

To be or not to be international?

The structure is simple. There are three diminutive bronze sculptures and a short animated video, with an eerie piano and a ghostly conversation as the soundtrack. The video is made of photographic stills, and occasionally an unnatural animated truck rolls through the forest. That is all.

The content is not so simple. The sculptures are a truck, Friedrich Hayek and George R. Brown. The conversation touches on economy, abstraction, business and government, the field of sensation and cartography. The stills show the Hôtel du Parc in Mont Pelerin, a shipping channel outside of Houston, a dam on the Texas Colorado River. That is not all.



The words and images have been carefully chosen by Joshua Mosley for his video *International*, currently on display in the “Live Cinema/Histories in Motion” rotating exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Hayek, the Austrian-born economist, was one of chief architects of neoliberal economic theory. Brown, the American-born businessman, played a central role in forming the military-industrial complex and in crafting the relation of business to politics in the United States, especially through his patronage of Lyndon Johnson. The dam on the river started Brown’s involvement with LBJ. The Hotel was the original meeting place of the Mont Pelerin society (of which Hayek was the principle member), which, as David Harvey has recently argued, was the founding site of neoliberalism.

The “conversation” never took place. Hayek and Brown never met, and Mosley has composed their interaction solely through recorded archives. The conversation perhaps appears stilted but this is as much because of the fact that it did not take place as because, had it taken place, it would have done so between the smooth accented English in which Hayek pronounces on philosophy and economy and the guttural, occasionally stuttered statements of the Texas businessman.

Indeed, the transition between concept (Hayek) and reality (Brown) is never so smooth. This is a clear point of Mosley’s work, and it is there even within the men’s own words. Hayek discusses the principles of abstraction and the autonomy of the economic and political, though he himself was deeply involved in policy matters. Brown, similarly, praises the free market at the same time that he notes the importance of Johnson’s involvement in business.

But that there is a difference between thoughts and actions is a rather banal point. There seems to be more happening both formally and thematically in the video. When the animated truck (modeled on the 1937 International D-50 flatbed truck) first begins to roll through the Oregon forest, it is Hayek’s voice we hear in the background:

“When you pass from this concrete society, where we are guided by what we see, to the abstract society, which far transcends our range of vision it becomes necessary that we are guided not by the knowledge of the effect of what we do but by some abstract symbols. Now this only symbol which tells where we can make the best contribution is profit and in fact by pursuing profit, we are as altruistic as we can possibly be, because we extend our concern to people who are beyond our range of personal conception.”

It is a rather remarkable quote. Relations, real and immediate, are denied. Losing the immediate, we are said to pass into the abstract, and not just any abstract, but profit as the abstract. In abstraction we go beyond our immediate interest into the altruism beyond. It is baffling, perhaps, but one can understand structurally Hayek’s point. It is no different from some contemporary visions of cosmopolitanism. Although the

end is different (justice and not profit), these forms of cosmopolitanism would make a similar move: denying the immediate relation in order to see a broader set of concerns and guided by abstractions such as “human rights,” “individual freedoms,” or “international law.”

Mosley does not seem to be taking a position here (indeed the video is more suggestive than demanding for the viewer), but the title *International* invokes at once cosmopolitan internationalism and the world market. It has, since at least the *Communist Manifesto*, been the gamble of certain sectors of the left that the internationalism of the world market could be transformed into the internationalism of global justice. If new voices – and Harvey is perhaps foremost among them – are challenging such a conception, it is because of a move from time (conversion) to space (realization). In other words, it is not a matter of converting the world market into perpetual peace, but rather developing a set of practices which keep their real and immediate relations to both space and time while *simultaneously* attempting to build broader connections.

It is here that Mosley’s animated truck moving through the Oregon forest is so interesting. What, after all, is the relationship between space, time, and the virtual? How do basic cognitive frames such as space and time translate into a media world whose coordinates seem different from everyday life (albeit not necessarily in a way all that different from how the painting, as a frozen moment, ever was)?

Two interpretive options present themselves. First, that the truck represents a form of abstraction which leads not to profit but to destruction. The pristine forests through which the truck rolls are perhaps condemned to the same fate as the Colorado River or the Swiss mountains – they will be destroyed, hijacked, privatized and converted from real entity to abstract-profit relation. The truck would then represent the ghostly presence of early international exploitation of resources, reduplicated and enhanced by the power of modern technologies.

The second is a more sanguine reading. Network theorist Alex Galloway has suggested that the terrain of activism is changing its dimensions. The historical-temporal Marxist model (four dimensions) acceded to the 3D spatial model (situationism, radical cartography, etc.) which in turn is leading us to a two-dimensional space of appearance/non-appearance, as signaled, for example, by the rise of anonymous communities on the web and growing political demands for things like opacity, invisibility, and so on. The model is not perfect, but it is still suggestive for considering Mosley’s animated truck. Under this reading, then, the animation would not signal the continuation of domination and abstract profit, but rather the invention of a new practice which allows for the erasure of such pernicious histories.

This is utopian and ungrounded, perhaps, but consider the close of the video. We return to a wooded path similar to the one in which the animated truck first appeared. There the woods were dark and the sky overcast. In the final segment, some light is showing through. The animated truck which the viewer expects never appears. We are left only with the image of the woods, standing free of the truck and its connotations of logging. The damage cannot be erased; but the continuation can be.



Similarly, the truck appears with Hayek’s thoughts on abstraction. The truck does not appear when Brown discusses his first forays into military contracting (his company would for a time be a subdivision of Halliburton). And the video closes on his words, “until the war was over.” From the abstract profit and coincident destruction to the concrete end of the war: A false promise? An empty utopian gesture? Perhaps. On the other hand, a critique of such beliefs? A mocking of the idea that the war ended, that wars are not still fought in the name of exploitation and cruelty? Equally plausible, and, historically, more accurate. But, still, sometimes it helps to remember that the path of history is no more guaranteed than the appearance or non-appearance of an animated truck, although perhaps it will be more difficult to change.

-Avi Alpert