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The construction of (un)reality

James O'Nions reviews a compelling piece of invented history at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Greenwich Degree Zero

Rod Dickinson and Tom McCarthy

Longside Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park

The premise of Greenwich Degree Zero is a piece of counterfactual history. In 1894 Martial Bourdin, a French anarchist, explodes a pipe bomb at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich (zero degrees longitude), setting off a fire that destroys the building. The mainstream press reacts with fury, and the police raid an anarchist association, the Autonomie Club, just off Tottenham Court Road. The anarchist press, meanwhile, defends the act as a blow struck for the liberty of workers and against the British Empire.

A little of this tale is true. Bourdin did indeed set off a bomb near the Royal Observatory, though he seems to have done so accidentally, and with little damage to anyone but himself. Since he was killed in the blast, no-one discovered his exact motivation, nor even if the Royal Observatory was his target. As the point from which all time in the British Empire was measured, it could well have been a highly symbolic target for Bourdin's attempted propaganda of the deed. However, at the time some on the left also speculated that Bourdin was encouraged in his act by an agent provocateur seeking to help the passage of Lord Salisbury's Aliens Bill through parliament through a 'outrage' committed by a foreign radical.

Regardless of the likelihood of this conspiracy theory, the incident itself was quickly forgotten until artist Rod Dickinson and author Tom McCarthy rescued it from obscurity to create this fascinating piece of art. Consisting largely of newspapers (from the Pall Mall Gazette to Commonweal: the revolutionary journal of anarchist communism), which have been doctored and reset, the installation also features invented police telegrams, Bourdin's membership card of the Autonomie Club, a reconstruction bomb and other ephemera, along with a primitive Victorian-style film of the Observatory burning down.



James O'Nions
September 2010

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We are never meant to be duped by the story, not least because its falsity is presented to us before we enter the room. Instead the work asks us to engage with the mass construction of reality through the media, and holds up a mirror to our own time. Fascinating though this aim is, it's the recreation of the milieu of late 19th-century London, with its community of political refugees from Europe, that really holds your attention.

As in a historical novel, you're not always quite sure where the real history ends and the fiction begins, save for in the main narrative of events. But in creating the detail, Dickinson and McCarthy make you want to believe in their conceit, to the point that I left half-believing that the Royal Observatory might indeed have burnt down.

Greenwich Degree Zero was originally created and shown in 2006, and gets this second outing at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park until 10 October. The park itself is famous for its Henry Moore sculptures, but also features site-specific work by Andy Goldsworthy and James Turrell, including the latter's Deer Shelter Skyspace, a place for contemplation created by cutting a perfectly square opening in the roof of an old deer shelter through which to observe the changing sky. Various other sculptors' works scatter the grounds, surrounded by oblivious groups of sheep (see below).

Also showing until February in both the Longside Gallery and the park itself is a major exhibition of the work of David Nash, whose work in wood combines organic and manmade shapes to create a compelling aesthetic.

A slideshow of shots of Greenwich Degree Zero is available at www.rodickinson.net

James O'Nions is co-editor of Red Pepper.

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