



Steve McQueen
Gravesend

September 16 – October 28, 2007

The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago

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at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours

Tuesday - Friday: 10am - 5pm

Saturday, Sunday: 12- 5pm

Closed Mondays

http://www.renaissancesociety.org

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Opening Reception: Sunday, September 16, 4:00-7:00pm

Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00- 6:00pm

The Grand Scheme of Things

"The Scramble for Africa" refers to a period in late 19th Century world affairs when Africa's interior was feverishly carved up under European imperialist expansion. The British, the Portuguese, the French, and last but not least the Belgians, whose infamous atrocities remain deep and dark enough to absorb whatever light is shed on them, were fierce rivals in gaining access to the Congo's vast mineral riches. Lacking all dignity in the fight for natural resources, what posed for civilization was a barbaric episode Joseph Conrad was none too shy in describing as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience." Told from the vantage point of the Congo, modernity is anything but a narrative of moral progress.

In 1960, within weeks of having been liberated from Belgian rule, the Democratic Republic of Congo was beset by political disintegration. Its two most diamond rich provinces seceded when the central government lost control of a mutinous and factionalized military. The United Nations then spent five years piecing the region back together at which point a pattern endemic to the Cold War emerged when a military commander, Mobutu Sese Seko, installed himself as a dictator with the blessings of Europe and the U.S.. During a brutal thirty-two year reign, he amassed a net worth in the billions of dollars while the country, with its colonial infrastructure left to rot, was driven into extreme poverty. He was deposed in 1996 by Laurent Kabila who led a successful coup with military support from Rwanda, Uganda and Angola. In the wake of Mobutu's ouster, the military coalition fell apart and the country collapsed into a de facto civil war that continues into the present. Scattered throughout the country, enough mineral riches are in the hands of armed brigands to securely finance a now decade-long conflict with a death toll estimated at 4 million.

The subject of *Gravesend*, a new short by British filmmaker Steve McQueen (b. 1969), is coltan, a mineral so valuable it is the new blood diamonds. Short for colombite-tantalite, coltan

is an ore rich in tantalum, a metal used in capacitors found in a host of computer driven electronics. As a result, coltan's price on the open market has surged some ten fold within the past decade. Eighty percent of the world's supply comes from the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, many of whose mines are in the hands of Rwandan rebels. There is no incentive to end what for them is a lucrative conflict as the demand for coltan continues unabated and indeed abetted by the craze for the latest model cell phone or gaming console. Cropping up in the headlines, the conflict, while in and of itself tragic, symbolizes a history far from healed as our global economic order is unable to dissociate itself from a blood-soaked, imperialist predecessor.

Coltan's is a tall story to tell. Relative to a topic teeming with documentaries, McQueen's approach is unapologetically abstract. Compressed within 17 minutes is a meditation on empire and the fascinating portrait of an ore. Shot on 35mm film, and decidedly non-narrative, *Gravesend* is structured around a series of radical leaps in location, modes of thought, and mood. Like a musical composition, it consists of movements varying in tempo. The mainstay of its footage are bouts of realism alternately broken by a fast-paced but lyrical, abstract animation aerially tracking the Congo River, and a slow time-lapsed dissolve that is a somber reflection on empire.

Gravesend makes its most radical leap in the opening sequences, boldly juxtaposing images of coltan's other worldly refinement with its all too earthly origins. These states of matter are worlds apart and save for that which is strictly visual, *Gravesend* is resolutely purged of information illustrating any causal economic links in between.

From a high tech refinery more believable as something from a James Bond film, to a wild and fecund jungle interior, it is not only a question of where these scenes are occurring, but when. Between polar extremes, the net effect is a present moment understood as thoroughly heterogeneous, an uneven mixture of

a pre-modern past of pick-axe and shovels, and a future ideal in which imperial power has effervesced into the "invisible hand" of supply and demand.

As for illustrating the global political economy, coltan is a lesson in historical materialism if ever there were one. In it lies the web of relations tying advanced industrialized nations to the remotest hand-to-mouth economies. For McQueen, it serves as an allegory of globalization in which the line between a legitimate and an illegitimate economy is hopelessly blurred. The casual demeanor of one prospector, cigarette dangling from his lips, speaks less to exploitation and more about an informal, underground economy with its origins in a finder's keeper free-for-all. The black market certainly begins here. But where does it end? Unable to locate the black market's end we cannot say with certainty where the legitimate economy begins. This issue is confounded by the fact that under either auspices, labor is labor, a point perhaps superseding the question of ethical awareness as it might be posed to the prospector whom McQueen has portrayed as neither victim nor aggressor. In other words, is the prospecting's legitimacy (and by extension the larger economy's legitimacy) incumbent on the prospector's ethical awareness? McQueen's isolation of the prospector from a larger context deflects indictment away from human agency and toward a larger economic system, at which point it becomes a question of where such an indictment would ever begin.

Gravesend takes its name from a town in Kent, England. Located on the south bank of the Thames, it was from Gravesend that Marlow, the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, set sail for the Congo. The time-lapsed footage of the sun setting over a harbor skyline punctuated by smokestacks renders, as if verbatim, the foreboding melancholy established in the *Heart of Darkness'* opening pages:

A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was

dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth....

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.

Forthwith a change came over the waters, and the serenity became less brilliant but more profound. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth.

For all of Conrad's eloquence, the phrase that more readily comes to mind is "The sun never sets on the British empire." McQueen's sunset, while graphically illustrating the historical twilight of empire's formal political structures, is also rhetorical questioning the very pastness of the past. Did the sun set on the British empire? Did empire come to an end? McQueen's conspicuous lingering over a sunset makes this sequence an allegory unto itself. Preceded by an image of coltan prospecting in which the end of a shovel rhythmically emerges from a grave-sized pit that is anything but shallow, this rhetorical question begs reframing. Are we ready to bury empire? More to the point, does exploitation empire's end obscure an exploitation that is historically uninterrupted as the West, still dependent on its former colonies, perpetuates gross iniquity now accompanied by internecine conflict?

Over and above any socio-economic and political machinations, *Gravesend* favors discreet outward appearances. For McQueen, the facts of the matter are visual and visual alone as *Gravesend's* stunning production values attest. He insists that *Gravesend* "first and foremost is about looking" even at the

expense of knowing what we are observing. Textual footholds are dismissed; no maps, no dialogue, no villains, and no experts. There is nothing to indicate or verify the setting is the Congo nor the nature of substances before the lens. Although precise and highly specific in bearing towards a subject better known through journalism, *Gravesend* steadfastly refuses to inform in that manner, opting instead to extract visually from its subject generalities that ultimately function allegorically. Unflinchingly direct, *Gravesend's* camerawork is a brazen species of realism. A sequence featuring a close-up of severely weathered hands hammering at stones, picking out black morsels of coltan is without doubt the direct descendant of Gustav Corbet's 1849 realist masterpiece *The Stone Breakers*, only now it is accompanied by the dull thud of striking pay dirt.

Gravesend does not trace the fate of a valuable ore from extraction to refinement. Nor do the worlds these states of matter represent collide. They are not only connected, but interdependent, part of an equation that accommodates their profound incommensurability. While its unembellished footage brings it into a discursive relationship with documentary and other forms of reportage, *Gravesend* above all else is a poem, and an epic one at that. Strikingly beautiful, and supremely ambitious, it is a highly formal meditation that speaks by looking. Paired with *Unexploded*, whose footage of damage wrought by an unexploded bomb was taken by the artist in Basra, Iraq, it becomes clear that McQueen is composing with elements from the here and now. Decisively unsentimental in their depiction of contemporary life, these works make all the clearer that as the ring tone tolls for one, it tolls for all.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION
September 16, 4:00-7:00 pm
featuring a talk with the artist 5:00-6:00 pm in Cobb Hall room 307
directly below the gallery

CONCERT
September 17, 8:00 pm
Ensemble Noamnesia, Ensemble N_JP
with guest Ko Ishikawa (sho)
music by Hosokawa, Coleman, and Takahashi

SCREENING
Sunday, September 23, 7:00 pm
Monday, September 24, 7:00 pm
***Mobutu King of Zaire*, 1999**
Part I and II
Thierry Michel
documentary, 297 mins.
The event will take place in Cobb Hall Room 429

CONCERT
September 28, 8:00 pm
ICE Ensemble and the Moving Theater
Company
XL (Kenakis/Ligetti)

SCREENING
Monday, October 1, 7:00 pm
***Congo River*, 2006**
Thierry Michel
documentary, 116 mins.
The event will take place in Cobb Hall Room 429

CONCERT
Wednesday, October 3, 8:00 pm
Leonel Kaplan (trumpet and electronics)

CONCERT
Thursday, October 4, 8:00 pm
Ensemble Dal Niente
with guest Gareth Davis (bass clarinet)
music by Sciarrino, Durand, Broberg, Hosokawa, Lachenmann and Scelsi

CONCERT
Sunday, October 7, 8:00 pm
Birgit Ulher (trumpet)
Lou Malozzi (turntables, assorted electronics)
Michael Zerang (percussion)

LECTURE
Thursday, October, 11, 6:00 pm
Michael Gorra, professor of English, Smith College
"Not a pretty thing: Joseph Conrad on the conquest of the earth."
Cobb Hall Room 403

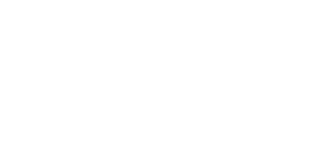
CONCERT
October 14, 8:00 pm
Ensemble Noamnesia
with guests Vincent Royer (viola)
David Grubbs (guitar, electronics)
The music of Luc Ferrari

CONCERT
October 15, 8:00 pm
Ensemble Noamnesia
with guest Vincent Royer (viola)
The music of Horatiu Radulescu

All events are free. Unless noted they will take place in the gallery.

Gravesend, which inaugurates The Society's 92nd season and its 28th in the Bergman Gallery, is dedicated to the memory of Edwin Bergman. Through his commitment to new and provocative art, Ed championed all The Society stands for. We remain grateful for his outstanding example, friendship, service and support.

Funding credits will go here.....



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Exclusive Airline of The Renaissance Society's 2006-2007 Season

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Steve McQueen
still from *Gravesend*, 2007
35mm film transferred to HD

Essay by Hanzla Walker. Layout by the JNE. Graphic Design, Chicago