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By James Flint

'Syzygy' – in plain English a conjunction or opposition of two things, especially heavenly bodies – is also the name of a recent show at London's Beaconsfield by the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit and Orphan Drift. The two groups (with occasional collaborators Traxis, Ocosi, Kodwo Eshun, Dmitri Nakov and Apache 61) yoked together their separate but related projects which anthropologise number, fictionalise anthropology and enumerate fiction. In a culture for which number and capitalism have become virtually indistinguishable, and with Y2K threatening to be the world's worst numerico-economical disaster, Syzygy attempted to recuperate the generative and mystical properties of numerical systems. James Flint reports back from the South London plateau.

"We're in the middle of a hyperfiction science-fiction story right now, ploughing our resources into a parallel but different system of temporal process. We're building up to a global disaster for wholly synthetic reasons." - Mark Fisher, CCRU

Small, neat, manic, intense, Mark Fisher talks to me about the Millennium Bug, the 'Y2K problematic' as he calls it. As a way in to the Syzygy show, the umbrella term for the five week-long mix of Gibsonian Cyberpunk portentousness and post-Deleuzian number theorising that occupied Beaconsfield Arts from February 26th to March 28th of this year, it seems as good a place to start as any. The Millennium Bug, nicely heralded as it is by August's solar eclipse, is the point at which our ultra-modern mathematical culture collides with the astrological soothsaying of the Maya and the Ancient Egyptians. Just as the Mayan city of Chichén Itzá was abandoned in the 9th century when the calendar drawn up by the priests came to an end, the inhabitants suddenly finding themselves outside of time and with no way forward but a return to a rural jungle existence tied to the rhythms of the earth rather than those of the stars, so the Y2K crisis – the biggest disaster ever to hit capitalism, with costs currently estimated at US\$36 trillion and rising – is, according to Fisher, "a disaster that's happening simply because of the date." A disaster, yes, but equally – and within the terms of the show – an artificially created opportunity, a doorway, a portal created by a certain configuration of numbers but through which demons and avatars – transformational and organisational machines – may pass. The syzygy here, the pairing, the twinning, is of the dark realm of fiction and the light realm of the real, the interface between them the dynamic possibilities of number.

"All cultural systems are some hybrid of magic, sorcery and religion." - Nick Land, CCRU

Syzygy's two-level *mélange* of video and photographic collage, left-field techno and gothic jungle, and hermetic and esoteric wallcharts left visitors wondering if they'd wandered into a gallery filled with psychotic artworks from the Prinzhorn Collection. But knowing that members of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit and art collective Orphan Drift – the two groups responsible for the show – would probably consider such a comparison as a compliment, it struck me that baffling, impenetrable, infuriating though Syzygy was, that was probably part of its point. Here, the question of how to progress beyond ninety-nine, of how to pass into the next millennium, was being understood in terms of temporality as defined by the computer. It was this kind of numerical machine, operating by and through capitalist culture, that was being examined in the CCRU's half of the show, using a technique that is increasingly familiar to the gallery context: that of fiction. But what are we to understand as fiction here? Fisher wanted to draw a distinction between what he called metafiction, the modernist and post-modernist literary production (and concomitant criticism) simultaneously exemplified and parodied by Beckett's *Trilogy*, with its recursive authors and bad infinities, and hyperfiction, which tries to set up a fictional plane of consistency not by deploying a hall of mirrors and bouncing meaning between the various reflective surfaces, giving the impression of density but in fact dissipating sense,

but rather by distributing narratives over a surface and trying to establish attractors, replusors, planes of force between them.

“If you examine the occult, you find within it all the appropriate resources for dealing with non-sequential phenomena.” - Mark Fisher, CCRU

Thus downstairs, around the walls and in the accompanying Abstract Culture booklet, the CCRU presented a series of artefacts: extracts from the notebooks of one Professor Barker, essays by Dr. Ron Eglash of the Institute of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University, archival material from the Massachusetts Cthullu Club, visual representations of self-organising mathematical processes and ground plans of temples in the Valley of the Kings are the fragments garnered from an attempt to solve an archeological mystery: the history and culture of the N’Ma people, who traced their ancestry back to the lost continent of Lemuria (thought to have once provided a land bridge across the Indian Ocean), and whose civilisation was largely destroyed by the Krakatoa explosion of 1883. Not so much invented as constructed, these characters and histories together formed a fiction in the fashion of H. P. Lovecraft (or perhaps, in a more contemporary mode, William Burroughs). The self-styled inheritor of the mantle of his “most illustrious and unfortunate fellow countryman” Edgar Allan Poe, Lovecraft penned dark tales of fear that often employed the figure of the explorer discovering some long lost race or realm from which he returned with madness or death as his only reward. Syzygy’s N’Ma seem to be drawn from one of these stories: obsessed with number, the N’Ma have a highly complex calendar with a 729 day year (the calendar is arranged as a frieze around the walls of the larger, upstairs space, forming a metaphorical land-link into OD’s half of the exhibition, about which more later) and their culture seems to form a kind of dark, occult twin to our own. Their study of the N’Ma was, so the exhibition’s narrative goes, the impetus that encouraged Professor Barker (Professor of Anorganic Semiotics, Kingsport College, MVU, Mass.) and Dr. Eglash to begin to try and rethink number, not as a hierarchical representational system, but as a non-linear iterated series that is not originally founded on the binary opposition of zero (absence) and one (inscription) but rather on the differential field created by multiple objects, most specifically the twin systems of the binary (drawn from two hands) and the decimal (drawn from ten fingers).

[IMAGE]

>>Image: Orphan Drift. Body impact by Traxis, photo Laurence Watts

It’s important to remember that while using many of its techniques to conjure mysterious realms of the other, Lovecraft detested the rise of occultism and mystical pseudo-science that continually threatened to overwhelm his genre around the turn of the century. He was not interested in explanation; rather, his writing was an attempt to evoke that fear of the unknown that he regarded as an important facet of the human – especially the Northern European – mind; a fear more physiologically than psychologically determined. “Atmosphere is the all important thing,” he wrote in his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature”, “for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation. [...] We must not judge a weird tale by the author’s intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point.” Using this type of fictional approach, the CCRU side of the exhibition ambitiously attempted to twin the Lovecraft-style hyperfictions of its frame with what they regard as the hyperfictional status of number itself. By examining – through the lens of their narrative – other non-linear iterated series such as the Fibonacci sequence, particular moves in the African counter games of Owari and Tarumbeta, and formations in Conway’s computerised Game of Life, Syzygy presents the idea that 1, 2, 3, 4 etc should be understood not as a number line but as a number plane. This would be step one. Step two – figured here as Barker’s grand project – would be to work out the dynamics of this plane, i.e., in another example of syzygical twinning, to map the hyperfictions of the binary/decimal series.

“The number is the mobile occupant, the movable (meuble) in smooth space, as opposed to the geometry of the immovable (immeuble) in striated space.” - Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Barker, Eglash and their fellow creations base their analysis of the dynamics of the decimal series on a cultural artefact recovered from the N’Ma: the Numagram. This map of the relationships between the numbers 0 to 9 is, according to E. Stilwell’s preliminary drafts for *Decrypting the N’Ma Numagram* (1954), the Ur-form for later, reterritorialised and hierarchised versions such as the Kabbalistic diagram of the Sefirot and the Tree of Life. The Stilwell character also maps the six numbers contained within the primary circuit of digital production onto the six lines of the I Ching, and claims to have been able to uncover through this a residue of triadic thinking underpinning the decimal/binary system which has long been obscured by our culture’s insistence on reading numbers in a line. Barker similarly uses the Numagram to map the number line on to plane – the figure he draws up, the Barker Spiral, is the key motif of the CCRU half of *Syzygy*.

The source for most of this stuff is Deleuze and Guattari’s *Treatise of Nomadology in A Thousand Plateaus*, most particularly the section in which they talk about the ‘Numbering Number’, which they distinguish from the overcoded, heavily representational notion of number with which we are most familiar. “The Numbering Number,” they write, “in other words, autonomous arithmetical organisation, implies neither a superior degree of abstraction nor very large numbers. [...] These numbers appear as soon as one distributes something through space, instead of dividing up space or distributing space itself. [...] The number itself is no longer a means of counting or measuring but of moving, [...] [it] has only a dynamic relation with geographical directions; it is a directional number not a dimensional or metric one. The numbering number is rhythmic, not harmonic.” The operations of this kind of number are compared with, indeed identified with those of the nomad war machine and distinguished from the kind of lineal, (State) overcoded arithmetic that emphasises and abstracts from one particular operation alone ($n = n + 1$) rather than taking all of the operations as interwoven parts of a complex. The Stilwell Numagram, the Barker Spiral – these are attempts to redress the imbalance by mapping aspects of this complex. In other words, they attempt to draw a plane of operations out of the internal relations of the numbers 0 to 9.

“How do you symbolise something that’s physically real?” - Ranu Mukherjee, OD

At this point, turning my attention to the OD part of the show presents me with some problems. More at home with the CCRU idiom of fiction and concept than with OD’s audiovisual language, I wanted to cast all of *Syzygy* within the terms of the former, but it soon became clear that this was not going to be possible – that, whatever the original conception of the event had been, during its realisation the two teams had seriously parted company. I have tried to find what links I could between the various aspects, but have increasingly come to feel that this is as much a function of my desire to have something coherent to say about *Syzygy* as a whole as of anything that was actually going on. While the CCRU group was more interested in this theoretical underpinning, the Orphans’ side of the show concerned itself with the dynamic reconstruction of various numerically-based cultural machines, and to this extent there was a fictional element, although its presentation – being primarily in the form of photo- or video-montage – owed more to Brion Gysin or Jackson Pollock than to Lovecraft. Still, there was a Lovecraftian thread – OD did use the notion of the demon in its various forms (though they preferred the term ‘avatar’) to code the various elements they were trying to make coherent within the contemporary mediasphere. Thus we were shown the avatar as a unit of sorcery; as a figure historically used to provide an ‘informational outside’ with physics, a link between logic and noise, as in Maxwell’s Demon [see footnote 1]; as a software agent, as semi-intelligent and semi-autonomous code-bot; and as a disruptive figure of darkness, as deployed in the *Necronomicon*. For OD, all of these have in common the casting of the demon as a multiple and invidious unit of ontological

disintegration, but one that is implicit in any act of communication – something which the angelologies of Michel Serres have already taught us. Using this pantheon, their side of the exhibition tried to pose the question: “What is a number, if it’s neither a cultural construction nor a Platonic universal?”. The answer, if there is one, being: “A hyperfiction established by a set of possible operations.” By examining the nodes/operations on the Numagram and recasting each as a demon or avatar, the art on display – the collages, the dancers, the audiovisual material – expressed each avatar’s realisation as a tendency in cultural production. “There’s been a huge shift in what people think of as their environment,” Mukherjee explained to me, “and each of the five avatars can be thought of as symbolising a different gap in the communications field. For example, the rapid multiplication of memory loss that is the actual function of the seamless splicing of a digital production.” Thus one avatar, Katak, grew out of the conflict between electricity and sunlight and linked to belief systems and sacrifice, to the concentrations of power typical of fanaticism, while another, Xes, was born of the reality of total surface presented by the camera. One creative conflict, one source of power for all five of the avatars was the duality that exists between tools and weapons, each able to perform the function of either depending upon the circumstance.

[IMAGE]

>>Image: Detail Syzyzy Installation, Orphan Drift

This was all fascinating stuff, complex and intricate. But – just as with the CCRU’s side of the show – how I would have made sense of any of it without having had lengthy conversations with various of the artists concerned I have no idea. As far as I could tell, Syzyzy aimed to turn Beaconsfield over to the alchemy of number: a creative and fecund proposition. The artists seemed to want to put forward the suggestion that there is a creative power of number and geometry that is not dismissable as numerology and mysticism but in which there lies a key to sidestepping the representational semiotic that dominates millennial culture. In a way Syzyzy was a contemporary attempt to draw a pentagram on the ground and convoke a demon – while simultaneously forcing us to ask what the drawing of that pentagram, what ‘doing magic’, actually consists of. The answer? Well, there’s the problem. It wasn’t clear. Worried that the show was being dragged out of Lovecraft and into Crowley, OD insisted that its avatars weren’t the occult figures that the CCRU wanted them to be, while at the same time the CCRU insisted that their occultism was not the literal trope that OD was describing it as. Both groups, it seemed to me, were using hyperfictional techniques to make the point that magic is an attempt to understand the world by referring to material pattern rather than to transcendental abstraction – a distinction that Frazer well understood and which he lays out in the opening chapters of *The Golden Bough* – but neither seemed happy with the way the other group was going about it and rather than create an interesting frisson this served only to plunge the whole issue into obscurity.

And this was typical of the show. At the moments when it should have been coming together, using its twinned schematic to echo and compound its meanings – as I’m sure was originally intended – it instead was constantly tearing itself apart. The fact that OD and the CCRU did not see eye to eye on how everything should mesh could not be disguised and the result was too complex, too heterogenous for its own good; its ideas, compelling though they sometimes were, ripped each other to shreds. So I was left with the impression that to succeed Syzyzy first needed an injection of that which all fictions need, whether their secret ingredient is traditional, meta or hyper in form: narrative. A narrative doesn’t need to be linear in form; it may be no more than a coherence of character or atmosphere, but that coherence is what allows the audience access to the larger project. The artists involved in this show had worked terribly hard on their narratives of number and demonology, but they overlooked the fact that a third narrative was required, the story of the dynamic interaction of Syzyzy’s disparate fictional shards. In its hurry to explore the triadic system that underpinned the binary, the show forgot to insert its own third term, and couldn’t contain itself for long enough to give the audience a way in. Its spell thus miscast, all the painstaking invocations of the participants couldn’t quite manage to

encourage Syzygy's demon to appear.

[Footnote 1] Maxwell's Demon was an imaginary creature invented by James Clerk Maxwell who, by opening and shutting a tiny door between two volumes of gases, could in principle concentrate slower (i.e. colder) molecules in one and faster (i.e. hotter) molecules in the other, thus reversing the normal tendency toward increased disorder or entropy and breaking the second law of thermodynamics. (Wordsworth Dictionary of Science and Technology) The contemporary point of this is that the second law can only be broken in circumstances in which information is allowed to enter the system.

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