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Mythopoesis, Scenes and Performance Fictions: Two Case Studies (Crass and Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth)

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Days were spent in fumes from the copying machine, from the aerosols and inks of the ‘banner production department’ – bed sheets vanished – banners appeared, from the soldering of audio, video, and lighting leads. The place stank. The garden was strewn with the custom made cabinets of the group’s equipment, the black silk-emulsion paint drying on the hessian surfaces. Everything matched. The band logo shone silver from the bullet-proof Crimpeline of the speaker front. Very neat. Very fetching.

Peter Wright (quoted in George Berger, *The Story of Crass*)

One thing was central to TOPY, apart from all the tactics and vivid aspects, and that was that beyond all else we desperately wanted to discover and develop a system of practices that would finally enable us and like minded individuals to consciously change our behaviours, erase our negative loops and become focussed and unencumbered with psychological baggage.

Genesis P-Orridge, *Thee Psychick Bible*

In this brief article I want to explore two scenes from the late 1970s/1980s: the groups Crass (1977-84) and Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (1981-). Both of these ‘performance fictions’ (as I will call them) had a mythopoetic character (they produced – or *fictioned* – their own world), perhaps most evident in the emphasis on performance and collective participation. They also involved a focus on self-determination, and, with that, presented a challenge to more dominant fictions and consensual reality more generally.¹

1. Crass: *There is No Authority but Oneself*



Fig. 1. Crass logo

Crass emerged, at least in part, from both the 1960s counter-culture and the 'tradition' of the avant-garde. As far as the former goes Penny Rimbaud and Gee Vaucher – to take two key members of the group as example – were products of art school (and themselves influenced by figures like John Lennon and David Bowie) and, later, Crass would go on to help organise one of the UK's key counter-cultural events: the Stonehenge free festival. In terms of the former Rimbaud had been the instigator of the experimental music group EXIT and, in this prehistory to Crass, had organised avant-garde music festivals and generally himself identified with Fluxus. Both these currents – high and popular culture – had a determining influence on Crass, but it was only with the arrival of punk and a third key figure – Steve Ignorant – from a less art (and more working class) background that the conditions for Crass were in place.

A further key factor in the group's formation and on-going existence was Dial House. Rimbaud had set up this rural cottage as his home, but also as an 'open house', in the 1960s. It provided a space for like-minded people to gather, talk and experiment, not least in the production of music (there was a rehearsal room at the cottage). Crass were adamant that it was not a commune (throughout their existence Crass were keen to distance themselves from any hippy connotations), but there is certainly a sense in which the house allowed a collectivity to form. Crucially it gave a group of people time together outside the pressures of finding work (Dial House was set up as a very inexpensive place to live, not least in so far as it refused typical commodity culture).

The location outside the city in relative seclusion in Essex also contributed to a certain rural idyll associated with Crass, as exemplified by the picture on one of their record sleeves of ploughed fields. The isolation also had its benefits insofar as it produced a certain intensity, the progenitor of any scene (this isolation also brought issues – especially towards the end of Crass – insofar as the group became somewhat cut off from the scene they had instigated, especially in terms of the squat culture of London). It is worth noting that a kind of radical parochialism was in play here (in fact, after some early attempts, Crass did not play outside England), but this does not mean the band did not resonate outside its immediate context. Indeed, quite the contrary: Crass had a more global traction because of its local and singular character.

For Crass punk was an attitude, but it was also a way of life (and, as others have remarked, in this sense punk looked back to the Situationists and, before this, Dada). The group took the 'Do it Yourself' attitude and aesthetic seriously both on stage and record, but also as a script for their lives. As George Berger points out in his biography of the group, it was this existence beyond the stage that also gave the group a certain mystery. Crucially Crass records were produced independently and distributed via the growing network of independent record shops at the time. There was no way Crass would be played on the radio (although they did, at one point, do a John Peel session) so this alternative mode of distribution was also crucial. The group was part of a larger mail art and DIY fanzine culture – an expanded network – that characterised what became known as the anarcho-punk scene.

The will to self determination, exemplified in their slogan ‘There is no authority but oneself, so, whatever it is, do it’, was a key factor in the formation of the band and its on-going development but also one of the key ‘political’ messages of the Crass songs. An example of this was their pitching of themselves against certain institutions: of work, the family and so forth, but also against that key agent of transcendence, Christ. There was also the renaming of individuals in Crass – a reclaiming, we might say, of identity from external causality. In fact, one of the key aspects that demarcated Crass from other punk bands was their ideas and the writings that were invariably included with their records. Polemical, angry, pitched against the status quo, but also, at times, cryptic and poetic, these writings – alongside the mythos of Dial House – help give the band a clear identity.²

But it was also the more general aesthetic of the band that produced what we might call their mythopoetic aspect. Crass always wore black and often sported armbands with the Crass logo (more on which in a moment). This ‘uniform’ was certainly open to being misconstrued – and Crass claimed that part of their intention was to explore these contradictions – but, in general, it operated to produce a certain cohesion and – especially from the outside – the idea of something with a consistency, something that had both a back story and future intention as it were. At the gigs band members would line up in a row at the front of the stage, whilst at the back there would be large spray-painted and screen-printed banners with various anti-war slogans and logos. Gigs would not just be an audio affair, but include several screens with looped projectors (again, harking back to a more Avant-Garde tradition of experimental film). In many ways the group, especially as they became more serious, were as much a multi-media collective (or a ‘living theatre’ as Gee Vaucher has called them) as simply a punk band.³

This aesthetic was also prevalent in the design of Crass records. Covers would be foldout posters, all printed in black and white with Gee Vaucher’s very particular collages (Vaucher has talked about the intention of developing a new language – an ‘aesthetic of the present’ – in her work with Crass). There was also the highly distinctive Crass logo, an amalgamation and condensing of different symbols (related to the church, the family and the state). Indeed, Rimbaud has claimed that Crass came up with the first corporate logo, but we might also suggest that the Crass symbol operated as a sigil of sorts (I will return to this below). The lettering around the edges of the record (and sometimes around the circular logo) also had a very particular stencilled appearance (that looked back to Jasper Johns). This was also part of the band’s mythos, not least as the Crass logo, alongside various slogans, was also found stencilled around London (harking back to Paris and the Situationists, but before graffiti as such had become a widespread ‘art’ form in the UK). It was this whole ‘look’ – in their output and gigs – that presented a kind of life-style package (to continue the corporate language), or what we might call the ‘Crass-assemblage’.

In conclusion then, although Crass cannot be understood separate from their explicitly political messages, they were also, it seems to me, a kind of performance fiction. There are two factors at play in the development and deployment of Crass in this mythopoetic sense. The first, we might say, is internal: a particular group of individuals, all sharing a similar perspective and intention and, crucially, willing to sacrifice individual identity in favour of the collective, came together in a certain space and for a certain time (there is a sense that with Crass there was a very specific time and set of conditions (themselves internal and external) when it all came together). Here, again, Dial House – literally a place in which to live and work together – was crucial. Crass were precisely a scene, constellated around certain key figures, like Rimbaud, Vaucher and Ignorant but, ultimately, collective in character and, indeed, more than the sum of its parts. The external aspect to this mythopoesis was how Crass were seen from the other side as it were: the effect that the ‘theatre’ of the gigs, alongside the myth of Dial House and the whole look of both the band members and the records had on their fans. Crass represented a different reality, one that – it appeared – was actually being lived. Indeed, it is this aspect of offering up a different ‘multi-media’ fiction for a subject that does not recognise themselves in more typical and dominant fictions that marks Crass out up and beyond the anger and polemic. Any mythopoetic practice needs what we might call this alternative reality effect, produced through different elements and on different registers, in order to produce another world.⁴

4. Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth: *Do What Thou Wilt shall be the Whole of the Law*



Fig. 2. *Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth* Tri-cross logo

Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY) was – and still is to some extent (at least in a certain instantiation) – a community of individuals dedicated to the modern use of magick (especially as this intersects with popular culture, hence the TOPY term ‘occulture’) and following, to a large extent, the thinking and writing of Genesis P-Orridge and, at one time, the band – or multi-media collective – Psychick TV. In fact, P-Orridge had already instigated and been involved in different collectives and scenes before this, for example around the influential industrial noise band Throbbing Gristle

(the formation of which predates punk) and, before this, the performance group COUM Transmissions that itself emerged (in part) from the 1960s counter culture and associated avant-garde.⁵ It is, however, with TOPY that we see the full development of a certain kind of mythopoesis that brings these experiences and interests in audio/visual presentations, performance and alternative collectives into conjunction with esoteric practices. In terms of the latter TOPY followed William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, especially in the adoption of the ‘cut-up’ as method,⁶ and Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, especially in relation to sigil magick. Indeed, with these two technologies – the cut-up and sigil – and especially in their combination and extension, TOPY were, it seems to me, involved in what might be called a systematic ‘fictioning’ of the real.⁷

TOPY also involved an ethics of sorts, when this is understood as specifically not a morality, but as the following of a very particular way of life pitched against any and all forms of external authority.⁸ Following Spinoza (to bring in a more typical philosophical reference) we might say they were concerned with exploring what, precisely, a body was capable of and in developing a programme, involving certain disciplines and discipline more generally, that might foster further experiments in the ‘short circuiting of control’ (one of TOPY’s key phrases (taken from Crowley) was: ‘Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law’).⁹ A central aspect of this ethics was the will to self-determination – ‘to become a cause of oneself’ – and, with that, the refusal of any transcendent enunciators, in particular Christianity (TOPY was specifically a form of mysticism without religion in this sense). We might note the connections with Crass here in so far as both groups waged this war against the Christ.

Although these practices were very much focussed on the individual and their transformation, it was the collective, which included, at different times, different forms of communal living and various other shared resources (and the sharing of experiences more broadly) that allowed for this experimentation. The group provided both a context and a legitimisation for this other way of life, as well as, more generally, a sense of belonging, and, indeed, identity (for example, the group assigned new names to its members). Indeed, it seems to me that a collective allows this fictioning, insofar as it can produce a common script contra the dominant (and, as such, present a kind of ‘living alternative’ to the what-is). TOPY discarded the use of ‘I’ and replaced it with ‘we’ to signify this collectivity that also extended ‘inwards’ to the multiplicity that constitutes any given individual (the many different personalities and fantasies ‘behind’ the illusion of the single self).¹⁰ TOPY had then this double aspect of individual and collective practice – and also of the private and public, the latter most obvious in the Psychick TV events and, indeed, the general media attention P-Orridge received (and often actively courted) in the 1980s. This was also in play with COUM’s performances: explorations concerning the body (and its limits) that were carried out in the public eye (indeed, we might say that COUM, in part, was

about making the intensely private public – or in bringing the hidden (the occult) into view).¹¹

In terms of this focus on the intensely intimate and, indeed, often repressed aspects of life, TOPY focussed on sexuality and the orgasm as a conduit to other states of consciousness (although this was also a focus of COUM and Throbbing Gristle, the latter, certainly, had more of an emphasis on horror and violence). The ritual exploration of guilt free sexuality and of sexual energy more generally was used as transformative technology. In this TOPY looked to Eastern tantric traditions (with their own focus on the ‘use’ and transformation of sexual energy), but also to various counter-culture ideas of free sexuality and sexual expression, as in the writings of Wilhelm Reich. Put simply, for TOPY sex was a powerful threat to control. In particular the group explored various collective expressions of this energy, for example through the ‘writing’ of sigils that involved the participant’s blood, hair and semen/vaginal fluids. These were ‘written’ by the wider TOPY community on a certain day and mailed to the TOPY head quarters.

Sigils are not art works or, indeed, aesthetic as far as this is typically understood. They are not ‘disinterested’, but have a very real traction on reality and a very specific function (to bring about the participants desires). They allow a certain focus and concentration and operate through a logic of contagion and magical causality (where like affects like) rather than through representation per se (they might be seen as representational but this is not their chief aim as it were). In fact, it seems to me that sigil’s operate cybernetically (they imply a kind of ‘flat time’), allowing a working on the future (or a writing of it) from the present.¹² The TOPY use of sigil magick followed this intention and logic, but in the use of various ‘splinters’ of the body (elements of the real that break with representation) also look to practices such as voodoo.¹³ We might also note the resonances with the spells of Antonin Artaud (whose life was also lived against control).¹⁴

P-Orridge himself was especially influenced by Burroughs’ idea that consensual reality was a ‘recording’ that might, precisely, be cut in to and rearranged (as evidenced by Burroughs’ own practices and various experiments with tape recorders). Reality was itself a fiction in this sense, one which could be re-written through certain techniques.¹⁵ In fact, P-Orridge (along with Burroughs and Gysin) saw a direct connection of the cut-up with the practice of magick, which, likewise, involved a manipulation of so-called ‘reality’. The practice of magick, more generally, offered an alternative to more typical techno-scientific understandings of causality and, indeed, to a contemporary mediascape that was, for TOPY, continuing the reduction of individuals to being spectators rather than participants in their lives.

A further key technology in this magickal practice was ritual: the setting up of very particular spaces and the use of certain tools (or props) and techniques, in order to side step habitual subjectivity and produce an altered state. Although, again, private

we might say that these rituals were performances in some senses, or, more accurately, ‘performance fictions’ whose aim was to counteract those consensual fictions already in operation. And, of course, with Psychick TV these magickal rituals took on a more explicitly public – and participatory – form (it seems to me that trance was a key collective technology here).

The key dominant fiction (in maintaining this consensual reality) is the fiction of the self and, as such, TOPY also involved various practices of deprogramming aimed at loosening this crucial anchor point. Again, there are very real resonances here with various Eastern practices and disciplines, and, especially Buddhist technologies. P-Orridge himself travelled to India (encountering sadhus and other Holy men) and Nepal (meeting Rinpoche’s and other Buddhist practitioners). However, it seems to me that the key orientation of TOPY in this regard was not introspection and emptiness, but rather the production – or writing – of a different kind of fiction of and for a given subjectivity. As far as this goes TOPY has more connections with a Western counter-culture tradition than anything non-Western. In fact, as P-Orridge makes clear in his own writings it was 1960s groups like The Process, as well as his own experiences in the Transmedia commune in the 1970s that were most formative.¹⁶

In relation to sigils we might also note the tri-cross ‘logo’ of TOPY (that P-Orridge himself relates to the Kabbalah, and the symbol of The Process)¹⁷ and, indeed, the skull/lightning bolt logo of Throbbing Gristle. Both these sigils ‘contain’ the key orientations of the two groups. We might also note the whole ‘look’ of Throbbing Gristle: the black and paramilitary dress, for example, that also resonated with Crass. TOPY effected a more ecclesiastical look (the group’s ‘uniform’ looked back, precisely, to The Process), but, in both cases, and in Felix Guattari’s terms, we might say that these clothes and costumes operated as ‘fabulous images’ around which a different subjectivity could coalesce and cohere.¹⁸ In fact, the ‘look’ of TOPY in particular was, according to P-Orridge (at the time), a kind of smoke screen for the real purpose of TOPY which was less the production of any group-mind and more the development of individuals.¹⁹ Nevertheless their group look gave TOPY a very particular identity that others could relate and aspire to (and, indeed, join). TOPY constituted a scene in this sense, one that eventually dovetailed with the rave scene of the 1980s (itself a period that let ‘the mask of control slip, just slightly, for a few brief years, for a whole generation’ (Louv 2009: 23)).

TOPY, and, more particularly, Psychick TV, extended the use of magick to other technologies, including TV. Indeed, it was this turn to more contemporary media that characterised their ‘use’ of magick (again, this followed from Burroughs’ own experiments with video recording, and, we might also say, also Gysin’s dream machine and experiments with the flicker).²⁰ The interest in TV as a technology that might be re-purposed was evidenced in Psychick TV events that were as much visual as audio performances. These would involve a form of cut-up and ‘surrealist’ TV

aimed at counter-acting a more typical – and passive – TV consciousness (and, not least, again, in displaying repressed ‘content’). This use of TV extended to advertising which was especially seen to resonate with the practice of magick: ‘advertising jargon is a magical language. It can be used to affect or program the unconscious mind. Advertisements are constructed in exactly the same way that rituals are, using mnemonic devices very similar to the kabbalah’ (TOPYNA 2009:175)

In its turn to popular media TOPY departed from the hierarchies and ceremonies of high magick and from Crowley’s original OTO. In general technology was to be embraced and magick was seen less as a pre-modern practice than as a contemporary, if not future orientated one (As P-Orridge remarks: ‘Burroughs, and Gysin, both told me something that resonated with me for the rest of my life-so-far. They pointed out that alchemists always used the most modern equipment and mathematics, the most precise science of their day (P-Orridge 2009a: 293)’. As far as this goes P-Orridge also had an interest in the feedback loops of neurolinguistics in so far as this might also allow a re-writing of reality. There are connections here with the technology of dianetics that also involved a de and re-programming of the mind; indeed, it seems to me instructive that the two founders of the key pre-cursor to TOPY, The Process, were themselves renegades from Scientology. It is in this sense that TOPY offered up a kind of religion without deity or belief, a scene whose intention was the transformation of individuals.

In conclusion then it seems to me that although very different in many respects (not least in some of their politics) Crass and TOPY both showed up the edges of our dominant fictions, but also produced new fictions and, with that the possibility of other modes of being adequate and appropriate to them. What I have written is invariably from a perspective outside of the groups themselves and, as such, attends less to what might actually have been the dynamics and relationship and more, again, to what might be called the mythopoetic aspects. Then again it seems to me that as well as historical accounts it is also important to look to what might be extracted from these kinds of scenes and perhaps re-activated today in a situation that itself increasingly deploys terms like post-truth and post-fact (and operates through a kind of hyper-individuation). It is crucial to challenge the fictions and myths of our contemporary political mediascape, but also equally crucial to produce other ones.²¹

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¹ The following is part of a larger collaborative writing project (with David Burrows) that explores mythopoesis, myth-science and what we call 'mythotechnesis' in relation to the fictioning function of contemporary art practice (very broadly construed).

² Alongside the anger was also a more utopian message – also exemplified by the cover of the first album – that, we might say, belied a more 1960s influence. Reading George Berger's *The Story of Crass* there is also, clearly, a more spiritual, even mystical thread that is especially present just before the group's formation – around Dial House, Wally Hope and the Stonehenge festival; and after Crass' split with Rimbaud's interest in Buddhism and Taoism.

³ An insight in to how this aesthetic was achieved is given in Pete Wright's account – in the quote that begins my article – of the preparations carried out for a rare European tour.

⁴ We might note a further – magickal – aspect of mythopoesis that involves apparently more incidental detail resonating across space and time (a logic of synchronicity). After Crass' split

Ignorant went on to do Punch and Judy shows, after having carved his own figure of Punch. David Tibet of Current 93 was also interested in this area – and had begun collecting Punch and Judy paraphernalia (after seeing *The Wicker Man*). After reading and being impressed by Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, a book that stages the nesting of fictions alongside various temporal loops and circuits, Tibet asked Ignorant (a 'connection man' if ever there was one) to open for his band.

⁵ And before this – formatively – as part of the *Transmedia* commune and, before this, working with the *Exploding Galaxy* group in the 1960s. For an account of this early history – and of COUM and TG more generally – see Simon Reynolds' *Wreckers of Civilization* (Reynolds 1999). For what might be called a corrective to this history, written by the other key member of the last two groups see Cosey Fanny Tutti's *Art Sex Money* (Tutti 2017). For a more theoretical reflection (through the lens of Gilles Deleuze) that focuses on *Throbbing Gristle* specifically (and their experiments with noise), see Michael Goddard's 'Sonic and Cultural Noise as Production of the New: The Industrial Music Media Ecology of Throbbing Gristle' (Goddard 2008: 162-72).

⁶ Burroughs had in fact been a key influence on both COUM and TG – and on P-Orridge in particular after a meeting between the two of them in the 1970s. For a discussion of the key role played by the cut-up, pre PTV and TOPY, see Goddard 2008.

⁷ Other key precursors (or points of inspiration) were Timothy Leary, Alfred Korzybski – and, indeed, figures like the Elizabethan mage John Dee and Brian Jones of *The Rolling Stones*.

⁸ For a discussion of ethics along these lines see my 'The Care of the Self versus the Ethics of Desire: Two Diagrams of the Production of Subjectivity (and of the Subject's Relation to Truth (Foucault versus Lacan))' (O'Sullivan 2012: 59-88).

⁹ This focus extends to P-Orridge's trans-sexual 'pandogyne' project – in which P-Orridge, ultimately, 'merges' with his then wife, Lady Jane Breyer (hence, his current name: Genesis Breyer P-Orridge). This project might itself be understood as a fictioning, or re-writing of gender – and, as such, a refusal of the sanctity of the given over the made.

¹⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjssKDFIBZM> (accessed 30 August, 2016).

¹¹ As, for example, with the ICA show *Prostitution* (1976).

¹² *Thee Psychick Bible* contains an essay that links this magical causality to the process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead (especially illuminating here is the idea of a fecund 'present time'). In relation to this, and, more specifically, *Throbbing Gristle*'s use of sound as a form of warfare, see also Steve Goodman's *Sonic Warfare* (Goodman 2012) that likewise involves a utilisation of Whitehead in its theorisation of sound.

¹³ Since the particular period of TOPY that this article is concerned with (roughly the 1980s) P-Orridge has explored voodoo more explicitly. See, as indicative, Hazel Hill McCarthy III's film 'Bight of the Twin' that records P-Orridge's trip to Benin to explore the origins of voodoo (available at: <http://www.bightofthetwin.com/#about> (accessed 28 April 2017)).

¹⁴ For a particularly fine analysis of Artaud's spells along these lines see Jon K. Shaw's unpublished PhD thesis: 'Subjectivity: On Reading Artaud' (Shaw 2017).

¹⁵ As P-Orridge remarks (about his meeting with Burroughs):

What Bill explained to me then was pivotal to the unfolding of my life and art. Everything is recorded. If it is recorded, then it can be edited. If it can be edited then the order, sense, meaning and direction are as arbitrary and personal as the agenda and/or person editing. This is magick. (P-Orridge 2009a: 279)

¹⁶ In passing I want to note a key connector that links this enquiry into mythopoesis and counter-cultural scenes with what might be called (following Sun Ra) ‘myth-science’: George Clinton. Leader of the bands Parliament and Funkadelic and instigator of the P-Funk sonic fiction, Clinton was also a one time a member of The Process and the key ‘leaders’ of the latter contributed sleeve notes to one of Funkadelic’s records. It is here that Black subjectivity meets the occult 1960s counter-culture, finding there an alternative fiction to the mainstream.

¹⁷ See the essay ‘The Process is thee Produkt’ (P-Orridge 2009b) where P-Orridge analyses this symbolism in contra-distinction to the ‘P Cross’ of The Process.

¹⁸ Guattari writes of Jean Genet’s fascination with the Black Panthers as an example of this image function: ‘the ways of being and dressing of the Black Panthers, which almost overnight change the way black people as a whole perceive the colour of their skin or the texture of their hair for example’ (Guattari 2013: 222).

¹⁹ See ‘PTV Interview (Genesis P-Orridge and Peter Christopherson)’, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjssKDFIBZM> (accessed 30 August, 2016).

²⁰ As TOPYNA remarks:

It might be interesting for a moment to consider magick, particularly ritual, as a form of editing. Like a good television editor, a magician strives for some form of continuity in his program, or life. By emphasising desired aspects, the magician tries to edit out, or banish unwanted footage from her life. Any idiot can shoot great footage; only a master can edit it all so it makes sense to a viewer later on. This could be used as modern alchemy. (TOPYNA 2009: 164)

²¹ With the rise of the alt-right and the ideology of ‘Neoreaction’ which themselves deploy fiction as method (as in ‘meme magick’) and/or a particular, often seductive mythos (that draws on occult themes and ideas of self-determination) then this work of an alternative myth-production seems to me increasingly crucial (see also my ‘Accelerationism, Hyperstition and Myth-Science’ (O’Sullivan 2017)).