

MY DISGUST FOR THE “MEGA-POLE”

By Ruby Bell

My holidays began in the Highlands; but the irresistible magnetism of “The Metropole” dragged us down into its trenches of concrete and stale air, with its promise of culture and fun and belonging.

In a metal box rolling through the ceaseless labyrinth of monolithic blocks, clarity of thought is obscured by aggressive advertising plastered onto the building sides. The silence of the hills will be drowned by the flat hum of traffic and tinny “Muzak” pumped from the speakers of the institutions which infringe upon the clear blue corners of my mind. Like battery hens, our wings clipped by the rhythm and rules of the city; our movement is dictated by the routes of the swarming crowd and train times and rail cancellations and the terrifying slice of the subway doors. We huddle in tense anticipation of the slaughterhouse of the soul: London streets.

I am spurred on by promises of liquid energy espoused from adverts on the sides of the subway, which appear to advance towards me as more blank stony faces and impersonal suits fill the remaining empty space of the claustrophobic tube. From the underground burrows we ascend, squinting in the rogue rays of sunlight that force their way through the oppressive, lingering smog. Muscles still stiff from hiking, stepping off the escalator, I am crossing a boundary and emerging into a way of life that disgusts me.

And I am swept up, enfolded into the tides of disgust that constitute the mechanical functioning of a metropole: waves of blue, littered with yellow stars, flags branding

slogans that say “Brex-shit” and “Europeans make better lovers”. As the mechanical functioning of the mega-city runs on petrol and industrial activity, so its labouring population are fuelled by their ideologies. Acts of tribal warfare that sustain the sense of importance and urgency in the everyday tasks that navigate the emotionally drained through the ant colonies of the metropole. Its flatness, its homogeneity has called for its inhabitants to build contours of their own creation. An attempt to carve out a belief system, a sense of meaning, a “soul” in “soulless conditions”, is characterised by proclamations of disgust. Whole lives built around an attempt to self-purify. The mapping of spatial territory along the lines of that which disgusts you. Revolt against the invasion of the other. The Brexiteers against the poor huddled masses of foreigners; the anti-Brexiteers against that unenlightened white working-class ideology... and I... I choke on the fumes of London pollution, but also on the suffocating debilitation of free thought that occurs when you enter a space such as this. The pressures of time and constraint of space swallow you up into the faceless hordes of blind faith in one “ism” or another.

We seek refuge in that sacred institution which populates London streets with about the same regularity as pigeons; that holy sanctuary of fresh filter coffee, avocado herb salad wraps and guilt free boxes of “health”. Ah yes, the alleviation from guilt that comes in the form of little gold stars telling you the ten pounds you just spent on something green and “free from...” will go towards supporting the homeless; the moral purity and tranquillity that these boxes of leaves and grain you feel guilty about spending your money on will stop you from becoming like them. Them: the sad, spiritless souls lurking on the subways staring dejectedly at their plastic shopping bags; greasy hands shoving fatty, meaty, evil, dirty grub into hungry insatiable mouths. You shudder and

return gladly to your point about Brexit and refugees.

And we scurry down the streets of Kensington, hungry and exhausted, searching for affordable food and a space to breathe. But still I am disgusted. Disgusted by the fetishization of the Breton stripe and jaunty berets of the anti-Brexiteers. And not only on their t-shirts and placards, but proliferating shop windows and restaurants - as if simply becoming French would be a solution to the British economic and political mess! My lip curls at the sickeningly twee, patronising shop and café names (“raison d’être, petit bateau” my scornful mimicry of which involuntarily adopts the high, immature, mocking pitch of a faux French accent). My stomach lurches at the obscenely high price tag on an inoffensive pastille coloured child’s toy in a shop window; at my sudden urge to buy a five-pound croissant.

It is not that I hate the French... no. I most assuredly do not hate the French (sweet pastries, wine snobbery and contempt for the English tourist are in fact three of my favourite assets in a nation). Do I hate the English for making me hate the French? No... (I quickly reassure my English boyfriend) that’s not it either... but these symptoms of disgust...

I am disgusted by city life - by its absence of life. Stifling air; fast pace; never truly alive never truly dead. Never awake; never asleep. Always mildly buzzing from caffeine and the coloured lines of subway maps imprinted in your mind. By people following the crowd; vapid faces and faceless corporations. By déjà vu on each street corner and the constant temptation to self-commodify – to initiate into one of the “tribes”, because the thought of tackling this dystopian clamour, concurrently chaotic and viciously coordinated, is simply terrifying. Because I know what it feels like. I can inhabit the

feelings of relief of associating with a strict way of life and ideological strand of thought that protects you from the misplaced wandering of an individual through an impersonal sprawl of concrete and bodies.

My senses rebel against it out of fear of what I know so well, and the knowledge of the empty feeling it ultimately creates. It’s a lack of free thought, because at the heart of hyper capitalism and ultra-regulation of behaviour we are stripped of agency, of autonomy over our own movements, so we follow the well-travelled thought and direction of others. Which came first, disgust or self-regulatory behaviour, I am not quite sure. But I will retreat from the dark, sluggish conditions of metropolitan soullessness in order to figure it out.