

SPRING / SUMMER 2020

PROVENCE

CONTEMPORARY ART. BIENNIAL. GLOBAL. WHAT IS A WEEKEND?!



TOWN & COUNTRY

Marie Antoinette, Moyra Davey, Contemporary Art Writing Daily,
Tyler Dobson, FOS, Coco Fitterman, Rodney Graham, Nancy Halt,
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Text

Hinrich Sachs

DIGITAL AND OTHER CULTURAL DIVIDES (AFTER RODNEY GRAHAM)

Hinrich Sachs considers the films of Rodney Graham and asks what the countryside might mean in a digitized world.

Film stills, *City Self/Country Self*, 2000, directed by Rodney Graham

In the past twenty years, magazines such as the British *Country Life*, which has been published for more than a century, or its German counterpart *Landlust* ("countryside desire"), have been lavishly feeding the desire for a homey life to a class of urban, post-Fordist entrepreneurs and employees.



In the later 1990s, parts of the Western world were engaged initiating the boom of the internet and commercializing digital technology. These years were marked by musical genres such as Techno, Drum and Bass, and Deep House, and the first avatars, like *Ann Lee*, appeared in the art world, while community-engaged practices like *Park Fiction* reflected upon the contradictory urban societal condition.^{1,2} In Vancouver during this time, artist Rodney Graham produced three video works, one after the other, and declared it a trilogy. All three narrate a male character living under marginal conditions in the historical past.

Watching these three videos, I see a castaway, a lonely cowboy, as well as a bumpkin.

The early eighteenth-century Caribbean environment presented in *Vexation Island* (1997), and the twentieth-century Rocky Mountains scenery of *How I Became a Rambler Man* (1999), are both shown in the cinematographic splendor of cinemascope, whereas the subject in *City Self/Country Self* (2000), located in a nineteenth-century cobblestone town, is seen in the 4:3 ratio of the television screen, from the time before flat screen TVs. These three visual short stories in the "shared language of cinema" gained Graham a reputation within the context of contemporary art.³

*CITY SELF / COUNTRY SELF,
PIGGYBACKS ON
THE CULTURAL ARCHETYPE
OF THE TOWN MOUSE
AND THE COUNTRY MOUSE.*

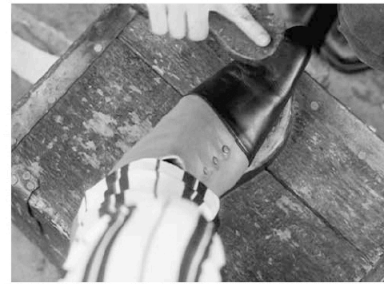
The dotcom businesses hype, with its urban yuppies, plummeted into recession in the fall of 2000.⁴ And as if he were an echo, a dandy appears in *City Self/Country Self*, in fashionable trousers, vest, eccentric

leather shoes, and red calfskin gloves. He keeps "in time" with a golden watch, while a strolling bumpkin in gray smock searches for the church clock. After having raised his hat for a lady, as a sign of respect toward a member of his own social class, the bourgeois dandy takes the opportunity to kick the bumpkin's ass, right after offering a shoeshine boy a depreciative glance—maybe regarding wage labor?

It is the title—*City Self/Country Self*—which instantly directs the viewer's attention to the *spiel* of a man who appears in two roles simultaneously, and on a deeper level, to a psychological condition.

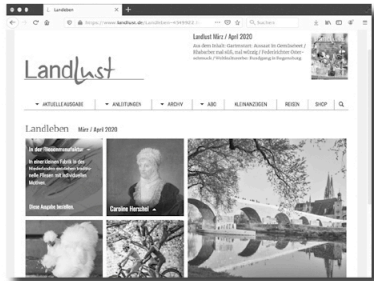
It must be noted that Rodney Graham has shown an ongoing interest in psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's work and his concepts of the unconscious and the subject constitution since his early projects. For example, when Graham placed copies of the book that had led Freud to describe the particular psychic productivity of the so-called chains of associations, in windows of bookshops (1987).⁵ Or when he exhibited himself in a drug-induced sleep, performed and filmed during transportation in a vehicle (1994).⁶

In *City Self/Country Self*, Graham precisely unfolds a dialectic relationship between the particular character depicted, and the performing actor—who also happens to be the signing artist—as well as using (written) language in the form of the title of the film, like in the process of constituting a subject. As a "compulsion to repeat," the work—a self-contained cinematographic allegory, one could argue—investigates a means of artistic production as well as production conditions and their role in the creation of subjectivity. Surprisingly, British psychoanalyst and author Darian Leader dismissed further in-depth reading in 2002, when he resumed that, the artist "only takes the stage as masked or altered, and that this is one reason why interpretation, beyond a private amusement, is ruled out." Even if the trilogy plays out "all the tragic—and comic—ways that characterize human endeavour."⁷



Modeled upon a popular tradition of representing life in dichotomies, *City Self/Country Self*, piggybacks on the cultural archetype of *The Town Mouse and The Country Mouse*, the Aesopian fable told for more than 2,000 years. The tale has proven fit to represent

a recognized cultural divide. However, cultural contexts smoothly adapt such binary patterns in order to activate and localize meaning, historically. If the era of European industrialization and its huge wealth accumulation recognizes the distinct living conditions of the countryside and the urban contexts, and thus their modes of orientation, generating new forms of bourgeois lifestyles, while the working class—including parts of the poor country populace—is ferociously fighting for bettering their social conditions, then the “European Self” is hardly able to recognize its blind spot. This blind spot is constituted by the equally exploitative and oppressive divide between the leading European, then Western, nation states and vast areas, countries, even continents, subjugated by the colonial project, initiated and managed by the West.



In the struggle for publicly pointing to burning issues during the time of the British industrialization, satirical illustrator George Cruikshank became one of the strongest voices, as a master of critiquing social conditions, by reaching out to a wide audience through publishing in newspapers with large print runs. Little surprise that he was a close friend of Charles Dickens, who combined narratives of social divide and cold-heartedness with the complexities of the literary form.

Cruikshank's punching illustrations are thoroughly built upon historical genres like fables, known since antiquity, or moral parables, such as those from the Christian Bible, and their modes of representing issues in popular dichotomies. Think of *Beauty and The Beast*. Sharply observed everyday issues—wealth, urban fashion, the steam engine—are rendered in an exaggerated and synthesized style, which locates his graphic work within the context of the grotesque.

Rodney Graham's video piece seems to have sprung from that world of Cruikshank.

Viewed as part of this lineage of the allegorical grotesque, all the characters from Graham's end-of-the-1990s trilogy may now actually appear as duplicitous types—romantic outsiders on the one hand, and agents of Western imperial expansionism on the other.



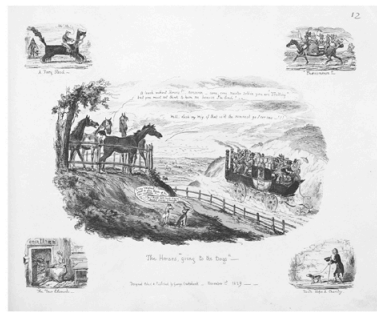
The absence of any signs of life from inhabitants in the filmed Caribbean and North American Western landscapes definitely feels awkward and eroded. While the three works depict those particular characters with somnambulist precision, allowing for a certain bias in each of them to be played out, and, in a second step, performing Graham's contemporary reflection on the author's position of “not being too confident of oneself.”

ALL THE CHARACTERS FROM GRAHAM'S END-OF-THE-1990S TRILOGY MAY NOW ACTUALLY APPEAR AS DUPLICITOUS TYPES.

Nevertheless, the recurring motif of deferred self-reference seems to fade into a remainder of the white, Western man.

Let me ask: What is a “Country Self” today, for me here in France, Switzerland, or the UK? Which part of me is my “Country Self”, that gets so badly kicked in the ass by the bourgeois hipster? And what about Graham's Vancouver, with its large tech multinationals, the Greenpeace headquarters, and a proud film industry known as “Hollywood North.” A peripheral countryside?

Rodney Graham's artistic work is too complex and human to allow a clear answer to this question. It



Top: George Cruikshank, *Monsters of 1825-26*, 1826, pencil and watercolor on paper / Middle: Website of Landlust, 2020 / Bottom: George Cruikshank, *The Horses, going to the Dogs*, 1828, etching

avoids forms of binary meaning production, but let me expand on the backdrop of cultural production in Canada, by including another, attention shifting cinematic tale. *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) dramatically tells a story of male and female characters, and the social dynamics of dealing with evil, in an Inuit community, set in an ancient past. Based on an orally transmitted traditional Inuit legend, the film was written, shot, and produced in Igloolik, Nunavut, in the Canadian North, from the mid 1990s until its release in 2001. It was produced by the collective Isuma, which in 1990 had formed Igloolik Isuma Productions Inc., in order to create “independent video art from an Inuit point of view.”⁸



Left: IsumaTV, DIAMA Postcard, 2010 / Right: Website of Country Life, 2020

Employing the immersive potential of both the framing while shooting, and the long duration of 172 minutes of the finalized *Atanarjuat*, the collective of script writers, actors, director, and others experiment with the cinematic form. However, they introduce a fundamental extra dimension. “Not only was the film in a largely unknown language,” resumes Monica Reid in her review from 2016, “but it [...] made no concessions to non-Inuit audiences. [...] No effort is made to clarify distinctly Inuit activities or devices which are not immediately obvious, or to interpret Inuit concerns and values according to a European perspective. The non-Inuit viewer [...] feels very much the outsider, watching a film made by and for an unfamiliar society.”⁹ The standard expectations regarding the shared language of cinema are partly set aside, and allow for a different meaning to unfold. The presence of the minority language and its culture experienced during the screening at the Cannes film festival, for example, points toward the fact of different socioeconomic realities that embody opposite and probably exclusive positions in history.

Now is the moment to repeat the question regarding which part of myself is the Country-Self? What about the effects of the digital divide, performed by high-speed internet access and digital

literacy, bound to class and age, as well as the stable networks of the industrialized economy? A related contemporary blindspot might well be the extraordinarily high consumption of electricity by information technology—still unquestioned—hand in hand with the ruthless capitalization of natural and human resources, their territories, and climate dynamics. A map of conflicts between digitally driven capital and many others, colonized and exploited, or declared non-existent, might be redrawn as the new countryside.



As I am writing this, however, news is coming in about an exhibition called *Countryside: The Future*. Let's hope that Rem Koolhaas's project at the Guggenheim in New York outruns *Country Life* magazine! In that light, *City Self/Country Self* allows me to sense something else than the popular logic of binary patterns, namely the undoubtedly complicated tangle of one's various selves of located and roaming biology, body, language, and culture.

- 1 From 2000 onwards, avatar character Ann Lee becomes the protagonist of several artistic productions, in parallel, as agreed by its copyright holders, the French artists Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno, and Pierre Huyghe.
- 2 In the German city of Hamburg, from 1996 onwards.
- 3 As such characterized by the author in *Talen delen op eigen risico, Metropolis M 6* (2001), using Adrian Piper's concept of shared language, as of 1996.
- 4 As tellingly documented by Geert Lovink in *My First Recession* (Rotterdam: V2, NAi Publishers, 2003).
- 5 Realized for *Skulptur Projekte Münster* in its second edition, in 1987.
- 6 *Halcion Sleep* (1994), 26 min., black-and-white, single-channel video, its referencing of Hollywood and film noir as well as of the genre of videoed early performance art have been precisely discussed by Alexander Alberro in his 1999 essay “Demystifying the Image: The Film and Video Work of Rodney Graham,” in *Rodney Graham: Cinema, Music, Video*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna, 1999), pp. 73–85.
- 7 Darian Leader, *The System of Rodney Graham's Costume Trilogy*, in: “Rodney Graham”, exhibition cat., eds. Ivona Blazwick, Anthony Spira, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2002, pp. 36–66.
- 8 www.isumavt.com/isuma, in: About Isuma.
- 9 Monica Reid, “Film Review: A Detailed Analysis of *The Fast Runner Trilogy*”, *Faroutmagazine.co.uk*, March 9, 2016, https://faroutmagazine.co.uk.