Passages of Stillness:
The Ethics of Landscape and Remembering in Shaun Gladwell's
1000 Horses

Shaun Gladwell's video work *1000 Horses*[1] seeks out forms and sites of remembrance that are, by definition, consistently elusive. It marks a series of absences and a history of movements as a critical and yet open engagement with place and past. Commissioned to coincide with the centenary of the Battle of Beersheba in Palestine during World War I,[2] it revisits the landscape as a means of contemplating the continued consequences of this formative moment in shaping a Middle East, which resonates still today. A literal form of return, when you know such a return is impossible, it re-enters the territory it is describing, if only to draw a larger map beyond this. It is a motion as unexpected as those Australian soldiers and their horses traversing Palestine towards the site of battle, fighting in a desert not their own, for a military outcome that would always be at some remove from their lived experience. Perhaps this is a condition of being Australian—a trope of distance? Filmed in both Israel and Australia, Gladwell's work recognises this distance, but also forms a bridge to draw parallels and uncanny associations.

The conditions, which brought that first event into being, are too soon forgotten. Perhaps the work, despite its negotiation of material monuments, recognises that it comes to the scene belatedly. The nuances of it are almost immediately lost to another mode of reflection and retrospection. In this way, the monument, or any formal remembrance, is always already an interpretation. How does a monument come into being? Why? For whom? The processes of its formation are not simply about that act of memorialising, which appears on the surface of things—the object or space being marked and inscribed with names and dates—the remaking of something that happened a moment or long ago. And if the monument is a deliberate or accidental site of remembering, then it insists upon an embodied reading. As if, more or less, there is no remembering without embodiment, without a form of witnessing in time and place. Even if that act of witnessing is constituted within a series of absences. University of Massachusetts Professor of English and Judaic Studies James E. Young proposes the counter-monument; a viable, ethical, alternative form that recognises the monument as a site of what is unrepresentable, while at the same time asserting the importance of establishing a site itself:

By defining itself in opposition to the traditional memorial's task, the counter-monument illustrates concisely the possibilities and limitations of all memorials everywhere. In this way, it functions as a valuable 'counter-index' to the ways time, memory, and current history intersect at any memorial site.[3]

This condition consolidates the uncanny nature of the encounter with the object. The absence is a mourned space, and remembrance may be configured through the negotiation of that space rather than a territorialising marker in the ground. Moreover, monuments fail when they over-literalise their subject. There's nothing left to do. No place for you, so you become blind to them. But how to mark what has gone?

Gladwell is no stranger to the problem of the unrepresentable. As an experienced Australian War Memorial commissioned war artist in Afghanistan and Iraq, his job has been to face up to the ethics of representations. That is, the ethics of *facing up*; to be elsewhere and to understand what it means to be out of place in this way. What can be represented? What can be seen in this field of vision? Art always asks these questions, but Gladwell intensifies the inquiry, and consistently puts himself into contested spaces, where this facing up is all the more fraught. Academic and author Paul Carter's "spatial history" is a useful model here.[4] For example, he writes of explorer Thomas Mitchell's charting of Australian territory,[5] mapping, surveying and naming, as he moves through it: "He was the means of transforming the dynamic space of travelling into the fixed and passive space of settlement. But he effected this transformation by positing a plausible place rather than by discovering it. He viewed the country he passed through as if through the eyes of the future."[6]

Gladwell's remapping offers a visualised version of that future perspective. While the nature of the moving image presupposes something linear, sequential, *1000 Horses* works in several directions at once. The terms are established from the first frames—birth and the end of life simultaneously. And it is that simultaneity that needs negotiating by the viewer throughout. Formally, the two screens of the artwork establish a mutual counterpoint, which resists singular reading. It is a device that Gladwell has used before, and has many precedents in film and video, going back as far as Abel Gance's film *Napoleon* (1927). But perhaps we learn most about how this doubling works from philosophy, especially Derrida, who often deployed doubled columns of writing (notably in *Glas,* 1974) not only to pursue two narratives, two conflicting interpretations, but to propose that unreadability within this formal conceit is the opening onto an ethics of reading.

It is about positioning. With the double screens you hardly know when and where to look. Your eye moves between the two and you adjust your sightlines in a kind of embodied looking. In this way, the gaze is deeply ethical, insisting on the difficulty of images while at the same time recognising an obligation to them.

Again, Gladwell is operating in the realm of the unrepresentable, where the composition is nevertheless defined by an obligation to 'see it through'. He has often deployed this strategy, notably in *Double Field* and *Double Balancing Act* (both 2009-10), which emerge from his work as a war artist. This ethical oscillation between two screens is crucial in such witnessing. But we also see it in more 'urban' works, such as *Broken Dance* (2012). Simultaneity is the condition of art that cannot be captured or stilled. It enables a subjective narrative to be configured by the viewer rather than the artist.

Perhaps most purposefully, *A Soldier of the Exalted Ottoman Empire* (2017) might be read as a doubled doubling. It was presented in the same exhibition as *1000 Horses* at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and in this context it read as a critical response from the other side of the 1917 Battle of Beersheba, while inhabiting the same territory, a ghostly resurfacing. While the exhibition itself marked the centenary of the battle Gladwell was determined to articulate an Ottoman perspective. Found footage of Turkish soldiers is juxtaposed with the figure of a soldier who, for anyone viewing the exhibition as a whole, is clearly sited in the same landscape of *1000 Horses*.

Doubling produces an undecidable encounter. But far from being without commitment, it establishes a 'facing up to' what is at stake here. In the absence of evidence, witnessing takes another, layered form. You witness the screen in this doubled manner. And in turn the screens establish a second layer of witnessing, another embodiment. The camera can inquire on your behalf, move through the secondary spaces that you witness as it is screened. This is different from the convention of looking at film which, while often a shared experience, is an act of unseeing both your surroundings and the medium itself in favour of a singular narrative. Gladwell never lets you forget that you are watching the madness of the moving image, an embodied gaze, which is inevitably making decisions throughout.

In a land of simultaneous seeing and unseeing, the Zionist landscape painters of Palestine working under Boris Schatz at the Bezalel School of Art and Design, founded in 1906, through to the 1920s landscape painters such as Reuven Rubin, Yisrael Paldi and Arieh Lubin, painted what they wanted to see. Or rather, unsaw in their painting, what got in the way of their often preconceived vision of the land, an impressionist blurring, or even effacing, in the landscape of something that was there before this encounter. Art historian Dalia Manor sees this as a type of ideologised memory:

> *The Zionist artists were not tuned to futuristic visions to present-day reality. They preferred to evoke the past, an idealised pre-Zionist, pre-modern past through landscape images. At times it was a Jewish past (and present), but not necessarily a biblical one; rather it was that of the so-called Old yishuv. The image of Palestine as portrayed by these artists was of the country as a kind of memory, a place to yearn for and to love from a distance.*[7]

What becomes (or returns as) the Israeli landscape is defined as an image of itself through stylistic devices, whether it is the early Zionist optimism, which often sees through what is directly in ahead, or the muscular redefinition of the land through the new body which works it.[8] This is always a paradox, because the absence represented in the land, the deserted space, is constructed as a site of return. The landscape painters 'recognised' it, or constructed an image of the land which became recognisable. There is another type of naming. The land is reclaimed, articulated again, through history. These are names you read in the Bible, so every naming becomes a renaming.[9] This is a theology of return, defined in the passage through these spaces, moving through them and belated recognition lays claim to them—constructed landscapes which anticipate or respond to that recognition.[10] And this is a site of another form of naming—marking place in someone's name. The land is over-written with dedications; 'written', in the sense that this marking is also always in someone's name. Naming is a ritual which consolidates the object or event. Not necessarily what you might call monuments, so often things are built in the name of someone else, and/or in their memory. Indeed, public spaces or buildings or monuments are defined through this act of naming, and as such are rarely without this secondary association—a country of memorialising, with an ideological drive towards not forgetting.

There are sites of remembrance that become monuments almost by accident. For example, along the highway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem as you turn your head to the side of the road, you can see the rusting shells of burnt-out tanks, long since abandoned in a battle for this crucial artery —territory not defined just in terms of spaces, but also the routes you might be able to make through them. A certain moment of intention, or making, occurs at their point of abandonment. They should suggest loss and failure, but instead they assume a sculptural quality, accidental, but nevertheless material. And it is that materiality that asserts a presence-in-absence over the land. Perspective on the object is always transitional, fleeting. Close to Young's counter-monument, these objects are almost unnoticeable (like many monuments, even the most monumental) and have the job of remembering put upon them.

Gladwell is often adjusting where foreground and background, centre and periphery, may be in permanent negotiation. This is not the cinematic convention of focus and depth of field, which is an entirely subjective imposition, but rather a series of adjustments which enable him to engage and leave the frame open. In the slow unfolding of the opening sequences of *1000 Horses* the viewer must negotiate its framing, not in terms of composition, but as a counter to the persistence of subject to which you bear witness within the double screen. Nowhere and nothing to hide.

Gladwell develops a formalism throughout the projection of the video which runs counter to the subject. The framing is more than aesthetic device, it acts as a mechanism to throw responsibility back onto the viewer. The subject, the image, is simultaneously the thing and not what his work is about at all. In the video we see the horse mostly with its rider, who is dressed in the World War I Australian Light Horse uniform.[11] Hardly moving, even when mounted, the soldier is seen leading the horses, or tending to its needs. We might be aware that this is staged, but the look of the relationship between rider and horse give the strongest sense of detached observation. The horse is both existential presence as well as a stand-in, an uncanny echo of the history that is being told. Perhaps this is why the work begins with a birth and a death. Reality and reenactment occupy the same place, the same landscape. Neither one nor the other, your reading must accommodate both.

The horse marks space by its passage, at one with its rider, whose own passage is enabled by this intimate relationship. The horse is in perpetual motion, marking territory not in a localised way, but in an expansive movement. Gladwell's work acknowledges those Australian 'Walers'[12] that were shipped to the Middle East to fight in the war, visualising beautifully a lifetime intimacy between horse and rider. Such intimacy is supported by contemporary narratives and found in Frank Hurley's images of soldier and horse from his time as Australian war artist in Palestine. The tragedy of this particular moment in history is that of the more than 130,000 horses which went to war from Australia, only one returned home.[13]

Gladwell is particularly moved by the plight of these horses. Soldiers often chose to kill their own to spare them from their fears of a life of cruelty.[14] While not part of the official narrative of battle, here is another moment which must be marked by an absence. Gladwell's solution in the final sequence of *1000 Horses*, is to step out of the formally prescribed narratives. A low-fi coda grabbed from a computer screen shows a news report of horses abandoned in an American desert. It is a tangential, disruptive, existential counter to the controlled formalism of Gladwell's stagings. It might be read as a gestural intervention that affirms a continued universal resonance of this very specific moment in history.

But for those horses left behind, a natural history takes an evolutionary turn or diversion; a legacy of cultural/political interference.[15] The figure of the horse becomes a trope of displacement. Although eminently suited to the Middle Eastern terrain, the Walers' displacement promotes a sense of something both at home with itself and not, out of place, but inside recognisable territory. The horse in Gladwell's configuration negotiates two places at once, visually and syntactically stitching together the landscapes of Australia and Israel.

Gladwell's work begins in a moment of history. It is not a reenactment, but questions the repercussions of an event, and always occupies a space beyond the event. The significance of the Battle of Beersheba cannot be overestimated. It turned the Gaza-Beersheba Turkish line. Gaza fell the following week, and British troops entered Jerusalem on 9th December. History conflates the Battle of Beersheba with the Balfour Declaration,[16] confirmed almost simultaneously on 31st October, prior to its publication three days later. Its consequences resonate, and continue to be contested, a hundred years on. The difficulties of revisiting this are not lost on Gladwell:

> It is a deep sadness that I make a work that somehow engages a battle that marked the eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and its key successor state is now collapsing again. I never saw the conflict as a success beyond specific militaristic and geopolitical terms. After my limited research, the battle of Be'er Sheva (Beersheba) seemed to generate a field of great loss.[17]

But *1000 Horses* isn't about this historic battle, as such. It can be seen as consistent with so many other works of Gladwell's which engage physically with the artefacts and actions of a culture. The film is not even about the horses of its title, even though almost every frame is marked with their image. But perhaps we can observes a set of relations that are consistent with Gladwell's encounter with, and in, the landscape—how we move through it, and what we need to do so. Everything you witness is fraught with a sense of presentness, ontological intensities, set against the residual objects of the past—objects which may mark that history (as monuments) and which are more inadvertently marked by that history.

In the same way that, say, the motorbike or skateboard in Gladwell's earlier works function as prosthetic extensions to the body, redefining its limits, the horses define *human* engagement with its surrounds. For Gladwell, these performative moments are not just sharp observations of a culture (bikers, skateboarders, beatboxers) but are agents of transition or what might almost be its opposite —an achieved stillness. Gladwell's own *Study in Balance and Stillness* (2014), for example, produces an existential tension at the moment the artist masters control of the bike. The bike defines itself as object only when in motion. Without the rider it is a merely an abstract object. The stillness Gladwell is seeking in this performance forces an intensity of experience. By extension the horse is bred across generations for its motion and stillness in equal measure.

There are many versions of this stillness in *1000 Horses*, moments of life and death in the opening sequences, scenes of feeding and drinking, and others. But there is a particular quality of stillness which is achieved when the horse becomes an agent of perception within the intimate relationship between horse and rider. This is a complicity of action (or stasis) which must be read as ethical. The film repeatedly frames this encounter, face to face, or body to body. When the horse encounters its own sculpted likeness, it faces up to an almost contradictory representation of the horse in motion. At the ANZAC Memorial in Be'er Sheva,[18] the monument assumes a scaled-up abstracted form of a horse. It is the first moment in the film where the images on the doubled screen become one. Gladwell opens up the memorial's formal qualities, both in terms of what it serves
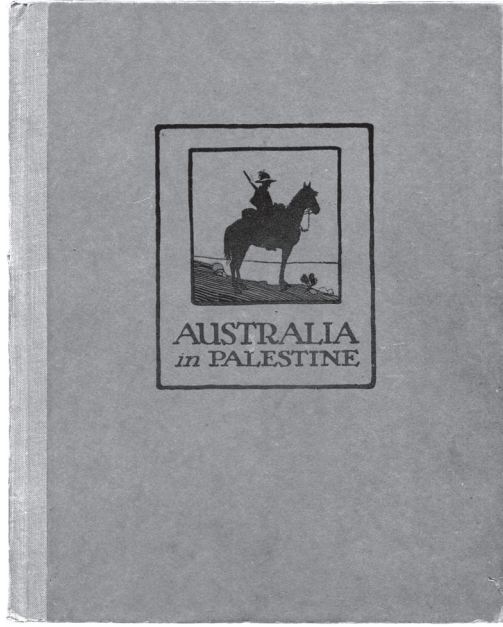
to remember, and another layer of functionality. A lookout; another take on the landscape, a site of, and for, contemplation. Observation is a strategy of control in war, in the manner of Foucault's panopticism. The more you see the more you control. Gladwell's horse is constantly shifting in and out of place. Here it is led up to the viewing platform, briefly suspended from its terrain. In another sequence it is framed by a tunnel of light formed within Dani Karavan's nearby *Negev Monument* (1963-68). Echoes, here, of Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76), where the viewer must adjust their body in and out of relation to the framed light offered in these passage or non-spaces.

Entering the landscape is always a political act, a form of engagement which is politicised through presence alone, one of unavoidable engagement. But what to do with this? Gladwell's work has persistently engaged with the Australian landscape and the ethical implications of moving through it, territory defined not so much by mapping or finite borders, but by passages and movements. The condition of transitional engagement, seen in works such as *Interceptor Surf Sequence* (2009), function as a gesture that might be termed counter-colonising. Critical in its recognition, that to enter territory is to change it. This 'contamination', is unavoidable, such as it is. But often what you see in the landscape is residual, occluded and indirect. How to look for those traces?

There are moments of literal disruption and redemption, such as the ritualised nursing of kangaroo and wallaby roadkill in Gladwell's *Apologies 1-6* (2007-09). But more often it is the cumulative power and simultaneous ambiguity of narratives and mythologies which accrue through reportage, after the fact, a layering of memories and storytelling on the one hand, as well as the legacy of what has gone before.

Gladwell's encounter with the Israeli landscape begins in a similar way, but is more out of sorts. There is less personal baggage to rely upon here, and movement must be tentative, questioning. In this biblical land there are infinite stories which go back millennia, but that is not what is at stake here. Gladwell's horse and soldier deliberately, barely, touch the territory. Not pushing forward, but often circling, pausing, seeking sightlines, making sense of a place that is not theirs.

Notes

[1] *1000 Horses* was commissioned by the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney and Museum of Tel Aviv for an exhibition of the same name at the Museum, 31 October 2017 – 28 February 2018. For clarity, all references to "1000 Horses" in the text are to this work, unless specified, rather than the exhibition as a whole

[2] This essay will default to the Anglicised spelling of the location when referring to the battle itself, rather than the more current transliteration from Hebrew רְאֵב שֶׁבַע, Be'er Sheva

[3] Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay, an essay in spatial history*, London: Faber & Faber, New York: Knopf, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 1988; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010

[4] James E. Young, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 18, No. 2, 1992, p. 277

[5] Thomas Mitchell (1792-1855) was appointed Surveyor-General of New South Wales in 1828. Responsible for the majority of the first surveys of Eastern Australia, he worked towards a unified survey of the territory, clarifying disputed boundaries. Four substantial expeditions charted much of the mapping of the state as well as surveying routes for the plotting of roads, the routes of which are often the same still used today

[6] Paul Carter, op cit., p. 120

[7] Dalia Manor, 'Imagined homeland; landscape painting in Palestine in the 1920s', *Nations and Nationalism* 9 (4), 2003, p. 551

[8] A reversal of the body subject to anti-Semitism, reinvented as a Zionist ideal, strong and able to work the land. Max Nordau coined the figure of the "muscle Jew" at the Second Zionist Congress in 1989

[9] Meron Benvenisti, in his book, *Sacred Landscape: the Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000) explores the politics of naming from 1949, through the government bodies such as Israel Exploration Society and the Committee for the Designation of Place-Names in the Negev Region. Arab names are Hebraicised, with an ideological zeal that proposed the Arabic names were themselves versions of an ancient Hebrew as an act of restoration, while elsewhere a past or a location is invoked in Hebrew coinages: "The irony was that the Jews were returning to their ancient homeland, but were able to identify the places there only because the people who had inhabited them during the Jews' long absence had preserved their names." (p. 46) Paul Carter, in *The Road to Botany Bay*, tracks a similar territorial impulse through naming by European explorers in Australia, when encountering local languages: "It is a name that refuses to admit the place was there before it was named, a name that celebrates the travelling mode of knowledge." (p. 9)

[10] It is no accident that Gladwell invokes and appropriates the photographer Sharon Ya'ari within his exhibition. Ya'ari is a chronicler of Israel's ideological legacies through landscape. He looks at its modernisms, and pictures corners of the land where those histories and ideologies intersect with a landscape which is often revealed as constructed. Ya'ari's images view such space with an ability to expose a layer of its history underneath. If the photograph makes a singular moment, then Ya'ari's punctum is an indirect clue to this location's past

[11] The Australian Light Horse were were like mounted infantry in that they usually fought dismounted, using their horses as transport to the battlefield and as a means of swift disengagement when retreating or retiring

[12] A colonial horse, with origins as far back as the First Fleet. Initially known as "New South Walers", it developed in Australia during the nineteenth century, a workhorse with anonymous lineage, most likely combining strains of Thoroughbred, Arabian, Cape Horse and Timor Pony." The colony is specially adapted for the breeding of saddle and light harness horses and it is doubtful where these particular breeds of Australian horses are anywhere surpassed. The bush horse is hardy and swift and capable of making very long and rapid journeys when fed only on the ordinary herbage of the country: and in times of drought, when grass and water have become scanty, these animals often perform astonishing feats of endurance." T.A. Coghlan, *Wealth and Progress of New South Wales*, Sydney: Government Printer, 1884, p. 348

[13] Sandy, owned by Major General Sir William Throsby Bridges (who commanded the 1st Australian Division at Gallipoli, where he was killed in May 1915)

[14] A popular poem published in 1919, 'The Horses Stay Behind' by Trooper Bluegum (a pseudonym of the war poet, Oliver Hogue), articulates this emotional attachment and, crucially, the impossibility of return. The persistent refrain of the title invokes a fantasy of return through "Mitchell grass" and "bush birds" with "other horses". The final verse proposes that it would be better to shoot the horse rather than thinking of it "crawling around old Cairo with a Gyppo on his back"

[15] Perhaps there is a corollary to be found in the camels imported into Australia from 1840s, as they were well-suited to travelling through the arid Australian terrain. They now roam the Australian bush and are subject to regular culling to keep their numbers in check. Never indigenous, as much as they have become a familiar site in the bush, their displacement is still marked, generations later

[16] The Balfour Declaration was a public statement issued by the British Government positing a hope for a Jewish homeland in Palestine: "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." The declaration is dated 2 November 1917, but was authorised on 31st October, the same day as the Battle of Beersheba

[17] Shaun Gladwell, email to Andrew Renton, 19 August 2018

[18] ANZAC is the acronym for the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps