

Omer Fast

in conversation with
Gilane Tawadros,
Director, inIVA

GILANE TAWADROS: What inspired you to make your new video piece *Godville*?

OMER FAST: I think I was looking for a place that could simultaneously connect some pretty disparate, admittedly vague, interests I have: historical representation and time travel, theme parks and suburbs, war and the media, split personalities and hybrids, tourism and tourists, performance and acting, America and Americana. I started by contacting re-enactment groups. These are people who meet on a regular basis in order to rehearse or perform a historical event, usually a battle of some sort, according to historical record and in period dress. I was hoping to join them as an unofficial observer or to complete the tableau by participating as a war re-enactment photographer. I wrote to several and was roundly rejected. Still, I prefer to do these things with permission.

Since I had not lived in the States for almost three years at the time, it was not practical

to fly over and hope for spontaneous cooperation. Also, the longer the military occupation of Iraq was continuing, the less interested I'd become in representing combat, especially as it is performed by people in drag shooting blank bullets at each other on weekends. In retrospect, this might have actually turned up something interesting, but soon after I was more drawn to living-history museums, where I hoped to find people who were somehow in a more advanced, if less ecstatic, state of deliberate disorientation. After a period of correspondence, followed by visits and meetings, I was rejected by the first three places in the northeast. The fourth and biggest of all, Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, generously agreed.

GT: Can you say a little more about this 'state of deliberate disorientation'? This seems to be a continuous theme in your work. The viewer is repeatedly made disorientated by the disjuncture between what he/she sees on the screen and the text or voiceover on the film. In the case of *Godville*, the viewer's reading of the work is continuously jarred by the slippage between past and present: the character-interpretors slip seamlessly between the colonial past of Williamsburg and contemporary reality.

OF: A part of what makes a time machine like Colonial Williamsburg work is the mutual consent it requires. The performer puts on a costume, emulates an accent and deliberately forgets the last two hundred years whenever a visitor is around. The visitor also participates by stepping into the time and space of the performer, not only activating the machine through his/her presence but by talking and asking questions, steering the conversation, often having to speak and behave in a way the character being portrayed would understand. This isn't just about interactivity though. What's more interesting is what happens to reality in the process. Both performer and visitor are complicit in maintaining the illusion created between them. At the same time, both are also aware of the present and the impossibility of fully escaping from it. They might choose not to acknowledge it, but the present is always there, within reach, just on the periphery of their dialogue. It's the measure against which anything said between them is tested. Like a memory, it can be referred to, repressed or recovered through a game

of avoidance, allusions and double entendres. How much something like this happens depends of course on the persons involved. One performer told me he uses his 18th-century character, an avowed subject of King George who is nevertheless beginning to find fault with His Majesty's policies, to make a point about what he sees around him today, where being a patriot increasingly means not being critical. He portrays his character, a 'founding father' and signer of the Declaration of Independence, not as the maverick revolutionary he believes the visitors were taught to expect, but as a British subject struggling to define his duties and rights within the framework of citizenship. This particular performer tries to avoid escapism and deliberately alludes to contemporary issues when re-enacting the past with his guest. At other times, if either party is just looking for a spectacle, the same interaction just leads to a pornography of the past, an affirmation of the present, or what that same performer called 'fast-food ancestor worship'.

During the shooting of *Godville*, I deliberately tried to engage the two centuries that converge in Colonial Williamsburg. In the beginning of each interview, I spoke to the performers as an ideal visitor would. I asked them about the town they live in, what's going on around them, their 18th-century life. At some point though, I stopped the illusion and started asking some of the same questions out-of-character. As expected, a strategy of this sort can sometimes be interesting or revealing, sometimes it just seems contrived. In any event, what I ended up with was a double portrait of one person, speaking about his or her life in two centuries. Back in the studio, I decided to use the material indiscriminately. Instead of sorting out the illusion of the historical character being performed from the reality of the contemporary person performing, I used the entire interview as an inventory which could be freely adapted. This means not only jumping between historical time and the present, but in a literal sense, jumping around the interview: cutting together entire statements, chopping and mixing sentences, even editing together words never spoken during the interview from consonants and vowels. It also means not only dissolving the two personalities of the interviewee into a hybrid, but eventually



Above: Omer Fast, *Godville*, film stills, 2004

also blurring the distinction between myself and that person, between what I want to pull out of the interview and what was actually said. Sometimes the characters go on long tirades, accusing me (or the viewer) of hypocrisy, of personal failing, of left-leaning prejudice, of turning them into clichés. None of this was said in the interviews, but the narratives are edited as smoothly as possible so that they're convincingly fluent. It is only by seeing how the person speaking is edited that the proper sense of time (and order) is restored, albeit one that is artificial and fractured.

GT: The idea of the time machine is a very interesting one. It is a long-standing theme of science fiction from TV programmes like *Doctor Who* to films like *Back to the Future*. The fantasy is that we can travel in time and know definitively what it was like. Yet, knowing the past in that pure and authentic way is impossible and probably less important than understanding how our past shapes present

realities and how we could use that knowledge productively. Is this your view?

OF: Of course. Having said that, I think my work reflects a notion of time that is not so fixed or stable. It's more about describing this instability, trying to find ways of articulating it, than prescribing a way of dealing with it. To the persons who appear in my work, or rather in the narratives that I make out of them, this lack of determinacy is a source of both pleasure and pain. In *Godville*, for example, there is a long unedited segment in which a woman recalls the loss of three of her sons. All three died in the War of Independence, over two hundred years ago. They are actually the sons of her character. Still, this recollection appears to be the least manipulated, most credible part of her narrative. She cries, wipes her eyes and the editing starts whirling around her again, bringing back the present tense, along with doubt and denial. In the end, she is unable (or isn't allowed) to make sense of the loss in a contemporary

context and the emotional moment appears almost quaint and drawn out compared with the bursts of fragments that follow. These kinds of real-life parallels don't usually happen to me but I remember editing this woman's segment at a time when there was a debate over publishing the images of American coffins coming back from Iraq.

GT: Your work makes us self-conscious of our deep-seated desire to sustain this illusion that we can suspend the present and enter the past. I'm thinking here about other of your works like *Spielberg's List*. Could you say something about the relationship between *Godville* and *Spielberg's List*? Among other things, are these works a critique of 'fast-food ancestor worship' and is this exclusively an American past time?

OF: For *Spielberg's List*, I interviewed people in Krakow who worked as extras during the shooting of *Schindler's List* in 1993. Some of them were old enough to have also experienced the events depicted in the movie earlier on in their lives. Others just speak vividly about something that is very real but is nevertheless a kind of a copy. The difference between their recollections is repressed though, and the work inconspicuously cuts between these persons' first-hand experiences: between memories that were lived through and memories produced by the cinema. The presence of the movie-event as a kind of public archive that both complements and corrupts the individual memory is therefore a theme that runs through this work. I started working on *Godville* a year after finishing *Spielberg's List*.

The two videos are obviously closely related. Still, for me, there are a few significant differences. To begin with, *Godville* doesn't revolve around an 'event,' be it historical or cinematic. Its setting is both broader and reaches farther back in time than *Spielberg's List* does. More explicitly put, *Godville's* historical context does not immediately hark back to a singular trauma. This allows the performers, at least the ones doing the white characters, more latitude to be 'normal' – to be more anonymous and paradoxically even more contemporary – than the Spielberg/Schindler survivors ever could. I tried to exploit this by editing much more of

the present into *Godville* and the work seems, at first perhaps, to be looser and more immediate. The second main difference is that *Godville* doesn't mourn the blurring of re-enactment and life the way Spielberg's *List* does. Somehow, I think this difference stems from the languages spoken in the two works. Even though I heard quite a bit of Polish early in life, I had to rely on a translator throughout my stay in Krakow. The more interviews we did together, the more sensitive I became to the role of this person. The dependency on a third party was often a rich source of frustration for me, but it also allowed for a certain distance from the people I interviewed and from their weird stories.

This distance was useful in forestalling any reaction to what they were saying: I only had access to their body language, to their act of remembering. Only after a pause and the ensuing translation would the content arrive, with all its contradictions. Eventually, instead of sorting through the details and separating fact from film, I decided to pass the responsibility along to the viewer. In *Godville*, on the other hand, the difference between re-enactment and life is suppressed and the two are literally mixed into a whole. The erosion in its characters' credibility, their loss of historical perspective, is not presented so much as a loss per se, nor as a challenge to sort through. It is presented as something intoxicating, especially in the work's most direct moments, when the characters become self-aware and lash out but their speech is totally artificial.

Despite all this, the two works clearly have a lot in common. Both look into the past through the perspective of persons who participate in its re-enactment. Both rely on these persons' experience and report from a first-hand point of view. Coming back to the time machine though, both works also misuse their subjects and derail in their bid to get at the past. I don't think that either work could be characterised as critique. I like to think of them more as portraits. They are portraits whose subjects are obviously splintered. They are also portraits in a modernist sense in that they foreground the surface and erode the distinction between artist and sitter. In that sense, they're self-portraits.

Omer Fast

07 September-23 October 2005

Wednesday-Saturday and Sunday 18 September
& 23 October 2005, 12.00-6.00pm
Admission Free

inIVA, 6-8 Standard Place,
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inIVA presents the first UK solo exhibition by artist
Omer Fast. *Godville* is a new video installation that
presents portraits from a town in America unmoored
and floating between the past and the present.





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