Opaque Melodies that Would Bug Most People: A Short History of Dislocation

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[1] I'm sure that everyone can think of something in the name of culture that continues to trouble them, infuriates them in its refusal to resolve into meaning, coherence and closure. I'm talking about those moments of aesthetic engagement with opaque methods that bug most people. [...] I'm talking about a poetics of dislocation. In referring to a poetics of dislocation, rather than pointing to a historical epoch characterized by dislocation, I am citing an ongoing continuum, a trans-historical, para-cultural sensibility, or, as Aristotle would have it, a way of doing things.

[2] Dislocation in the arts has a long history. It is a history that converges with our contemporary informatic moment: a quantum, post-media moment when you can be here and there and at the same time, a vectorial moment in which there is no longer any there, any, to begin with. In the age of the internet, location itself has become mobile, dispersed, fragmentated. Communications networks have modified the way we relate to locality and presence. As Scott McQuire has noted, we are still struggling to come to terms with the strange valencies that telepresence brings with it, even as we spend more and more time in cyberspace (McQuire, 2002). New media artists have also been exploring the perverse locations of dislocation for some years now and their work, like the work of new media theorists, actively engages with the emerging unconscious of the cyber age: and, yes, it is indeed an unconscious structured like a language, this unsettling "grammar for being elsewhere" (McQuire, 2002).

[3] I have been interested in exploring the historical unconscious of this unconscious for many years now, but principally in two books, Memory Trade. A Prehistory of Cyberculture, in collaboration with artist Murray McKeich, and Parallax, a collection of essays on art, culture and technology. But these works weren't actually books. They were masquerading as books, and were in fact examples of one of the most prominent contemporary forms of dislocation, the compilation tape. True compilations, like collage, are eclectic, bringing together items drawn from different contexts, different locations, into a contextual dislocation. That is, to dislocate is not to separate or disintegrate, but rather to re-locate something in another context, often, as in collage, in surprising, even disturbing ways. Montage, as distinct from collage, is perhaps less dramatic, in that it provides links that are absent in collage; so, for example, as distinct from my compilation tape, montage synthesizes the thematic "best of" or "greatest hits", in which a particular artist or style provides the contiguity lacking in the true or eclectic compilation (for example the best of funk, punk, or, god forbid, Andrew Lloyd Webber's greatest hits). Media cross-dressers, these works were assemblages of ideas pertinent to me in thinking, in the former, about the foundations of cyberculture in alphabetic literacy as a technology of distance and, in the latter, of new media aesthetics as a technology of the historical avant-garde, whereby Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage are contemporaries of digital artists rather than models the latter would want to succeed.

[4] This essay, equally a masquerade, is the most recent in a series of explorations into the co-evolution of cyberculture and new media arts practice. Like any compilation tape, it is un-apologetically selective, provisional and highly idiosyncratic. It is made up of tracks that have a resonance for me within a specific act of critical speculation on dislocation and aesthetics. In thinking about the tracks I would include on my latest release, I wanted to bring together selections that would underscore an attitude to dislocation as a way of doing things, or, to use Suz Gilbey's words, a form of aesthetic making (Gilbey, 1995). In particular, I wanted to counterpoint a historical tendency towards aesthetic dislocation that is specifically pertinent to an understanding of the contemporary phenomenon known as new media art. This tape can be played on monoaural or stereophonic equipment.

\[ \text{Figure 1: John Zorn} \]

\textbf{Track One: "Never Sweet or Satisfaid"}

[5] One of the axioms of cyberculture is that the speed of telecommunication is dramatically impacting upon our senses, creating a hyper-sensorial cognitive relationship to the world that is all once influenced by speed and at the same time attuned to it. That, is turned on to it. John Zorn, the American experimental jazz composer, is an artist whose work dramatically represents this sensibility. Steeped in the history of American experimental music -- John Cage, Charles Ives and Harry Partch -- Zorn's early work in the 1970s was already attuned to questions of atonality, noise, genre transgression and disruptive structure. Since that time he has actively experimented with the creation of discrete sonic moments that can be combined together. These moments, along with the principles of combination that bring them into juxtaposition, do not prioritize original composition over pastiche or sample, ambient noise or snippet of radio. In this it's no accident that one of Zorn's formative influences was Jean-Luc Godard, whose signature jump-cut represented for Zorn the collision of isolated, dissipated moments that he was interested in exploring in his composition and performance.

[6] When I first heard Zorn's music in the mid '80s (it was his tribute album to Ennio Morricone, The Big Gundown), it had a profound and urgent impact on me. In fact, as they say in the Supras, it knocked my socks off. In retrospect, I now realize I was listening to one of the first examples of music produced and for a hybermediated sensibility. At the time, I remember feeling that this guy was someone who had watched lots of television and built cartoons onto it. Even before the information age, mass media had produced its own kind of hybermediated sensibility and Zorn's music of the '80s, on the cusp of the computer revolution, evidenced the convergent and co-evolutionary, rather than revolutionary nature of the poetics of dislocation (it's worth remembering in this context that McKenzie Wark's seminal 1994 text Virtual Geography, in which he outlined his familiar vectorial model of media, was concerned with television and not the computer network).

[7] Conventional esthetics was said to be one of the pathological conditions of watching too much television, one of its more famous sufferers being Homer Simpson. For Zorn, however, this is not so much a condition to bemoan, but rather a recognition of the complexity of media flows and the surprising flexibility of the ways in which we have adapted to them. As he indicated in the liner notes to his 1988 recording Spillane:

\begin{quote}
I've got an incredible short attention span. In some sense, it is true that my music is ideal for people who are impatient, because it is jam-packed with information that is changing very fast. But it also takes a little patience because you get to see something you don't like, you have to wait ten seconds or so and it turns into something else. Facing is essential. If you move too fast, people tend to stop hearing the individual moments as complete in themselves and more as elements of a "fluid effect". In fact there are sections in Spillane that are two or three minutes long. Here, I've eased off the speed with something slow -- like the rain scene at the end of the piece -- to give the speed perspective and meaning (Zorn, 1988).
\end{quote}

A self-proclaimed media freak, growing up in New York City, watching movies and TV and buying hundreds of records, Zorn acknowledges the heterogeneous nature of the media that he has avidly consumed: "There's a lot of jazz in me, but there's also a lot of rock, a lot of classical, a lot of blues, a lot of movie soundtracks. I'm a mixture of all those things" (Zorn, 1988). Zorn's music combines a diverse range of musical styles, from bop, bossa nova and country and western, to reggae, hardcore, thrash-metal and free-form jazz. At once dislocated and disintegrating, it is, as one commentator has noted, "[a]brasive, loud, fast, unpleasant, disjunctive... never sweet or satisiated in the conventional sense" (McNeilly, 1995, 3). Describing Zorn's music as an "ugly beauty", the same writer, in an essay on Zorn published in Postmodern Culture, cites Linda Hutcheon's concept of postmodern parody to theorize Zorn's practice. While sensitive to the opaque, infuriating aspect of Zorn's utilization of "mass-media noise making", he adds that it can and does "lead to a vision of interconnectedness" (15). This ambivalence towards dislocation reflects one of the truism of the information age: and that, is whether to listen to John Zorn's music or communicating with remote others via email or IRC, interconnectedness is very much in the eye and ear of the beholder.

\[ \text{Figure 2: Carl Stalling} \]

\textbf{Track Two: "You Ought to Be in Pictures"}

[8] One of the great, unsung precursors of non-linear editing and composing is the novelist Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov used a system of file cards to create his plot structures, shuffling and shifting pieces of detail here and there to enliven the linear technology of the book with temporal synapnotations akin to music; dislocations that would align dramatic and surprising thematic moments. Like Nabokov, John Zorn also used file cards as a system of composition, to exploit the unexpected tensions of adjacent moments, of sound being placed together on the principle of juxtaposition rather than linear, thematic development: that is, the Paterian concatenations of "and then, and then, and then". I've absolutely no idea whether Zorn was familiar with Nabokov or not, but he admits to an important influence on his approach to structure, Carl Stalling.

[9] Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Carl Stalling wrote the music for the classic Warner Brothers cartoons that John Zorn was weaned on. "At that time", he notes with the certainty of conviction, "my father Cage nor Harry Partch came close to what Stalling was doing". Stalling described Stalling's music as a "constantly changing kaleidoscope of styles, forms, melodies, quotations", adding that his music, when listened to in isolation from the image, constantly throws you off balance, "yet there is something strangely familiar about it all" (Zorn, 1988) (dislocation, once again, as both de-inter and integration). For Stalling, Stalling's significance was in his shift from traditional rules of composition, such as the development of theme and variations on a theme, etc, to following the visual logic of the action on screen, which included rapid shifts in tempo and style, as well as the sonic description of often frenetic visual events.

[10] Carl Stalling actually composed in a manner that Zorn was many years later to call "block structure" (Zorn, 1988). Consistent with the co-evolutionary, rather than revolutionary nature of the poetics of dislocation (it's worth remembering in this context that McKenzie Wark's seminal 1994 text Virtual Geography, in which he outlined his familiar vectorial model of media, was concerned with television and not the computer network).

The aggressive cut-across attack of Stalling's sublime compositions is a product of working in bits at a time, in bits of time -- persistence of vision, we should not forget, is the measure of our interactive role in animation, which rules of composition, such as the development of theme and variations on a theme, etc, to following the visual logic of the action on screen, which included rapid shifts in tempo and style, as well as the sonic description of often frenetic visual events.

\[ \text{Figure 3: Stalling's "block structure" composition type} \]

\begin{itemize}
\item Generally speaking, Stalling was in on the film almost from the beginning. After the storyboard was finished, we'd take the whole thing in there for a little session with Carl and talk it all over from. He was never interested in the mundane details, but rather in the grand design of the story. Of course, he'd look at the story board and say, 'Carl, put that scene on 8, or on 10, or on 12," or whatever -- meaning a 5-, 10-, or 12-beat for particular character actions. By the end of the season, Carl would have set the tempos for the entire cartoon (McCabe, 1990).
\end{itemize}
something like Char Davies’ communications, but also of virtual environments, which involve a profound and complex form of temporality. The idea of the virtual space as a non-space, yet a space of navigation, contemplation and immersion, can be likened as a spatial utopia or nowhere, cyberspace resounds with the cache of novelty. There has been insufficient attention to the temporal dimension not only of cyberspace, broadly defined in terms of computer mediated communication, but also of the tether. “A common response to this album”, writes one commentator, “is initial hatred” (Sherill). “Some may find this album so disturbing as to be unlistenable”, wrote another (Seigal, 1983).

[13] Like Zorn and Stalling, Beefheart was a genre transgressor, drawing on and bringing into dense, frenzied collision a dizzying array of musical styles and influences, from free-form jazz, Delta blues, African chant rhythms, to squealing noise for its own sake. While the effect is much coarser than Zorn or Stalling, the music on Trout Mask Replica nonetheless emerges out of a similar vision of calcified discordance, determined dissolution. In an attempt to redress what he called “public incomprehension”, Lester Bangs, reviewing the album in Rolling Stone, described Beefheart as “the only true dadaist in rock” and asserted that Trout Mask Replica, “difficult and rough as it is, is founded on a unique and original consciousness” (Bangs, 1969). Sounding very much like Samuel Beckett in his 1938 essay on James Joyce, citing the sages who found Fimegane Wai unreadable, Bangs drew attention to the differentiated discipline of the virtual’s readalcibility, or what another critic referred to as the “manifestation of forethought and precision masquerading as anarchy”. Another masquerade, you will note, and another instance of de-integration as integration.

[14] In this respect Trout Mask Replica takes all available musical genres and foregrounds them as genre through abrupt and aggressive juxtaposition. This is the kind of “organized violence” that Roman Jakobson had in mind when he theorised literariness, that quality of writing that makes something literary rather than simply linguistic. Dick Larson, reviewing Trout Mask Replica in 1969, described how Beefheart and his band “hear and slath at the guts of their music, ripping its lungs out, grinding and crushing the bones, then put it all together again in a couple of bars” (Larson, 1969). Beefheart deconstructives and revives the “tired-out bullshit conventions of every contemporary musical field”, Larson asserts, noting that the “real value of the music is its texture, its depth, and the subtlety of reaction between rhythms and melodies — harsh as they may seem” and this is the point about organized violence, certainly as Jakobson had theorised it. Literariness was not merely the quality that distinguished poetics from pragmatism, it was the guarantee and promise of linguistic richness, of polysomy. “Great literature”, wrote Ezra Pound in his ABC of Reading, “is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree” (Pound, 1973, 28). Pound also identified the “endless return” as the mark of literariness, a force identified early on in the reception of Trout Mask Replica that prevails today.

[15] This sense of unending, the perception that a test is never complete, never exhausted of meaning and able to be continuously re-read, combined with the notion of an ongoing, ever life-long commitment to a work, seems to be lacking in contemporary culture, as writers such as Sven Baek´er’s in his Gutenberg Chronicles, have asserted. But as critics of hypertext fiction have noted, it is exactly this kind of commitment to the open test that hypertextion has revived. In hypertext theory we encounter a concept that hypertest, by its very nature, heralds a new age of re-reading, a new covenant between reader and test that will last a lifetime, a new generation of ideal readers with ideal insomnias.

“Determined listening”, what is required to come to terms with the cacophenous polyphony of Trout Mask Replica, according to one commentator (Sherill). The hypertest theorist Jane Yellowlees Douglas has said something similar of her account of four separate readings Michael Joyce’s hyperfiction Afternoon, a story. “As I completed each reading”, she notes, “I remained painfully aware that my reading represented only one among many actualisations of the narrative’s constellation of possibilities” (Yellowlees Douglas, 1994, 165). Each reading necessitates a re-reading: a linear structure of feedback as much as an attitude to determined reading. A reader whose mnemonic bookshelf includes texts such as James Joyce’s Ulysses, Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway and Alan Robbe-Grillet’s In the Latitudes, Yellowlees Douglas concludes that reading electronic hyperfictions such as Afternoon require practices “translated directly from reading print narratives and... strategies which embrace the test as an interactive narrative existing in virtual, three-dimensional space” (172). It was exactly this anticipation of the test as cybertext, as an ergodic, interactive re-reading, that we hear in Kazuo isse’s sonnet of 1815, “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer”.

(Exhibited as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music)
As a practitioner and theorist of materialist film, Peter Gidal described himself as someone who deals with "the inexpressible"; an aesthetic of "non-interpretive art" that he outlined in a wonderful piece published in Studio International in 1974 called "Beckett & Others & Art: A System" (Gidal, 1974, 183). This piece is professed by Wittgenstein’s dictum that “What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of a language. What can be shown, cannot be said”. These severe restrictions on the translatibility of the expressible, on the presentable and the representable, are suggestive of the rigours of Beckett’s work. “What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed?” asks the narrator of the third novel of Beckett’s trilogy The Unnamable: “By aporia, pure and simple?” is the uncertain response. “Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered.” It was this systematic tension that had eluded most of Beckett’s commentators. In wanting to “accommodate the mess”, to use Beckett’s own term, without resolving its relentless contradictions of subjectivity, enunciation and presence, Gidal explored in his 1986 book Understanding Beckett a quality that had been the hallmark of his writings on materialist film: a quality that his colleague Deke Duberri called “consistent oxymoron” (Duberri, 1977). In a 1977 article published in Screen, Duberri described Gidal’s “theoretical strategy” in terms of a discontinuous, disjointed style of writing of dissonant rhythms, repetitions, contradictions, elusive interrogation and intrusive quotation. The overall effect, in Duberri’s words, is a “fragmentary composite of subjective voices” (81). Such a description effectively accounts for the style of Understanding Beckett. On the basis of a mimesis conception of criticism aspiring to connectivity, analysis and argumentation, Understanding Beckett is unreadable, opaque and tortuous. The entire book (250 pages, excluding notes) is a sustained collage of fragmented quotations, comprising Beckett’s writing (principally his dramatic works), theoretical and polemical writings and a miscellany of annotated typescripts, reported conversations, letters and photographs. It is perhaps more accurate to describe it as intermedia or mixed-media art than criticism; or more specifically, as Susan Sontag had said of Godard’s films, an art work doing the work of an essay: one medium doing the work of another, or, remediation, by any other name. However, along with Ted Nelson’s key manual of hypertext theory, Literary Machines, Understanding Beckett achieves any authorized or linear way of being. “As with many books”, Gidal notes in the Introduction, all of these lines, “it might be useful not to start at the beginning. Perhaps Chapter XVIII or XX, and certainly the Notes (pp.251-78). Then from p.1”.

Theoretically, Gidal’s book is a kind of indirect free style, or imitative form, that puts into play the very problematics of subjectivity and expression at work in the object of his critical attention. Mark Dery has described “buzz saw streaming” as the objective correlative of cyberpunk music (Dery, 1996, 95). Understanding Beckett can be read as an objective correlative of the adjacency, concretion and juxtaposition that I have been outlining in relation to Zorn, Stallings and Captain Beefheart, in the context of an aesthetics of dislocation.

Track Six: The Zurbrugg Effect

[21] Now you may well be new to be asking yourselves what the hell any of this stuff has to do with new media. One response to such a question is to assemble a list of proper names used throughout this tape in the manner of Stanley Fish and set you all an exercise in new media response theory: how to recognize a hypertext when you see one. Another is to note that it is very difficult to tolerate new media as a coherent or singular thing. The term new media can have to do something very much in the spirit of what I call the Zurbrugg effect.

[22] In The Parameters of Postmodernism, Zurbrugg convincingly argues that the emergence of hypertext art practices, which he defines as the postmodern avant-garde, are “quasientwentiethcentury technological innovations” that contribute to a continuation of the “European modernist avant-garde’s explorations of kinetic and electronic art” (Zurbrugg, 1994, 133). This remark, in itself, is an adequate counterpart to the speculations I have been postulating. However Zurbrugg’s eloquent and rigorous genealogies of avant-continuity offers a persuasive insight into the connective aspect of new media, from remote communications and the creation of virtual communities, to the radical panarchitectonic of hypertext fiction. In other words, phenomena of dislocation associated with new media that are co-evolutionary with forms of cultural production in pre-digital media. Nor have I simply identified precursory examples of disjunctive poetics that can be pointed to as precedents, or forecasts of digital media (though Joyce came pretty close in Finnegans Wake to being a soothsayer of the digital age with the line “Speak to us of email!”). What I have tried to do is something very much in the spirit of what I call the Zurbrugg effect.

The key word in Benjamin’s phrase is of course changed, since the singular characteristic of contemporary technological avant-garde creativity is not so much that it employs the familiar potential of the popular mass culture to which Huyssen refers, but that it relentlessly explores the unfamiliar potential of contemporary media by juxtaposing them or by modulating them in experiments which frequently anticipate effects which, in Benjamin’s terms, may only be fully achieved in the future with the advent of a changed technical standard (Zurbrugg, 1981, 41).

Zurbrugg’s argument is that unfamiliarity, or novelty, is generated through the juxtaposition of existing cultural technologies. This idea converges neatly with more recent theories of new media that draw on their residuum nature, their remediation of available media into new, hybrid forms (although I don’t agree entirely with the implication that particular forms of experimentation could only be achieved with the advent of the right technology: that’s an argument for another time). While these forms may present us with creative modes that seem revolutionary, in the context of Zurbrugg’s argument they are actually co-evolutionary, continuing a poetics of radical displacement and experimentation that has driven the avant-garde sensibility. To exemplify this, we may well find Shelley Jackson’s Patchwork Girl or Mark Amerika’s Grammatron inventive and avant-garde. But we should not forget that the digital nature of hypertext, as a new technology, is not the same as hypertextuality, which can be defined, as Esben Aaen has done, as a form of textual behaviour that is not exclusive to electronic hypertext.

As we elevate such works to canonical status in the pantheon of new media, we should spare a thought for all the examples of hypertextuality that are still largely unread and apparently unknown to those critics for whom hypertextuality begins with hypertext. This, then, is the Zurbrugg effect, the recognition that what we call new media art is part of a continuum, a co-evolutionary avant-garde that encompasses all modes of cultural production, including non-electronic, partly-technological works: works that have and continue to bug most people.


Endnotes
[1] The title of this paper comes from Captain Beefheart’s “Sam With The Shoving Scalp Flat Top”, from the Prank Zappa/Captain Beefheart album, Buffalo Fury (1975).
[3] This line is attributed to Prank Zappa between tracks on Trout Mask Replica.

References


