

A Return Home to No Place

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Welcome to the Noughties. The double-breasted zeros that have given rise to the cheeky defining pun of our new millennium make my heart sink, but do of course have an appropriately fin-de-siècle resonance. Like Toulouse-Lautrec's tarts we are kicking our heels and exposing our frilly backsides playfully at the world as we enter (perhaps a little jaded after six exhausting years of such un-repenting posturing) another monumental period of human history. The collectively guilty group I have in mind is perhaps a fictitious one, discernable only through a media lens: the smackable backsides of all media's whores. No matter how good or bad our product may be, if a journalist finds an angle, up we go to join the ranks of the dollar turning minions: in the words of Mr. Jimi Tenor "I'm feeling hungry for the dollar bill, but I like it somehow. Sugar Daddy, don't let me down".¹

But who am I to say what is good or bad? It may be undeniable (although of course it is not) that the press is suffocating us, flattering us into grotesque positions, our arses in the air and our faces wedged into our neighbours' frilly backsides, but how did we get here and does it even matter that this is where we seem to have arrived two thousand years after the resurrection of our Christ? Of course, I'm taking an extreme position myself here. And I'm not just talking about 'popular' culture either. I'm going to stretch this accusation as far as I can: wherever I look I can see how transfixed we have all become by the slick monotony of the media machine.

If we live in an age of scepticism, suspicion, playfulness, knowingness - a world that is too slippery for the notion of truth to take hold - then perhaps it is no surprise that we allow ourselves to be sausaged through the media manufacturing process so readily. Even our transgressions are eagerly grasped upon: all institutions love nothing more than to seduce into their midst those people that have most violently railed against them. Enter Sir Mick. And we are like lambs to the slaughter because, despite everything we tell ourselves, we believe in the

¹ Jimi Tenor, 'Sugar Daddy', *Intervision*, WARP Records Limited, 1996

myth of truth and so lament its absence in this post world war, post-dada world of tricks and mirrors. We are prostrating ourselves because we still believe we have a self to sacrifice. We can't move freely and independently, slip effortlessly through the loopholes of our culture, because we insist always on naming and comparing where no names are necessary and no comparisons possible. In order to defend our own tiny corner of cultural territory, we manufacture truths and half-truths where none are present. Ultimately, only by declaring ourselves false can we begin to experience the truth of our existence, and dissolve the impulse always to defend our own.

Our secular culture pleads relativism but in fact we all know ourselves to be trapped at the centre of a matrix of our own construction. We tell ourselves to be objective whilst feeling the gut-wrenching force of our subjectivity driving us from one encounter to the next. But like guilty children, we pretend. We make out that we are capable of comprehension and ultimately of mastery. If a man from the moon were to spend a few hours trawling the radio stations of any European country (and many other besides), he would have a very different story to tell though. Surely, in fact, his heart would break at the misery of mankind - song after song after song of loneliness. Despite everything we have achieved, the discoveries we have made, the isolation and fear remain unchanged, like a stone at the heart of mankind. We cry out for something more: to reach deep inside the wounds of our own existence. To know that we have truly lived. Yet every time we name something, we deprive ourselves of that possibility.

...The tongue
is forever taking us away
from where we are, and nowhere
can we be at rest
in the things we are given
to see, for each word
is an elsewhere, a thing that moves
more quickly than the eye, even
as this sparrow moves, veering
into the air
in which it has no home. I believe then,
in nothing
these words might give you...²

² Paul Auster, 'Facing the Music', *Disappearances*, Overlook TP, 1989

But perhaps by doing a kind of ontological double-take we can devise ourselves an escape route from this matrix, even if we cannot demolish it altogether. By turning to face the constructs by which we live and by declaring them to be nothing more than this, we can find freedom within them. Here there is even room for objectivity and truth, but only as paradigms from which we can experience the world and with which we can therefore be playful. We can use them as a means of listening to the world, adjusting them or discarding them in order to hear the world more clearly. We do not need to use them as a means of unwittingly barricading ourselves against the unknown.

'What are you saying in your confession?'

'That I cannot afford to believe. That in my line of work one has to suspend belief. That belief is an indulgence, a luxury. That is gets in the way.'³

But in order to do this, we must regularly take out and examine the constructs by which we live. If we do not, we risk losing sight of them altogether, at which point they will wield most forcefully their surreptitious power over us. If we pretend that we do not, each of us, seek personal truths strong enough to match and to withstand the truth of death, we will be - as indeed we are - dominated by a blind subjectivity, rather than guided by a seeing one.

Within this context, then, the arts cannot elicit generalisations. They may encode the culture within which they are embedded, but the act of decoding is an act of transformation, causing the subject to fall like sand between our inquisitive fingers. Of course, as a human being, decoding is what I do to Be, but again, if I can only declare it as nothing more than this - an ontological rather than a universal necessity - I can more freely dissolve one idea into the next and thus move closer to experience itself.

"When I draw a magnificent horse, I am who I am, nothing more."⁴

³ J.M Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, Vintage, 2004, p 213

⁴ Orhan Pamuk, *My Name is Red*, tr. Erdag M. Göknar, Faber and Faber Limited, 2001, p339

There is no newspaper headline here, no possibility to pitch one truth against another, only the bald fact of existence, vast and unknowable. And within this, I can declare with freedom the paradigms from which I most powerfully experience the world. As an atheist, I do not declare God. As a pacifist, I do not declare war. But as an artist, I do declare resistance, relishing the vibrant struggle against what Bernhard Lang, in describing the wonderful films of Martin Arnold, coined "the unbearable un-resistance of matter."⁵ Not for me the bleached-out generalisations of church or party politics then; instead I search out places in which the shock of my existence is reflected in the grating of one surface against another, one idea against the next. To be always on the move, compelled by the necessity of thought and action. In describing his magnificent 1971 orchestral piece *Kontrakdenz*, Helmut Lachenmann says:

"That which resounds does not resound for the sake of its tonality and its structural modification, but signals the actual use of energies in the musicians' actions and renders the mechanical conditions and instances of resistance associated with these actions tangible, hearable, anticipatable... The title may save the piece in good time from being perceived as an extreme case of antitonicity instead of, as intended, an example of an immanent logic which must be assumed and the handling of which is a matter of aware awareness."⁶

Musique informelle.⁷ Secreted like juice from a berry by the kinetic force of existence. Drawing structure in its wake. Evolving and reinventing. Confounding memory, sounds emerge from and draw us towards the indefatigable physicality of existence. Because no matter how vigorously we name, locate and define our world, it will not remain so.

In *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*, Isabel Fonseca writes that:

"*Nostos* is the Greek for 'a return home'; the Gypsies have no home, and, perhaps uniquely among peoples, they have no dream of a homeland. Utopia — *ou topos* — means 'no place.' Nostalgia for utopia: a return home to no place."⁸

In my own music, and in the guitar piece *Nopstos Ou Topos* in particular, the modular formal structure of the work acknowledges this rootlessness, defying attempts to define it structurally

⁵ Presentation given at the Borealis Festival in Bergen, Norway, 2006

⁶ Programme booklet for Helmut Lachenmann, *kontrakadenz*, KAIROS, 2001

⁷ Theodor Adorno, 'Vers une musique informelle', *Quasi una fantasia*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963

⁸ Isabel Fonseca, *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*, Vintage, 1996

or temporally. Because, for me, we are like gypsies in this world. Words are my home, the things that locate me, but the place they define does not exist. So I am free to explore the possibility of moving from one paradigm of experience to the next; independent of truth, my life is a chain of interlocking stories, each unfolding its own perception of the world. The trick is not to forget that all is fiction. Ergo: nothing of what I have said here is true, and could only ever become so the moment I believe it absolutely *not* to be.

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