

“I could scarce convince myself I had not been born the being I represented; my past existence began to appear to my reflections only as some idle dream, that the fever of sickness had brought upon my mind...”

– Robert Montgomery Bird, Sheppard Lee: written by himself

Dark reflections always distort. Dissonant strings, horror film bass, drawn out vocals, “baby it’s slow /when lights go low / there’s no help no.” There is a palpable feeling of ill will entwined with an erotic shiver at the beginning of The Walker Brothers’ “The Electrician,” written by Scott Walker in 1978. The sustained notes add an effect of pathos, a trait often found in the symphonies of Schubert, or Mahler, or any number of romantic composers really. Suddenly, a drum break and bursting from this dark haze lush string swells and a baritone croon over take you. Brightness and warmth rush in, “he’s drilling thru the Spiritus Sanctus tonight / thru the dark hip falls screaming OH YOU MAMBOS.” Before you can shake off the harmonic uplift to fathom what those lines mean, “kill me and kill me and kill me / if I jerk - the handle / you’ll die in your dreams / if I jerk - the handle / jerk - the handle / you’ll thrill me and thrill me and thrill me.” Bass, castanets, Flamenco inspired guitar and plucked strings—romance and seduction continue. Until the dissonance of the opening returns, “baby it’s slow / when lights go low / there’s no help no.”

“Still, to struggle with the decay and death of notes (in music, things decay before they die) is one thing. To try and actually win seems somehow wrong: a Faustian error. Hence the Marshall stack.”

– Marc Ribot, “Earplugs”

The rock trio Sightings released a cover of “The Electrician” in 2007. The song lurches, a loud fight through chaotic showers of metallic sparks, the instruments are both punisher and punished, feedback and distorted throb rule this version. Sightings retain the undertow of eroticism, but rather than swelling romance and seduction in the croon and orchestration, there is a disciplined desperation in the vocals, bone sawing guitar, sub dermal bass and epileptic drums. This isn’t romance any more this is arrhythmia induced sadomasochism. Through the pain it is much easier to perceive “The Electrician” for what it is, Scott Walker’s response to news reports of Latin American right-wing torture squads. Walker did not write a song of direct damnation or protest in response to his disgust, Walker chose to bring forward the heart of torture: the thrill that overcomes the tormentor as he/she feeds on the surrender and collapse of the prey. Today, in 2008, the song is still strikingly current thanks to the Iraq War and any number of other global conflicts. What is interesting about comparing both the Walker Brothers and Sightings versions is that even if Sightings shuck romance for S/M, the pulsating emphasis of both is still desire. Both renditions coerce us into wanting bodily trauma—mine, yours, ours—with rhythm like a snake constricting the body of its prey. The lyrics alternate between torturer and victim as reflections of each other. Every drum break a bone fracture.

Reason is a light
that makes me see things as
they aren’t

-Francis Picabia, Chi-lo-sa

Rhythm always casts shadows on the reflection of self when our normally defined within submits to the without. Given that our living of time is not one of a linear progression of markers but of swells and fluctuations as past, present and future envelope each other during reception, it is

ironic that rhythm aids this experience by emphasizing a linear tick-tock progression of time passing. - bamp - bamp - bamp - Explanations depart, but "beyond discourse is not darkness or abyss, just a momentarily empty mirror" as T. J. Clark writes in *The Sight of Death*. You might wonder what that is in your body, who that is doing the boogaloo, where your reflection went. At those moments there will be a distinct stomp, you might hear a heart wreck, within/without will realign and vibrate together, all will surrounded by resonance, followed by a recognition of where the reflection missing from the mirror went when the tone decays. Let it all come forth and rock.

Anthony Elms