

The Duke Regains His Chops. (1)

They need yet another new moniker, an alter ego, a stage name. What about a name like *Uncle Chop Chop* for a manual of the black arts? It could have been all kinds of names; Pere Ubu, or Mad Jack or Rip Van Winkle but these have all been exploited at least once. Pere Ubu had 30 seconds over Tokyo but John at least would rather have several minutes over his childhood estate of Thamesmead. He's expressed a lingering fascination with this particular estate on more than one occasion and no doubt Graham has some baroque designs on the districts of his youth, though you would have to ask him about that.

Conjurors and visionaries and eccentrics have come to show the other side, the darker, sillier one. Mel Brooks took us behind the cardboard western facades in *Blazing Saddles* (2) and went from spaghetti to beans in one deft canned food moment. We can all take a look behind the po-faced film sets of today's big box office disasters. Behind some big moonfaced cartoon character we could see him/her represented by a pulsating grid on a large and expensive monitor.

The *Westlers* hot dog icon from the cinema foyer is not unlike the *Wimpy* products that are a good feeding ground for John and Graham's fantasy burger vision. *Wimpy*, the great British food outlet that still gives you your burger on a plate, as if it really matters. Their stomping grounds, the estates of the sixties and seventies, suddenly seem vast and hubristic compared with the mock Tudor visions of the other *Wimpy* i.e. *Wimpey* (did it have a ginger moggy as its logo? I can't remember). We are in a new kind of building programme where these older skeletons have become the property of housing associations, the remaining crumbling and neglected personal effects of any city council. In this instance ruins are grounds for 'morbid tourism'. John and Graham make a plea for untidiness, a plea for run down to look like run down and for them to exist in crumbling privacy. The ideal village that emerges from the fevered brain of Prince Charles, where everyone knows everyone else and everything about everything, is no grounds for an Uncle Chop Chop (though a local chutney would go nicely on a burger). Mr Wimpy, whoever he may be, could do with some good old-fashioned baroque side-show terror. Instead of these fast food sound-a-likes we could do with a vision of terror to startle us out of our self-indulgent suburban reverie. I don't know if the exhibition will feature a gallows pole as originally intended. Perhaps a house made of gallows wood would be more appropriate. At one time this material was prized for its curative

properties,' a splinter of the wood being placed in the mouth to cure toothache'(3). If the two Wimp(e)ys can't give it to us we need a precedent for an architectural Chop Chop we need to start trespassing on Charlie's land. As Terry Jones said in one of the python shows, 'It was a typical east end street, everybody in and out of each others houses, with each others property.'

There's an eccentric website, amongst its arbitrary requirements is that the historical figures it researches are camp. By virtue of this criterion it details William Beckford's grottoes (4). The writer is clearly trespassing on some ones property though as the eccentric owner is long since dead it doesn't matter. Photos use a small boy for scale to prove the author's theory that they were built by William's father for the young millionaire. Should we be worried about the author borrowing this child for the purposes of his investigation? Hopefully it's the author's nephew. Beckford was a millionaire at the age of nine, and at one point the richest man in Britain before he blew it all on his extravagant tastes for servants and porcelain. He'd made his money through exploitation, not with fast food but through the sugar trade.

The fact that our web page author gives a very warped account of Beckford's inventions only adds to the entertaining historical confusion. The kids from the estate have made it onto the lord's land. The geezer hasn't 'got a flame-thrower' but the lad in the tracksuit is contributing to something quite subversive. In Beckford's elitist fantasy vision this would be horrifying, kids are there to be exploited. Universal education is a bad idea as Aldus Huxley mused, as this would merely swell the ranks of the 'new stupid' (5). The writer of the websites doesn't do himself any favours on this count. His argument about the fact that the grottoes were built for a small boy is not even slightly convincing. He shoots himself in the foot by commenting that apart from the small entrances the interior spaces to these grottoes are pretty spacious, rather like his skull.

It's hard to think that it matters as their existence is in no doubt which is more than can be said for many other work's of Beckford. Something of his that no longer exists and barely did in its day (for anyone not trespassing like our author of the grotto article) is Fonthill Abbey, William Beckford's splendid country house set in a huge amount of land. It had one extraordinary feature, its enormous tower. It was such an improbable projection that it collapsed several times; its owner's only dismay being that he never actually saw it fall. The difference between the tower buildings of his adulthood seems like a logical progression from the grotto burrowings of his father. It is as if rubble from

the grottoes was reassembled like a giant worm cast. What is more puzzling is why such a private man should pursue the building of such an architectural beacon. Only in later life did he devise the simple motto of 'Secret and Happy'. He built himself in, so much so, that in desperation he eventually sold off his estate and most of his collection.

In death and disappearance his building never gave him a lasting memorial like an infamous contemporary Mad Jack Fuller. Mad Jack in death was entombed in a huge and incongruous pyramid built in his local churchyard. Apparently he was buried seated at a table with a bottle of port and a chicken in front of him. It's this kind of good time craziness of the folly builder that makes for good web resources. Beckford built himself the tower but Mad Jack did the same thing, for a bet, something that any pub goer should recognise as not without the bounds of reason after a few stiff drinks. Mad Jack makes a lot of sense today. He has appeared on PG Tips cards as a ruddy faced man surrounded by game pies and wine, much as I would imagine Uncle Chop Chop to look. Mad Jack, a name to match his dubious reputation and building exploits. I'm sure he was pleased with his name though I'm not so sure if Beckford's long-suffering child butlers appreciated theirs as much. If he was around he might have come up with the collective moniker of Uncle Chop Chop for Beagles and Ramsey though I hate to think of what they might be called individually. Consider these inventions of Beckford, Pale Ambrose, Infamous Poupee, Horrid Ghoul, Insipid Bion, Cadaverous Nicobuse, The Portentous Dwarf, Frigid Silence, Miss Long, Miss Butterfly, Countess Pox, Mr Prudent Well-sealed-up, The Monkey and The Turk and then feel very afraid.....

What these architect mavericks did have in common was their stubbornness when it came to creating their own distinctly home-made visions into which they could retreat, the paranoid foppish Beckford and the big bear-like Mad Jack. In the Tex Avery cartoon '*Rock-A-Bye-Bear*' Spike the dog is released from the dog pound to guard a hibernating bear, a sadistic puppy escapes at the same time. Of course the increasingly bizarre attempts by the puppy to wake the bear all fail. The ordinary part is that he wakes up at the end of the cartoon, that's the contrast that makes the cartoon theology seem all the more funny. E.L Doctorow in *The Book Of Daniel* summed up cartoons of the thirties and forties like this:

"Theology: 1.people are animals. 2.the body is mortal and subject to incredible pain. 3.life is antagonistic to the living.4 flesh can be sawed, crushed, frozen, stretched, burned, bombed and plucked for music. 5. the dumb are abused by the smart and the

smart destroyed by their own cunning.6. the small are tortured and the large destroyed by their own momentum. 7. We are able to walk on air, but only as long as our illusion supports us' (6).

It goes back again to the idea that illusion, whether it's made in your own mind or planted there by some dubious type, can protect against attacks on our fantasy existence. The conjuror takes no prisoners. Now Mad Jack and William Beckford might have been sick puppies too but they never woke up from their reverie no matter how visible their architectural fantasies. Let us all hope to add to these ranks by making misjudged and ill-fated attempts to create and to envisage our future accurately. As Darryl F. Zanuck, head of 20th century Fox Studios confidently predicted in 1946, 'Video won't be able to hold onto any market after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring into a plywood box every night'. The brave new worlders have of no time for dogma and superstition, in Huxley's last novel '*Island*' they spend most of the time trying to be 'liberated from the bondage of ego' by gobbling piles of 'truth and reality' pills. To melancholy egomaniacs like Mad Jack, Uncle Chop Chop and Walt Disney this sounds like a living hell. React to reality in all its dumb and inevitable forms. As Dorothy Parker's adage goes, 'Razors pain you, /rivers are damp, / acids stain you, / and drugs cause cramp. / Guns aren't lawful, /nooses give, / gas smells awful, / you might as well live.'

ALL HAIL THE STUPIDS!

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