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Image by Benedict Drew, *Statement FYI*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery, London

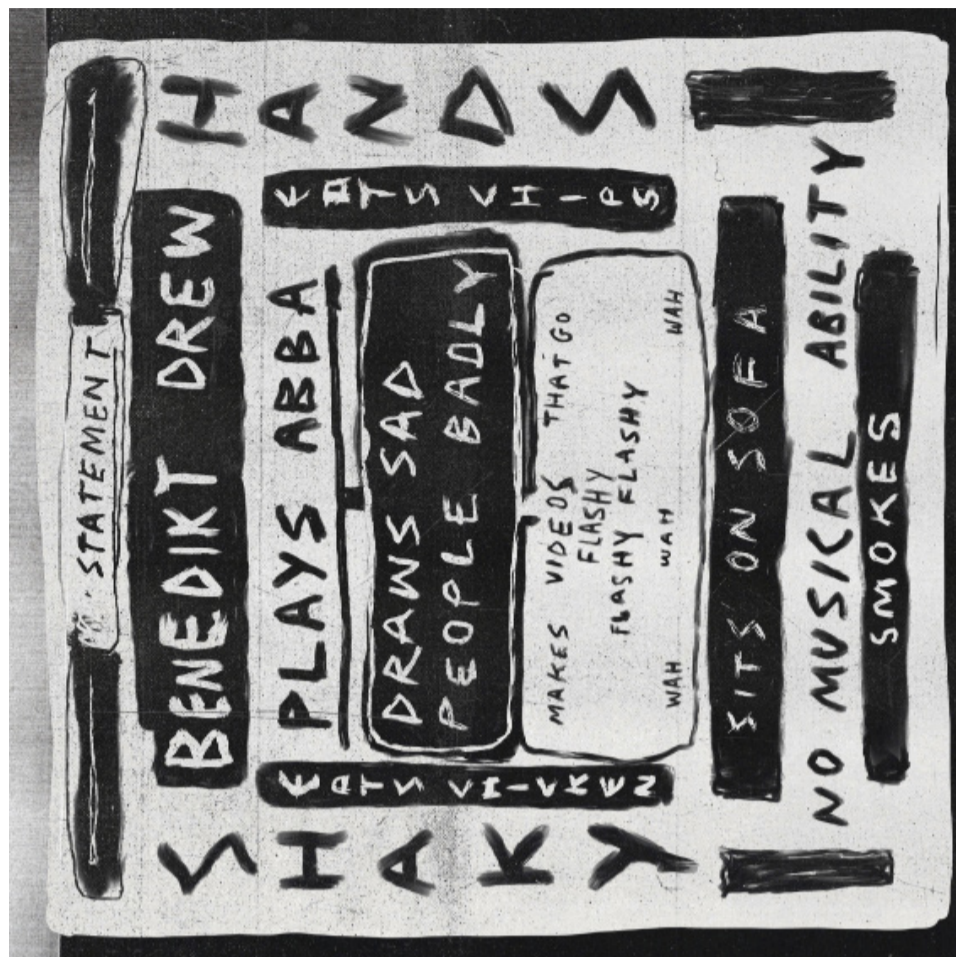
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Trapped in a Sticky Shed with Side Chain Compression

I. Screaming Tapes & Laughing Loops

When Benedict Drew and the iMT Gallery asked me to write this essay, my first question was based on a hunch, soon confirmed. In January 2019, while living on different continents, Drew and I were simultaneously, inexplicably preoccupied with the media degradation issue known as “sticky shedding.” It’s not exactly a common thing to be obsessing over.

Drew was somewhere in Kent, beginning to conceptualize the exhibit with which this essay is concerned—*Trapped in a Sticky Shed with Side Chain Compression*—while I was in Detroit, putting together a lecture called “Sticky Shedding: Exorcising Teenage Media” for Sukhdev Sandhu’s Colloquium for Unpopular Culture series at NYU. Two strangers on two different continents, each wrestling with the meaning-making possibilities of sticky shedding.

My introduction to sticky shedding: one day, I attempted to watch a VHS compilation called *Horrible Horror*, hosted by Zacherley the Cool Ghoul. When I inserted the video into the VCR and hit play, the tape... *screamed*. The squeal was caused by demagnetization, friction, and signals weakened by moisture. The information layer was shedding off in little oxide dots over the VCR heads, which were attempting and failing to grab the tape.

At the Colloquium, I speculated that sticky shedding could serve as a creative passthrough for the entropy and exorcism of memory. In a literal sense, it explained the glitches that transpired when I tried to screen a short film I made when I was a teenager called *Attack of the Space Zombie* (which is as you can imagine, about as terrible as it sounds). I paid a media recovery company \$30 to digitize the circa-1993 Hi8 tape the video was on, only to discover that spores from a mold-infested house I’d lived in had infiltrated the spools. Where the spores had colonized, they had digested information on the magnetic tape. Where space zombies had once been, there was now rolling static, rainbow defects and blue drop-out screens. It was a forced collaboration with fetid formats. The unauthorized soundtrack, Devo’s “Gates of Steel,” pulsed in and out in a fungus-generated sidechain effect:

*Unlock the secret voice / Give in to ancient noise ... The earth it moves too slow /
But the earth is all we know / We pay to play the human way /
Twist away the gates of steel.*

Benedict Drew, on his end, was considering sticky shedding as “an analogy for thinking around current politics in the UK – a horror.” And continues:

The ghosts in this work are like the bad vibes of politics, the haunting of everything by capital, colonial exploitation, labour. The electronics are haunted by them being conceived as military things, and the paintings are haunted by commodity fetishism. Perhaps these are all attempts at exorcisms.¹

Trapped in a Sticky Shed with Side Chain Compression contains a group of paintings, video monitors with animations and a tape loop on a reel-to-reel machine playing the disembodied laughter of the conservative politician Jacob Rees-Mogg. Drew notes “the tape machine with its degradation, its lossiness seems to resonate with memory, the repetition of being sold a lie, the cycle of psychic abuse.”

What is clear is that sticky shedding—typically approached as a preservation issue—is a concept loaded with potential. The excess of consciousness present in the “media things” that bleed into Drew’s work have the best whiffs of Gothic horror, where hauntings do not reference ghosts, but the trailing artifacts of a vague and unseen “something else.” industrialism, impinging environments, architectural imprints, psychological anxieties, and the failings of modernism.

II. Marinated Materialism

The technology, environments and objects Benedict Drew engages with are given over to animist agency and digital materialism. Stone, slime, mud and soundwaves are mineral level media with *opinions*. The taboo that connects the grime to the shine of our everyday digital life is on Drew’s mind too:

The tools I use are haunted by the souls that made them and origin in which they were conceived. It feels inescapable, as I type on my mid-2014 MacBook Pro. All the techno-wonders just feel drenched in exploitation—or bad vibrations—imbedded in the circuitry.²

In his video, *Notes on Rhythm and Pitch*, the screen flickers with the text: “*These waves are portholes to the spirit world.*” It becomes difficult not to feel like you are falling inward.

In the early-1980s, my family had one of those behemoth cabinet televisions that sat on the floor. When I was around 4 years old, I would often sit as close as I could to the CRT display, putting my face up to the screen to watch the image smear into clusters of morphing abstract blobs—all strobing noise and bad fidelity. Each individual dot dimming and flaring in a fractured matrix of collective potential. I wanted to visually isolate each pixel, but the phosphor kept exciting the photons and redistributing the light. In retrospect, this extreme sport mode of watching was allowing me to have some kind of intuitive CRT-based séance with the static defined by the aperture grille. The distraction of questioning the magic behind the function of the media was just enough to keep me grounded.

From Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky’s short story, “Collector of Cracks”:

“The jerkiness of our vision, the discontinuousness of our perception of a motion picture, say, is a fairly well-known fact. But to face that fact is not enough: One must go inside it. Wedged in between instants--when the film, having withdrawn one image from the retina, is advancing so as to produce another--is a split second when everything has been taken from the eye and another new given it. In that split second the eye is before emptiness, but it sees it: Something unseen seems seen.”³

Watching the “flashy flashy” video works of Drew, submitting to the flicker fusion of a strobing pink screen—there we are, locked in with the dazzle, now the text is falling, and we are floating upward through a screen that has taken on new dimensions—a portal indeed. The séance-like effect of the “unseen seen” is encouraged by Drew’s use of interference patterns, spliced realities, expanded cinema, invisible narrators—and a lot of fragmented humor.

When my parents found me, face mashed against the television, they of course yelled at me for ruining my eyes. But who could have guessed that a few decades later we’d be engaging with our screens at face-level anyways? Squinting and groaning—psychically fractured by the smartphones held just a few inches from our faces?

“an unfathomable density / of complex mechanisms / all material / marinated in exploitation / radiates bad vibrations / direct to your fucking head”⁴

III. The Crumbling Chorus

Since the works for *Trapped in a Sticky Shed with Side Chain Compression* are in production at the time of this writing, I’ve been piecing together scenarios, hoping my presumptions are correct. Benedict Drew tells me that the overall vibe of the works will be a “shit ghost train—a really poor fairground ride,” and that the televisions surrounding the cackling tape of Jacob Rees-Mogg are an attempt to trap the negative energy of vile politicians. It sounds like ritual design to me.

The voice of Rees-Mogg [or, insert your politician of choice here] is served up as an isolated fragment in a constantly diminishing loop. It is an antidote meant to weaken the signal-hold of politics. One oxide nanoparticle at a time, the laugh rips itself apart over the tape heads. Today, it feels like we are denied the buffer of the laugh track, which, if we listen to Lacan, is an emotional safeguard that “relieves us of our duty to laugh.” Drew has summoned up a bad carbon copy as a remedy that we may project sympathetic magic upon. An obscured head of a politician floats in digital slime, his hateful laugh captured in a web of magnetized tape, forced into a repeating loop until any power is reduced. Like produces like.

We dwell in the hauntological realm of lo-fi spaces, responding to the liveliness in its cracks. Nihilism with humor. Anticipating “all of this will crumble” entropy. We learn to “love the pile of ashes” through remixing. When Stan Brakhage taped dead moths to celluloid, he reanimated them as they flew past the projector shutter in a burst of new life and film became the embodiment of a *thing* in a “symphony of matter.”

With this exhibition maybe, it’s more like a cartoon. The lancing of a boil that is the social / political feeling currently. The right have used nationalism to move towards even more extreme deregulation and free market anarchy. The rhetoric mobilises the bad ghosts of nationalistic colonial pride, and it’s a very dangerous game played in the most cynical of ways. I want to make things that exorcise these feelings, and maybe like an ecstatic scream—that is my hope at least.”⁵

I mishear things often and mishear this in a video from Drew’s *Trickle-Down Syndrome* exhibit: “You hear that sound? That’s the sound of the building being dismantled from the outside.”⁶ There is something about “negative alchemy” and “transforming your house into gold.” A woman clacks rocks together, and I wonder how the reversal of that sound would play out, amplified from the inside.

In 2010, the year that Drew tells me he first encountered the term, “sticky shedding,” I was filming inside Detroit’s Packard Automotive Plant—a monumental abandoned factory and locus point for the city’s underground rave scene. The floor of one room was covered in melted-together interior car door panels, which I wobbled across to look into a courtyard filled with dumped tires. Under stalactites hanging from the concrete ceiling, an arson had created a bouncy castle for the Anthropocene. This was just before the “rebirth” of the city and before gaslighting reports began to appear, claiming that allegations of gentrification were unfounded.

Below, in the Packard Plant, I could hear scrappers dismantling the building with acetylene torches.

A few weeks later, a semi-circle of the fifth story fell in a chain reaction down into the first thanks to an overzealous attempt at recovering a ceiling beam. In the winter of 2019 a brick production line bridge spanning Grand Boulevard (the building’s most notable feature) gave out during a rapid freeze-thaw cycle and let go, crashing into the street. The utopian graphic wrap that a wealthy, out-of-town developer had installed to visually restore the structure to its unmarred 20th century state was left flapping in the wind.

And now the vocoder sings:

*There they are in their cars...
There they are in their cars...
an outstanding example of individualism
sitting in their own higher purchase little metal plush leather interior heart FM
songs of freedom and the open road combustion engine
shoveling ginsters stake into sniveling lonely mouths
on the way to the board meeting where will everyone will try and conjure
the imaginary power of big dick energy.⁷*

IV. Ducking that Sinking Signal

Sidechain compression / You know that sinking feeling? / It’s real.⁸

Watching clips of Benedict Drew’s videos in my web browser, two banner advertisements flip back and forth. One implores me to refinance my student debt and another promotes a card game called *What Do You Meme?* with the customer testimonial: “these ain’t your grandma’s memes.” It’s 2019, and as I write this, we are 75 days away from Halloween, 75 days away from no-deal Brexit in the UK, the Amazon rainforest is burning, and the recession panic button has been pushed in the US. That sinking feeling? It’s feeling more real. But we like to say we’ve been here—or somewhere vaguely like it—before. Drew notes:

Since the 1990’s, there has been a slow and steady rehabilitation of nationalism, but through extremely soft means. The flag waving, the putting of flags on objects, bunting, and pre-fixing television programs with the words “the great British.” The coopting of folk music and lore, the endless reference to the second world war with the very fact that it was fighting fascism removed. All of this stuff has been flying around in pop culture in a very kind of sanitised way.⁹

Sidechain compression is a utilitarian music production effect that allows independent sounds to overlap. A threshold is set and any sound above it is divided into the mix, with quieter sounds remaining audible. Think of a DJ talking over music. Sidechaining can be hitched to capitalism too: when an announcement cuts over shopping mall Muzak, that muffled drop out is the effect of compression.

From “Collector of Cracks,” again:

“The cracks crept quickly away, driving their empty twists for all they were worth over roads, footpaths, and impassable places ... [they] crannied in wherever and however they could: a mountain defile squeezed into the soundboard of a violin; a soundboard crack hid in the cranial bone of a passerby. ... Frightened by the racket and jolts from above, the swarms of cracks crept deeper and deeper as the earth closed over people and their chattels. People’s panic multiplied the cracks’ fears; the cracks’ terror multiplied human misery. This was a dreadful and woeful day for the earth.”¹⁰

“Ducking” is a sidechain artifact that gives space for the boom of a kick drum to manifest, pulsing along as everything else gives way beneath it. In dance music, “ducking the kick” is that feeling where a beat carries an uptick of energy, making the track waver under its own internal pressure systems. Signals playing off one another’s presence through implied motion and expressive dynamism. It creates an architectural listening experience that only exists in a sonic-psychological sense. Things ooze up from the cracks. That push and pull might be a close parallel to our feelings of political malaise—the sonified embodiment of a fight or flight response.

Sidechaining was originally invented to deal with sibilance (“de-essing”), which in slang, can also mean a catcall, a boo, a buzz, contempt, or derision. But like sticky shedding, we might think about co-opting the concept to define our current socio-political state of being. Our protests need to be a loud enough boom, forcing the most maligned signals of our culture to “duck.”

I think what I desire is to be transported and overwhelmed and made dizzy, like when I listen to free jazz or something. That’s probably what I want and sometimes what I want the works to do. It seems like a positive form of resistance.¹¹

Where traditional compression is set to deal with levels within a track, sidechain compression is triggered by an external source. Maybe this is the mental mechanism we’ve been forced to apply to our lives in recent times. Sidechaining as an attenuating filter for coping, hushing the rise and fall of bad vibes emanating from austerity’s gates of distraction.

Kristen Gallerneaux

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1. Benedict Drew, email interview with the author, August 2019.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *Autobiography of a Corpse*, New York Review Books, 96.
 4. Benedict Drew, *Anti Ecstatic Machines* video, 2018.
 5. Benedict Drew, email interview with the author, August 2019.
 6. Whitechapel Gallery, 2017.
 7. Benedict Drew, *Anti Ecstatic Machines* video, 2018.
 8. Benedict Drew, *The Trickle-Down Syndrome*, 2018.
 9. Benedict Drew, email interview with the author August 2019.
 10. Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *Autobiography of a Corpse*, New York Review Books, 96.
 11. Benedict Drew, email interview with the author, August 2019.