

From the Faraway Nearby

Rebecca Solnit

SOME MONSTERS DIE SLOWLY

Attention deficit and activism don't mix

IN THE STANDARD-ISSUE fairy tale most of us grew up with, the hero bounded up from somewhere far away or offstage and in short order dispatched the monster, liberated the maiden, and was well received by the peasantly populace. The drama followed the rhythm of action movies, one damn thing after another, with dispatch—bang, bang, bang—and then maybe kiss. You can tell the story other ways; after all, the maiden has a lot more at stake in rescuing herself than the newly arrived stranger-hero does in doing it for her, and so do the peasants oppressed by the beast devouring the bounty of the land. These alternate versions are

attention spans and much to distract them—like the next monster, since monsters, atrocities, and troubles are seldom singular. And so the great scaly behemoth slouches off inconclusively, rather than thrashing to death spectacularly on the spot. Offstage, he slowly festers, enters a dreadful decline, and finally expires, forgotten because he was vanquished but took a long time to die. Or forgotten because the next monster has reared its ugly head.

This is pretty much what happened to the World Trade Organization. More Godzilla than Kong, it was organized in the mid-1990s to more or less literally take over the world, abolishing all local power to

environmental activists in the overdeveloped North and the global South, an alliance of extraordinary power.

Quite literally, the peasants—including the 100 million members of the Via Campesino, or Peasant Way—were revolting, and organizing. The initial vision of the WTO as an inexorable force bulldozing everything in its way was replaced, at first, by that scene of battle, which produced disarray, internal dissent within the organization, and a stalemate between rich and poor nations. Four years later the juggernaut of corporate free trade melted into a puddle of slime in Cancun, with a remarkable round of anti-WTO activism spearheaded by Korean and Yucatan farmers. The Hong Kong round in 2005 didn't go so well either, thanks in large part to activists both inside and outside the meeting who provoked delegates from the poorer countries to think through the issues and stand up to the rich countries. Then, rather quietly last summer, the WTO gave up the ghost.

Had it dropped dead immediately after Seattle, or even after the 2001 Doha round, or Cancun, the activists would have looked like heroes with incredible power. But when five years of negotiations ended this past July without any agreement among delegates, even the U.S. alternative media mostly dropped the ball on the story, and the mainstream media

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fairly familiar now, as are those in which the monster is complex and misunderstood, the Frankenstein, King Kong, and Grendel narratives. In others, the hero is the monster—a racist, uneasy John Wayne in *The Searchers*, for example.

But the most useful and least familiar version of the fairy tale is the one in which the monster remains monstrous, and the peasants or maidens or even the altruistic heroes shoot him full of small arrows. The members of the group are noble, heroic, but normal enough in that they have short

legislate labor and environmental issues, trampling down all the walls protecting local goods to make way for the cult of unregulated international trade that favored the rights of corporations over all else. It could have unfolded that way. But the legendary (and much-mythologized) Battle of Seattle peppered the November 1999 WTO ministerial meeting with the arrows of resistance. A new solidarity was born, not so much among “turtles and teamsters,” as the domestic labor-green alliance was called, but among agricultural, labor, and



marked the WTO's probable passing with a few lame stories about how it would hurt poor people. Because the withering of the WTO happened so incrementally, those who helped bring about its demise did not look so victorious in the end, nor that demise so newsworthy. And so it goes with slaying the monster in stages.

Technically, the WTO still exists as an organization, but it appears to have no future. For the most part, it has been superseded by bilateral and multilateral agreements in which, rather than a blanket trade policy, regional and two-nation deals have been set up, generally at the expense of the weaker nation. There's always another dragon. But not all the multilaterals have gone forward so smoothly either. In 2005, in the exuberantly anti-Bush summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina, the Free Trade Area of the Americas got smashed up

by undeferential South American national leaders and huge masses in the street. In May 2006, the Bush administration broke off talks concerning a free trade agreement with Ecuador when that country decided to cancel a contract with Occidental Petroleum.

In a similarly protracted plotline, Peabody Coal's Black Mesa strip mine expired quietly on the last day of 2005, thirty-nine years after the world's largest coal company gained access to the resources beneath Hopi and Navajo lands. The coal was pulverized and immersed in water—three million gallons a day—sucked from an aquifer that kept sacred springs and local water

flowing. The resultant slurry was pumped 273 miles to the Mojave Generating Station in southern Nevada whose monstrous air pollution—up to forty thousand tons of sulfur dioxide per year, according to the EPA—occluded views at the Grand Canyon. The power plant was shut down for its pollution, and the mine followed. When the mainstream media noticed, they played up the downfall of this devastating operation as a job-loss story. That it was also an environmental victory long in the making got lost. In the fairy tales the monster dies quickly; in the Westerns the fastest man wins, but in the environmental battles the most enduring, stubborn, patient, and least distracted one wins, because the timelines of these battles extend well beyond what most people can follow or even remember.

I always thought that the failure of the

nuclear-freeze movement of the early 1980s was due to people who expected a quick victory so they could return to their normal, apolitical lives. When victory was not so quick, they settled for defeat instead, and the peace dividend of nuclear disarmament that was possible when the Soviet Union vanished in 1991 slipped away. If I were prone to conspiracy theories, I would espouse one in which the shortening of the average attention span has been a conspiracy to weaken our ability to follow a long-term news story, to commit to a long-term goal, to even perceive the expansive but hardly geologic scale on which social and political change unfold. The people I meet who believe in an unchanging status quo have chopped their own trajectory into incoherence, since anyone over thirty has lived through astounding changes produced through activism.

In my elementary school we used to watch nature movies in which the growth of a plant, the blooming of a flower, was sped up to transpire in less than a minute. They were helpful for understanding botanical life, but they turned flora into fauna, landscape into action movie, feeding our impatience. What we really needed was training in seeing how suburbia was spreading, one development at a time, how non-native species were proliferating, how wildlife species in our coastal region—pelicans, peregrines, coyotes, abalones—were coming back. What we really needed was practice in paying attention over long periods of time. That's what would have given us the power to see that we can prevail, and that, thanks to the more stubborn and patient among us, we have, from time to time, and we will. *~*

Rebecca Solnit wrote about slowness in her history of walking, Wanderlust, and about speed in her book about railroads, photography, and the acceleration of everyday life in the nineteenth century, River of Shadows. She remembers the 1980s well.