

Beatitude in Robert Ashley's Perfect Lives

“What about the Bible? And the Koran? It doesn't matter. We have *Perfect Lives*.”
—John Cage¹

The reception of works of the *avant-garde*, such as Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives*, is often fraught with misunderstanding. This is sometimes thought to be characteristic of the *avant-garde* itself – a seemingly willful attempt to make a once meaningful art esoteric to its public. David Cope writes in his survey *New Directions in Music*, “The raison d'être of the *avant-garde* movement has centered around shock and “newness...” The very nature of the [avant-garde] concept binds the composer to reject the past and work within a multitude of limitations often surpassing those of the strictest contrapuntalist.”² As in the Cope excerpt, this “rejection” is seen as endemic to the *avant-garde* – the new in art is invented *ex nihilo* – the caprice of artists to turn away from both the past history of the medium *and* its audience.

However, this misunderstanding can at least in part be attributed to the frequently catholic nature of the work; the concept may be new to the art form, but not new in and of itself. The Surrealists Yves Tanguy and René Magritte, and later “Action Painters” such as Jackson Pollock, were dependent on psychoanalytic theory; Luigi Russolo, Futurist painter and composer, looked to modern industry for his *Intonarumori*; John Cage discovered the music of Zen Buddhism through the *I Ching*; Jack Kerouac *wrote* bop. The *avant-garde* in a sense exists in a broader cultural community – the more disparate the influences, the richer

¹ Nicholaus Zurbrugg, ed., *Art, Performance Media: 31 Interviews* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). p. 35.

² David Cope, *New Directions in Music*, Sixth ed. (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Communications, Inc., 1993). pp. 347-348

the art. Such is the nature of Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives*, a "television opera" realized in various forms from 1978 to 1983.³

Ashley's work, described by the composer as a "comic opera about reincarnation,"⁴ draws from sources as varied as Duke Ellington, the writings of the historian Frances Yates, Theosophy, occultist and philosopher Giordano Bruno, the *Bardo Thödol*, melodrama, performance poetry, and Greek theater. Though it is expressly opera, knowing its literary and extra-musical sources are crucial to fully understanding the work as such, and its proper context in American music and performance art.

The "Beats"

"The 'beat' connection surprised me, because nobody has made it before. I've vaguely always wondered why, given my age. I guess it was simply a matter of being in a different place. There weren't very many beats and they were mostly in New York. I didn't meet even Ginsberg until just a few years ago. But I read all the books and liked them. I have to say that I thought Corso was a better poet. I liked a novelist whose name I can't remember who said, 'I have a small mind and I intend to use it.' I actually embarked on an 'on the road' adventure when I was finally out of high school..."

—Robert Ashley, in an E-mail message to the author, November 19th, 2009.

Though it is not a connection that has been explicitly made by those who have written about his work, many parallels can be drawn between the writings of "Beat Generation" authors such as Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, and the "New Narrative" style of Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* – something that has been noticeably missing in the critical response to Robert Ashley's "television opera." More than any other work, this quintessentially American body of writing seems to best anticipate Ashley's

³ Keith Potter, "Robert Ashley and 'Post-Modernist' Opera," *Opera* 38, no. 4 (1987). pg. 392.

⁴ Robert Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera* (San Francisco: Burning Books, 1991). pg. xi.

particular blend of religious iconography and *hip* sensibility. In fact, Ashley's work can be seen as a further development of the Beat project begun with such works as Kerouac's *On the Road*, or Ginsberg's *Howl* in the 1950s; it is Beat poetics in music, video, and performance art.

Like Ashley, the Beat writers worked with a broad palette. The poetry of Li Po, Issa, and Blake, Existentialist philosophy, Zen Buddhism, the Bop of Charlie Parker and "Dizzy" Gillespie – all of these informed the writing of a small group of like-minded authors throughout their heyday in the 50s and early 60s. The Beats were bohemian writ large, the beginnings of a truly popular counterculture in the U.S. Within a decade, this once avant-garde literary movement was absorbed by the mainstream, and certain aspects of the beat ethos found their way into the work of artists outside of literature. Lisa Phillips writes about this influence on other mediums, most notably Pop assemblage and performance art: "...the street level realism of much Beat writing from Kerouac to Ginsberg to Corso – was a harbinger of new emerging forms in the visual arts, namely junk sculpture, assemblage, and Happenings... From Robert Rauschenberg's combines, to Bruce Connor's assemblages using photographs, beads, lace, and nylon stockings, to John Chamberlain's junk sculptures of smashed car parts..."⁵ In popular music, Bob Dylan exemplified the new bohemian in his early folk-inspired records, and his lyrics are considered part of the Beat canon as a kind of "outsider" poetry:

"...if you're going to start out by creating a musical situation in which a story is told and in which you can show off all the dramatic aspects of making music – which I think is what opera is all about – you might as well use Bob Dylan as your model rather than Verdi."
—Robert Ashley⁶

⁵ Lisa Phillips, *Beat Culture and the New America. 1950-1965* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996).

⁶ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 184.

Ed Sanders's rock band "The Fugs," formed in 1965, is a particularly vivid example of the Beat influence on music in the 60s. (Sanders's collection of stories, *Tales of Beatnik Glory*, set in New York's Lower East Side, offers one of the more charmingly eccentric accounts of the decades following the early success of Kerouac et al.). The Beats' effect on the arts and broader culture should not be understated.

The most obvious parallel is generational; Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926, Michael McClure in 1932, Gary Snyder and Gregory Corso in 1930 – the same year as Ashley (Kerouac, the "King of the Beats" was born in 1922). "Beat" was originally used by Kerouac to describe the postwar milieu – his generation's sense of displacement and emotional ambivalence in the early years of the Cold War. John Clellon Holmes quoting a conversation he had with the author writes, "It's a sort of furtiveness," he said. "Like we were a generation of furtives. You know, with an inner knowledge there's no use flaunting on that level of the 'public,' a kind of beatness – I mean, being right down to it, to ourselves, because we all really know where we are – and a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world... It's something like that. So I guess you might say we're a *beat* generation."⁷

Kerouac's original conception of "beat" was soon amended to include the idea of *beatitude* or blessedness. The novels of Kerouac and the poetry of Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and in a more limited sense Corso, are essentially religious writings – often a syncretistic blend of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Catholicism, Blakean mysticism et al. Holmes writes, "What differentiated the characters in *On the Road* from the slum-bred petty criminals and icon-smashing Bohemians which have been something of a staple in much modern American fiction – what made them *beat* – was something which seemed to

⁷ John Clellon Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967). pg. 107.

irritate critics most of all. It was Kerouac's insistence that actually they were on a quest, and that the specific object of the quest was spiritual. Though they rushed back and forth across the country on the slightest pretext, gathering kicks along the way, their real journey was inward; and if they seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side. "The Beat Generation," he said, "is basically a religious generation."⁸ It is in this essentially religious, *beat* mode that *Perfect Lives* can best be understood.

A "New Narrative"

Though Ashley's "New Narrative" style first materialized in 1967 with the composition of his opera *That Morning Thing*, it was not until 1978 with the composition of *Perfect Lives*, that Ashley's mature operatic style was developed – 20 years after the publication of the defining Beat works, Kerouac's *On the Road* and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. It is primarily the method and aesthetic of these two authors that is relevant in the context of a discussion about Ashley's opera; they were, along with William Burroughs, the theoretical and affective foundation of the Beat 'movement.'

Ashley's opera *Perfect Lives* is a series of seven 24-minute episodes for television – an involved blend of improvised music, performance poetry, popular song, and often bewildering mysticism. It is the work that best defines what would become the "New Narrative" variety of contemporary opera; marked primarily by novel ways of using the voice, whether spoken or sung, and a preoccupation with diegesis as opposed to the usual mimetic re-enactment of a story. Robert Sheff ("Blue" Gene Tyranny), who played the character Buddy in the video and stage productions, and composed much of the music,

⁸ Ibid. pg. 117

describes the “New Narrative” style as a new type of opera that “...employs a great fluidity of inflection and character dependent on the performer’s imagination.”⁹ From Sheff’s perspective, the crucial aspect seems to be the collaborative and improvisatory nature of the operas.

Often, some form of modern media is also integral to the work. In *Perfect Lives*, it is electronic music and broadcast or projected video, depending on whether it is produced for television or the stage. The video directed by John Sanborn, and first premiered in 1984 on Great Britain’s Channel Four, is perhaps the definitive version of the work. However, in its ideal and as yet unrealized form, it is for “live” television with the same sense of improvisation that imbues other aspects of the work – what Ashley calls “...the spirit of first decision.”¹⁰

The episodes are titled after their respective settings in a small town in the Midwest, in the order of the opera: *The Park*, *The Supermarket*, *The Bank*, *The Bar*, *The Living Room*, *The Church*, and *The Backyard*. The places are significant for their very banality; it is Ashley’s realization of an archetypal Middle America, in the video represented by Galesburg, Illinois. The plot, as much as there is one, involves a couple of entertainers, the storyteller Raoul de Noget and “The World’s Greatest Piano Player” Buddy, who come to town to perform at “The Perfect Lives Lounge.” While there, they commit a “philosophical” bank robbery (the money is only removed for a day) with two locals, Isolde and her brother Donnie, “The Captain of the Football Team.”

This crime is the central event of the opera, around which occurs a wedding, an elderly couple shopping at a supermarket, a conversation at a bar, a picnic etc. All of the

⁹ Sheff, Robert. E-mail to Michael Kennedy, 22 September 2005.

¹⁰ Zurbrugg, ed., *Art, Performance Media: 31 Interviews*. pg. 37.

characters are in some fashion affected by or involved in what happens at the bank around mid-day. The scenes of the opera happen out of sequence, with each given a specific time in the libretto. For example, the second episode *The Supermarket* occurs (in the fictional narrative of the opera) after the bank robbery in third episode *The Bank*, or at 3:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. respectively.¹¹ The unusual sequencing de-emphasizes the sense of a coherent, linear story.

The plot is primarily a conceit around which Ashley develops his idiosyncratic characterizations of the Midwest. Much as in the writings of Kerouac, the emphasis is not on a sequence of events so much as philosophical musings, the illustration of a scene, or the setting of a mood. Ashley explains, “The audience that I’m writing music for likes to get into the same state of mind that I’m in, I guess. Which is an attention to words and music at the same time and that kind of daydreaming quality that I experience. I think it must be almost the same thing. In other words, when I’m happiest, I’m in a kind of daydream where I can hear... I hear words with music, I can just hear it in my head. I try to write down something that will make that same experience for the listener... My music doesn’t satisfy the kinds of intricate formal patterns that many people are interested in.”¹² The world of *Perfect Lives* is static, a series of thinly connected images and ideas, animated by Ashley’s sympathetic speech-like song.

¹¹ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. xv.

¹² Melody Sumner, ed., *The Guests Go in to Supper*. (San Francisco: Burning Books, 1986). pg. 99.

Kerouac's Beatitude

Kerouac reading from his novel *On the Road* as a guest on Steve Allen's popular television show in 1959¹³ is in a rudimentary way *Perfect Lives*. Allen playing the blues on a mirrored piano could be a stand-in for the character Buddy – “The World's Greatest Pianist” – and Jack Kerouac a self-conscious Raoul de Noget. The work is live television, as previously suggested, Ashley's ideal medium for his operas. Kerouac's careful diction, matching the phrasing of the piano, is a natural extension of a musical prose style. The text itself is similar to Ashley's in its self-referentialism; much of Kerouac's writing, including *On the Road*, is a series of roman à clefs he called the *Duluoz Legend*, and Ashley's personal experiences supply much of the substance of the libretto for *Perfect Lives*.¹⁴

Another trait that Ashley shares with Kerouac and the Beats is his hagiographic treatment of jazz musicians and overt metaphysical themes. In his poem *Mexico City Blues*,¹⁵ Kerouac likens Charlie Parker to the Buddha; the poem blends Kerouac's Dionysian Buddhism with his Catholic upbringing, and jazz is often used as a symbol of spiritual and emotional salvation. In fact both *Perfect Lives* and *Mexico City Blues* treat religious themes – Tibetan Buddhism in Ashley, and Zen in Kerouac – in an unconventional colloquial style. In the elegiac 239th chorus, Kerouac writes:

Charlie Parker looked like Buddha
 Parker, who recently died
 Laughing at a juggler on the TV
 weeks of strain and sickness,
 Was called the Perfect Musician.
 And his expression on his face
 Was as calm, beautiful, and profound

¹³ Richard Lerner and Lewis MacAdams, "What Happened to Kerouac?," (USA: Shout!, 1986).

¹⁴ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 152.

¹⁵ Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959).

As the image of the Buddha
 Represented in the East, the lidded eyes
 The expression that says “All is Well”
 This was what Charley Parker
 Said when he played, All is Well.
 You had the feeling of early-in-the-morning
 Like a hermit’s joy, or
 Like the perfect cry of some wild gang
 At a jam session,
 “Wail, Wop”
 Charley burst his lungs to reach the speed
 Of what the speedsters wanted
 And what they wanted
 Was his eternal Slowdown.
 A great musician and a great
 creator of forms
 That ultimately find expression
 In mores and what have you.¹⁶

In Robert Ashley’s later opera *Atalanta*, Bud Powell is one of the “three golden apples” – a proxy for the idea of music in the opera, and one of the principle “heroes” in the work.¹⁷ The name of Buddy in *Perfect Lives* is also likely an oblique reference to that other “World’s Greatest [jazz] Pianist.” Whereas in *Mexico City Blues*, Charlie Parker is merely compared to the Buddha, in *Perfect Lives* the character Buddy is literally a *saint* – or more likely, a bodhisattva in the tradition of Kerouac-like beatitude. His lessons in boogie-woogie are both musical and metaphysical. Ashley introduces Buddy in *The Bar* with this text:¹⁸

Hi, my name is Buddy. If I could help you make the
 Load a little lighter, it would be my pleasure.

We’ve all felt that it’s hard, at least harder than
 We think it should be, and we look for change.

¹⁶ Kerouac, Jack. *Mexico City Blues*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959. pg. 241.

¹⁷ Robert Ashley, *Atalanta (Acts of God)* (New York: Lovely Music, Ltd., 1997), Liner Notes.

¹⁸ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pp. 68-69.

It's my way – it's been given to me – to move among
The people, and to know our nature.

So, I should not hesitate to share my thoughts
And my experience with you.

For instance, to begin from the beginning, as it
Should be:

...

There is only one Self. That Self is
Light. The Self is ageless.

Spiritual Improv.

Ashley's connection to Beat aesthetics, intentional or not, are clear – particularly in his method of composition – a technique that he attributes to his interest in involuntary speech. For many artists working in the 40s and 50s in the U.S., such as Willem de Kooning in painting or John Cage in music, the process of creation was a crucial part of the art itself, and in some instances, most notably in Cage, the art was the process. To distinguish between the object and the act of creation became untenable. But more broadly, there seemed to be a renewed focus on how a work of art was produced, and how that process would affect the result. It was during this period that Kerouac developed the idea of “spontaneous bop prosody,” which Ashley would imitate years later in works such as *Perfect Lives*.

Inspired by the jazz musicians he admired, Kerouac worked out a method for prose composition that mimicked, at least in a naive fashion, the frenetic Bop improvisation of

Parker and Gillespie. His dictum, which is sometimes attributed to Ginsberg, was “first thought, best thought.”¹⁹ He was famous for writing on rolls of Teletype paper, drinking coffee and taking Benzedrine so that he could keep working for days without losing his improvised narrative thread. In his *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*, Kerouac illustrates his method: “The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image object... Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image... Not ‘selectivity’ of expression but following free deviation (association)...”²⁰

Ashley’s description of his compositional method closely follows Kerouac’s language: “...[in] the first episode of *Perfect Lives, The Park*: those words were not changed, except for their most trivial aspects, from the moment I sang them to myself... In other words, in writing *Perfect Lives*, I had this practice: I’d go into a room, close the door, and start singing. And then, when I couldn’t retain the image any longer, when I’d lost it, as it were, I’d stop... Having had that experience, I can tell you that with most of the things I do now, I start at the beginning, work to the end, and I *never* think twice.”²¹

Ginsberg, who also practiced spontaneous writing, thought the idea of “selectivity” as a type of intellectual compromise, or capitulation to public opinion in much the same way that Ashley views it. Discussing the method at the Naropa Institute, he stated that according to “academics,” selectivity was important, “...that you really had to make fine distinctions between different kind of thoughts and only choose... the most poetic thoughts, and you had

¹⁹ Lerner and MacAdams, "What Happened to Kerouac?."

²⁰ Thomas Parkinson, ed., *A Casebook on the Beat* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961). pp. 65-66.

²¹ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pp. 149-150.

to intercede or intervene in your mind with another mind from somewhere else... Lionel Trilling's mind or Allen Tate's mind, or Brooks and Warren's mind, the critics' minds... but I think that is too hard, I think that's too much work... You'll forget what you were thinking, and you'll think what you were supposed to be thinking."²²

Ashley, speaking with students about his compositional method, had much the same advice: "You're all healthy, you're all strong enough to make sounds until the end of time. The only problem you have is deciding whether your sound is any good. What I'm encouraging you to do is not to think about that too much, not to reevaluate too much the sounds, but just examine them, and see what the structure is. See what's actually there, before you start this process of trying to ask yourself whether Nancy Reagan would like it, or Mrs. Bush... The music's there... I was taught that I didn't have anything, and it was my job to work hard and get something, and that's just not true."²³

There is also some evidence that this form of improvisation had significance for Ashley beyond mere technique. In his discussion of *Perfect Lives*, he obliquely refers to "Extemporization as a form of wisdom..."²⁴ Similarly, Ginsberg refers to the "first thought, best thought" formulation as an expression of the Buddhist concept *suññata* or *shunyata*, translated from Pali as *void*.²⁵ According to the exegetical "Wisdom Teachings" in Evan-Wentz's translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* – a treatise Ashley used to structure certain aspects of *Perfect Lives* – *suññata* is "...the one great aim; for to realize it is to attain the unconditioned *Dharma-Kaya*, 'Divine Body of Truth,' the primordial state of uncreatedness,

²² Allen Ginsberg, *Composed on the Tongue* (Bollinas: Grey Fox Press, 1971). pg. 110.

²³ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pp. 151-152.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 151.

²⁵ Ginsberg, *Composed on the Tongue*. pg. 117.

of the supramundane *Bodhic* All-consciousness – Buddhahood.”²⁶ It is conceivable that Ashley’s “wisdom” in extemporization is derived from Ginsberg’s shunyata.

Incarnate gaps/images juxtaposed

This Buddhistic or occult-type conception is also relevant to other aspects of Ginsberg’s writing, and by extension the musico-literary poetics in *Perfect Lives*. One of the principle techniques of both works is the pairing of seemingly unrelated images or ideas. Along with a certain density of language, this is one of the most distinctive features of the Beat style. It is found in Corso’s poetry, and much of Kerouac, but finds its theoretical support and best expression in Ginsberg’s writing.

Influenced by his study of art history at Columbia, Ginsberg attempted to mirror Cézanne’s juxtaposition of color in his poetry, and what he thought to be its metaphysical or visionary effect on the viewer. “...I had the idea, perhaps over-refined, that by the unexplainable, unexplained non-perspective line, that is, juxtaposition of one *word* against another, a gap between the two words – like the space gap in the canvas – there’d be a gap between the two words which the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence... Or in the haiku, you have two distinct images, set side by side without drawing a connection, without drawing a logical connection the *mind* fills in this... this space. Like O ant / crawl up Mount Fujiyama / but slowly, slowly... So, I was trying to do similar things with juxtapositions like ‘hydrogen jukebox.’ Or ‘winter midnight smalltown streetlight rain...’ Or the end of *Sunflower* with ‘cunts of wheelbarrows,’ whatever that all meant, or ‘rubber dollar bills’ – ‘skin of machinery.’ ...the idea that I had was that gaps in space and time through

²⁶ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960). pg. 10.

images juxtaposed, just as in the haiku you get two images which the mind connects in a flash, and so that *flash* is the *petite sensation*; or the satori, perhaps, that the Zen Haikuists would speak of...”²⁷

Who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time and
space through images juxtaposed, and trapped
the archangel of the soul between 2 visual
images and joined the elemental verbs and set
the noun and dash of consciousness together

jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens
Aeterna Deus

from *Howl*²⁸

In *Perfect Lives*, Ashley uses the same technique to marry a portentous death with a supermarket checkout line, or soyburgers, fate, and the “lost civilization” of Atlantis: “imagine yourself can of succotash in hand / part of th’material body of the supermarket in the / checkout line you are about to be exhausted / symbolic writing fills the skies...” From *The Bank*, “Soy burgers and Atlantis are the themes. Soyburger dreams of a lost civilization are my fate / We are drawn together in the dream.” Or a little joke, “Our demodulation registers among the great transmitters in the east atop the / giant fundamentalist / hotels, where everything is black and white and checkout time is / 6 AM.” There are similar pairings found throughout the libretto of *Perfect Lives*; pairing the prosaic with a kind of oracular vision – cows chewing and the “crashing of the cosmos,” or boogie-woogie and “the eternal present.”

²⁷ Thomas Clark, "The Art of Poetry Viii," *Paris Review*, no. 37 (1966). pp. 28-30.

²⁸ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956). pg. 20

In John Sanborn's video of *Perfect Lives*²⁹ there is frequently a kind of "cross-scripting" that suggests this type of effect, with images that seem to relate to each other only obliquely – usually something occult paired with mundane Americana. *The Bank* from 14:17-15:17 illustrates much of this Ashley/Beat aesthetic as *television*. The bank teller "Jennifer" is portrayed initially at 14:33 as a fortune-telling machine reading palms; a poster in the teller window implies an ancient Egyptian setting. The most succinct image is at 14:47; fortune-telling lines on a palm are illustrated with traffic signs – a whimsical pairing of kitsch mysticism and prosaism in a visual pun.

The Bank – JENNIFER (14:17-15:17)

Timings with image and scoring information [mine]:

14:17 Fade to black. Title card in green with drop shadow "MEANWHILE BACK AT THE BANK" in upper 3rd of the frame.

14:18 Visual effect of boxes with bank tellers in order of narrative appearance from left to right: JENNIFER, KATE, ELEANOR, LINDA, SUSIE.

14:22 Title card "JENNIFER" drops down to center of frame; title is transparent to next image and superimposed over boxes. CHORUS: "*Introducing Jennifer.*"

14:26 Dissolve to MASTER of teller window – camera pulls back. NARRATOR: "Jennifer dreams when she's at the window."

14:29 Camera motion continues revealing poster with "Egypt" text and pyramid in BG. Title card "SHE DREAMS." NARRATOR: "The sun beats down on a marketplace..."

14:33 Backlight fades and colored spotlight reveals bank teller JENNIFER costumed as machine fortune-teller. Title card "SHE SERVES." NARRATOR: "Here in the shadow of the palms, I serve."

14:39 Palm enters frame right, palm branch in BG. Title card "SHE READS." NARRATOR: "This man, for instance, stays close to home."

²⁹ John Sanborn, "Perfect Lives: An Opera for Television," (U.S.A.: Lovely Music, Ltd., 1983).

14:45 Title card “SHE KNOWS.” NARRATOR: “And the other one’s a traveler.”

14:47 Dissolve to palm reading chart with traffic signs; CHORUS: “*Jennifer works at The Bank...*”

14:50 Dissolve to NARRATOR gesturing with left hand in front of pink and blue neon grid backdrop.
CHORUS: “*Mostly she helps people count their money.*”

14:53 Subtitle in white with drop-shadow “she likes it.” Chorus: “*She likes it.*”

14:57 Dissolve to XCU of BUDDY – right hand playing the piano, grid on mirror and reflected in parallel to backdrop – camera TILT UP. Title card “AN OASIS.” NARRATOR: “...The Bank is like an oasis.”

15:02 Camera motion continues. Title card “VERY SWEET.” NARRATOR: “...like glue and very sweet.”

15:08 Dissolve to CU of NARRATOR gesturing with left hand. Title card “WATCHING CLOSELY.”
NARRATOR: “...to think, the closer you watch the less you see.”

15:15 – 17 Return to visual effect of boxes with tellers; title card “THEY ALL SAW IT.” NARRATOR:
“Jennifer dreams when she’s at the window, but they all saw it..”

These dichotomies found in the libretto can be seen to extend even to the explicitly “musical” parts of *Perfect Lives* – “Blue” Gene Tyranny’s improvised³⁰ “avant-cocktail” piano, the vocal inflections and patterned emphases, and the absurdist/ironic “rhythm templates” derived from the Gulbrandsen “Palace” organ. In *Perfect Lives* there is a continuous pairing of the vernacular with the high concept abstractions and concerns of the avant-garde art scene of the late 70s. This marriage of the prosaic and the sublime is the essence of both the Beat aesthetic and Ashley’s mature operas, particularly *Perfect Lives*.

³⁰ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 158.

Neo-Platonism

Both Ashley and Ginsberg speak of Neo-Platonism in the context of their work; Ginsberg speaks of Plotinus in relation to his study of juxtaposition in poetry and painting, and Ashley of the hermetist and Neoplatonist Giordano Bruno, particularly Frances Yates's historical and exegetical writings about Bruno's occult thought. Melody Sumner, in her preface to the libretto, speculates that *Perfect Lives* can be heard as a "letter" to Giordano Bruno, probably deriving her opinion from Ashley's address in the closing lines of the opera, "Dear George, what's going on? / I'm not the same person I used to be" and other similar references to Bruno throughout the opera.³¹ Both in its text and video imagery, particularly in *The Backyard*, the Nolan's presence is felt:

<i>two</i>	Giordano Bruno.
<i>three</i>	I think they burned him.
<i>four</i>	He was too positive.
<i>five two three four five six Section</i>	
	Fight fire with fire. ³²

This pairing of vernacular and occult occurs in the video in connection to Bruno in a characteristically funny image; the letters "G Bruno" appear in a doubled still of two footballs about 12 minutes and 40 seconds into Sanborn's video of *The Bank*. While it seems unlikely that *Perfect Lives* is in fact a "letter" to G. Bruno, the many references do at least suggest him as a central figure in any interpretation of the work.

Like Ginsberg, Ashley's interest in pairing these relatively insignificant images with metaphysical ideas can be explained by ideas found in Neo-Platonism. Ashley implies this in

³¹ Ibid. pg. 146.

³² Ibid. pg. 145.

Melody Sumner's book *The Guests Go in to Supper*: "Neo-Platonism is sort of like holography: the idea that the whole thing is contained in the smallest detail. The philosophical machinery that they used had very elaborate schemes for being able to remember how different parts of the universe related. You could sit down and start thinking about a flower and come out as god. There's no barrier between you and god."³³

In Ashley's *The Bar* we hear Buddy speaking to the bartender Rodney about the presence of God in Rodney's response to a drink order:

You say to me, We Don't Serve Fine Wine In
Half-Pints, Buddy, 'N

That sound is just what we expect... and
Need.

We take sound so much for granted, don't we?
It's the sound of God.

We Don't Serve Fine Wine In Half-Pints, Buddy
Is the sound of God.³⁴

Ginsberg's famously provocative lines from *Howl* can also be interpreted in this light, for if every particle of the universe is representative of the whole and informed by God, than everything must be sacred:

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!
The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand
and asshole holy! Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is
holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!³⁵

Yates describes this type of Neoplatonic (or hermetic) relationship in her well-known book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. Quoting Bruno's *Spaccio della bestia trionfante* she

³³ Sumner, ed., *The Guests Go in to Supper*. pg. 118.

³⁴ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 73.

³⁵ Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*. pg. 27.

writes, “For... diverse living things represent diverse spirits and powers, which beyond the absolute being which they have, obtain a being communicated to all things according to their capacity and measure. Whence God as a whole (though not totally but in some more in some less excellently) is in all things.”³⁶ In Ashley, this affinity with Neo-Platonism can be seen in not only the poetic imagery in the libretto, but also the structure of *Perfect Lives*. Kevin Holm-Hudson, in his thesis on the opera, suggests that, “The self-similar template form of Perfect Lives can also be traced to Neo-Platonism” and points to Ashley’s remark about his template of durations, i.e., that he “...started working with the idea... that obviously, predictably, went from the largest to the smallest unit of the subdivision. [That Ashley] ...wanted to be able to take care of the biggest form and the smallest form in the score.” as indication of this kind of analogical thinking.³⁷

Ashley’s “Template”

Ashley’s “template” concept is what binds *Perfect Lives* together as a cohesive work, and does in fact seem to be related to his particular brand of mysticism; form in the opera is likely inspired by Neo-Platonism or Brunian hermetism, and certain aspects of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The “template” concept is Ashley’s method of shaping the opera. Loosely defined, it is a set of guidelines, often drawn from the libretto, that determine much of the content in *Perfect Lives*; the template functions something like a platonic/hermetic archetype, as implied in Holm-Hudson’s thesis. All aspects of the opera, from the smallest to the largest elements in both the music and video “participate” (to use platonic language) in the template; it is similar in effect perhaps to Cage’s “square root form.”

³⁶ Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964). pg. 233.

³⁷ Kevin Holm-Hudson, "Music, Text and Image in Robert Ashley's Video Opera "Perfect Lives"" (Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1992). pg. 169.

The most basic formal elements in *Perfect Lives* are the “temporal templates” – an episode’s duration, pulse, and metrical structure. Often these have some metaphorical meaning for Ashley, such as in *The Backyard* where he depicts the Brunian character Isolde contemplating numbers: “In the last episode, if you can imagine the sphere being a third of the surface, symmetrically – since the last episode is in sixes, that is, medieval perfect time – if you think of the circle as having the same symbolic value, then if she, Isolde, makes it to heaven, you’ve defined a sort of doorway. In *The Backyard*, there is the doorway defining a third, a third, a third.”³⁸ In the fourth episode, *The Bar*, the contrast of Buddy and the bartender Rodney are portrayed by alternating the division of a seven-beat cycle, 3+4 for Rodney, and 4+3 for Buddy.³⁹

The visual templates consist of simple geometric shapes for each episode, a color scheme, and an indication for camera movement; the template acts as a defining motif, and is commonly taken from images in the text. For example, in *The Church*, the geometric template is a sphere – as in the rose window of a chapel.⁴⁰ In *The Backyard*, the camera movement, i.e., a “compound truck shot” is indicated in the libretto:⁴¹

Circling, but not circling her.
 She is circling.
 We are circling.
 Now she is on the left edge.
 Caught, still, in her accounting of those three decades silently.
 She is so beautiful.
 A (quote) pre-industrial (unquote) equation.
 God, this is sentimental.⁴²

³⁸ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 165.

³⁹ Holm-Hudson, "Music, Text and Image in Robert Ashley's Video Opera "Perfect Lives"". pg. 116.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* pg. 74.

⁴² Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 143.

The template idea is interpreted with different strategies for each episode. The “musical” template is essentially the metrical structure of each section as realized most clearly in the pre-composed “orchestral beds” – the previously mentioned “temporal templates.” However, the performers often use the visual template or the text for interpretive cues. This suggests that defining a template as “visual” or “temporal” is ultimately misleading; like a platonic/hermetic archetype, the template is an abstraction that can be expressed in any part of the opera, at any structural level. For example, “Blue” Gene Tyranny, who helped compose the instrumental backgrounds in *Perfect Lives* and performed as Buddy, frequently improvises on the “visual” template. As Holm-Hudson discusses in his analysis of *The Park*: “...low horizon, panning left, ‘fluid’ edge... are all ‘illustrated’ by musical gestures... The ‘pan left’ of the camera is illustrated in three ways. First and most subtly, the two-chord ‘loops’ that Tyranny notes ‘never come to rest’ are a musical analog of the ‘seeking’ mood that Ashley has cited as a consequence of the camera panning. Second (and more explicitly), the movement of images from left to right is musically paralleled by an ascending scale (left to right) covering the upper two-thirds of the keyboard, beginning on the 6th beat of the 13-beat cycle. Finally, the leftward direction of the camera is portrayed in a playing technique: a downward ‘cascade’ of notes on synthesizer, occurring in the first section.” Similarly, according to Holm-Hudson, the “low horizon” image that defines the geometric template of *The Park*, is symbolized by Tyranny in an octave-drone ostinato in certain sections of the episode.⁴³

The first section of *The Bar* is exemplary for its clear use of Ashley’s template idea. This template is at least in part derived from the visual images presented in the libretto, mostly references to cinematic conventions; presumably because the principle characters in

⁴³ Holm-Hudson, "Music, Text and Image in Robert Ashley's Video Opera "Perfect Lives"". pp. 81-82.

the episode, Buddy and Raoul de Noget, are “stars” at the “Perfect Lives Lounge.” The libretto begins with “This is a close up. / An arm. / Big muscles / gone to seed.” A few moments later, “From rocks to skin. / A tendency toward motion pictures” and “So Rodney’s not the star. Star / Enters now, with a friend, a slightly seedy older man.” etc. The crucial lines from the libretto for camera movement occur early in the first section of the episode:

Remember, we were close, and
When the arm moves, finally, making room for other things,

We start a long, a slow,
Release from Rodney and his history.

A pulling back, as they say.
Widening the shot. An unfolding.

The world streams in the edges.
I know what I’m doing.

This is heaven. No, not yet.
This is just the bar.⁴⁴

The visual template for *The Bar* can be summarized as follows: the camera movement is a dolly shot “pulling back,” and all of the dominant images in the video are vertical, as signified by the blue neon lights in the background of Ashley’s performance space. This verticality is everywhere present throughout the first section: the patrons at the bar, the bottles behind Rodney, Ashley’s hand gestures, the piano keys etc. Musically, Tyranny’s playing uses a limited tessitura in a fixed position to suggest the vertical aspect of the template. The principle colors are illustrated by the blue neon and the red light bulb next to

⁴⁴ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pp. 63-65

Ashley as the narrator in the video – the blue and red suggestive of the colors in Rodney’s tattoo, and likely matched with the white of the piano keys and vodka bottles in the video:

“In a garland of roses and with a flag. / Forty-eight stars. / The good old days.”⁴⁵

The Bar – (01:13-03:34)

Timings with image and scoring information [mine]:

1:13 Wipe to XCU of BUDDY’S hands playing the keyboard; the keys are perpendicular to the bottom of the frame. BUDDY wearing a blue suit and a red “lucite” heart-shaped ring.

1:24 Slow dissolve to street scene. Camera in continuous motion “pulling back.”

1:26 Transparent title card “RODNEY” enters from left of screen superimposed over RODNEY smoking.

1:28 Wipe to XCU of piano keys. Title card “RODNEY” fades out; “A CLOSE UP” in red fades in over an XCU of vertical piano keys. NARRATOR: “This is a close up. / An arm. / Big Muscles / Gone to seed. / It moves. / But first, / We read, / Rodney.”

1:32 Low horizon of *The Park* appears at the bottom of the frame – BUDDY playing the piano. Vertically arranged title card “AT WORK” superimposed over the upper 2/3rds of the frame.

1:38 Upper portion of frame dissolves to RODNEY, then NARRATOR. Red title card “IN CHINESE.” NARRATOR: “The design / Looks Chinese. / Flashpowder / Tattoo.”

1:45 Upper portion of frame dissolves to street scene; “pulling back” camera motion continues.

2:04 CU of RODNEY’S tattoo in upper 2/3rds of frame. NARRATOR: “In this case on the forearm, / Slightly gone to seed: Rodney. / In a garland of roses and with a flag. / Forty-eight stars.”

2:09 Camera motion continues. Red title card “IN LOVE.”

2:16 Upper portion of frame dissolves to CU of NARRATOR.

2:22 Upper frame dissolves to RODNEY; camera pulls back quickly.

⁴⁵ Ibid. pg. 64

2:29 Dissolve to NARRATOR. NARRATOR'S gestures mirror the light that signifies the template; i.e., the vertical lines of the neon in the BG. Camera continues motion slowly. NARRATOR: "We start a long, a slow, / Release from Rodney and his history. / A pulling back, as they say. / Widening the shot. An unfolding."

2:43 Title card in red fades in: "AN UNFOLDING."

2:52 White subtitle with drop-shadow "This is heaven." NARRATOR: "*This is heaven.* No, not yet. / This is just the bar."

2:56 Upper frame dissolves to BUDDY and RAOUL DE NOGET standing.

3:02 Upper frame dissolves to RODNEY smoking – white liquor bottles arranged vertically behind him. Lower frame begins to move horizontally, panning left – the camera motion of *The Park*.

3:08 Dissolve to NARRATOR gesturing with hands, parallel to the neon. Upper frame camera motion continues. New musical section for the piano – BUDDY'S hands in fixed tessitura between D3 and A4.

3:18 Dissolve to BUDDY and RAOUL DE NOGET in sunglasses. Title card: "STAR ENTERS." NARRATOR: "...Star / Enters now, with a friend, a slightly seedy older man."

3:23 Dissolve to XCU of RAOUL DE NOGET smiling. NARRATOR: "And smiling. / And why not smile?"

3:26 Dissolve to NARRATOR gesturing. Camera motion continues.

3:34 End of section.

The seven episodes themselves are divided into groups of seven, with each division referring to that episode's template; for example, moments in *The Park* will refer to *The Supermarket* or *The Backyard* by alluding to its visual template, or footage from that particular episode, *The Bar* has a *Park* section etc. These divisions can also be further delineated into seven subsections – what Holm-Hudson refers to as a "compound" form.⁴⁶ The relevance of the number 7 and its multiples is from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* – there are 49 days in

⁴⁶ Holm-Hudson, "Music, Text and Image in Robert Ashley's Video Opera "Perfect Lives"". pg. 89.

the Tibetan afterlife or “Bardo,” and “...seven worlds or seven degrees of Maya.”⁴⁷ Ashley makes this formal influence clear in an interview in Cole Gagne’s book *Soundpieces: “Perfect Lives* is not a parody of the Book of the Dead; I don’t mean for the relationship to be frivolous at all, but it does use other aspects of the Book of the Dead in a very simple, almost unquestioning way. I’m referring to the formalistic proportions – the numerology. It seemed to me that if I were using the functional elements as I understand them from that particular book, then I could use some of the formalistic elements at the same time, and sort of invoke their magic.”⁴⁸

Ashley describes the template as, “...the subjective assignment of emotional values and moods to visual forms and corresponding musical structures. Within the rules defined by the templates, the collaborators, in all aspects of the work, are free to interpret, ‘improvise,’ invent, and superimpose characteristics of their own artistic styles onto the texture of the work.”⁴⁹ Using this template concept, Ashley seems to be attempting something akin to a Beat opera, with all of the attendant aesthetic and religious concerns that entails. The template allows for a jazz-like freedom among the individual parts, total spontaneity in the composition of the video, music, words, and characterizations. Bop opera per Kerouac.

Beat Poetics and the Embodied Voice

Ashley’s setting of vernacular English can also be seen as an extension of Beat poetics into the realm of opera and performance art. Ashley’s music *is* the text – how it is

⁴⁷ Ibid. pg. 158.

⁴⁸ Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers* (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1982). pg. 30.

⁴⁹ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pp. 180-181.

set, inflected, rhythmically patterned, the choice of the words within the text, etc. He does not draw a clear line between the explicitly “pitched” material of the electronic and instrumental “orchestra,” and the libretto as it is performed. He writes, “I’m trying hard, in *Perfect Lives*, to reproduce the music of the way people talk. It’s not poetry, it’s song.”⁵⁰

This in a very real sense is a natural progression of Beat poetics; the Beat focus on performance, the *sounding voice*, led to what was eventually known as performance poetry in the 80s. Ginsberg would sing his poetry in the later phases of his career, and Kerouac et al. were known for their staged readings accompanied by jazz, and the audio recordings of their writings. In the words of Edward Halsey Foster: “Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso (although not Burroughs) tried to develop a poetics of the voice – a literal presence of the poet in his words. So, too, did many other writers – Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Michael McClure, among them – who were anthologized in Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* (1960)... the book had great effect in altering popular perceptions about what a poem should be and do.”⁵¹ However, what is perhaps more essential in uniting the Beat aesthetic is what Ashley refers to as “the music of the way people talk” – the sound of vernacular speech rather than the conventions of written English.⁵²

This “poetics of voice” was criticized on a number of fronts. The work as seen on the page was considered no longer adequate to convey the meaning and music of the poem. In the mind of some critics, this was a failure of the poetry; without the poet to interpret the printed work before an audience, some of the writing was thought to be ineffectual.

Thomas Parkinson’s essay “Phenomenon or Generation” is one of the more salient pieces about Beat aesthetics, both in regard to the shifts of idiom within a poem, i.e., the use of

⁵⁰ Ibid. pg. 168.

⁵¹ Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Beats* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992). pg. 193.

⁵² Ibid. 194

prosaic and “elevated” speech, and the increasing relevance of the embodied voice in Beat writing. And his analysis is remarkable in that it seems to anticipate the poetics of *Perfect Lives*, i.e., Ashley’s use of special diacritic markings, and other musical notation for transcribing and shaping his musico-poetic speech:

A certain amount of ironic comment has been made on the importance of oral delivery and the writer’s physical dramatic presence to the full impact of the poetry of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti. Their poetry, and that of McClure and Whalen (and Snyder, to a lesser extent), attempts notation of the actual movement of mind and voice in full vernacular. It seems difficult to take this poetry off the page largely because the mode of poetic notation that fits the movement of American speech is still in the realm of the nonconventionalized. Accustomed to syllabic stress and foot verse, the normal audience for poetry is not prepared to take into consideration intensity (loudness), pitch, and duration, and the concept of breath pause is far from being ritualized. The usual prosodic assumption is that the precise notation so readily accepted for music is not possible for poetry, that poetry will have to bumble along with concepts that more or less fit the products of another tone and tempo of speech... The primary problem of poetry is notation, through the appearance of poem on page to indicate the reality of articulation. *A poem is a score* [italics mine].

Looked on in this way, much of the notation of poetry ceases to seem odd or frivolous. The capital letters, the broken lines, the long long long lines, the shift from vernacular idiom to lofty rhetoric, these are attempts to shift from conventional idiom to actual, to *increase the vocality of the verse* [italics mine]. The experiments with jazz accompaniment are more dramatic instances of the stress on precision of notation.⁵³

Perfect Lives is one such solution to the problem of an embodied poetics, a “poetics of the voice” as described by Parkinson. Ashley along with Charles Rizzuto⁵⁴ developed a method of notation that could indicate a way to rhythm and meter for the spoken libretto – elements that would be lost in traditional poetic notation. Along with his template concept, which supplements the notation in terms of “tone” (not necessarily pitch, but emotional

⁵³ Parkinson, ed., *A Casebook on the Beat*. pg. 287.

⁵⁴ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. xi.

tone and inflection garnered from the meaning of the text), the markings offer the performer a certain amount of flexibility in the context of a relatively precise rhythmic notation.

For example, in *The Park*, the lines are 13 beats long, divided into groupings of 8 and 5; it is consistently 72 beats per minute throughout the opera – according to Ashley this tempo was chosen so that it would be easy to sync the music with John Sanborn’s video.⁵⁵ Though Ashley’s “diacritic” notation has changed from opera to opera, the intention is still clear – the transcription of an embodied poetry, the “music of the way people talk.” In the score each line represents a beat, and the asterisks silences:

| * | * | *a fact* | He takes | himself | seriously. | * | *
| Motel rooms | * | * have lost their | punch for him. | *

| * The | feeling is | * | *a fact* | * | expressed | in bags. | *
| There are two | and inside | those two | there are | two more.

| It’s not | * an easy | situ | ation, | *a fact* | * but there is | something like | *
| abandon in | the air | * | * | *

| * There is | something like the | feeling of the | idea | of | *a fact* | * | *
| silk scarves | in the air. | * | * | *⁵⁶

Art/Crime/Transcendence

For Ashley the “immaterial” or spiritual meaning of the opera is likely related to Ashley’s conception of *Art* itself. It is difficult, given the relatively opaque nature of *Perfect Lives*, to make a definitive reading of it; though the text is highly allusive, no single meaning can necessarily be ascribed to it. This is how it should be. The best in art is both personal and universal; perhaps the relevance of a work like *Perfect Lives* is not what intends to say, but

⁵⁵ Ibid. pg. 155.

⁵⁶ Zurbrugg, ed., *Art, Performance Media: 31 Interviews*. pg. 41.

what is actually meaningful to the individual who listens to it, what is inevitably communicated.

Even so, I would like to suggest that the central moment of the opera, the bank robbery, might be the key to better understanding Ashley's *Perfect Lives*, and perhaps his work more generally, particularly his operatic "trilogy" which Ashley intended to represent "the history of consciousness in the United States"⁵⁷ – *Atalanta*, *Perfect Lives*, and the quartet of short operas *Now Eleanor's Idea* (*Improvement*, *Foreign Experiences*, *eL/Aficionado*, and *Now Eleanor's Idea*). The premise of the opera, according to Ashley, revolves around four characters who "...hatch a plan to do something that, if they are caught doing it, it will be a crime, but if they are not caught it will be Art." He continues: "The idea is that the son of the sheriff, who is the assistant to the manager of the bank, will make it possible for them to take all the money out of the bank for one day. And then they will put it back. They've set themselves a challenge, but it's outside the realm of crime; it's not like Bonnie and Clyde. There's a kind of metaphysical meaning for the removal of the money."⁵⁸

This idea of "Art" as a kind of crime or having some relation to the "law" is a recurring theme that appears in Ashley's writings and interviews. Though the idea that transgression is central to the avant-garde ethos is not a new one – it can be traced at least to the beginning of historical Romanticism – in Ashley and the Beats it has a particularly spiritual emphasis.

In *The Guests Go in to Supper*, Ashley discusses the idea of rules or "law" in the context of making art, using the Bop pianist Bud Powell as an example – Powell is one of "the three golden apples" in his opera *Atalanta*. "It seemed to me that if Bud Powell thought about

⁵⁷ Sumner, ed., *The Guests Go in to Supper*. pg. 106.

⁵⁸ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 153.

music in the most common way, in a way that he could describe his feelings and describe his ideas to anybody else, he would have to explain music in terms of the law, I mean in terms of the laws of music and the laws of how you are supposed to behave.”⁵⁹

He continues in the interview to speak of a kind of “transcendence” – the ability of certain musicians, Bud Powell in this instance, to transcend the materials of music – the implication is that this is in some way achieved by subverting the “law” or perhaps simply the conventions of music – the traditions of a particular musical “language” or idiom. “If you are playing a piano most of your experience is that the piano is something that’s physically outside of you, and that you are playing on the piano... Rarely, but sometimes, you can make the piano speak, you can make it a voice that is disembodied from its actuality of a sound producing instrument... And you can hear that in Bud Powell, especially in Bud Powell, because of his musical style, his musical language. You can hear moments where what he plays on the piano is not possible... He actually transcends the piano. Rarely, but sometimes.”⁶⁰

More profoundly, Ashley seems to be making a kind of ontological argument about the nature of Art and the artist. “He [Bud Powell] spent a large part of his life locked up. Certain people thought that he had to be locked up because he couldn’t take care of himself, that he was supposedly mentally deficient. Other people among his friends thought that was not true at all, and that he was expressing his indignation at his role as a black musician in America by just refusing to think the way the establishment required him to think. So there were the two points of view, one that he was crazy, and one that he was not crazy. Either

⁵⁹ Sumner, ed., *The Guests Go in to Supper*. pg. 103.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 104.

one of the points of view invoked the notion that he was breaking the law.”⁶¹ While this could be read as simply another expression of the trope of madness as a prerequisite for the act of creation, the more important point seems to be about the Idea of Art itself; i.e., that avant-garde Art *is* crime, at least as it is practiced by Ashley et al., and that it has a metaphysical aspect that transcends it.

Ashley seems to be suggesting that some form of coercion or “law” is critical for the artistic act, whether it is social in nature or merely aesthetic. In *Perfect Lives*, the central moment, stealing money from the bank only to return it a day later, is meaningless in this context without the notion of it being criminal. It would simply be a series of banal actions, much like going to the supermarket, or a bar – to use two other examples from the opera. To Ashley, it is this transgressive ideological frame that makes the “robbery” artful. Of course, criminality alone is not art; what he gives us in *Perfect Lives* belies typical criminal intention, the object is not to actually steal the money, but to make it disappear for a day. It is a kind of non-sequitur activity more in the character of Fluxus than Bonnie and Clyde. At the same time, it seems that the “artists,” Donnie, Buddy, et al., are making something that transcends the materials of their art, e.g., the money, an elopement, and a car full of holes, with the intention of having a transformative effect on those who experience it. It is this hallucinatory experience in the tellers at the bank that leads to the rest of the operatic trilogy. Viewing Ashley’s work in this light suggests that the audience is an accomplice in his transgressive act, that we as an audience are willing participants in his brand of hermetic and operatic crime.

This also seems to be a critical element in Beat art, if not the idea that art is crime; it is at least a significant part of its creation. The public response to the Beats, particularly by

⁶¹ Ibid. 103

the more conservative elements in American society at the time, focused on this apparent criminality, “Beat” as synonymous with “delinquent.” The Beat writers themselves seemed to accentuate their crimes and cultural transgressions, actual or imagined, as an important part of the Beat mythos: in Burroughs it was primarily opiates, pederasty, and even murder, Ginsberg’s madness, (homo)sexual and spiritual transgressions, in Kerouac, the milieu of petty criminals and lowlifes, most celebrated in the Nietzschean figure of Neal Cassady. Outside of their fictions, Gregory Corso spent his time in the Clinton Correctional Facility reading poetry; Burroughs widely known murder of his common law wife and extensive heroin use anticipates his writing; Lucien Carr’s killing of David Kammerer, and Kerouac’s implication in the crime, is an oft referred to, and crucial part of Beat mythology.

This celebration of crime, in Ashley’s work and that of the Beats, is not so much a celebration of the transgressive act itself, but of its transformative power. In *Crimes of Art + Terror*, a study of the relationship between the avant-garde and crime, Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe make just this point: “Transgressive artistic desire – which wants to make art whose very originality constitutes a step across and beyond boundaries of the order in place – is desire not to violate within a regime of culture (libel and pornography laws, for example) but desire to stand somehow outside, so much the better to violate and subvert the regime itself.”⁶²

For the Beats it is a too-late Romantic Dionysian affair – an (apparently successful) attempt to subvert what they perceived as an oppressive America, hostile to their vision of spiritual and sexual liberation, a vision realized by the counterculture they helped to establish in the 1960s. For Ashley too, it is a subversion of the status quo; the crime in *Perfect Lives*, i.e., the theft from the bank, is Art in that its inexplicable character, its essential surreality,

⁶² Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, *Crimes of Art + Terror* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003). pg. 3.

has some effect on the consciousness of those involved. The bank tellers are in fact transformed – each has a different “vision” of the criminal act and is inspired – their stories told in the subsequent quartet of operas following *Perfect Lives*. It is perhaps just this that Ashley desires from *Perfect Lives*, a transformation of consciousness, even the kind of enlightenment peddled by Bodhisattva Buddy in his “easy” boogie-woogie lessons:

Continuing education from the music store.

Thirty easy lessons. Just do as I do. Watch.

CCEE CCGG CCBB CCGG

CCEE CCGG CCBB CCGG

Always.

Boogie woogie is the vessel of the eternal present.

That’s the only way to use that word.⁶³

In his informal lectures at Mills about the opera, he revealed something of his subjective experience of writing: “In composing *Perfect Lives*... I got into the very bizarre, for me, condition of feeling that every time I started to compose a piece of music I was making a social crime, or I was insane, as it were. That I was like one of the people who talks to himself on the street... When you go into a room, lock the door, and decide that you are going to compose music, you are doing a criminal activity, an antisocial activity, and if you can’t face it you’ll never be a composer.”⁶⁴ It is the act of creation as a social crime, and Art itself as *necessarily* subversive. What Ashley and his characters in *Perfect Lives* have found on the other side of this “law,” or in John Clellon Holmes’s *Beat* language – the “boundaries, legal and moral,” is belief and transformative vision. For Ashley, *Perfect Lives* and the related operas might not only be a “history of American consciousness,” but a hoped-for prophecy

⁶³ Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera*. pg. 77

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 179.

of its future, an attempt to shape the psychic lives of the public through its most popular mass medium, television.

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