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The Banisher of Thought

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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2015

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University of California, San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Banisher of Thought

by

Andreas Daugstad Leonardsen

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Brian Cross, Chair

This thesis explores the array of fragmented histories surrounding the ancient instrument known as the jews harp, and the consequent translation of this research into a cinematic form. It seeks to enunciate the instruments basic potential for connecting seemingly disparate cultures across the world through a shared ancestry, and discusses the formal decisions employed to illustrate this potential in a visual form. The cinematic iteration engages Norway and India through a mode of observation that seeks to generate a mythical dimension of reality. Through such mechanisms as highly constructed and

minimalist shots, what is arguably an ethnographic modality of documenting culture is pushed to its very limits, consequently problematizing the operation of the ethnographic gaze itself.

Foreword.

I am compelled to begin this text with the flip of a coin, for I imagined a forked endeavor in the presentation of the artifact that my work has come to orbit. It was as if I saw the forest before me, with trails overarched and winding through it. I thought about Robert Frost. Upon consideration, a propensity for the romantic had kicked the reasonable in the shin. There really is only one choice. The approach of this paper is an attempt to engage the poetic potential within the instrument by first addressing facts and histories. This is the order the whole experience began for me initially; a set of facts, that upon examination were revealed to be an intricate and expansive map. The structure of this paper then is implicitly autobiographical. It was never the slow tipping of a scale, from the concrete to the elusive, but rather a series of ruptures where the wordless quality emerged from within the word. It is a process of compounding and meandering complexity, from the dull to the magnificent and back again.

Heads.

“Therefore by special commaundement this Agnis Sampson had all her haire shauen of, in each parte of her bodie, and her head thrawen with a rope according to the custome of that Countrie, beeing a paine most greeuous, which she continued almost an hower, during which time she would not confesse any thing vntill the Diuels marke was found vpon her priuities, then she immediatlye confessed whatsoeuer was demaunded of her, and iustifying those persons aforesaid to be notorious witches.

...to the number of two hundreth...they had landed, tooke handes on the land and daunced this reill or short daunce, singing all with one voice.

Commer goe ye before, comer goe ye, If ye will not goe before, commer let me.

At which time she confessed, that this Geilles Duncane did goe before them playing this reill or daunce vpon a small Trump, called a Iewes Trump, vntill they entered into the Kerk of north Barrick.

These confessions made the King in a wonderful admiration, and sent for ye said Geillis Duncane, who vpon the like Trump did playe the said daunce before the Kings Maijestie, who in respect of the strangeness of these matters, tooke great delight to bee present at their examinations.”

This text is from *Newes from Scotland*, a 16th century pamphlet written by King James VI of Scotland. It details the infamous North Berwick witch trials of 1590 to 1592, which is concerned with a supposed plot against the Kings Maijestie. Of particular note is an Agnis Sampson. Under the encouragement of torture, the accumulative apex of which focusing on her genitals, she described an elaborate story, of such elements as the tying of human limbs to a cat and drowning it in the sea in order to create a storm. The weather did not fully realize its evil intent; the cat’s “baptism” sought to affect James VI by drowning his newly anointed queen, Anne of Denmark, who was at the time seeking passage from Norway to Scotland. Anne stayed the storm, but suffered the loss of her handmaiden and an unspecific amount of wedding gifts, as a ship sank north of the Firth of Forth. Anne had initially attempted to reach Scotland from Denmark, but was forced to seek refuge from yet another storm. This weather was also attributed to witchcraft, albeit the Danish kind.

A royal wedding eventually takes place in Norway. What followed were more bad weather, a prolonged stay in Denmark and a difficult return voyage to Scotland in April of 1590. At some point during this time, the Danish admiral of the fleet attributes the conditions to witchcraft. The suspicion of said craft was already well established in Denmark, and considering the expanded circle of stimuli and consideration that James VI's newly formed alliance entails, this might be what compelled him to seek unholy justification for the storms upon his return. Up to this point the king had been lenient on the matter of witchcraft. The trial that followed was the first major witch-hunt in Scotland, seeing the execution of some 70 people.

It is a postulate at best that a Danish influence catalyzed the North Berwick affair, but what can be said with actuality is that the trial and the documentation thereof reveals a most absurd piece of information. Hidden unassumingly amidst accounts of the most evil of human undertakings, is the written record of the first known player of the "Iewes Trump", a girl named Geilles Duncane. And not only that, she played it for the king himself, and he enjoyed it. If one considers that Geilles had been tortured and otherwise deprived prior to her performance, of a piece of music she was said to have played for the devil, no words can describe the scene that comes to mind. It would seem kings of earthly and dark realms alike could appreciate the same music.

I wonder if they both tapped their feet.

“Jewes Trump”

A petty customs account, dated to 1481, contains references of two consignments for a London merchant by name of William Codde, clearly using the words *Jue Harpes* and *Jue Trumpes*. Proof that the names actually refers to the instrument in question arise in context with two 16th century sources, one of which being *Newes from Scotland*. The other text is *The Nomenclator, or Rememberbrancer of Adrianus Iunius*’, which states in both Latin and English the following;

“...others think the word crembalon refers to that instrument made of steel, commonly used by boys, which, held by the lips, gives a musical sound when the bent tongue that passes through the middle, put in motion by the finger, makes a sound. A Jewes trumpe or harpe.”

What we have here is the first definition of the instrument, addressed by its oldest English name. Etymologically, the theories surrounding the words Jews harp and Jews trump are far-reaching to say the least. Although attempts have been made to draw an obvious connection with Judaism, there exists no proof to back this assertion. Other suggestions, that jews may be a corruption of another word, such as jaw or jue, have not faired better, being dismissed by the Oxford English Dictionary as “*baseless and inept*” theories. It is a disputed subject. There exists no explanation as to why this name was given, only theories after the fact. By the time the name made its first appearance in the aforementioned customs documents, however, it must already have been well established. According to Michael Wright, former vice-president of the International Jews Harp Society,

“This is a hand-written account intend for auditing, implying that the name must have been in common usage or no one would have known what they were dealing

with. They must also have been imported in sufficient numbers to justify inclusion in the customs' book of rates or merchandizes from 1545 to 1765, or 200 years, where the official name in various spelling was Jew's trump." (Wright, "Penning the Air" 4)

His assertion is further backed by archeological finds near the river Thames, dated 1280 to 1320, and the imagery of an angel playing the instrument on the Crozier of William of Wykeham, dated c1367. William was the Chancellor of England, and received the crozier at his consecration as Bishop of Winchester. On the crook of the crozier are 19 depictions of angels playing various instruments, one of which being the jews harp. In the span of 224 years, the instrument went from being played by an angel on the silvered staff of a man of god, to being a tool of witches for the delight and summoning of Satan. It begs the question; just what was the position of the jews harp?

One could argue that such a loaded name as jews harp derails a potential consideration of the instrument into a realm where it does not belong, placing it into context with a culture, religion and political environment with which it appears to have no connection. Yet, it is also its undeniable origin. Why call it a jews harp if it has nothing to do with jews? It is a question with no real answers. The name, like the instrument, is shrouded in a mystery, and this latter quality is one that frequently arises in relation this most peculiar of artifacts. Many people, however, do not seem to care in the slightest, and interest is of course predicated on just such a care.



Image 1: (Left) William of Wykeham with Crozier, (Right) Jews harp detail of Crozier

If the king cared, why should I?

The jews harp is a chronically ridiculed instrument. With few exceptions, it has consistently been considered unfit for academic investigation and historical note. As can be seen in the aforementioned excerpt from *The Nomenclator, or Rememberbrancer of Adrianus Iunius*, it was considered a children's toy, and furthermore, not regarded as a real musical instrument. It was an uninteresting trinket of the lower classes, an obscure curiosity to behold and hear. A 1906 article, published in *Popular Science Monthly* under the title *The Jewsharper* by Dr. H. Carrington Bolton, sheds some light on the situation;

“This humble instrument of music, treasured chiefly by semi-civilized races and by children of intellectual nations, is but rarely mentioned in print, as its mediocre qualities give it no prominence in musical circles, and toys are seldom subjects of discussion.”

These attitudes towards the instrument have been dominant in much of the world. In the 20th century, the jews harp was the sound of Tigger bouncing in Winnie the Pooh, played by Snoopy in the 1969 film *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* and used for sound effects in Tom and Jerry. The instrument has been treated in like fashion to a sheet of metal, wobbled to produce a sound of lightning.

In contrast to the median, the jews harp experienced what can only be considered a golden age during the 17th to the 19th century. During this time, several jews harp factories existed throughout Europe. In the Austrian town of Mölln, a factory employing 33 master smiths and 13 apprentices produced as much as 9000 jews harps in a day, peaking at 2.5 million in 1818 alone. The village of Boccario, in northern Italy, forged approximately 114 million jews harps between 1600 and 1850, 1 536 000 being produced in 1833. These mass produced instruments

where shipped all over the world, some of which making their way to Canada and the Americas, being traded with the original people of those lands. Trading with the Jews harp was so advantageous that Sir Walter Raleigh, a British explorer, proclaimed in 1596, "*Wee should give them Jewes-Harpes, for they would give for every one two Hennes.*" (Fox, 57) I kind fashion, Horace Walpole, 4th earl of Orford, wrote in a letter to Richard Bently, "*This very morning I found that part of the purchase of Maryland from the savage proprietors (for we do not massacre, we are such good Christians as only to cheat) was a quantity of vermillion and a parcel of Jews Harps!*"

Consistent with the first landfalls by the extended social group of Columbus, one can find a tradition for the instrument in places such as Venezuela and the Kogi people of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. A document from 1593 states a Spanish expedition traded 500 jews harps with a tribe located in the north east of South America. Trade with the jews harp also occurred in Africa, where the instrument has been adapted into local varieties, such as the Xhosa isitolotolo, or become as a piece of jewelry, slung like a necklace.

Within this time of colonial undertakings, effort was made to elevate the jews harp to a more recognized position in Europe, manifested chiefly through the emergence of virtuoso players of the instrument. These were traveling musicians, who preformed solo with up to 14 jews harps at a time. Held together by auras, circular discs that clamped down multiple jews harps of different notes, one held in each hand so as to fluidly switch between them, the end result being the performance of elaborate pieces of classical music. The quicker one switched between the instruments, the more impressive it was, and the more complicated the melody, the higher the esteem. If one has attempted to hold a jews harp against the teeth, switching between 14 of them with precision and speed takes on a definitive weight.

At Melk Abbey in Austria, around c1765, a certain monk possessed great talent for this technique. The Austrian composer Johann Albrechtsberger, a music teacher for Mozart and

Beethoven, among others, having spent time at Melk Abbey with said monk, became inspired to write several concertos for the jews harp and strings. There were seven in total, three of which remain in Budapest today. Although the traveling virtuosos played solo, the surviving concertos provide a reference for what this peculiar merger of high and low culture may have sounded like in action.

The technique for playing, known as *wechselspiel* in German and roughly translating to changing play, was difficult to master. Many players, even those at the height of skill, chipped their teeth to the point of being unable to perform. For those that soared, standing ovations in filled concert houses complimented them. Accounts by bedazzled 19th century fans describe the concert experience of Karl Eulenstein, perhaps the most famous of the virtuosos, as performing heavenly music with sounds quite unlike anything.

There exist today no players that can approach the near mythical skills these virtuosos are said to have mastered. However, one can argue that this form of playing the instrument is a corruption of the innate qualities of the jews harp; the virtuoso style grew out of a competition of skill and a desire to be considered as real musicians playing real music on a real instrument. This was inherently a response to the neglect of the culture of the lower class. In order to engage the upper tiers of society, the jews harp was conformed to the parameters of high culture, namely classical music.

The finer details of a sellout

The jews harp is considered an idiophone, which is an instrument that derives its sound primarily from vibration. It is also considered an aerophone, which is an instrument that derives its sound primarily by causing a body of air to vibrate, by virtue of the turbulence generated by the spring when it passes by the narrow space between it and the frame to which it is attached. Furthermore, it is a drone instrument and an overtone instrument. Depending on how it is made, either of these qualities can be accentuated. The drone aspect consists of a fixed note that sounds every time you play the instrument. The overtones are produced and accentuated by virtue of how one shapes the throat, tongue and mouth. What you have in combination is a base note that sounds whenever you engage the spring of the jews harp, and a series of overtones that are produced along side it. Breathing also plays a role, for example in indicating, as would occur when one changes the direction of the bow on a violin, separate notes or rhythm patterns.

There are two basic designs, one in which the spring is attached to the frame of the instrument, a bow jews harp, and one in which the spring is apart of the frame itself, a frame jews harp. An example of a bow jews harp is a thin and flexible piece of iron attached to a sturdy frame, the flexible piece being struck by the players finger, causing it to vibrate, which further travels into the frame the spring is attached to. When a bow jews harp is held against the teeth, this vibration is magnified by virtue of traveling from the frame and into your bones, your body becoming the resonate chamber. Without this connection to the body, the vibration of a bow jews harp is almost inaudible. A frame jews harp, on the other hand, can be a thin piece of bamboo in which a sliver has been cut in the frame itself. When the frame is struck or otherwise engaged by finger, wrist, fist or the tugging of a string that is fastened to the frame, the sliver vibrates in turn and generates sound. Both categories of design can be made to produced specific notes based on specific scales, such as a c#, or otherwise disregard specific tuning altogether.



Image 2: Ainu woman playing mukhuri, a traditional bamboo frame jews harp

The forms of playing that emerge from the jews harp's properties can be separated into two rough poles. On one hand, as a rhythm instrument, one in which the instrument is concerned with producing its base note like a drum beat, and as a melodic instrument, concerned with creating melodies through the articulation specific overtones.

When the jews harp is conformed to fit classical music, however, it is in a sense asked to not produce sound on its own terms, moving away from its innate and most unique qualities; the base note, which is usually the drone of the instrument, becomes the melody producing aspect rather than the overtones of the instrument articulating the melody. The articulation of specific and clear notes, i.e. a set of tuned jews harps played in succession in order to generate a scale, takes precedence above the articulation of overtones, which are consequently suppressed so as to not interfere with the purity of whatever the desired note may be. However, if one uses

Albrechtberger's concertos as a reference, the end result can actually succeed in a sort of delirious fashion.

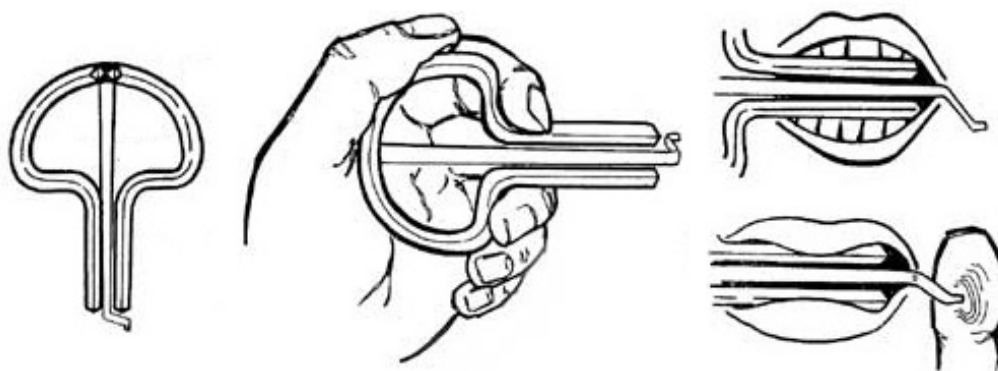


Illustration 1: Bow jews harp and playing technique.

Grandfather

At the heart of all of this is a particular sound, one which is wholly unique. It is raw, archaic, and without comparison. The jews harp is undoubtedly among the very first of musical instruments, and as it can be heard today, depending on how the instrument is fashion, is either a direct replica of what our most remote ancestors experienced or a separation by degrees.

In its most basic form, the jews harp is a twig that one bites down upon. As it is flicked with the fingers, and in combination with altering the cavity of the mouth, one produces overtones. The drone, or base note, of such an instrument is muted because the vibration of the spring, the twig, is not sustained. This was beautifully illustrated to me when I asked a musician from the republic of Tuva where he believed the khomus originated. He promptly picked up a wooden pencil, held it towards me saying “Grandfather”, and proceeded to do the aforementioned. He articulated several notes with such precision and clarity that the truth of it was undeniable. Khomus is the Russian name for the jews harps, and depending on how on counts, there exists between 1000 - 3000 different recorded names for the instrument across the world.

Another form of the jews harp is a bird feather, as has been the case with the Inuit population of Belcher Island, located in the Hudson bay in Canada. One simply holds the feather with on hand, in such a fashion that the base of the hollow shaft that runs lengthwise of the feather is free and positioned over the open mouth. One produces sound when the free hand strikes the base of the stalk, causing it to vibrate. It is a bit like putting a flexible ruler over the edge of a table while pressing part of it flat against the surface. Pull the ruler up, or down, and then release, and you will have sound. Put your mouth close to it, and you can make overtones. The longer the part that is extended outside the edge of the table, the lower the note is, i.e. slow vibrations, while the shorter it is, the higher the note, i.e. fast vibrations. It is exactly the same with long and short bird feathers.

Along with bone and horn, these are the primordial materials that the first jews harps were fashioned out of. The impossibility of determining when the jews harp was first created lies in the fact that these materials decompose relatively quickly. In essence, all one would need is a population of birds, or a forest, and curiosity. There is no crafting necessary in order do to it. Nature has already made it for you. And as such, the instrument exists potentially everywhere. When you are done, or it breaks, you just throw it aside.

Once tools enter the picture, the situation begins to change. Now you can carve a frame mouth harp from a piece of bamboo, or scrape a piece of horn until a thin length remains. If the tools are fine enough, one can fashion a bow mouth harp, such as a version of the mukkuri pictured above. The far end of this begins when humans learn to manipulate metal. That is not to say that a jews harp made from iron is the pinnacle of its evolution. However, it is the latest iteration of the instrument to have emerged, and through the mechanisms of trade and imperialism, now proliferates the whole world.



Image 3: Bamboo jews harp from Papua New Guinea.

Sounding an imagined depth

Effort has been made to define a particular area where it is most likely that the jews harp first came about. Asia is a strong candidate in this regard. A Chinese illustration from the 4th century BCE gives credence to the jews harps early presence in the region. It shows 3 musicians playing in a market, one of which holds a hand to his mouth in distinct jews harp playing fashion. Coupled with the sheer and unparalleled diversity of jews harps that exist on the continent, notably with the indigenous peoples, the Asian origin hypothesis is far from unlikely. The only jews harp tradition that is known have existed in Europe, is one of iron, while traditions for working with what can be considered the jews harp's proto-materials, i.e. bamboo, as well various metals, is established across the Asian continent. Although the instrument could have arisen independently throughout the world, it may have reached a higher degree of refinement in the Far East that moved west through cultural dispersion.

The Kou Xian is a traditional jews harp of the Yi People in China, and consist of a combination of 2 to 5 pieces of brass shaped like leaves. The leaves are attached at the base and fold out like a fan, each leaf having its own distinct and complimentary note. By virtue of the Kou Xian's design, it is possible to play up to 3 jews harps, i.e. 3 notes, at the same time.

There are numerous examples of such unique Jews harps present in Asia, and considered in their totality, emerges as highly respected and valued instrument that require great skill to fully articulate their musical potential. They are consistently used for courtship, the expression of deep and wordless emotions, and in certain regions functions as a shamanic instrument. It is also used for voice masking, a special skill for speaking into the jews harp while playing and the like talent of perceiving this secret language.

As the instruments and the culture surrounding them consistently resides with indigenous people, much of the lore regarding these jews harps and their function within a given group, is

either lost or close to disappearing entirely. Almost no information exists about the jews harp in China, and although it paints an image of reverence and great depth, one is left to superficially imagine what that depth might be.

An anomalous counter point to this is the Shakh Republic in Russian Siberia. Although the jews harp has undoubtedly existed there for a long time, being but part of a wide and diverse musical tradition, it was elected the national instrument of the republic sometime during the last decades. Arguably in efforts to strengthen the so called bond of the people, it is now elevated to a mythical level that does not appear to precede it. Beautiful women of the steppes play the khomus in elaborate dresses adorned with horse hair, iron and silver, exporting the exoticism of the raw and untamed tundra. It is an unprecedented mixture of beauty pageant and neo-shamanism, playing a style of jews harp where one howls like a wolf, neighs like a horses and calls as a cuckoo in the quiet of the forest. It is an incredible experience to hear, and no sarcasm is intended in this, however, it is not ancient. Two French people invented the style some twenty years ago, which now has become the pop standard of playing the jews harp in Shakh.

500,000 people are claimed to play the instrument in the republic, from a population just under a million. On June 24th in 2011, a Guinness world record of 1344 people playing the jews harp at the same time was set in the city of Yakutsk, while on December 21st a Sakhan khomus was sent to the international space station, spending 192 days in orbit. I saw footage of the astronaut playing it in non-gravity during the 8th gathering of the International Jews Harp Society in Taucha, Germany in 2014. I saw the blacksmith who made it there. He was a quiet man.

Arriving at the beginning

Setesdal is a valley located in the south of Norway, whose tradition of blacksmithing and jews harp music may reach back to the early Iron Age. It is possible that the jews harp arrived there through the Vikings or their ancestors, along trade routes stretching east along the Volga river and beyond. The craftsmanship necessary to produce the local variety of the instrument renders among the finest mouth harps in the world. Rich in overtones, they are designed to articulate the precise and nuanced melodies of the local folk music, a tradition so rooted the mass-produced jews harps imported from Mölln were never able to take hold. The factory instruments were simply unable to express the fine and subtle qualities that were required to play the Norwegian jews harp style. The sound and playing technique is highly developed, to such an extent that it stands out against what other European traditions, or remnants there of, are left to be considered.

In the Norwegian language there is a word called trollsk, which describes a particular atmosphere that occurs in nature. It translates roughly to troll-like, and points to a quality of feeling where the veil between the underworld and ours seem to lift. As such it is a twilight sensation, not by virtue of the beauty of a given light, but by the quality of a subtle mystery that begins to grow palpable around you. A quintessential scenario would be one of mist drifting slowly through a dark and dense forest. In such moments it is as if nature comes alive, and one can see or sense the creatures of the underworld expressed in the surroundings.

There are stories of people learning music from these beings, or receiving magical instruments that would grant its wielder extraordinary skill. These bargains, however, always came at a price. By confluence of such elements, aspects of Norwegian folk music were deemed demonic during the protestant reformation. Certain states of ecstasy, as if possessed by otherworldly forces, were said to issue forth from particular songs, seizing both performers and

audience in states of rapture and trance. If one considers the fractal quality within Norwegian folk music, meaning a melodic pattern that repeats itself with subtle variations, becoming as a circling dance that returns upon itself ad infinitum if the participants so desire, the latent potential for trance is evident.

Such accounts, however, operate as estranged myths until one finds the appropriate context for its echo to emerge. In the hands of a master player, the jews harp becomes an entirely different instrument. It can be genuinely profound to experience, for its is rather perplexing that so much can issue from something so very small and simple. In such moments the myth starts to unravel, and the sense of experiencing something outside of time is palpable. For it is as if you have come upon an echo, resounding through the player before you, and the very space you are in melts together with the past, leaving the envelope of time.



Image 4: Painting by Theodor Kittelsen; Huldra Forsvant / The Fairy That Disappeared

Too stupid to understand

There is a concept in music called the break in the voice. It refers to the disturbance in the voice that can occur when changing between ones modal voice register and a register outside of ones range, i.e. a tenor shifting to falsetto. It is akin to the voice passing over an edge. Within classical music, this break is traditionally something to be removed, as it is the mark of the unrefined, and as such, there are techniques to suppress or eliminate it all together. However, the break can also be engaged as a potent field of sound, where a different form of expression is possible. Examples of this are Inuit throat singing, where the song resides within the break, or yodeling, where the break functions more as a punctuation between high and low notes. By expansion, the break in the voice is the charge that resides within the space in-between. It is an actor that stumbles and reveals the illusion, changing the course of the theaters energy, and it is what a ballet dancer leaves behind when her body and movements are conditioned to mechanical uniformity. It is the quality of the raw and untamed, outside the domain of order and predictability.

In my research, avenues that appear to be a direct approach onto the jews harp have only remained so initially. Upon examination, facts, the concrete if you will, lines of connectivity and chronology, will eventually dissolve and rebound into uncertainty. There is no straight path towards it, save at the loss of its sheer complexity and magnitude. As such, the jews harp is an instrument that resides within the break, suspended between fragments of histories, charged, albeit latently so, with what possibilities the liminal space may afford. This is a mythical positioning, in which the nodes of information function in their totality as a mechanisms for projecting one out from the perceived real.

Milking the cosmic cow

Werner Herzog is a filmmaker that actively blends modalities of fiction and documentary film, so much so that much of his work, despite being categorized as one or the other, actually inhabits both spheres. The pursuit of what he calls an ecstatic truth is central to his work, which operates as a consistent metanarrative of whatever the given film may be. His work is hyper subjective and cinema functions as a tool to engage/generate the mythic. During a speech in Milano, following the screening of his film *Lessons of Darkness*, which depicts the burning oil fields in the wake of the gulf war, Herzog addresses his concept of the ecstatic. The film opens with the following quotation by Blaise Pascal, “*The collapse of the stellar universe will occur—like creation—in grandiose splendor.*”, which Herzog admits is in fact written by himself. He expands as follows,

“... what moves me has never been reality, but a question that lies behind it [beyond; dahinter]: the question of truth. Sometimes facts so exceed our expectations—have such an unusual, bizarre power—that they seem unbelievable.

But in the fine arts, in music, literature, and cinema, it is possible to reach a deeper stratum of truth—a poetic, ecstatic truth, which is mysterious and can only be grasped with effort; one attains it through vision, style, and craft. In this context I see the quotation from Blaise Bascal about the collapse of the stellar universe not as a fake [“counterfeit”; Fälschung], but as a means of making possible an ecstatic experience of inner, deeper truth. Just as it’s not fakery when Michelangelo’s Pietà portrays Jesus as a 33-year-old man, and his mother, the mother of God, as a 17-year-old.” (Herzog)

In a sense, it is as if Herzog’s films function as scaffolds, their narrative being a preoccupation or point of departure for the ecstatic quality to reveal itself. It emerges from the collision of fact and fiction, especially through manipulation and the poetic staging of reality, and sometimes even outside of ones efforts entirely. Herzog will often disappear down seemingly tangential pathways, moving away from his main narrative to pursue whims, however, it is the

emergence of such micro-stories that are the very purpose of the scaffold. For within them, traces of the ecstatic may appear.

It is glimpsed in a scene from *Nosferatu the Vampire*, when Jonathan Harker, played by Bruno Ganz, has just left to ride in pursuit of Klaus Kinski as Count Dracula. The camera lingers on the door that Bruno has just walked through. A beat passes and it pans right unto an old couple and holds. They are caught in the frame of the camera, uncertain of what to do. The scene is over, yet the camera keeps rolling, capturing the unexpected moment of two actors wavering between their assigned personas and who they actual are in the real .

Such moments most often occurs with untrained actors, as is the case with the aforementioned. With such persons the veil between whom they are and whom they play is prone to transparency and easily punctured. In its most glorious instances, it is as if the layers of that person are peeled back and they appear with an indescribable honesty, vulnerable and raw. It is important to note that the mechanisms and surrounding circumstances that lead to such a moment of rupture also shape the energy that emerges from within it.

In the context of *The Banisher of Thought*, I have explored quite simple strategies to encourage this emergence. I would sometimes give the person I am documenting, all of which are non-actors doing what they actually do, simple instructions, such as where to stand, where to look and so forth. The intention is not necessarily for these directions to be followed to a point, but rather to see how the subject interprets the instructions given, and further what may emerge in the moment before and after the instructions are enacted. The scene is “over”. The question has been answered and the action is completed; yet the camera rolls. We just sit looking at one another. The subject does not really know what to do.

An example of this is a scene with Keta Khan, an Indian jews harp musician, standing atop a building in the ruins of Kuldra, located in the west of India. I had told him to walk to a certain spot in front of the camera. He reaches the spot, and I give him a hand signal to stop. As

I lower my hand, he interprets this as if I have signaled him to come closer. What follows is an improvised moment of hand signs, where Keta stops and walks and stops again, until he has come into a close shot. Neither of us knew where this would lead and exactly what was happening. It emerged spontaneously. The movement of his body is subtly expressive of our interaction, improvisation and questioning.



Image 5: Auðumbla, the primeval cow in Norse mythology.

The Donkey that played the flute

It is important to me speak from a position of truth, however constrained or delusional it may be. I am not interested in the mask, but rather what exists behind it. Honesty then is a most essential quality. I have worked from the position that there is no such thing as an objective observer, that the perceiver is never separate from the perceived, and one's mere presence within a space is enough to alter it. As such I sought to aesthetically embed myself in the process of filmmaking, seeing that anything but this would be a dissipation of energy, as I am working against the truth of the matter. If I make a film about the jews harp where I pretend my gaze does not exist, I am diminishing my capacity for inquiry as the energy available for this task is divided. Furthermore, it became paramount that I embrace my subjective relationship to the instrument, one that is enamored and oriented towards its capacity to engage a mythical field; it's most inspired point of entry. Otherwise my film would be a lie, tip toing around the heart that aroused me to movement, a gesture to appease, limit and conform to modalities of accepted engagement.

Initially I perceived the essay film as a strategy with which to maneuver the multitude of disparate histories surrounding the instrument, a strategy that furthermore enabled a highly subjective mapping of these histories. In actuality it was a way to consider how to suture my research of the instrument, rather than the practice that the research engendered. For the film that has emerged is far from an essay film, and limited by its scope of production, perhaps at its service, it was not able to engage the global mapping and complexities histories available. Rather it engaged a different modality altogether, that of ethnographic film.

I want to stress that my knowledge of this field is superficial, and the relationship that has arisen with it, and the comments that follow, are grounded in ignorance, at least on a level of what can currently be articulated. One can postulate that the tropes of the ethnographic were engaged and problematized unconsciously, by an orientation of love for the artifact and its

catalyzing function, which in turn engendered a particular form of observation that addressed the environments surrounding the instrument with care, stillness and a contemplative eye.

Documentary theoretician Bill Nichols, in his book *Representing Reality*, describes ethnographic film as an observational mode of documentary representation, a mode that “*stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker...[ceding] “control” over the events that occur in front of the camera*”. He continues,

“Observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of the others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life, to see the colors, shapes, and spatial relationships among people and their possessions, to hear the intonation, inflection, and accents that give a spoken language its “grain” and that distinguish one native speaker from another. If there is something to be gained from an affective form of learning, observational cinema provides a vital forum for such experience. Though still problematic in other ways, there are qualities here that no other mode of representation duplicates.” (42)

The problematic in question is in part the belief that ethnographic cinema can reveal an objective and scientific truth about the other, somehow capturing what is natural and undiluted through a process of pure observation, a particular form of observation in which the presence and prejudice of the ethnographer and his or her tools are held to not alter the world that is investigated. As such, ethnographic film functions as data for the social sciences, as documents of facts. Ethnography is Eurocentric and racist at its core, viewing the indigenous people and the environments it engages as avenues for recording earlier stages of humanity and form, to trace the trajectory of a dumb and primitive organism to an intelligent and higher form of complexity, the white European man.

Perhaps by reaching for the mythical within my heritage, in Norway, and displacing the subjects within this internal and external landscape, i.e. attempting to position them in a different quality of the real, the other worldly, through cinematic form, however romantically motivated at

its core, and further transposing these tropes onto an investigation of India, created a unifying field by subjecting everything visually addressed to the same kind of mythical displacement. The exotic other is constructed and simultaneously deconstructed because the cinematic mechanisms that make the subject/environment as such is revealed and utilized. Perhaps by these attempts at honesty, of announcing formally that yes I am romanticizing you, and saying this would inherently occur whether or not I expressed this fact through cinematic strategies, I am enabling a double operation, of the subject being both magical and non magical, other and the same. There exists a different form of integrity in this operation, for the subject appears with a particular strength, one which is perhaps rooted in this liminal placement, where the subject has a freedom to inhabit and traverse multiple spheres, arguably a gesture akin to that of a god whom inhabits different realms of reality, shape shifting between them.

The central pillar of the ethnographic, being the observational approach aforementioned, however superficially presented by yours truly, is engaged and extended to such a degree that it begins to shift. What occurs is a form of self-reflective ethnography in which the viewer becomes aware, not of the ethnographic subject looking back at them, but of the ethnographic gaze itself. By inscribing my subjectivity and pushing the form to the point where it becomes apparent that I am pushing, i.e. the image remains beyond what is needed to convey the imagined scientific truth, wrapped in a lens/frame that reveals its gaze through stylization, the cinematic operation in question arises in new and particular light. In a sense it turns over and reveals its latent qualities. However, I would argue it is more so than that. What is seen perhaps is not only the ethnographic modality and its tradition of treating its indigenous subjects as scientific samples of primordial human remnants, but the capacity for the mundane, for everything, to exist in a super dimension of reality through the degree of attention and care one shows towards it.

A basic narrative dimension of this work, one that it is quite possibly a hyperbolic self-inflation, is the desire to communicate how radical the simple is, that it is we who no longer look,

that our civilization engenders an attention and care in which that which requires the heart to sustain it will die long before that which makes us escape our immediacy, being forms of extinction of varying degrees of magnitude. For me, the jews harp is but a mirror of a much larger operation, and embedded within the veins of the artifact is the possibility of addressing the complex implications of the mundane. What I did not know, however, was how to communicate this, and I effeteely abandoned the idea of being intelligent enough to understand how. I did not imagine this potential existed within my current approach. Perhaps it doesn't. What can be said, however, is that this concern shaped the process all along, existing, literally, as a note under the heading narrative sub-dimensions, a category I imagined would only get eaten up by the multitude of other histories that was more easily expressed. It would seem this more abstract concern operates as part of the organizing mechanism for how the fragmented histories of the jews harp are positioned on the map, for the shapes of the constellation are endless, each form reflecting the hand that shaped it. In kind fashion, the experience of perceiving a map is just as much a mirror of the person that gazes upon it.

In closing, I can only say that this underscores the necessity for honesty, however ignorant one may be of its implications. Once taught, it is very difficult to unlearn what has been imprinted. It is important to be just stupid enough for once own good.

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