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Reverberation and the parodic: an invitation to the spaces of sound

Abstract:

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* Jacques Rancière speaks of artistic practices ‘as ways of “doing and making” that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making’ (2013: 8). ‘Reverberation’ in the various dimensions explored by this paper is the compelling and parodic force, which signals the transformative potential of the spaces of music, word and sound collaborations. This paper will present the mixed impulse of parody as repetition with difference in Deleuze’s sense, or ironic ‘trans-contextualisation’ (Hutcheon 2000: 32), contextualised by Foucault’s heterotopic thought, Steve Reich’s minimalist music, and Brian Eno’s recognition of ambient sound in 1975 (Howard 2004: 91). Also explored is Hutcheon’s investigation of the etymology of parody as ‘counter-song’, which suggests intimacy and accord. The latter understanding of parody will be of particular importance in a discussion of New York-based band, The National.

Biographical Note:

Josephine Scicluna is a poet, fiction writer and academic who collaborates with musicians, sound artists, scriptwriters, and film makers to create performance works and recordings for radio broadcast. These have featured on RRR-FM, ABC Radio National, and 3CR. She has won several awards for her short fiction, and her poetry, fiction and essays have been published in various journals. She has a PhD in Professional and Creative Writing and is currently teaching at Deakin University, Melbourne

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[R]etentir... is very apt, for in sound both time and space are epitomized. John R. Stilgoe (cited in Bachelard 1994).

Introduction

Some years ago I pulled over to the side of the road in my car so that I could listen more intently to a radio interview with anthropologist and primatologist, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy. She was speaking upon the release of her book, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (2009). What caught my attention was Hrdy talking about a point raised in her book: her personal conviction concerning the prospect of human evolution phasing out empathy:

I think our very compartmentalised childrearing means that we're rearing much more individualistic and less empathetic children and there is a price to pay because a trait that is not expressed is not visible to natural selection...No matter how valuable something like cooperation or empathy is for our species, if it's not expressed in the developing organism it can't be favoured (2009).

In her book she writes:

I have no doubt that our descendants thousands of years from now (whether on this planet or some other) will be bipedal, symbol-generating apes. They will probably be technologically proficient in realms we do not even dream of yet, as well as every bit as competitive and Machiavellian as chimpanzees are now, and probably even more intelligent than people today. What is not certain is whether they will still be human in ways we now think of as distinguishing our species – that is, empathic and curious about the emotions of others, shaped by our ancient heritage of communal care (Hrdy 2009: 294).

The idea that empathy could be lost as a trait began to re-infect my understanding of creative practice. It made me think about how such a space might form a model for the kind of retention of memory needed to counter the loss by natural selection of which Hrdy spoke. Active listening felt significant here and I recalled a moment of revelation described by Dianne Wolkstein during her collaboration with cuneiformist, Noah Kramer, on a contemporary translation of stories and hymns of the ancient Sumerian goddess, Inanna. Wolkstein was trying to understand the first line of Inanna's descent: 'From the Great Above she *set her mind* [my italics] to the Great Below' (Wolkstein and Kramer 1983: xvi). Kramer explained to her that 'mind' meant 'ear', since, in Sumerian the word for ear and wisdom were the same. However 'mind' was the intended meaning (in Wolkstein and Kramer 1983: xvi-xvii). Kramer said that the word 'set' was to be understood here as akin to the way a donkey sets its ear when it hears a particular sound (xvii). In this expression of listening derived from our oldest known story, the epic of Gilgamesh, we are presented with the ear as a receptor for wisdom, suggesting a listening that is done with the whole body. The active listening implied in artistic practice and the way that it and its resultant artefacts form counter-spaces in the everyday can be seen as a powerful antidote to a late capitalist world marked (using Rancière's description) by labour market collapse, destruction of social systems of solidarity, and increasingly precarious employment (Rancière 2010: xi).

An auditory experience which reflects this cycle of loss and repetition in performance can be found in the sonic phenomenon of reverberation. While this will be explored on an experiential level, 'reverberation' here is to be understood not simply as a physical phenomenon which emphasizes acoustic variance of sonic instances, but also in metaphorical terms as an instance of repetition, difference and as a means for the creation of newly conceptualised spaces. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard calls upon the phenomenology of Eugene Minkowski in order to elucidate his own project, which is to determine the being of the poetic image in the psyche via the experience of what can be understood as the visual counterpart to reverberation – its reflections:

If, having fixed the original form in our mind's eye, we ask ourselves how that form comes alive...we discover a new dynamic and vital category, a new property of the universe: reverberation (*retentir*). It is as though a well-spring existed in a sealed vase and its waves, repeatedly echoing against the sides of this vase, filled it with their sonority (Minkowski ctd in Bachelard 1994: xvi).

The space of artistic practice and the way it forms a rupture in the everyday is distilled by this phenomenological understanding of reverberation. The movement out of one's usual experience of time in the creation of an artefact is a vase of sorts in the above reckoning; a container for both the distillation and dispersion of experience and of memory. Hutcheon's explanation of the mixed impulse of parody as both law and its transgression; both conservative and provocative, and even revolutionary (2000: 76) suggests the seeming contradiction presented here in the creative space, which is at once contained and suggests infinite possibility. Deleuze and Guattari's description of the kind of movement that occurs in the refrain (1987) is also helpful in elucidating this sense of the creative space.

This essay will present 'reverberation' in various dimensions as the compelling and parodic force which signals the transformative potential of creative practice. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* Jacques Rancière speaks of artistic practices 'as ways of 'doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making' (2013: 8). The mixed impulse of parody as repetition with difference in Deleuze's sense, or 'ironic 'trans-contextualisation'' (Hutcheon 2000: 32) will be contextualised by Foucault's concept of heterotopias: Foucault posited that external conceptions of space/ place had the 'curious property of being in relation with all the others, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relationships designed or mirrored by themselves' (1997: 3). Elisabeth Grosz's understanding of the 'in-between' will furnish the discussion of heterotopic space here. Hutcheon's sense of parody as 'counter-song', which has a long history in the arena of parody studies (as discussed by the editors of this issue with reference to Giorgio Agamben), will also be explored in relation to artistic practice, involving music, word and sound collaborations and their resultant artefacts. French philosopher, Catherine Malabou, and her concept of plasticity in the wake of post-structuralism (Crockett in Malabou 2010) will be briefly presented for its signalling of the revolutionary potential of artistic practice, in relation to an audio technique using reverberation known as the 'shimmer-verb'.

The exploration of these concepts in praxis will be contextualised through the work of different composers and performers. Steve Reich's minimalist music (including his invention in 1968 of gradual process music), and Brian Eno's recognition of ambient sound in 1975 (Howard 2004: 91) will be explored as examples of these concepts at work in reverberation praxis. Hutcheon's investigation of the etymology of parody as 'counter-song' suggesting intimacy and accord as opposed to comic derision will be pertinent in reference to the New York-based alternative rock band, *The National*.

Part one: the creative space as counter-song

The idea of parody as an 'alongside song' has long been in the arena of parody studies. 'Counter' suggests that opposition and counterpoint are produced through the alongside. In the foreword to this issue the editors write: 'Parody is *alongside song*: a spatial relation, which the German *Beigesang* repeats: not *under* what is sung, not *sub* but alongside the serious ode... [i]t is what is spoken alongside, and catches there the *other of the song*' (Campbell, Hecq and Keane 2015). Further, in *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern*, Margaret A. Rose cites Fred W. Householder's suggestion that 'parados' suggests 'singing in imitation, singing with a slight change' (Householder 1944, cit in Rose 1993: 8). This is further echoed by F. J. Lelièvre (1954) in his definition of 'parode' as 'singing after the style of an original but with a difference' (cit in Rose 1993: 8). He also points to 'the ambiguity of the prefix 'para' and its ability to describe both nearness and opposition' (Rose 1993: 8). In *A Theory of Parody* (2000 [1985]) Linda Hutcheon, in her own description of the etymology of the Greek noun *parodia*, meaning 'counter-song', locates 'the textual or discursive nature of parody (as opposed to satire) [as being] clear from the *odos* part of the word, meaning song' (2000[1985]: 32). The neglected meaning of *para* in the Greek as 'beside', therefore suggesting 'an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast' (ibid) will be important in my discussion. Difference characterises contemporary parodic practices of repetition, argues Hutcheon. Further, '[t]he pleasure of parody's irony comes not from humour in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' ... between complicity and distance' (2000[1985]: 32). Hutcheon concludes that a number of artists have 'openly claimed that the ironic distance afforded by parody has made imitation a means of freedom, even in the sense of exorcising personal ghosts – or, rather, enlisting them in their own cause' (2000[1985]: 35). Her emphasis on song as discursive and textual, and moreover, her description of the 'doubleness of *both* form and pragmatic effect' as making 'parody an important mode of modern self-reflexivity' (34-5) in literature, music, film and the visual arts is at the foundation of the agency of reverberation. The instability of context and meaning implicit in parody can be elucidated by various understandings of reverberation (which also implies a similar instability) including its technical application in music production.

Reverberation in as many other spaces

Foucault acknowledges a debt to phenomenologists for their realization 'that we don't live in a homogenous and empty space, but in a space that is saturated with qualities,

and that may even be pervaded by a spectral aura' (1997: 2). We don't live in a vacuum, but in a set of relationships (1997: 2). In his concept of heterotopias as liminal spaces, that is, 'spaces where categories are disrupted and are yet to be defined' (MacKenzie 2001), which form cohesion by adjacency, it is the gap or the rupture as a result of the collision of these spaces (Foucault 1997: 3) that emerges as a site of difference and creativity. A heterotopia, write Lieven De Cauter and Michiel Dehaene in *Heterotopia and the City*, is 'the counterpart of what an event is in time, an eruption, an apparition, an absolute discontinuity' (2008: 92). De Cauter and Dehaene argue that the reductive dichotomy in Western thought 'has obscured the dialectical understanding of space to which Foucault's concept of heterotopia proves ... a wonderful point of entry' (2008: 93). They go on to describe alternative, altered and alternating spaces as those which occur 'when two different time-spaces come together and switch from one into the other' (2008: 93). The ways in which real and virtual spaces of the theatre combine within the performing arts are offered as an exemplar of this by the authors. To give another dimension to this understanding of heterotopic space Elisabeth Grosz's reflections in *Architecture from the Outside* (2001) are pertinent. She describes the space of the in-between as:

the locus for social, cultural, and natural transformations: it is not simply a convenient space for movements and realignments but in fact is the only place – the place around identities, between identities – where becoming, openness to futurity, outstrips the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity (2001: 92).

For Grosz, such a model of indeterminacy and undecidability is a pervasive element in the work of philosophers like Deleuze, Derrida, and Irigaray. It is significant, she writes, that when these philosophers speak of difference as having:

an irreducible relation to the conceptualization of space and time: difference is not simply the collapsing (or circulation) of identity, it is also the rendering of space and time as fragmented, transformable, interpenetrated, beyond any fixed formulation, no longer guaranteed by the a priori or by the universalism of science (2001: 95).

This approach reflects the process at work in reverberation, and can be transposed into a way of articulating artistic practice involving sound collaborations which can be envisioned in terms of just such a cohabitation or even a collision of spaces.

Combinations of music, sound and word, and also the spaces in which they are created and enacted, form counter-songs; 'adjacent' spaces in the sonic field. In these adjacencies, there is a constant crossing of thresholds, which mark these zones with new emergences. The spaces of artistic practice and the way they form a rupture in the everyday is emblemized by the movement out of one's usual experience of time into the making of an artefact, which then becomes a container of sorts for both the distillation and dispersion of experience and memory. Hutcheon's explanation of the mixed impulse of parody as both law, and its transgression; both conservative, and provocative (2000: 76) suggests the seeming contradiction presented here in artistic practice.

To lead into my discussion of reverberation as an entrancing form of repetition in music and to perhaps problematize the notion of repetition as a potentially

conservative force conceded to by Hutcheon (2000), Deleuze's view of repetition is befitting:

If repetition is possible, it is due to miracle rather than to law...In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality (1994: 2-3).

Deleuze is not interested in what is the same in repetition; but rather, what is revealed as different and new. For example, concerning the common force in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Péguy, Deleuze writes, repetition is opposed to all form of generality. These philosophers do not take the word 'repetition' in a metaphorical sense: 'on the contrary they have a way of taking it literally and introducing it into their style' (1994: 5). Similarly, reverberation in music production is an enacted form of repetition as style. It is compelling because of the way it alters our sense of time and space.

Writing about music generally, Elizabeth Margulis, in her book *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*, describes repetition as a beguiling force that 'makes music knowable in the way of something outside time' (2014: 7). Further:

it enables us to 'look' at a passage as a whole, even while it's progressing moment by moment. But this changed perspective brought by repetition doesn't feel like holding a score and looking at a passage's notation as it progresses. Rather, it feels like a different way of inhabiting a passage – a different kind of orientation (7).

The suggestion that repetition in music shifts our perspective and makes us feel as if we inhabit space differently conceptualises the space of artistic practice as a container of sorts for the dispersion of experience and memory. The passage allows us to reorient and reinvent ourselves in relation to the past whilst at the same opening ourselves out to our futures. Musician and producer T J Eckleburg describes the entrancing nature of sound and the way it 'stretches, expands and inhabits a space' (2014) thus: 'Reverb and delay impart time, space and texture – the sense this has happened, is happening, somewhere in a real or imagined world. We remember, we reinvent in the refracting of spaces' (2014). The dispersion of memory and experience implied by artistic practice further suggests revolutionary possibility, exemplified by Deleuze and Guattari's sense of movement in the refrain:

One opens the circle not on the side where the old forces of chaos press against it but in another region, one created by the circle itself... This time, it is in order to join with the forces of the future, cosmic forces. One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune. Along sonorous, gestural, motor lines that mark the customary path of a child and graft themselves onto or begin to bud 'lines of drift' with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures and sonorities (1987: 311-12).

Martin Scherzinger writes that if the social upheaval involving demonstrations, strikes, student revolts and resistance to police in Paris, in May 1968 was the informing context for *A Thousand Plateaus*, then its informing technical principle was the easy to use and relatively affordable new electronic instrument, the synthesizer (2010: 108). The synthesizer, Deleuze and Guattari explain, 'unites disparate elements in the material, and transposes the parameters from one formula to another (1987: 343). The

synthesizer places ‘all its components in continuous variation [and as such] music ... enters the service of a virtual cosmic continuum of which even holes, silences, ruptures, and breaks are a part’ (1987: 95). It is an instrument of repetition and difference, both literally and figuratively.

The synthesiser has allowed for experiments in reverberation including the removal of the original sound from the output. This is what happens in a technical application of reverberation in music production called the ‘shimmer-verb’. The shimmer-verb is an effect pioneered by musicians Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois. The technical process is described here by audio engineer and reverb expert Sean Costello:

Create a feedback loop, incorporating a pitch shifter set to +1 octave, and a reverb with a fairly long decay time. By controlling the gain and equalization of the feedback loop, and the lengths of the various delays within the loop, the temporal evolution of the sound can be altered (2010).

Perhaps this process can make us see parody in a new light. As already discussed, parody can be understood as harmonic, as repetition as difference, and as reverberation of an original sound. An interesting question, then, is what happens to parody when an original sound appears to be removed altogether?¹ This invites us into a space where it is not possible to locate a context upon which parody seems to rely. On the other hand, the evocation of loss in itself creates a space that allows for a deeper, more poignant meaning. Musician and producer Tom Kazas, in discussing a development in the technique of ‘shimmer-verb’ devised by T. J. Eckleburg², describes a ‘new emotional resonance [that is] created by the predicament of a distinction between presence and absence’ (2014). This process of loss and temporal disturbance may create a deeper level of parody in which the lost original is imbued with a new significance. This parodic act of remembering and repetition of a lost sound may gesture towards ways in which artistic expression can recall losses sustained by the operations of late capitalism, as suggested earlier by Rancière, of which Hrdy offered a possible example in her foreshadowing of the evolutionary loss of empathy.

Catherine Malabou’s concept of plasticity, in particular, suggests a provocative and revolutionary approach towards articulating this lost space. Malabou positions plasticity as being both flexible and malleable, but holding at the same time the potential for explosiveness in the sense of having the potential for great change and transformation. ‘Plasticity refers to the *spontaneous organization of fragments*’ (2010: 7).

The most striking model of this organization is the nervous system, whilst as a concept, ‘plasticity is also endowed with [using Lévi-Strauss’ term] a ‘dithyrambic gift for synthesis’, [the] ability to hold together heterogenous elements’ (2010: 7). Citing the articulated masks of Australasia and Melanesia as examples, Malabou posits that diverse, seemingly fragmented elements are in this way articulated to create a whole persona, which in itself opens onto another mask. An authentic face is never revealed, and may in fact be impossible to locate as the masks are always changing. They are always in a state of flux.

Malabou’s approach to plasticity recalls a present moment that has been removed as is also demonstrated by the operation of the shimmer-verb. According to Malabou, a

major advantage of plasticity ‘discovered for the first time in the preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* - derives from the fact that this concept can signify both the achievement of presence and its deflagration, its emergence and its explosion’ (2010: 8). For Malabou, plasticity from the outset appeared ‘as a *structure of transformation and destruction of presence and the present*’ (2010: 8).

In his foreword to Malabou’s *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* Clayton Crockett describes the brain as the ‘*incarnation of time in a body*’ (2010: xxii) and then proceeds to sketch out three forms of time: circular, or eternal return; linear which is paradigmatically Christian; and ‘plasticity itself, absolute plasticity’ (2010: xxii).

[Here] is time in its explosive capacity, understood as spacing (Derrida), as time-image (Deleuze) or as dis-enclosure (Nancy). The form of plastic time is bifurcation, which leads to a fractalizing of temporalisation, an unfathomable involution. Here the proliferation of multiple forms of temporality exceeds the ability of a subject to seize them as a moment and construct a linear sequentiality. The ability to function as a brain depends upon the ability to set up parallel networks, loosely connected inference systems that do not run through a central processor or programmer ... the plasticity of the brain is so radical that we create our brains (in Malabou 2010: xxii).

Malabou describes *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* as recounting ‘a change of era alongside an intimate metamorphosis: this is the conjunction that endows the concept of dusk with its particular hue and density’ (2010: 1). Artistic practice in its unfolding of space, its creation of adjacencies which cause rupture in the everyday, and the way it alters the texture of memory might be seen to find expression in the reverberations of a lost sound.

Part two: Steve Reich’s influence

Parody emerges as a powerful force in the minimalist music of American composer Steve Reich, whose entrancing use of repetition is also a major influence on the New York-based alternative rock band, *The National*.

Around 1968, Reich was radically renewing the musical landscape with a minimalist music, which fused ‘the heightened discourse of serious music with strong elements of the vernacular’ (Hillier in Reich and Hillier 2002: 3). The basis of Reich’s earlier music ‘is the simultaneous repetition of two or more voices of a pattern with self-regulating changes’ (Hillier in Reich and Hillier 2002: 3). At any given moment, this rhythmic/melodic pattern appears as static, yet vibrant and ‘a process of gradual change is established’ (4). More importantly though, Hillier argues, ‘it becomes clear that the changes we hear *emerge from the process itself* and are not arbitrarily imposed from without’ (4, author italics).

This harkens back to Deleuze’s elucidation of repetition as being literally introduced and incorporated into style. In an interview gathering together various musicians to reflect upon Reich’s influence, Bryce Dessner of *The National*, also a classical guitarist and composer, says: ‘I think for a lot of musicians like myself, Steve Reich’s appeal is quite broad, and in a way just to open this big space for musicians to move in’ (Wein 2011). Dessner describes how *The National* ‘enjoys a daily connection to

Reich's music [via] drummer Brian Devendorf who is obsessed with the composition "Clapping Music" (Wein 2011). The 1972 minimalist piece was written for performance entirely by two people clapping. Dessner says that Devendorf plays it for an hour to warm up before shows meaning that the whole band heads for the stage with the clapping music looping through their heads (Wein 2011).

In terms of their distinctive music style, the mix created of voice and instrument is important. Matt Berninger the lead singer has a distinctive voice with a limited octave range. Kelsey Keith writes that their music is 'born of an apparent limitation – Matt's voice' (2010). This apparent limitation gives rise to reverberation in a heterotopic space in which repetitive voice and changing instrumentation find new meaning in each other:

His is a classic baritone with a resonant, melancholy timbre, but it lacks range and tonal variation; Matt often half-talks his vocals in the style of singers like Tom Waits and Nick Cave. Over the years, the band's solution has been to create shifting instrumental shapes and colors just beneath the vocals. All the intersecting sounds mesh with Matt's voice in a way that seems to deepen his texture, and with repeated listening the songs achieve emotional intensity (Keith 2010).

Eno's ambient ideal

Brian Eno's recognition of ambient sound invited us to listen in a different way. Eno's 'ambient ideal,' writes Liam Singer, 'formed in 1975 during months of lying in a hospital bed recovering from a car accident, forced to listen to too-quiet 18th century harp music that his body cast prevented him from turning up' (2004).

Further, Singer continues:

This alerted him to the way that recorded sound can effectively merge with the environment in which it's played, appealing to 'many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular' (Eno 1978 cited in Singer 2004). He aimed to create a cocoon for thought and reflection through a music that could be used with utilitarian purpose (2004). [Here I understand 'utilitarian' to imply usefulness in creating a space for imagination and reflection, which also could have therapeutic value].

David Howard in his book *Sonic Alchemy: Visionary Music Producers and their Maverick Recordings* writes that Eno's sound processing techniques united producer and musician by enabling them to make the one combined sound. This was a portent for techniques later used in hip-hop and electronica music (2004: 91).

Eno has described the process as being akin to 'a painter taking the human figure out of a landscape. In music, this figure took the form of his own voice, a cohesive melody, and other evidence of human intervention' (Singer 2004). With no object, all that was left was a sense of space (Singer 2004). Yet the absence of humanity in this form still 'subverts itself to the standards of musical beauty ... the ambient albums embody a duality of emotional distance and deep affection within that detachment' (ibid). Here, we have at play the sense of parody as counter-song in Hutcheon's definition: a textual and discursive space suggesting accord and intimacy (2002).

Further, this infers a process of loss and memory that acts in a similar way to the shimmer-verb in evoking the intimacy of the lost human element.

The National

The rise to fame of *The National* might be attributed to the accord and intimacy suggested in Hutcheon's understanding of parody as counter-song. It can also be linked to the importance of mutual understanding signalled by the work of Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, which introduces this paper. The band formed in Ohio in 1999 and its slow, halting rise to fame in the new century is described by the band in two documentaries: one made by Vincent Moon (*A skin. A night*) and the other (*Mistaken for Strangers*) made in collaboration with Berninger's younger brother, Tom (Berninger et al. 2014). In the latter, front man Matt Berninger reflects on the band's current success in rock industry terms by recalling the humiliation of going on tour and playing to virtually empty rooms. This continued for a long time. After their first gig at the Mercury Lounge he describes going home, closing the door and starting to cry (2014). A shift in the band's course is suggested here:

I think when we started putting that tension and anxiety and fear and humiliation into the music – just putting it out there...it made us closer to each other and for the people who did come to the shows that was the connection (Berninger in Berninger et al. 2014).

So we might identify part of the allure of the band as emanating from the experience of these emotions. We follow a movement from these raw feelings into their reinvention in sound, music and words. A fault line painfully explored in the documentary is its creation by Berninger's brother who is younger by nine years and whose own self-doubt and feelings of self-pity about living in the shadow of his successful older brother are at times excruciating. Yet the revelation about humiliation from Matt Berninger arises precisely due to an expression of empathy for his younger brother. There is a poignant moment in the film when Berninger says to his younger brother: 'Lean towards what you like about yourself and fake it, fake your way upwards' (Berninger in Berninger et al. 2014).

The scenarios explored in Berninger's song lyrics in relation to love and sexuality in a chaotic and unpredictable present seem to reach to a space in which the expression of vulnerability and intimacy holds people together and sees them through difficult times. A recurrent theme is that of hiding away, with a lover of course, and reinventing the world via play as described in the following paraphrased summary of lyrics from different songs. (The presentation as a narrative of sorts is an attempt to circumvent the disembodiment of lyrics from their music): Let's hang holiday rainbow lights in the garden (The National 2007c) and we'll stay up super late, eat apples, bake pies and do gay ballets on ice with bluebirds on our shoulders (The National 2007b). In the guestrooms couples throw money at each other and cry, and there are ropes for us to tie each other to our wrists (The National 2007d), and we play nuns-versus-priests until somebody wins or cries (The National 2010a); and then stay up all night boning up and reading American dictionaries (The National 2007a) But this is not the free-love world depicted by Asger Jorn in his mock ethnography of 1960s Paris bohemia

‘where anyone can fuck anyone’ (Wark 2011: 82). Nevertheless there’s still a lot of unfinished business for ex-lovers to explore in the music of *The National*.

While reverberation is a parodic and also revelatory force via the agency of repetition, it can also be seen as limiting in the case of disembodied song lyrics. The combination of music, sound and words is experienced as forming its own differentiated kind of space. As with the changing moodscapes created by the repetition of Berninger’s voice merging with instrumentation, one loses texture with one compositional element in isolation from the other. This process of isolation and diminishment can be seen in a Twitter feed devoted to Berninger’s lyrics: *The National Lyrics@Berninger’sWords*. This site churns out fragments of lines dismembered from their songs and narrative contexts. Moon’s documentary *A skin. A night* can be seen to address the problem of the written lyric presented without music via his own attempts at fragmentation using conversations of the band members which are sometimes made unintelligible due to competing sounds and the mix (perhaps deliberately) set to privilege sounds over the human voice.

Conclusion

The opening space for this writing is located in the prospect of a loss. As is often the way, in the face of loss of something we hold dear our immediate response is to become consumed with how we might keep it. I’m reminded of a writing exercise I sometimes give to my postgraduate students called ‘The Dream Police’ by Dana Metzger (1992: 65). The exercise asks the participant to list, very specifically, everything and everyone in their lives that they wish to keep, for when the dream police arrive in twenty minutes, anything that hasn’t been documented will vanish from their lives forever. The exercise often provokes a palpable state of nervousness.

At its basis, this paper has tried to articulate various qualities of artistic practice, which might offer one means of keeping what Hrdy foreshadows concerning the evolutionary loss of empathy. Proceeding from Hrdy, I have presented possibilities that the spaces of artistic practice offer as a model for mutual understanding, and as a way we might recall the losses sustained by the operations of late capitalism. I have done this through an investigation of reverberation as a parodic force both in theory and praxis, suggesting that the combination of music, sound and words form their own differentiated kind of space, and conceptualising artistic practice as a container of sorts for the dispersion of experience and memory.

If the context on which parody relies is disturbed by the appearance of removed sound as indicated in the shimmer-verb technique, such a questioning of ground perhaps moves us into an even deeper experience of the parodic. Such a passage allows for reorientation and reinvention of ourselves with respect to our pasts and in opening ourselves out to our futures: the kind of space alluded to in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the refrain, where chaos presses hardest, cracking open the circle so that we can venture out on the thread of a tune. In the sound-space we become like the nautilus: flitting across the dense blue skies inside the sea and bumping gently into rocks.

Endnotes

1. This question was initially posed to me by Tom Kazas in a discussion about reverberation technique in relation to parody. As an audio engineer, sound artist, composer and musician Tom has a longstanding interest in the possibilities of reverberation in both praxis and theoretical terms. The 'presence-absence' dilemma in relation to sound production is further explored in his 2014 blog post 'Shimmer-verb: Presence and Absence'.
2. For further discussion about the technique shimmer-reverb see T J Eckleburg's 2014 blog post, 'All I Want is You. And Shimmering-reverb'.

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