

Lars Bang Larsen

To Be Spoken Like A Thing Possessed

On Richard Grayson's *Possessions_inc.*



Smuggling the most up-to-the-minute contraband in antiquated charabancs – that's what I like doing.

Witold Gombrowicz about his novel *Possessed*, serialised in 1939 under pseudonym and claimed by the author shortly before his death.

In his 1977 novel *A Scanner Darkly* Philip K Dick has his protagonist state that going crazy is 'a lost art'.¹ It is hard to overlook that this insight was offered by an exquisite speed freak – Dick, not his narrator – who cultivated paranoia with his every unhinged fibre, and, on top of that, later loses his head in Richard Grayson's *Possessions_inc.* Needless to say, Dick was on to something. That he foresaw madness disappear from the horizon of aesthetic achievement already in the 70s, must be down to an extraordinary cultural sensibility that enabled him to pick up murmurs of distant future events. If you thought madness was likely to never go out of style – a symbolic default position of civilised woman and man – Dick suggests another scenario.

What we may not immediately realise is how the consequences of the loss of madness are quite dizzying, certainly in the field of art. Madness can be aptly characterised as 'a lost art' because it in a foundational way has shadowed the development of the art concept, as an influential supplement to the official tenets of aesthetic philosophy. It has in this way been one of art's dialectical tropes of otherness to cultural reason, incarnated the radical subjectivity of the mad genius, and mediated artistic insights. It was one of the things that culture was not (supposed to be) – and that therefore art (and counterculture) could be, or of which it was supposed to possess an element. However it is not the only trope that contemporary art has lost. Other powerful

¹ Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind. Cold War Politics and the Sciences of the Human Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

tropes that have waned, turning *altmodisch* and grey, include the former harbingers of a historically redeemed human co-existence, play and childhood. This you could put down to a symptom of the brutality of our times, yet to have madness disappear without any fanfare is puzzling, considering that it – to the point of mainstream cliché – was such a motor of 19th- and 20th-century art. (I am guessing it went quietly at some point in the 1980s, seeing that the 90s were the decade that gave modernism Prozac and forgot it was part of the 20th century.)

Hermann Hesse reassured the readers of his bestselling *Steppenwolf* (1927) – ‘madmen only’ – that the fee to be paid for entering his magic theatre wasn’t about literally losing it, but opening your mind so that the theatre can exist within it.² As Jamie Cohen-Cole has shown, the intellectual and political history of the notion of ‘keeping an open mind’ interwove Cold War era educational policies, cognitive science, and later, the struggle for political legitimacy between the neoconservatives, feminists and the New Left in the US in the 1970s.³ That the two latter camps succeeded in redefining openness as a characteristic of left-wing politics is unsurprising seen in the light of how artistic avant gardes earlier in the 20th century détourned and deliberately wrecked a Cartesian reason into a revolutionary, eroticised ‘*Soy loco*’ – as Salvador Dalí might have said – ‘therefore I am.’ If keeping an open mind marked progressivity, why make do with a little mental ventilation if you can blow it completely and play the cuckoo card in the face of bourgeois self-control, as a life-affirming affront to the distinction between fiction and truth?

If it is true that ‘no one is afraid of going crazy anymore,’ as my veteran artist friend noted about his colleagues (now all very nice, their occupational hazards veering instead towards overwork and depression at most, which is hardly very colourful) left-wing politics shows a similar reserve with regard to keeping an open mind.⁴ There is a pattern, you may say paranoically, a pattern that is part of a larger, cognitive map that Grayson draws up in *Possessions_inc*.

Based in conspiracy theory – the poor man’s cognitive mapping – replete with a web of mystery and hypotheses concerning hidden treasures, secret societies, occluded bloodlines, mystic geographies and geometries, the serial connects to many tropes associated with the unreasonable in its more delirious, ornate, and undeniably contemporary forms. Grayson shows how the disappearance of madness is neither a blessing nor a step towards a more enlightened humanity, but, counterintuitively, another diminishment of human agency. However, when humans abdicate the centre stage of civilisation, agency doesn’t just go away. Like the Swiss watchmaker’s slogan goes, you only look after it for the next generation. ‘Our’ agency once came from God, remember? If it now seeps out from the human subject, history’s long-reigning potentate, like some enchanted fluid that is a medium for the great chain of modern history, it is certain to reappear somewhere soon and close by. Ever since the bourgeoisie cursed history by connecting capitalism and revolution, agency returns with a vengeance, like some accelerated spectre that only goes out to haunt at night in fresh bedlinen in the cut of the season.

The demon king Asmodeus leads and narrates Grayson’s serial, the guardian of the treasure of the Temple of Solomon. In the aspect of a scantily digi-animated sculpture from a small church at Rennes Le Chateau where for a century, it has supported a Holy Water Stoup and met entering visitors with a plastery aspect of very active misanthropy in a welcome-to-Bedlam sort of way. Commissioned by the Free Priest Abbé Saunière from a prestigious factory that provided religious statuary in Toulouse, this particular Asmodeus was part of the renovations of the church and its surrounding

2 Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, Picador, London 2002 (1927), p.32

3 Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of the Human Mind*, University of Chicago Press 2016.

4 Thank you to Søren Andreasen for this remark. My translation.

lands that started the rumour that Saunière had discovered a hidden treasure of Spanish origin at the start of the last century. This rumour became the starting point of the complex series of fictions and fakes initiated by right wing fabulist Pierre Plantard and small-time-actor-with-vanguard-aspirations Philippe De Chérisey in the 50s and 60s, which has led hundreds of people to further speculate, 'research' and 'reveal' the Secret Society of the Priory of Sion and hidden currents of history. This is supported through the 'revelation' of hidden meaning in the smallest architectural and geographical events: everything becomes a clue... part of a network of association, influence and meaning, with so many occult dots to be connected by the open-minded... including this devilish statue that has been identified as Asmodeus by one of the seekers of truth. These fictions have flowed in the real and brought an entire world into being, including 21st century airport-lit and Hollywood epics; one of hidden 'truths', which is why the description of the unfolding events of this history of fakes and beliefs that constitutes the Mystery of Rennes Le Chateau is the central narrative arc of Grayson's project.

Intractable perverter of social relations, beholden only to his own laws, the devil is the perfect thing, a radical object. As an abstract surface of shape-shifting or metaphoric possibility, Grayson's Asmodeus is the host of a highly dynamic range of narratives and properties, and, as always, animation draws the viewer's attention to the vitality of objects while pseudo-recognitions enter the fray: 'Some of the discoverers of treasures have faked the treasures', as Grayson puts it in his liner notes. Vacuous effects, created and pimped by the disingenuous meddling of (highly agential) middlemen who infect discovery and dilute origins, subjecting us all to the thralldom of things and reified forces...

As with so many serials before it, the theatre of operations he has chosen for *Possessions_inc.* is that of a counter-Enlightenment with fascinating toys in the attic. Setting the stage between the psychoanalytical trope of the uncanny and a view of history as mystery, events are couched in a hesitant secularisation in which a web of over-determined narratives echo. Associated with a sensationalised otherness of Victorian-era pulp culture, serials were more than this, seeing that not only Wilkie Collins and Conan Doyle published serially, but also writers of the canon such as Dickens, Flaubert, Dostojevskij. Its duration and emphatic relation to repetition links it to the TV series, the blog, and the podcast, as does its per tradition ambiguous relation that it establishes between domesticity and otherness. If serials were often consumed in a space that was affirmed as domestic in more than one sense – the Westerner's hearth, where she would read the weekly installment in the paper or, later, hear an episode of her radio play – it could also be a format that allowed for alterity to seep in.

The two radio plays that Öyvind Fahlström created for the Swedish national broadcast, *Birds in Sweden* (1963) and *The Holy Torsten Nilsson* (1966), were created in a comparable spirit of madcap genre hybridity as *Possessions_inc.* Where *Birds* is a concrete poem narrated entirely in Fahlström's home-grown monster-language 'Birdo', Torsten Nilsson wildly montages named celebrities, royals and politicians into a psychedelic style political thriller. With all the apocalyptic promise you want to read into this, Fahlström dubbed his radio plays 'blind movies', intending them to be consumed at night with the lights out. Such imaginary transport on the basis of limited visual information seems apt in relation to *Possessions_inc.*

'To study nineteenth-century women's serials,' writes Dale M. Bauer, 'you have to love repetition.' The formulaic character of serial B-literature aside, the love of repetition importantly allowed authors to reflect on ways of 'moving beyond an intolerable status quo,' for instance in relation to 'the fear of tragic repetition in women's lives.'⁵

5 Dale M Bauer, 'Serial Women Writers and Racial Intimacy,' in *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol.72, no.1, Spring 2016, pp.1-24. Accessed January 11 2018 on <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/612464/pdf>

In this light, the serial's sense of social critique can be seen to reside in its heaping event upon event; the delays it continually produces in bringing the plot to a conclusion become zones of indetermination by which it produces new, non-intrinsic relations. As agency sneaks off, meaning appears in the cuts.

Marx's forbidden rhetorical fruit, his fascination of the spectral, can help accentuate how the other side of agential objects is objectified agency. Marx would definitely concur that proprietary relations, and our possessions themselves, are possessed. The psychokinetics of the fetish... In Asmodeus's flow of speech this extends to how we are 'spoken by the speech of capital', as Jeff Kinkle and Roberto Toscano put it, to address capital as a sentient being that puts us under its spell. This describes a shift from the customary patterns of commodity fetishism to what they call 'capitalist shamanism – a ventriloquism of impersonal structures that registers an ambient experience of powerlessness before the abstraction, complexity, and global scope of an economic spirit...'⁶ Think the runaway mouth in Beckett's (1972), all yapping matter and linguistic organicity, but now spouting neoliberal blarney. Capitalism as a blind movie, spoken by each of us.

The rolling, proliferating episodes of *Possessions_inc.* may be seen as an attempt at so many *descriptions* of how totems rule the marketplace. Considering how things unfold, without sobriety and through the mouth of a devil, reference to such narrative matter-of-factness sounds absurd unless you dismiss a common-sensical understanding of description, in favour of seeing it as a way of exhausting and spending an object that has been revealed to you.⁷ In this literary economy you grind an object down in a kind of narrative potlatch that finds pleasure in calling up everything and their connections, in order to faithfully reduce normative reality to its hallucinatory constants.

If you in the 20th century were supposed to keep an open mind, the contemporary subject which is predestined for the network is expected to make the right connections. Once subjectivity was based in the dialectic between self and world that resulted from autonomy (for better or worse, another one of those near-extinct, modern terms). In the 19th and 20th centuries, political subjectivation came about through the acquisition of rights to become acknowledged as citizen or collective, say. But we no longer become somebody by choosing ourselves, as in existentialism, or through direct action, as in Marxism, or by balancing the ego and the unconscious, as in psychoanalysis. We don't even become somebody in the head-to-head of madness and norm. For better or worse, but perhaps more vulnerably, we today become somebody by feeling out attractions and tensions, ceaselessly connecting and reconnecting in sentient posthuman milieus, navigating flows and synching in with rhythms and intensities. From a dialectical understanding of history as so many struggles between incompatible forces, we have moved collectively to a cybernetic understanding in which history itself is domesticated, playing out inside networks according to systemic parameters. Put cybernetically, the self is an environment within systems of communication. Accordingly, in the world of K W Jeter's science fiction novel *Noir* (1998) the word 'connect' is an obscenity: people say things like 'connect you, you mother-connector' or 'connect that' or 'get the connect outta here'. In short, if you are connected, you are fucked.⁸ No wonder we are prone to being spoken.

Norbert Wiener, one of the fathers of cybernetics, realised towards the end of his distinguished career that a world ruled by feedback mechanisms would be a world gone literally loopy. In his *God & Golem, inc. A Comment on Certain Points Where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion* (1964) – a title that in more than one way resonates with Grayson's serial and its star demon – Wiener quotes another instance of nonhuman, ominously

6 Alberto Toscano & Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Zero Books, Alresford 2015, p.46.

7 This would be Georges Perec's way, see for instance his *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, 1974.

8 K W Jeter, *Noir*, Bantam Books, New York 1998. I am also quoting from Steven Shaviro, *Connected. Or What it Means To Live In the Network Society* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2003).

plasmatic instability, the Golem. In Jewish folklore this is an animated anthropomorphic figure created from inanimate matter which can be seen as an archetype for the figure of the rebellious slave automaton who has been created in a human image and (therefore?) inevitably casts off its yoke of inhuman *travail obligatoire*.

A world cohabitated by humans and machines is one that Wiener unhesitatingly compares to the fiction of Lewis Carroll (in whose main work, of course, the figures are ‘all mad’, if we are to believe the Cheshire Cat).⁹ Such radical ‘toying’, as Wiener put it, with ideas concerning the reproducibility of life and other questions, are key to his ethical discussion of the use and misuse of modern automatisations.¹⁰ Wiener resorts to the unholy mix of cybernetics and religion from the conviction that thanks to our capability to build intelligent machines and self-generative systems we – ‘we’, because the human species can seemingly only get together when it comes up against that which is radically non-identical to us – will some day soon be able to create artificial life. What will humankind decide to do with these great powers? How will it comprehend its miraculous mastery over human-made nature?

Asmodeus, the best thing we could have with us, may hiss out of the corner of his mouth that it is a mastery of which we shouldn’t be too assured.

9 Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), in: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Other Stories*. Barnes & Noble, New York 1994, p.65.

10 Norbert Wiener, *God & Golem, Inc. A Comment on Certain Points where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion*, MIT Press, Massachusetts 1966 (1964), p.36.