

In the beginning there was nothing. And the Lord said 'Let there be light' and there still nothing, but now you could see it.*

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Power is a problem, or at least the struggle for it provokes problematic situations that can be severely dangerous to the health of the one seeking it or trying to exploit it and have disastrous consequences on those for whom a concurrent loss of power is inevitable. Interpretations of the word power, from the person to person understanding of socio-political power, to the generation of power for use in homes, transport and industry, share expressions of danger and instability. It is no accident that we talk of fighting for power, power struggles and harnessing power. At every moment we have to deal with a willed tension between equilibrium and explosion, usefulness and implosive melt-down. Within most cultural contexts the use of power as a metaphor is now restricted to a deconstruction of the methods used by those who are perceived to be in control of social and political operations along with a concurrent exposure of the genius of capitalism for creating ever more subtle techniques in its monopoly of power. Most other forms of demonstrative power in relation to artistic culture have been re-aligned. The expression of power is limited and held at arms reach, for it now only reminds us of bankrupt neo-isms. Power expressed through aesthetic gesture is seen only in monochrome terms, the expression of power is something that can only be attached to extremist ideologies that have been thoroughly discredited. From the bluster of neo-expressionism to the morbid self-indulgent psycho-babble of the spiritually enabled and those who seek to harness the "power" of the unconscious.

Standing at the top of an Italian hydro-electric plant the dammed river is held in place by concrete as thick as could be realistically achieved with mid-century technology. The silence is perfect. The containment is precise. Increasing reports come from China about the potentially disastrous consequences of the government's hydro-electric policy. Veiled stories filter through of displaced populations and barely imaginable disasters. Damming and displacing in this context is seen by the Western press as a precise equivalent for the problematic relation between the Chinese State and its disenfranchised citizens. Yet closer to home the damming and harnessing of natural power also causes problems. The British too know the potential of the power metaphor. Scandals came to light in the last few years about Britain linking humanitarian aid in the South East Asian arena to contracts for hydro-electric plant. Cinematic references help bolster such power-plays, from Warren Beatty fishing in the river below a monster of concrete construction in "The Parallax View" to Harrison Ford jumping and surviving in "The Fugitive". Just about any situation where it might be necessary to indicate the struggle of one individual against a monolithic system of power barely held in check by the social rules of decency between the person and the state ends in a dam scene. Hydro-electric is symbolic in

America, both of the attempts to move through the depression of the thirties and of a half-cocked memory of pioneering struggles between inhabitants and a large land.

Nano-technology is the Nineties equivalent, in many senses, of the macro-projects of the Twentieth Century that range from NASA to the Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. Small images of even smaller achievements are now imaged for us to marvel at and provide a more intimate picture of the way power may be exercised over nature. The creation of a small guitar or tiny gear system. The power fantasies are now restricted to small moves with micro-tools. Yet it is still unclear how such technologies can be harnessed to provide true usefulness within the sphere of production. The exercise of revealing potential alone is judged a useful project in its own right. A demonstration of the power of maybe. Nano-technology is the contemporary equivalent of Dr. Johnson's advice to "Speak softly and carry a big stick". It is a continuation of the Judeo-Christian heritage of contained threat and polite power. Against the apparent bluster of Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosovic the Western European/American actions mirror the Johnsonian advice to the letter. Threat and power are exercised behind a veil of euphemism and description rather than appeals to a national spirit, ethnic calls to arms or turning to Gods as a justification for the ultimate sanction when naming behaviour as evil. Hussein dropped his guard during the Gulf campaign and slipped into the rhetoric of frustrated logic when constantly faced with accusations that his area of the world was geo-politically unstable. Losing the grand metaphors of Koranic struggle for a moment he pointed out that Europe was the place with the dirty past, unstable borders and constant factionalism. In comparison, Iraq was ancient and stable. You may disavow his belief system but don't tell him that his power is without precedent.

Eamon Collins wrote a book titled "Killing Rage". In some ways it reads like one of the longest suicide notes in the history of the Nationalist struggle in Ireland. A former British Customs Officer operating out of Newry near the border with the Republic, Collins joined the IRA through a sense of affiliation with the dynamic Leftist struggles of the Seventies. He was interested in seeing the IRA's work in parallel to that of the Red Army Faction in Germany or the Brigade Rosso in Italy, part of the collective struggle to bring about a particular form of Marxist revolution through terrorism and destabilisation of neo-democratic structures. Collins was effective and committed as an IRA man in the Seventies and Eighties, if his account is to be believed he brought a sense of order and precision to his small part of the struggle. Yet at all times he held down a position in the heart of the British system, operating as rogue customs officer and using his role to guide IRA operatives over the border and back again. When he cracked under police questioning he already claims to have had many doubts about the nature of the IRA position as an organisation increasingly moving towards democratic representation through its political wing Sinn Fein. Standing in Derry at the time his book was published, I was introduced to a group of people working on a mural painted on the side of a building. The image depicted a famous press photo of an important female figure standing up to the threat of British Army and Royal Ulster Constabulary presence, a bold image of female power as part of a tradition of Celtic womanhood. It was the women who banged on dustbin lids to warn the local community that the

occupying forces from Britain were on patrol, it was the young girls and grandmothers who taunted and challenged those playing out war games on Irish soil. I turned to one of the muralists. "Surely she was wearing a red jumper in the original photo". We all stood back in the drizzling rain and stared at the painted image. Now resplendent in knitted green they explained that it was better to depict her in the colour of the Irish not of the old-school Leftist struggle. Repositioning and renegotiation are at the heart of some power-struggles. The constant misunderstanding of powerful nation-states is that of the Nationalist struggle. From Vietnam to the punishment of Serbia. There is nothing like occupation and threat to prompt people to go and stand on bridges or set up the execution of their colleagues.

Playing Simm City on a plane makes some sense. While up front the pilot smiles. They know that it is necessary to turn around when they talk to you, so at those moments you know that they are not flying and that it is OK to talk to them. Richard Branson, the owner of Virgin Atlantic airlines claims a form of dyslexia prevented him from a glittering academic career. And we are all encouraged to empathise with his continued habit of working from home and dressing down for the customer. His communication is verbal and his interest in the details of financial accounting is apparently vague. The key to exercising power within the terms of the capitalist entrepreneur is seen to be closely linked to the creation of an image of control that is unencumbered by attention to detail. Risk and decision making are key to a certain form of economic power that sees development and speculation at the heart of success. The centre of Berlin is now semi-planned and semi-speculated. Planning versus speculation was the great power struggle of the Twentieth Century. The five year plan against the potential of entrepreneurial risk. Steve Jobs of Apple Computer knows these games well. He remains only acting Chair of the candy-coloured computer company. He is aware of the fact that to assume complete control would remove the threat of his potential absence. He retains a rather contemporary position of fence-sitting, half in and half out. Always free to leave and not bound by a commitment to be judged as the absolute boss. As such Apple are now perceived to be successful once more, with the application of power manifest through ambiguity of role and potential to up and go at a moments notice. It is the desire to avoid a particular structure of judgement that is interesting in this case. Removing the process of assessment and reward that normally limits power and offering services on a day to day basis.

Revolutionary gestures used to be played out against monolithic power structures. Just after the fall of the Berlin wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union a new advert for Smirnoff appeared on British television. A group of revolutionaries are seen storming into a building and up the stairs. They look from room to room and generally sack the place. In one grand state-room an Imperial representative sits drinking Smirnoff, enjoying the last moments of privilege. As the Red Guard arrive, he is torn from the chair and a revolutionary takes his place. As soon as the communist assumes the seat and takes hold of a glass of Vodka he sits back and places his feet on the table to enjoy the fruits of class struggle. Immediately a second wave of revolutionaries enter the room. They in turn tear the proletarian from his assumed seat, and one of the new wave now takes the chair and bottle of Vodka

in his place. The implication is that this process is endless. A sequence of assumption of power and the implication that once the symbol of power is picked up then it becomes impossible to distinguish the revolutionary from the Imperialist oppressor. A demonstration of the stifling logic of Capitalism to assume success by default. A challenge from the power of relativism to the struggle against injustice. All this in order to sell indifferent Vodka. The assumption of corruption is central to the transfer of power. Constant vigilance is expected and maybe necessary to prevent the Smirnoff cycle. Yet it remains unclear whether the necessary moral and ethical indignation remains in order for such checks and balances to retain currency.

Britain has had two major miners strikes since the early Seventies. The first was seen as a great victory for the workers with their well organised domestic and industrial power cuts acutely symbolising the strength of a mass movement to improve pay and conditions. The second strike occurred during the Thatcher years. This time the government and the police were ready. No power cuts this time as the miners were goaded into action in Spring when coal stocks were high. The break-down of mining communities all over Britain was accompanied by an ideologically motivated desire to see the end of large scale production and manufacturing in Britain in favour of opportunistic "efficiency". The power-cuts that were forced ten years earlier in the first strike were the ultimate tool of the miners. By withholding supplies from the power-stations they could nightly demonstrate their collective hold over the nation. In the Eighties, supply was maintained and supplemented from elsewhere. The courts were used to outlaw strike activity and to sequester the assets of the unions. It was a difference of approach equivalent to comparing the strategies around Watergate and the activities of Kenneth Starr. The abuse of power resulting from covert dealing mutating into a quasi-open policy involving the employment of legal tools to challenge the actions of a political rival. No more bugging, but a lot of briefs. Attempts to exercise political power through the ever expanding legal field. With the cultural relativism of our post-utopian situation there are many layers of action, all of which may represent struggles for power.

There was an artist known for the varied and eccentric nature of his cultural production. While no-one could precisely pin-down his work, he was still invited to take part in many exhibitions during the late 1960s and early 70s alongside contemporaries whose work could be more easily slotted into precise categories. As the years went by his work became more and more vague and aesthetically out of focus in relation to the work of others apparently more closely tied to the concerns of the day. One set of work was particularly off-beam. One of the pieces in the series was weaker and vaguer than the rest. Yellowish paper with another small bit of paper half-heartedly stuck to it. The thing ended up in the bedroom of a sympathetic friend with an inquisitive child. The child was intrigued by the work and on a rare visit by the artist eagerly enquired of the meaning and ideas in the work. "Simple" the artist replied, "It's a protest against The Vietnam War."

***Terry Pratchett quoted in “Impossibility: The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits”,
John D. Barrow, Oxford University Press, 1998**

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