident and scrutinised.

A Redeeming

It's clear, also and thankfully, that there *is* yet a position shared, however, behind the surface difference. A great *wanting to find out*, the engine of any art and science worth the salt, remains the mother-lode, the seam of founding note; for it is out of that constant itch to intelligence that the *thing to be discovered* can emerge. This is the crucial first lesson.

What engines these remarkable responses to natural forms and forces is the imaginative reach of both Semiconductor and the scientists they meet. To imagine is to exist and is essential. It is the quayside before the ships can embark *and* it is the fuel.

Science journalist Tim Radford catches well this almost actual 'leap into the dark' - this conjuring of pictures before the event horizon of confirmation - in his review of *Gravity's Engines*, a 2012 survey by Caleb Scharf of current thinking on Black Holes (www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/dec/12/gravitys-engines-caleb-scharf-review). That they were first compelled to conceive them in the mind's eye, and then they had to locate them, this is the wisdom. Knowing you don't know, you dream and then you search. This is what Semiconductor does, constantly, and so also those whose findings they respond to.

"The other paradox of these unimaginable objects is that somebody first had to imagine them. John Michell, a British pioneer of earthquake science in 1783 followed the logic of Newton's theory of gravity and proposed a dark star, a star so massive its own light would return to it. The French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace separately arrived at the same reasoning a decade later. Albert Einstein began to explore the way a massive star might distort the fabric of the universe around it. Karl Schwarzschild, a German mathematician and, in 1915, a gunner on the Russian front, worked out the way space and time would be distorted around a massive spherical object. The event horizon, the point beyond which light cannot escape, is now formally called the Schwarzschild radius. This was more than 70 years before a single black hole had been identified."

Indulgence

If this *essay* seems already too partial, too circling, too associative, loaded with a sense of a strictly personal involvement in its attempt to understand, please excuse and even tolerate this attitude for as long as can be borne, because it is also a strategy. One must never lose sight of the fact that these

astonishing creations have been realised by *people*, in consultation *and* production, and that they, these films and installations, while hugely charged intellectually and aesthetically, draw such potency at base from their intensely felt impact on the entire physiognomy and psychology of the audience (viewer *and* listener). Although the human is often almost entirely absent – scientist-commentators aside – as a presence or agent within the frame of these works, that creature is most definitely present in the making and reception.

Clarifying Origins

At this point, in a spirit of counterpoint to these numerous, depth-charged accomplishments, a swift visit to Wikipedia, the fount of non-specialist appreciation, did however reveal this about the nature of the device from which the artist duo take their moniker: "...semiconductors are very useful devices for amplification of signals, switching, and energy conversion. Understanding the properties of semiconductors relies on quantum physics... Semiconductors are the foundation of modern electronics, including radio, computers, and telephones." Indeed.

*What does understand mean?**

Visit the Semiconductor website and, once you have marvelled at the keyword menu (everything is a viable option here), you are immediately offered two core currents of navigation: Art and Data. The former consolidates the production catalogue; the latter delivers supporting documentation, biographical business, itineraries of presentation, declarative statements and so on. However, spend any time in Semiconductor world and it swiftly becomes apparent that a wry humour is afoot: In this *modus operandi*, art is data, and data art. And there's a probing subversion of the old adage 'information is power'; here it is quite *literally* potent, evidence of vast charge.

I hope not

Culture's sometime vocation as elegist is increasing. Marking the passing of things and fearful of the voids opening up where once the known – or perhaps familiar - was strong, we look back in loss but also as a way of incubating ourselves against further erasure. It's a kind of denial – perhaps a willing back into being through creativity of what is being lost. Most notably now, this process is taking place in regards to 'place' - distinctive natural and urban localities destroyed, depleted, gentrified, commodified, homogenised – and of course to the entire natural world, from bees to bears, and forests to farms.

Do you understand love?

However, there's also a more intangible role which is both memorial and strangely prescient. As formal religious structures in the West - and in zones of Commodity Capital globally - decline in influence, wilder, more extreme faith groupings have of course emerged, but so also has a secular metaphysics. From new incarnations of pilgrimage to revived but rebooted folkloric ritual, and from the hugely popular music of composers such as Part, Gorecki and Tavener to the spiritually expansive and lyrically ambiguous cinema of Malick, Reygadas, Dumont and others, belief-driven questions of belonging are being asked more and more widely across the arts.

There are even several very recent documentary essays – Patricio Guzman's *Nostalgia for the Light*; Peter Mettler's *The End of Time*, to name only two – which marry (political and) philosophical reflection with astronomic speculation, proposing quite directly that the answer to our deeper needs might literally lie in the stars, not as the domicile of a divine entity, but as the site of origins and therefore aiding towards a sense of our own small but still viable place in the schema of things.

Say the question again

As the materialist consumer project frays and as a technologically-aided authoritarianism and a spreading austerity increasingly define public life, so, in a form of ecological balance, there appears a rising hunger for a greater kinship with, and understanding of the larger structures that frame and shape us. This is something rather more than a desire for the latest news from the frontline of popular science, widespread as that might be. Art's ever-accelerating engagement with the numerous disciplines of the academy in many arenas could be said to evidence this deeper longing. What do we seek now from those patterns of enquiry and expression that for so long have helped us place ourselves in both the known and unknown arcades of the cosmos?

My gut feeling is probably no

Inevitably, most of what is produced rarely strays beyond the illustrative, the more or less rhetorical, the referential, however well intended. Forms of 'about culture'; this is understandable. Crisis on its own does not produce intrinsically better art.

The work of Semiconductor, however, is not of this camp.

Please define everything

From earlier works, where they built on screen the cities we are currently living in – mutable, ecstatic, excessive, wired, nervous, oh so unpredictable – and revealed the concealed patterns of energy informing and threatening them, to the investigations of the last almost-decade, trans-continental and interstellar, they have *embodied* their themes, subjects and objects, their intention and expression in ways that are genuinely startling, dauntingly beautiful and technologically pioneering all in one. This oeuvre is both without parallel but also astonishingly bold. It can delve within the absolutely literal - what would it look like if we could *see* magnetic forces; or properly perceive our earth moving around the sun and not the exact opposite – *and* with the deliriously dreaming; what if sound was turned into structures, or raw data logs could generate architectures in the conscious and receptive morning...

Earlier

I look out at the weather – metallic light, fast skies, the turning face of planetary motion. It feels changed, looks changed, looks different; it looks like *itself*, itself in all its hues.

What do you mean by that?

Their work shows and tells, but this showing and telling does not reduce the mystery as it informs. Rather, it heightens the outcomes of searching and knowing and reveals them to be intrinsically aesthetic artefacts, however ungraspable except through medium capture. Expanding our species' sensory spectrum far beyond its meagre bandwidth, it is building an archive fuelled by a psycho-poetic, transoformative impulse and towards a sensual democracy of perceptual inclusion. Deploying constantly evolving new technologies –tailored or created for each project's needs – and working alongside the scientists whose frontier explorations provide the raw material, Semiconductor have, over 15 years and every possible platform, fashioned a way of working that has to a great degree reimagined both art and the role of the artist for this fragile, unstable century.

A Question in Passing

Who else has received support – for the same piece of work – from The British Geological Survey *and* English Heritage (the latter so superseded in its reach, waiting to be swallowed, by the focus of the former)?

The Held Distance of Bodies in Space...

Normally unperceived matter, unperceived by daily senses – planetary and cosmic forces acting in always *material* ways - *performs* itself in these films. It presents itself *dramatically*, as protagonist, narrative, topography *and* culminating act. To reveal itself it occupies the expressive capabilities of technology as a kind of avatar, borrowing the means of its representation, means that can only exist because of the forces – electrical, elemental, physical and energetic – they are now serving to reveal.

...and Time and Light

Duration is both *strong* (what takes place within it is immensely powerful), and extended, in that the quality or quantity of action, event or outcome is not determined by a clock-based sense of chronology. A film of only single-figure minutes running time can contain its own complete expression of the most significant forces of planetary geology, or of the solar system's transmitting potential.

Did I ever think that I could?

That said, 'real time', as with most terminologies attached to this work and means of investigation, occupies two dimensions; the more familiar realm of what increasingly, in the face of the dynamics caught here, feels like a kind of 'colloquial' filmic – recording concurrent with unfolding event; and then the altogether more striking temporality of the states, fluxes and systems interrogated, unfolding either in nano-divisions of the clock or at the greatest frames imaginable (or, more likely, further).

What is art?

This is a corpus – the only one in contemporary practice I'd assert– that unequivocally places itself in relationship to the solar, for its raw material and for its philosophical centre. Harking back to much older structures and systems of cosmic perception that include the alchemic, it is work made from and *for* the universe, that it might experience itself translated, celebrated, perceived for what it is – defining (but never definitive) and, again, remarkable. To borrow a phrase from the late astronomer poet Rebecca Elson, this is work motivated by a 'responsibility to awe' (www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?owner_id=202).

Important to Note

Even if obvious - that these places we are taken to are not *virtual* worlds, however they might share the tools of making with forms of animated environment. All that informs and directs them derives from the existing universe.

Further Thoughts

At this juncture on the material-metaphysical... any sustained analysis of matter and the physical universe, leads, as has been widely noted, perhaps inevitably to questions of faith, belief and intelligent design. The Semiconductor film *Do You Think Science* (2006) riffs on this with wit and open-ended pleasure. And yet there is no doubting a metaphysical underpinning (conscious or not) to the artists' own excursions through the techno-physical sublime. Beyond the satisfying paradox that visual and sonic media are deployed to relay and reveal that which cannot be seen or heard by human faculties,

there's a profound sympathy with human limitations – and vulnerability - in the face of such spectrum potentials, and yet at the very same moment that human achievement of having discovered and learnt so much, however tiny in the final sum.

Everything, no; do people actually say yes?

Religious implications aside, the spiritual in their work is indicative of that *spirited* enquiry, leading way off the map and into *Ultima Thule*, where, if it is not the realm of monsters, discoveries are waiting to be made that will continue to instil both shock and awe for as long as the longing remains to make the voyage in the first place. Scientists might have set the course but artists like Semiconductor are bringing back the findings in ways that can travel far beyond the lab, deep into the perception of anyone whose mind and senses are alert, awake and open...

What Has Been Learnt

Fascinated by scale shifts and all the un/stabilities of perceiving that follow, indisputably *particular*, politically relevant and ecologically, so as to institute the faculty of wonder, so as to rebalance the scales of the daily away from the trivial, the parochial and doomed - all this and more is at play in the fields of the work.

Maybe that's not the goal

What Else Has Been Learnt

The fecund beauty of what *is* cannot be matched by any human artifice. The work of Semiconductor is not artifice but the revelation of this *is*. These are things we have not encountered before.

These are, in all meanings, *moving* images (watch *Some Part of Us Will Have Become*).

Can a Manifesto of Sorts Be Proposed; Some Distilled Reminders to Keep in Mind, Nothing More

Imagine first, then discover.
Curiosity is the thing.
Know nothing except what you find.
The voyage towards awe requires new vessels.
Listen to the pictures.
Watch the sounds.
Make the invisible *not*.
Make manifest. Oh...

The answer is in the wind...

Data like a murmuration of starlings - birds of information - flocks into the dusk. But we have seen them and so we now are different.

Later

Rain over Hackney, London
Trouble at the junction
All the wine is finished

My son is sleeping, dreaming (strange small words he mutters)

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“The purpose of knowledge is to display your ignorance”

All leading statements in italics are taken from the Semiconductor film *Do You Think Science* (2006)

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