Cluster Essays on World Youth Cultures

The Dialectic of the Dance: On Talvin Singh's "Anokha"

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> The most serious part of the difficulty is the necessity to bring the dance and its tempo into tune with the "revolution." The lack of place for the madness of the dance — this bit of luck can also compromise the political chances . . . and serve as an alibi for deserting organized, patient, laborious . . . struggles . . . when brought into contact with all the forms of resistance that a dance movement cannot dispel, even though the dance is not synonymous with either powerlessness or fragility.
>
> JACQUES DERRIDA, "Choreographies"

> How do we read the agency of the subject when its demand for cultural and psychic and political survival makes itself known as style?
>
> JUDITH BUTLER, "Agencies of Style for a Liminal Subject"[1]

STANDING AMID AMIABLE American students, impeccably dressed Japanese tourists, laconic Englishmen, and jocular Asian youths chattering away on tiny cell phones, I move slowly though the snaking lines of *Fabric*, London's newest and biggest nightclub (obligatory gimmick: "featuring a floor built entirely out of speakers"). On this unseasonably warm March night, *Fabric* is playing host to *Anokha*, the Hindi term, loosely translated as "unusual" or "unique," attached to the infrequent performances put on by a group of British-Asian DJs, visual artists, and musicians, headed up by Talvin Singh: musician, promoter, record-label owner, and all-round artistic figurehead for the young generation of British born people of Indian descent.

Wandering about the three cavernous spaces of Fabric, weaving one's way through the "chill-out room," where a skinny, spectacled Asian DJ mixes the sound of a North Indian vocalist

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chanting the Hindi religious utterance "Sita-Ram" with a frenetic track from some unnamed member of the British electronic avant-garde; brushing past the spindly monobrowed twenty-something just arrived from Calcutta, the one who taps me on the shoulder and says — in the unmistakably syncopated enunciation of those who are, as us "diasporics" often call them, "fresh off the boat" — that "he is son of wealthy industrialist from Calcutta . . . one of those fucking rich bourgeois kids, mate," shortly before adding, "I get twenty-five thousand fucking quid a year spending-money, mate, and I spend it all on fucking acid"; stopping to notice Talvin Singh himself — "fresh" from remixing a Madonna song — "just back from Bombay where he gave respect to his tabla tutor" (as one of his beautiful acolytes later informs me), acting as the grand master of the evening, overseeing the DJs, nodding appreciatively as contemporary jazz great Cleveland Watkiss (armed tonight with turntables rather than a saxophone) blends a ghazal by Islamic Qwaali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan with deep, dark-sounding drum and bass beats, patting old friends on the back, smoking cigarettes incessantly, continually putting his hands to his head to re-shape the dyed-green spikes in his hair . . . walking through all of this cultural *mélange*, the kind of thing so championed in today's age of a privileged pastiche, it is easy to forget that one is in the same London where not more than ten hours ago a pimply, adolescent youth, eating fish and chips from a grease coated piece of paper towel, snarled at me that "people like you should go back to your own fucking country."

More important, or perhaps less important for those not caught in the narcissism of intellectualism (the ones who must therefore more directly live the vicissitudes of racism), when walking through the intensely hedonistic, opulent atmosphere of *Fabric* it is also easy to forget that *Anokha*, which began meeting almost a half-decade ago for bi-monthly nights organized by Singh, has often been championed by the younger generation of cultural workers, not to mention by Singh himself, as a kind of model for postmodern cultural identity — a place where the hybridity behind the moniker "British-Asian" is — to use one of the defining words of contemporary theory — "performed" in an ultimately audio-specular manner.

Influenced in no small way by Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*, one of the crucial works of the French intellectual rejection of base/superstructure Marxist models of anti-hegemonic agency, it is the contemporary theoretical *zeitgeist* to find radical opposition to the power structure(s) in the most nonpolitical of spheres, to read the nonpolitical as profoundly political, the tactics of everyday life as agentive acts of guerrilla warfare. Operating under this framework, many have seen *Anokha* as enacting a double movement of subversion, both disturbing the boundaries which lie between the British self and the Asian Other (a perturbation made present by *Anokha's* melding of Asian music with Western beats), and problematizing the proximity of the British-Asian self to the Asian Otherness of one's migrant parents (Western beats deforming the "purity" of Asian music). Though the link has never to my knowledge been made totally explicit, *Anokha* (or other like-minded "events") has been instantiated, perhaps quite unconsciously, as a contemporary model for the discursivity of culture, thereby updating the older Derridean dictum that "there is nothing outside the text." In other words, "reading" culture off of the model of the sonic has been accepted, albeit without precise articulation, as simply more "hip" than reading culture from the model of the grammatologic.

Surprisingly, readings of *Anokha* do not emerge from the pages of *Public Culture* or *Diaspora*, highbrow journals that have devoted little attention to either Singh or the British-Asian scene.[2] Instead, they can be found on the numerous web sites devoted to Singh himself, to dance music, or to that amorphous thing known as sonic postmodern culture. For example, browsing the web site of Island Records, the major label which releases Singh's work, one finds the following comment on Singh's 1999 album, O.K.:

> A question often asked: What will music sound like in the 21st Century? Ask Talvin Singh. He lives there already.

And a few lines later, we read:

> "O.K." [Singh's] debut album . . . is from the floating world, music that captures the feeling of movement between identities, cultures,

> destinations, languages. A place between the body and digital processes. A zone of oscillation between traditions and heresy. In the gaps between genres, where music is currently at its most interesting, or in the vast differences of scale between rural village and urban supersprawl. Everywhere is exotic; nowhere is exotic.
> (23 May 2000 <http://www.island.co.uk/news/news401.html>)

Though Singh's work (and, by proxy, *Anokha*) does indeed partially reach out to what Jean-François Lyotard characterizes, in one of his more beatific moments, as the "post-modern sublime" (80-81), something akin to what Island records describes as the disjointed and perhaps ineffable state of betweenness, "between identities, cultures, destinations . . . between the body and digital processes," or what another site calls "the alienated space of transition where nothing really belongs yet everything is there" (10 Aug. 2000 <http://imusic.com/showcase/club/talvinsingh.html>), it seems as though the work is also inscribed within the liberalizing politics of mainstream multiculturalism. This is a politics that, in the words of Rasheed Araeen,

> is not about the equality of all cultures, but how the dominant culture can accommodate those who have no power in such a way that the power of the dominant is preserved. (16)

One does not need to look to such theoretical writings to note Singh's complicity with the rhetoric of multiculturalism. Even magazines indebted to a certain Eurocentric *belles-lettres* (perhaps, more appropriately, *belles-music*) vision of the avant-garde often make similar comments about Singh. A recent review, published in the British magazine *The Wire*, charges Singh's production of an album by the Moroccan Master Musicians of Jajouka with "doing a *Reader's Digest/ Wallpaper Magazine* job in forcibly reducing [Jajouka music] into digestible chunks of ethnic colour" (Bell 53). It is this double moment of both Singh and his music — part agency of style for the marginalized ethnic subject, part cultural hegemony for the imperialist multicultural center — that this essay seeks to chart.

In a recent article, postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha condemns those who too quickly praise the Internet for providing a space in which subjectivities can be informed, deformed, and reformed in a liberatory manner. He warns against heralding the

Internet as a kind of "digital diaspora." According to Bhabha, behind the existential phantasms of self-fashioning entailed in "e-mail epistemologies . . . where 'what you see is not what you necessarily need to know' . . . [and] . . . on-line ontologies, where 'you need not be who you say you are'" (viii), lie the very real cultural codes that produce, reinforce, and sustain the sense of an imagined purity of identity that subsequently gives rise to the rhetoric of neocolonialism and the fetishistic economy of racism. In adopting the figure of the electronic cosmopolitan as the privileged locus of ethnicity, one ignores the politics of space and place that prohibit, both physically and psychically, such an unconstrained passing of boundaries.

Similarly, might there not be a marked danger in too quickly celebrating *Anokha's* surface appearance of cultural signifying play, the level on which it can be said that the "originary" separation of India and the West, the transcendental signifier of Orientalist discourse, is dissolved in the instantaneous shifting of the note, or quite literally deconstructed on the two turntables of the DJ's mixing board? This is not to say that *Anokha* fails entirely at such manoeuvres. In fact, the commendable desedimenting import of *Anokha's* approach to cultural interaction is made strikingly clear by Singh's astute comment that in opposition to typical musical collaborations between East and West, the sounds issuing from his self-professed "Asian-Underground" are not a fusion, because "fusion is for someone who is ignorant, you shouldn't need to fuse two things together. They already are fused, you just have to see what's linking them" — a comment that, at least to my mind, evokes Edward Said's provocative idea that it is only in relation to the disavowed East that the West can constitute its own sense of a punctuated and self-aware modernity, or Bhabha's discussion of the Third-Space, where the ambivalent structure of signification, the *différance* of "writing," disrupts any unidirectional, unequivocal organization of the flow of power between colonizer and colonized.[3]

But to further explore the discourses of that branch of postcolonial theory which is indebted, at least in part, to poststructuralism, what a total textual celebration of *Anokha* would elide is the materiality that rests outside of the semiotic of the electronic (whether of the computer or sonic variety), a space not

dissimilar to the Lacanian *point de capiton* that prevents a completely infinite play of signifiers.[4] If *Anokha* does indeed partially achieve a delicate state of the in-between, challenging cultural hierarchies without thereby dissolving cultural difference, revealing the originary and disavowed difference at the origin, the Third-Space between Western self and Asian Other, it also, perhaps equally, takes us back to the reactionary rhetoric of cultural plurality. As I have mentioned earlier, in this theoretical space, the presence of the Asian is important to the extent that it enhances a British aesthetic, not to the extent that it contests the very notion of culture as pure aesthetics, a discursive mode under which, as Walter Benjamin famously noted, the separation of the self and the Other is maintained with a dogged, perhaps even fascistic, determinism.

Nowhere is this made more clear than in the roped-off space of the small, utterly chic *Fabric* V.I.P. Lounge. I end up here at 3 a.m. (sipping the fifth of my $8 gin and tonics) thanks to my lucky decision to talk to Shabana, a gorgeous Leeds born British-Asian girl, who just happened to be the sister of the evening's promoter. Sitting on outrageously expensive leather couches, watching a well-dressed middle-aged Indian woman (about whom someone whispers to me, "she's like going to be the next prime-minister of India or something") talk to a man who I swear is film star Roshan Seth, I am reminded not only of the class distinctions that limit the British-Asian's access to the post-modern culture of *Anokha* (*Fabric*, after all, has an entrance fee hovering close to the $20 mark), but also, more important, or again, less important depending on one's intellectual outlook (or rather, the intellectualism of one's outlook), on the kind of unspoken exoticism underlying *Anokha*, an exoticism displayed not only in one of the possible translations of the word "anokha" itself (it is, after all, not a far step from "unusual" to "exotic"), but also in the faces of my couch-mates, the two British B-grade film producers (noses red and inflamed from snorting badly-chopped lines of cocaine) who stare amusedly and more than a bit condescendingly at the swarm of Anglo and non-Anglo Asians surrounding them.

To my hazy, drunken mind, their expressions — glassy eyes, smirking, upturned mouths — speak with all the codification of a written text. They say to me, "Yes, we will tolerate you here, for tonight. We will listen to *your* 'interesting' music . . . which, after all, really does sound quite hypnotic when blended together with *our* own. We will even let you believe that the spirit of collaboration will become a fixed model for aesthetic production. But, in the end, you will go back to your East-End Bollywood-Bhangra clubs and we will go back to our typical nights at *Fabric*, only occasionally meeting when we get a bit bored, when the soporific pounding of Speed Garage or the deadening groove of Deep House needs, as it were, some *spicing up*." [5]

But it is crucially important to note that the fault behind the project of *Anokha* does not stem entirely from its absorption into the larger text of the British postcolonial racism (a racism so subtly and marvellously enacted by the seemingly benevolent film producers). It is not a fault simply determined from without. Rather, it can often be found within the words of Singh himself. For example, when asked about the title of his album *O.K.*, Singh responds by completely collapsing the interesting antagonisms between and within generation(s) and culture(s) that his music often adumbrates with such subtlety:

> Why was the album called *O.K.*? Because it's the most common word in the world, . . . You go anywhere in the world and people know what OK is. Music shouldn't have boundaries. That's the way I've always seen music. Indian classical music . . . It's just language, that everyone can identify with. That's the most valuable thing in music today. We're living in that time when things have got to unite. (23 May 2000 < http://www.island.co.uk/news/news401.html.)

Then of course there is Singh's somewhat disheartening statement, uttered upon receiving the prestigious British Technics Mercury Prize: "the industry needs to accept music that's a bit colourful. I am not a minority anymore. I am a majority. This is celebrating that [fact]" (BBC News Online, "UK Asians Doing OK," London: 23 May 2000 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/low/english/uk/newsid_442000/442262.stm>). This comment that does little to disrupt the liberal multiculturalist, assimilationist imagination.

So how then should one "read" both Singh and *Anokha*, this person and place that moves, with all the characteristics of the dialectic — the term which now serves as a kind of generational shibboleth, the separation of the existentialist fathers from the post-structuralist sons/daughters, the 1950s humanist-Marxists from the 1970s Althusserians[6] — between a non-mystical ethical transcendence, a dissolving of the ethnic polarities that still manages to maintain a contestory separation, and an immanence that remains on this side of our liberal understanding of "culture," an understanding marked by racialized ethnic separation in which Otherness is viewed as mere aesthetic, in which the world, with its very real antagonisms of cultural difference, can be made radically hybrid by the hypnotic structure of sitars?

It is almost pure conjecture on my part, but I think that the key to understanding this vacillation lies in a consideration of the nature and scope of a performative politics, specifically, of the individual body of the club dancer as he or she offers a kind of performative gesture to the Others located at any given moment within his or her space. Here of course we must break with my equation of Singh to *Anokha* itself, for in realm of the communal sharing of rhythm, where as Emmanuel Levinas writes, "we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it" (4), the "author" of the sounds themselves is almost totally separated from his claims to authorial initiative, from his desire to possess a controlled mastery of the dissemination of the "text" at hand.[7]

Instead, we must look to the dance floor of *Fabric* itself, where Singh, standing behind a large iron grate to prevent dancers from bumping into his turntables, bobs his head up and down in a mad frenzy, spinning what is essentially a montage of Drum and Bass/Jungle with a myriad of Asian sounds, of the folk, classical, and popular varieties. We must look to the sweaty men and women who perform the contorting, languorous movements that "accompany" this strand of dance music by matching its hyper-frenetic beats in half or even a quarter time, cataleptically following the numerous breaks between clusters of densely

packed beats — that is, we must attempt to think what Paul Gilroy calls "counterculture's unique conjunction of body and music" (76).

Shortly after my attempted flirtation with Shabana fails miserably due to both my general incompetence and the presence of a drunken, almost vomiting friend of hers who "really must be taken home," I climb to the topmost balcony of *Fabric*, more than a bit disappointed. Surprisingly, from this elevation the dancers gyrating to Singh's music do not form an amorphous sea of collective movement, a sweaty mass of sexuality that one regularly observes when clubs approach their peak hours. Rather, I observe a somewhat surreal patchwork of movement — Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* desert orgy scene *sans* orgy. Separated by three feet or more, the dancers seem locked into invisible cells, each contorting and twisting in time with his or her own conception of the logic of these illogical rhythms.

Even from this height, I can make out many of their individual features: the British-Asian boy with nice cheekbones, the British black girl with dreads so immaculate that they scream out a kind of louche Hoxton hipsterism rather than a "true" Brixton attitude. These are not dancers dancing in any sort of modernized scene of tribal collective catharsis, each individual indistinguishable from the next — in fact, the scene before me proves to be something quite other than Levinas's (Eurocentric) take on rhythm, where the collectivity swallows up the participants.[8] These are atomized individuals, occupying a completely desexualized space, each using unique hand movements to self-stylize themselves, to present themselves to the Other as an aesthetic object to be appreciated, though not approached.

This is the kind of situation predicted by the Frankfurt School; many of the components of its theorizing are present: the dance floor of *Fabric* does indeed appear to resemble the fragmentation of the individual at the hands of capitalism run amok, the death of collective, the impossibility of radical consciousness due to the stultifying effects of financed, strategic "counter-culture." If this is to be taken as a correct reading, what the logic of late capitalism has wrought is the death of dancing as a vibrant scene in which (wo)man can bond together and develop a kind of community. In other words, the dance

floor of *Fabric* would simply become yet another supporting example of what Robert Kaufman describes as Frankfurt School theoretician Theodor Adorno's insistence that "this or that projection of mass culture radicalism is in reality the profoundly depoliticizing projection of capital itself" (706).

Yet, at the risk of lapsing into an equally limiting Francophilic theoretical approach, what such an analysis misses is the subtle subversiveness simultaneously sneaking into this milieu: the new notions of a disjunctive collectivity being forged (a collectivity without subsumption that the new breed of Levinasians might just call "ethical" — at least if they can disavow their investment in the possibility of a particular unmediated experience), the radical gender equality in which women are for once not solely turned into objects of the male gaze. Aesthetically, the dance demonstrates new notions of rhythm, of what dancing should be and what it means to dance well; there seems to be no set model for what in fact constitutes "good" dancing. It is a community built not around some fixed exoticization of the Other but around a self-determined style of self-exoticization, an avowal of the zones of the abject, the silly, the base, that both inform and perform the very "core" of the self. So once again, we seem to be back to where we started: staring into the face of an almost interminable dialectical contradiction.

Much as I would like to resolve these contradictions, we must, as it were, appease the aporia, and realize that *Anokha* and Singh exist not only between "identities, cultures, destinations, languages . . . the body and digital processes . . . traditions and heresy," or, as I have just stressed, between the theoretical languages of France and Germany, but, ultimately, between a truly subversive politics of aesthetic enjoyment and a truly reactionary, individualized enjoyment of aestheticized pseudopoliticism. We must realize that *Anokha* is a dialectic without transcendence.

I want now to return to our point of origin: the epigraph from Jacques Derrida. Here, Derrida's comment comes from an often-overlooked interview on the subject of sexual difference within the scene of Western metaphysics, both revolutionary and reactionary. In response to an interlocutor who cites anarchist/feminist Emma Goldman's famous comment that "If

I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution," Derrida speculates at some length about the tension between enjoyment and politics, symbolized in the context of his words by the tension between dancing and revolutionary action. His comments are worth quoting in their entirety:

> The most serious part of the difficulty is the necessity to bring the dance and its tempo in tune with the "revolution." The lack of place or the madness of the dance — this bit of luck can also compromise the political chances . . . and serve as an alibi for deserting organized, patient, laborious . . . struggles when brought into contact with all the forms or resistance that a dance movement cannot dispel, even though the dance is not synonymous with either powerlessness or fragility. (443-44)

If we listen to Derrida, it becomes apparent that one can discard neither dancing nor the revolution — neither *Anokha* as a site of contestory struggle nor the necessity of combating reactionary cultural politics in a more political sphere. Rather, the two must continually be brought to bear on one another, even though such a bringing to bear will never result in a dialectical synthesis. The denizens of this night at *Fabric* will not wish to engage in anything resembling overtly political action, and neither will many (though certainly not none) of those engaged in political activism wish to indulge in *Anokha's* more Epicurean aspects. Yet both groups exist, and both, ultimately, have a similar desire to liberate the vicissitudes of cultural difference from the constraints of cultural hierarchy and racism. Ironically, it is here that the need for something between dancing and action — namely, the *pas de deux*, the dance of duplicity — avowedly announces itself.

Before turning to a speculation on the question of woman in Nietzsche, Derrida speaks about "the impossible and necessary compromise . . . an incessant, daily negotiation — individual or not — sometimes microscopic" (444) between the dance and the revolution. In writing this article, I hope to have begun such an impossible negotiation.

NOTES

1 Butler's essay sees itself as an attempt to unfold and expand her excellent question.

2 Today, more than six months after this article was written, I stumbled upon Ali Nobil Ahmad's article, "Whose Underground? Asian Cool and the Poverty of 'Hybridity,'" published in *Third Text*. For those who have read Ahmad's article, a scathing critique of post-colonial theory which does little to no justice to the specificity of "Asian Cool" (or, for that matter, to post-colonial theory), I hope it will become apparent by the end of my article that my differences from Ahmad are so great that any sustained reflection on them would transform this paper into mere polemic.

3 For this provocative linking between the structure of signification and the construction of cultural identity, see Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory."

4 In Lacan's theory of discourse it is the *points de capiton*, the quilting points, which stop the incessant sliding of signifiers, allowing something like a (provisionally) stable meaning to emerge; see Slavoj Zizek 87-88.

5 In many ways the reaction of the white film-producers to *Anokha* is similar to what bell hooks calls the desire to fuck the non-white Other. That is, the producers "claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for . . . asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects" (24).

6 Six months later, I now wonder if this is still the case . . . after all, so many of our best known practitioners of "high theory" seem suddenly bent on recasting the dialectic as that which encircles, but does not assimilate, the *objet petit a.*

7 In fact, it appears that the death of the author is the most marked in DJ culture, where the "song" emerges from somewhere between its originators, the DJ who reconfigures his or her work and perhaps melds it with that of others, the currently technology of mixing, and the spatial configuration of the club; for some similar reflections on the deconstructive nature of the DJ see Simon Frith 465.

8 Of course, this is due to the frenetic nature of this particular branch of Techno. Other variants, Trance for example, seek precisely to recreate such a "tribal" atmosphere.

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