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Ice Cold in Austria and the Frozen Signifying Chain

Written by Allan Smith

I first watched *Where Eagles Dare* in my school hall in Hamilton in 1970; the same year my grandmother died and left our family a print of Pieter Breughel's painting *Hunters in the Snow*. The following year I read the thriller that Alistair MacLean wrote up from the film's screenplay. For those who haven't seen it, you could picture *Where Eagles Dare* as a WWII version of Breughel's winter vista, with milling troops of the Wehrmacht Alpine Corps replacing Breughel's weary peasants, and with his icy valley floor criss-crossed by railway tracks, an assortment of trucks and motorcycles, and a cable car, with a dark castle set on the highest of the painting's mountain crags.

Alternatively you might think of it as Alistair MacLean's *Ice Station Zebra* retold as a wartime story of allies versus Nazis.ⁱ The imagery of the film, shot in several Austrian sites, has stuck with me since that first viewing. Over the last few years my own minor obsession with the alpine imagery of the movie has merged with a widespread contemporary fascination shown by art, cinema, writing, and advertising in all things remote and Nordic, in excessive landscapes of ice, snow and pine forests, in the sublime beauty of an implacably cold world, in nostalgia for the coldness of the Cold War; in something quite different than Hamilton.

I know friends who can't wait to get their hands on a second-hand copy of one of the classic accounts of Polar exploration to add to their collection of this compelling genre of stripped back, whited-out Romantic adventure. Absolut Icebars and Hotels have surely benefited from incessant talk of global warming in their intent to evoke the exact opposite, to finesse an arctic imaginary through extreme fantasies of a new ice age. Promotional advertising for Chivas whisky has similarly produced its own imagery of the fashionable luxuries of a super-cooled life on ice. Recent studies such as Francis Spufford's *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, and Eric G. Wilson's *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science and the Imagination* have put these enduring tropes into a reflective historical context.ⁱⁱ

Through brutal simplification, a snow and ice bound landscape turns the world into something like a mental model, like a working diagram that gains intensity through aggressive reduction. Black and white photographs work in a similar way; they intensify affective content by suppressing or blanketing, as if by some iron decree, so many confirmations of the familiar that we normally rely on to feel at home, like local colour and the comfort of incidental details. The narrativised monochrome landscape of the film *Where Eagles Dare* and the graphic architecture of Simon Esling's eponymous installational painting are

both kinds of stark working diagrams; abstract machines, working conceptual structures that generate various kinds of significance and affects. The ceaseless and repeating journeys of the cable car, that are really a type of circulation, are at the heart of them both.

Simon's work, in fact, clarifies how the cable car functions in the film as a type of operational model of the film's generative structures; the cable car is an impersonal machine that makes connections between two opposed spaces – the castle and the village at the foot of the mountains. Further variety of alternating oppositions and contrasts in the film can be read as the circulation of Hollywood cut-out characters and thematics; sinister castle and local village; Allied spies dressed as Germans and German spies dressed as Germans posing as Allied spies; Allied spies posing as German double-agents; good intelligence officers and traitorous intelligence officers; the supposed Top Secret mission and the real mission lead by an actor posing as a General who is in fact only a private. Snow smocks which turned one way show white and the other way a patchwork of forest camouflage patterns, and the continual alternation of indoor warmth and illumination with outdoor darkness and poor visibility reinforce the subterfuges and dissemblings of identity. *Mad* comic, at the time, aptly parodied the movie's formulaic shadow play in a summary of its use of Hollywood codes for authentic speech in a foreign country: "Ok men! In a little while we are going to have to speak fluent German so we can pass off as Nazis! Of course, when we start speaking German later it will sound exactly like the English we're talking now. Why is that? So the audience will understand exactly what we're saying!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Seen from another angle, the fictional mechanics of the film, as it revolves its pasteboard signs of stereotypical characters and narrative set-pieces, points to what psychoanalysis understands as the ceaseless machinery of desire and lack; the continual movement to and from the inaccessible castle of 'the big Other' that along the way triggers an incessant generation of signifiers full of significance, "rigid with energy", but somehow frozen and unable to really declare themselves to us other than as animated fragments. The nature of this ceaseless movement toward signification is closer to the mindless persistence of the cable car ascending and returning than it is driven by any subjective intentions of individuals: "Freud's crucial breakthrough", says Eric Santner, "is, as Jacques Lacan has often emphasized, that unconscious mental activity has something mechanical about it."^{iv} Numerous writers on psychoanalysis have taken up the behaviours of various technological devices, whether telephone, television, typewriter or computer, to displace the primacy of human agency in attempts to interpret human or non-human behaviours and self-organising systems. In terms of local art practice, Esling's toiling cable cars are akin to the two hollow towers that

ground back and forth along their tracks in et al.'s 2005 Venice exhibition of *The Fundamental Practice* and Simon Ingram's appropriation of cellular automata to generate paintings according to a set of instructions rather than painterly intentions.

From dark ground to dark castle Simon's inclined signifying chain of heraldic devices, ice and twisted bone climbs in imitation of the cable car's trajectory. A chain of iconic accretions, a twisted rope of semantic shards and material excrescences, this climbing bridge assembles itself as a concatenation of compelling signifiers whose meanings shatter and implode; together they have what Santner calls an "uncanny vitality"; a signifying energy that exceeds their communicative content; a "surplus of validity over meaning"; they are "hypnotic fragments".^v Simon's eagle motifs are taken from a variety of sources including archaic Mediterranean pottery, American and German military insignia and decorations and from the floor designs from St. John's Co-Cathedral in Malta. Eagle symbols such as these also featured in the blazons of the Holy Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and of Imperial Russia. Through a maze of indirection and implicit associational links, Simon concocts a potent cocktail of military, political and ecclesiastical power. Injecting motifs from the Maltese church sets loose a swarm of conspiratorial associations and possible connections. One conspiracy website tells me that many prominent Nazis were members of the order of the Knights of Malta and that after the war the CIA's two founders, both Knights of Malta, enlisted ex-Nazis as key members; that several 'Sovereign Knight of Malta' passports were issued to high-ranking Nazis and death camp scientists to enable them to evade justice as war criminals; that two past presidents, Ronald Reagan and W. George Bush senior, were honorary initiates of the order.^{vi}

Simon himself has made mention of the mixture of different reversals and ironies of history that he understands as contributing to the work's maze of significations. This content mixes adolescent versions of WWII history and military aesthetics with a more sober knowledge of post-war politics in Germany and Europe, and Simon's own brief brush with war in the Middle East during his 2 year stay in Bahrain from 1990-1992. He describes his most surreal experience as "Going to the Gulf War after-party at a large compound/country club in the desert with thousands of US troops, and huge laser-lights and a massive sound-system, and listening to Snap's hit song *I've Got the Power* playing at full blast."^{vii} Simon has thought often of re-runs through history of powers from the West ensnaring themselves on the barbs of the East – Simon thinks of Frederik I, the Holy Roman Emperor known as 'Barbarossa' who died while leading a massive German army to the Holy Land through Turkey to crusade against Saladin's Muslim army in Jerusalem; of the failed German Barbarossa

campaign against the Russians in WWII, of Napoleon's previous defeat by Russia, and most importantly of America's imperial interventions of the first and second invasions of Iraq and the degenerative impotence of the American military in the country now. He thinks of "Operation Paper Clip", the deliberate and thorough imposition of 'intellectual reparations' on a defeated Germany by America in the late 1940s, whereby vast amounts of research and scores of scientists and researchers were co-opted to further the growth of the American Military and Industrial concerns. Whether factual or fictional, momentarily lucid or persistently opaque, the flurry of cross-references that Simon's abstract machine produces, generate a world of bleak political aspect configured as elegant graphic intrigue.

As the Director of Con Ops says to his top agent in a more recent espionage thriller: "Up there is the great and powerful Oz, and down there is the schmuck beneath the curtain. But it's not just him, it's the whole goddam contraption, the machinery, the bellows, the levers, the steam nozzles, the diesel engine, or whatever. ... And once you had that up and running, it's not going to make much difference who you've got behind the curtain, or so we figured. It's the machine, not the man, that matters." ^{viii}

1. Movie trivia from Wikipedia tells me that Howard Hughes watched the 1968 film of MacClean's 1963 novel *Ice Station Zebra* "at least dozens of times" in his hotel suite. And Quentin Tarantino has evidently named the 1969 *Where Eagles Dare* as one of his favourite films and as a film he would like to remake at some stage in the future.
2. Francis Spufford, *I May be Some Time: ice and the English imagination*, Faber and Faber, London and Boston 1997; Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science and the Imagination*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2003.
3. Larry Siegel and Angelo Torres, "Where Vultures Fare", *Mad*, # 130, 1969, see: 'Where Eagles Dare, The Unofficial Home Page': <http://www.whereeeaglesdare.com/index2.php>
4. Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: reflections of Freud and Rosenzweig*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2001, p 22, 24.
5. Eric Santner, p 37,39
6. "The Web of Intrigue"
http://www.geocities.com/newworldorder_themovie/web_of_intrigue.html
7. Email from artist to writer, September 2006.
8. Robert Ludlum, *The Janson Directive*, Orion Books Ltd., London 2003, p 467, 468.