

Shell Shelf

Simon Palenski

The best time to look for snails in your garden apparently is in the morning after a rainy night. I read this in a book about companion planting and the author describes how the morning hand-picking of snails is ‘a satisfactory but lengthy job.’¹ My own searches around the garden turned up no snails, only some small slugs, which I found underneath the mounds of fallen leaves collected by the wind.

There are many possible reasons why I could not find a snail in my garden. The most likely being I slept in and missed the early morning snail time. Some other possibilities are that my garden has too many predatory birds, like blackbirds and starlings, for an established population of snails. And that the dry weather conditions that have gripped the region since last year mean fewer rainy nights, and so fewer snails. Autumn might be a bad time of year to find snails, certainly by winter they will be hard to find. The archaic Greek poet Hesiod says as much in his didactic poem/agricultural almanac *Works and Days*: ‘On a wintry day ... the boneless one gnaws its foot in its fireless house and dismal abodes, for the sun does not show it a rangeland toward which it can set out.’² Hesiod might be talking about a different creature, though, like an octopus or a cuttlefish, the editor and translator points out in a footnote. It seems more like a snail, at least in my reading. I say this because later in the poem a snail does appear, climbing a vine as the harbinger of summer.

No snails is a good thing, undoubtedly, from a gardener’s point of view. If anything, it should be a relief for my searches to turn up no snails. But it is worrying. Ziggy Lever and Lucy Meyle had similar luck when they searched for a snail spring rider, or any animal-based spring rider, in the playgrounds around Tāmaki Makaurau. By spring rider, Lever and Meyle mean, as they define it in their book *Snail Time*, a piece of playground equipment that is basically a sculpture mounted on car springs.³ Instead they found that spring riders based on cars, planes, trains, and skateboards were far more popular. They note that there is some irony in this, as the ex-car, functionally wobbly spring part has migrated from below to inform the subject of the whole sculpture. Lever and Meyle ponder how this change in spring rider subject might reflect the shift from an agrarian-minded playground to something closer to notions of progress and movement, i.e. capitalism. But they are quick to remind the reader that

¹ Brenda Little, *Companion Planting in New Zealand*. Auckland, New Holland, 2000

² Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*. Glenn W. Most (ed. and trans.). Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018, p. 131

³ Ziggy Lever and Lucy Meyle, *Snail Time*, p. 02:29:03

despite this shift, spring riders are still anti-progress; you go nowhere when you ride them, they serve no 'productive' purpose. Like Hesiod's dormant, winter-bound snail, there is no rangeland to set out for.

Spring riders then, and, in general, playground environments, potentially sit outside of the relentless capitalist, cumulative, and profit-based moment we live in. Lever and Meyle give a brief history of playground design in *Snail Time* and describe how the earliest playgrounds in modern cities did this perfectly, being massive, anarchic mounds of sand in public parks that children, perhaps some adults too, could freely climb.⁴ Another way playgrounds can do this is how they often reuse materials, utilising stuff surplus to manufacturing or local council infrastructure. Recycled car springs to make spring riders, or concrete utilities pipes placed in playgrounds as tunnels are examples. There is a playground in Twizel that I remember from my childhood made up of ex-Ministry of Works construction equipment from the Upper Waitaki hydroelectric scheme, like a bulldozer and other heavy vehicles, parked up for children to clamber over. And locally, I found a spring rider made from an old merry-go-round horse, perhaps salvaged from an earlier fairground or playground. But this circular economy frugality can work both ways. In *Snail Time*, Lever and Meyle describe how the large frame-work, structural, 'model' equipment that typifies playgrounds in the decades after the industrial revolution in the West, were basically all dismantled during the Second World War and their precious steel melted down for the war effort. Mass-produced, plastic playground equipment outnumbered anything that looked even a little bit sustainable or recycled in my own search for a snail spring rider too. In the end, the closest I got was one I found designed by the Danish company Kompan Play Institute. A 'Stinger' design according to their website.⁵ Its snail features were limited to a pair of eye stalk handles and a spiral shell design on the plastic seat, but it was clearly snail-informed. It is very similar to the spring rider to the right of Lever and Meyle's snail and leaf spring riders photographed in situ at Walker Park in Point Chevalier for *Snail Time*.

Libraries share with spring riders and playgrounds something of this potential space outside of the relentless capitalist, cumulative, profit-based moment; being a place where people can go, spend time, and use various services, but not spend money. Like playgrounds, the extent to which libraries resist being totally subsumed by capitalism is possibly debatable; the recent closure of the Fine Arts, Architecture and Planning, and Music and Dance libraries at the University of Auckland is one example that seems pertinent to Window. Lever and Meyle with *Snail Time* also draw attention to

⁴ Lever and Meyle, *Snail Time*, p. 02:29:85

⁵ <https://www.kompan.com/play/freestanding-play/springers/stinger>

some of the myths that obscure how libraries and archival collections can actually function. How the fabled Library of Alexandria operated as a brutal power that held rival cities to ransom over their own library collections, stole and forged manuscripts, and even sentenced to death scholars who asked to do research somewhere else.⁶ They noticed, when doing a reconnaissance of the university library, how libraries, as a public space, also have a guarded private sphere. The spaces of off-site storage, backroom offices, the sorting and returns area, and the archives or special collections that require authorisation to view. Also how the library's collections exist in flux and move between these spaces. *Snail Time*, as a slim book surreptitiously indexed by Lever and Meyle under the 'snail' and 'time' subject headings and placed on their respective shelves, has found a way to slip undetected into the library and join the flow of its distributions.

Heterotopia is a term that is sometimes mentioned in discussions of spaces like playgrounds and libraries. Michel Foucault is credited with coming up with the concept, as, in a rudimentary sense, a real space outside of all places but with a precise and determined function that can represent, contest, and invert other real spaces. Some examples he outlines are cemeteries, gardens, fairgrounds, and public toilets.⁷ Foucault defines libraries, together with museums, as fitting the description of heterotopia, as places that break with time by perpetually and indefinitely accumulating objects from all times in a specific space. Incidentally, Foucault pitches fairgrounds as spaces opposite libraries. Instead of being linked to the accumulation of time, Foucault believes fairgrounds embody time in its most flowing, precarious, and transitory sense. Could playgrounds do this too? Playgrounds are not known for having some of the spectacular things Foucault associates with festive fairgrounds, like heteroclite (irregular or unusual) objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, and fortune-tellers.⁸ Fairgrounds are temporary affairs too, while playgrounds, for the most part, stay put. But the experience of using the playground equipment, a spring rider for example, could embody the same temporal experience outside of traditional time. The same rush. Lever and Meyle seem to have found this in their field research looking for spring riders, when riding them they were impressed by their unpredictable, possibly dangerous, wobbly motions. It might not be a stretch to call playgrounds, or even spring riders specifically, a form of heterotopia, though where do snails fit into this heterotopic frame?

⁶ Lever and Meyle, *Snail Time*, pp. 02:09:75-13:59

⁷ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias', Jay Miskowiec (trans.): <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/>

⁸ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias'

Snails complete a kind of interconnected triad with *Snail Time*. An unknowable third place alongside libraries and playgrounds, which are much more familiar, to most people anyway, I would guess. Snails are unknowable despite the number of fantasies and metaphors that, in Lever and Meyle's words, people tend to stuff into their shells: laziness, the resurrection, seasonal harvest, unknown threats, impotence, sexual desire, and even the habit of referring to the shell as the snail's house.⁹ A possible heterotopic link snails have with libraries and playgrounds, without being deterministic and stuffing snails with the same conjectures, is their relationship to time. A snail's gradual 'speed' as it moves, its trail of glistening slime left in its wake, allows it to be inferred as slow, the opposite of the temporal rush of riding a spring rider, but arguably still outside of a normal embodiment of time. The whorled spiral on its shell too suggests an infinite deepening of time with the spiral line flowing simultaneously forwards and backwards, not unlike the ever-accumulating material, and so time, inside libraries and museums.

It is probably a stretch to refer to snails as heterotopic, after all, going by Foucault, they have no precise or determined function. Lever and Meyle include in *Snail Time* correspondence between a group of disbelieving, Enlightenment-era gentlemen concerning the phenomenon of reviviscence snails that are suddenly reanimated when submerged in water, after being held for years in a fossil cabinet.¹⁰ It is an anecdote that shows how snails go at their own pace and follow their own internal rhythms. Their apparent idleness could still be an illustrative and critical deviation from the relentless capitalist moment that overwhelms everything else.

There is one part of *Snail Time* I have not drawn attention to much yet and that is the leaf spring rider that keeps the snail spring rider company behind the glass at Window. Perhaps it is just something for the snail to chew on, the leaf does have a bite mark. It mirrors Meyle's bread snail in her work *Loaf* (2020), which is left outside on a garden lawn to be devoured by sparrows.¹¹ The companion planting book I mentioned earlier obviously advises against encouraging snails to the garden, but it does offer a way to think about how things, at least in the natural world, can relate to each other sometimes, not always, for mutual benefit. Something similar could be going on here between the snail and leaf spring rider. I might not have found any snails in the garden when writing this, but the practice of companion planting, cabbages with beans, marigolds, borage, and nasturtium around, orders the vegetable beds where I was looking. Some of Lever and Meyle's thinking behind *Snail Time* reflects this I think. A

⁹ Lever and Meyle, *Snail Time*, pp. 00:24:38-26:84

¹⁰ Lever and Meyle, *Snail Time*, pp. 01:21:71-32:21

¹¹ *Loaf* (2020) can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/422047660>

proposed meeting of snails, spring riders, playgrounds, and libraries. Crops, pests, and predators. A sort of minimally maintained polyculture where resources are shared and biodiversity thrives. Books on a library shelf as companions that happen to be tied together by the Dewey system. Whale, ladybird, bumblebee, and cricket spring riders. A field flush with connections made and remade indirectly and by chance.

Written for *Snail Time* (2021), an exhibition at Window Gallery (NZ) by Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever.

Snail Time adopts the image of the snail to open up playful research into the related spaces of the library and the playground; and how symbols, images, and representations of time are circulated or concealed within them.