



Plastique Fantastique Review of the Kibbo Kift: Seven Celebrations/Seven Critiques/Seven Parallels

Plastique Fantastique

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1. Introductory remarks

Having visited the exhibition 'Intellectual Barbarians: The Kibbo Kift Kindred' (which we applaud),¹ and read the accompanying book *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (well put together, informative and instructive),² we would want to assert that the Kibbo Kift (KK) is not over, nor, indeed, can be understood as simply a historical phenomenon.³ Rather, this other mode of existence is operative within the present as a past that offers a different future (that is to say, we see the KK as a contemporary resource).⁴ In addressing this living archive, we would want to foreground certain aspects of the 'kin' under these headings: 'Seven Celebrations': of what, it seems to us (as a performance fiction ourselves),⁵ is most crucial about the KK; 'Seven Critiques': in terms of what, it seems to us, were wrong turns or are characteristics worth correcting (our criticisms may seem harsh given the kin's apparent location within a specific period of twentieth-century history, but then, again, we approach them (no doubt as they would want) as an always present possibility; and 'Seven Parallels': in which we reflect on the lessons of the KK for ourselves and perhaps

¹The exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery (October 2015 – March 2016), co-curated by Annabella Pollen and Nayia Yiakoumaki, presented a number of KK artefacts and texts, including totems, costumes, banners, communiqués and the 'Kinlog' itself (containing the richly illustrated history of the kin). Accompanying the works was a film of a kin camp, recordings of kin songs and an interview with the movement's progenitor, John Hargreaves – or 'White-Fox' – alongside other photographic documentation. Indeed, it is with the latter – the staged images of the kin in various dress at various sites (and, especially, on hikes or in procession) – that a sense of the kin as a 'lived group' comes over. Which is to say that it is through the photographs especially that the other artefacts on display are 'activated'. The 'we' of our review refers to *Plastique Fantastique*, a collaboration and 'performance fiction' that exists to present anticommunique's from the extreme past and future in the form of artefacts, audio and video works, performance and



writing (see www.plastiquefantastique.org).

²Pollen's book, published by Donlon Books, contains many of the photographs of the kin mentioned in footnote 1 alongside documentation of various artefacts. The format of the book is especially good at conveying the graphic nature of the kin's ceremonial equipment (for example, the flags and banners) and, indeed, the book's overall design (cover, typeface, and so forth) is very much 'attuned' to its subject matter. Pollen has not attempted a philosophical or theoretical interrogation of the KK; instead she has written a thorough history, broken down into four sections: History, Culture, Spirit and Resurrection. In each the author draws out the many connections of the kin with other groups and ideas, perhaps most compellingly in the section on Spirit in relation to Aleister Crowley and the Golden Dawn. Pollen also makes clear that the most prominent figure of this top-down governed movement was 'Head Man' John Hargrave, and so the book is more often than not a biographic tale of this original but flawed individual. What follows in our 'review' of the KK draws on the material in the book (and in the exhibition).

³The Kibbo Kift were a woodcraft and predominantly youth organization – or movement – of the inter-war years. They were especially distinctive in their style of dress (and general 'outlandish visual style'), as well as their emphasis on camping, hiking and other outdoor activities (Pollen p. 11). As Pollen suggests, however, this does not adequately account for the 'bewildering aims and

for so-called expanded art practice more generally (especially when it is collaborative and performative).

2. Seven celebrations

2.1. *Neo-medieval and alter-modern* (or, the KK as pre-industrial moderns)

The KK offer up an alternative future to the present one (on offer from our 'futures managers') that cannot but involve a revival and reversioning of aspects of the past.⁶ Again, this is not, however, simply a historical project, but a use of the residual as an effective alternative – and possible opposition – to the impasses of the present (theirs and ours).⁷ Accompanying this 'return' is then a future-orientation within the kin, a calling forth of something, well, different (they are modern and avant-garde in this respect).⁸ The time of the KK is, in this sense, patchwork. Understood cybernetically – *laid out flat* – different times (past, present, future) loop backwards and forwards producing different circuits and recursive nestings (more on these latter below). The KK live a time out of joint.

2.2. *Magick and ritual* (or, the KK as 'open secret')

In this turn to a different space-time the KK foreground ritual and magick as both counter to prevailing tendencies of our Spectacular society (most notably: consumerism) and the techno-scientific paradigm more generally. In this the kin's use of sigils (contra brands) is especially prescient (on banners, tents, totems and so forth), as is their mobilization of death-rebirth initiations and, indeed, the 'Ndembo'.⁹ There is a kind of 'kin within a kin' in this sense – secret teachings that are, nevertheless, 'open' to all. It is, however, the performance of these particular future-past techs that is compelling (for example, the ceremonies at the camps).¹⁰

2.3. *Privileged points on the landscape* (or, the KK as pilgrims in space and time)

The kin announce an inter-connectivity and spirituality immanent in all things, but also enact this through their constellation of practices. Key here is walking the landscape and, indeed, making the pilgrimage to privileged points in it – knots – between this and that. Ley lines and Standing Stones in particular are tracks and marks of a previous – magical – mode of existence (before technicity and religion), places where unmediated access and exchange are enabled between being and milieu, ultimately, earth and cosmos.¹¹ A ritual performed at these points doubles this magical structuring of the land with a similar structuring in and of time: each Maypole dance repeats those in the past and those yet-to-come.¹²

methods' of the kin that 'ranged across health and handicraft, pacifism and propaganda, myth and magic, education and economics' (Pollen p. 11).

⁴In this, we are concerned with the period of KK activity identified by the movement's leader as 'nebulous' (1920–24) and 'formative' (1924–28), which, as Pollen argues, can be seen as the period when the kin made their most significant contribution to twentieth-century culture by producing original and complex artefacts and practices.

⁵We define 'performance fiction' as a collaborative 'writing' practice produced through enactments and the use of artefacts that produce not only fictions of alternative worlds but actual and new relations through group work. In this, fictional and actual relations create a feedback loop, between the desired world and actual relations developed through collaboratively staging the fiction.

⁶Pollen makes the case that while the KK shared an interest in Primitivism with the avant-garde, many of the artistic influences came from outside the latter. She gives the examples of a trip the KK undertook to the Dordogne Caves to view Palaeolithic art and the importance of the ethnographic collections of the British Museum for the kin (see Pollen p.121).

⁷We take this notion of the residual – as an alternative and/or oppositional form of culture – from Raymond Williams, who differentiates it from the archaic which, rather, names those aspects of the past that have been more effectively incorporated within the dominant hegemony (see Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist

2.4. *Initiation and naming* (or, the KK as a production of subjectivity)

The name given to you (at birth but also sometimes later in life) ties you to social and symbolic mandates. It is the name of the subject-as-is. There is no more powerful technology of transformation than the refusal of a name (that is given to you) and the affirmation of another name chosen by yourself.¹³ Has the kin ever been about anything else than assuming this determination? Become the cause of yourself. The KK as group analysis – an imaginary construction – in which the usual rules are suspended in the name of a 'what if?' This re-naming exists alongside a host of other associated practices, for example, the choosing and carving of a totem (to make yourself anew). The KK are a very particular regime of signs, or production of subjectivity in this sense.

2.5. *Concepts and objects* (or, the KK as 'myth-science')

The KK are well aware that any effective myth-science needs concepts that individuate the world differently (what else would a belief system be for if not this?), as well as objects (broadly construed) that make these manifest and worldly.¹⁴ In terms of the former, witness: the 'Kinlog' (and the KK's own archive of 'historical' resources and fellow maverick travellers). In terms of the latter, note: banners, flags, masks, totems, lecterns, tents, tunics, cloaks, belts, brooches, drinking cups and so forth – as well as songs, music, plays, journals and magazines. A note about colour: the refusal of the mundane and subdued announces a more vibrant and vital reality.

2.6. *From politics to micro-politics* (or, the KK as both homo ludens and a-typical communist)

We applaud the realization that any aesthetic needs must be accompanied by an economics (or else it remains window dressing), albeit we would also claim that it is the surplus produced by the sun (or wealth produced through sweat and toil) that needs burning up rather than a 'social credit' that needs distributing.¹⁵ While White-Fox promoted a conservative approach to wealth redistribution, there was many a KK member with more radical ideas. And so, we also applaud the political vision of the kin-deserters who demanded more democracy within the movement and, after resigning, went on to focus on education for social change. White-Fox would bitterly label them communist and was pleased to be rid of them. Despite the KK's rejection of class politics in the name of a more global politics of and for the 'human race' we view the KK as being among the first to address various transits from a local scene (a radical parochialism) to something more universal (a world culture) – although this also constitutes one of our critiques (see below).¹⁶ The key ethico-political interest of the kin is, however, away from this particular vision: it is their micro-political constitution – an anti-

Cultural Theory', *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, London: Verso, 1980 (1973), pp. 31–49).

⁸At the same time as referencing the past, the KK did not reject science and its products in their imagery, an example of which is the cover of the *Kinlog*, designed by Hargrave in 1924, which presents an arm inscribed with KK insignia against a landscape featuring a speeding train, automobile and aeroplane. The *Kinlog*, like many of the KK's designs, is rendered in a style that owes much to the shallow space and formal invention of modernist compositions.

Pollen reflects upon what she identifies as eclecticism (the use of past and modern references, and the graphic, commercial style of KK images), and points to Hargrave's statement that he forbade KK followers to imitate and revive. Instead, Hargrave encouraged the KK to produce art from their 'heart and souls'. This Romantic idea led to amateurs producing, as Pollen suggested, a specifically English modernism that was original not in its imagery but in its hybridity. Pollen's observation of this hybridity is that it was produced to interrupt existing cultures and 'slipped between existing categories' (see p. 122).

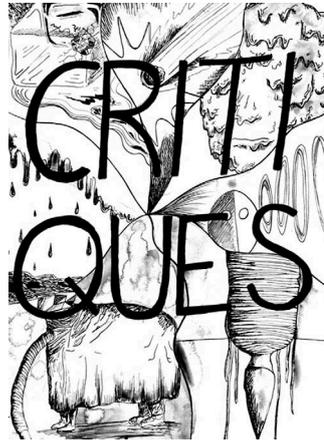
⁹The 'Ndembo' was a secret order within the KK that worked to further the movement's principles and goals (see p.147).

¹⁰Pollen asserts that magic and mysticism was of fundamental importance to the KK (see Pollen p. 143) and that the visual impression and appearance of the KK were a key concern for Hargrave. The KK's leader

democratic collectivism – and their existence and operation as a pack under the influence of a pack leader.¹⁷

2.7. *The great outdoors* (the KK as a refusal of the domestic and interiority)

A final celebration and affirmation of what is intrinsic to the KK and manifest in its green offshoots (most notably the 'Woodcraft Folk'): the turn to an outside – to walking, camping, hiking (and to a stillness that come from this) – but also to animals. This is also a turn to the outside of the bourgeois interior in the affirmation of other forms of alliance (the tribe) and other forms of relation beside the domestic. The kin offer, in part, a different kind of grouping, and, as such, the pre-view of a people-yet-to-come.



3. Seven critiques

3.1. *Heteronormativity and patriarchy*

Our first reservation is how straight this wonky movement is. Or, more specifically, how its queerness was 'under the radar' (it seems clear that the KK was, for some members, homoerotic, for others, queer).¹⁸ The KK place an emphasis on conjugality and 'legal' relations that militates against more unnatural (and productive) nuptials. Why, we would also ask, does the future society mimic the sexual roles (and dress) of the moribund one it leaves behind? Although there is an empowering 'role' for women in the kin (as demarcated by men) the KK displays a patriarchal character that threatens to stymie its more libertarian impulses.

found inspiration in the scout movement, particularly the uniform of the latter, and decided before the KK came into being that what the new movement looked like was important. As Pollen points out, not only was Hargrave interested in sigil magic, he was a graphic designer and understood modern techniques of persuasion (see Pollen p. 99).

¹¹In relation to magic as a prior 'phase' of consciousness (before the techno-religious mode of existence of modern man), and the particular structuring of the magical landscape (and of temporality) this implies, see Gilbert Simondon (extract of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Nandita Mellamphy, Dan Mellamphy and N.B. Mellamphy, *Deleuze Studies* 5, no. 3 (2011 [1958]): 407–24. In relation to the kin, Simondon also remarks on the resonances between this earlier mode of existence and an aesthetic consciousness yet-to-come.

¹²Hargrave was also aware that the image of the KK in the landscape was powerful, as can be seen in the photographs of Angus McBean (a KK member also known as Aengus Og). Pollen highlights this point by quoting Hargrave, who makes it clear that images of kin members traversing the landscape was 'better propaganda than all the printed paper in the world' (see Pollen p.106).

¹³Members of the KK adopted a woodcraft name, a ritual that assisted in the production a picturesque world but also, as Pollen points out, broke hierarchies between young and old. Renaming is an aspect of all performance fictions, and a revealing process as well.

3.2. *Hygiene and the body beautiful*

We also react to the culture of the 'body beautiful' in the KK; for us the ill (and degenerative) body precisely enables other and different kinds of thought (indeed, we do not yet know what an ill body is capable of).¹⁹ Likewise with cleanliness. We affirm the unclean. Hygiene is to be refused unless it is as preparation for a deeper infestation by the outside (as others have pointed out before it is perhaps as lure – or 'good meal' – that the healthy and clean body invites the outside in).²⁰ In our own time this notion of a smooth and clean body-image is especially troublesome (as air-brushed and photoshopped bodies dominate our high streets). We reject the calls to 'care for the self' unless this refers to a different kind of messed-up self.

3.3. *Hierarchy and a head*

Although we have sympathy for the kinlodge – to be located in a utopian KK land – and, again, for the Ndembo (indeed, with any fiction within a fiction) we react negatively to any throne or figurehead and, especially, their legislative powers.²¹ The KK has a pyramidal structure with a white fox at the top. We are reminded of an idea contemporary to that of the KK, that of the Acephale (the idea of the headless organization), which would be our favoured form of organization. Indeed, we would hope for the eventual sacrifice of any 'leader'. Clearly, members of the KK who left the movement in disgust at White-Fox's rule made a mistake in not killing their leader (we would suggest that the kin should have succumbed to the cut-up).

3.4. *Universalism and communication*

As mentioned above, the local-global circuits of the KK are important. However, unlike the kin we do not affirm internationalism. The connections – or resonances – of a scene towards other scenes does not go by way of the universal human, but via something more multiple, underground and secret. The attraction of societies such as the KK is not the ease with which their ideas can be communicated, but, precisely, the parts that are opaque and which, as such, suggest a hundred further societies and a thousand different customs and relations. How then might this other universalism work? Through space and time, singular scenes 'speak' to one another, albeit not in words and not in order to communicate.

3.5. *Escapism and the exotic*

The exit – the 'white flight' – from the city is over. There is no longer an 'other place' to flee towards (we will never escape the suburbs). Nature is no longer as it was. This applies to non-Western culture as much as pre-

Pollen comments on a problem the KK faced in relation to the naming rituals (Pollen p. 102); some names proved too popular and the KK vetoed the name 'Wolf' in 1922, perhaps revealing the unoriginal and Romantic (and predictably masculine) imagination of many of the KK.

¹⁴The term myth-science (originated by musician Sun Ra) refers to a practice that uses technologies (of various kinds) to circulate fictional accounts of the past and future as alternatives to that which is generally accepted as reality. Sun Ra understood myth to be the vibration of an idea, which can reverberate through societies, and through art, music and performance.

¹⁵Pollen addresses the economic concerns of the KK throughout her book and describes how the notion of Social Credit (the rebalancing and raising of wages in relation to production costs) and economics generally became the key concern for Hargrave and what was left of the KK by the end of the 1920s.

However, economics was an important issue for KK in its early inceptions, particularly as many kin members had to work in professions and for a wage that prevented them from having the time and means to fulfil the potential that life could offer.

¹⁶Pollen writes well on the contradictions of KK politics, which while opposing socialism, attracted many socialists owing to its covenant, which promoted non-competitive industry, cooperative workshops, disarmament and the founding of a world council (see Pollen p. 38).

¹⁷Much space is given over to the pragmatic problems of KK organization and

modern culture. We do not hold either to the appropriation of other (native) cultures as possible panacea to our own time or in order to fetishize and thus misunderstand these others. The turn to a mythical West (or East) must be refused at the same time as an unproblematic desire to live in a simplified and idealized past.

3.6. *Biology and blood*

Our biology is not determinant of our being. We are Prometheans and we affirm that the production of different selves and non-selves is possible and happening. The cult of nature – and the natural – stymies experimentation and exploration of what it is we might become. The KK are not fascist, but within some of their communiqués we hear the call of blood and earth and with this a reinstatement (and sanctity) of the given over the made.

3.7. *Coherence and fully functioning units*

There are no points of collapse within the KK; all attempts are made for it to cohere and function smoothly. But any practice needs moments where incoherence is risked to allow something different to emerge, or some new problem or orientation to point the way forward. Put differently: as the KK developed, the kin's interest in untimely images – that aspect of their practice that spoke back to them as if from an I-know-not-where – was expunged. After reorganization and the process White-Fox named 'normalization', a military discipline was accompanied by a military look, with uniforms and berets, and rambling replaced by marching. After this, how does the kin invite in the unexpected and unwelcome as the possible opportunity for something new to emerge? Who or what wrong-steps White-Fox?²²



recruitment in Pollen's book, which, within the context of mass movements of the interwar period, becomes a political question. Pollen comments that in the 1920s, Hargrave asserted that he did not want the KK to become 'a nebulous mass movement'. She suggests that it became clear though that this approach did nothing to help Hargrave's ambition for expansion of the movement. By the time Hargrave was focused on promoting Social Credit, he was convinced that a radical reorganization of the KK was necessary if the cause was to be furthered. This led to a military-styled organization. In this tale, a dialectic of sorts can be traced. The KK promoted an (avant-gardist) rejection of mass cultures and an anti-democracy led by an elite, which was in tension with the desire to found a movement or influential community supported by the masses; a problem identified by Georges Bataille and experienced by most avant-gardes, particularly the Surrealists, who embodied a collective refusal of what most took as reality with the aim of producing a revolution that was unsupported by the masses, who reject avant-garde ideas as difficult or strange.

¹⁸In a fascinating section of Pollen's book, the story of Angus McBean's sexual relationship with Roland Berrill, known as Deathwatch, is recounted. Initiated on a walking tour in Switzerland, it was kept secret from Hargrave, who classed homosexuality as 'sexual rot' equivalent to paedophilia. McBean, an important contributor to the aesthetic development of the KK, only informed Hargreaves of his

4. Seven parallels

4.1. Failure

The failure of living up to any model – and the gathering of people around this failure – can work as a nucleus around which to spin a community (the KK both see this, but also refuse it). No one fits the model. But White-Fox cannot accept this, failure for him means only one course of action, revision towards ever more normalized models. There is desperation in this search for an alternative model of living – from camp craft to military drills – that will attract a mass (as well as people of status), but also be radically different from anything that currently exists. But it is the failures – the stammerings and stutterings – that are of interest, and that make the KK important.

4.2. Collectivity

For us, collectivity is not just on the side of the socius or the group, but on the near side also (we are always more than one). A molecular collectivity which, as such, foregrounds *other* kinds of alliance – and strange becomings. There are animals and Piltdown fictions ('standing on the dawn of a new age') and humans dead and returned to life, walking side by side. The KK have opened the door – it must be gone through (and, in this, the adventures opened up by drugs are instructive).

4.3. Technology

Like the Kin we use technology (artefacts, instruments and tools) to conjure up worlds as much as to perform utilitarian functions. More than this, for us, technology not only allows the accessing of the intensities and becomings mentioned above but extends and shapes us, just as the kin were shaped by their cloaks and tunics (technologies that kept bodies warm but communicated that something different was in the air too). We follow the KK's lead, and combine with technologies of various kinds to become complex assemblages but also 'fictioning' assemblages. Unlike the KK, however, we believe all technology, ancient, contemporary or advanced, should be considered and used in these experiments. We are the machine interface. We practice mythotechnesis.

4.4. Ridicule

Humour is required in order that the real may 'slip in' unnoticed. As with the KK we do not fear ridicule as what we do is also ridiculous. Serious culture is a smokescreen – simply another name for the capture of thought or Control. Humour – when this is not irony but the absurdity of non-sense – is a contact and alliance with other forces. We note though that, in Pollen's book, White-Fox does not come over

sexual orientation on leaving the group (see Pollen p. 120). This raises the question of whether Hargrave's policing of sexual relations was as successful as he thought.

¹⁹The images (propaganda) produced by the KK, particularly the photographs of the rituals and activities, emphasize the healthy bodies and lifestyles of kin life.

Hargreaves equated a clean and healthy body (achieved through camp craft) with a clean and healthy mind (that thinks 'internationally') (see Pollen p. 35). An emphasis on discipline seems to permeate every aspect of kin life, which might explain why there seems to be little humour in Hargrave's work and writing. Disorder seems to be the KKs enemy and greatest fear, perhaps best illustrated in two diagrams printed in Pollen's book. Both appear as modernist abstract works, the first is asymmetrical and illustrates the confused mind; the second is arranged as a symmetrical assemblage of elements and illustrates the ordered mind.

²⁰See Reza Negarestani, 'A Good Meal: The Schizostrategic Edge', *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, 195–207. Melbourne: re.press, 2008..

²¹Hargrave responded badly to calls for more democracy within the KK, believing it a sign of weakness. While the KK rejected the racism and nationalism of fascism, there is much that seems to echo the totalitarian politics of fascism of the interwar era. The notion of the 'Head Man' seems one more aspect of KK organization that points to fascist leanings. However, Hargrave's thinking may have been closer to the reactionary convictions

as a humorous man or a fellow who liked to lark around or do ridiculous things (an austerity that may signal a lack of reflexivity). But White-Fox did promote the idea that humans should be free of the burden of work, and free to play. In this we are in accord, as it is a ridiculous dream.

4.5. *Performance*

Any new way of being in the world must be willed and then performed in that world – even if it calls to another world (this is the secret of magick and ritual that the kin knew only too well). But performance itself is also the representation of this, which, rather than detracting from any effectiveness, adds to it (see also immediately below). The 're' of representation announces an increase in power and not its opposite.

4.6. *The nesting of fictions*

The KK's practice of producing fictions within fictions is exemplified by the mummung plays and puppet theatres of the kin (the staging of a play within a play). We are mindful here of another fictional presentation, *Riddly Walker*, a novel by Russell Hoban, which tells of a future in which all has gone to ruin and of the divinatory power of the 'Eusa Show' (a garbled, mutated Punch and of Judy performance) that narrates how the brutal, primitive societies of Kent came to be so. All societies have their theatres or mirrors through which performance and gesture are doubled. All societies too seem to have their myths, to bind and orientate a people. The fictioning or actualization of the kin was produced through many fictions, staged through costume and ritual, and photography too (the photo as theatrical set-up). The myths of KK may seem ridiculous, being taken in by the Piltdown Man hoax – a sad event. But for us the fiction of the Piltdown Man is not a problem. Indeed, the problem would be if there were no fictions (to operate as quilting points).

4.7. *Non-art*

Perhaps most important – for us – is that the kin are not art. Not only insofar as their 'work' is not for a gallery (another time we will steal the totems on show and return them to life), but also, more radically, in its initial inception, this is a movement that is not about the world as is – not yet another 'take' on it – but a calling to something else yet-to-come. The kin are utopian, but this vision is instantiated – embodied – in the here and now. Are the KK then 'Visual Culture in Britain'? Only if each of these terms also contains the sense of its opposite.

of the Ayn Rand-inspired politics of today. Pollen writes that Hargrave believed, like many of his contemporaries, that the world was divided between the unthinking masses and an elite who could solve the world's problems if allowed to do so, without interference or question by inferior intellects (see Pollen p. 38).

²²Pollen states that Hargrave rethought the KK and banished all that was 'strange', 'queer' and 'fantastic' as aspects of the movement that confused the general public (see Pollen p. 47). This was a key turning point for the movement, worried about alienating a general public.

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