

A Review of *Airstrip*, featuring poet John Gartland, by Joey Madia

At the core of this hour-long visual–aural post-postmodern mind-jazz journey is John Gartland reading selected poems from his *Five Books of Inundations*, supported by a high-speed, trance-inducing barrage of techno beats and a far-ranging, superbly subliminal eye-feast of images.

The whole thing opens with white letters on a black screen:

Airstrip

Featuring John Gartland

overlaid with the sound of an airplane taking off.

Other title cards appear along the way, tracking the trip, Phnom Penh to Bangkok, with changes in music and vertigo and vibe to sometimes support and sometimes glean additional meaning by working counter to Gartland's text.

Gartland, an ex-pat poet and teacher living in Thailand whose novels and books of poetry I've enjoyed and reviewed many times over the past decade, begins to speak, his voice at first electronically altered. As the early words implant in our ears we hear underlaid techno-dance boom-boom beats and see in a small square field a series of subtly psychedelic geometric patterns like glimpses into a computer download generating a semi-formed virtual reality dreamspace, wherein lies and rises and deftly dances:

A Marilyn Monroe–esque hourglass blonde in a black cocktail dress (or perhaps Norma Jean herself in her MM facsimile state [pre-echoing 1980s brand-aping by Madonna, Belinda Carlisle, and Melanie Griffith, all in better days and frames]) and the timeless Betty Boop.

As the images morph, making their message and operating on us in their overlay, Gartland—every bit the carnival barker—cautions: “Be careful. This weirdness might be who you are.” The line repeats, at times echoed and distorted, as the layers of images grow in their carefully crafted complexity.

Following the streaking red balls and letting the light pulse work your brain waves, as I did, you might feel yourself tumbling into a trance state.

It's essential to getting the full tones of the trip.

From Horatio and Napoleon to the “age of robotic sex,” *Airstrip*, through Gartland's vocal–textual ministrations, moves rapidly through space–time, as do the images, including about every conceivable mode of transportation and human kinesthetic movement, and its unsettling, undulating patterns.

Moving into minute 4, we have Bergman-, Warhol-, Fellini-eque visions mixing through the minds of Dolby- and Moby-inspired live-wire pulsing musical mandalas,

an Eno–Burns ambient meets echoplex aural dance by Nick E. Meta and mixed by Prof. Kinski. Love the names. Dig the layers of code.

Like a modern-day emcee for the gone Ginsbergian real-Beats, Gartland declares: “Real poetry is going to get you into trouble” and “All cultures are conspiracy... their dreams are not your friends.”

The visuals, by Nico Mesterharm, run the gamut of avante-garde, Dada, dreamstate, movie, and montage—at times David Lynchian *Twin Peaks* reboot visual story-stab and others 1984/Big Brother/JG Ballard *High Rise* surveillance-state, brainwash mass-education McLuhan-medium-message mindnumb, dog-eat-lady littered street Kristallnacht. In a few of the later sequences, bar codes are overlaid with the pillars of the corporate oligarchy: fighter planes, transportation, oil, porn, colonialism, all in rapid succession, mixed in with pictures of flowers and words like PEACE and LOVE.

“Pasteur Street”’s vocal visions will keep you up at night with their dichotomy-clashing slices of aberrant society, the poem’s “hookers get[ting] inoculations of ennui.” At minute 7, is it the Oracle of Delphi dancing trances with our own as Gartland sees our present in a palsied past and frightening future?

“Noir Shades,” one of the longer un-altered passages of Gartland’s poetry-recitation, is a condensed declaration of the operative images and themes throughout the *Airstrip* trip. Given that Gartland is known as the “Poet Noir,” this poem could be the skeleton key to making semi-sense of all the rest. Another long passage comes from “The Eye,” one of my favorites of Gartland’s alter-ego rap-poem personas.

I could go on for pages and pages analyzing the images—often provocative and disturbing, from the real to the surreal to the robotic, and rightly so—and quoting Gartland’s text, which is a razor-sharp mix of observation and proclamation de- and reconstructing topics from Derrida to disheartening dialectics. Instead, I have tried to set the stage for your own experience. With such a great variety of image and word (Mesterharm does a masterful job of always supporting and never competing with or superseding Gartland’s reading), you can spend hours going through the hour, picking out celebrities, politicians, and lingering on the rapid-fire bar-code images and decoding the numbers and texts floating past your field of vision. This is truly a mirror for the brave to get a glimpse of themselves, if they so choose.

Early on, Gartland says, “Poetry. Don’t ask me to talk about poetry... Poetry... people say they don’t get it... That’s up to them.”

The same can be said about *Airstrip*. If you give it a go, glean from it what you will. But, the deeper you go, the better it gets.

To get a free download of the video, send an email to slingsnarrowz@gmail.com and mention New Mystics.

PS There is also an eight-minute film of Gartland reading at the launch party for *Airstrip OMG* available on YouTube, backed by a digital computer laptop-fortified

band. This is a different experience and well worth checking out to get the full effect of this mind-hitting, mesmerizing project and to get a glimpse of the Poet Noir in action.