

SoundEffects



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*Roderick Coover,
David Jhave Johnston
and Scott Rettberg*

The Poetics of Combinatory Cinema:

David Jhave Johnston interviews Roderick Coover and Scott Rettberg

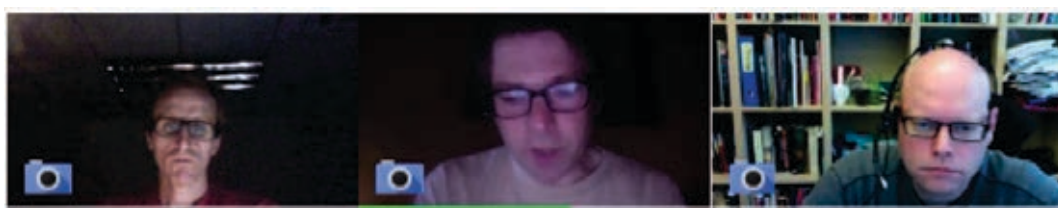
Roderick Coover, Director
MFA program in Film and Media Arts
Temple University, USA

Scott Rettberg, Professor of Digital Culture
Department of Linguistic, Literary, and Aesthetic Studies
University of Bergen, Norway

David Jhave Johnston, Assistant Professor
School of Creative Media
City University of Hong Kong

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Abstract

For the past several years filmmaker Roderick Coover and fiction writer Scott Rettberg have collaborated on a series of film and digital media projects that address climate change, environmental catastrophe, cross-cultural communication and combinatory poetics. Working between Philadelphia, USA, where Coover directs the graduate programme in Film and Media Arts at Temple University, and Bergen, Norway, where Rettberg is Professor of Digital Culture at the University of Bergen. Their projects, including *The Last Volcano*, *Rats and Cats*, *Three Rails Live* (with Nick Montfort) and *Toxi•City*, deal thematically with contemporary and past moments of environmental change and human loss, and formally with interdisciplinary practice and combinatory poetics. Coover and Rettberg were interviewed by digital poet and experimental filmmaker David Jhave Johnston, Assistant Professor in the School of Creative Media at City University of Hong Kong.

SCOTT: Alright, now we can speak and know that we'll be preserved for posterity.

JHAVE: Posterity – we are wondering about that one. That's the appropriate term, I think, given the material that you've fed me. The earlier stuff, not so much, but the later stuff is clearly apocalyptic in many ways. There's been a turn in your voice and your work, which is quite profound at a thematic level, and obviously the first thing that struck me about it.

SCOTT: I don't know, what do you think, Rod? Apocalyptic or ...

JHAVE: *Rats and Cats? Toxi•City? Three Rails?*

SCOTT: A little dark, I guess. Although I think *Rats and Cats* has its sense of humour ...

ROD: Do you think it corresponds to entering middle age, Scott?

SCOTT: I don't know. Yeah, I guess it does. Stephanie [Strickland] thought maybe it was having kids – that raises these concerns.

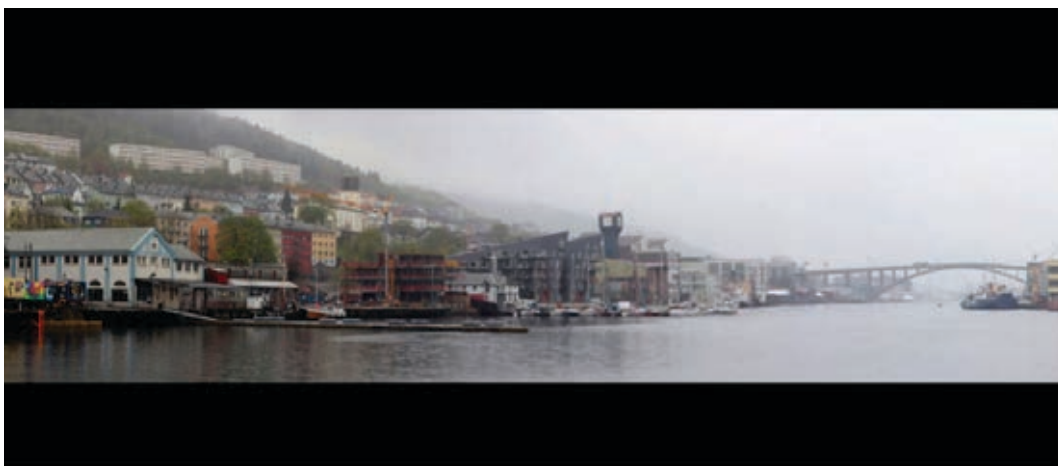
ROD: Well there is definitely an age element that has entered into all the stories, and they're all about generational relationships, right?

SCOTT: Yes, and the environment in some way – different ways with the different pieces. At the same time, I hope they're not completely grim. I mean, it's a grim set of circumstances, but I think we're trying to also keep our hopes about us, and keep our sense of humour.

JHAVE: Well, I didn't find them grim – there are certain thematic continuities that are running through them. It's not a fear of water, but it's almost like recognition of the fluidity of life processes. Water and ships reoccur over and over as those sorts of metaphors. Eventually I'll get to talk about technique and stuff, but it seems like *Rats and Cats* begins with water and big ships and freighters, and then *Toxi•City* returns there. There's a lot of [water] – is that something that you've conscientiously decided to explore, or did this just occur?

SCOTT: Well, I think maybe Rod can say a bit about the method, because the thing is, in all of them really, there's a back-and-forth, but they really started with the images.

ROD: Well, we started, first, because we thought about this international exchange between Philadelphia and Norway, with the idea of a water connection – port to port. *The Last Volcano*, which was the first in the trilogy, was filmed down on the docks in Bergen, Norway, at a time when volcanic ash coming from Iceland threatened to leave many like myself stranded, unable to fly. In *Rats and Cats*, a telephone date creates a kind of passage: a passage between people's lives, across place, across airwaves. With *Norwegian Tsunami*, nothing is left but the dock -- an oil rig in the-



Still from *The Last Volcano*, 2011.

North Sea. Filming on the docks in Norway and the US provoked questions of climate-change and floods. The metaphors became increasingly grounded and tied to specific locations – which is a difference between *Rats and Cats* and *Toxi•City*.

SCOTT: Yeah, Rod got here [in Bergen] right after the volcano thing had happened. He was shooting some images, and we're looking at images, and I started talking about the Iceland volcano and its effects in Europe. And it was curious here, too, because it's a pretty long distance from here [Norway] to Iceland, but we did have ash falling in the rain. So it was this strange experience where you couldn't travel for a while, but also, you could put a cup out on the porch and there would be little bits of black volcanic ash in it. And I started to look into what historically had happened previously when these eruptions occurred. And there had been effects in Norway, not from Eyjafjallajökull, but the other one, the one that usually follows Eyjafjallajökull [Katla] that hasn't erupted yet in this cycle. All across Europe, but in Norway in particular, there was a lot of death and devastation the last time that volcano erupted, which was around the time of the French Revolution. So that was happening, and that set a sort of thematic background.

The other thing that I think carries through all three of those pieces is a kind of fascination with the cycles of disaster, or with the cycles of fascination with disaster, actually. It's compelling to me how there's this pre-packaged news cycle now that gets wrapped around these really devastating events that occur with regularity, and strange how quickly they get processed. They become a big news item, an item of concern, and then within a few weeks they're sort of flushed out of the system. So I think that the first three pieces are about disaster and they're about the context in which more and more of these disasters are going to be occurring. But they're also about this weird cycle of fascination and then trivialisation that happens with all sorts of natural disasters in a really deeply networked world now. We hear about all these disasters, almost continuously, but then they're flushed out so quickly.

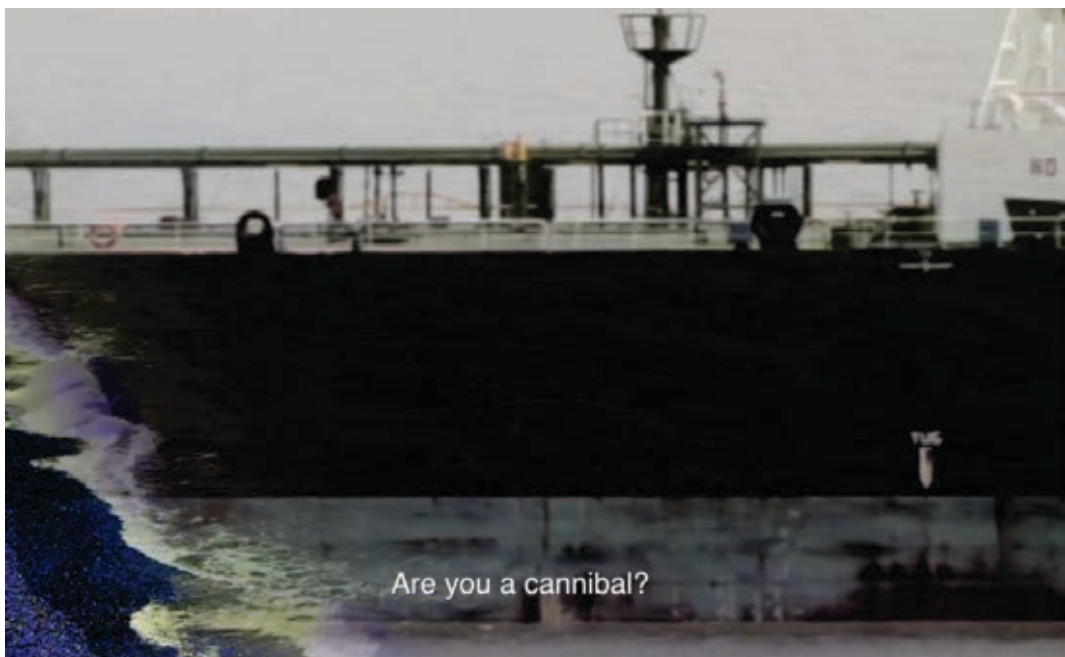
So what we decided to do with the three films in the trilogy was look at Norway, which is usually known as a kind of pretty peaceful place, aside from the Breivik shootings. But aside from these major disasters, Norway is not a place where you think of a 'trailer park landscape', where tornados and hurricanes often wipe through. But there were these three defining incidents: the Iceland volcano, the plague, which shaped the history of Norway and Europe in general very deeply, and then also the tsunami – the tsunami that actually formed the English Channel. In this period of pre-history it actually wiped out much of the Western coast of Norway. The land bridge between Europe and Asia [Britain] was, at the time, a centre of human civilisation, and it was wiped out entirely at that time. So the project is one of re-contextualising these historical disasters and trying to use them in a way to think about how we receive and interact with disaster in the present.

JHAVE: I got that. And what I liked about it is that you managed to evade what I feel is the conventional voice of disaster that you get on the news all the time, that sort of hyperanxious, 'Oh, we're being eaten by zombies, let's protect our citizens' sort of quality, like, roaming flashlights in the dark: the disaster movie that pervades Fox News and CNN and National Geographic even. I think you went back to a form of cadence in the voice that I almost found reassuring, because it's like the voice of mythological Cassandras. That occurred to me over and over, that term, the Cassandra. It comes to that point in *The Last Volcano* where the woman's approach in the conversation shifts. In *Rats and Cats* there's another transition like that, where it's almost like the register of conversation changes from being a normal structured conversation and becomes prophetic. Like, it becomes a really oracular scene. I find that quite affective.



VOICE CLIP FROM *THE LAST VOLCANO*

ROD: I wonder how much of that is the act of the characters being in the present, trying to make a relation that doesn't jive. That is in clash. In none of the cases do they, essentially, know what's going on when it happens. Right, Scott? The woman [in *The Last Volcano*] is trying to make sense of the historical documents; the guy



Still from *Rats and Cats*, 2014.

has no idea what she's talking about. The couple [in *Rats and Cats*] are trying to find a reason to like each other, while desperately not liking each other. The people on the oil platform [in *Norwegian Tsunami*] are just taking a cigarette break and are not aware of what's going on underground. In each case the central topic is not the disaster, yet it's the thing that shifts relationships of one kind or another.

SCOTT: Yeah, and it's sort of sideways. The other important thing, I think, is that repetition, and that was sort of accidental or arbitrary in a way. It was kind of a decision that Rod made while we were recording it with the actor, whose name was Gro, which is sort of an interesting name – sort of like 'grow' or 'grew'. As we were recording in their apartment, her husband, Jan Arild, was periodically in the room and kind of making noise and sort of interrupting. And it was just the aural quality of that which was really interesting. So we made the decision to make that repetition. And the interesting thing, when I watch people watch it, is that when you hit the second round, it kind of gets serious in a way, and you actually begin to question, 'Wait, we thought this was a fiction, or is it real, or what's happening?' And you sort of get some of that with the guy trying to figure out what it's about. It's also – well – could this be happening now? Could this happen *again*?



AUDIO FROM THE LAST VOLCANO

JHAVE: Well, I like the cyclical twist. When I heard that voice say, 'Some say that things only happen once, but others say that nothing only happens once', or something like that. It's a very nice repetition. And again, that's a theme in the works. Like if you go to *Toxi•City*, you've got this sonic horn that blows off like a pulse, the pulse of death itself, which is just like, there, beep beep. Just like a melancholic elegy in some ways. I really like it. And, Gro. This thing at the end. This was accidental? But it really works. It's like a Beckett moment. And you have another metalayer that takes you out of that harbour where you've been spinning in circles. And in *The Last Volcano* there's this interesting moment where I become Gro, in a way. And I'm like, who's Gro? Who is interrupting Gro now? Where could this be happening? In what garden? What strange deserted space?

ROD: Yes, it breaks the image in an odd way, because the image is so seamless. And the voice becomes kind of attached to it, the woman's voice. And then another voice comes in and suddenly you really don't know where you are.

JHAVE: Ah, I see how that happens now. But when it comes in a circle, do you come in a complete visual circle and a complete audio circle?

ROD: You do. You go all the way around. You go around once with the picture, and twice with the sound.

JHAVE: It's a signature.

ROD: It takes two voice cycles to make it one way around in the visual circle. And I guess also, as we were talking about breaking the news cycle melodrama, I suppose that it's both a cycle and an anti-cycle. Because there's no drama in the cycle, right? The drama is her stuck on top of it, but there's actually no drama whatsoever in that cycle, just a totally normal day on the docks in Norway.

SCOTT: Except for the weird mist you put in there. The yellow mist.

JHAVE: Clouds of chlorine drifting past, or chloride, or something.

You spent a lot of time in each of these stories being very detailed about characters as well: very attentive to the narrative. So what is the narrative of how you make them? Who does what in your process? How does your creative partnership work?

SCOTT: Well, I think typically it has been a sort of iterative and reciprocal process. Although, I'm definitely thinking that Rod's the filmmaker, and so he sort of ends up getting stuck with more of the work. The way our process has worked so far is that Rod has shared some images with me, and then we meet and maybe have some general ideas going in about a story. It was like, 'Hey, this volcano moment is really interesting', in the way that it kind of becomes obsessive. And then he showed me some images and we started to kind of go back and forth. And then I drafted a story and Rod made some suggestions, made some edits, asked me to compress and bring it down into a short script length.

There's also a distinction with *Three Rails Live* and with *Toxi•City*, in that those are actually database narratives, too. So the juxtapositions are different each time that they run, so we're also thinking in terms of the fragments there, in a different way than something that's meant to be a linear narrative or a cyclical narrative – whatever you want to call those first few things. But typically we've gone back and forth several times, where there's the images, and there's parts of a story. Then we talk about the story and talk about the images, and some new images come in and some new text comes in and it layers in this responsive way.

And then the other thing that happens, that has been interesting for me, is what happens when the voice actors get involved. Because, we gave an example with Gro, but I'd say each time, once we actually hear the voices, I don't think we've left anything alone. I don't think we've done one straight recording session. We keep coming back to the recordings because they change the quality of the narrative immensely, depending on whose voice is speaking and how the actors interact together. But beyond that, we can't even tell how the voices work, really, until they're together with the images. So several of them, like the third one [*Norwegian Tsunami*], we're still going to re-record a third time, because you don't really know whether it kind of comes off working or as contrived, until you hear what the actors are bringing to it, and see how that works with the images.

ROD: Yeah, it's a tonal match with the pictures, which are also part of the sense of voice. The pictures come from all over the world. They're selected more as kinds of quotations – as tropes connecting ideas- than as direct representations. Then also to go back to the news cycle concept: in *Rats and Cats*, for example, there were images shot in a train station in Buffalo, or whatever it was, that were in there, because they fit the Gothic window concept I wanted to connect to structures in Norway. I wanted to make that bridge. In *Toxi•City*, there were images shot on the Thames because the industrial imagery of the Thames provides effective quotations to express the kind of industrial decay and despair that is also parallel to what's happening in its supposed side of Pennsylvania – quotations expand the concept. So, I think in all the films there are images which are taken from other places and are not place-specific at all. They are chosen for tone – in search of the voice that also gives them tone. And that's what I'm searching for; searching for the match between the voice of the image and the voice of the language is an interesting challenge. But also the casting process, particularly in *Toxi•City* – where we had quite a large cast – and it took, after hearing the voices, going out and shooting images that fit the voices also. That's part of a kind of cycle that happens, which can happen in this way of working that doesn't always happen, in film. That is, in this way of working with the elements as separate and combined, you can keep adding and changing so you get some of the voice without things happening, and then you try to find the cues to work with that voice – the visual cues.

JHAVE: So you've got this rolling wave of image/writing, image/writing and then it passes into audio and you've got this wave of audio coming in. So it's almost this wave process, but at some point, how do you get the final real cut? What is in that combinatorial cutting in each of these cases? How, technically, is it done? Maybe it's not such an interesting question, but for me, I like that sort of question. I want to know your secrets. How are you cutting these things and how is the archive held?

SCOTT: Well, maybe you want to talk first about the process in the first three films, and then we can think about the database structure, Rod?

ROD: Okay, the cutting that happens in the first three films versus the database? Well, the database is a challenge, actually, probably more a different type of challenge. But with the first three films, as I said before, the choices are quotations and metaphoric, and they're very different because they are designed around different fundamental metaphors. *The Last Volcano* offers an encounter with a kind of emptiness, a disconcerting emptiness. I shot a lot of panoramas that explored fixed relationships. *Rats and Cats* sets these elements in motion through the connecting tissue of the boats. We have elements that represent the two characters; we keep having the boats clashing as the elements connecting the characters. And the *Tsunami* is [about] being submerged within imaginary spaces. So there are all these fairground elements that come in underneath the waves. I think the structures for all the combinatory films are in a way more detailed, like trying to connect certain kinds of shots together in sets, including the ship shots and foghorns as connecting tissues in *Toxi•City*. Including the random number images and photographs in *Three Rails Live* –



Six frames from the combinatory film *Three Rails Live*, 2013.

SCOTT: And the perverses, Nick's perverses as well –

ROD: And those become structuring devices. In a way that self-sorts, in *Three Rails Live*, because it has very clear chapters and themes. *Three Rails Live* has industrial themes, its various decay-life-environmental themes, snakes. Those themes came out of some images and then generated the production of others. So Scott saw a photo I had of these kids holding a snake, creating the death-by-snake concept, which then provoked me to think that there were going to be images that related to that kind of a death. That really collected self-generative images, and that's actually

what I think the recombinatory form does particularly well; it generates production. And that's really different.



AUDIO CLIP FROM *THREE RAILS LIVE: SNAKES*

SCOTT: And that process was interesting because Rod has a set of images and both Nick and I got them and then sort of independently came up with two concepts and didn't really talk about how they would work together necessarily. So I took the images and kind of sorted them into thematic buckets, in a way, and assigned a theme to them, and then started writing, thinking of the images that were kind of in those buckets. And they ended up being things like travel and flood and death by snake, and I forget the whole list of them, but there's 10 sets and three texts within them. And those sort of formed the narrative texts. Meanwhile, Nick took them and sort of used them as the base for perverses, these juxtapositions of two proverbs. And then when we got back together and checked in on what we were doing with the writing, that's when it made sense to say, 'Okay, rather than both doing one of these either narrative or perverses, let's figure out how we can use them together'. And then the perverses kind of become these framing devices, morals to the story.



AUDIO CLIPS 'MORAL OF THE STORY'

The difference in tone, I think, is really interesting too, because the narrative text in *Three Rails Live* is kind of heavy. I think I wrote that right after I almost lost a finger and [laughing] had this sort of series of injuries. So there was this kind of, ah, you know –

ROD: You also couldn't hit certain keys, right? [laughing]

SCOTT: That was the other interesting thing about that. It was during this time, when my hand was like in this cast, right? And I got Dragon Dictation [software], and it was the first time I actually tried writing something by just sort of sitting and speaking it, and then I went back later and edited it. But it was actually originally a spoken text, and then I edited it, and then I re-recorded it. So it came out of this different type of orality than I usually work with.

ROD: But those claw hands also like made him look like he was becoming a lizard again, receding back in evolution. *[laughing]*

SCOTT: Atavistic.

JHAVE: It does feel like you're heading down some – as much as the piece is thematically looking forward to the destruction of civilization and the return to our atavistic roots, the way you're using structure to structure the use of these audio clips, these morsels of the voice, the narrative, the way it has a beat to it, a little section. It doesn't feel to me like its beating in the way that modernist fiction or postmodern fiction just sort of churns on. This is much more – there's a metronomic and elegiac quality, like beating a large tympani drum as you lead a community through a village. There's something really quite slow and gracious about all these pieces. And it feels as if, fundamentally, you're moving your way towards a form that's ancient and kind of contemporary.



Matted and layered imagery in Three Rails Live, 2013.

SCOTT: Yeah, I think in *Toxi•City* that is especially the case, or at least more consciously the case. When we started talking about that piece and Rod filled me in on the circumstances – I used to also live close to where Rod lives now. I lived in New Jersey, coastal New Jersey –

JHAVE: – which doesn't do well in *Toxi•City*.

SCOTT: – well, there was this image that really stuck with me. It was when we were at the ELMCIP conference in Edinburgh [in November 2012]. I got my newspaper in the hotel room, and there's this picture of President Obama standing in front of this flooded landscape of Brigantine, New Jersey. And I looked at the picture and I realised that was three blocks from where I used to live. That's where I walked. If I just walked from my house to the beach – that was where he was standing. So the Hurricane Sandy stuff was obviously very present in my mind, because the island I used to live on was devastated pretty severely during the storm. And then, as Rod and I talked about the research that he and his group were doing with all the chemical sites in Philadelphia, and of course, the big storm and the other sorts of flooding that are happening on a regular basis, it was kind of natural for me to think back to New Jersey.

And then what I did was – my first impulse after Rod had sent me some bunches of different materials, including some news clippings – was to find out all of the death stories of everyone who died in New Jersey. So I spent some time just searching online and I found these detailed obituaries of all these people and I kind of adapted them. So there was that, but there was also the fictional layer. And the fiction is meant as a little bit of forecast maybe, thinking a little bit ahead to the future. I think the function of the New Jersey death stories is to remind us that though this is a fiction, this isn't like *science fiction*. This is something that is already present. Maybe trying to bring a certain kind of seriousness to this, so it doesn't become a disaster movie, right? So that it's actually more about human beings.



AUDIO CLIP DEATH STORY FROM TOXI•CITY

ROD: Yeah, and the human story also was that these things, especially climate change, come in gradual states as life just keeps going on. So people keep doing what they're doing, just in bleaker and bleaker circumstances. The fisherman still fishes, but he fishes for furniture. That kind of thing. Life keeps going on and changing.

JHAVE: There are a lot of beautiful details and you know there's a lot of resonance going on. Like, I was thinking of *Six Feet Under*, that HBO show, where they begin every episode with a tiny little vignette of someone dying. But it was almost as if you took that technique and it was just repeating infinitely. And, infinitely, that word, I realise you're on the edge of a possible combinatorial fiction, which would be just like the obituaries. It'd be like a global obituary and it would never stop. It could continue forever. You would just be writing like mad, adding new trinkets and hob-

bies for people and then just splash it out. There's a long stream of work that would occur there. It's sort of fascinating in the way that the sunset or a tide is fascinating. Just to watch things come and go and hear about them going and coming.

ROD: Yeah, theoretically that's true of a bucket theory of writing – you keep throwing things in the bucket as long as they're 30 seconds in length, or 90 seconds depending on which bucket.

JHAVE: So there's an obituary and then there's a clump of descriptive morsel. Are those randomly combined?

SCOTT: We're still working that out. The combinatorics are a little bit different in *Toxi•City* than in *Three Rails Live*. And we're still tweaking things with both of them. But the interesting thing that happened – or the decision we made with *Three Rails Live* – was that initially we were going to do things kind of keyword-tied-together, so you'd have a story about a flood, and there would be a flood image, but then we started running tests on it; it was actually much more interesting if the randomness was more arbitrary and less tied to the keywords. Because it's much more interesting to have an image that reminds you of a text you heard three scenes ago. Or to see something, and then that process of your mental conversation with the text, with the voices, is much more interesting if it's not just purely illustrative, even though the thematic buckets of *Three Rails Live* or *Toxi•City* are directly in response to these images. So at least with the first one, we ended up with a much simpler combinatory structure than we initially plotted. When we started making it more of a one-to-one correlation, it turned out to be less poetic, or less interesting, than having it function kind of like memory, where you're trying to remember something and then five minutes later you're standing, waiting for the train, and the memory comes to you. We're still working that out with *Toxi•City*, but basically what we've done in the cut that's being used at the museum right now is that Rod sort of shuffled the deck and just did the combinatory algorithm by hand.

ROD: Yeah, I have three shuffled combinations that work at the museum. And what I found was necessary was to shuffle things into basically three buckets – beginnings, middles and ends – text-wise, and draw from those. I wanted to have images be the beginning of a narrative, or the end of a narrative amidst a two and half-minute cycle, so that each time a story cycle comes up, it has two pieces of text and two image sequences. The image sequences within those fixed 90 seconds can come up in any order, divided simply within the beginnings, middles and ends structure, for now. And again, I don't know if we'll want the keyword structure, but I find that

shuffle at least allows us to develop interweaving mood changes as opposed to just having two hours of random images.

SCOTT: I think with this one it'll be interesting to stick with the beginning, middle and end, because now we're sort of using chronology. The first one, there are two buckets of narratives. There's the matted and the non-matted image. I think that with the keyword possibility the important thing would be to be careful about how we use it so that the connections that are formed aren't the illustrative kind, but other types of connections that are more thought-provoking.

ROD: Right, originally I designed it in three frames, thinking of it as three separate images. It was very wide, three meters wide. It would function more like a gambling machine, where you pull the lever, and out come different fruits, three separate images. That proved to be a little bit unwieldy, especially next to the panoramas. The idea was that you would have a panorama and then three random images next to that. Combinatory-wise it helps to prefigure lots of variations and let the variations come up with sets that roll through. I was playing with the effects of chance and its relation to disasters. At any moment there are variable options triggered by chance encounters, each with differing and unpredictable narrative and visual outcomes.



Three stills from Toxi•City, 2014.

JHAVE: Are these mechanically constructed prior-to-exhibit or are they running in real time and developing these optional systems, or are you using the rules to influence an editing process?

ROD: *Three Rails Live* runs live. That's a fully finished combinatory piece that runs live –

SCOTT: – for installation. We're still working on the web version: the installation works.

ROD: Right. The installation version is just a bit big right now; we have to compress it to run online or our web just needs to get better. And *Toxi•City* is designed to run in a combinatory structure, but that structure is not finalised because we had a museum deadline first, so we used that as an editing strategy and then came up with two or three versions. So it cycles for about 50 minutes and then cycles through another version for 50 minutes and then another version, and then goes back to the beginning. One of the problems was by running three HD monitors, the computer could not charge, run or support that without a lot of expensive extra equipment. So, the most effective way was to bring that down to a fixed edited approximation of the combinatory structure. But it should work fine, it's just not set up in that form, and we haven't quite finished the other form.

JHAVE: Generally, in terms of the sort of proportions, usually a combinatory structure is a bit like an iceberg, where the viewer only sees a small portion of the available material – either the writing or the images, or the soundtrack, or whatever. How large is your base for what you're moving towards, or do you just empty it all and show it all? That's obviously a technique where you have an archive and just shuffle it till it's empty and then fill it again, reshuffle it, and keep going.

SCOTT: In *Three Rails Live* it is possible for segments to repeat, and once every 30 times you might have two instances of the same narratives right after one other. I think we might change that a little. In *Toxi•City* I think the strategy is going to be to empty the bucket on each run.

ROD: Not exactly. I agree, but I think in *Three Rails Live*, actually the repetition gets really fun; I really love that. In *Toxi•City*, the way it runs now is, we have about a 50-minute cycle drawing on about 80 minutes of material, and so there always will be something that drops out. Particularly visually, and so you get a few surprises worked in. There are more deaths as well. And this obituary thing, Jhave? There

are more deaths in a cycle that you'll hear and you'll follow most of the character stories, but there are more images that will support the characters in all the stories.

SCOTT: The difference is that in *Toxi•City* we will make it so that in the cycle narrative segments will not repeat. But when the project is complete, we'll probably have 90 minutes of material, 60 minutes for a run.

JHAVE: That's a significant amount of material. I think you're heading up towards something like a novella – what is that, a novella heading towards a novel?

SCOTT: Well, of course the writing is always more of an act of compression. *Three Rails Live* is 30 narratives long, 30 short narratives. *Toxi•City* is more than that. I'm not sure if we've actually counted.

ROD: It might grow.

SCOTT: Yeah, it will grow, but still maybe novella in terms of the actual text. But what happens is that it gets expanded so much when you bring in the image and the human voice. So in a way I'm always more thinking about compression of the writing; it's just always an act of bringing it down to a more manageable size. And trying to choose moments or fragments that compress a lot of character, and sometimes a lot of emotion, into a small sliver, as opposed to stretching it out more.

ROD: Right, well you have to fit the text into 90-second segments, which is a good challenge. Every piece of read text should be about 90 seconds to fit in the rotation.

JHAVE: Yeah, it did feel like there's a sense that even though it's moving, in a strange sort of methodical linger, there's a tempo to the voices, and most of the voice actors are carefully precise. When they tell an anecdote, they're not trying to be like a newscaster, they're not hurtling through space. Instead they're steady about things, they're talking as people do. But then there's a sense that somehow these are micro-portraits, that there's a lot of details chipped off. It's like you've entered a room where there's a conversation that has been going on for hours maybe. And I like that quality a lot. The sort of truncated fragment.



AUDIO CLIP OF NARRATIVE FRAGMENT FROM TOXI•CITY

SCOTT: I hope that the fragments grow into something more as they connect and layer onto each other. I did a lot of thinking about form when I was doing research, because these aren't normal obituaries I was using, kind of harvesting materials from in *Toxi•City*; they are a strange form. They're not obituaries like they're normally presented in newspapers. They're trying to do both these things. In newspaper obituaries they're normally trying to compress facts and details of a person's life. This is also trying to do this, but also coming out of this moment of trauma – the interesting thing is that they all told the death story too, right? And that's – immediately after something like this, it is both who these people were, but also how did they die? It's a kind of collective trauma that everyone's dealing with simultaneously as they're reading these things. So that sort of compression, the question of 'What details do you bring out to establish this story as that of an individual person?' is really interesting, and I think ties in to a lot of this type of really compressed fragmentary writing.

JHAVE: I'm thoroughly enjoying it. I'm two-thirds of the way through and I'd like to get finished, because this really is a strong work. It's got a lot of grace to it. It's evocative, on a fundamental affective level, and it's effective visually.

ROD: One of the nice things that Scott did with the text is that a lot of these futuristic stories are actually from historical data, which also gives it a kind of factual accuracy. So, for example, the kid talking about seeing a chemical train wreck is actually based on a chemical train wreck that happened five months ago. The fishermen's story about all the birds dying in oil from a new shipwreck is actually drawn from an oil shipwreck that happened six years ago. It creates a strange challenge. Is it historical or is it futuristic? Anyone who knows the local history will recognise all of these futuristic disasters as in a sense old disasters that happen again and again and again. I like that timelessness, but also it gives the character something very detailed to hold onto, because it draws out a past that keeps happening in worse and worse circumstances.

JHAVE: It feels like in a few years you guys will probably make a return to the volcano, right? You'll make *The First Volcano*. I don't know what it would be about, but there will be some sort of cyclical structure, and it will start with the same words and water, I don't know.

SCOTT: Well, historically, whenever that one volcano blows, within a 10-year period, the other one blows. So, the big volcano is most likely coming soon, if geological history is accurate.

JHAVE: And even just to keep us in this moment, there's a typhoon that's just about to strike the coast of Japan. And if it continues to grow, it could surge waters into Tokyo and potential flooding throughout Fukushima. You don't have to look far for evidence of sort of strange, edge-of-the-world disasters, yet there's also this extraordinary resilience going on, like one of your speakers in *Toxi•City*, speaking about the estuary and the crabs and how good they are to eat. They are still safe, and that sort of thing. So it doesn't feel like you annihilate all people; it feels like there's actually some sort of reservoir of people that you're listing, without monotony, but with some sort of –



Examples of industrial and post-industrial landscapes in Toxi•City, 2014.

SCOTT: Well, that's the thing, right? All apocalypses are personal apocalypses, really. There are these kind of Hollywood narratives where the world comes to an end, and that's not how it's happened so far, right? What happens is that people go through these horrible things, they die, they're gradually forgotten, and then other people come in and repeat the same mistakes, and then it just kind of continues, but humans are extraordinarily resilient and they rebuild things. And the troubling thing in that cycle, obviously, is how much rebuilding can you do? At what point does it just make the conditions of living infeasible?

ROD: Another element of this is just that disasters and tragedies aren't all singular. These adaptations keep happening and they are responding to what occurs one event after another after another after another, which each requires a slightly different story, a slightly different personal apocalypse. Just as with Fukushima, you have a tsunami, then you have a nuclear disaster, and now you have a typhoon. And each thing is a different variation of a tragic thing. So the thing with the fiction, how we envision *Toxi•City*, is that you still have shipwrecks, just as you had before flooding, but now with the added element of flooding. You still have pipe leaks and sewage leaks and train wrecks, but now the context has shifted and almost has a bigger impact, just as they have with Fukushima in Japan. But then you have these characters who are there in the narrative, for them the apocalypse is always the same but different, because there's always a flux that comes in and shifts it, shifts the attention to the pollution of the masses, pollution of the drinking water, pollution of the fish, the contamination of the food, the death of the cows. It's never one single world's-burning-up story – each one affects a different person. So a different person goes to a different apocalypse.

JHAVE: So what do you want people to take away from this? Like, it begins with the relationship *Rats and Cats*, or in *Volcano*, and then comes in two sets of relationships, a sense of combinatorial people combined. But you're also talking always about playing your death or end or something. Are you becoming ecological authors in some sense? Is that part of what's just occurred by accident?

SCOTT: I think these are definitely among the more pressing concerns of being alive now. So, yeah, I don't think it will really make sense to divide ecological or non-ecological writing. I don't think we're trying to be completely didactic, beyond what is kind of obvious about climate change. But I also think it's part of what we should be doing as authors, filmmakers, poets, whatever – kind of reflecting on the conditions in which we live and that we're leaving behind. So I think it's part of the present moment, and that just noticing is important, and making note of, so, yeah.

JHAVE: I agree, I agree. What I just thought of is, isn't it ironic that all the climate change data say it's going to be the poor countries like Bangladesh that will really get struck incredibly hard by these transitions, but the United States with this massive shoreline and a big interior might weather that storm in some ways, but its these small little coastal states that are going to get monsooned out. I think you guys should go to Bangladesh with cameras and audio equipment, and write the stories of people there in parallel. It'd be a good, impeccable sort of follow for this.

SCOTT: It's a good idea.

JHAVE: That's not a good interview question. But I think it would be a good follow-up to the whole project.

SCOTT: That's true. And that's part of the whole thing, right? Of course, we're all – and even focusing on the people of New Jersey, right? – we're living in these places of incredible comfort compared to where these changes are being felt most directly and most severely. I mean, but maybe there is a kind of didactic thing to it as well, or a sort of lesson, it is that it's also you, in the 'first world', that it's also our world that is changing.

ROD: Kayaking up the Delaware River with 200 active petrochemical sites, EPA clean-up sites and chemically contaminated brownfields, you can't help but feel that this is really nasty – that conditions are potentially very nasty. And what happens, although it's First World, people don't have the money just to get up and go. When disasters happen like Hurricane Sandy, many are stuck in their houses and what to return there, because that's where home is and there's not much else. And it's the working communities around Paulson and Marcus Hook where the refineries are. When they get hit, they get hit with pretty bad stuff. There's plenty of unevenness here, too. But it's also just filming what one sees. That's the thing. If one goes to Bangladesh and can understand it, or most of the rest of the world, as you say, but not see it, it is pretty evident and very immediately accessible. There is something about seeing the stuff, seeing the documentary side that makes fiction happen. Where this kind of started off from, just, it's here. And we have personal stories, so it's like as Scott said, being in Brigantine and seeing the place wiped out a couple years after you've left it has a sort of immediate impact that allows one to tell some kind of story too.

JHAVE: Yeah there's plausibility to it, because the United States now doesn't evoke an atmosphere to extreme healthiness, from the external perspective. It feels like Rome tottering towards the fin-de-siècle of its imperial power. The senators bickering in their gracious glass houses, and the smoke rising from the rubble, and people arming themselves in the corridors. It's strange, like the vectors of energy there are quite volatile. So that's partially what makes the pieces gripping and I appreciate the fact that you didn't amplify their group, and that it's at quite a personal level. Personal stories are being told with images that are quite quiet, in many senses. And there's something successful about the combinations that are growing there. And the use of voices. Who else in the electronic literature community that we know of is actively using really good voice actors? That's a successful sort of structural change, I think.

SCOTT: Yeah, and I think that's been the sort of opening thing for me. Both film, but the thing that has really surprised me is how much the human voice adds to and shapes a narrative. Which I guess shouldn't surprise me. And also from a technical perspective, it does new and interesting things to combinatory writing, which is something I've been interested in for a long time. Even if just technically, it's sort of a cheat, the fact that we're using images that generally don't have images of people, but that the people come to us through the voice – that has some interesting effects and surprises that change your position when you're watching something, rather than just kind of objectifying this other person. When you see these things they may be seeing and you hear their voices, it changes the way that you react. So that's another just weird, interesting thing – the voices are central, but you don't see anyone.

JHAVE: I think it's very reactive to not see those people. In the same way the imagination is given primacy over pure descriptiveness. There are multiple descriptions of a place, but everyone ultimately has to paint the red wall in whatever colour red they really require. I can hear those people's bodies when I hear them, and to be watching something else at the same time – and to be quite honest, I think I'm one of the first, or one of the many victims of Ong's secondary orality. Reading long sections of fiction is not something I find myself doing in the sort of sustained way that I used to do. But listening to people read that fiction for me is, while I watch some sort of ambient video and have some thoughts about how that video connects to the voice – that works, somehow. That is actually the medium of writing in this tiny little niche of history that we are in technologically. There are other people reading novels, but I've sort of given up recently reading the big books, right? That's sort of faded away.

SCOTT: Yeah, I don't read as many as I used to. I mean it's not – we don't want to end on the death of the novel.

JHAVE: It's too late. I should get some sleep.

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