

# OVERGADEN.

Søren Thilo Funder  
*You're Gonna Die Up There*  
23.01 – 13.03 2016



Søren Thilo Funder, *Swerve* (*You're Gonna Die Up There*), 2016. Video still

## The World after Billy Cutshaw

By Jacob Lillemose

On February 29th 2021 TIME Magazine met with four astronauts who had all known Billy Cutshaw. In 1971 Cutshaw had been dragged screaming out of the space capsule that was about to take him to the Moon. At a private party just a few months before, the daughter of an acquaintance had convinced him that he would die up there. The prophecy seriously affected Cutshaw, and led to a nervous breakdown. He was subsequently admitted to a mental asylum for military personnel. The asylum, however, closed relatively shortly after his admission, when its director and Cutshaw's psychiatrist Colonel Hudson Kane committed suicide due to posttraumatic stress. In 1980 a rehabilitated Cutshaw visited the manor in Washington State that had housed the asylum, after which he disappeared from the public eye. But his case continued to interest both professionals and those who had known him enough to make him, or rather

his re-emergence, the reason for TIME's correspondent to contact the astronauts for this feature article.

I met the four astronauts at the exhibition *You're Gonna Die Up There*, which were the exact words the girl had used when she made her prediction. In the back room of the exhibition held at a former printing works, the Danish artist Søren Thilo Funder screened previously unseen footage of Cutshaw driving home from the party talking to himself about his impending death in outer space – as if it had already taken place. The recording was accompanied by present-day recordings of his precise route through the streets of Washington DC, from the villa where the party was held to the ghettoized area of Anacostia, accompanied by a score for strings composed especially for the piece. Another work in the front room of the building consisted of foot-

age of the group Futurist Youth, who had adopted Cutshaw as a kind of mythological figure they paid tribute to through rituals performed on the outskirts of Copenhagen. He was the inspiration for their manifesto, which Thilo Funder had also included in the exhibition. The manifesto was projected onto a stage curtain printed with an image of smoke from a rocket launch.

"They are the true children of Cutshaw," David Bowman said when he entered the room and recognised the wording of the manifesto. "They came to one of my lectures and wanted to know everything about HAL." HAL 9000 was the name of the computer Bowman took with him on his trip to Jupiter in 2001. The computer took control of the spacecraft, and in the end Bowman had to shut it down. "They told me that technology does not bring unconditional freedom. The older I get, the more convinced I become that they're right."

Bowman grew quiet while everyone else in the group read the manifesto as it emerged from the smoke.

*Overwhelmed to see the future up ahead we stopped singing.*

*Overwhelmed by all these interpretations we lost courage.*

*Futurist Youth speaks in defence of Billy Cutshaw.*

The exhibition was held just a few years after the outbreak of Cold War II. Russia and the US were at war again on the fronts of science and technology to rule not only the earth, but also outer space. Everyone in the group belonged to the faction of astronauts who opposed outer space being taken political hostage in this way. Instead, they wanted to explore outer space to discover new social forms and existential insights. Rumour had it that a similar faction of cosmonauts existed in Russia, and that the two factions were in contact. But due to the seriousness of the situation, this was impossible to verify. After the International Space Station had been abandoned and blown up in 2018, any communication between the two countries was classified as treason.

Dr Ryan Stone had met Cutshaw once. Without speaking to him. Cutshaw had just looked at

her. It was at an astronauts' dinner at NASA Headquarters. On her way to the bathroom, Stone saw Cutshaw sitting alone in a room looking at the night sky out of the window. He suddenly turned around and looked straight at her. He was crying, which embarrassed her, so she hurried on without a word.

The first time she heard Cutshaw's voice was when she saw the footage of him driving home. "He sounds so human, so vulnerable. It's as if I suddenly understand him after all these years," she explained. "Even though he scared me back then, there was something insightful about him."

"I wish I'd met him before I left. I wish I'd had the courage he had to say no. If I had, I wouldn't have died up there." Sam Bell had spent three months on the Moon. "But I ended up defecting. Billy did too."

Stone nodded as Bell spoke, and continued: "I think he understood outer space and the whole Apollo project better than anyone else. But instead of listening to him, they called him insane and locked him up."

The subject had obviously agitated Bell: "I can still remember how furious I was when I read about the asylum. It's them and their technology that's insane. Just ask Bowman."

Ellen Ripley cut in before Bowman could reply: "Cutshaw was definitely not insane."

Ripley had an on-going relationship with Cutshaw throughout the 1970s, also when he was in the asylum. She was, she told us, attracted by Cutshaw's dark vision. Like her, he was an outcast on earth. "He never doubted my stories. I think they confirmed what he felt. Whenever we were together he wanted me to repeat them again and again in minute detail."

"What about you being pregnant? How did he take that?", asked Stone.

"I didn't tell him until one of the last times we were together. After he'd got out of the asylum. He smiled and laid his hand on my stomach and said it gave him hope."

"Hope of what? It was the child of an alien!

That had killed all the other passengers on board *Nostromo!*”

“Right, I asked him about that, and he said it gave him hope that our destiny wouldn’t be loneliness after all.”

“We shared that hope,” Bowman added. “We saw each other a couple of times after he got out of the asylum. Usually at a cemetery in Cleveland we both visited frequently. He was especially interested in the second mission in 2010, when Dr Heywood Floyd found life on one of the moons of Jupiter, but had to escape on a Russian spacecraft before the planet imploded and became a star. Cutshaw kept on asking me what I knew about that mission.”

“And what did you tell him?”, asked Bell.

“The same thing I transmitted to Earth. That all these worlds in outer space are ours if we use them in peace.”

We continued into the central room of the exhibition. The materials here reflected Cutshaw’s intense aversion to institutions and authorities, and his constant battle to survive in the world they dominated. None of the astronauts spoke. It was as if each of them was remembering this part of Cutshaw’s story, and was thinking about how they themselves had taken matters into their own hands – off the record and at great personal risk.

When we reached the work with the footage of Cutshaw driving, they stood listening to Cutshaw’s voice mixed with the dramatic music filling the room.

“I remember him telling me about that party,” Ripley said.

“I was invited too,” Bell continued. “It was hip to invite astronauts to parties for the city’s intelligentsia. We were just the entertainment. It was an act I hated, and I know Cutshaw hated it too. When I saw him a couple of days later, he swore it was the last time he’d accept an invitation to anything like that.”

Ripley nodded. “Yeah, I remember showing him the newspaper article claiming that the girl at the party was obsessed. He just cast

a cursory glance at it and said sarcastically that she was probably obsessed by enlightenment.”

“I thought about him a lot on my way home from the dinner where I first saw him,” said Stone. “What was it he was looking for up there, and why did it make him cry? The emptiness? Eternity?”

“He often referred to his existence as ‘this life after death’,” Bowman replied. “I think a lot of us felt that way in the 1970s.”

Ripley turned to the other astronauts, and as Cutshaw drove past Capitol Hill behind her she said: “He’d seen evil. The thirst for knowledge and power that divides people and nations. Like the space race. When we were together he never stopped looking for a way to counter it – counter the evil and loneliness.” She paused and looked at the film again. “He’s probably still looking.”

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David Bowman was mission commander of Discovery 1’s mission to Jupiter in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and reappeared in *2010: The Year We Made Contact* (1984) as a Star Child that has seen inside the core of the universe.

Sam Bell is a clone who worked on the Moon for Lunar Industries. As documented in *Moon* (2009), Bell refused to be replaced by a new clone when his three-year term was over, and managed to double-cross Lunar Industries and get sent back to Earth instead. For legal reasons he now lives underground. This article is the first time he has appeared in public since his return.

Ellen Ripley has ever since *Alien* (1979) been associated with horrifying parasitical life forms from moon LV-426. Again and again she saw how these life forms had killed her fellow astronauts. She was not killed herself because their embryo was growing inside her. At one point she committed suicide to kill the embryo and prevent the Weyland-Yutani Corporation from using it as a biological weapon. In 2196 she is cloned on board USM Auriga and settles down in the vicinity of Paris.

Dr Ryan Stone from *Gravity* (2013) heroically survived debris from a satellite destroying her space station. She hovered between life and death in outer space for hours until she managed to fight her way onto a Chinese spacecraft destined for Earth. She landed in a lake in Western Canada, and had to trek through some hundred kilometres of forest only in her underwear before meeting any other people.

This article was originally published in TIME Magazine in spring 2021 in a special issue on the new space race between Russia and the US.

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*Translation: Jane Rowley*

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## CV

Søren Thilo Funder (b. 1979) graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2008 and The School of Art and Architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2006. Most recently Thilo Funder has exhibited at Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb (2015), X AND BEYOND (2015), Tranen Contemporary Art Center (2014), the Biennale of Sydney (2014) and DIAS – Digital Interactive Art Space (2014).

## EVENTS

Thursday 28 January 6.30-8pm

### **Reading and live music // Rocket Summer**

On occasion of the exhibition Søren Thilo Funder invites you to a reading session about rocket launches with live music accompaniment by the string orchestra Con Fuoco with composer Tine Vitkov and the punk band 0%.

Thursday 11 February 5.30-6.30pm

### **Walk and Talk / Game Over – You and all your friends are dead**

This evening Søren Thilo Funder invites you on a walk-through of his exhibition in the company of artist Asbjørn Skou.

## THANK YOU

Søren Thilo Funder would like to thank: Tina Helen, Jacob Lillemose, Lui Gram Mokrzycki, Poi, Den Økologiske Produktionsskole, Flopper, Silas Inoue, Asbjørn Skou, Theis Wendt, Københavns Kunstscole, Produktionsskolen k-u-b-a, Falck, Forbo, By og Havn.

## UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 1 April 2016 Overgaden presents the solo exhibition *Bugs in the War Room* by Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter and the group show *Varulv!*, which is curated by Overgaden. Both exhibitions run through 29 May 2016.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: [www.overgaden.org](http://www.overgaden.org)

The exhibition is supported by:

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