

‘Speak Truth to Power’ OR ‘Stick to the Script’ . Five years since the publication of ‘Total State Machine’ (PC- Press, 2014)

When ‘Total State Machine’ was published in 2015 it was the culmination of a long, complex process of collating, documenting, reflecting on and writing on what was nearly 35 years of Test Dept work. Created from nothing in true DIY style, inspired by Punk and Electronic music and but developed in their own unique style, where Politics meant as much to them as their art; Test Dept made work that played a part in transforming and inspiring activism in its audience:

We saw our whole creative process as being revolutionary and transformational and that remained as a continual, central focus for us’ (TSM, 2014, p.50)

Test Dept’s work was art: they saw themselves primarily as sonic and artistic revolutionaries rather than political ones, but they involved themselves and their art with the struggles of workers and the wider population who had minimal power unless it was realised through activity, activism or workers action. They attempted to turn that lack of power into something self-made, self-developed and self-propagated, the power of creativity, self-organisation with little financial backing. The miners’ strike, the Wapping print workers strike, the Anti-Poll Tax Unions campaign, the Voices Against Censorship campaign all had interventions at various levels by TD and the group of artists, writers, performers and musicians around them. They lived and breathed the idea of self-organisation and creativity against the Culture Industry (Adorno, 2001)¹ and against the mainstream offering the practice of an alternative to the Conservatism, jingoism and reaction of the 1980s and 1990s.

Where are we now? In the five years since this book was published Test Dept have re-emerged to push the envelope of creative activism and self-motivated production once again. In fact, Test Dept had already re-activated before the publication of the book; Total State Machine’s final chapter documented the group re-emerging as Test Dept Redux; this started as a process of using fragments of the old music catalogue and repurposing them into new tracks that the pairing of Paul Jamrozy and Gray Cunnington played as a laptop duo. The group also produced the show DS30 at Dunston Staiths on the river Tyne to mark the 30th anniversary of the miners’ strike. These works led on to the reformation of Test Dept as a live unit and the reworking and recording of works based on old tracks. These reworkings eventually became the template of the album ‘Disturbance’ and the band developed a new relationship with the record label ‘One Little Indian’ which was originally started by members of Anarcho-Punk band Flux of Pink Indians. This interaction of a label that gives artistic control to the musicians and has the principles of DIY and Anarchist ideals at heart seems totally apt for Test Dept and the current period.

Are Test Dept and the ideas they embody any use to the public in the current period? As a way of approaching life, art and politics we can say they resoundingly make sense in 2020 as

¹ Adorno, Theodor. The Culture Industry: Selected Essays On Mass Culture. Routledge, 2001

they did in the 1980s. The Corona Virus pandemic and the response of governments around the world has given people more cause for concern about the levers and organisation of power in the current world. The 'Disturbance' albums starts with the track 'Speak Truth to Power' which questions the 'triumph of capitalism' and tells the 'truth': 'poverty is a crime, austerity is a lie' (Lyrics: Speak Truth to Power). The idea of Speak Truth to Power or Parrhesia as it is known from the Greek beginnings of the concept is an interesting and according to Michel Foucault a dangerous one:

...parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.²

Test Dept want to 'Speak Truth to Power': they want to enlighten, enrage and stimulate activity. But as we have seen it can come at a huge cost. The Miners' strike in 1984/85 was one such example of people trying to put a spotlight on what the government were doing but not being believed by large parts of the population despite large campaigns in support of their struggle. Truth is as interesting a concept in these COVID 19 times as it was in the 1980s. Seamus Milne³ wrote about and uncovered the extraordinary lengths the Thatcher government went to destroy the National Union of Mineworkers despite what they said in the press and to Parliament at the time. The 'enemy within' was deliberately attacked by her government and the intelligence agencies using phoney bank deposits, staged cash drops, forged documents, agents provocateurs and unrelenting surveillance. Truth was untrue, reality was not what it seemed. Today we have a dangerous relationship with truth. The Politics of lying and caring little for the consequences as long as the immediate present is won is dominant. Examples are everywhere but lies about life after Brexit – 'Get Brexit done: invest in our NHS, schools and police' trumpeted the Conservative party slogan for 2019 as it won the election on a tide of petty nationalism and a belief that Boris would look after the working class in a way that Labour wouldn't. What do we have today? The understanding that the very people being lauded, clapped and given new badges will be refused a pay rise in the post Corona conservative economic landscape. The privatisation of the NHS continues as:

Deloitte, KPMG, Serco, Sodexo, Mitie, Boots and the US data mining group Palantir have secured taxpayer-funded commissions to manage Covid-19 drive-in testing centres, the purchasing of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the building of Nightingale hospitals.⁴

² The Meaning and Evolution of the Word "Parrhesia": Discourse & Truth, Problematization of Parrhesia - Six lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, Oct-Nov. 1983

³ Milne, Seamus, *The Enemy Within: The secret war against the miners*. Verso, 2014

⁴ Garside, Juliette *and* Neate, Rupert, *The Guardian* Mon 4 May 2020

But lies and a less than honest relationship with truth go hand in hand with even more disabling and regressive concepts for the wider population. The over dominating idea of branding is one such destructive concept, we are encouraged to develop a brand, our identity as a branded, new products are brands that really masks their true worth. Any close and critical watching of Alan Sugar's The Apprentice and the over constructed and manicured but ultimately characterless individuals that populate the show can tell you that. We also have the insistent voices that tell us to 'stick to the script'. Don't become subversive, do what you need to do to make money and don't rock the boat. 'Stick to the script' often brings people to the realisation that the script is a lie, a diversion or a weapon of sales rhetoric. So we must 'Speak Truth to Power' but if you do the danger is you pay a huge cost. Whatever we think of Jeremy Corbyn, the reality was that his leadership was taken apart by lie after lie from the Conservatives, the media and the right wing of the Labour party. Now we have leaders who 'stick to the script' and tell us that the response to Covid 19 has been a 'success'⁵. As Catherine Bennett of the Guardian⁶ observed, the Government briefings day in, day out 'stick to the script' and tell us very little, hiding the real truths under a veneer of reciting the mantra of the 'Five Tests', the slogan; 'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save lives', and now 'Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives'. The Government talk about the heroic frontline workers, talk about our 'world leading scientific experts', lead the clapping every Thursday but do not consider a pay raise for these workers, and in these excruciating times of rhetoric and branding Matt Hancock stepped forward saying that there should be a 'New Brand' for Social care; a badge:

"This badge will be a badge of honour in a very real sense, allowing social care staff proudly and publicly to identify themselves, just like NHS staff do with that famous blue and white logo"⁷

Badges, clapping, slogans and mantras but no sense of real help for heroes, how about learning the lesson that COVID 19 shows us how unequal our society is, how about the lie about 'austerity' exposed by the use of billions of pounds to furlough workers and build new hospital centres to deal with COVID 19 in days? A government and politicians who have lived and breathed empty slogans that cover up the reality and paint a lie to the public continue to push these hopeless mantras. From 'Strong and Stable'⁸ to 'Get Brexit Done' to the lie of our 'success' in combatting COVID 19 we need to 'Speak Truth to Power' but also to act upon it. Boots Riley's film 'Sorry to Bother You'; a dystopian tale of life in a call centre for a young black American who has to use a 'White' voice and should 'stick to the script' to get his sales done is another wake up call for us with similar themes to those we are experiencing now. The main character ends up being promoted into a world of selling weapons and secret government projects of human and animal transplation and in the process ditches his colleagues who are forming a trade union for call centre workers. Riley like Test Dept is an activist himself, his film uses dystopian tropes and surreal fantasy to paint a world of corruption, greed, anti-humanism and mass exploitation of the majority of the population by corporations and complicit politicians who all lie about the reality of the

⁵ Johnson, Boris, Speech to the Nation, Downing Street, London. 27th March 2020

⁶ Bennett, Catherine. Opinion, Corona virus outbreak 'No 10's coronavirus briefings: stick to the script and hope no one sees your nose growing' Guardian 2nd May 2020

⁷ Independent Newspaper Online, Wood, Vincent, Thursday 16 April 2020 00:16

⁸ Theresa Mays 2017 Election Slogan

world. Test Dept like Riley want us to act and think and build our own new worlds, taking down the logic of corporations and capitalism. The growth of mutual aid organisations delivering food and help to anyone who needs it and some deep reflection on what is valuable to us as human beings is something that this current crisis has brought to many and is beginning to show a different way forward beyond the lies, the exploitation and the greed. What the anniversary of this book shows us, and why it is valuable to learn from the Test Dept experience, is that we can develop our own future and try and make a new reality. It may come at a cost but we need the ideals of DIY, self-organisation and mutual aid more than ever.

Pete Webb, Bristol, May 2020.