

ENERGY – Visions (TERROIR Jasper Testo ENG 12.294 battute s.i.)

It's Too Late, The Future Is Over: 1979

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There are episodes in history, proper crises, when for a brief year an abyss of possibilities opens up. For a circuit around the sun, the planet continues to rotate as it should, but human affairs are thrown into disorder. Viewed retrospectively, these episodes appear as times of uncertainty, in which the normal entrainment of political, economic and cultural power is undone. Superpowers find themselves helpless, sovereign parliaments legislate into the void, previously immutable economic laws no longer hold, and the actions of individuals have wildly unpredictable results. This is a time in which accidents take precedence over policy, and meaningful narratives break down into a sequence of atomized facts. It is as if the world is afflicted by a kind of amnesia, not so much an erasure of the past, but an inability to remember the future.

It is without doubt that 1979 was one such year. A timeline:

In January of 1979, Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavī, Shah of Iran, king of kings, Light of the Aryans and heir to a throne of 25 centuries, begins a holiday that will end in permanent exile, seeking refuge in Egypt and the United States before accepting the hospitality of General Torrijos, dictator of Panama.

Four days after the Shah leaves Iran, Saudi Arabia speculates upon perceived instability in the oil supply by announcing a drastic cut in production. Spot prices of oil rise by 36%. The British Government, not known for its theocratic leanings, but a major merchant of Iranian Oil and bound by contract to supply oil to Japan, declares the crisis *force majeure*, effectively an *Act of God*, in order to escape its obligations. Corporations follow suite. The vertical integration of the international oil market begins to fray. On February 11, the last troops loyal to the Shah are overwhelmed in street fighting by adherents of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic Republic of Iran becomes an inevitability.

On the following day, the first World Climate Conference opens in Geneva. Convened by the United Nation's World Meteorological Organization, it is both a scientific and geopolitical affair, and conducted with all the cumbrous tentativeness and ceremony that this implies. Self-referential resolutions are passed, research programmes are suggested, investigations are tabled, further conferences are proposed. At the time of the conference, there are 4.4 billion people living in the world, consuming 64 million barrels of oil a day, 23 billion barrels a year.

March 28, a pump fails at the Three Mile Island nuclear power station. Coolant circulation stops, and the reactor begins to melt down. Contaminated water is released from the reactor core, and superheated vapour escapes the generator. Within the 20 mile radius of the plant, hundreds of thousands of people evacuate.

On the 4th of November, a group of militants occupies the US embassy in Tehran, seizing 90 hostages (53 of them American).

On November 9, NORAD computers report a massive Soviet nuclear attack, causing the scrambling of long range bombers. The cause of the alarm is human error – a technician loading a simulation into the computer system without switching the system status to "test".

On November 12, US president Jimmy Carter freezes all oil imports from Iran, thereby masochistically preempting an Iranian threat as American policy.

On the 20th of November, fundamentalist militants seize the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Initial attempts by Saudi security forces to reclaim the site result in failure. A special dispensation is given to allow French Commandos—non-believers—into the holiest of cities. The two week long siege leaves several hundred dead. The price of oil doubles, and continues to rise. Rationing is introduced, and long queues appear across the US as drivers seek petrol. It is later estimated that 150,000 barrels of oil are wasted by car engines left idling as they wait in line at the gas station.

In the midst of this year, on the 12th of April, 1979, the film *Mad Max* is released. Made for around half a million dollars, it grosses two hundred times as much in ticket sales worldwide, becoming for a time the most profitable film ever made.

The Iranian revolution, the disaster at Three Mile Island, the World Climate Conference are all significant historical events in the period that is often now called "the second oil crisis". The Iranian revolution can be seen as a culminating event in the ideological renaissance of the Middle East, roused from centuries of near slumber by the dual stimulus of foreign currency and the scandal of Israel. Three Mile Island, for its part, can be seen as the moment of despair in the technocratic reverie of the US military-industrial complex. The most sophisticated of cybernetic systems showed themselves to be completely impotent in the face of the idiocy of men. The World Climate Conference presented scientific research, but it also revealed the international community as a ponderous fiction, less real than the tasteless, colourless gases that were slowly changing their proportions in the Earth's physical atmosphere.

The release of *Mad Max* seems, at first inspection, to be wholly unrelated to such portentous events. However as the co-author of the script, James McCausland, explained in interview many years later, *Mad Max* was a film written under the realisation that we aren't going to make it. What struck McCausland was the possibility that collective challenges might not bring out the best in humanity, but the worst:

"there were further signs of the desperate measures individuals would take to ensure mobility. A couple of oil strikes that hit many pumps revealed the ferocity with which Australians would defend their right to fill a tank. Long queues formed at the stations with petrol – and anyone who tried to sneak ahead in the queue met raw violence. ... George and I wrote the [*Mad Max*] script based on the thesis that people would do almost anything to keep vehicles moving and the assumption that nations would not consider the huge costs of providing infrastructure for alternative energy until it was too late."

—James McCausland, writing in *The Courier-Mail*, 2006

In McCausland's imagination, the car was tool, motive and motif of violence. McCausland's co-author and director, George Miller, had more direct reason for associating automobiles with morbidity. Miller had been a medical doctor in an Australian emergency room, where he was continually exposed to car related injuries and deaths. Miller and McCausland were part of a generation who no longer saw the automobile as proof of individual autonomy and prosperity, but rather as a sign of unbound egotism and impending collapse. Had the second energy crisis not taken place, *Mad Max* may well have bombed at the box office. As things turned out, *Max* was the unwitting beneficiary of world events, fiction appearing as prophecy.

Mad Max presented a future in which petrol is a scarce commodity, and roads, rather than being freeways of commerce, are the terrain vague of violent gangs. The film was not explicitly concerned with the politics of the day—it was a dystopic Sci-Fi Western, set in a landscape that was dusty, waterless and ruined. What was pointedly contemporary was that *Mad Max*

managed to miscegenate its post-apocalyptic theme with anxieties about fuel shortages, bikies, the underbelly of the countercultural movements, and an skepticism about the moral agency of individuals. The eponymous main character, Max Rockatansky, in general fulfills the cliché of rogue cop turned vigilante, dedicated to avenging the murder of his family. The detail that disturbs the genre is that Max attempts to leave the force *before* his wife and child are murdered, because he is troubled by the possibility that he might be enjoying the violence. Mad Max is no Hamlet, but it showed a world out of joint, in which even the heroic characters act out of a mixture of brute force and sadism, and all importantly, *the film does not end happily*.

Mad Max violates the golden rule of Hollywood -- that the future should be better than the past. The popularity of Mad Max's techno-pessimism, low-brow and half-articulate as it is, speaks volumes about its era. More articulately, the Iranian rhetorician Reza Negarestani has argued that oil is evil, a sentient residue of the dead, and that the burning of oil represents a collective guilt more powerful than original sin; the feeding of a historical machine driven and lubricated entirely by necrosis.

What emerges half-thought in this disappointed period of the 1970s is the obscene corollary of the hippy doctrine that the earth is holistic, interdependent, and sentient. That is, that the earth may indeed be alive, but the *Eros* that animates the planet is accompanied by a bloody minded, malicious *Thanatos*, a desire to die. Rather unlike the outcome of Buckminster-Fuller's "The World Game", in which all players co-operate to succeed, we are individuals conspiring to fail. Whether by nuclear strike or slow asphyxiation, by starvation or over-population, the beast is slouching towards Bethlehem.

Like Mad Max, Terroir's proposition is concerned with a post-apocalyptic landscape. Suggestively, the regions that Terroir considers do not correspond to the traditional lines of sovereignty of states and territories. Their project, in crudest terms, divides the Southern Continent up amongst four sources of alternative energy: solar, wind, geothermal, and wave. The west coast and the east coast are dependent on wave power, the north, hooked on solar energy, the south reliant on geothermal energy, and the south-east highlands dependent on wind power. The territories of Terroir are zones with blurred, curved and shifting boundaries. The moral is clear: energy does not recognise political borders. These zones rather represent competing technologies of adaptation—competing, but not mutually exclusive, interconnected, but not necessarily interdependent. The people that can harness the waves are not necessarily the same as those who can trap the wind, but all feed the road, the all important road that promises fluidity and survival.

In the old Australia, before the apocalypse, each state had a clearly defined boundary with its neighbours. With the sole exception of the old and fertile states of New South Wales and Victoria, these boundaries were sharply drawn lines that cut across deserts and rivers, highlands and swamps, as if inscribed by a mandate from heaven. Each state existed as the hinterland of its capital city and port. Roads brought the resources of the state to the city. Seen from space, roads wove into a canker around each city like nerves in a gangloin. Their role was to assist in the exploitation of the continent, in the transport of resources from the periphery to the imperial centre, whether London, New York or Rome. After the apocalypse, roads form a looser web, a sensitive network whose weave is defined by the availability of energy. The roads are both an energy grid, and a consumer of energy. These roads are not amenable to authoritarian government. They are both nerves and muscle cells of a vitalised continent, routes for nomads, paths without destinations. This is what the promised collision and collusion of automobile and landscape looks like.

Energy is harvested and distributed in small power stations splayed along these roads. Each type of power station has an iconography all its own, part improvised cathedral, part brutal pragmatism. They express the elemental forces that enable them to function. In the solar stations, the form of the building traces the motion of the sun with the same obsession as the Maid of Corinth tracing the face of her lover. In the geothermal stations, escaping water vapour provides a sublimated column, connecting the land with the heavens. Windmills are transformed into the ranks of giants that Don Quixote tangled with... Cultural references from a dead civilisation, all of them. Rather than memorials to a spent past, these are monuments to an indecipherable future.