

S T R A N G E W A Y S

Some observations on violence

Repetitive Beats¹ Lord and Taylor are quite special characters to which I shall return. What ensued was at the least, unsurprising. Prison officers present at the time describe seeing those in the prisoner congregation pull out chair legs from their trousers. A kind of magician's trick set to produce at first bemusement, then horror and finally recoil in the prison officers and their families. A mass adrenalin release across 300 prisoners surged forth overwhelming their intaglio structure of Victorian discipline, repression and religious condemnation. The stress hormone probably also overwhelmed the Largactil, an anti-psychotic drug meted out to prisoners as a controlling measure. An extensive scaffolding structure in place to repair the roof windows became their means for access.

Civic Illustration 25 years ago, April 1st 1990, at approximately 10.28 BST prisoners interred at Strangeways Prison (since renamed HMP Manchester) began rioting. Paul Taylor and Alan Lord had initially planned for a peaceful protest in the prison chapel. Taylor had leapt on the chapel altar taking hold of the live microphone used by the Reverend Noel Proctor, who just prior was amplifying the prisoners' sinful states. Taylor pronounced their own sinful conditions, "This gentleman has spoken about the blessings of the heart, he has spoken about how Jesus can take away the hardness from your heart. I would like to touch on how prison brutalises you."

R e v e l a t i o n .

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The rest is images.

As an 11-yr old I remember those images of the Strangeways riot.

Broadcasting from the street to the roof, I can recall the sisters, the girlfriends, the wives and the mothers shouting for their insurgent sons to come down. Even then I remember thinking 'you daft cows they're trying to fight, the state, the system'. Their bulbous northern vowels played out in the media like a Coronation Street special or a Ken Loach film. I cringed at their roles, their true roles. **Loves' Warm Circuit** What flowed was 25 days of images and exchanges, exchanges in the form of images and words. Those between prisoners and prison officers, between prisoners and the accumulated media, between the purveyors and the purveyed. From roof, to street, prison to city, outlaws to lawmen, the circuit was rerouted into a Dionysian event. This is not to demean the actions of the prisoners or undermine their seriousness of point. To the contrary, quoting the works of Byron and Shakespeare through a traffic cone and barbecuing steaks *al fresco* speaks to the ecstatic,

unbounded joy of the prisoners' seizure². A YP³ at the time recalls reaching the roof and seeing the sublime urban sprawl speaking these words, 'Manchester, what a beautiful city'. And as a Romantic novelist would sense, this moment was a death thro⁴. An episode on credit; a type of credit that must later be redeemed through the legal system to the deficit of all, inside and out. Amongst others, this insidious ricochet is the most abhorrent violence perceivable in Strangeways⁵ as it is written into the very fabric of the fundamental operations of the law, and invoked as a protection for the law itself. The stakes are the highest possible. And like in Kevlar™ the weave works to repel and absorb the incoming attack. This moment of violence is not before 'the End' as such but occurs just before a total internal and external restructuring of civic and social relations, irreversible henceforth. Strangeways was the longest recorded prison riot in British history.

It was also the last. By this I mean not the actual last but the final moment a riot could ever be organised and executed in such a blatant and earnest manner. A rupture to the circuit, the circuit then reorganised around this scission, never failing to see its opportunity to further consolidate the violence of exploitative relations. Did the prisoners know they were the index of becoming molecular for us all? Perhaps they did. On the inside they existed in a highly concentrated and molar set of circumstances waiting to explode. These included slopping out, a practice of explicit bodily functions and severe overcrowding. There is no romanticism to these abject processes and states. The accumulation of physical bodies and processes in such a way is at the level of human stress what the hypermarket is at the level of commodity⁶. And as in a commodity the violence of production is what we know as reality. "What is produced in reality is that the institutions implode of themselves,

by dint of ramifications, feedback, overdeveloped control circuits."⁷ Which leads to the question :why does the assertion of a right follow with the further erasure of that right? Within the very idea of a right is the potential for the rewriting of the context, which confers the very same right. Taken up with speed and fervour by Major's Conservative government through the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994, this act singularly eroded civil liberties from law to culture. A complete sensorial rearrangement of the civic body, this bill effected the reorganization of the organs of the social subject. Specifically, via the criminalization of gathering with other bodies, two or more, the removal of the right to silence without self-incrimination, additions to the Video Recording Act 1984, which introduced a particular notion of harm "caused to potential viewers or, by their behaviour, to society" by material dealing with "criminal behaviour, illegal drugs, violent behaviour or incidents,

horrific behaviour or incidents or human sexual activity". In this sense, the right we believe is reliable, embedded, natural and fundamental to our civic existence, nay our human existence is also a site of violence. A story of scale ensues. Cat and mouse. The mouse becomes more assertive and stronger, the cat responds with an increased multiplication of its own available powers. Outside Strangeways this is what the wives and mothers knew. **Lord & Taylor** An unlikely couple, the two bonded in the one hour they had to exercise each day while in the Segregation section of the prison's D wing, the place for problematic prisoners. They walked side by side "on the same wavelength". Lord was in for murder, Taylor for chequebook fraud. The latter crime is probably not even possible to commit anymore. Murder still is. Holding up their remarks and announcements, ('I Alan Lord, herewith declare my defiance to military or whatever intervention to extract us!')

to the gathered eyes, Taylor and Lord provided urgent representations of text and image that are full frontal, didactic and caring. They presented their own complexities and muddled the silhouette of an archetypal 'prisoner'. It was hard to reconcile the previous violence of Lord's crimes, his eccentric, clownish outfits, his clear and poetic declarations scribed on a blackboard. Taylor's thoughtful, erudite demeanour was unexpected, pleasing and incongruous. As characters, their intensity was a profound contribution to the narrative. They each got a further 10 years for it. **Stone Island** *A says 'Strangeways was Madchester on the inside.'* Our universe is no longer a visual or discursive one where power is perceivable wholly honest in the order of representation; a mode necessary at least for the recognition, digestion and reflection of the manipulated, the instrumentalised, the circulated and the syntax for the analysis and critique of power. In Strangeways the vio

lence can be determined, it's perceivable and though their protests did nothing to extend the notion of civil liberties, rather it is remarkable as the final gasp of a visualisation of liberating violence. Violence capable of producing forces, joys, new knowledge, new feelings, values and reason. What ushered through the next decade was the genetic code for a whole other apparatus of violence apparent today. Not an extension based on scale, increasing, multiplying, reproducing from the source rather a 'genetic miniaturisation'⁸ of the prison. A dense, deep, vortex of integration swallowing the outside and the inside, saturated in deepest black, travelling inwards at imperceptible speed towards implosion. As Baudrillard points out, this implosion is not a negative process, but one that demands careful attention and effort. A type of work difficult for its oscillations, its 'incalculable consequences', its undeveloped vocabulary.

Who will do this work?

25th April 1990, Taylor is the last one to come down from the roof. His clenched fist surged upwards as the cherry picker's hydraulic pistons drew him downwards in underwhelming but satisfying slow motion.

¹Sections 63, 64 and 65, Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994, a rave is defined as a gathering of 100+ people at which amplified music 'wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats' is played.

²Contrast this to the State's tactic of playing Barry Manilow records through loudspeakers in an effort to drown out Alan Lord's protests.

³ Andrew Nelson was 20 years old at the time of the riot serving time as a Young Prisoner (aged 18-25 years) – following the riots he was acquitted of charges of conspiracy to cause grievous bodily harm, riot and violent disorder and involvement in the murder of 46 yr-old Derek White, an inmate awaiting trial for alleged sex offenses. White died from injuries sustained during a severe physical attack from fellow inmates during the riot. Nelson kept a diary during the riot.

⁴ In *Optical Media*, Kittler argues the Romantic novel marks the death of the monopoly of writing and reading and argues Romantic reading is a kind of 'proto-film viewing'. The moment that the novel as form exceeds its dominant place as storage of images, sounds, smells and tastes for the individual, solitary reader. In the wake of rival media such as the *laterna magica*, writing could no longer bear the burden of holding sound and image. From then on in novel writing subscribes into a more complex relationship with the 'world of images'.

⁵ "one might consider the surprising possibility that the laws' interest in a monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals is not explained by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by that of preserving the law itself; that violence, when in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law...This cannot result from his deed, but only from the violence to which it bears witness."

⁶ 'Critique of Violence', Benjamin Walter, *Reflections*, pp.281.

⁷ Baudrillard, Jean, 'The Beauborg Effect', *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981, pp.68.

⁸ Ibid, pp.73.