

A couple of years ago, during Liverpool Biennial 2014, I visited The School for the Blind; one of the venues for that edition. I was catching it late, towards the end of the run. I remember walking around the building, with the trace of so many lives running through the space: piles of papers left hanging for twenty years, as if the assorted cohort had cleared out early for the send-off pint; leftover furniture; old signs. A ruin. It worked well as a venue. The work on display wasn't overwhelmed by the texture of the building. It panned out.

I can only imagine the huge logistical exercise that must go into accessing these sites, so it seems only fair to point out that this is something the Biennial does well. As an event that takes place through the city, the scale of the trajectory – across the streets, buildings and spaces – often resonates, even if the critical themes don't necessarily intersect your own interests. It has the potential to reveal a clandestine sub-conscious of the city, with thoughts and ideas incidental to the curatorial set-up often coming to the fore. With Biennial 2016 in the last couple of weeks, I wanted to visit one of these spaces – the ABC cinema – partly, I admit, to see the building, remembering how much I'd enjoyed The School for the Blind.

On entering the ABC, the first work on display is Samson Kambalu's *Casablanca*. The work refers to the space of the cinema: the last film shown at the venue, before it closed its doors for the final time in 1998, was *Casablanca*. Someone at the ABC obviously had a bit of a clue – what a great last film – and credit must go to Kambalu for picking up on this. He has asked a group of children to imagine the film's content as part of his broader 'Nyau Cinema' concept that intersects the place of the building, film, and the everyday: the group were shown the original movie poster and asked to go from there. The installation comprises a series of screens, with projected still photos of the children, whilst they were thinking about the film. There's a subtlety to it. On reading the Biennial blurb, I was expecting the children to be describing this imagined version of *Casablanca*. It's a lot fainter than that; the trace of the movie is barely present, but I thought that worked.

Being a Tuesday, Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni's *The Unmanned*, was running all day in the space. The work comprises a series of films that offer up a history of technology in reverse, kicking off with the Earth's dismantling in 7242. *The Axiom* was playing as I entered the space. On the screen, video footage, shot on a microscope, shows a blade shearing through metal. There is something geological about the film, as if the Earth's crust is being chewed-up and destroyed. The accompanying audio has a child reading a text. It's difficult to follow, as if the child is learning to read, or perhaps reading phonetically.

The second film showing in *The Unmanned* sequence was *The Death of Ray Kurzweil*. It's set in a forest, with a waterfall as the centrepiece. The cinematography feels automated; the movement has the feel of CCTV footage (with further research revealing the entire film was shot using drones.) A naked man washes in the river whilst a young boy makes a net, with rope and string. They have camping gear, which hints at the machine-age apocalypse that has taken place. Out of the blue, the lights come on in

the cinema and a voice talks directly to us, about the space we're in. We go from a mediated to a situated experience. It works well: it's dramatic. The voice talks, broadly, of time, situating the words in the space outside the cinema: the Irish pubs and karaoke bars; Chinatown. Again, only the faintest of meanings are distilled for the viewer, through the assemblage. There's an openness; my mind wandered (in a good way) outside of the space of the film.

The ABC cinema space doesn't disappoint. The (fantastic) Biennial helpers gave me a torch, to make my way down to the screen, which added to the effect of the building. I ended up messing about with shadows for a bit. The wooden floor is slanted, so as to accommodate good viewing positions. That got me, for some reason. The drapery still covers the old screen. Upstairs there is a relief of a skyscraper, painted with gold leaf, against a red wall. An old-timer, in a black-leather, joined me halfway through *The Axiom*. I think he just wanted to have a reek of the building. I let on to him. He watched the film for a bit and then got off. I would have been interested to hear his thoughts about the microscopic imagery. Perhaps, his mind was elsewhere. A group of school children turned up. They had fun with the torches – think 80s Spielberg kid's movie. They were a bit disbelieving of the whole art thing but they seemed to have a great time, regardless. Three of them were in a huddle, giggling, and checking their phones in the dark.

There is something of Manchester-based academic Tim Edensor's essay, *Walking Through Ruins*, in what I'm trying to get at. In the piece, he goes on a series of walks through disused industrial buildings, at some risk to himself. I'm sure you can see the connection. It's a different experience at the ABC, knowing the Biennial have taken the trouble to do all the health and safety checks, but who cares: seeing these spaces open-up, unfold, as a network through the city, is fascinating. You'd have to be very mean-minded not to acknowledge that. It's a kind of critical estate agency; maybe, that's what a speculative strand of urban cultural studies could become. Of course, the Biennial still have to connect with artists and curators from around the world – that's what gives the event credibility and a broader scope – but the overall trajectory, the psychic archipelago of buildings and spaces set within the rhythms of the city: isn't that the key gesture?

See you in 2018...