

THE KILLING; unspooling our cells so the party can start . . .

by Samuel Te Kani

Chewing gum; what is it? A chemical component, a pharmaceutical non-entity which seeks shapelessness in its consumer directives. Prettily packaged, juicy, in its dry-state bristling with potential. And then, in the moment of designer physical proximity, releasing its quanta in an affective burst. Between lips and teeth and tongue giving a visceral read of itself, its identity, its signature. Harrowingly intimate, and yet utterly mundane. A store-bought intimacy that, in its whorish replication, ultimately means nothing. Essence extracted, form destroyed, it's expelled like so much shit onto pavements and under desks. Not by any means a shocking demeaning of the product; this demeaning, this demise, is folded into the faceless polymers of the product itself. It was always going to be this way.

In RM's latest group show *The Killing* the abjection of bodies, like gum in a state of masticated formlessness—chewed up and spit out by forces which simultaneously fetishise and denigrate them—is rejiggered as something euphoric. Pain is alchemised, given over to an exuberance which the beiges of wellness normally reserves for the monied, the cis, the formal. Call it a femme-revenge. Pink stands here not as a signifier for the marketability of an LGBTQ 'rainbow'—the dreaded pink-wash; just white guys with abs—but as the retrieval of mutant powers, the 'chewed up' re-gathering its agency in exile, growing stronger in the gutter, waxing in the dark. A discarded foetus deciding it does not wish to die. When the best revenge is staying alive, the next logical step is attaining a state of joy.

Nothing says fuck you quite like joy.

There's a scene in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) that speaks to *The Killing*'s gleeful paranoia about the world's destructive labial capacities; the labia as mouth, the labia as something to be penetrated, but also to be consumed by. The film's protagonist perhaps orbits these labial possibilities as observer, a Man whose gaze positions him decidedly beyond the labial, putting him in eroticised tension with the labial as his Other. He's very used to being the viewer, and never the viewed. Seeing penetration as something done to passive-lumpen flesh, as opposed to that lumpen flesh having its own ravenous agency, he has never considered the labial potentiality within his own cells, in that swirling quanta which gives solidity to his man flesh.

Suddenly—in a turn of events too convoluted to explain to the uninitiated—a vaginal opening appears on his stomach. In the context of the film this opening begs to be filled with media, in the retro-futurist form of a fleshy VHS (endearingly rendered in era-specific practical effects; much like *The Killing*'s waddish centrepiece). It's a commentary on our habits of media consumption, but also fascinatingly gendered. Like, we are all labial when it comes to desire, viewing-vectors drawing us into enamouring objects—this being the eighties presumably a naked woman, or some other pleasing cis-coded form—with inexorable persuasion. These seductions, far from being simple equations of passive-object and active-subject, are interactions finding equal generation in that 'lumpen flesh' normally deemed inert in its desirability. If we want to penetrate, 'it' wants to be penetrated. Both parties are taking something.

Perhaps this veneer of passivity works to disguise which of these two parties is the more insatiable—read; more labial (pussy power?).

Beauty, like matter, is not inert. It teems, it bristles.

Think the vivid geometries of minerals. How would you say a stone yearns, hungers, craves, thinks? Its objectal disguise misleads. Behind this stony facade a vibrant quanta—like some microcosmic palace, grandly architectural—works tirelessly to give the appearance of stillness. It is so much more than its shape. It is so much more alive than we presumptive sentients allege; and in ways which us hubristic bipeds can't conceive. We're too used to fucking anything that moves, that we don't think to expand our sexual repertoires into the mineral kingdom. Perhaps the plant and mineral kingdoms need a re-brand, need a savvy advertiser to sell their stillness not as a marker of banal utility, but as a mating-signal of loaded coyness (a stone batting its quark-eyes at me, a flower twerking in the breeze etc).

The Killing's group exhibit knows all about the erroneous inertia of beauty. Entering a space of unhinged colour and form, where vibrant murk is king, a berg-like wad of chewed up gum in the middle of the room dominates. But it's certainly not 'lumpen'. If anything, the tagged walls bristle as its thoughts, its feelings. As a centrepiece it is active, countering the assumed devastation between its original form—whatever that was—with revelry. The 'thing', much like the titular beastie from John Carpenter's cult film of the same name, is more powerful for its ability to assume a myriad of differing mantles. Between known states it is not dormant, only gestating. Perhaps inevitably, a show about loss of form skates the interstice of Cronenberg's body horror, and the profound speculations of cosmic horror.

H.P. Lovecraft—noted granddaddy of cosmic horror, but also a huge xenophobe—wrote *The Colour Out Of Space* (1927) almost a century ago. It's a story about the lethal contamination of native ecology by a foreign space-microbe, one which spawns exponentially and subjugates earth flora with a colour unseen or undreamt by earth-natives. In a recent 2019 film version starring everyone's favourite lunatic Nicholas Cage, the specific site this alien colour corrupts is the New England farm house of a white semi-affluent nuclear family. Director Richard Stanley, something of a horror granddaddy himself, takes the stiffer indignation in Lovecraft's prose and pivots it towards the stasis at the core of the family structure which this 'colour'—a pretty pink fuchsia—liberates. Mutation becomes a painful rebirthing, a cellular catharsis of all the boisterous life which maintenance of mores and strictures necessitates. The horror is sharp but fleeting, as family members rapidly succumb to more and more horrible mutations à la Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly* (1986)—arguably not as fuckable though.

And yet there's a point where the youngest daughter seems to embrace the changes, standing at the family well and willing a multi-pronged bacterium up and out so it might colonise the wider world with its miracle-pink—literally a big-ass gum-wad. Ultimately, the horror is not the corruption of form, but the oppression of form unchanging. The 'normal' body as prison, those/these configurations both material and social that block a potentially infinite libidinal thrust. A thrust that might otherwise tickle the scaly rears of sleeping dragons, instead of bothering the stale bodiless images we've seen over and over again; you know, the ones peddled as 'health'.

Similarly, the film adaptation of Jeff Vandemeer's *Annihilation* (2018)—directed by Alex Garland—pretends cosmic horror at the prospect of a foreign contaminant blurring body-lines, only to end on a note of relief, or even emancipatory pleasure at the prospect of our cells opening like ravenous labia to blend and breed with everything around them. Funny that these horror-stories written by men should centre on the vertiginous threat of their bodies being irrevocably changed only to arrive at a more celebratory stance, in which phasing through a genetic blender is inevitably the only means towards innovation, towards evolution. Towards freedom.

But freedom from what?

In Garland's *Annihilation* the story centres on one female scientist and her failing marriage, annoyingly coding proceedings in the service of a heteronormative coupling. Her husband, a military

man, vanishes on a secret mission only to return quite changed. The wife is briefed at a facility bordering The Shimmer, a quarantined area in which some crash-landed space debris has caused an anomaly, one which no single discipline has the language to describe or even apprehend, let alone comprehend. It is completely Other. It's here her husband was sent, thought lost but returning in his subtly transformed state which is acting like cancer, tearing his body apart cell by precious cell. The wife, freshly guilty from an infidelity, decides to venture through The Shimmer with other female scientists in the faint hope she might figure out the nature of the anomaly, and subsequently save her husband's life.

Traipsing through the realm of the Other, shit gets weird. At first morbidly, and then wondrously so. Turns out The Shimmer acts as a prism, refracting not light but genetic material, cross-breeding everything inside it like a wayward particle collider; mineral, vegetable, animal. Everything. Like giant labial maws champing down on human gum, mashing and mixing in callous enjoyment. Only when the viroid directives of the anomaly is finished, there's not some shapeless remainder. Rather, beings subject to it are unholy remixes, gorgeous gang-bangs of this and that—like a toddler's crayon renditions of zoo-animals filtered through Doctor Moreau's lab.

The Killing not only speculates on formlessness and the freedoms that come with it thematically, but formally—in as much as it's a group exhibit that refuses individual presentation. Rather, the input and impetus of each practitioner is smeared across the space indiscriminately, itself a gestalt entity swirling over the gallery's otherwise monochrome walls like melted ice cream. Sticky, sweet, a candied orgy of sex and rage—daringly partnering the two in a climate which seems bent on sanitising rhetorics around sexual intimacy and racial othering, respectively. Here, these ideas roll around like genies out of their diamanté bottles, fucking and sucking on a bed of adolescent journal entries and vitriolic innuendo, in their lust breaking down the disciplinary partitioning which keeps the specialists from the hobbyists, the renters from the landowners. Here in this anomalous space—The Shimmer, The Zone à la soviet sci-fi classic *Roadside Picnic* (1972), that nefarious Lovecraftian *Colour Out Of Space*—anything is possible. And like Carpenter's *The Thing*, the atomic libidinal forces the group-work represents are hell-bent on taking everything you've got. Even if only for a ride or two.

More soberly, The Killing intuits a necessary shift in knowledge formation. In *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (2018) cultural theorist James Bridle bemoans the outsourcing of truth-configuring to big-data, a manoeuvre which reduces criticality to data harvesting. This is most harrowing in the methodologies of science, in which analysts nominate a 0.004 percentage of accuracy in findings harvested from astronomical data-sets as 'true' (or true enough). This has resulted in endemic un-repeatable experiments and spurious findings being published in leading journals, generally corrupting the ability of science—as a church-like institution from which we gauge rational conduct—to give credible indicators of fact. This at a time when robust systems-checking of climate change is more crucial than ever, as even wholly effected by computational bias—itself often inflected with overriding neoliberal pressures—the sciences have still been able to gauge that the end is very fucking nigh (not even hyperbole, if the 'facts' checkout).

From this Bridle ropes in Timothy Morton's intriguing provocation that climate change is a hyper-object, or a 'thing' so vast in space and time that it literally takes more than one human life or even epoch to properly grasp. As such, Bridle points to the melting of the permafrost—meaning permanent frost; not very permanent after all—as indicative of how wrong our assumptions of the concrete realities around us have been. Yes, hyper-objects are experienced directly, because they're so inconceivably enormous that they muscle in on the phenomenological. But their visible textures and movements are tantamount to singular scales on the body of an enormous beast, turning with unfathomable temporal dimensions of its own in the furnace of creation (making our whole galaxy a barnacle on the ass of some drifting space-whale). To better grasp them, a loosening of our

dogmatic-algorithmic analytics is required. Enough breathing space is needed to hold space for not just our known unknowns, but also our unknown unknowns. In Bridle's own words, "the melting of the permafrost is both danger sign and metaphor; an accelerating collapse of both our environmental and our cognitive infrastructures". Our myopic reliance on the computational has resulted in a new dark age, which "will demand more liquid forms of knowing than can be derived from the libraries of the past alone".

This celebration of formlessness in *The Killing*, then, can either be a life-affirming provocation, or a predictor of our ultimate annihilation. Take your pick.