

## Sculpture and the purpose of action

Years ago I came across an uncertain creature, seemingly trapped between two worlds. If the way it ran and laughed was almost human, its form was that of a machine, with rods and spools for legs, joined by a crossbar where a torso might be needed. I found it in a small text by Franz Kafka called *The Odradek*,<sup>1</sup> and since then I have frequently remembered it. More than its ambivalent nature as animal and machine, what struck me was the fact it had both a clear form and an unknown function. The creature looked like it *might* serve a purpose, but one laying just past our understanding: functional and useless at the same time, it remained outside our world of productive action and flowing time. Lurking 'by turns in the garret, the stairway, the lobbies',<sup>2</sup> it did nothing more than ramble, wander, killing time for all eternity.

The last time the Odradek appeared in my mind was while considering the use of mechanical references in the practice of David Murphy, a Glasgow based sculptor.<sup>3</sup> David's work progresses through the use of both sculpture and drawing, the latter often functioning as a test field for the former. Pervading both, there is a constant presence of disused mechanisms, once used for producing energy or goods and now only activated by our memories. However, even making references to functional objects his pieces manage to elude their productive actions, and as the Odradek, carve into the world a space of uncertainty.

In a piece exhibited in 2006, for instance, the audience faced three identical star shaped structures. They bear various resemblances to old technical drawings I later came across – totally absent from the exhibition – while boldly keeping such drawings away. These are, indeed, bold creatures: the strength of their yellow colour stops any archaeology or nostalgia, bringing them resolutely to our presence. It is as if the colour, in its decided playfulness, had forced the sculptures to fall out of time, cutting any fragile thread still linking them to the source of inspiration. Their forms, as well, elude resemblance: too mechanical to have no purpose, yet evasive in their metaphor of a function. The sculptures are thus left in a threshold, condemned to perform an action whose end is unknown. Even the title suggests nothing but missed goals, telling us of a destroyer by itself destroyed, a creature whose purpose is unfulfilled.

However, this piece has a feeling of urgency to it. Even outside time and with no known purpose, I sense here a great intensity, an intensity born of repetition and its insistent display in the gallery. David Murphy did not really exhibit three structures, as I wrote before, but indeed only one. As in the Muybridge stop-motion photographs of running horses, what we truly face is three moments of an object's progression in space, set in a perpetual, revolving motion. This is where it distances itself from the Odradek's wandering: the insistent creature opts instead for a determined movement, even if along a path unknown.

A very simple question could now be asked: if there is no path, if its mechanical forms suggest no purpose, why should the creature keep moving? To attempt an answer I will bring forward a previous piece by David Murphy, a drawing made on wood. Central to the composition is a hole, and it changes everything: what might be a circle is suddenly designated as a wooden wheel by this empty axis, where lines in turmoil seem to battle each other, wave after wave after wave. The title tells us of an East Wind, surely strong enough to turn around the most rusted wheel. What I find striking, here, is having movement not only suggested but imprinted in the wheel itself. There is a term in Physics, potential energy, used to designate a body's inherent capacity for action. By superimposing an inert wheel *and* the forces that ignite its action, movement is reified, becoming not an element but the subject of the piece itself.

What I am trying to suggest is that movement, in its own right, might well be the reason behind the creature's insistent motion. It advances through space, with no sign of purpose or achievement, not for the sake of any productive action but in the name of action itself. In fairness, it needs no other purpose. Its mechanics are not those of labour but of hope; not those of production but of resistance, to immobility, to decay, to all that freezes the endless regeneration of life. And so in its action it finds its purpose: determination beyond reasoning, renewal beyond destruction.

Pedro Faria, May 2007

---

<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, 'The Odradek', in: Jorge Luís Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Vintage, 2002, pp. 108-109

<sup>2</sup> *op.cit.*, page 108

<sup>3</sup> David Murphy graduated from the Glasgow School of Art in 2006. He is now working towards an exhibition at the Glasgow Sculpture Studios gallery, opening in the end of July.