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Some Thoughts on Autumn Song

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“Some thoughts on *Autumn Song*: a video by John Conomos”

Jon Cockburn

January 2009

Substantially revised from the draft of May 1999

In late 1998, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Roslyn Oxley 9 Gallery, Sydney, *Autumn Song*, a twenty-three minute video by John Conomos, was shown for the first time. This work explores the theme of ‘threat’ meted out to John Conomos by his parents, when in his childhood he was thought to be indolent. The core of this threat was that Conomos would become a member of the do-nothing culturati, like his geographically distant Uncle Manoli “who never left the Greek island of Kythera” (Conomos “Artists Statement” 2). Yet for John Conomos’ parents, an immigrant family working-to-do-well operating an Australian milk bar, issuing the “Uncle Manoli” threat was always more about the engagement of memory than the calling to notice of a tangible and present reality. At the time, threats of becoming an “Uncle Manoli” provoked in the young John Conomos a distant narrative more than it did the prospect of a mimetic eventuality on reaching adulthood: *Autumn Song* implies that this response has changed. To negotiate its contents Conomos sets out *Autumn Song* in four sections following the introduction. These are: “I am at home, nowhere, in no house and in no country”; “The limits of my language”; “Nonsense...is the sense of all senses”; and “The writer, daytime insomniac”. The following thoughts on Conomos’ work are also set out under four sub-headings addressing the works’ concerns, but they do so differently.

Part 1: Grabs of despair – the Aleph and the Autodidact

The forays by Conomos into the realms of the moving image essay can mistakenly be interpreted as a claim for one form of artistic expression or media over another, yet this is far from the case. On the contrary, Conomos, with forty years of working with the moving image, has used media for the

facility of delivering clever manipulations of images, sound track and sound effects in combination with a poetic yet intellectual dialogue. During his career, the moving image essay in experimental film and video has shifted or jumped between small frame moving film, reel-to-reel videotape, VHS, CD-ROM, DVD, and now confronts the rapid take-up of Blu-Ray HD among other digital HD formats. In short, the fleeting impact of images, sound effects, sound track and the spoken word, when combined and moving across the viewer's field of vision, in essay form, best signifies for Conomos the entropic effect of time on the collective intellect. It is ironic that to cut-out or "grab" an analysis of John Conomos' work and unpack its construction it is necessary to fall back on the operational choices built into the hardware functions that drive content delivery. In the case of *Autumn Song*, the work was first available as VHS cassette recording and the START – PAUSE – REWIND – REPLAY – PAUSE *ad infinitum* prerogative of the reviewer imposes upon the work its own poetic form:

PLAY – *Autumn Song*, what impresses first is the motivated saturation of image and sound.

STOP – to be immersed in memories – is this what is being suggested?

REPLAY – 5 minutes: 22 seconds into tape – whose memories are not the memories of others? Whose memories are not immersed in the memory of others?

FAST FORWARD – passion and pain, hope and despair!

STOP – the past present and the present past collide.

REWIND TO GRAB – 2 minutes 55 seconds and the graphically motivated image saturation is purposefully manipulated: WHY? What links the flow of sequences! A jump cut, then a montage of references, all set before the viewer who must seek their meaning – in the following multi-sensory experience just what is being circumscribed?

STOP – REWIND.

Autumn Song sets up its moving image essay content autobiographically and consequently the situation of the viewer before the video is that of a voyeur. Taking the point further, if an analogy best describes the viewer of *Autumn Song* it is that of a phantom Jorge Luis Borges, within the cubic confinement of the televisual where the monitor becomes Carlos Argentino's cellar in Buenos Aires and in that cellar the fictional narrator, presumably Borges, claims:

I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy... (21)

However, unlike the Borgesian Aleph we do not see "every point and angle" knowable in the spinning universe. Instead we are restricted to traces of Kythera: the core of *Autumn Song*'s lament. Yet as these images 'flicker', an appropriate 1920s-30s American colloquialism describing the cinematic experience, before our eyes-mind-eyes we see the bowels of place play-out from every point and every angle between Kythera in Greece, Tempe in Australia and Conomos' imagination reaching back to childhood memories. In *Autumn Song* the cascade of these images is held together by Conomos depicting himself as an existential insomniac perspiring his place amongst the placeless (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. *Autumn Song* 1996.
John Conomos as insomniac.

In a fanciful amalgam of literary cross-references, one could imagine that Jean-Paul Sartre had Borges in mind when he described the autodidact in his novel *Nausea* (1938). Jorge Luis Borges, locked in the routines of an Argentine library, buried in the barely visible post-colonial Latin-American condition, Borges the autodidact scanning for files of profundity, only to invent fictions to stand in place of his favourite redolent facts. However, in *Autumn Song*, instead of Borges and Sartre we have the image of Conomos' childhood, with him trapped out back of an antipodean milk bar scanning the mind's restless cypher, trying to see all points in a universe, a world made up of popular cultural references inextricably bound to yet conflicting with his developing conventional cultural entablature. *Autumn Song* articulates the young Conomos' struggle to keep up with the banal chores of a family business (Fig. 2), yet all the while he is increasingly trapped in the ambience of necessity that cultivates the potential Sartrean autodidact craving to go beyond immediate intellectual limits.



Figure 2. *Autumn Song* 1996. Young Conomos out-back of Tempe Café in Sydney, sorting empty soft drink bottles.

The actions of an autodidact are raw excavations of knowledge, but what is the motivation for autodidactic digging? Is it a concern for signifiers of memory? Is it the indexing of a collective archive to the past or an attempt to know on every level the present/future? Is the answer found in an ill-disciplined search for a certain and indisputable shared cultural memory? John Conomos sweats memory and its threat throughout the rummaging of restless imagery and iconic cultural talismans in *Autumn Song*. In all, these restless images and personal excavations, represented as

memories captured in twenty-three minutes of iconic emblems and cinematic grabs, are set out to signify the scholarly nightmares that haunted the life of Uncle Manoli in Kythera. It is also implied that these scholarly nightmares now haunt the life of his adult academic nephew. How can the viewers before these excavations, this ‘flicker’ of an Aleph entitled *Autumn Song*, cypher of memory – PLAY ON? THE VIEWERS CAN PLAY ON BY SIMPLY PUSHING THE CORRECT COMMAND ON THE REMOTE CONTROL! TO BE REMOTE = AS IN DISTANCE AND AS IN TIME!

Part 2: The enclosed, the open and the storyteller

To take your thoughts on memory inward is to be immersed in the dominion of silence that is remembrance. In the urbane milieu, recall combines entities, such as of tears and trams, of laughter and sirens, of solitude amidst crowds and the crowding of solitude in subways. Yet this representation of urbane memory is too sentimental, for to be alone in Georg Simmel’s metropolis is to be in control, where “in an intellectualized and refined sense the citizen of the metropolis is ‘free’ in contrast with the trivialities and prejudices which bind the small town person.” (75-76).

The metropolis is memory in perpetual motion – memory is put to work in the activity of Simmel’s ‘blasé’ *flâneur*. This same blasé *flâneur* is able to tap the potentialities of multiple experiences as extensions of persona – putting them to the task of perpetually reinventing the self as mental activity, or in other words the perpetual self as reinvention (Simmel 69-79). However, this is not the case if you are Uncle Manoli, the autodidact of Kythera, a place where the “sphere of life of the small town is, in the main, enclosed within itself” (Simmel 76). In Kythera the sphere of life has a finite circumference and the flesh and blood Uncle Manoli’s identity was fixed. Uncle Manoli was among the do-nothing culturati, as purposeless über-autodidact, wherein lay his tragedy.

It is this tragic irony, this inescapable condition of being in place that John Conomos investigates in respect to the threat of “Uncle Manoli”. But what else can be said of memory as threat? Is memory conditional? Passed from hand to hand to mouth to ear to mouth to hand to eye to ear to eye to eye to hand to mouth to fear to friendship to family to fact to fiction to fantasy to imaging to representation to insomnia. Alternatively, is memory akin to Walter Benjamin’s storyteller? Where he claimed that:

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (91)

As storyteller John Conomos indulges a conceit, when within *Autumn Song* he acknowledges the poetic French film and photography essayist Chris Marker. In *La Jetée*, the 1962 short film composed almost entirely of photographic stills, Marker placed at the spiralling core of his time-loop paradox the image of a woman standing on the pier at Orly Airport near Paris. With each return to this image, via the memory of the protagonist, the woman on the pier, in the park, at the museum, on the pier, with each return to this image the recollection leads closer to its ultimate consequence. This consequence is described in the film’s final scenes when the fideist fidelity of memory attains



Figure 3. *La Jetée* 1962. The time-travelling protagonist recalls, witnesses and experiences his death on the pier at Orly Airport, Paris.

its moment of absolute mimetic recall. At that moment memory, the memory of the protagonist, remembers its—his own death (Fig. 3). The storyteller and the storytelling immerse the story in transformations, processed within its own kiln, to burn away the storyteller but leave the story. In this sense John Conomos' story is as a trace, the trace of "Uncle Manoli" that flickers on a video monitor not as report, but as a time-loop paradox where in place of Marker's protagonist in *La Jetée* is seen John Conomos perspiring his "Uncle Manoli" as the insomniac autodidact (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).



Figure 4. *La Jetée* 1962. The time-travelling protagonist enlisted "to summon the Past and Future to the aid of the Present" (Marker).



Figure 5. *Autumn Song* 1996. John Conomos as time-travelling protagonist from *La Jetée*, selected for "his obsession with an image from the past" (Marker).

To follow Benjamin's line then is to hold that storytelling is not the journalistic act of recollecting. But is memory recollecting? No, memory is not recollecting, as a recollection is a moment forgotten in its recall, the square root of the enunciator. But to recollect a recollection, that is memory. And memory recalls its recollection at every moment, being both blind and sighted, at every moment similar to yet different from the moment recalled. Memory shifts in its ambiguous accuracy while a recollection stands alone; as recall it is fixed then forgotten.

Part 3: The something-nothing and montage's idiot savant

In the early twentieth century, the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian painted a jetty jutting into an elliptical sea. He painted that recollection of the jetty and it became memory, memory of a jetty painted again and again, but with each painting in the series, with each recall transfixed as memory, the jetty and the sea disappeared into an abstraction, into a grid of primary paint, a structure in place of the thing recalled, yet signifying nothing (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). The memory of the jetty had become its own something-nothing. In Mondrian's own words: "Our whole being is as much the one as the other: the unconscious and the conscious, the immutable and the mutable, emerging and changing form through their reciprocal action." (Mondrian 287)

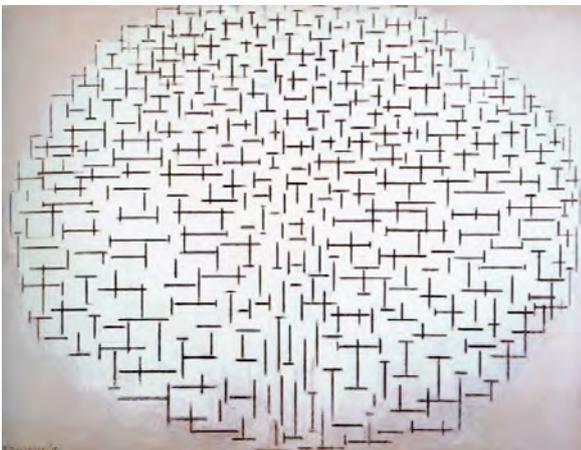


Figure 6. Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). *Composition No.10 (Pier and Ocean)* 1915. Oil on canvas. 85 x 108 cm. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Netherlands.



Figure 7. Piet Mondrian. (1872-1944). *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray.* 1921. Oil on canvas. 76 x 52.4 cm. MoMA, New York.

As established earlier, in *Autumn Song* John Conomos montages an accumulation of biographical references, both poetic and descriptive, as an encyclopaedic archive of intellectual and cultural signs mimetic of the chaotic structure applied to facts by an autodidact. With each return to central

motifs drawn from this collection we, the viewers, witness memory becoming its own something–nothing. However, this something–nothing is not a variation on the concept of simulacra promoted by Jean Baudrillard. What we witness in *Autumn Song* is something, as the references contained within the video do not stand in place of; rather they are in place and the place is the no-place tossing between recollection, memory and personal identity. In this sense something is nothing which, like the progression of Mondrian’s jetty and ocean, becomes the something–nothing.

To return to the motifs of the video, can it be, is it possible to interpret the direct and indirect referencing of intellectual and cultural signs within *Autumn Song* as a montage strategy of the Eisenstein method? Yes! Eisenstein’s method of dialectical editing and subsequent manipulation of reception require the drift of the juxtaposed and imaged information into something, into the third or synthetic meaning. Does this exhibition of the video maker’s virtuosity reduce *Autumn Song* to the display of technical facility within a modernist moving image convention, as against Walter Benjamin’s trace as function of the storyteller? NO! This classic–modernist cinematic method operates in *Autumn Song* coincidentally and is used obliquely as a structural device – contrary to the autodidactic act that shuffles montage like playing cards in the hands of an *idiot savant*.

Does the populist description of post-modern culture as the plethora of unbound, nomadic and meaningless information apply to the development and structure of Conomos’ video? NO! The characterization of Uncle Manoli depicts him as *idiot savant* pursuing a montage of intellectual and cultural interests, and to do so the diegesis of *Autumn Song* takes on the form of straight-faced parody, where structure is significant but not didactic. Likewise, *Autumn Song* acts the satirical mask, a Greek theatrical device to fool the inattentive as to the true character of Conomos’ intent, framed by the video’s core referent, the threat of “Uncle Manoli”.

Part 4: The Aleph, the storyteller, the something–nothing, the trace and the reader

Does the threat of “Uncle Manoli”, within the Conomos family memory, operate only as referent where the figure of this now distant and long dead relative acts as a talisman of Greek cultural contact rather than that of cultural intellect? Does it follow then that “Uncle Manoli” is a talisman of nothing? Are the intellectual and cultural signs collected and projected in *Autumn Song*, images indexed by Conomos as if indexed by his Uncle Manoli, signs of Conomos’ cultural contact and not his intellect? Are these signs of Uncle Manoli and Kythera equatable to Baudrillard’s empty signifiers, four stages removed from any content and existing as no more than vacuous semblances? No, they are not! The structure, organization and content of *Autumn Song*, as an audio-visual experience, still refers directly to scholarship that is based upon preoccupied research and not to empty cultural and intellectual contact characteristic of autodidactic habit. Furthermore, the grabs employed in *Autumn Song* are garnered by years of practice and knowledge acquired by John Conomos as a professional academic. The breadth of the references loaded into *Autumn Song* by Conomos is not a narcissistic refection of the vacuous gaze of an inattentive mtv viewer, distracted channel jumper or bored net-surfer. Likewise, they are not the product of Kythera so much as Kythera reframed, repositioned and re-shot by Conomos. It is through the technical and academic sleight-of-hand of the storyteller that John Conomos exposes himself as trace and not as the dumb mimic of a long dead relative.

Consequently, the trace of the storyteller in *Autumn Song* is the ambiguity of the “Uncle Manoli” threat and John Conomos being one and the same, while merging into a scholarly personification of Borges’ Aleph – that point “in space that contains all other points” (Borges 17). *Autumn Song* is a litany of cultural artefacts that peel off like exotic recollections stamped in the pages of a well-travelled passport or the crowding of on-line hypertext information when an unstoppable cascade of pop-up windows confronts the user. The exotic recollections represented in *Autumn Song* are

standing, but not necessarily understood, facts in reserve just as they are fields of vision waiting to be acted upon. The litany of cultural artefacts and exotic recollections presented in the video essay form gives ephemeral shape to the ambiguity of something that stands before us as nothing – but could this something be collectively acted upon? NO! The audience takes in information relatively and acts within the parameters of their reception regardless of the author’s intent – the something–nothing is always the something and the nothing regardless – is it – not? To rephrase and pose again this question – is memory “a residue left in the mind by the ruins of time”? (Hartman 1). Like the boatman in Claude Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah* (rel. 1985), a holocaust survivor who gets to sing again many decades later as an old man on the same river of death that in his adolescence he sung as a bargain for life, while hauling goods for his Nazi captors. The boatman gets to sing again, not in an act of re-enactment nor as a representation, but as trace. In that same countryside through which the river of death once meandered comes the haunting chant of a sweet voice returned but different, matured to bear witness. The something–nothing is always the something and the nothing. It is this haunting and inexplicable doubt before the gates of our own mortality that troubles John Comonos as the frame freezes, blurs, slows in motion and runs through again this recounting of his Uncle Manoli, as person and as threat.

The present moment in *Autumn Song* (be it poetic, be it imaginary, be it concerned with place or placeless, be it existential or phenomenological, be it visible or implied) is the present as the ruins left by the residue of time parcelled out as memory. Over the course of twenty-three minutes of video, John Conomos poses these ruins as multivalent, a composite in which the mind acts as a component and not as the centre of a meaning-making machine. This component, not unlike an engine’s electrical distributor, attempts to control the charges fired off by the collision of childhood socialization, parental expectations and enigmatic family history confronting personal cultural and scholastic preoccupations.



Figure 8. *Autumn Song* 1996. Speaking of the fabled Northwest Passage, John Conomos looms from behind a grab from *The General* (1927) depicting a melancholy Buster Keaton resignedly realizing locomotion.



Figure 9. In *Autumn Song* 1996, a grab from *Entr'acte* (1924) the surrealist film by René Clair showing the anarchic funeral procession.

In *Autumn Song* the various scholarly references act as Bakelite encasement, attempting to contain and organize the working charge. Several of these scholarly references pronounce themselves explicitly within the text, such as the brief grab showing a melancholy Buster Keaton unaware of his incorporation into the forward rhythm of a steam locomotive (Fig. 8). Yet other references are choreographed as asides that whisper of René Clair (Fig. 9), Man Ray, Maya Deren and “the tranquil wintry landscape of Kythera (the island that the surrealists included in their map of the world)” (Exhibition Broadsheet). *Autumn Song* plays out as if it is a linear compilation of findings drawn from Vannevar Bush’s laterally indexing Memex machine, while also reminding us of Roland Barthes who pointed out that:

a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is

the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (148)

In keeping with Barthes' note above, on the unanchored and shifting possibilities of reception, the scholarly references in *Autumn Song* often double in significance. For instance the landscape of Kythera had a fascination for the Surrealists and is also the video's major motif, often standing in place of Uncle Manoli. In Conomos family history Uncle Manoli was the distant family member left behind on Kythera when his close relatives immigrated to Australia. He is the enigmatic and fabled name used to intone threat and its consequence when uttered at the childhood John Conomos for not pulling his fair share of the workload in the family milk bar. "Uncle Manoli" as threat was a descriptor for the dire outcomes that follow when intellectual action appears to be physical inaction. In the family Conomos, "Uncle Manoli" was a threat used to intimidate – to curb cultural inquiry and intellectual curiosity manifesting itself as inconsequential indolence before family obligations and milk bar chores. "Uncle Manoli" was also the threat of an ultimate adulthood consequence – to grow to become an Uncle Manoli – the "legendary lazy misanthropic writer who spent his time playing cards in taverns" (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11) (Conomos "Artists Statement" 3).



Figure 10. *Autumn Song* 1996. Kythera
Café card game.



Figure 11. *Autumn Song* 1996. Kythera
Café card table.

In the history of the Conomos family, the flesh and blood Uncle Manoli's ultimate suicide implied the dangers of accumulated cultural memory, that is of knowing too much and doing too little, when recollections on recollections crowd to the point of being uncontrollable, unable to be contained or put to good use. Uncle Manoli might once have been Kythera's cultural Bakelite structure, but in time, in memory, in accumulated knowledge and restricted to a limited and well known geo-social topography, the flesh and blood Uncle Manoli is swallowed by the core of his own erudite yet unstructured assemblage. Uncle Manoli, the autodidact, tied a rope to a boulder and threw himself down a large well (Fig. 12). (7)



Figure 12. *Autumn Song* 1996.
John Conomos re-enacts Uncle Manoli's suicide.

Paradoxically, viewers of *Autumn Song* have "Uncle Manoli" positioned as a threat against them, a threat that conflates "Uncle Manoli" with Simmel's blasé intellect. However, the threat to the viewer of "Uncle Manoli" does not emanate from the realization of a blasé intellect in itself, but rather the threat that a prized blasé intellect will remain unrealized, rendered negative through misinterpretation, as indolent being rather than being cosmopolite. The positioning of the viewer in *Autumn Song* is unlike the pedantic persona of the autodidact in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, the hobbyist of studies, the accumulator of knowledge, the inscriber of memory, who is personified as an absurdity. In Sartre's fiction the many attempts by the autodidact at a cosmopolitan posture –

fawning to be blasé intellect – remain unrealized, misunderstood and misinterpreted, becoming an introvert’s tragedy:

I got rid of the Autodidact after stuffing his pockets with postcards, prints, and photos. He went off enchanted and I switched off the light. Now I am alone. Not quite alone. There is still that idea, waiting in front of me. It has rolled itself into a ball, it remains there like a big cat; it explains nothing, it doesn’t move, it simply says no... (Sartre 57)

The autodidactic knowledge – “Uncle Manoli’s” knowledge – knows no purpose and this is its absurdity; it has no direction but to testify to the autodidact’s social inadequacy. The prospect of this existentialist placelessness humidifies the insomniac scenes in *Autumn Song*. In his video John Conomos questions the purpose of his own intellectual preoccupations and accumulations, only to stare at his shadows while imagining his “Uncle Manoli” as threat fulfilled. In short, the ultimate doubt for Conomos is that, like Sartre’s autodidact and his own Uncle Manoli, he is empty of any intellectual worth. In this scenario, the promise of Simmel’s blasé intellect is a phantom promise. Throughout *Autumn Song* an overwhelming sense of intellectual, cultural and social inconsequentiality runs as sub-text. The period between 1996 and 1998, during *Autumn Song*’s production and release, coincided with the heating up of economic rationalism and global corporatism. In that triumphant neo-conservative milieu critical scholarly interests and intellectual preoccupations were being attacked as if life being thrown down a village well. As John Conomos was fond of saying at the time: “Intellectual integrity, don’t make me laugh, it’s all smoke and mirrors Jon, just you wait and see, I’m telling you, it’s happening now, tomorrow’s academic is Krusty the Clown” (Krusty the Clown: character in the popular American television cartoon series *The Simpsons*).

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