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Caution, Landslide Ahead (This is a Metaphor)

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We are living in a world of simulations, a cosmos in which the dividing line between the metaphorical and the literal becomes slippery and evasive, and goes beyond the reach of our mind, which seeks to lay it down in any possible realm, to determine objective means for its demarcation. Documentation is such a means. And since it is perceived as such, it is being used to create convincing simulations. What are the chances for two art works relying on the power of the convention of documentation and moving in completely opposite directions, to be presented at the same time and thus raise questions as to the essential nature of fake documentation? Divine providence or mere chance, which is to blame?

A film called *The Blair Witch Project* has recently been released, and is astonishingly successful in the box offices, while in the Herzliya Museum, an Israeli artist named Keren Russo is currently presenting a work called *Spontaneous Human Combustion*. Both investigate phenomena that are usually located in the realm of folklore. The *Project* presents us with photographic films taken from video cameras carried by three American students who set out to document the Legend of the Blair Witch and her mysterious conduct, and experienced her reality first hand. *Spontaneous Human Combustion* presents the phenomenon of fire bursting out of people’s bodies and consuming them. Russo’s work is constructed much the same as a TV documentary. She presents scholarly opinion and eyewitness testimonies, a historical review of the phenomenon accompanied by various explanations regarding its nature. Most victims of spontaneous combustion perish inside their own homes, sometimes in the vicinity of family members who are nearby but do not hear them screaming for help or crying out in pain. They die silently, by way of tacit consent. The body is ignited like a candle; the flames feed on its fat, muscles and bones much as a baby feeds on milk. There are no inflammable materials in the vicinity of the body. Parts of the body are completely consumed, while other organs are hardly even touched by the flames. Furniture and personal belongings that are in the same room where the conflagration occurs

do not catch fire. The first report we have of spontaneous human combustion is from the second half of the 17th Century. The phenomenon has only fairly recently been introduced into folklore, and involves an odd geographical distribution: the cases that have been reported come only from Britain and the United States.

The very description of the phenomenon brings to light the initial differences between the two works under discussion. The *Project* documents an external threat to human beings, while *Combustion* documents an internal one. By the same token the two works adopt two different models of investigation, which are often used in detective stories. *Spontaneous Human Combustion* adopts the armchair-detective model conceived by Edgar Allan Poe, in which the protagonist, who remains aloof from the series of events which follow one another in quick succession, solves the riddle from a distance using cold-blooded intellect, and does not miss a single opportunity to preach his credo to his slow readers and thick-headed assistant. *The Blair Witch Project*, on the other hand, adopts the model of the so-called *hard-boiled* genre, introduced by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Here the detective is an integral part of the successive disasters, stumbling into them blindly, trusting his healthy instincts, his relentless spirit, his pack of cigarettes and the comfort of several loyal assistants, such as alcohol and voluptuous blondes.

The major source of the fake documentation's strength lies in its self-reference: it constantly directs the viewer to its own nature. The two works make it clear that in general they do not seek to present a straightforward documentation of a given event, but are taking advantage, rather, of the conventions and structure of documentation *per se* to promote their own agenda. In fact, the moment when the work reveals itself to be a fake documentation demonstrates the meaning behind the use of the convention. Its status as a fake documentary gives the *Project* the right to be presented as a cinematographic work, fills out the three students' pockets and helps resolve any outstanding issues of reliability. How is it that Mike and Heather remember – of all things - to take their cameras along in a moment of a total loss of their faculties, a moment when the need to escape, to let panic take over, possesses their frightened consciousness? After all, we are talking about American youngsters, those classic victims of horror movies, and not about people who've been through the tough basic training of combat photographers [e.g. in the Israel Defense Forces]. Scary moments

are the *raison-d'être* of any horror movie, and reliability has to be slightly compromised for their sake. The rationale of the horror movie overpowers the convention of documentation because it is simply a more basic need. The so-called documentation employed in the film was used to create a reality effect and reach out to an audience that is used to seeing teenagers being submerged in sheer horror. The *Project* uses the convention of documentation literally, therefore it belongs much more to the history of public relations than to the history of the cinema.

Russo's work, on the other hand, uses the convention of documentation in order to turn both the convention itself and the documented phenomenon into metaphors. The titles at the end of the film present the list of actors. Suddenly, both the commander of the firefighters' unit – who discusses so enthusiastically his inability to explain the bodies' condition in terms of an ordinary fire, and the rationalistic psychologist – who vehemently invalidates the phenomenon, find themselves reading out a prepared text. What status can we accord the very substance of their claims? And what, for that matter, is the reality status of the phenomenon itself?

It is not the phenomenon's claim to reality that is at issue here, but the very fact that the discussion is allowed to take place at all. The actors' words are inconsequential as arguments for or against the validity of spontaneous human combustion, and are important only as part of the treatment of the metaphor it supposedly represents, namely the cultural taboo on self-annihilation.

Some will say that life itself is a form of combustion. From the rock star to the Buddhist monk, from the visionary poet to the bucolic farmer, all humans are consumed by an internal combustion, each according to his own rhythm. This is a metaphor. *Spontaneous Human Combustion* tries to examine how an extreme literal event of inflammation may shed light on the fundamental metaphor.

Reports of spontaneous human combustion have no traces in myths or common ancient folk-tales. Stories bearing the closest resemblance to any description of the phenomenon can be found in Greek Mythology, in the tales of two boys who annihilate themselves by fire. The first, Python, Apollo's son, insists on driving his father's solar chariot across the heavens and loses control over his steeds. The other, Icarus, using

the wings his father designed for him and disregarding his father's dire warnings, flies towards the sun where its rays melt the wax which holds the feathers together, and drops into the sea.

Chronologically, spontaneous human combustion is a phenomenon located in the twilight zones of historical episodes. The first reports come to us from a peculiar period in the history of the West. The Renaissance is over. The Enlightenment movement has yet to gather strength. Descartes begins to wonder about the source of man's certainty regarding his own – and the world's – existence. Rembrandt replaces the eyes of his models with his own suffering eyes, because he can only investigate himself. The world is being filled with reflections, doubts, broken truths. The time has come to design a cultural cloak for the riddles lurking in the darkest reaches of the mind, bereft of verbal existence.

These two Greek myths present self-annihilation as a punishment for the children's rebellion against paternal authority, and not as a form of rebellion in itself. Russo's discussion of the phenomenon of spontaneous human combustion as a cultural metaphor purges self-annihilation of its sinful nature. It claims that, just like the question of fake documentation, the question of suicide or self-annihilation is all about primary knowledge authority and the part played by the investigator. The decision about the preferred investigative model determines the nature of the relationship between viewer and artwork. *The Blair Witch Project* instructs its viewer to act as the shadow of a detective immersing himself in the mystery, without giving him/her any real choice, while Russo's work turns him/her into a detective seated in an armchair, and thus into the only authority capable of judgment. But why am I speaking in the name of a general, faceless and nameless viewer, when I'm supposed to exemplify a viewer experiencing both works? Well, am I wondering whether some unsuspected horror awaits me in some distant darkness, or whether it is already upon me, in the murkiness of the lungs hidden away inside my own body? And how can I learn to reject it? By way of asking questions? Has the world indeed gone so far that the way questions are being presented is the only answer one is entitled to expect?