

Schizo-Productive Performance Fiction – a.a.s

Recent a.a.s projects in *The Other Place* universe, such as *The Family* (2009) and *The Nagual* (2009 – 10) have drawn significantly on two concepts from contemporary theory: Performance fictions and the paranoid-critical method.

I would like to discuss our development of the paranoid critical method into what we have termed the 'schizo-productive *dérive*' during *The Family* (2009), which was part of *The Event 2009* festival in Birmingham. I will begin with a discussion of the concepts involved and then use Saturday 7 November 2009 to exemplify how the process manifests.

The Paranoid Critical Method

The Bughouse, a London-based 'art practice' with a shifting membership, have made use of the 'paranoid critical method' for several years. The practice is an evolution of Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, which he used to generate content for his paintings. For Dalí the paranoiac-critical method, which was developed after hearing a lecture by Jacques Lacan, was the means by which 'the passivity of the automatism of symbols is replaced by the dynamism of the delusion of interpretation.' (Martinez-Herrera et al., 2003) The Bughouse have developed the practice in such a way that it is used to build paranoid connections between chance elements they encounter on Situationist-style *dérives*. They also uncover unexpected associations by mixing the work of several artists in such a way as to cause disruptions during events that act as a kind of *séance* for the unconscious mind.

While the paranoid critical method is concerned with making connections, we became convinced that the terminology and implications of the method were too reactive. It should be noted that while The Bughouse's usage of the term 'paranoid' is not necessarily the same as that used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for whom paranoia represents 'obsolete, or traditional, belief-centered modes of social organisation' (Holland, 2003, p.3), it still carries those associations. The form of connective, fluid, practice the Bughouse describe is more akin to Deleuze and Guattari's usage of the term 'schizophrenia', which Eugene Holland describes as designating 'freedom, ingenuity, and permanent revolution' (Holland, 2003, p.3), and which is productive rather than reductive. Therefore we modified the paranoid critical into the schizo-productive method.

Performance Fictions

In David Burrows' recent essay *Performance Fictions* for Mute, he reminds us of Robert Smithson's maxim that artists 'do not seek the truth but the fictions that reality will become' (Burrows, 2010). Burrows takes this to mean that fictions are 'realities-to-come', that new potential is produced and affirmed through myth-making. This 'fictioning' of reality is something of which, via Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), he accuses governments of in the control of their citizens through fear. Burrows proposes performance fictions as a means to undermine this control, not by direct confrontation but by the production of new alternative readings of reality that draw dominant significations into question.

Stephen Zepke writes that 'The world is neither true nor real but living [...] There is no truth of the world as it is thought, no reality of the sensible world, all is evaluation, even and above all the sensible and the real.' (Zepke, 2005, p.174) This is a particularly Bergsonian take on reality perception. For Henri Bergson, 'The waking state consists in eliminating, in choosing, in concentrating unceasingly the totality of the diffuse dream-life at the point where a practical problem is presented' (Bergson, 1908/2002, p.143) and so the dream-life or unconscious is the primary reality from which consciousness selects and edits.

In *The Other Place* universe, a.a.s have brought together the practices of schizo-productive *dérive* and performance fiction in the production of collective, co-participatory projects based around a series of semi-distinct, overlapping collective practices: The Family, The Nagual, The Nomads, The Changelings, The Operators, The Scientists, The Storytellers, and The Clears. *The Family* was the project that so far has best exemplified the processes we wish to discuss.

The Family

In *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write that art 'wants to create the finite that restores the infinite.' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p.197) Reason imposes 'truth' on the world and tries to determine what *really* happened, but art opens up possibility. For Guattari, perception of art is composed of two types of affect: sensory affect, such as the empirical perception of the view out of a window, and problematic affect which is network of associations and feelings evoked by the sensory affect. The problematic affect opens the moment up onto past memories, hopes about the future, etc. in a potentially infinite network of associations. (Guattari, 1990/1996)

In the first example, the sensory affect of the balloon seller was probably more or less the same for all of those encountering him, but we all have different associations for the idea of the balloon seller. For those involved in the earlier a.a.s project called *KR-36* (2007), the problematic affect of the balloon seller established connections to avatars called Boyd and The Viking and an encounter in which a zebra balloon was bought as a 'macguffin' for developing relations within the project. This is obviously in addition to the expected associations with childhood.

In *Ritornellos and Existential Affects* (Guattari, 1990/1996), Guattari introduces the concept of the refrain, or *ritornello*, which is then further developed, with Deleuze, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). A refrain is a kind of repeating process of creating and dissolving existential territories that help us to make sense of chaotic situations and environments. Each refrain begins with a deterritorialisation, in which a 'motif' is detached and which operates as a kind of 'attractor'. An example of one such motif around which a refrain was formed was La-la Rabbit, which was a confluence of a.a.s' obsession with pookahs, specifically of the rabbit-shaped variety as in the film *Harvey* (1950), and an anagram of 'Bari Bari Halal Meat' (except that it's not because there was a transcription error).

The figure of La-la Rabbit was detached and operated as a refrain that kept attracting other material to it, such as the *Rabids* marketing stand, but also the La-la Rabbit chant was detached from La-la Rabbit and functioned as a refrain in its own right, developing the meat mask variation, which I will discuss shortly.

A feature of the schizo-productive *dérive*, as with other forms of psychosis, is that it specifically affirms anything that confirms its own processes. For example, the Birmingham Indoor Markets are full of a wide variety of products, but The Family picked up on the coincidences that could be interpreted as indicating we were 'on the right path' or that the pookah, La-la Rabbit, was guiding us: wrapped cheese with the label 'Family Block' and the obviously significant La-la Fish Crackers.

Following Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, Zepke writes that 'art is not representational, but is an experimental process by which the form of representation is overcome, and through which something new emerges.' (Zepke, 2005, p.11) It is legitimate to misunderstand a text or situation in its reading because that causes something to leap from the book (or artwork) and create something exterior to it. (Zepke, 2005, p.12)

The process of misreading or misunderstanding affirms something completely new that springs *from* a source rather than being conditioned by it, i.e. misunderstanding the nature of the '*rabids*' marketing stand allows for new readings of the situation and feeds into the content and mythology of *The Family* and the figure of La-la Rabbit.

A further series of coincidences at the *Rabids* stand suggested to The Family that we were on the correct path: The rabbit statue, the green wrist bands, and a man working there who wore the same type of hat as the balloon seller who had sold us the rabbit balloon. We struck up a conversation.

After eating lunch together, The Family went on a tour of other projects in *The Event* festival and engaged in some 'gapping', a practice we had copied from a book we saw during the development stages of The Family. While gapping at one of the exhibitions, we ended up exploring the basement of the space and one family member 'manifested' as an 'e-witch'.

The mask was part of a costume from an earlier part of the project called *The Fear Train*, which was part of *Family Fun Day* (2009), and the idea of e-witches came from a semi-destroyed, re-spoiled, VHS tape that we found at 2am in a tree at Woeley Castle and which was mythologised as having been left there by John Cussans of The Bughouse and transferred as a video glitch into digital format.

The message decyphered from the tape was:

give me the pound, E-witches,
and if we don't eat a few minutes, you can call a tour rip.
You might be pookah via look train dreams.
If it can catch me a mix and come back here,
all the slave world workers carry me into this tenth fire burn.

It's got to be working, gang.

Baby found you.

The figure of the e-witch was detached from this incident and became a new refrain, which at times replaced La-la Rabbit as an incorporeal leader, or at times seemed to be interchangeable, at least during periods of chanting.

The Family continued to drift around the Eastside district of Birmingham, calling in at art venues participating in the festival. Gapping at The Lombard Method, Chanting at Rea Garden and in the basement of a warehouse, doing Chi Kung exercises on the street, and seeking Katie at Eastside Projects (Katie, Katie, Katie, Katie, Katie...).

In *A Thousand Plateaus* the refrain occurs as an 'account of common experience' (Zepke, 2005, p.157) in which we create temporary territories in the midst of chaos. These territories open up onto new spaces that the refrain itself has created with just enough stability to resist chaos, without succumbing to rigidity. Our development of the refrains of La-la Rabbit and the e-witch as temporary, incorporeal leaders seems to have spontaneously developed as a response to The Family's insistence that there should be no leader. These temporary, mutating figures served as semi-stable attractors for our affirmations about what we were doing and what to do next, they served as an avatar for the collective will of the group. The next figure to emerge was Meatman, which arose from chanting about the meat masks:

'I am real, La-la Rabbit' mutated into 'I am real, La-la meatmask' which mutated into 'I am Meatman, La-la Rabbit' and other variations.

In this image, one member of The Family can be seen wearing an animal print bag as a hat; this later became interpreted as symbolic of his having been possessed by the e-witch who was resisting being discarded as the group's temporary leader figure.

In the evening, a dinner had been arranged for artists and curators involved in the festival. The original message we received about this said that only two people could attend, but after some negotiation, during which we explained the new reality of The Family, it was agreed that we could all come. When we arrived, there was no space at the main tables and we found we had been relegated to a small coffee table at the end of the room. Affirming our position as the excluded, we put on our meat masks and continued with dinner, which included a period of ceremonial chanting.

During the meal, it became clear that the e-witch was exerting too much influence over the family member who was wearing the bag-hat. A decision was made that we needed to burn the hat, because it was emblematic of witch burning, so we walked to a quiet spot by a canal to destroy the hat. This symbolic act, accompanied by chanting, meant that we were able to rid The Family of even the refrain of incorporeal leaders that we had made use of during the day.

We returned to the witch's hat shaped climbing frame by Millennium Point, which we had visited during the twenty-four hour *dérive*, in order to just hang out and reflect on the day.

The performance fiction of *The Family* allowed for a distancing of our habitual ways of behaving, and part of the fiction was dependent on something we called a 'No-I transformation'. What we meant by this term was both a kind of self-denial and a call to develop a collective consciousness. However, one of the things that became obvious was that the group had a tendency to organise the chaotic welter of information thrown up by the schizo-productive *dérive* into thematic refrains. These refrains took the form of temporary, disposable leaders who served a function within the group for a short amount of time before becoming irrelevant. This type of decentred self-organisation is mirrored in the political philosophy of anarchism, or what we might call a theory of spontaneous order.

In *Anarchy in Action*, Colin Ward writes that 'given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation.' (Ward, 2008, p.39) This ability of people to organise themselves spontaneously, without the need for top-down organisation, means that, rather than the imminent process of the schizo-productive *dérive* descending into chaos, it is able to develop a series of semi-stable refrains. These semi-stable territories then create new potential openings that could not have existed without them. This implies that immanent, collectively produced refrains tend to develop much more creative potential than if the project had been planned thoroughly in advance, and without the need for any form of control by a lead artist or director.

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