

Cultural heritage and the ficto-critical method: The ballad of Utah and Ether

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Abstract

Once dubbed “the Bonnie and Clyde of graffiti”, the globe-trotting, train-painting duo of Utah and Ether occupy a central place in contemporary graffiti folklore. Having both served jail time in the US for graffiti offenses, the couple skipped parole and embarked on a long term “probation vacation”, painting subway networks across Europe and Asia. Their exploits were carefully documented through photographs and web videos, including a collaboration with *The Grifters*, a ground-breaking video series. In 2016, Ether was again arrested and jailed while placing stickers on a Melbourne street. This paper considers the implications of Utah and Ether’s graffiti practice. Using ficto-critical writing techniques, it attempts to fill in the gaps of Utah and Ether’s fantasy life on the run and think through its implications for cultural heritage and graffiti research in a late capitalist world.

Keywords:

Graffiti, Ficto-criticism, Law, Literature, Research methods, Utah, Ether, “Probation Vacation”

1. Introduction

Ficto-criticism emerges as a genre of writing in the 1990s, driven by a range of cultural forces such as strands of feminism and the advent of the Public Internet (Gibbs, 2005).¹ In ficto-criticism, the eradication of clear boundaries between public and private selves under the conditions of highly-mediatised late capitalist societies is reflected in a breakdown in strict generic demarcations between forms of fiction, essays and criticism and between stories, reflections and arguments. Ficto-criticism is also the product of a space created for more marginal voices in publishing enabled by shifts in the economic models of electronic publishing and the institutional consolidation of creative writing programs in a global University system, particularly in the Anglophone world.

This paper argues that ficto-critical approaches have a role to play in cultural heritage, particularly in responding to

1 - See also Schukne and Brewster, 2005, p. 393-395; Worth, 2014, p. 8.

graffiti and street art. In the case of graffiti, the combination of illegality, the ephemerality of the physical product and the seeming-longevity of its digital products (its “Second Lives”, to quote Utah and Ether’s collaborator Good Guy Boris) mean that traditional heritage approaches may struggle to capture its true value. After all, in an era of highly-mediatised graffiti, there is no shortage of images, but often a dearth of contexts, narratives and emotions

Utah and Ether are a female/male duo of American train painters, who skipped parole following arrests in the US and commenced a spree of international graffiti (Knight, 2016). They have painted graffiti in dozens of countries including through Asia and have become key figures in the global graffiti movement, documenting their own activities with videos, books and ‘zines (see utahether.com).

Despite their prominence and importance to graffiti, Utah and Ether were excluded from my forthcoming study of the major graffiti and street art Instagram accounts as the data-driven algorithmic methods did not register their popularity

and influence. Their Instagram account also suffered suspensions and cancellation, likely as a result of the illegal nature of their activities. The omission and methodological failure in my Instagram study has driven this methodological innovation.

As Anna Gibbs (2005) notes: “Fictocriticism is a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the course of engagement with what is researched” (Gibbs, 2005: n.p.). Ficto-criticism as it is practiced here is not a form of self-expression but rather a careful transcription of the multiple texts produced by graffiti writers and an inventory of the contexts in which graffiti might appear, including the forms of affect it might generate. Through its careful staging of narrative, ficto-critical approaches are also designed to register the many connections – both institutional or coincidental – that shape graffiti’s production and its consumption, the spatial, temporal and cultural networks in which it appears. Through its capacity to simulate an inner voice or to mark emotions of pleasure, fear, desire, boredom or disgust, ficto-criticism can get closer to dimensions of graffiti that are absent from its visual simulacra.

Ficto-criticism is also appropriate for a terrain involving secrecy, lies, rumour, machismo and dissembling. When the subjects are engaged in ongoing criminal activities, risking jail or other punishments and are subject of surveillance, any documentation can threaten their freedom or, as was the case with the *New York Times* reporting of Utah and Ether, draw unwanted and unhelpful attention to the actors. However, in a ficto-critical approach, where a single authorial voice is absent, facts are not identified and truths are mingled with lies and speculation, the risk of jeopardy to the protagonists is minimised.

Finally, ficto-criticism is a helpful approach when there already exist a wide range of public documents that can be drawn on, including the extensive documentation produced by the artists themselves.

This ficto-critical approach has many antecedents. A key one, necessary in thinking through the gender dynamics of their relationship is the writing of Chris Kraus, particularly *Summer of Hate* (2012), which includes an extended

section on the US prison system. A broader tradition of popular terrorist literature has also contributed to this piece: Bret Easton Ellis’ *Glamorama* (1998), for its registering of international mobility and self-conscious mediatisation and Jarett Kobek’s *ATTA* (2011), a fictional first-person account of the 9/11 hijacker, published by Semiotexte press, of which Kraus is a co-editor.

Key sources for this work include Michael Moorcock’s Jerry Cornelius quartet and, as mentioned in the piece, fellow Sci-Fi New Waver Harry Harrison’s *Stainless Steel Rat* series, as well as two novels on the Kennedy assassination: Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988) and its key progeny James Elroy’s *American Tabloid* (1995) which develops a hallucinogenic account of place and conspiracy. The opening sentence of *Libra* also pay tribute to the teenage fascination with the subways of New York, that gave birth to the sub-culture of train painting that Utah and Ether have taken to new heights. As a teenager, we are told of DeLillo’s Lee Harvey Oswald: “This was the year he rode the subway to the ends of the city, two hundred miles of track.”

My first use of ficto-critical method was in a commissioned essay about a graffiti-themed mural in inner Melbourne, which was published as “The Grandmaster Protocol”. What follows is an extract of a longer ficto-critical account of the adventures of Utah and Ether.

2. The ballad of Utah and Ether

This is a work of fiction. Most of the events in this story did take place, but not in the way I describe. I wasn’t there.

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Jim Clay Harper slumped in a seat at Departure Gate 55 of Singapore Airport. The gate was empty. No planes would leave here for the next few hours. Four oil workers in dirty overalls and high-vis vests were sleeping on the rows of seats near the windows. The carpet smelt new, the high ceiling of delicate white steel glowed, repeating endlessly in huge glass panels.

Across the cavernous passage of the empty terminal, an eight-year old boy playing on the furniture slipped a cracked his head on the oversize bolts of a steel pillar. There was a little bit of blood, then a lot of blood. His parents started

screaming. Jim watched as the parents yelled as they tried to staunch the flow. The boy turned white. Two airport staff shuffled nervously, but no one came to help.

Danielle Bremner waited at Gate 58. She was flying out to Australia with Jim but they never sat together at airports. Ten hours earlier she and Harper had crept through a bamboo grove, scaled a concrete wall, hid in the shadows cast by the sodium lights of the train yard, cut through a fence and finally, spray-painted a Singapore commuter train. Then they went to a nightclub. Then in the morning, to the airport. Her shoes were still damp.

Sitting separately at different departure gates seemed silly but it could be the difference between freedom and prison. Jim had first learned this way of thinking from a novel he read as teenager in Boston. Invented in the 50s, novelised in the 1970s and set in the twenty-first century, Harry Harrison's book *The Stainless Steel Rat* was the story of an outlaw, who hacked, scammed, sneaked his way across the galaxy.

Like Harper, the Rat's real name was also Jim, Slippery Jim Di'Griz. And the Rat's wife Angelina provided the template for his future relationship with Bremner, a sexy, post-psychopathic co-conspirator. Growing up in Melbourne, *The Stainless Steel Rat* was also Julian Assange's favourite book. In the early 1990s, Assange used Harry Harrison as his pseudonym on his *OK Cupid* date profile.

Jim never liked to read but Harrison's anti-hero had exercised a fascination over him as a fourteen year old. Was it possible the powers-that-be were that impotent, that the army of sensors, robots, police and policies was so easy to evade? It turned out that it was true.

It was a little over a month before he would be arrested and go to trial.

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On the last day of May 2016 in Room 5 of the Melbourne Magistrates Court I met one of the most notorious graffiti writers in the world, the American Jim Clay Harper, aka "Ether". Short, slender and white-faced with close-cropped dark hair and wearing an oversized dark green prison tracksuit, Harper sat silent and distracted for the 30-minute

contest hearing, though he was facing a likely six-month jail term in Australia, before being immediately deported to the US to face a second sentence for violating parole in Riker's Island, New York.

On his arrest, in a headlock on Brunswick St, Fitzroy, Harper was found in possession of a Canon camera, a blue box-cutter and numerous paint cans and markers. His grey jacket and camouflage hat also contained paint residue. The Prosecutor reports that transit police intelligence confirmed that Ether was an international graffiti vandal and that within graffiti culture, tags could be viewed as unique and personal identifying markers.

"Are there any prior matters?" asked the Magistrate. "I assume because he has just arrived in Australia there's no prior matters?"

"No, your honour," said the Prosecutor, "but I do have some American priors," she said, searching through her papers.

"American priors?" said the Magistrate. "I'm not sure what I can do with those...."

Through whispers in the courtroom I realise that Harper is calm and disinterested because he knows things that the police and Magistrate do not. Danielle Bremner, "Utah", was still on the run.

The night before Harper's trial, she had purchased an airline ticket from Brisbane and checked in online for the evening flight to Melbourne. Police waited at the airport but Bremner did not appear. Like a Stainless Steel Rat, she had simultaneously purchased tickets with cash for a flight to Hong-Kong, clearing customs while her Melbourne flight was still in the air.

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At the Singapore departure gate, the child was still bleeding. Jim watched this parable of modern times play out in front of him: a badly injured tourist in an empty, multi-million dollar airport terminal with two young staff on walkie-talkies, unable to summon a doctor. The building is buzzing with technology, humming with money, at the centre of the city but as remote as village life. The mother is screaming at the

airline staff but nothing happens. The life is draining out of the boy and no one comes.

This is the logic that Jim and Danielle confront in each city they visit – vast new, expensive empty infrastructure with screens and cameras but no people in sight – whatever terrible event of crime takes place, there is only silence, waiting. The glistening face of the control society is a mirage. In India, famously, they paint at a virgin train lay-up so new that modernity and graffiti is yet to arrive. The sparkling new trains have never been used. They are wrapped in heavy plastic. With their trusty boxcutters, Utah and Ether cut them open like Christmas presents.

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The bleeding child in the empty airport and the crime or emergency where no one comes is part of a larger understanding. Like the Wikileaks founder, they are led by a science-fiction hero born in 1957, the Stainless Steel Rat, like the 9/11 hijackers with everyday stationary knives for cutting cardboard becoming a makeshift weapon, like Edward Snowden, they choose to evade authorities in Hong Kong, an international city that is also part of an old empire and a New Century, out of reach of American warrants and extraditions.

This isn't just about graffiti or about Asia. Utah and Ether are following the logic of a New Age, a new Triad, a twenty-first century Alphabet: A is for Assange. B is for Box-cutters. C is for China.

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