

‘Thought is Made in The Mouth’

Radical nonsense in pop, art, philosophy and art criticism
(With reference to *Scratchcard Lanyard* by Dry Cleaning)¹

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During the 2020 London lockdown I became newly passionate about pop on the radio, while reaffirming that it has always been a significant diversion for me. Given downtime in which to dwell I recalled making myself late for school to hear a song by Gladys Knight play through to the end on the radio, and many similar moments when a special voice had come to my rescue over the airwaves and thus become a formative experience. These memories then led me to think more about the way in which the mere sound of a human voice, over and above a song’s words (which we don’t always know so well as the tune) can be redemptive and strangely ‘meaningful’.

Writing almost a hundred years ago, in his essay on Surrealism, Walter Benjamin asked the question: ‘What form do you suppose a life would take that was determined at a decisive moment precisely by the street song last on everyone’s lips?’² I’ve been trying for some years now to answer this, paying closer attention to pop music, and making comparisons between pop and fine art, which I also practice and teach. Last year the lyrics of indie band Dry Cleaning’s song *Scratchcard Lanyard* caught my ear and eventually led me to think and write this in response.³ I want to know more about just what their art is offering to its audience and to the practices of other arts and artists, including myself.

Part of this song’s perversity and absurdity relies on the strangely deadpan delivery of the singer Florence Shaw – the tone of her voice, her regional accent, etc. But here, in writing, I can only point the reader to those sonic qualities while sharing some of her words. Here is an extract:

¹ This essay is based on a paper given at the 2021 AICA Congress, titled ‘Intellectual Aftermath’ and hosted online by AICA Turkey

² ‘Surrealism, The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ [1929], in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, Verso, London, 2000, pp 225–239

³ Songwriters: Florence Shaw, Lewis Maynard, Nick Buxton and Tom Dowse; lyrics © Warp Music Limited.

I think of myself as a hardy banana with that waxy surface
And small delicate flowers
A woman in aviators firing a bazooka
I've come here to make a ceramic shoe
And I've come to smash what you made
I've come to learn how to mingle
I've come to learn how to dance
I've come to join the knitting circle
That's just child chat
Why don't you want oven chips now?
It's a Tokyo bouncy ball
It's an Oslo bouncy ball
It's a Rio de Janeiro bouncy ball ⁴

As I say, the radio often rescued me through lockdown, but occasionally I switched it off along with other sources of the pandemic's morbid news mantra. I sat close by a closed window, that allowed minimum virus and maximum daylight to enter, and there read some escapist literature, including the Italian Folk Tales gathered by novelist Italo Calvino.⁵ These fanciful forays then led me to re-read Walter Benjamin's 1920s essay on the storytelling tradition.⁶

Writing in the perilous years between the twentieth century's world wars, Benjamin seemed to encourage us to behave like characters in fairy tales, maintaining what he called 'cunning and high spirits'. Like many of the examples in what follows, 'cunning and high spirits' are not so much evidence of the modern intellect as they are an alternative to it. Benjamin (who wrote and broadcast almost one hundred radio programmes for children⁷), may have suspected that 'cunning and high spirits' are facilities that children access more readily than educated adults. Most importantly, he saw that, whether negotiating a conundrum in a fairy tale or living dangerously between world wars, 'cunning and high spirits' might sometimes serve us better than a mature, educated intellect, and might just save our lives.⁸ after all, many of the worst atrocities inflicted by mankind have been the outcome of logical considerations. And these are based, if not on visceral conviction, then on more

⁴ From *Scratchcard Lanyard* (2020) by Dry Cleaning

⁵ Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1981

⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp 83–109

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin*, Lecia Rosenthal, ed, Verso, London, 2014

⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, op cit, p 102

bureaucratic but equally deadly ‘informed decision-making’, marked by a dubiously ‘intelligent’ weighing-up of options and odds that in retrospect seem to reveal, with strange inexorability, an all-too-human penchant for gung-ho murder and destruction.

[image]

The idea that early twentieth century Dadaism (of which Benjamin was a fan) deployed a strategic refusal of intellectual reasoning in response to the greater ‘stupidity’ of the First World War, is a familiar art-historical notion, but like all familiar ideas this one might prompt us to go in search of more examples of nonsense and stupidity in art with which to confirm or contradict it. There is surely a non-sensical tradition in fine art, and today’s most non-sensical indie pop lyricists and stupid band names (like Dry Cleaning and their *Scratchcard Lanyard*) might well be derived from 1920s DADA. Meanwhile, DADA drew upon older farcical traditions, as in their perverse deployment of ‘cabaret’.

One of the things I love about today’s DADA-influenced pop singers and bands is their attractively stupid choice of stage names and band names. Such a stupid base or frame for a creative enterprise appears, then, to free the artist from reliance upon intellectual sense while opening a parallel realm of sonic and otherwise sensual values. An assumed stage name, for the act or the front-person, helps license a use of words bent primarily in the direction of rhythm and rhyme, and this can also provide an invitation to deploy nonsensical lyrics. These, in turn, might move closer to the music that accompanies them, as nonsense lyrics make more sound than sense.

It might be helpful to note here that the radical philosopher Gilles Deleuze showed an interest in a ‘sense’ that is sensual, *affective*, and therefore challenging to the constraints of the intellect. He found examples in Lewis Carroll’s mind-bending adventures of Alice ‘*in Wonderland*’ or ‘*Through the Looking Glass*’ while writing his book titled *The Logic of Sense*.¹¹ This title is itself worthy of consideration – after all, just what *is* the ‘logic’ of ‘sense’ or of the senses? Are ‘logic’ and ‘sense’ differentiated or synthesised in this title? Deleuze and his collaborator Félix Guattari might also associate our theme here with two of their

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* [1969], The Athlone Press, London, 1990

potentially anti-intellectual concepts: ‘becoming animal’ and ‘becoming machine’.¹² These might be implicated by pop music’s inhumanly wild, soulful outbursts (‘becoming animal’) or by the technologically assisted, mechanically repetitive beats, breaks and choruses (‘becoming machine’) for which Rock and Roll, Pop, Soul, Reggae, Hip Hop, Techno, Electro, Grime, etc, are known and loved.

As an artist, writer and lecturer, who is also a musician and songwriter and who has worked under assumed names, all this messing with sense seems admirably brave, liberating and worthy of celebration. Apparently nonsensical lyrics like those by Dry Cleaning also lead me to wonder how nonsense can maintain a special freedom and value in pop, and whether is it more difficult for fine art – including its criticism and theorisation – to also ‘get stupid’ in this way?

Pop music may have an advantage over fine art in readily replacing meaningful messages with nonsensical sentences and sung sounds. For example, as the best way for Little Richard to introduce his song *Tutti Frutti, Oh Rooti*, the emphatic declaration ‘A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop, a-lop-bam-boom!’ is unquestionably satisfactory; we wouldn’t change it for the world, even though the vocal here, like a drum or trumpet, makes, again, more sound than sense, and yet surely also something more than sound alone.¹³ And we might also ask once again just which ‘sense’ do we mean here? The most ‘common’ sense we encounter might *not*, after all, be logical or couched in a recognisable national language, but might instead be found in a trans-national, non-sensical bringing of noise that we appreciate, enjoy and value even if we cannot ‘make sense of it’.

[image]

Consider the following examples: in 1996 the Nobel prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney accepted France’s Order of Arts and Letters. As the medal was placed around his neck, it slipped to the floor causing the poet’s mouth to gape in laughter. We can only imagine how

¹² See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], Continuum, London, 2004

¹³ Songwriters: Dorothy Labostrie, Joe Lubin and Richard Penniman; Tutti Frutti lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

he creatively interpreted the resulting symbolism, but it is difficult *not* to see, there inside the poet's open mouth, something like the antithesis, yet also the cause and root, of all the crafted language for which he is renowned.

In one of his unworldly short stories, the writer Franz Kafka (a near contemporary of both Benjamin and Tristan Tzara) gave the name 'Josephine' to a mouse singer who performs at the heart of a burrow of nervy rodents.¹⁴ When Josephine sings, her audience is transfixed, they feel united, safe and fulfilled even though none can understand, interpret or evaluate what it is that she conveys, nor whether what she is doing should be called 'singing' at all. The pitch and vibrations of her voice invoke something strange, possibly ancient, *ur*, originary, that suffices as a valuable and compelling communication.

[2 x images]

The sound poems of sometime Dadaist Kurt Schwitters¹⁵ (who, like Walter Benjamin, was an inter-world-war migrating refugee) were made in response to the artist's experiences of captivity as an enemy alien and immigrant, but also in response to a twentieth century of unprecedentedly nonsensical destruction when many highly educated minds contributed to multiple hells and 'final solutions', including the holocaust and atomic warfare. Those limit cases left some artists of the late twentieth century practically speechless, or open mouthed, as illustrated by the stark production of playwright Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (1972), which uses severely controlled lighting, posture and make-up to leave only a single mouth to hold the stage. Here the language we rely on to make reasoned intellectual argument seems to grapple with its own limits and question its own ability to contribute to either art or sense.

Beckett may also want to remind us that we tend to think of and refer to the mouth as an isolated organ with which we can speak eloquently and intellectually, but we also use the mouth to sing, shout and swear, as well as eat, salivate, kiss, and more. DADA supremo

¹⁴ See 'Josephine the Mouse Singer', or 'The Mouse Folk', Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, New York, Schocken Books New York, 1971, pp 360–376

¹⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks05YuDGy6A>

Tristan Tzara, in one of his inter-war manifestos boldly claimed that 'Thought is Made in The Mouth'. Of course, we don't have to make sense of Tzara's purposeful deployment of a kind of provocative nonsense, but to pursue such an enquiry promises to prove fruitful and might, in fact, prove to be the fulfilment of Tzara's wishes.¹⁶

We do not usually say that we 'think' with the mouth. So, what happens if or when we entrust thought to mouth rather than mind, and thus see the body as a thing that thinks? Tzara might be alluding to the mysterious or automatic way in which we talk, invariably rapidly, rarely conscious of, or barely clear about the reciprocal dialogue occurring between thought and speech. Does speech lead thought or thought lead speech? What are the implications of this question for native and non-native speakers, class-natives and class-migrants, or for a more general, social and cultural divide between those who simply speak with habitual confidence and all those who are less sure, at any moment, about the value of the words that are about to come out of our mouth?

'Thought is Made in The Mouth' might seem most readily applicable to those singers we have mentioned above, whose tone, even if un-worded or indistinct, can communicate value and some obscure sense of meaning (think of Aretha Franklin's or Al Greene's inspired improvisations, or the popularity of Thom Yorke of Radiohead's plaintive whine). So Tzara may be referring to a form and a level of communication like that of Kafka's Josephine, 'made in the mouth' and that is above and beyond (or below and beneath) meaningful words. But then, why describe this as 'thought'?¹⁷ Tzara's phrase ultimately seems to make a more universal claim, applicable to every mouthed exchange, ie that thought is a product of the body rather than of the mind, and/or that he sees no convenient distinction between a thinking mind and an unthinking body.

Tzara's image may then correspond with radical Surrealist Antonin Artaud's and radical philosophers Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari's image of a 'Body Without Organs'.¹⁸ For these

¹⁶ See Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, Barbara Wright, trans, John Calder Ltd, London, 1977, p 35

¹⁷ Here we might start to consider what philosopher Gilles Deleuze called our 'image of thought', chapters on the theme of which can be found in both Deleuze's 'Proust & Signs', and his 'Difference & Repetition.

¹⁸ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1972], Continuum, London, 2003

creative thinkers, no ‘body’, of any kind, can be adequately or justifiably made into an organised object of knowledge, as some ‘thing’ – a whole with distinct and named parts, that we ‘know’, if only because knowledge production is itself an intellectual ‘organ-isation’ that denies what Deleuze, Guattari and Artaud perceive as a body’s greater complexities and contingencies (what precedes and enables it, and what it enables and produces). In place of an intellectually organised and conveniently understood body, their ‘Body Without Organs’ might remind us of certain less sensical grotesqueries alluded to in the literature and criticism of De Sade, Rabelais, Swift and Bakhtin, or in that image of a disembodied Beckettian mouth mentioned above.

[2 x images]

In the mid-to-late 1970s, Korean/American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, experimenting with technology, performance and issues of identity, on UC Berkeley’s West Coast campus in the US, explored ways in which the mouth forms language and thereby forms thought, and possibly forms the self. Her video, *Mouth to Mouth* (1975) shows the mouth, and nothing but the mouth, forming the basic Korean vowel graphemes – Ah, Yah, Eo, Yeo, Oh, Yoh, U, Yu, Eu, Ee. This suggests, like Tzara, some discomfiting associations between the supposedly dumb, material body and all the celebrated sophistications of language, as well as between nationality and nature. In her renowned artist’s book *Dictée*, Cha also included her own poetic thoughts on the matter, alongside anatomical diagrams that explain the body’s mechanism for manufacturing sounds that we call meaningful language.¹⁹

[image]

Now, having gathered several justifications for doing so, it would be a shame, given this unarguably intellectual setting, not to deploy a few more nonsense words that speak strangely to us across generations, nations, cultures and languages – for example, the Muppets’ magnificently mnemonic ‘Mah Na Mah Na’;²⁰ or Julie Andrews’ ultra-adjectival ‘supercalifragilisticexpiallidocious’, along with its playfully procrastinating accomplice ‘um

¹⁹ See Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2001

²⁰ Songwriters: P Umilliani, *Mahna Mahna*; lyrics © Edward B Marks Music Company, Marks Edward B Music Corp

diddle diddle diddle um diddle aye'.²¹ If these are words at all then they are words that, despite their apparent worthlessness, in being meaningless, make a claim on us and remain with us. Their idiosyncrasy and specificity make them especially memorable, and so, despite their absurd simplicity or inscrutable complexity (their 'cunning' and their 'high spirits', we might say) we treasure them as exceptions to our everyday dealings with more ordinary, useful and practical words.

It might even be that these nonsense words remind us of some underlying *meaninglessness* that haunts every meaning and therefore threatens the downfall of human supremacy – a tragic image to which we might respond with (non-intellectual) laughter or tears. And yet these nonsense words also seem to provide us – like art in general perhaps – with a space in which to play and invent, in such a way that new nuances of meaning, and possibly new thoughts, can be formed to help us articulate and negotiate our radically changing experience. If nothing else, nonsense words assure us that another word is always possible – and if another word, then perhaps another world?

The Beatles' unlikely 1967 hit *I Am the Walrus* was surely influenced, obliquely at least, by Little Richard, one of that band's formative idols.²² But its lyrics present a more fantastic mindscape in which anything it seems can appear and comingle so long as it is *not* logical.²³ Given this, we might think not only of DADA and Surrealism as precedents for the Beatles, or for Dry Cleaning, but further extend our connections from John Lennon's 'Walrus' mindscape way back to the fantastical imagery of the fifteenth-century painter Hieronymus Bosch, thereby suggesting that art's tendency to nonsensical association and fantastic imagination is historically deep-rooted.

Lennon's contemporary, Bob Dylan – seemingly licensed not so much by his meteoric success as by his *disdain* for all the hype – penned, circa 1965, several nonsense songs

²¹ Songwriters: Richard M Sherman and Robert B Sherman © Universal Music Publishing Group

²² Songwriters: John Lennon and Paul McCartney; *I Am the Walrus* lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

²³ (NB Before completing even the most moving and 'meaningful' of classics, like *Yesterday*, the Beatles often wrote provisional nonsense lyrics for their works in progress. ".... Getting it down, he used dummy words: what became "Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away" began as "scrambled eggs, oh my baby, how I love your legs" [Blake Morrison](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/20/the-lyrics-by-paul-mccartney-review-the-stories-behind-the-songs?utm_term=6199fc8375c3ed9ef510e78db413e5a3&utm_campaign=Bookmarks&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=bookmarks_email) in *The Guardian*, 20 Nov 2021 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/20/the-lyrics-by-paul-mccartney-review-the-stories-behind-the-songs?utm_term=6199fc8375c3ed9ef510e78db413e5a3&utm_campaign=Bookmarks&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=bookmarks_email)

wherein anything seems to go so long as it satisfied the maverick criteria of rhyme. These sometimes-Surreal songs, seeming less serious than many of the noble hobo ballads that brought him to fame, nevertheless open vistas of possibility beyond the limits of the logical and then make all this available, not just to Dylan but also to his huge audience.

Bob Dylan might also be an exemplar of the way in which a lyricist, poet, or any serious and experienced writer eventually comes to craft their text in such a way that it both requires and allows a reader or listener to 'read between the lines'. And this, once again, is less an intellectual procedure than it is a formal and sensual process, involving the barely conscious crafting of a potentially meaningful space, instead of the consciously constructive loading of that same space with prescribed and presumed meaning.

For any twenty-first-century artist inheriting the territory, license and liberty negotiated by centuries of preceding modern art and artists, what we might assume to be the specific *content* of our work can today be considered less consciously than the way in which we craft its receptacle, ie the formal device that allows it to appear in the world and make itself seen or heard. Our supposed or presumed content can and probably should be less consciously considered than the formal ways in and with which we deliver it. Thus, our content is allowed to reveal itself to us and to our audience obliquely, graciously, even enigmatically – often (and perhaps at best) as a surprise even to ourselves. Once again this is not necessarily an intellectual activity so much as an exercise in 'making' – to echo Tzara.

Nevertheless, today's fine art and fine artists continue to rely upon a certain 'intellectual certainty'; ie a modern, secular means of justifying art practices intellectually, even though they may also be described and valued (more mysteriously) as 'intuitive' and therefore *not* essentially intellectual after all.²⁴ Today, artists might do what they can to pre-emptively immunise themselves and their production against what they perceive to be the potentially ponderous and ever-pending process of modern, secular criticism.

²⁴ To parody Freud's reference to 'intellectual uncertainty' in his definitions of 'The Uncanny' (see 'Sigmund Freud,, Art & Literature, Penguin Freud Library, Volume 14, Penguin, London 1990, pp. 335 – 376

I recall being a Fine Art undergraduate who soon discovered that I was free to propose *anything* as art, so long as I honoured my own side of an unwritten pact by accepting that the judgement of others – present or deferred, real or imagined – accompanies or shadows that same freedom. This fact of the artist's life and work, it seemed to me, needs to be swallowed whole and accepted as an inevitable condition of the post-academic and post-modern artist. It eventually prompted me to make some art criticism of my own, if only to see, from the 'other side' as it were, just how criticism works, *if* it works, whether a critic's judgement is something to be afraid of or perhaps anticipated and incorporated into a work of art as it is being made? After many experiments in this field, it seemed to me that, to make a work of art we need the judgements of others just as much as we need our personally cultivated freedoms – along with all the externally imposed parameters we can get.²⁵ However, it is also important to remember that all of this – the work, the criticism, the tradition – is 'made' (again echoing Tzara) and thus none of it is, what might be called 'intellectually transcendent'.

In 2014, AICA's (Association of International Critics of Art) congress in Seoul cultivated a discussion of the changing role of the critic in the age of social networking, wherein in-depth, long-form, intellectual and professional criticism – and even professionalism in general – all seemed and continue to seem under threat. Then, AICA's 2019 congress in Berlin dedicated itself to analysing the challenges of populism, which thrives on ignorance and cultivates dangerous forms of stupidity that profess to be playful and liberal but soon reveal themselves to be toxic, even lethal, to democracy, society, and ultimately to life itself. So, can a stupid criticism (of art, music, literature), perhaps guided by Tristan Tzara's mad manifestos and some of our other examples above, possibly flourish within an 'Intellectual Aftermath' (the title of the 2021 AICA congress) created by the current nexus of barbaric challenges made to our intellectual ascendancy?

[image]

Above, we have already seen that a strategically non-sensical art or philosophy might be possible and has historical precedents, but a non-sensical art criticism seems less likely. But

²⁵ The name of a German post-modern rock band here comes to mind: *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle*

to provide one or two examples of art-critical activities that are not entirely intellectual, the nineteenth century, Parisian poet and critic Charles Baudelaire advocated the satirical singing of revolutionary songs as the most appropriate critical response to paintings made by conservative artists like Horace Vernet.²⁶ Meanwhile, in 1995, artist Nicholas Bolton visited Donald Judd's exhibition at MOMA Oxford, equipped with a home-built 'reading device', something like a Geiger counter and supposedly able to analyse and evaluate works of art. It was a spoof, of course, assembled from what looked like plumbing supplies, but thought-provoking as it was then, twenty-five years on it might have predicted those QR codes that instantly deliver description, interpretation and evaluation to a smartphone. Bolton might even have pre-empted the current potential for an Artificially Intelligent art critic/come audio guide.²⁷

Given these examples and precedents, might we justifiably ask whether artists and critics today could achieve their aims, find answers to their questions, and solutions to their problems by perhaps *emulating*, rather than simply being appalled and dejected by our current challenges to the long and proud rule of the Enlightened, modern intellect? After all, the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy's 1898 poem 'Waiting for The Barbarians' famously described an anxiously waiting citadel, housing a comfortable civilisation for whom the worst thing that can happen is that barbarians *will not* come.²⁹ An absence of barbarity is a problem precisely because barbarians (etymologically defined as those whose speech we cannot understand) provide a 'kind of solution'.

And so, it might just be that the barbarity of *all* non-understanding, of the apparent stupidity of all that we ourselves fail to articulate to uncomprehending others, or that we ourselves feel in the face of the unfamiliar and unknown, can, in some way, help us to solve our conundrums where and when logic and commonly understood forms of 'sense' might not.

²⁶ 'Thus, in front of every canvas by M Horace Vernet may be sung: "You have but a short time to live friends, live it gaily"' Charles Baudelaire, *The Salon of 1846*, in *Selected Writings on Art & Literature*, Penguin, London, p 89, footnote

²⁷ Also invoking the memory of Andrea Fraser's 2001 work *Little Frank and His Carp* in which the artist performs playing-up to the seductive language of an audio guide

²⁹ In C P Cavafy, *The Canon: The Original One Hundred and Fifty-Four Poems*, Stratis Haviaras, trans, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, pp 53–55

[image]

As a model of an artist wishing to ward off thoughtfully worded responses to, and intellectually loaded investigations of their art, Andy Warhol comes to mind, making nonsense of interrogation by critics (paraphrased in what follows). In one YouTube clip he can be seen, reassuringly flanked by his dealer, and answering each question put to him by a critic or journalist with a sniggering, monosyllabic mantra: 'errr Yes', 'errr No', heh heh, 'err No', 'errr Yes', heh heh'. In another, he responds to the critic's question by saying: 'could you give me the answer as well as the questions and I'll just repeat those'; and in another he holds his hands to his lips and asks '... can I just err say, err, blabba blabba blabba...'

The artist, often critical of criticism, thus criticises the critic. *Touché!* But this is a long-established tradition performing a necessarily reciprocal and mutual cultural exchange in which artist and critic ultimately use each other to determine the value of their own role and contribution. The critic may seem to come off worst in these exchanges but can nevertheless lick their wounds while retaining pride in the fact that they inherit a legacy that comes with a qualification to describe, interpret and evaluate whatever a fine artist sets before them and proposes as art – including an awkward interview.

If the art critic has become responsible for perpetuating a certain intellectual legacy according to which artists feel a need to either justify their work in intellectual terms, or to claim their work is largely intuitive, or to sabotage the whole critical procedure, then the critic can also subvert in their own ways – for example, by revelling in their profession's perennial potential for poetics, seeking suggestively sonic and otherwise sensual values in the meticulous choice of words. Here is a sentence scripted by the critic Lisa Turvey, describing, interpreting and evaluating a work by the painter Hurvin Anderson; a work which, according to Turvey: '... conjoins diluted runnel and opaque blot; audacious stroke and calligraphic tangle; scumble, dot, impasto, and wash, splintering the very terrain it defines'.³⁰ This reads well to the eye but equally appeals to ear and mouth, even crying out perhaps to be spoken aloud so that all those sensory qualities (above and beyond the

³⁰ Lisa Turvey, 'Hurvin Anderson', *Artforum International*, Vol 49, Issue 8, April 2011, pp 212–213
<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201104/hurvin-anderson-39169>

words' intellectual meaning) might have their full effect and become physically present as materials that meld with (and don't just describe, interpret and evaluate) the materials and processes to which they are responding – in a form of *ekphrasis*.³¹

To turn towards a conclusion now, and simultaneously return to pop lyricists Dry Cleaning, this indie band has engaged and impressed me with their brave assemblages and inspired juxtapositions. Through the strange times we currently endure, where the combined logic of political management and medical necessity rein in and reign over our usually more carefree behaviour, the unruliness of Dry Cleaning's non-sensical lyrics seems to offer freedom, humour, pleasure and possibility. Like birdsong, the nonsense lyrics found in this indie pop from an emerging generation sound promising, even though I do not 'understand' them, nor really want or seek to do so. No-one can translate them into 'common sense' without destroying their peculiar purpose. Despite this non-sensicality, they are clearly valuable and valued as contributions to culture. In fact, they are a 'hit', or in Walter Benjamin's words they are: '... the street song last on everyone's lips' and might even be capable (to complete the Benjamin quote) of 'determining a life' 'at a decisive moment' ³².

Scratchcard Lanyard, like all good pop songs, is a modern, miniature, machine-made work of art, which, although cheap, cheeky, ubiquitous and ephemeral has a special, sensual, cultural meaning, and a peculiarly philosophical depth and importance that we may have only begun to explore here. Today, as we search for ways of comprehending a feasible future, and of rescuing a vision of a global society, where peace, prosperity and understanding might yet win out and reign, we could justifiably be tempted to wish for a form of art, and its associated criticism, suited to an emerging trans-national world where 'barbarity' and 'civilisation' (echoing another famous quote from Benjamin) might cease to be simplistically regarded as mutually exclusive, and instead, like body and mind, live more truthfully one-in-the-other, part of an emerging world where contradictions, ambiguities, oxymorons, odd juxtapositions, and other challenges to intellectually organised 'good' or

³¹ *Ekphrasis*: a work of art made in response to a work of art

³² From: 'Surrealism, a Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia, Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, Verso, London, p.229.

'common' sense, abound. A world where sense and nonsense also become reacquainted and re-equated.³³

If so, some of the pageant of examples paraded above might allow us to uphold the 'high-spirited' value of nonsense and its 'cunning' or strategic deployment, while simultaneously providing access to a kind of *ur* or originary utterance that while it might not be obviously 'meaningful' nevertheless provides us with some essential value and sense of possibility.

The future of language, and thus of thought, may lie (and may always lie) in the direction of its pre-intellectual, physically embodied origins. If so, this would support an etymological definition of the word 'radical' as meaning 'to the root'.

³³ 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' – Walter Benjamin, from *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp 253–264 (p 256)