

At Rio Carnival

I always find that journeys seem to get quicker when repeated, perhaps, as anticipation diminishes, we are set free to enjoy the process. We exist in the now, rather than focusing on the destination. In motion we are able to transform and drift into a malleable state of mind. We become ready. I give a cursory smile to the officer as my passport is handed back. I flick through the stamps.¹ This is my third time in Rio, I'm at ease, relaxed. I am ready. Layers of memory etch themselves onto place as a palimpsest, waiting to be retrieved.² I remember the first visit so clearly though, I was eighteen, having just finished school, about to embark on a journey across South America.³ I trembled with naivety on that first visit, the world was everything and anything. A blank cheque at the end of adolescence, on the cusp of adulthood, a fracture from parental steer. A search for independence, a defining of the self.⁴ The second emerged from a moment of spontaneity. I tentatively came to visit a love interest after surgery as a form of rehabilitation and to escape the tedious English winter skies. Lying in the hot sun I opened my body, gorging on the vivid world, lifting the dark clouds of hospitalisation. What healing that was. Mind and body replenished. Replete, sense receptors contained within the mind and body rejuvenated.⁵ Now strong, this third time, the love interest had turned into partner, travelling companion, together, one. We had spoken at length about coming for Carnival, now here. Ready, in unison. But I am unsure of my role. Will I be a part, a player, a protagonist? Or a watcher? A voyeur, witnessing the spectacle from a far?

Through being distant I can be near, but through my nearness I am also distant, unable to truly see the subject. Out of focus, fragmentary. There is a point at which the subject reveals itself and I am able to reveal myself to it. Perhaps being a watcher, rather than a protagonist brings clarity, a step back, disconnected. But if I am a protagonist then I can see through different means, less a process of seeing but a process of being. In this sense, through being I am seeing, presented from a different angle. Obscura. The audience becomes the actor, watching over the audience.

Our lives are constantly defined by moments of gathering that range from the intimate to the expansive. Perhaps these moments are more poignant when they are defined by absence, by a lack of gathering or an inability to gather. What of the passages that these moments construct? Periods of time that seem to ebb

¹ Pierre 'was enjoying the feeling of freedom imparted by having got rid of his luggage and at the same time, more intimately, by the certainty that, now that he was 'sorted out', his identity registered, his boarding pass in his pocket, he had nothing to do but wait for the sequence of events.' Marc Auge, *Non-Places*.

² 'Memory is freedom of the past. But what has no present will not accept the present of a memory either. Memory says of the event: it once was and now it will never be again. The irremediable character of what has no present, of what is not even there as having once been there, says: it never happened, never for a first time, and yet it starts over, again, again, infinitely. It is without end, without beginning. It is without a future.' Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

³ 'Memories sharpen the past; it is reality that decays.' Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History*.

⁴ 'The process of isolation is a process of the search for power', 'a man who is affectionate, who is kindly, has no sense of power.' 'Understanding of the self requires a great deal of intelligence, a great deal of watchfulness, alertness, watching ceaselessly so that it does not want to slip away. I, who am very earnest, wants to dissolve the self.' Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

⁵ 'There is nothing other than the experience of sense (and this is the world) if 'experience' says that sense precedes all appropriation or succeeds on and exceeds it.' Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*.

and flow through our lives, undefinable. Water slipping through my fingers. Overlapping and meandering. It's hard to reflect on these passages and without clear moments we become directionless souls floating in an abyss of limitless time.^{6 7} So many of these moments simply become time markers rather than transformational events.⁸ Moments of transformation are most likely rare in the average persons lifespan. It takes a great deal of discipline to undergo transformation.⁹ Falsely, many experiences are heralded as transformational, with many happening in so called congregations. Congregate. A loaded word. Simultaneously implying passivity and danger. Following like a dutiful flock of sheep under a watchful Shepherd or gathering as a threatening outlier of change.¹⁰ For some, vicissitude.

I think back to my childhood and the fragmentary visits to Mass. Boredom. The Church of England. Sitting in ordered rows with ordered books and ordered cushions, congregating together in supposed harmony, we are one. United through the common ability to be connected through song, as music guides us to a higher place - can minds focus and expand? Rave.^{11 12} Leaving our ourselves we float upwards, with twitching minds left in abeyance, we will be back. Onwards through sound we float on tender waves that tickle the nape of our necks, while whispering sweet utterances of obeisance. Teasing sounds bring tender love to the restless soul, easing pain and releasing ills. Focus. Presence. Instant. Release. We hold hands and hug, we share alcohol and place wafers or pills on our tongues. 'This will elevate you, connect you to something higher.' 'God' perhaps? Does it matter if we use words or chemicals?

Release.

That is all.

What are our motives for donating our precious time to these events? Is it for our own internal nourishment? Or external validation through the eyes of others?

⁶ 'We live by time, we are the result of time. Our minds are the product of many yesterdays and the present is merely the passage of the past into the future.' Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

⁷ 'It is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence - that which makes its truth, its meaning - its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream - alone.' Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

⁸ 'Transformation is not an end, a result. Transformation is not a result. Result implies residue, a cause and an effect. Where there is causation there is bound to be effect. The effect is merely the result of your desire to be transformed. When you desire to be transformed, you are still thinking in terms of becoming; that which is becoming can never know that which is being'. Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

⁹ 'It is that quiet mind, that still mind which brings about transformation. When the mind is no longer resisting, no longer avoiding, no longer discarding or blaming what is but is simply passively aware, then, in that passivity of the mind you will find, if you really go into the problem that there comes transformation.' Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

¹⁰ 'DJs who can elicit and sustain these ecstatic states are highly sought-after "techno-shamans" who help structure a ritual space-time characteristic of raves.' Ryan J. Cook, *Rave Culture and Religion*.

¹¹ A 'commingling of utopia and hedonism would pervade the sensibilities of rave culture, along with the effects of Ecstasy and the corresponding need for unregulated spaces where this new world could be invented—an invention that extended beyond club hours' Clover, *The Second Summer of Love*.

¹² 'In 1988 the word 'rave' was in common parlance, but mostly only as a verb, e.g., 'I'm going out raving tonight.' By 1989 'rave' was a fully fledged noun.' Joshua Clover, *The Second Summer of Love*.

Ecstasy, which evades our daily rituals, savoured only for elusive moments.¹³ A rare beast. Through this state of intense pleasure, we move beyond rational thought carried to a place of frenzy or rapture, or perhaps it is a point of madness in our delusions of apotheosis.¹⁴

Priests rave about how Jesus died for our sins, to be reborn, emerging from the cave, bringing ecstasy to his followers.¹⁵ I wonder if he himself moved through states of ecstasy during his fateful death and rebirth. When we die serotonin floods our brain, bathing our neurones, aiding a soothing climax. Rapture, will it come? As the chemicals of Ecstasy do the same, have we cheated nature through science?¹⁶ Despite the fact that Christianity now has billions of followers, it was initially driven underground by the Romans. Disciples would secretly identify themselves through the drawing of a simple fish in the dust. What sweet irony for church goers to frown on the activities of the Rave scene, which also driven underground due to its nature of difference.¹⁷ A British government advisor was sacked in 2009 after his findings suggested that Ecstasy was less dangerous than alcohol and tobacco.

Almost 6 million people die from tobacco use and 2.5 million from harmful use of alcohol each year worldwide.

Money talks.

Don't ask questions.

As it happens, I am now nearly entirely sober. Stone cold. I'm not entirely sure why, I think I'm just too busy; however, I am enjoying the clarity of mind. Perhaps it is society's lack of honesty and confused rhetoric that leads to a necessity of escapism. Stuck in perpetual cycles of meaningless collective gatherings in order to reinforce personal narrative.

'I am popular.'

'I am cool.'

'I'm important.'

'I know I am.'

'I am wonderful.'

Bliss. We are forever unrepentant and oblivious as we drown in this elusive state, yet always unable to slake the unquenchable thirst. Addiction. Bliss.

¹³ 'An ecstasy of truth, an opening of sense.' Nancy, *The Sense of the World*.

¹⁴ 'I do not know if you have noticed that when you have ecstasy, a creative joy, a series of bright clouds surrounded by dark clouds, in that moment there is no time: there is only the immediate present.' Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

¹⁵ 'Love is transformation from moment to moment' Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

¹⁶ 'Happiness is that state of being which is timeless' Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

¹⁷ The 'underworld can also become a place of romance, where childhood impulse to hide can be indulged to the wildest extent. The idea of secret passages of mysterious entrances and exits, of retreat and concealment, possesses an incurable charm.' Peter Ackroyd, *London Under*.

Dutch courage. To be something you are not. What stops a person from having courage when it can simply be unlocked through a chemical reaction induced by alcohol? The same substance which is consumed in the name of God, socialising, depression and freedom.

I join them. I drink.

Emancipated - endorphins wildly coarse through my body.

Fleeting collective joy.

Just as endorphins surge through my veins, people pulse and flow through narrow streets, clotting on arrival.¹⁸ Regular service shut down. The city will be soon on the move again.

I stick a pin in the end of my finger just to watch the blood rise up. A festival of claret. Haemoglobin and platelets working together to close the gap. The apex of beauty. It hurts. I am real. Life.

We were meant to have arrived at 11am. I check my watch, we are late. Lactic acid had built up in my legs from the steep trudge up the cobbled streets to Santa Theresa. Tight lanes filling fast as we get closer to the distant beating of drums. We find a vantage point by the side of the road, up a small staircase and onto a slender walkway. It's humid. The cool metal balustrade eases my sweaty palms, an oasis in my hands. A mass of people coalesces around a central truck with singers on the roof, while on the street below, performers, drums and brass instruments shimmy out in front. In the trucks wake: a connected being of bodies, one cellular organism. As it drives past, we make our way into the crowd, as disciples of a prophet. We pass through colonial streets, over tram tracks and under low slung telephone wires reverberating from the loudspeakers. Turbulence. Life, visceral and raw flowing through an exchange of salty bodily fluids, a celebration of the now, the instant. A sea of flesh transmuted into a common entity, a cross section of society, bodies become body. This is the start of Lent.

Pleasure.

A finger fondles my bottom lip, teasing my mouth, while a hand runs its way up the back of my neck and tugs on my hair. I gently pull her head towards mine, our tongues lock together. The sweet exchange of anonymous saliva. Our bodies pull close, we are one, pulsating on every beat. A collection of vibrating atoms, figures of carbon, we are energy. We have been reborn together as a single cell. We look into each other's eyes, transfixed. Emotions don't exist when joined in ecstasy, there is only being. Truth. We disentangle. This is the start of Lent.

¹⁸ '[...] byways of the city resemble thin veins and its parks are like lungs.' Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography*.

Finally we come to a halt at a square with a single central bus stop. The drums continue to beat, but the crowd is starting to change, the smell of unease pervades the air. Alien bodies metastasise into the throng as the prevailing wind of safety abates. Danger bubbles up as a formless sludge. This was our cue to move on. As we fight our way out into clear space the heavens open. A baptism of rain. Washing away our sins and cooling our hot bodies, ready for the rapture.

We move down the hill, torrential rain lashes our exposed skin. I'm not fussed. My eyes scan the horizon and fix on the sight of a sprawling slum, then Christ the Redeemer, then the slum. Christ looms over the city as a master of ceremonies, a great preacher. The saviour. Does he care for the people dancing in the rain? Was he saving them? What was Carnival saving? This vast celebration that drenched the city in common ecstasy, mutually escaping from society's ills. I see no threshold, just an awakening to grasp the painkillers that provide an escape from the inevitable hangover. Yet, what remains is a tapestry of cultural threads. Solidifying social narratives and structures while affirming collective identity, bringing a sense of belonging.

Ritual.

Identity, in flux.

This is a place of many edges, a series shifting moments defined by the geography itself. It is on the coast, wide sandy beaches define the area between land and sea. Then fault lines appear between favelas, lush craggy mountains and the sprawling urban terrain below. From above it's littered with constant junctions between the manmade and the natural.¹⁹ Concrete and foliage. Rich and poor separate, yet intertwined as two lengths of yarn.

The days pass as rolling waves hitting sand crested shores, merging into the same single memory.²⁰ We traverse the city from dance to dance. Truck to truck. Hearing stick after stick, hit thin skins that create rippling vibrations in drums inner chambers, reverberating. Dispersed energy travels through particles in the air, which, in turn hits more skin inside the ear. As energy is converted into information, it finally makes its way through synapses to the responsible neurones. A drumbeat. Then, just like that, it's over. Momentary and fragile.

Life.

Gone in an instant.

¹⁹ 'Deep ecology emerges out of deep experience of nature. Our modern way of life lacks that deep experience as we hardly interact with nature. Our life is designed to keep us away from her.' Satish Kumar, *Soil Soul Society: A New Trinity For Our Time*.

²⁰ '[...] there was no memory, only a spontaneous application, a direct response; today you are desirous of recapturing that experience of yesterday. That is, memory is intervening between you and the sunset, therefore there is no enjoyment, there is no richness, fullness of beauty.' Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.