

## Numbing Like the Stingray – Meno’s Servant at the Care Farm: On Alternative and Autonomous Spaces

A

One

A - the indefinite article

The Vinyl Factory publish a short article on Stan Douglas's Luanda-Kinshasa, the six hour film he showed as part of the Hayward Gallery's offsite show, The Infinite Mix, last autumn. You could buy the soundtrack as a double vinyl, hence the hook for the article, which was pulled out from a conversation with Douglas. Towards the end of the conversation, Douglas says:

Music is usually a metaphor or a model for the way people can enjoy time together, and this sounds like utopia to me.

The endless groove of Luanda-Kinshasa, the film set, which was a painstakingly accurate recreation of Columbia's New York studio, The Church, the musicians' clothing and their hairstyles all contribute to what is a substantial homage to early 1970s Miles Davis, in particular his album On The Corner. On The Corner, released in 1972, marks the beginning of a short stretch following Bitches Brew, Live Evil and Jack Johnson in which Davis worked in the studio with a shifting group of musicians, recording long improvisations over an extended funk groove that were subsequently cut and spliced into the final tracks for release. On The Corner was widely panned when it came out on the grounds that Miles Davis was a jazz musician and as such he should be playing jazz and this that he was

playing here didn't fit the established ideas about what constituted jazz. On The Corner is - and was, when I first heard it in 1972 when I was, for sure, an indefinite article - amazing. You couldn't say it starts, it's more that from the first moment you hear the music it's full on. It's like someone has just opened a door on something that is, in the jargon of the time, always already happening. If you were listening to, say, Sly and the Family Stone, and had maybe heard some Stockhausen, that first twenty minute track On The Corner / New York Girl / Thinkin' Of One Thing And Doin' Another / Vote For Miles wasn't too much of a stretch. If you came to it in later years having already lived with hip hop and drum and bass it most likely presented no problem. But if you were hoping for big band swing, perhaps enlivened by the presence of a polite electric bass, it wasn't going to work for you. Davis himself said of the music:

I had always written in a circular way, and through Stockhausen I could see that I didn't want to ever play again from eight bars to eight bars, because I never end songs: they just keep going on. Through Stockhausen I understood music as a process of elimination and addition.

The albums that came out of those sessions were, apart from On The Corner, Big Fun and Get Up With It, the latter including the slow, spacy homage to Duke Ellington, He Loved Him Madly, and Calypso Frelimo on which the drive from by then established ensemble members Al Foster on drums, Michael Henderson on bass, and Reggie Lucas on guitar is relentless.

Reading the article on Douglas I'm struck by his comparison of shared musical experience to utopia, especially since, as I read it, my brain transforms 'utopia' into 'paradise'. It does this because I'm taken back to last summer when, having to be in my office to do some necessary admin, I reckoned that I should listen to some music in order to make things go a little more enjoyably. I decided that the

thing I needed to hear was Steve Reich's Four Organs. In Four Organs we hear the thorough examination of a dominant eleventh chord in the key of E. The notes of this chord, which range across three octaves, are divided and grouped into separate dominant and tonic chords, isolated, overlaid and enormously stretched. Reich has described the work as the longest perfect cadence in the history of western music. At the start, when the four organs play the chord, it lasts a quaver. The opening bars are in  $11/8$ , the beats first grouped  $3 + 8$ , then  $4 + 4 + 3$ , then  $4 + 3 + 4$ . From bar 23 the bars lengthen until bar 42, the penultimate bar of the piece, which is 265 beats long.

My love for this piece, like my love for the music of Miles Davis, is deep and long-held, and from the first hearing my reaction has been the polar opposite to that of the woman concert-goer who famously walked to the front of the Carnegie Hall in New York during a 1973 performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, took off her shoe and banged it on the platform while another member of the audience shouted, 'All right. I confess.' This, anyway, was the piece I wanted to listen to while I worked, so I searched YouTube and found several versions. The one I chose was a performance at the 2014 Fields Festival in Baltimore. The five musicians - in addition to the four organists there is a fifth playing a steady, unaccented beat on the maracas throughout - the five musicians sat in an open-sided temporary structure - a large tent with wooden plank flooring. You could see the trees in the park behind them, the sun, and people walking around in the park in conversation with one another. In sympathy with the fine weather and the generally relaxed atmosphere of the occasion, the performers were comfortably dressed in shorts, t-shirts, and similarly light, loose fitting clothes. My initial intention, to listen to music while I worked, gave way to a more pressing need

simply to watch the film of the performance. As it progressed I thought, 'this must be something like how it is in paradise'.

I watch it often. I know it's not paradise. All the performers are white. And although I can't see them, my guess is that most of the audience are, too. It's not the paradise that Miles Davis alludes to when in 1975 he calls an album *Pangaea* - a supercontinent - all the countries coming together to make something that is not a country, just a fully interconnected space. I don't really want paradise or utopia at all anyway. There is nothing human in those places. We're not dealing with utopias or paradises here. We're in the search for another kind of mutable and open space.

Way

Two

Way - a noun

We're thinking here about alternatives. I've thrown in the word autonomous, too.

The distinction between alternative spaces and autonomous spaces is taken from the geographer Peter Kraftl in his book on the geographies of alternative education. Alternative spaces tend to establish themselves apart from mainstream, orthodox educational structures. In so doing there arises an almost inevitable tendency for them to be seen, and to act, in opposition to those structures. Autonomous spaces make greater acknowledgement of the fuzzy distinctions between things. Where opportunities are useful, they are made use of. Where ideas are tested and found to be sound, they are put to work. Kraftl, making reference to the book *A Postcapitalist Politics* by J K Gibson-Graham (Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson), and a 2006 paper by Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton, *Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactics*, summarises the distinction thus:

While often anti-capitalist in nature, ... autonomous collectives are rarely inward-looking, isolated or escapist communities of interest. Rather, they seek communal alternatives that stitch together diverse interest groups and identity groups, across time and spatial scale.

...

But, Kraftl continues, autonomous practices do not merely 'jump scales' and connect diversity. Rather, they have two further, notable features. First, they constitute a 'praxis, concerned with the revolution of the everyday'. They are concerned with living alternatives - sharing resources and skills, experimenting with new lifestyles in small and temporary ways, and ... engaging in collective learning and critical reflection through the course of these everyday experimentations. These are lively, fleshy, engaged spaces that begin less with a grand utopian vision than in the process of living differently. Second, autonomous spaces differ from many earlier communes and cooperatives because they do not aim for complete isolation from mainstream modes of governance, policing or everyday life.

A similar distinction between the alternative and the autonomous is central to the argument in Richard Sennett's book on social anarchy, *The Uses of Disorder*. There he examines what he calls a 'purified identity', and the myth of a 'purified community'. Given that living in such a community is necessarily an impossibility, the need is pressing to move beyond the sense of a purified identity. What is called for in this process is firstly an acceptance of limits to one's own desires, and secondly, a caring for the desires of others – and not just the desires of those others who more or less agree with you, but the desires, reasonings, needs and anxieties of those with whom you have little in common. We must exercise, Sennett suggests, 'the courage to look in unknown places and experience feelings and situations not met before. Out of this process can come a kind of human concern centred on and appreciative of the 'otherness' in the world.

Not

Three

Not - a negation

The essential thing to acknowledge is that an absence is not necessarily a lack. Pierre Clastres attempts to show in his *Society Against the State*, that a so-called 'primitive' society, so classified by Western disciplines because they lack a system of writing, a body of written law, and the institutions of state through which a numerically small elite exercise coercive power over all other subjects, need not be seen as social groups in want of such things. We have to be clear that the Western disciplines responsible for such classification have been not just history, anthropology, law, politics and economics, but literature, music and art as well. Following Clastres, James C Scott's study of the many displaced groups pushed into the highland areas of Burma, Thailand, Laos, India, China, Vietnam and Cambodia again considers the positive aspects to the absence of coercive state structures for these people. In chapter 6<sup>1/2</sup> of *The Art of Not Being Governed*, he suggests that orality among these acephalic communities, far from being pre-literate, can in fact be seen as groups that have adopted a post-literate strategy of resistance to co-optation and the inevitable oppression and exploitation that would ensue. A criticism of a society without a written body of law is that it is a society without history. It cannot refer back to its foundations, cannot trace a definitive line from those foundations to its present day realities. And it cannot judge the rightness of its present decisions and actions through such reference. For Scott, this absence is a benefit. For the state, language is violence, for a

community whose exchange of stories is fundamentally oral, this is not necessarily the case. 'What,' Scott asks, 'of people living at the margins of the state, in unranked lineages, and moving their fields frequently, as swidders typically do? Does it not follow that such peoples might not only prefer an oral history for its plasticity but might need less history altogether? First, the 'history-bearing unit' itself, including lineages, may be shifting and problematic. Second, whatever the history-bearing unit might be, it is for swidders likely to have little in the way of entrenched historical privileges to defend and many strategic reasons to leave their history open to improvisation.'

To

Four

To - a preposition, whose function might be to indicate movement toward, direction, contact, proximity, relative position, purpose, intention or tendency, the result of an action or process, position or relation in time, addition, attachment, connection, belonging, possession, accompaniment, response, extent or degree, proportion, the application of an adjective or a noun, agency, or that a following verb is in the infinitive.

I want to think, or hope, or actively promote and enact the possibility that art education can help contribute to orality's resistance to the impositions of the state – a resistance which, far from rejecting knowledge, facts and experience, makes use of it in countless ways. And while those ways might contain within themselves their rightness to the situation in which they are taken, they will not assert themselves as a fixed solution for any future situation. I was preparing to make a short contribution to a recent meeting of the Lewisham Art Network. The topic for the evening was the importance of the arts in school. I was speaking from the other side of a fence, from a place the pupils might find themselves occupying once they had left school. Unsure of how to describe the path from one location to the other, I offered a brief account of where I had been led by students over the course of the preceding day.

Seven conversations:

- I. Anarchism and education, the Socratic dialogue, noise protest, sound, space and movement, the relationship between architecture and music
- II. Use of standard software design packages as against bespoke, individual solutions, the advantages and disadvantages of either choice, reproduction and the effects of repetition, the copying of copies, ad infinitum, typefaces, marking time, filling time, wasting time, using time
- III. Land art, parts and wholes, the setting of things in relation to one another - placing, tying, welding, screwing, sticking, hanging, draping, standing, lying, propping, nailing, and so on, the Great Salt Lake, materials in sculpture - hard, soft, shaped, formless, organic, mineral, living and dead
- IV. Anxiety, recurrent dreams, obsession, therapy, RD Laing and anti-psychiatry, performance, the necessity, sometimes, not least if one is dealing with anxiety and obsession, of extended duration and the physical hardship that might come with that, how to deal with such hardship
- V. The physiological experiment in which one breathes re-circulated air, such that the concentration of oxygen gradually reduces with each breath, the effect of doing this, its remedy, the importance of removing carbon dioxide in each cycle to avoid death, the Copernican Revolution, descriptions of various industrial processes
- VI. Reflection, mirroring, the interior design of clinical spaces and health resorts, fashion shoots
- VII. The architecture of Tadao Ando, glass buildings more generally, the desert landscape of the western USA, its appearance in film, snipers' ghillie suits, the romance of junk yards

Think

Five

Think - a verb

I haven't studied Plato in any depth. I've read some, for sure, and periodically I do go back and try to read more, but each time I find it difficult to muster any sustained interest. The thing is, that despite what I'm endlessly told - that he is the mind at the root of all that is fine and good in Western civilisation - Socrates - or at least Socrates as fictionalised by Plato - strikes me as an insufferable, devious chancer. He's never happier than when he's shifting the goalposts, he argues from premises that he has carefully constructed himself in order to be able to move to the conclusion he has already decided he wants to reach. He tricks, plays dumb, taunts, is disingenuous, makes pronouncements that are the more assertive and insistent for the false modesty that drips from them. And he is very smart. From everything I've said so far it might seem that a shifty chancer is exactly what I'm championing. The problem here, though, is that it's all done in the service of reinforcing a rationality that is ultimately state sponsored.

The title, *Numbing Like the Stingray*, comes, then, from Plato. You can find it in the dialogue between Socrates and Meno, a dialogue about virtue and knowledge. Meno complains that Socrates' questioning leaves him befuddled, as if stung by a stingray. It is Socrates' contention that due to our experiences in past lives we already know everything. Education, therefore, is merely a process whereby latent knowledge is discovered within and drawn out of an apparently

unknowing consciousness. At the start of the dialogue Meno purports to know what virtue is, but Socrates' questioning soon shows that he really doesn't. All of this is fine, it seems, because as Plato characterises him, Meno really isn't at all clear as to what virtue is. The latter portion of the conversation concerns Socrates' demonstration of a simple proof in geometry to Meno's servant. The demonstration has to be made to a slave, because if even a slave can come to realise how to draw a square of double the area to the one you start with, then by implication anybody can understand it. Equally, the servant has to display sufficient ignorance at the outset so that Socrates can proceed with his proof. It's all fine, and really none of it is at all fine.

My dissatisfaction draws me back to one of Gregory Bateson's Metalogues that form the first section of his Steps to an Ecology of Mind. A Metalogue is a dialogue that mirrors its topic. Bateson's take place between a father and daughter.

D     Daddy, how much do you know?

F     Me? Hmm - I have about a pound of knowledge.

D     Don't be silly. Is it a pound sterling or a pound weight?

F     Well, my brain weighs about two pounds and I suppose I use about a quarter of it - or use it at about a quarter efficiency. So let's say half a pound.

D     But do you know more than Johnny's daddy? Do you know more than I do?

F     Hmm - I once knew a little boy in England who asked his father, 'Do fathers always know more than sons?' and the father said, 'Yes'. The next question was, 'Daddy, who invented the steam engine?' and the father said, 'James

Watt'. And then the son came back with ' - but why didn't James Watt's father invent it?'

...

D I know. I know more than that boy because I know why James Watt's father didn't. It was because somebody else had to think of something else before anybody could make a steam engine. I mean something like - I don't know - but there was somebody else who had to discover oil before anybody could make an engine.

F Yes - that makes a difference. I mean, it means that knowledge is all sort of knitted together, or woven, like cloth, and each piece of knowledge is only meaningful or useful because of the other pieces - and ...

D Do you think we ought to measure it by the yard?

F No. I don't.

D But that's how we buy cloth.

F Yes. But I didn't mean that it is cloth. Only that it's like it - and certainly would not be flat like cloth - but in three dimensions - perhaps four dimensions.

...

D Daddy, why don't you use the other three quarters of your brain?

F Oh, yes - that - you see the trouble is that I had schoolteachers too. And they filled up about a quarter of my brain with fog. And then I read newspapers and listened to what other people said, and that filled up another quarter with fog.

D And the other quarter, Daddy?

F Oh - that's fog that I made for myself when I was trying to think.

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A Way Not To Think

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