

# BIG WHITE MALES (TEARING DOWN THE HOUSE)

Leigh Davis

## 1. Hunting the Plot

Paradise is at least a big idea. It is also usually a big problem - because it hides, and because there are so many versions of paradise; heaven, Xanadu, the differing enthusiasms of art, good retail.

But if the thing itself is hard to know, arriving at a common sense definition that will do for now isn't: paradise is a classic pattern in events or experiences which, when recognised, triggers some fulfilment of intense meaning. This classic patterning is a work of language. The paradise I am interested in here is therefore a property of thought and language. It is of the same grain as prophecy.

Two large paradise narratives touch upon public culture in New Zealand. One is residual, and one is emergent. For ease of reference, I call these One and Two. Both have their roots in constructions taken from white New Zealand history (I have a feeling for how Maori thought of paradise over this period, but that is all). Specifically, constructions made of the Diaspora from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

To say what I want to say about these, in scarce space here, I have to sketch and roam, and join Herman Melville, and Saatchi and Saatchi, and Colin McCahon.

Paradise One is a state found in the conditions of mapping and identity. Paradise, in this story, is a situation understood as a type of landfall. It is represented in the culmination of a journey from an origin, to a new destination viewed as an improved version of the origin. This paradise, perhaps despite appearances to the contrary, is actually the result of a loop movement: not a one-way voyage from origin to destination but a journey from origin outwards and back. The journey results in the discovery of a place that is an intensification of origin conditions. Standing back, it is a virtual circumnavigation; one leaves a place and journeys to its broad symmetrical pair: analogous with the origin, but better. The dominant metaphor here is that of the hemisphere: the southern being symmetrical with the northern, so that both form one round world or globe.

In this account paradise has an empirical bias or a bias towards being resolved through intensive occupation, in the alleged concrete details of experience. By contrast, it is a story of fixed land and not fluid sea. Sea is what one crossed to get to land. The world, viewed as an open system, with the insubstantial possibilities of space, time, and media, is closed by an act of landfall, of fetching up upon a new concrete country. In this view the sea, that

risky intermediate realm crossed, is displaced by a beachhead that is rich, verifiable, and confirming, in its cultural and natural history facts. Insofar as it is an economic story, such a paradise promises new economic opportunity and scope for progress along all of the axes, in all of the same critical areas, that characterised the conception of progress in the place of origin.

This paradise condition is therefore a paradise condition for farmers.

But there is a second condition of paradise, seen as a narrative of not – mapping. This view is abstractable from the whaling industry that was so influential in the region’s history. It is a narrative in which symmetry is broken. In this, paradise has the classic features of a gap: between land or fixed edge and horizon, between poles, each bounding and charging the other. It is not a story of landfall but of coastal space. If the first story portrays paradise as land-facing, the second portrays it as sea-facing (“water-gazers”). This latter is a maritime story and it is one characterised by a bias for abstraction.

This paradise is less semiotically precise. We get to know its tell-tales well enough, but have to acclimate to a more abstract register, including in this discussion to give it expression. Here, I get out some pointers only since to do more would turn this essay on it’s head. Paradise Two is an *intermediate* place. It is where meaning is something you have to work at because it is not obvious to you anymore. Signifiers hunt, as though roving over the frequency band of a radio station. Ascribing appropriate context, or appropriate proportion and scale, to meaning’s objects, consumes unusual attention. Characteristically, in accounts of Paradise Two, a certain *glissando* effect emerges through attention directed at lists and quantities. (Paradise Two puts the *poly* back in *Polynesia*.) And recognition proceeds by negative definition to an unusual agree, since positive definitions are relatively less well known or are what you are trying to get to.

The economics of this paradise differ as well. Here paradise is not petty bourgeois. It is not organised around an ‘economy of one’, not set upon the personal grammar of a life viewed as a sequence of gradual self-improvement. Rather, I want to say we view an industrial capitalist paradise, presented impersonally. Paradise here is a place in Adams Smith, or the Communist Manifesto, or Red Herring Magazine. It is a space of unbelievable markets, of invisibly patterned enterprise creation and destruction.

This paradise condition is a paradise condition for hunters.

## 2. Exhibits for Paradise One

“Everything was ultra *couleur de rose*. Such land – such Country – such crops – such vegetables.. the carrots were not like ordinary carrots, they out carroted carrots..”

Edward Gibbon Wakefield, quoted p 301 Belich

But New Zealand, like the British Isles, consisted of two main islands; it was very roughly in the antipodal latitudes. For the crusaders this was enough. The Britain of the South motif and its variants, along with paradise and progress metaphors, pervaded crusader literature.. (New Zealand) Company literature portrayed New Zealand from the outset as a ‘LAND of PROMISE “..

“..the crusaders outpublished their critics, and comparisons of New Zealand with both Paradise and Britain became common and uncontroversial. Arcadia, Utopia, ‘the Eden of the World’, and ‘earthly paradise’ and the ‘land of milk and honey’ appeared.. in later crusader literature..in company tracts” The titles of books on New Zealand published between the 1850s and the 1880 included *The Land of Promise*, the *Wonderland of the Antipodes*, *The Wonderland of the World*, *An Earthly Paradise*, *The Future England of the Southern Hemisphere*, *The England of the Pacific*, *The Britain of the South* and *Brighter Britain!*

Pp 298 299 Belich

“Better or Greater, New Zealand was to be the Britain of the South, and was also to be an impressive list of specialist paradises – for brides, governesses, carpenters, gentry, invalids, and investors. English wood pigeons ‘would find New Zealand a paradise’, and so too would balding humans. After two years in Auckland, wrote one woman settler, “My hair, from being thin and weak, is now so thick that I can scarcely bear its weight’ (p.306, Belich)

### 3. Exhibit for Paradise Two: Melville's Moby Dick

"Call me Ishmael. Some years ago – never mind how long precisely – having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world...

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs – commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the Battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there.

Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall northward. What do you see? – Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries..

But look! Here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremist limit of the land: loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand – miles of them – leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues – north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them hither?

...why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and still deeper is the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, wild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

..I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did..

Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable nameless perils of the whale; these, with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped sway me in my wish.. I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote....

By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great floodgates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air."

(pp 3-8)

#### 4. Second Exhibition for Paradise Two: The Edge Campaign

Our domestic economic future lies totally in our relationship with the international. Selling New Zealand as the hottest destination on the planet for international travellers is the most important economic job this country has.

Kevin Roberts  
Address to New Zealand Tourism Industry  
August, 1998

#### The Need

New Zealand has positive values it must build on, negative ones it must remove and in line with its ambition new values to add.

To Remain	To Remove	To Add
Natural	Rural/Provincial	Energy/Active
Scenic	Unsophisticated	Intrigue/Mystique
Beautiful	Empty	Popular/Hip
Friendly	Isolated	Excitement
Clean & Green		

These are the Brand's **values**.

#### The Need

"The world is getting smaller and smaller, just as the number of people with the means to see it grows larger and larger. More than N.A.F.T.A. and more than G.A.T.T., international tourism has naturalised cultures, goods, language and even scenery and made it into an increasingly homogenous place. And it is precisely this flattening of difference that inspires the industry to the ever more desperate pursuit of exoticism and authenticity - which renders the world ever more ordinary and unauthentic. Millions of us are on the road and in the air, going nowhere."

Barry Katz  
Professor  
Stanford

Our competitive frame rather than a country or countries is the **commoditised** middle. A middle typified more by the explored, the dangerous, the unfriendly, the crowded, the big and the commercial.

## The Answer

But the pictures the world will see, the how and where they'll see it, justifies this approach. Our TV show offers excitement, drama, hard-core action, comedy, amazing visuals, romance, beauty and oodles of humanity: the spectrum of life on the edge in its full glory - and unpredictability.

The idea confirms New Zealand's position as **the** playground on the edge because the proposition is authentic. It falls within our budget (surprisingly so), captures every single variety of experience we've thought of telling the world and then some. It's new; we know no country's ever marketed itself this way, yet the risks in going in first are insignificant. On the contrary, New Zealand will probably be lauded for its vision. Importantly, this idea is in keeping with the most venerable New Zealand tradition of all, ingenuity.

It integrates everything to promote New Zealand currently, and have fantasised about doing in the future.

## The Answer

**The Truman Show**, written by Auckland's Andy Niccol, was a runaway Hollywood critical and commercial smash in 1998. A heavy favourite for a fistful of Oscars at this year's Academy Awards, it's grossed over \$500 million dollars at the worldwide box office. Some critics consider it the most influential film of the nineties.

The story of Truman Burbank, a man whose every moment is unknowingly filmed for the pleasure of a vast world television audience, dazzled cinema-goers with its conceptual audacity. In satirising television's role in society, **The Truman Show** proved how possible it is to attract a global congregation if the content is truly special. Truman's viewers crossed creeds, colours and continents. They were everyday people from all walks of life, going about their business, who were hooked on its 'reality'.

## The Answer

Our intention is to adapt the premise of **The Truman Show** as the basis of our tourism strategy.

In an unprecedented move of logistics, we will position cameras, locked off and mobile, throughout the country and film the best things about New Zealand and New Zealanders, without pause, for an entire year. Every second of what we'll do as a nation from July 1 1999 to July 1 2000 will be satellite-fed to a clued-in audience of millions, who will be watching us live our days and nights on giant TV monitors in prime international locations at the same moment we're doing it.

Everything will be Totally Real. Unfaked. Unscripted. And each moment will be very, very **live**.

## The Answer

When The New Zealand Show first screens in London, New York and elsewhere, it will kick-up a storm of attention. We hope it's where the world will go to kick-start every day. In a unique moment of broadcast and tourism synergy, New Zealand will become the subject of its own television show, a never-ending production which overcomes age, language, cultural and distance barriers. For 366 continuous days and nights, New Zealand will never go off-air. Spanning six different time zones, viewers in the world's great cities will cross seasons with us ... go to work when we're sleeping, come home when we're getting up ... dress for winter while we're larking at the beach ... observe what we eat ... how we play ... where we go to have fun.

## The Answer

The juxtaposition in time zones and seasons only serves to heighten the value of The New Zealand Story. There is as likely as many different prompts to think "holiday" as there are people, but one thing is constant. It is in direct contrast to what that person is doing right now.

Most tourists have only brochures, word of mouth and travel guides to help them decide where to go on holiday.

Our viewers can inspect us at their leisure. They have an entire year to get to know our place, check us out, observe our customs, chuckle at our habits. They'll marvel at some of the cars we (still) drive, drool at the fish we catch, ogle at the scenery landscaping our backyards, and discover the people up close: New Zealanders of all shapes,

## The Answer

From July 1st 1999 we'll be filmed every second for an entire year. (That's over 30 million seconds, half-a-million minutes, 9,000 hours of screentime to fill.)

It's a truism great art imitates life. Andy Niccol penned **The Truman Show** from what he'd observed.

the New Zealand Show will reverse this process, and reflect Andy's art. there is one critical conceptual difference: In **The Truman Show**, Truman Burbank was an unknowing participant in the filmed story of his life.

Unlike Truman, New Zealanders will be openly recruited to play their part in The New Zealand Show. We need them: they're the core cast.

## The Answer

The first key theme of The New Zealand Show will naturally be ...

### **The Playground on the Edge of the World.**

We will show the world how New Zealand can bring together such diversity and variety, all within the same country. A country half the size of Texas, a third the size of New South Wales.



## 5. Interview

**Q.** You draw the reader's attention to documents outlining a Saatchi and Saatchi creative and communication strategy where New Zealand is portrayed as "the edge". It is a strategy that has so far not been taken to market. It is just a pitch. So what's up?

**A.** I love the Saatchi proposal. It has more cock-a-doodle than Chaunticleer. It is a huge priapic story with hunting spirit not farming spirit. Serious moxie. There is an exuberance of scale and traffic in large numbers, of audience ratings, minutes of footage, and size of impact. There is a lot of political reinvention going on, in the framing of the meaning of the country, and the strategy of creating market share. The agency pitches up a big idea of paradise that by implication is almost ready to become dominant in the public culture. Take a close look at the material. Two years ago the government of farmers could still turn it down. The campaign may have been killed by Lilliputians but it drives off the whaling side of things.

**Q.** The 'whaling side?'

**A.** It thrums and murmurs Melville, not least because it does the one single thing that makes *Moby Dick* great: it connects the money with the poetry. There is an industry in the meaning. The Saatchi idea is to set up an immense virtual gap: New Zealand as a not-like-here alive thing set in a sea of video, thrust in the face of its northern hemisphere target audience. It is a face-off: big audience, and opposing it, a big electronic billboard in which New Zealand is a trophy of fluid images. An aggregate of roving camera content. And New Zealand pictured as 'the Edge'; therefore the campaign says that the world is flat...you can get to the edge of it and then you have a gap, an uncategorisable place, over which you scan and in which you see wonders.

The agency views a market of would-be tourists. It proposes that they assume the emotional position of, say, the crew of the Pequod. They could stand as with the fretful crews of Columbus too. Both crews/audiences are taken where they can apprehend the end of the world seen as a whale of images. You are in Times Square, that mystical co-ordinate in "old Manhattoes", looking up, and gazing at the silver screen. Straightway feeling like an Ishmael:

"Call me Ishmael. Some years ago – never mind how long precisely – having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world "... etc

I want to take this very literally. Think of the television medium as the South Pacific ocean. Think of the television audience proposed by the campaign as having a strong resemblance to that mentioned in the opening chapter of Melville's novel, a public made automatic, gravitating en masse to the beach.

You have to see this great campaign proposal and this massive failure of government not to run it out. The Saatchi's idea makes Christo's draping the Reichstag look like the act of placing a table napkin on a salt shaker and a pepper shaker.

**Q.** Aren't you pushing this all a little too far?

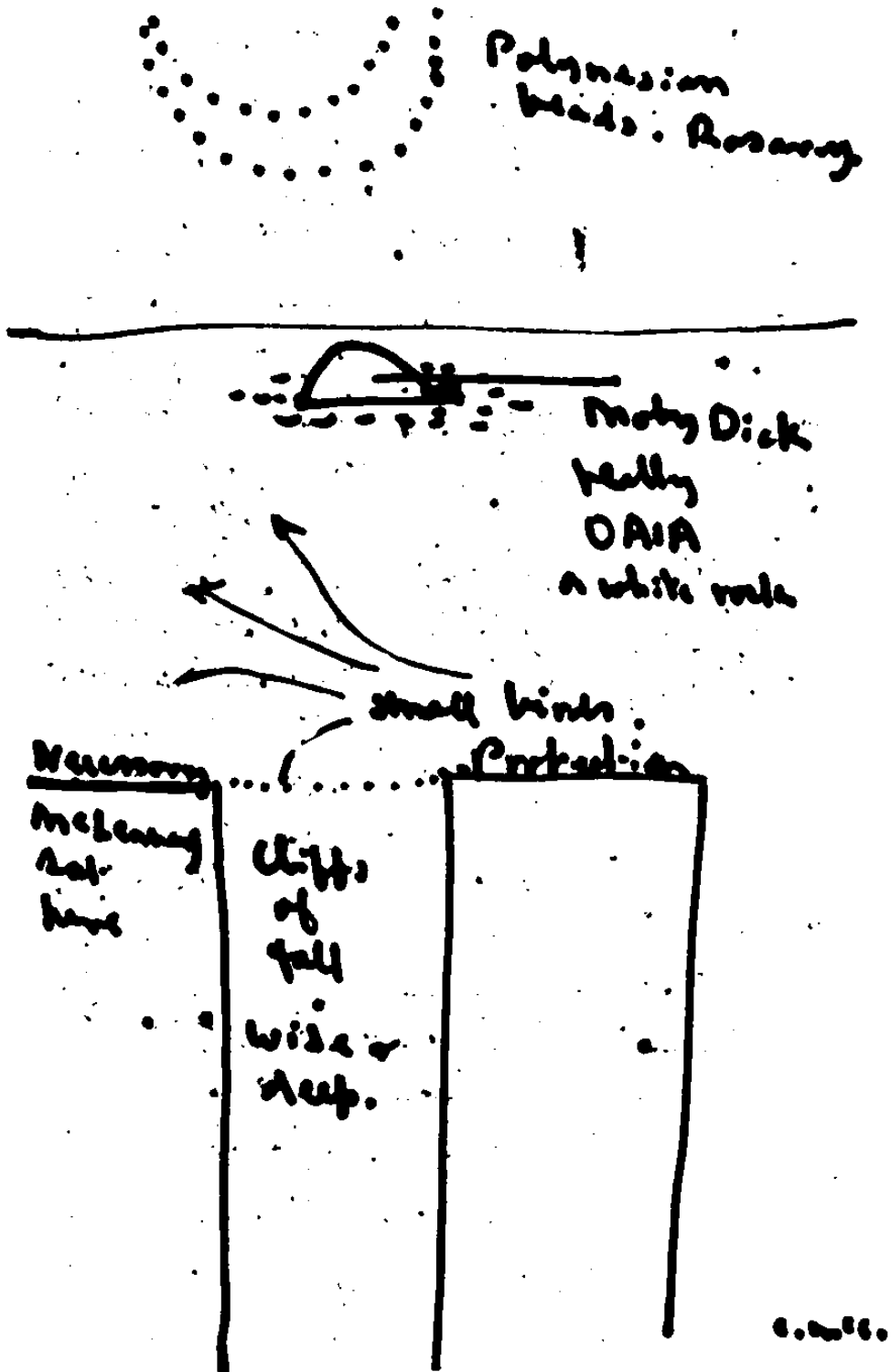
**A.** Nah. No no no. It just keeps going, Tough Guy. Yours is the anxiety of farmers. For example, Saatchi's great strategy would have made the North Atlantic public audience stir as a vast mammal, to feel themselves as residing in the brain of a whale. They were to look at an unimaginably large flow of New Zealand virtualism televised on a giant outdoor screen over, say, Times Square. Imagine the public, looking up at this flow, at once, and then around at the traffic in the Square, and then at the screen, and then back. They are placed in an abyss. They become possessed of split screen vision, as are whales, according to Melville. Take this on board.. (reads):

"Moreover, while in most other animals that I can think of, the eyes are so planted as imperceptibly to blend their visual power, so as to produce one picture and not two to the brain; the peculiar position of the whale's eyes, effectually divided as they are by many cubic feet of solid head, which towers between them like a great mountain separating two lakes in valleys; this, of course, must wholly separate the impressions which each independent organ imparts. The whale, therefore must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him.

**Q.** Oh. Uh-huh. Well, I've gotta go ...  
(ends)

## 6. McCahon's Great Sketch [Epilogue]

You stare at it and you can't believe it. It is as a treasure map, drawn urgently, to set out a crucial location.



You recognise the situation immediately. It is the coastal strip, the gap of the not-mappable paradise. Prodigious, and in the middle distance, and astonishingly, lies Moby Dick, which causes the whole scene to be translated. Moby Dick is no cutesy fish. It is one of the great emblems of disruption and tormenting infinity. McCahon's depiction of the Muriwai island Oaia as Moby Dick is riveting. It could perhaps be a casual Arcadian cartoon, but to take this view one has to look for less satisfying readings of the scene portrayed under the resonant "Necessary Protection" title.

The Muriwai cliffs are constituted as the poop of the Pequod and/or the edge of the world viewed as flat. In sight of Moby Dick is a zone of moment. It is only in this context that one *gets* why McCahon's *protection* is deemed necessary: classically, this is a place of possible mortal collision and annihilation. A Polynesian necklace hangs over the scene. If McCahon invokes Moby Dick as "monomaniac incarnation" then he also, at least partially, invokes Ahab's magnetic viewpoint in this drawing. The White Whale is in part a blank cut-out (more edges) or perforation through the wall of visible reality, revealing blankness;

"Hark ye yet again... All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me."

And McCahon's great sketch can bring upon the viewer some faint echo of the identification that Ishmael, and the Pequod's crew, had for Ahab's obsession:

"I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest...A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine."