

# The Antithetical Ben Watson Meaning of Primal Guitars

In his essay *The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words*,<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud anticipated V.I. Volosinov's definition of the sign: a material pivot whose very ambiguity allows dialogue to occur. Attempts to fix semiotic systems in unambiguous correlation to single signifieds (Heidegger, Pound) are in effect blocks to the linguistic process. Leon Trotsky welcomed Freud's thesis as a blow against undialectical categories (what he called the 'impermeable bulkheads of Anglo-Saxon thought').<sup>2</sup> The perceived social ambiguity of the Avantgarde (its 'polysemanticity') results from bringing the antithetical nature of signs to consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Such semiotic materialism should not be confused with either political disengagement or liberal collusion with an exploitative system.

Generalisations about the Avantgarde need to be contradictory to be true.<sup>4</sup> Adornoite paradoxism can however be tempered by examining a particular case. In the third week of April, 1996, the 'Godfathers of Grunge', Sonic Youth, played a three-night residency at The Forum, part of a European tour to promote their *Washing Machine* album. Prior to this, guitarists Lee Renaldo and Thurston Moore, dissatisfied with the repetitious labour of precisely such work, had been dabbling with the Avantgarde. They'd played instrumental freak-outs at New York's Knitting Factory, an activity routinely condemned by DJs and record reviewers as 'self-indulgent'. Since 'self-indulgence' is high on the list of virtues found in yBa, this development seemed worth a closer look.

The antithetical moment actually arrived in the form of Sonic Youth's support act on the final night: Descension, a combination of the 'noise terrorist' guitar/drum duo Ascension and the 'jazz-players,' Simon Fell (bass) and Charlie Wharf (soprano sax). Definitions need to be hedged in quotes because what Descension play has not settled into the known quantity that makes regular musical life such a tedious reflection of undialectical Kantian categories. Once in the door, the 2,500-strong sell-out crowd packed itself to the front, teen spirit insisting that no-one relinquish their 'close-to-the-stage' spot, no matter how ghastly the support band (or how urgent the need for a pee). The opening band played predictably 'aggressive' folk-punk numbers and were applauded politely.

Descension's four members strolled onstage and went straight into a thirty-minute wall of delirious post-Coltrane Noise. I heard Duke Ellington's overarching pulse in their visceral propulsion, but this was a minority reaction.

Cans and plastic cups rained on the musicians throughout. Guitarist Stefan Jaworzyn especially enraged the trapped Youthies, who began aiming drinks at him, creating a dangerous pool around his leads. A roadie risked electrocution to lift a socket-board onto a towel. Drummer Tony Irving identified someone who'd hit him with a plastic beaker. He came out from behind his kit and drummed on her head with his sticks. She insisted on clambering up onto the stage; the crowd roared. Some roadies were raised from torpor and a brief struggle ensued. Leaflets showered down from the balconies. The conflictive caterwaul of Free Jazz laced the altercation of the crowd into an epic Gordian knot of convulsive sonics.

Having only witnessed these musicians in small venues (Disobey Upstairs at the Garage, a crèche in Walthamstow and a horrible gymnasium in Leeds), I was taken aback by the detail and gory complexity of the sounds. With their amplifications free to move in an Odeon-sized air-space, Descension developed a garish grandeur. They were total negative/utopian rock-'n'-roll. Everyone was upset. Even better, everyone made something different of why: no two identifications of style or genre tally. Something happened, but none of us knew quite what. We'd changed. The chrome rabbit of Modern Art had been pulled from the rock-rigmarole wig-hat. Descension's music had become a material pivot for discourse.

In the intermission Thurston bounded up to Descension's dressing-room: "Gee! Is that was the Pistols were like?" Having had the fortune to see both, I can only pronounce that Descension were, if anything, better. At the Royal Links Pavilion in Cromer in 1977, the Pistols were great, but they were a supreme rock machine (those who maintain that Cook/Jones 'couldn't play' are deaf). As McLaren perceived, the Pistols meant more when banned and imagined, than in the flesh. With Descension, positive noise could embrace the paradoxes of denial and erupt stinky black mushrooms of speculation. After this wipe-out, Sonic Youth couldn't but sound fey, their adherence to song structures ridiculously cute and conformist. The formal calculation—artistic and economic—necessary for a record-promoting tour was perfectly symbolised by the party-time polka-dots of their computer-assisted lightshow: the pop-art prettiness of a late Lichtenstein print. Their much-heralded ten-minute guitar freak-out exposed them as cerebral celibates, too New Wave to indulge Jaworzyn's appalling motor-rev straight-to-the-loins innuendo.

Free Improvisation is the ongoing, practical training-ground that enabled Descension to strip bare the pop charade. But the event also depended on a conjuncture of ambitions: Ascension's rock

dreams and Sonic Youth's art perversity. Shot out of the pub-upstairs ghetto of Improvisation, where form chases itself in circles, deprived of social content, the event had the 'utopian broadcast' quality of a performance by Coltrane or Hendrix. Deprived of the media forces that could identify with this shock (no NME reviewer with the wit to report it), it remains an ambiguous curse, an underground rumour.

Sonic Youth showed that the 'end of the avant-garde'—the belief that artistic developments can no longer turn antithetical to the commodity system that produced them—is a consoling fantasy peddled by professors.<sup>5</sup> As politically inspirational as The KLF's sheep at the Brit Awards, Descension's music—material movement of air molecules—proved that the generic distinctions between rock (Hendrix/Pistols), jazz (Coltrane) and classical (Varèse) are products of class niche-marketing rather than divisions intrinsic to musical form. All the 'category defying' promises (every one broken) of the South Bank brochures were suddenly enacted in real social space: one where psyches are capable of change.

Neither the commodified protest of Rage Against the Machine nor the status-flattering metropolitanism of Ambient, Descension went nude down the star-system staircase and delivered an immanent critique of rebel-rock 'extremism': antithetical dissension in the Temple of Grunge (even their name proved polysemantic). Free Improvisation woke up to its own outrage, its sedimented content exploding into shrapnel; pop's spectacle of indulgence was interrupted by a social exhibition of the self's own wants. The sonic potential was handed to the attendees to do with what they can—and what they will.

1. Sigmund Freud, 1910, *Collected Papers*, vol iv, London: Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 184-191.

2. Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Notebooks, 1933-1935*, translated Philip Pomper, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 89.

3. V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism & the Philosophy of Language*, 1929, translated Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 80.

4. A complaint from some brain-dead Kantians at a recent conference (Discipline, October Gallery, London WC1, Saturday 30 November 1996) was that a definition of the Avantgarde as something both produced by capitalism and antagonistic to it was 'contradictory'; we can only reply, with Marx: 'If, therefore, such expressions ... appear contradictory, this is only because they bring to the surface a contradiction immanent in capitalist production.', Karl Marx, *Capital*, 1867, translated D. Moore and E. Aveling, New York: The Modern Library, 1906, p. 238.

5. For unconscious attestation of the Kantian nature of both commercial pop and its academic crumb-suckers, see Simon Frith, *Performing Rites*, Oxford: OUP, p. 152.

6. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 121.