NOSTALGIA – MEMORY, AND A SENSE OF WHO WE ARE



Fabulous piece of writing from Gordon Burn today in the Guardian about a particular, and very familiar, relationship with the past – The ‘English disease’

See also Gordon Burn in my blog entry on murder, the domestic and the uncanny – [Link]



So good I have to quote quite a bit …

Bob Dylan hated nostalgia. Dennis Potter called it dangerous. Yet the charts show that we can’t stop looking back. Gordon Burn wonders whether it’s time we gave up fighting our attachment to the past.

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Forty years ago, “new” was a word to conjure with, and Dylan was new all the time. This was part of the

phenomenon of Bob Dylan. He tried not to be in the same place twice artistically – and to the bewilderment (and frustration, then unbridled rage) of many, he made it work. “I’m not interested in myself as a performer,” he told Playboy in 1966. “It doesn’t matter what kind of audience reaction this whole thing gets. What happens on the stage is straight. It doesn’t expect any rewards or fines … It’s ultra-simple, and would exist whether anybody was looking or not.”

By 1966, he had already rattled the cages of his core supporters by refusing to go on being a neo-Woody Guthrie with whom the civil rights marchers and anti-war protesters could identify. He had stopped singing talking blues and songs about “causes”. He had thrown away his dungarees and denim jacket, and had desecrated the purity and authenticity of folk music by appearing with a rock’n’roll drummer and amplified guitars. The crowd booed and jeered at the Newport folk festival in 1965. He was slow-hand-clapped and called a “sellout” at the Forest Hills Stadium later that summer. And then came the fabled “Albert Hall concert”, which, as the whole world now knows, actually took place at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester on May 17 1966.

The resulting album, Live 1966, is possibly the most collected, dissected, analysed, categorised and scrutinised 100 minutes 24 seconds of music ever recorded. Even the heckler who yelled out “Judas!” was tracked down 30 years after the event, and when he died, aged 56, in 2002, he was obituarised by papers across the world: “Keith Butler, rock legend.” Butler said about the gig: “I think what really sent me over the top was when he did those lovely songs – Baby Let Me Follow You Down and One Too Many Mornings. I was emotional, and I think my anger just welled up inside of me.”

But what was it really that Butler and the many members of the audience who cheered and applauded his “Judas!” intervention were so worked up about? Part of the answer is to be found in Dylan’s introduction to the new, electrified version of one of his old acoustic songs: “It used to be like that, and now it goes like this!” Cue Robbie Robertson’s sawtoothed guitar, Garth Hudson’s jabbing Hammond, Dylan’s insolent, taunting harmonica, his belligerent vocal. It is the clearest articulation of a message that has been implicit in all his work since his first dabbling in amplified music on

the Bringing It All Back Home album early in 1965: nostalgia sucks.

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Frederic Jameson's conclusion (in one of his ruminations on the postmodern present), which is presumably one that would have been shared by Dylan at the time, is that "nostalgia for the present" represents a loss of faith in the future. This loss of faith has produced a culture that can only look backwards and re-examine key moments of its own recent history with a sentimental gloss and a Vaselined lens. Angela McRobbie has summarised Jameson's position thus: "Society is now incapable of producing serious images, or texts which give people meaning and direction. The gap opened up by this absence is filled instead with cultural bric-a-brac and with old images recycled and reintroduced into circulation as pastiche." Steps, in other words. Kylie. The retread of Starsky and Hutch. The plague of tribute bands to Abba, Queen, the Beatles and others.

But the truth is, it can get wearisome making everything new all the time. Around the time of The

Singing Detective (1986), Dennis Potter, scourge of the sentimentalist reactionaries, admitted that there is a place for nostalgia as long as nostalgia is firmly kept in its place. “You can almost lick them, they are so sweet,” Potter said of the 1930s records that his characters mime to in the series, “and yet they have this tremendous evocative power, a power which is much more than nostalgia. Nostalgia is a second-order emotion. A nostalgiac looks at the past and keeps it there – ‘Oh those dear dead days.’ Which is what is dangerous about nostalgia. And what makes it a very English disease. I use the immediate past to intrude upon the present. If you don’t have an alert awareness of the past, then what you’re actually doing is being complicit with the orthodoxy of the present – totally.”

At a stroke, though, Apple iTunes, the jukebox software that allows you to build a selection of tunes for your iPod, has changed all that. The random shuffle option short-circuits the tendency to listen only to what you already know. In this way I suddenly discovered the Magnetic Fields’s 69 Love Songs after owning the three-album box set for years. Also Bonnie “Prince” Billy. The Smiths (!). Smog. Yo La Tengo. Ms Dynamite. Four

Tet. Jim O’Rourke. Each one a reminder that the past is not dead, as William Faulkner once put it; it is not even past.

There is proof of this every Saturday morning on Radio 2, when a voice from my childhood can be heard introducing the same records in the same way he introduced them more than 40 years ago. The only difference now is that the Searchers and Rory Storm and Jefferson Airplane are being played as requests for silver weddings and “grandad’s birthday”.

Brian Matthew’s voice, still occasionally to be heard “joshing” with the lovable mop-tops in what it is tempting to see as a safer, simpler time, is the main vehicle for this journey down a tunnel into the past. Every Saturday at 10, I have to be there for the sign-off. “This is your old mate Brian Matthew saying that’s your lot for this week, seeeeee you next week!” It takes you back even if you were never there originally.