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THE COMPRESSION AND EXPANSION OF MUSICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE
DIGITAL AGE

A Thesis Presented

by

Jesse Lawson

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

October, 2008

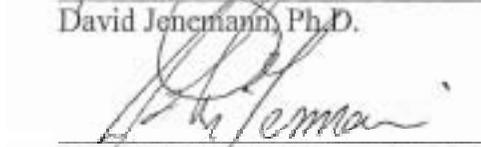
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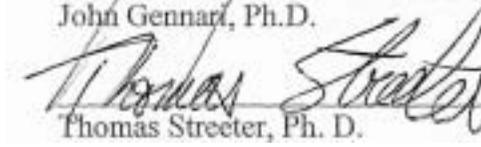


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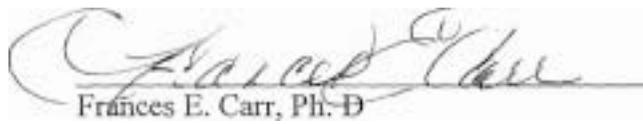


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ABSTRACT

As the record industry's fortunes decline, consumers experience increasing access to the world's recorded music, legally and otherwise, through digital technologies. At the same time, recordings not only take up less physical space (on hard drives and MP3 players), they are compressed — not just as data, but in terms of dynamic range. While it allows for constant audibility in noisy environments like cars and offices, dynamic range compression has frustrated many listeners for limiting the impact of the music and causing “ear fatigue.”

These listeners long for access to the purity of the original recording before it was “squashed,” but the problem is that the original recording does not, in a sense, exist. Producers and mastering engineers assemble the tracks recorded and create a particular sonic product that can later be revisited and “remastered.” Ostensibly this process is meant to get closer to the original sound, but in reality it simply comprises a different manner of interpreting the existing recording.

Theodor Adorno had written of surprisingly similar phenomena more than half a century ago in essays like “The Radio Symphony” and the notes collected in *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*. Though infamous for his hostility toward popular music and its “infantile” listeners, Adorno's writings on music contain much that is valuable for an understanding of how pop works in the digital age. Combined with a consideration of works on music and postmodernity by Fredric Jameson, Jacques Attali, François Lyotard and others, Adorno's work helps one to consider how reification continues to work in an era where music is seemingly no longer a “thing.”

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This thesis had its beginnings in a paper I wrote for Valerie Rohy's Critical Theory seminar. Professor Rohy has been enormously helpful in my graduate career not only for what she has taught me about theory but for her much-needed reminders that academic writing is supposed to present arguments. She has been as consistently accessible, open and helpful as any professor I have had during in my six years (undergraduate and graduate) at UVM. Recalling her comments on that first term paper, I hope I have managed to put my topic sentences closer to the beginning of paragraphs.

My gratitude toward my three readers, John Gennari, David Jenemann, and Thomas Streeter, should go without saying. I had stimulating conversations with all of them in the course of writing this thesis; Professor Jenemann in particular helped me not only with his critical acumen and vast knowledge about Adorno and cultural studies, but in helping me to hone (or, indeed, discover) my central argument. Furthermore, I thank my readers for their patience and flexibility with scheduling the defense.

During the past two years I have benefitted on many levels from the friendship of my graduate student colleagues. Whether for their support, their willingness to listen to me ramble about this project, or the amicable distractions they provided, I am particularly indebted to Brad Bannon, Stacey Cheng, Dan Clark, Charles Haragely, Rae Muhlstock, Daniel Redmond, Christian Reifsteck, Tim Reimer and Sarah Sargent.

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INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERNITY AND THE DIGITAL AGE

Moderninity: what it means to you and I and this CD you hold in your hand.

—Mark E. Smith, “The CD in Your Hand,” *The Post Nearly Man* (1998)

To speak of a digital age is to suggest two things: one, that this age is somehow fundamentally different from some previous (presumably analogue) era; two, that the difference is “determined” by technology. But as Jonathan Sterne reminds us, there are reasons to be skeptical of this line of thinking.

Scholars often write about new digital communication technologies as if their mere presence demands that social life and social thought be remade. But this is advertising talk masquerading as academic discourse. If there is some social magic in the digital transmission and storage of sound, it is not to be found in the brute fact of the technology itself. Instead, we would have to ask the same questions of CD, DVD or MP3 players, hard-disk recorders, wireless telephones, and digital audio workstations that we asked of the telephone, the phonograph, and the radio. Why *these* technologies, *now*? (337).

Sterne couches his argument in light of a criticism of periodization in general, particularly insofar as it deems contemporary culture utterly divorced from its past. As an example, Sterne mentions the oft-questioned distinction between modernity and postmodernity: “Marx and Engels famously wrote of modernity in 1848, ‘All that is solid melts into air.’ Jean-François Lyotard would echo their sentiments in 1979 as proof of a postmodern condition” (335). The problem with this kind of epoch-making for Sterne is that the “conditions” of modernity and postmodernity somehow precede human endeavor, totalizing before the fact. Actually, he implicitly argues, notions of modernity and postmodernity are very much the product of human foibles. And so it is with digital technologies.

In part, I have chosen to write about “the digital age” simply as a shorthand for the present era insofar as it is informed by the use of these technologies. I began this project by attempting to ask what becomes of the “value” of popular music at a time when it seemingly becomes free — even though, legally speaking, this is still not entirely the case. While I do not exactly answer this question in these pages, I do find that one way of explaining the record industry’s decline is to suggest that it is losing control of the “original text” of popular music. Essentially, while the industry has maintained mastery of the recordings it distributes with relative success for the better part of a century, consumers now are “buying it” less and less. The record labels (or sometimes the artists) *do* have something that the consumer does not, this being the master recordings from which CDs, MP3s and other media are made. But no CD or other format is a perfect reproduction of these recordings because specific decisions are made in the mastering process about how the sound will be manipulated (even if the artist or engineer strives for “transparency”). What’s more, multitrack recording, with its endless possibilities for cutting and pasting, means that in a sense there *is* no “original recording” to refer to; the “master” made from the multitracks can always be replaced by another. In the digital age, this has become particularly evident with the rise of the “loudness wars,” in which dynamic range compression is used to raise the overall volume of a recording while reducing the difference between quiet and loud parts.

It would seem that the most obvious theorist with which to make these arguments would be Walter Benjamin, whose “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” articulated the resistant possibilities of artworks that were all

copies without an original. However, the rise of different available versions of a work complicates this notion, particularly in the use of digital remastering, bringing consumers to compare the sonic qualities of, say, the “original vinyl” to the CD reissue (or the second, third or fourth CD reissue, to consider David Bowie or Elvis Costello). Because it reflects a keen interest in issues of musical interpretation and reproduction, Theodor Adorno’s work is more appropriate to the arguments I present. While I do not share Adorno’s disdain for popular music, I find that an engagement with his admittedly thorny and “contradictory” texts can be productive for situating recorded music in the present era.

To the extent that using Adorno is problematic — and there would be no reason to “use” him if he was not — it is perhaps because of the tensions between modernism and postmodernism. As perhaps the most famous (and most Marxism-informed) exegesis of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson’s work helps to recontextualize Adorno’s. This is particularly important when discussing problems of cultural “resistance” to capitalist norms after the time of Schoenberg and Picasso. On this score I am, like Jameson, basically ambivalent; the music I valorize in these pages is for the most part commercially successful, and much of it does not challenge the political status quo in any meaningful way. Yet since dynamic range compression has become an *aesthetic* status quo, I argue that recordings that lack it have more depth and provide a more meaningful “experience.” Two of the works I discuss at length, Kraftwerk’s “Autobahn” and the Avalanches’ *Since I Left You*, aurally depict journeys; they provide an “escape” that is all the more genuine for its lack of authenticity (“Autobahn”’s motorway sound effects are

overtly synthetic; *Since I Left You*'s samples are altered in myriad ways). Adorno and Horkheimer said that in the culture industry "Something is provided for all so that none may escape" (1225); the only response one can offer in postmodernity may be that the best escape is that which knows it isn't one.

And yet if the original text of the recording is escaping the culture industry, some sort of liberation does seem possible. Ironically, by introducing digital recordings to the public as CDs, the industry ultimately enabled the online distribution of music as MP3s, FLACs and other formats. Although for much of the nineties the CD was a major boon for the industry, particularly as consumers replaced their vinyl albums with the new format, it ultimately precipitated the industry's current malaise and presumed future downfall.

In a parallel paradox, Jameson's depiction of late capitalism seems to hold out the possibility of its decline. In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1991), Jameson provides an account of the labyrinthine space of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. It "aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city" (40); its "glass skin repels the city outside . . . [like] those reflector sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity and power toward the other" (42). Its "escalators and elevators" have "their very real pleasures," but taken as a whole they are "a transportation machine which becomes the allegorical signifier of that older promenade we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own" (42). Such is "the vengeance this space takes on those who still seek to walk through it" that guests are unable to find their way: "Given the absolute

symmetry of the four towers, it is quite impossible to get your bearings in this lobby” (43). And so the result of this very mastery is that the shops within do poor business:

[I]t has been obvious since the very opening of the hotel in 1977 that nobody could ever find any of these stores, and even if you located the appropriate boutique, you would be most unlikely to be as fortunate a second time; as a consequence, the commercial tenants are in despair and all the merchandise is marked down to bargain prices. When you recall that Portman is a businessman as well as an architect, and a millionaire developer, an artist who is at one and the same time a capitalist in his own right, you cannot but feel that here too something of a “return of the repressed” is involved (44).

The turmoil in the hotel’s retail sector is reminiscent of the record industry’s decline in that the very way musical space was mapped — as a digital medium, on a compact disc — ultimately brought about its decline. This despite the mastery the disc seemed to represent: also having a glass sheen, with the “eyes” of the disc (the pits, the zeroes and ones) invisible to the outside observer; a space that a consumer could map to some extent by using the skip button (like an elevator’s floor buttons) but could not “walk” through (i.e. watch the progress of the needle on the record, move the tone arm physically). Both hotel and disc are antiseptic worlds, seemingly perfect unto themselves, but both precipitate economic problems.

That the digital age be understood as a consequence of developments articulated under the rubric of postmodernity should come as no surprise. Lyotard had spoken of the computerization of society as a facet of the era in *The Postmodern Condition*, even in 1979 noting that his predictions were “banal” (7). This is part of what Sterne objects to when critiquing the millenarian provocations of cultural theorists in *The Audible Past*. He has a faith in a rearticulated humanism, in the continued value of human communication:

To deprive the speaking subject of its presumptive privilege is not necessarily to signal the death of the Enlightenment subject or the humanist subject as such. It is to suggest, instead, a more thoroughgoing humanism, a more sophisticated enlightenment, one that can move beyond the idealized voice of the one — a god-like voice in a human guise. Communication is a collective endeavor, not reducible to a model of two people talking (343).

So when Jameson speaks of a “suppression of depth” in postmodernity (43) or Lyotard argues that “Technology is . . . a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency” (44), Sterne would be suspicious.

Although Adorno would probably have approved of Lyotard and Jameson’s assertions, one senses he may actually have shared some of Sterne’s antipathy towards overhasty periodizing. While practically all of Adorno’s arguments require a sense of history in order to function — consider, for instance, his famous remark about the barbarity of writing poetry after Auschwitz (“Cultural Criticism” 34) — he tends not to define historical eras with great specificity; the question of when the culture industry “began,” for instance, is not addressed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Adorno criticized the latter’s poetic notion that “Every epoch dreams its successor,” proclaiming it “undialectical For the sentence implies three things: a conception of the dialectical image as a content of consciousness, albeit a collective one; its direct — I would almost say: developmental — relatedness to the future as Utopia; and a notion of the ‘epoch’ as proper, and self-contained subject of this content of consciousness” (*Aesthetics and Politics* 111). On the most basic level, an epoch isn’t a reality — neither objectively nor intersubjectively; the choice to fashion one can lead to the construction of easy narratives where things happen as a matter of course. While Adorno is certainly invested in describing social processes, he hopes that by

realizing how inscribed one is in these processes one can, paradoxically, put oneself outside them.

This thesis attempts a similar movement. Chapter One considers Adorno's critique of "infantile" music listening and approaches the problem of text and interpretation of recorded music in this light. To believe that one is experiencing the music "itself" in some objective fashion *is* childish, and yet there is perhaps no other way *to* experience music. In postmodernity, there is no way beyond childhood (or rather, the distinction between childhood and adulthood is essentially vexed). So while this chapter is concerned with entrapment, Chapter Two seeks possibilities of musical escape in the digital age. How does one experience music authentically while knowing that the experience is always mediated, always "false"? Here the tension between expansion and compression is considered in light of the "ambient" experience of music (both as ambient music and as pop made ambient by Muzak) before focusing on readings of *Since I Left You* and Roisin Murphy's song and video "Overpowered." Inevitably, the two chapters address some of the same topics — dynamic range compression, postmodernity, the possibility of resistance; my hope is that these repetitions will not prove too "distracting" but rather reinforce the larger dialectical rhythm.

**CHAPTER ONE: IS THERE ANY WAY BEYOND “INFANTILE” LISTENING?
ADORNO, MUSICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE ELUSIVE ORIGINAL**

Popular music scholarship as a whole cannot help but approach Theodor Adorno’s work without a fundamental ambivalence. On the one hand, Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt school helped to legitimize the study of popular culture in the academy. On the other, Adorno in particular treated popular culture with derision, suggesting that it was a top-down mechanism through which consumers were controlled, a “culture industry.” Repeatedly noting the “infantile” character of hit parade fans, Adorno seldom if ever allowed that pop music might also have a potential for resistance, or that consumers might have meaningful agency. Frustratingly, he never addressed the sweeping changes in popular music (jazz especially) that occurred in the twenty years prior to his death in 1969. Yet in a way his writings provided the occasion for one of the most frequent cultural studies arguments: responding to Adorno, cultural critics have concluded that most “popular” commodities *are* irredeemable, but certain ones “resist” normative capitalist culture in some way.

I am using Adorno’s work to pursue a somewhat different line of argument. I am concerned first and foremost with how we get at “the text” of popular music, or the music “itself.” For Adorno, this was more of a problem for classical music than for pop, yet some of his writings about classical music and its interpretation and mediation provide a useful point of departure for thinking about similar aesthetic issues in pop. What emerges is that just as there is no definitive interpretation of a classical work, there is really no

way to hear the work itself in pop, either, despite the notion that all copies of a recording are the same.

Because Adorno regarded pop music fans as “childish” – whether through their own fault or that of the culture industry – the issue of whether the “work” itself could be “truly heard” would probably have been irrelevant to him: it contained no truth to begin with. In the age of modernism, in fact, even the great classical works of an earlier age could no longer stand true because of their commodification. “A successful work,” he wrote in his 1951 essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” “is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure” (32). Thus his oft-noted enthusiasm for modernist composers like Arnold Schoenberg, whose twelve-tone music strikes many listeners as impenetrable even today, even after achieving the canonicity Adorno disdained (once twelve-tone became a kind of recipe, it lost its critical edge, as Adorno would point out in “The Aging of the New Music”). Music that would lay some claim to oppositionality can only do so by engaging the listener on an intellectual level, by making one recognize that conventional harmony is a delusion.

This critique can seem deeply perverse. After all, it is tempting to hear music opening up possibilities of resistance, escape and meaning in a world where mundanity dominates, to hope that it is not just more of the same, that it provides access to some kind of authentic experience. Music, one might argue, should *redeem* the world, not negate it. But Adorno will have none of this.

By way of illustration, one might consider Oliver Sacks' account of the life of Clive Wearing. Wearing, a British musician and musicologist, suffered a brain infection in his forties that caused severe amnesia. He had a memory span of "only a few seconds" and had forgotten "virtually his entire past" (188). In an attempt to retrieve some semblance of greater continuity in his life, Clive tried keeping a journal, but all his entries tended to read the same: "I am conscious," "I am awake" or "this time properly awake." He would describe his experience as follows: "I haven't heard anything, seen anything, touched anything, smelled anything. . . . It's like being dead" (189); "I am completely incapable of thinking" (190).

Despite these major shortcomings, however, Clive remained a very accomplished musician. Though when asked to name the composers he knew he could only come up with four, Sacks recalls that he had no trouble playing through one of Bach's *Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues*: "He remembers almost nothing unless he is actually doing it; then it may come to him. He inserted a tiny, charming improvisation at one point, and did a sort of Chico Marx ending, with a huge downward scale. With his great musicality and his playfulness, he can easily improvise, joke, play with any piece of music" (198). Sacks describes how Clive performs in a 1986 BBC documentary, *Prisoner of Consciousness*:

In these scenes from only a year or so after his illness, his face often appeared tight with torment and bewilderment. But when he was conducting his old choir, he did this with great sensitivity and grace, mouthing the melodies, turning to different singers and sections of the choir, cuing them, encouraging them, to bring out their special parts. It is obvious that Clive not only knew the piece perfectly, how all the parts contributed to the unfolding of the musical thought, but also retained all the special skills of conducting, his professional persona, and his own unique style (204-205).

Music provides a structure and continuity that allows Clive to engage with the world, and with other human beings, that ordinary conversation and day-to-day existence do not. On the one hand, this seems miraculous. On the other, it is universal (at least for music lovers): music can put one in the moment, change and channel emotions, and provide reassurance, comfort and a sense of authority at times when these are lacking. No particular piece of music will do this for all people in any given context, and some individuals are indifferent to music (Freud and Nabokov being famous examples), but certainly much of the power of music has been to make one “feel good,” or at least feel something. On this level, while one might find that Clive is redeemed by his ability to engage in an intellectual process, the resonance of his story lies in its pathos.

Yet for Adorno, Clive would be more conscious when he is “dead,” when his experience is discontinuous and he is aware of his alienation (even if he does not understand his amnesia as such). When Clive leads the chorus, he is engaging in a “spurious harmony” that cannot ultimately reconcile the real dissonance of his existence. In an Adornian reading, *this* is what makes Clive’s experience “universal”: that the meaning or catharsis provided by most musical experience in modernity is false, and that it is only through difficult, serious intellectual engagement – specifically in the form of negative dialectics – that we can hope to find some semblance, or at least some possibility of real freedom.

Popular music, at least as conventionally understood – three-to-four-minute songs with a verse/chorus/bridge structure, typically in 4/4 time, with easily recalled melodies, rhythms and “hooks” – seems unlikely to force the kind of thinking Adorno requires. One

can, as Adorno did in various essays (most infamously those on jazz), bring negative dialectics to bear on pop songs, but the songs themselves, if dialectical at all (say, between the verse and the bridge) tend to find a synthesis (in the chorus).

It is these qualities that brought Adorno to regard pop songs and their audience as childish. In his 1938 essay “On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,” he wrote, “Regressive listeners behave like children. Again and again and with stubborn malice, they demand the one dish they have once been served” (*Essays on Music* 307). But this behavior was hardly limited to popular music audiences; it infiltrated the reception of classical works as well. Given the circumstances of atomistic listening and fetishizing interpretations of the latter, Adorno wanted to find a purer way to get at the text. In a 1959 note for a projected work called *Toward a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, he wrote:

Introduce the mere *reading* of music as a conceptual extreme. Perhaps — as a residue of unsublimated mimesis — the ‘making’ of music is already no less infantile than reading aloud (comes to the fore in choir). Silent reading as the legacy and conclusion of interpretation. It is this possibility — playing complex chamber music from memory . . . and as asserting the absolute primacy of the text over its imitation — in comparison to which essentially *all* ‘music-making’ already sounds antiquated (*Toward a Theory* 5).

So Clive, whatever he conducts, is finally still engaged in something infantile. And Sacks would not necessarily deny it: although he expresses incredulity that an “artistic or creative performance of this caliber [could] be adequately explained by ‘procedural memory,’” he nonetheless explains that

Episodic or explicit memory, we know, develops relatively late in childhood and is dependent on a complex brain system involving the hippocampi and temporal lobe structures, the system that is compromised in severe amnesiacs and all but obliterated in Clive. The basis of procedural or implicit memory is less easy to

define, but it certainly involves larger and more primitive parts of the brain – subcortical structures like the basal ganglia and cerebellum and their many connections to each other and to the cerebral cortex (207).

So in a way, Adorno is right: although Clive presumably learned his musical skills over years of study, the cerebral structures that allowed him to do so are actually those that mature first; therefore, music making *in general* is infantile. Perversely, Adorno suggests that reading music would be truer to the music than listening to it, even though he knows that a written score is not music itself but an interpretation of imagined music. The spuriousness of the harmony is not just in the literal presence of harmony but in the received wisdom. We will recall that for Sacks, “Clive not only knew the piece perfectly, how all the parts contributed to the unfolding of the musical thought, but also retained . . . his own unique style.” That “the musical thought” would “unfold” in such a natural way indicates that this “prisoner of consciousness” has *escaped* consciousness, replacing it with style.

If this reading of Clive’s brief triumph over adversity sounds cruel, even anti-humanistic, Adorno would certainly have recognized the perversity; “introducing conceptual extremes” is an essential component of his negative dialectics. The fact that he never completed *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction* indicates, perhaps, that he had not quite arrived at just how one should arrive at the “x-ray image” he thought musical interpretation should produce (1). And yet this very unfinished quality resonates with the lack of synthesis in his dialectical approach. In this way, no Adorno text can be considered a “definitive” representation of his thought, and virtually any criticism of the limitations of his arguments can be answered, at least partly, by the work itself.

For instance, one might quite reasonably find Adorno's take on the "infantile" aspects of music performance and listening hostile, not just for what it says about music but for what it says about childhood: surely one can find richness and gratification in the memory of one's youth. A properly Marxist perspective, of course, would not find much use for nostalgia, but Adorno was hardly an orthodox Marxist: in a 1965 radio lecture "On the Question: What Is German?" he recalls one of several reasons he wished to return to Germany during his American sojourn: "I simply wanted to go back to the place where I spent my childhood, where what is specifically mine was imparted to the very core. Perhaps I sensed that whatever one accomplishes in life is little other than the attempt to regain childhood" (126).

While Adorno's childhood included access to the tradition of European art music, most present-day Westerners are brought up hearing popular music. In this way, while Adorno wishes to get at the real text, or the "true" interpretation of a classical work that probably does not exist, pop music listeners may be engaged in a similar search. What's more, although some listeners do experience their tastes shifting and evolving from pop to classical (and jazz, which by now arguably has a similar status), the "adult" audience for rock and related styles has grown significantly since the fifties – a trend that could reflect either more sophisticated pop music, a more prolonged adolescence (as Adorno would have thought) or some combination of these features. It may simply be that the shrinking distinction between "high" and "low" culture that Fredric Jameson and others observed as a feature of postmodernity dovetails with an increasingly uncertain distinction between adulthood and adolescence.

Adorno, hoping what he learned from his exile experience would enable him to combat “the fabrication of stereotypes” (“On the Question” 125) nonetheless acknowledged that “The identification with the familiar is an undeniable aspect of this hope although it must not be misused as a theoretical justification for an impulse which is probably legitimate only as long as it is obeyed without appealing to involved theoretical justifications” (126). One might extrapolate something about music here: that although pop music audiences identify with the familiar, this does not necessarily have to indicate that they are, in essence, infantile. Choosing to listen to and enjoy pop music is, perhaps, not theoretically justified; at the worst level, one might (to use a phrase Adorno often employed) find it has value because of its “mere existence,” but on the other hand, to the extent that it forms part of our identity and consciousness, it is certainly worth theorizing about.

But just as one can never fully regain childhood, one can also never “objectively” locate the music. Fredric Jameson described this problem in “Reification and Utopia”:

In mass culture, repetition effectively volatilizes the original object – the “text,” the “work of art” – so that the student of mass culture has no primary object of study.

The most striking demonstration of this process can be witnessed in our reception of contemporary pop music of whatever type [W]e never hear any of the singles produced in these genres “for the first time”; instead, we live a constant exposure to them in all kinds of different situations, from the steady beat of the car radio through the sounds at lunch, or in the work place, or in shopping centers, all the way to those apparently full-dress performances of the “work” in a nightclub or stadium concert or on the records you buy and take home to hear. This is a very different situation from the first bewildered audition of a complicated classical piece, which you hear again in the concert hall or listen to at home. The passionate attachment one can form to this or that pop single, the rich personal investment of all kinds of private associations and existential symbolism which is the feature of such attachment, are fully as much a function of our own familiarity as of the work itself: the pop single, by means of repetition, insensibly

becomes part of the existential fabric of our own lives, so that what we listen to is ourselves, our own previous auditions (137-138).

The distinction Jameson draws between pop and classical, while allowing more for the meaningful potential of popular music, is not in essence far removed from Adorno's view of pop as essentially a commodity. Certainly classical was commodified too, but pop existed *only* for and by the market, with songs distinguished only by pseudo individual elements (the eccentricities of a particular jazz soloist, say, or the texture of a singer's voice) — an emphasis on the detail over the whole, as the wholes of pop songs were (according to Adorno) always the same: “No longer do the partial moments serve as a critique of the whole; instead, they suspend the critique which the successful aesthetic totality exerts against the flawed one of society” (“Fetish Character” 291).

Consequently the question of taste in popular music is a false one:

If one seeks to find out who “likes” a commercial piece, one cannot avoid the suspicion that liking and disliking are inappropriate to the situation, even if the person questioned clothes his reactions in those words. The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it. An approach in terms of value judgments has become a fiction for the person who finds himself hemmed in by standardized musical goods. He can neither escape impotence nor decide between the offerings where everything is so completely identical that preference in fact depends merely on biographical details or on the situation in which things are heard (288).

Jameson, in “Reification and Utopia,” had posited that the problem with Adorno's culture industry critique was that its valorization of high art as “resistant” belonged to a specific historical moment, that of modernism; he points out that such respected writers as Dickens and Balzac had mass audiences in their day (134). Nonetheless, his understanding of what constitutes the “text” of popular music is very similar to Adorno's, and like Adorno he makes the divide between classical works (as something one does,

indeed, hear for the first time) and popular music a real, meaningful one. In his various writings, Jameson is far more likely to analyze a film or building in detail than a pop song, preferring instead to describe general qualities of “postmodern” bands. The threat of autobiography — not the kind that emerges, finally, as a critique of larger socioeconomic structures but that which says “they’re playing our song” — abounds. Even Simon Frith, who has been concerned with the problem of pop music’s value for decades, finds himself unable to answer Adorno directly: he argues that “The utopian impulse, the *negation* of everyday life, the aesthetic impulse that Adorno recognized in high art, must be part of low art too,” but in saying this he acknowledges that “my own tastes will inform everything that follows” (20). Can it be otherwise? The presence of so many “introductory” academic texts on pop music relative to more focused studies suggests an inability to get beyond a basic acquaintance, as with any object of desire whose true character eludes when one is blinded by lust or stereotype.

In *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, Theodor Gracyk makes an attempt to remedy this problem by defining the “work” in popular music. Along the way, he offers numerous criticisms of Adorno, some of them less persuasive than others,¹ but some of which can actually engage Adorno in productive ways. Popular music’s “commodity character,” he argues,

¹ Gracyk argues, for instance, that “If Adorno is concerned that the mass audience vulgarizes great music with a fetishization of its parts at the expense of the larger whole, his own fetishism lies in focusing on structure at the expense of other musical values” (165). Although Adorno certainly valued structural listening, he was not averse to excerpts and in 1965 even put together a two-hour radio program called “Beautiful Passages” which consisted of fifty-two brief moments from classical compositions with his commentary (Leppert 227).

does not exhaust its appeal. Reviving the primacy of music as something *heard*, both jazz and rock reject the tyranny of the composer's intentions and the autonomous musical composition as the focus of listening. Emphasizing individuality and individual performance, jazz negates conventions developed by the tradition of Bach to Schoenberg. Offering recordings as primary texts, rock emphasizes a multileveled collaboration and negates the same conventions. At the same time, Adorno's insistence that nonmusical factors must be considered in interpreting and evaluating musical works reminds us that music's core properties are always culturally emergent. Rather than explain its appeal, the "culture industry" may generate barriers to hearing rock and jazz, just as Adorno thinks it has for serious music (173).

Two of these points merit consideration. The first is Gracyk's insistence that the recording in rock is the primary text, rather than a composition or a particular performance. He notes that even "live" recordings are not typically reproductions of an original event (the way they are mixed combines perspectives that could not coexist at once). Pop and rock music is sometimes composed in the studio, often without the use of sheet music, and live performances are typically judged by comparison to recordings. That multitrack recording makes possible "performances" that could not take place in a live setting has been a commonplace for decades; in fact, now that computers and elaborate digital synthesizers have prominent roles in live performances, this is in a sense no longer true (although the "liveness" of the performance might appear compromised).

But the second point I wish to examine — that, in fact, the culture industry obstructs proper listening to rock music as well as classical — actually complicates the first. The use of dynamic range compression in contemporary mastering alters recordings in substantial ways, and thus the problems of interpretation Adorno explored in *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction* actually have some significance for recordings. By bringing recordings to a relatively constant volume, dynamic range compression alters

their meaning or potential meaning, and remastering is an reinterpretation (based on what audiences “want” to hear) that makes the music harder to listen to.

First, though, I should note that Gracyk has, to some extent, anticipated these issues. He discusses the problem of multiple available versions of a recording and asks whether their differing sonic characters make them different “works.” He mentions, for instance, Neil Young’s infamous disgruntlement with digital technology: “Listening to a CD is like looking through a screen window. . . . It’s an insult to the brain and the heart and feelings to have to listen to this and think it’s music” (22). Gracyk ultimately maintains, though, that while an album might have been recorded to be heard via analogue media (a vinyl record, a transistor radio), digital remastering does not create a fraudulent variation, even where remixing is involved, unless the remix is designated a “special version.” “While they are audibly different from the originals, audible differences are insufficient to make them distinct works. It seems that both genealogy *and* intention are required to distinguish one work from another when we are dealing with nonperforming arts that have multiple genuine instantiations” (28-29). Thus Gracyk’s view of the infinite reproducibility of recordings, while acknowledging that differences exist, is essentially faithful to the Benjaminian notion of the work of art that has no “aura,” no original.

Nonetheless, in the packaging of reissues of back catalogue titles, record labels will often advertise that the disc has been “remastered from the original master tapes,” implying that while any given copy a consumer purchases of this reissue will be identical to another, what makes its value greater from that of previous releases is that it is closer

to the source material (first generation CD reissues often being mastered from whatever source material was most immediately accessible – often not a “first generation” source). In the past few years many reissues have reproduced the cover of the box housing the master tape, with handwritten track listing and times. That the master tape itself is a kind of inaccessible fetish object — albeit one that most consumers would be unable to play anyway — is suggested by the series of Abba reissues from 2001: an insert depicts the covers of each album with the catalog numbers beneath, but in the center is a photo of the boxed master tapes captioned “not for sale.” And no wonder: they were remastered yet again in 2005. As long as Universal Music Group has financial incentive to keep revisiting the Abba catalogue, they need to appeal to the notion that each time they are getting closer and closer to the original, bringing out further unheard details. The master tapes signal the authenticity of the product, but they also hold out a talismanic sense of infinite possibility (even as new technologies like SACD supposedly have sampling rates and frequency ranges that far exceed the range of human hearing and could presumably reproduce every nuance of tape hiss).

The irony is that the remastering of Abba’s catalogue has, with respect to dynamic range, probably gotten further from the master tapes with each new release. (At the time of this writing, Wikipedia’s page on “the loudness wars” compares waveforms of “One of Us” from 1981’s *The Visitors* in its 1983 and 2005 CD reissues, with the latter of course filling up a considerably greater share of the available space.) In fact, most rock and pop remastering jobs follow the “squashing” trends of newer recordings. Human hearing naturally responds to louder sound as “better,” at least in the short term, so it is not

surprising that recording engineers — often against their inclinations, or so the story goes — have been asked to produce ever louder-sounding masters. Mastering engineer Bernie Grundman says, “I can’t tell you how many times someone comes in and plays me something he wants mastered and I’ll say, ‘Do you want to make it slamming loud or retain some of this great sound?’ They’ll say, ‘We want to keep it really pristine.’ Then the next day they’ll call me and say, ‘How come mine isn’t as loud as so and so’s?’” (qtd. in Levine).

One might ask why this would be cause for complaint: after all, top 40 radio has compressed the range of the singles it plays in order to produce constant volume for many years; pop music typically lacks the kinds of shifts in volume one finds in much orchestral music from the Romantic period onward (a compressed *Bolero* would make no sense at all). If rock and pop music are mainly meant to sell themselves, they need to get your attention, and thus it makes sense that they be loud. However, if everything is more or less equally loud, nothing will stand out, and thus it has become increasingly common for listeners to complain about “ear fatigue.” There is even some speculation that the loudness wars are responsible for declining compact disc sales, although it would be hard to prove this empirically, since some very loud CDs have sold very well (the success of Oasis’ *What’s the Story Morning Glory?*, a very loud recording at the time of its 1995 release, is said to have precipitated the loudness wars). If, as Gracyk argues, rock is a recording art, it is reasonable to suggest that more subtly mastered recordings with greater amounts of detail and range are, in some sense, better. In particular, the sense of

“space” one can hear in a recording has value to the extent that it creates an immersive sound world.

Adorno himself valued these qualities, if not insofar as they applied to popular music. In “The Radio Symphony” (1941), he writes, “To ‘enter’ a symphony means to listen to it not only as to something before one, but as something around one as well, as a medium in which one ‘lives.’ It is this surrounding quality that comes closest to the idea of symphonic absorption” (257). Thus the specifically *monaural* quality of radio limits the music, but this is not all. For Adorno, if Beethoven’s music is properly rendered, it can make the listener lose awareness of its duration — but not as it is heard over the radio.

The first bars of the Fifth Symphony, if rightly performed, must possess the characteristic of a “statement,” of a “positing.” The positing characteristic, however, can be achieved only by the utmost dynamic intensity. Hence, the question of loudness ceases to be a purely external one and affects the very structure of [the] symphony. Presented without the dynamic emphasis which makes out of the Nothing of the first bars virtually the Everything of the total movement, the idea of the work is missed before it has been actually started. The suspension of time-consciousness is endangered from the very beginning: the simple, no longer emphasized in its paradoxical nature as Nothing and Everything, threatens to degenerate into the trite of the “nothingness” of the beginning fails to be absorbed into the whole by the impetus of the statement. The tension is broken and the whole movement is on the verge of relapsing into time (259).

From a compositional point of view — at least the kind of composition Adorno is referring to — popular music doesn’t have the same kind of subtlety and existential impact that a Beethoven symphony does. But the issues of space and duration *do* matter in popular music to the extent that a lack of dynamics makes it difficult for listeners to sustain attention: “The excitement in music comes from variation in rhythm, timbre, pitch

and loudness,” says Daniel Levitin. “If you hold one of those constant, it can seem monotonous” (qtd. in Levine). Monotony puts the listener pretty squarely back in time consciousness.

Since the traditional pop song is three or four minutes long, one might ask how a change in dynamic range is really going to change the fundamental monotony, the repetition of the structure. For Adorno, indeed it might not. Nonetheless, one can cite numerous examples of popular music whose impact is largely driven by dynamics. For instance, much of the “alternative” music of the late eighties and early nineties would actually repeat the same riff for the duration of the song; choruses were distinguished by an increase in volume as much as anything else (Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” is characteristic).

That said, popular music had expanded its boundaries considerably in the sixties and seventies. The seventies were probably the peak decade of the album as art form, with songs expanding into side-long suites and concept albums coming right and left. This is an appropriate figure of speech for a time when stereo became established as the dominant listening mode for LPs, something that brought Adorno some satisfaction, to judge from “Opera and the Long-Playing Record.”

One of the most famous side-long recordings of the seventies, the title track to Kraftwerk’s *Autobahn* (1974), hailed from Adorno’s homeland. It makes an interesting comparison with Adorno’s account of Beethoven’s Fifth: if the latter achieved its meaning through the tension between the “Nothing” of the opening and the “Everything” of the whole first movement, “Autobahn” is in a sense all Nothing — or rather it’s

impossible to say if it's Nothing or Everything, as there is very little tension. It maintains the same pace throughout, and for the most part repeats the same refrain: "Wir fahren fahren fahren auf der Autobahn." The mindlessness of this repetition might well have grated on Adorno, who quite naturally saw the autobahn as part of the infrastructure of the Third Reich, a sign of the end of modernist German culture (*Minima Moralia* 57). We drive on the highway, we participate in the infrastructure: we do as we should. And while the distorted, highly chorused voices that intone "AU... TO... BAHN" about a minute in hint at some kind of threat, the track essentially drifts along gracefully like a well-maintained vehicle on smooth pavement.

And yet "Autobahn" is not boring. Synthesized sounds fade in and out like different forms of vegetation, the volume subtly surges and declines as though passing over long hills. Key changes suggest new enticements — a certain amount of distance covered, a city passed by; nothing fundamentally changes, but there is a quiet satisfaction in being served by machines, and perhaps being one with them. (Perhaps this fantasy of unimpeded comfort and convenience was particularly appealing in light of the 1973 oil shortage; an abridged version of "Autobahn" made the U.S. top forty.) The pleasures of the recording might appear infantile, like a child's fascination with light switches, power buttons and other enticing modes of transformation; it may be that the ideal listener is the child in the passenger seat. Nonetheless, this fascination with gadgetry never goes away for many adults.

The 1986 UK CD release of *Autobahn* never reaches peak volume; its waveform has a great deal of what audiophiles call "headroom." To date, long-promised remasters

of Kraftwerk's catalog have yet to appear, but if they followed contemporary mastering trends, one can only guess that much of what makes the recording effective — what makes it an “accurate” depiction of the autobahn — would be dismantled. Dynamic range compression not only makes everything loud (and surely a smartly engineered vehicle should run quiet!), it “squashes” the sounds together so that they lack individual presence (which makes it difficult to hear if something is wrong with the car).

For all that, though, there is nothing in the original multitracks that says the recording *has* to be mastered a certain way. (Kraftwerk remixed it and other tracks for their 1990 release *The Mix*, after all.) If one does listen to *Autobahn* in the car, chances are she will not hear the sound of the car starting on the disc beneath the sound of her own, and much of what goes on in quieter passages will be inaudible as well (unless the driver decides to turn up the volume so that the loud passages are quite loud indeed). So in a way a dynamically compressed *Autobahn* would actually better suit the environment it was meant to depict. Moreover, since what little tension existed would be removed, the recording would be even more properly Nothing than before. It would also be a less engaging listen.

“The ambiguity [Zweideutigkeit] of the results of forward-moving technology — which does not tolerate any constraint — confirms the ambiguity of the process of forward-moving rationality as such,” Adorno wrote in his 1927 essay “The Curves of the Needle” (271-2). Speaking anachronistically, he could have been discussing Kraftwerk's synthetic sounds and their employment in the service of transportation (they never sing

“wir fahren nicht” or “wir halten”), or he might have been addressing the benefits and detriments of the loudness wars. Instead, he was concerned with records which, now reproducing electric rather than acoustic recordings, managed greater “plasticity and volume” while losing “the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound” (271). The essay is a collection of brief aphorisms revealing, not surprisingly, a basic ambivalence toward the object. While noting at one point that newer records “wear out faster” (271), he later suggests that “The archival character of records is readily apparent: just in time, the shrinking sounds are provided with herbaria that endure for ends that are admittedly unknown” (274). And while Adorno naturally points out the commodity fetish aspect of the discs, which “are virtual photographs of their owners, flattering photographs — ideologies” (274), he also observes their entropic possibilities: they “interfere with both the work and the interpretation” when the spring wears out and “the sound drops in chromatic weakness and the music bleakly plays itself out. Only when gramphonic reproduction breaks down are its objects transformed” (275).

Adorno does not speculate on the dialectic between the record as archival document and as a source of technological rupture. During his lifetime, records would be used in the creation of *musique concrete*, but Adorno thought this genre had “failed to fulfill its own idea” and that its compositions all essentially sounded the same – the technology was more in charge than the composer (“Aging” 194-195). The obvious contemporary parallel is hip-hop, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two; for now it seems relevant to note the use of turntables as against convention while also fitting in the groove of the music: Adorno saw a glimmer of possibility in the gramophone that

“breaks down,” but in hip-hop samples from records become “breaks”; malfunction becomes function. This practice *does* “interfere with both the work and the interpretation,” as when the Beastie Boys loop the guitar and drums from the Beatles’ “The End” in “The Sounds of Science” (from *Paul’s Boutique*, 1989). In the context of *Abbey Road* (1969), “The End” both (almost) caps the record and the Beatles’ career with triumphant affirmation; in “The Sounds of Science,” the “theft” is essentially irreverent, as the Beastie Boys rap about drugs, women, dancing, partying and the evils of the establishment with rhythmic authority and little sense (“No one really knows what I’m talking about,” admits Adam Yauch). What’s more, the actual assembly of samples was largely done by the Dust Brothers, making questions of originality and authorship problematic at best. Obviously the Beastie Boys, who bragged of “Rhymin’ and Stealin’” on *Licensed to Ill* (1986), know this and are gleeful about it.

And in its way *Paul’s Boutique* and other ‘80s hip-hop albums did present a challenge to the culture industry in their free appropriation of source material; two years later it would have been legally necessary to get sample clearances in order to release the album, which would have been prohibitively expensive (and probably impossible in some cases). One can proclaim ignorance (“No one really knows”), but in the end the “text” of the recordings sampled is brought to bear on the defendants.²

Adorno explored the notion of the record as a literal text in “The Form of the Phonograph Record” (1934), describing its grooves as “a delicately scribbled, utterly

² Or at least it was at that time. Mashups and other forms of cutup smorgasbords are now everywhere on the internet; it may be hard to profit from such productions, but it is not difficult to get them out to an audience. The record industry can only sue so many of its customers and purloiners.

illegible writing” (277). Obviously this essay dates itself when it announces that there is no “gramophone-specific music” – studio recording has changed this, so that virtually all rock and pop recordings are made, if not for particular formats, at least for some kind of playback reproduction. Moreover, the issue of the medium’s roughly three-minute time limitation, which Adorno correctly notes favor “Dances composed of dull repetitions” (278), has since been bypassed by a variety of media (MP3s can go on for hours if need be). But the text remains illegible, even when converted to ones and zeroes, except by the technology itself.

An objection might be raised that digital technology has in fact made accessible a legible representation of music: the waveform. In order to analyze the digital audio from “Autobahn,” all I need to do is import the data from the CD into a recording program like Audacity or ProTools. If I wish to make embellishments, the process is not dissimilar to what I do with a word processing document, selecting a portion of audio, cutting and pasting it, changing the “font” with various functions that alter the sound’s frequencies, texture, volume, and pitch.

For all that, no one “listens” to waveforms as such (although listeners interested in the mastering may watch the waveform as the track plays, and recording artists and engineers certainly do). Digital technology has not yet made music into pure writing, and yet its cut-and-paste aesthetic may appear to come “at the price of its immediacy,” which Adorno said would be the cost of turning music into writing. The hope, though, was that turning music into writing would create “true language to the extent that it relinquishes its being as mere signs” (279-280). But while waveforms “don’t lie,” they also don’t really

convey much more than rhythm and tempo (which can be perceived by examining the regularity of the peaks) and dynamics. Melody and harmony are elusive, which is perhaps appropriate for musics whose most distinctive qualities tend to lie elsewhere.

Adorno's last essay on records was "Opera and the Long-Playing Record" (1969). Being written for the popular German weekly *Der Spiegel*, this piece is somewhat less dialectically engaged than its predecessors and takes an unusually favorable view of technology. Long playing stereo records, Adorno says, have overcome the sonic boundaries of earlier *Platten*. "The entire musical literature could now become available in quite-authentic form to listeners desirous of auditioning and studying [opera] at a time convenient to them" (283). Adorno does have reservations: that LPs end the era of a certain kind of hybrid of pop and classical ("the Neapolitan semihits whose image Proust attached in an unforgettable manner to 'O sole mio'"); they seem overpriced; worst of all, "the manipulation of the sound" remains (Adorno does not specify on this point). Nonetheless, what LPs do is provide for the *archive* that interests Adorno throughout his writings on records: "Similar to the fate that Proust ascribed to paintings in museums, these recordings awaken to a second life in the wondrous dialogue with the lonely and perceptive listeners, hibernating for purposes unknown" (285-286). These listeners seek refuge from the visual distractions of the opera house, where both period appropriate and modern costuming are out of place (283). In this sense, as Richard Leppert notes,

“Adorno re-imagines the progressive potential for what was, after all, an established commodity form” (236).³

Yet Adorno’s claim for the authenticity of this commodity is troubling. While it might be unfair to criticize Adorno for a popular piece written at a time when he was still working on such demanding texts as *Aesthetic Theory*, the notion that the records more or less represent the works adequately sidesteps issues of musical interpretation he had written about extensively. To complain about “the manipulation of the sound” is to ignore that sound is, in a sense, *always* manipulated (i.e., it does not occur “naturally”) whenever the occasion is for recording, and even when it is not. As Jonathan Sterne attests to in *The Audible Past*, early audio documentarians wanted to get the best “take” of a “real-life” sonic phenomena (235).

By way of justifying the enjoyment of a commodity, Adorno argues that “there remains hardly any means other than possession, other than reification, through which one can get at anything unmediated in this world” (285). What is peculiar on the face of this statement is that Adorno seems to imply that an LP is not a medium. In the conventional sense, records are a medium through which to hear sound recordings. In another sense, though, Adorno is right in that the recording is *not* a medium through which to hear an *original*, whether it would be “the work itself” or “the recording itself.” Manipulation is the *essence* of recording. The most profound and surprising benefit of musical reification is that it does not, that it *cannot*, reproduce authenticity.

³ One wonders if Adorno simply finds visual stimuli a distraction from the music regardless of their historical relevance. He is somewhat like those rock fans who felt that MTV corrupted rock music in the eighties, making it more about image than substance. In this sense it is difficult to see his critique of visual distractions as progressive.

CHAPTER TWO: MUSIC RETURNS TO THE AIR: SPACE AND ESCAPE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In his philosophical look at records, *The Recording Angel* (1987), Evan Eisenberg suggests that “music becomes a thing” in the twentieth century (9). Prior to the mass production of records, people didn’t “own” music; even written scores were not for the public at large. It was shellac and later vinyl discs that seemingly solidified music, before these were supplanted by the compact disc. The latter technology, Eisenberg mused in a 1996 Afterword, seemed almost to threaten the thingness: “the CD’s iridescent sheen hints that it is not really a thing at all, just a ring of bright air plucked from the nimbus of music that envelops the planet” (212). This seeming immateriality foretold a real one:

Ten years ago, I wrote that digital sound would return music to the Pythagorean realm of pure number. For most people, though, number has nothing to do with it. People don’t read the numbers of the waveform samples on their compact discs, any more than they read the bits on their floppy discs. Instead, music — like everything else — has become “information.” Of this, the elevated view — Teilhardian, if not quite Pythagorean — is that music is poised to enter the noosphere, Earth’s whirring halo of mind. Freed from the spell of thinghood, music takes wing once again, carrying everything else on its back. In the digital age, the question of who actually owns and houses the Elgin Marbles ceases to matter; they are shattered to bits, the dematerialized image free for the taking. Not only all arts but all things aspire to the condition of music (213).

Eisenberg anticipates the liberating possibilities of music’s digitization: no longer trapped on records, music channels through our collective brains. While physical products are still needed to achieve this channeling, they take up so little space that it almost seems we need not notice them. Moreover, recordings of once tantalizing rarity may be a brief Google search away: while relatively few people may be able to own Jorge Ben’s

influential 1967 album *O Bidu: Silencio No Brooklyn* (on vinyl or CD), anyone with an internet connection can download it from Loronix, an MP3 blog. (This is not legal, but as of this writing the link has been up four months.) Internet mediation, by putting everything in one place (which is, of course, no one place) allows a purity of access unanticipated by any library.

And yet “the elevated view” here follows the insight that music has become “information.” Just what are these quotation marks questioning? To think of music as mere data to be mined seems profoundly anti-humanistic, but Lyotard had warned that in postmodernity information and access would override “deeper” principles. “The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer ‘Is this true?’ but ‘What use is it?’” (51). It goes without saying that the same is true for commercial institutions, which of course provide most of our music.

If Eisenberg is right and all things do aspire to the condition of music, how does this gel with the essentially pragmatic contours of “information” in postmodernity? One of Adorno’s complaints about the reproduction of Beethoven’s music through radio had been that “What is heard is not Beethoven’s Fifth but merely musical information from and about Beethoven’s Fifth” (“The Radio Symphony” 262). Thus if music becomes information then it must be *reduced* to information.

So perhaps it is what gets “shatter[ed] to bits” in Eisenberg’s account that warrants attention. While Eisenberg indicates that the objects themselves don’t matter, one might read his prose differently by recalling Adorno’s remark, from “The Aging of

the New Music,” that “Art, and above all music, is the effort to preserve in memory and cultivate those split-off elements of truth that reality has handed over to the growing domination of nature, to scientific and technological standards that permit no exceptions” (192). Thus art and technology are rendered antipathetic, although Adorno does stress that “authentic artists of this age” do indeed use technology in ways that foster “the integral and transparent production of a nexus of meaning” (193).

Perhaps it has to be so: since technology inevitably cannibalizes everything, it must become the basis of that which is “new” as well. This in a way was always true, given the multifaceted meanings that can be applied to technology (as Adorno acknowledges in “Opera and the Long-Playing Record,” the German equivalent *Technik* also refers to technique). What Adorno is really after is getting away from the *contemporarily* dominant forms of technology, or at least using these against their purpose. “Theory,” he wrote in *Minima Moralia*, “must needs work with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such has admittedly from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic” (151).

Thus the Elgin marbles – records – may find new uses. To return to hip-hop: some DJs do as Adorno would have theorists do, seeking out forgotten, anachronistic material. But while they have the goal of “making it new” again, this inevitably takes the form of assimilation. Thus when DJ Shadow samples a piano line from David Axelrod’s otherwise forgotten 1968 album *Songs of Experience* on *...Endtroducing...* (1996), the former is eventually reissued and canonized as a “classic” in its own right. This is

characteristic of Fredric Jameson's "nostalgia mode" in postmodernity: can anything really escape the historical dynamic? Can anything avoid reduction to information?

By way of addressing these questions, I will consider the role of "ambience" in music, both as an aesthetic (i.e. Brian Eno's "ambient" recordings) and as a more pernicious reality (i.e. Muzak and its use of songs to fill up spaces with overtly commercial intent). In both cases, the original musical "text" is deemphasized; for ambient music, this results in resignation; for Muzak, it results in an affirmation of consumer culture which, in Adornian terms, would also be resignation.

To begin, one might consider Adorno's own example of unassimilated musical material, the music of Erik Satie. Satie's "pert and puerile piano pieces . . . are flashes of experience undreamed of by the school of Schönberg, with all its rigour and all the pathos of musical development behind it" (*Minima Moralia* 151). What Satie saw that Schoenberg didn't, Adorno doesn't articulate — the better, maybe, that listeners can discover these flashes of experience themselves. But Satie himself seems to have wanted his music to be as much an enigmatic presence as something to listen to:

You know, there's a need to create furniture music, that is to say, music that would be a part of the surrounding noises and that would take them into account. I see it as melodious, as masking the clatter of knives and forks without drowning it completely, without imposing itself. It would fill up the awkward silences that occasionally descend on guests. It would spare them the usual banalities. Moreover, it would neutralize the street noises that indiscreetly force themselves into the picture (qtd. in Cox and Warner 63).

To envision music as furniture is to immediately assign it use value, and a use value in a particularly domestic, probably bourgeois sphere at that: music that, by mingling with the other sounds about, is not listened to for itself, for its own purely structural or melodic

qualities (whether these are informed by the kind of social malaise Adorno perceived or not). This would also be music that, by eliminating the need for small talk, arguably diminishes social responsibility. The “usual banalities” are theoretically something we shouldn’t miss, and yet perhaps they are necessary steps on the way to serious conversation. So while Satie articulates a use value for music that would help us live better — perhaps even allowing us the possibility of hearing all that surrounds us as music, should we listen (to anticipate John Cage) —furniture music could contribute to atomization. It might be that Adorno recognizes this, too, since he speaks of *flashes* of experience.

Whether one experiences these flashes in the course of the dinner is open to question, but in any case Satie foresaw the creation of a music made for “not listening to.” Muzak is perhaps the name most often associated with “background music” and aimed, by selecting music that lacked much range in dynamics or tempo, to subliminally increase productivity, starting in the forties with the infamous “Stimulus Progression” (Owen). No flashes there.

In the pop world, Brian Eno brought the idea a certain artistic credibility with his “ambient” records of the seventies and eighties. While some of these albums have pleasant, unobtrusive melodic content, their emphasis is on textural rather than tonal qualities. (In this regard, Eno’s work takes after that of Pierre Schaeffer, who created *musique concrete*. Adorno, as we saw in Chapter One, did not find what he heard persuasive.) By this time, Eno argued, “Records and radio had been around long enough for some of the novelty to wear off, and people were wanting to make quite particular and

sophisticated choices about what they played in their homes and workplaces, what kind of sonic mood they surrounded themselves with” (94). In his sleevenotes to *Music for Airports* (1978), he wrote,

Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to “brighten” the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms), Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.

Ambient music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting (qtd. in Eno 97).

Eno emphasizes the “unnatural” sonic manipulations of Muzak and its competitors despite the fact that he is engaged in the same process – recording and manipulating sounds – that they are. This is not to argue that Eno and Muzak are ultimately on the same artistic level because they use the same media, but it is meant to show that both are invested in conceiving of music to alter the hearer’s experience of a space. Adorno, who emphasized repeatedly the intellectually nullifying effects of popular art forms, would certainly approve of being offered “a space to think”; his enthusiasm for private listening (recall his fondness for the archival properties of records in “Opera and the Long-Playing Record”) suggests he might have shared some of Eno’s enthusiasm for exhibitions that create such a space.

But calm alone can only have so much value, particularly for someone who wanted us to recognize our alienation. Eno, writing of *Music for Airports*, said “I want to make a kind of music that prepares you for dying – that doesn’t get all bright and cheerful

and pretend you're not a little apprehensive, but which makes you say to yourself, 'Actually, it's not that big a deal if I die'" (96). Eno's music would not thwart but actually encourage resignation – in the confines of a commercial institution, one that may (if not deliberately) be the cause of death.

Of course, one might reasonably say that it is better to face and defuse your anxiety than to ignore it. Furthermore, to think one's life unimportant would seem to reflect a non-reified consciousness, a rejection of ownership as Marx described it in his *1844 Manuscripts*. "Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it . . . in short, when it is *used* by us." Instead of having a full sensory and intellectual experience of something, "there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses — the sense of *having*" (106). The recognition that one's life is finite makes the ownership and ontology of things fundamentally insignificant not only because they are culturally constructed but because these constructions exist *in time*, that is, historically. If one thinks of music as something de-reified, then one might be more aware of one's *own* nonidentity (to use Adorno's term). The "environmental" aspects of ambient music, given its enhancement of "idiosyncrasies," theoretically encourage us to hear things "for themselves" – even if the sounds themselves aren't the music *per se*.

Many of Eno's ambient recordings are, in a sense, de-commodified: they consist of unevenly-timed, overlapping loops – one thread of sound lasts thirty minutes, another forty-seven, a third twenty-six, and so on – so that the piece can go on seemingly indefinitely without repeating itself. Although things "reproduce" the music (a group of

CD players and speakers), it is possible that the music produced is never quite the same, depending on when one hits the respective play buttons, or if one sets the players to shuffle. While the music still consists of repetitions, the repetitions change in relationship to each other.⁴ Some art installations Eno has assembled work in exactly this way, emphasizing the spatial (as opposed to the material) qualities of the music.

However much such works may allow for listener agency, though, it's hard not to reflect upon how the "ambient" conception of music reflects a concession to the fact that music isn't necessarily "for listening" anymore and, in its lack of insistence on being truly heard, becomes an invitation to unconsciousness as much as "a space to think" and (as Eno suggests) to death. In *Noise*, Jacques Attali had spoken of how in the era of records — of "repetition" — music, which had once been part and parcel with "ritual sacrifice," for him no longer served its social function, instead heralding an omnipresent "threat of death" and silence (120).

[T]he triumph of capitalism, whether private or State, is not that it was able to trap the desire to be different in the commodity, but rather that it went far beyond that, making people accept identity in mass production as a collective refuge from powerlessness and isolation. . . . For with records, as with all mass production, security takes precedence over freedom; one knows nothing will happen because the entire future is already laid out in advance. Identity then creates a mimicry of desires and thus rivalry; and once again repetition encounters death (121).

⁴ The "mechanistic" aspect of this music is, of course, not new; it was anticipated, for instance, in George Antheil's 1924 *Ballet Mechanique*. Similarly, the aleatoric elements of Eno's music were anticipated by numerous composers, not least John Cage, whose *4'33"* (1952) famously consisted of the sounds surrounding the performer, not those produced by any *intentional* musical instrument. What is significant about Eno's efforts here is their specific context in popular music – or to put it another way, they show that the context of popular music is unclear, even if Muzak might seem more officially "popular" as such. (Eno has co-produced several albums by U2, one of the world's best-selling rock bands.)

Noise was published in 1977; since then consumers have gained somewhat greater agency in how they listen to music: most CD players are programmable and have shuffle play; MP3 players allow listeners to create practically as many playlists, of whatever length or type, as they desire. The future is seemingly no longer laid out in advance; one can, theoretically, connect an iPod to a stranger's computer, upload a new library of music (albeit at the expense of one's own) and have a completely new set of recordings to listen to. Superficially, the future is full of possibilities.

However, the recordings themselves have already been manufactured, predetermined. MP3 players and internet connections make the "stockpiling" Attali referred to infinitely easier, allowing listeners to fill hard drives with thousands of hours of unlistened-to music. Ultimately, the only agency is in being able to choose music you "like"; the listener's creative freedom is only marginally expanded, and "death" is just delayed – or sustained – a little longer. In a sense it is telling that the ubiquity of the iPod, differentiated only subtly by size, amount of storage, color, and video capability, replaces more heterogeneous record and CD collections. There are practical reasons to prefer this, notably liberated living space, ease of transport and fewer megatons of plastic destined for landfills, but the cramming of the iPod seems to mirror the crammed sound of the music on it: despite the device's enormous capacity, its music (at least, if it has been mastered in the iPod era) lacks dynamic space. In a way it is homogenous.

It is not so much ironic as appropriate that the Muzak corporation, no longer a purveyor of "canned" (orchestrated, low-intensity, instrumental) versions of popular songs, has essentially moved into the business of creating playlists, choosing from among

a selection of 1.5 million recorded songs (this time the “original recordings”) to craft a mixture that will appeal to the image particular retailers want to uphold. An employee, Dana McKelvey, explains:

The key is consistency. How did those songs connect? What story did they tell? Why is this song after that song, and why is that one after that one? When we make a program, we pay a lot of attention to the way songs segue. It’s not like songs on the radio, or songs on a CD. Take Armani Exchange. Shoppers there are looking for clothes that are hip and chic and cool. They’re twenty-five to thirty-five years old, and they want something to wear to a party or a club, and as they shop they want to feel like they’re already there. So you make the store sound like the coolest bar in town. You think about that when you pick the songs, and you pay special attention to the sequencing, and then you cross-fade and beat-match and never break the momentum, because you want the program to sound like a d.j.’s mix. . . . For Ann Taylor, you do something completely different. The Ann Taylor woman is conservative, not edgy, and she really couldn’t care less about segues. She wants everything bright and positive and optimistic and uplifting, so you avoid offensive themes and lyrics, and you think about Sting and Celine Dion, and you leave a tiny space between the songs or gradually fade out and fade in (qtd. in Owen).

These remarks hail from David Owen’s *New Yorker* profile “The Soundtrack to Your Life,” a title which implies that we live our lives, essentially, as consumers, and that our identities are still very much fulfilled for us; as Attali suggests, we accept our identity in mass production. McKelvey speaks of “the Ann Taylor woman” as if the latter existed — and perhaps, at moments of perfect identification, in the changing room, she does. Ann Taylor hires Muzak to help leave this identity construction as little up to chance as possible. It is probably needless to point out that in smoothing out the differences between songs Muzak employs dynamic range compression.

It’s a commonplace that dynamic range compression is a reflection of the changing ways people listen to music. I have already mentioned the example of *Autobahn* in the car; if one listens in an office space, on a bus with an iPod, or in other relatively

noisy environments, having the levels more or less constant allows the listener to let the music play on without having to adjust the volume. (If one uploads CDs from the eighties and early nineties to iTunes, of course, the levels will vary considerably, but iTunes has a “sound check” setting that partially ameliorates this difficulty.)

But then the question is whether the music is there to change one’s consciousness (allowing for reflection, as Eno suggests) or if it’s meant to fill up aural space and not be listened to. Setting iTunes to shuffle through thousands of songs makes the individual songs function as advertisements for themselves (to borrow a phrase Adorno and Horkheimer used in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*): a hook makes its way into one’s consciousness, and the listener may think “I’ll have to listen to that some time,” even though the music is actually present at the moment. I have had this experience, for instance, when running: a song I downloaded without having listened to it appears via shuffle play; because I am in an environment (the gym, on the bike path) where external noise abounds, I can’t really *listen* to it, but only to hints of what it might be (a stray lyric, a prominent synth line).

When mastering a recording for this kind of sound environment, the engineer might well ask whether – if the point is to hook the listener – it’s worth bothering to include “all the nuances” of the “original recording.” The “loudness wars” were propagated for this very reason: listeners responded to a louder sound. As with commercials on television, the sound needs to be adequately *distracting*, to get our attention (although in an age where almost all popular music is mastered this way, this becomes increasingly difficult).

Adorno and George Simpson had written about the “distracting” elements of pop songs in their 1941 essay “On Popular Music.”

Distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject. This mode of production, which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its “non-productive” correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all. People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire. It reduces relaxation because it is patterned and pre-digested. Its being patterned and pre-digested serves within the psychological household of the masses to spare them the effort of that participation (even in listening or observation) without which there can be no receptivity to art. On the other hand, the stimuli they provide permit an escape from the boredom of mechanized labor (458).

In the “post-industrial age” in which we supposedly live, one might argue that the “mode of production” has changed and with it popular music. In a “service economy,” people perform a greater variety of tasks, engage more with other human beings than with machines — albeit through machines. Meanwhile, popular music, through its emphasis on recording as opposed to composition or “arrangement” (Adorno argued that the latter was most distinctive in pop) has gained a complexity of texture and historical situatedness through its referencing of earlier songs and recordings, often explicitly in the form of sampling. Both of these narratives admittedly oversimplify cultural changes in the past sixty-five years, but they also beg the question of whether the rationalization and mechanization of both work and popular music have changed significantly.

The rise of hip-hop in the eighties and nineties suggested the possibility that popular music might increasingly be a work of postmodern pastiche, in which part of the

“depth” of the music lay in recognizing the source material used. While for Jameson this aesthetic would be a marker of a failure to recognize and understand our own historical moment, the specifically political uses of sampling by groups like Public Enemy suggested a sense of historical continuity, as with their use of James Brown and Afrika Bambaata in “Fight the Power.” Public Enemy’s music was “distracting” in a way that led to considerable public vitriol, and to argue that its central function was to help people “have fun” — even given Rosie Perez’s exhilarating dancing over “Fight the Power” at the beginning of Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) — would be a partial reading at best. The commercial success of such music (the parent album *Fear of a Black Planet* went platinum) might appear to indicate an audience that merely wants to look radical (because it’s chic) or “just likes the beats,” but even if the listener ignores Chuck D’s remarks about the racism of Elvis Presley and John Wayne (which admittedly would probably not have alienated the average “gen Xer,” even as it brought the group considerable media attention), the music itself retains an aggressive amelodicism that remains fairly unusual and jarring in popular music. Musically and lyrically, while its paean to collective consciousness might have struck Adorno as a form of pseudoindividuality or even fascism, it is in many remarkably “cross-grained material.” The layers of voices and sounds, sampled and otherwise, has been called cacophonous, and it *does* create this impression even as production team the Bomb Squad’s mix is very tightly controlled.

Since that time it has not been as common for overtly political, status quo-flaunting music to make such an impression on the Billboard charts, and the aesthetic of

hip-hop has in many ways smoothed out. While rappers continue to attract media controversy, for instance over the misogyny of a Jay-Z or Eminem, those who would attack the white-dominated status quo are receive little media attention. One of the most widely praised hip-hop albums of the past decade, Australian DJ troupe the Avalanches' *Since I Left You* (2000), has a party atmosphere that, on its sunny surface, is unlikely to offend anyone. Being fashioned from a reported 3500 samples (Pytlik) from records, films, and television shows, the layers of sound — crowd noises, vinyl crackle, bird and water noises — often suggest a sea voyage, and each sample and track blends into the next. This is a supremely distracting album, yet while its contents are more literally pre-digested than they ever could have been in Adorno's time, the album nonetheless asks to be listened to as a whole and has considerable range, dynamically and emotionally. The music on this album rises and falls, to use the obvious simile, like the sea. (Comparisons to *Autobahn* are obvious here, although the former is a far more placid, less busy recording.) Each of the twenty tracks is not necessarily a "song," and some serve mainly as bridges between others. Consequently the album will suffer if put on shuffle on an iPod, while sustaining extended listening. And if most of the content will serve admirably for modern-day jitterbuggers (one of the lower levels in Adorno's hierarchy of listeners), there are also passages where sounds and tones take over and the beat disappears almost entirely: a fog horn sounds out, the mood is pensive, the effect cinematic. And while *Since I Left You* is only marginally a concept album, it does frame a narrative of sorts, most charmingly articulated by the difference between its first sung couplet and its last: from "Since I left you / I've found a world so new" to "I've been trying but I just can't

get you / Since the day I left you.” It is as if the album began by articulating its distance and freedom from traditional albums, being as it consists of bits pillaged from other people’s recordings, but ended by showing its fundamental nostalgia for the art form.

Since I Left You was an eagerly anticipated album and took some time to come out due to the logistics of sample clearance, among other things. (These “party animals” craft their work slowly; as of this writing their second album still has not appeared, though it has been declared “almost finished” at least twice.) In order to satiate fans, the group offered the *Gimix* megamix cassette, which previewed parts of the album while including the catchier bits of some three dozen famous pop songs — “Billie Jean,” “Like a Rolling Stone,” “I Can’t Go for That,” “Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” “A Roller Skating Jam Called Saturdays.” For many listeners this has functioned as an alternate — and better — version of the album itself, which goes to show just how vexed the question of what the “original” work is: is *Gimix* a vast plagiarism of others’ work, and is *Since I Left You* then a plagiarism of that work? Is there any authenticity in these gimmicks? The original recordings by the artists sampled are so far removed from the resulting work (with their tempo and pitch often adjusted to fit the flow of the mix) that the question of what constitutes the work proper finally seems irrelevant. One poster on the I Love Music forum poignantly described how the music affected him some years later:

I never had an mp3 of GIMIX back then for some reason, although I LOVE LOVE LOVED *Since I Left You*. I just downloaded it off the site, and it’s wonderful. I had an atrocious hangover on Saturday (and no sleep, due to my ongoing futile attempts to combine fatherhood with going out occasionally) and was getting the train to Southampton (to see us beat West Brom!!) generally feeling like crap. And within minutes I was literally dancing (on the escalators at Waterloo). My world was filled with sunshine and joy. I’ve rarely felt happier. It’s ahistoricity actually seems to sum up it’s era perfectly, that first

Napster/Audiogalaxy rush of file-sharing, all of musical history spread out for your pleasure. So listening to it now is a kind of nostalgia for the permanent present, which is a weird idea. It sounds so light of touch as well, (whereas looking at the track list you would think it could be heavy-handed), and so light and fizzy and bubbly in the sonics, all high end skipping over the bass/beat fundamentals so you hardly notice they're there. Erm. I'm gushing rather (Smith).

For Adorno, an awareness of historical circumstances was crucial to understanding the human condition: as he wrote in “Cultural Criticism and Society,” “The cultural critic . . . speaks as if he represented either unadulterated nature or a higher historical stage. Yet he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior” (19). Perhaps taking his cue from Adorno, Jameson described the “nostalgia mode” in *Postmodernism* as one that masked a deeper anxiety: a “desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past” (19) in “a society bereft of all historicity” (18). There is a sense that the society that cannot place itself adequately in some kind of historical narrative refuses adulthood. It is difficult not to read Smith’s posting in this light: he cannot balance fatherhood with more youthful pleasures, but he tries to anyway; the results have left him unhappy, but for a moment — presumably for the forty-six minutes of *Gimix* — he is euphoric, brought to a place out of time, on escalators no less. His champagne metaphors are entirely appropriate to an album whose first spoken (as opposed to sung) words entreat the listener to “get a drink, have a good time now,” adding “Welcome to paradise!”

This invitation bespeaks the banality of commercial views of utopia, yet *Gimix*, as Smith indicates, achieves something greater. It can be heard as anticipating a pop fulfillment of Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*, as articulated in the fourteenth of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin describes the experience of a movement in history as a

repetition of an earlier one, as “to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history” (261). Similarly enough, the Avalanches’ work — because none of the voices in it are those of the group’s members, because they treat their source material, whatever the era, as essentially equal — also builds a non-chronological continuum, where Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” is a perfect compliment to the bassline of Madonna’s “Holiday.”

That said, if “Origin is the goal,” as Karl Kraus’ epigram to Benjamin’s thesis reads (261), it seems to be somewhat out of sight. Smith experiences *nostalgia for the permanent present*, which does suggest an attempt to get at something fundamental — a time that was somehow out of time. As we have seen, the “narrative” of *Since I Left You* finally acknowledges its entrapment in time and expresses a certain regret. *Gimix*, however, lacks this narrative arc: it retains “Since I’ve left you / I’ve found a world so new” but not the “trying but I just can’t get you / since the day I left you” couplet that close *Since I Left You*. One wonders if those who prefer the earlier version do so partly because the escape it provides is more pure.

If celebrating intoxication, literal and otherwise, has been a feature of popular music since long before postmodernity, one of the more distinct features of the present era might be the celebration of — or at least fascination with — mundanity. Jamie Thraves’ video for Róisín Murphy’s 2007 single “Overpowered” reflects both of these concerns. It also serves as an analogy for contemporary atomized listening experiences.

Before turning to the video itself, it will be necessary to describe the recording. “Overpowered” is a synth-driven, midtempo dance track employing a variety of textures, from the dirty squelch of the bass to the bell-like tones that announce themselves at the chorus. Murphy’s voice is double-tracked during the verses, where she describes desire as a genetic process: “A chemical reason / If reason’s your game / A chemical needing / Is there in the brain / With preprogrammed meanings / Like a little more pep / These alien feelings / We have to accept.” Murphy sings these lines in a clipped, precise manner, emphasizing the “logic” of attraction; the double-tracking (with no harmony) lends a slightly robotic quality to the voice. At the chorus, the voice appears to “blossom,” single-tracked, into earnest expression: “When I think that I’m over you / I’m overpowered,” lingering on the “you.” The first repeat of the chorus adds a further couplet, this time double-tracked again: “As science struggles on to try and explain / Oxy-toxins flowing ever into my brain,” where the more emotive voice is merged with the objective one. Flowing upward strokes on a harp (or some synthetic equivalent) accompany this moment, and heavenly laws become one with those of science, which must nonetheless struggle with the sheer unreason of desire.

The effect is supposed to beguile, and certainly some listeners have responded accordingly: “she write with new words and xpression used on the web and teknology science and marketing in a beautifull way!! when i heard her music i feel overpowered!” (Riccio). Spelling and syntax aside, this conveys pretty well the minutiae that make the song distinctive; relatively few songs reference oxy-toxins or rationalize desire in quite so literal a way, even though rationalizing overpowering passions is the business of a great

deal of pop music. The specifically technological aspect of the recording – reverberant, retro-futurist synth sounds – suggest a cyborg romance. This sort of imagery is not new to Murphy – seventies albums by David Bowie and Kraftwerk romanticized machines extensively, and new wave followed in their wake – but this is nonetheless part of what makes Murphy “distinctive” at this particular moment. While the sounds and certainly the structure are not notably so different from other popular contemporary dance tracks, it is the “idiosyncrasies” that make the recording distinctive. At the same time, because these features are constructed in such a deliberate way, they are not really – at least not fully – idiosyncratic. This is essentially Adorno’s critique of pseudo-individualization: in popular music (in this context, jazz),

the detail remains openly connected with the underlying scheme so that the listener always feels on safe ground. The choice in individual alterations is so small that the perpetual recurrence of the same variations is a reassuring signpost of the identical behind them. [There is also] the function of “substitution” – the improvisatory features forbid their being grasped as musical events in themselves. They can be received only as embellishments. It is a well-known fact that in daring jazz arrangements worried notes, dirty tones, in other words, false notes, play a conspicuous role. They are apperceived as exciting stimuli only because they are corrected by the ear to the right note (Adorno and Simpson 446).

The same might be said for the more peculiar sonic textures in “Overpowered.” Such features, of course, account for much of the pleasure in popular music; if we deny them, then we essentially have to side with Adorno and conclude that pop has no real value. To oppose this position, it helps to value fun, which Adorno and Horkheimer famously denigrated as “a medicinal bath” (1231). “[T]he ‘escape’ provided by popular music actually subjects the individuals to the very same social powers from which they want to escape”; this results in “fury” and an inevitable backlash against what was seemingly

loved when it was new (Adorno and Simpson 462-463). But this does not have to be the case, as popular music has developed a much stronger canon formation by now than it had in Adorno's time, while the resurrection of "forgotten" artists and styles is crucial to the fabric of postmodern music. Fans may be tools of the market to some degree, but the more devoted among them follow the artist before the market, even if it is the market that provides the map to follow the artist. And so those who liked Murphy's work as half of the electronic duo Moloko might well follow her through her solo career.

But as cleverly assembled as "Overpowered" is, the use of dynamic range compression arguably limits its potential for pleasure. The recording is not as aggressively mastered as some, but when the song sounds like it is "supposed" to hit a peak in volume – "As science struggles..." – there is no actual increase, because most of the space in the waveform has already been filled, despite the doubling of Murphy's voice and the addition of the harp. Even as Murphy sings of oxy-toxins filling her brain, "science struggles" to create an impression of increased intensity in a space that is already crammed with sound. In order to be beguiled the listener has to *imagine* that the volume has increased, somewhat as Adorno and Simpson's jazz fans "correct" "false notes" – with the difference that the false notes are what make the performance or recording distinctive, while dynamic range compression eliminates distinctions.

In typically ironic postmodern fashion, Thraves' video undermines the song's appeal to incessant desire through its "quirky" presentation of Murphy's post-performance journey home. The film opens with Murphy at the end of a concert. She bows to the crowd, receives hugs from people backstage, and makes her way for the

dressing room. Rather than attend some lavish and decadent post-concert party, she takes the bus, stops for fast food, goes home, puts laundry in, brushes her teeth while sitting on the toilet, and finally simply goes to bed. All the while, she wears her Gareth Pugh-designed, checker-patterned, shiny dress and a pointed, vaguely bird-shaped hat. She removes neither of these articles even when going to bed. Thus the video plays on expectations of what pop stars “should” do by showing her behaving more or less like as anyone who had just finished a job would, the only difference being that she never abandons her flamboyant costume.

What is odd about this is that the video seems to articulate a desire to *escape* the music. The “performance” portion of the video ends as the song begins, yet the soundtrack suggests that the music is actually being played, since we hear the noises of the crowd. When Murphy closes her dressing room door, the sound of the song is muted. At this point Murphy could receive visitors, meet some object of desire, or she could “sing” the song to the viewer. But most of what follows does not hint at any desire greater than that for the costume. As she walks home, Murphy briefly encounters a couple in embrace, but this is incidental – a tease, perhaps, or a sign that such pleasures are actually pretty banal themselves. Apart from a brief moment when Murphy smilingly speaks with the fast food employees, she does not engage with other people; the drunk who plops down beside her on the bus, oblivious to her costume like everyone else, is naturally enough a minor irritant. The song does not transport, does not overpower her or anyone present. The images do not even appear to need the song, apart from their promotional function (though Murphy does walk roughly in step with the beat). After the

performance footage, there is relatively little evidence of fun onscreen, even if viewers can enjoy the eccentric attachment to costume.⁵

So while Smith experienced a complete identification with *Gimix* as he danced on escalators, Murphy in her video is like the atomized listener who simply has the music on and does not listen to it. She is the creator of the work – the source of its voice – but does *not* connect with it. She is attached to the trappings of her performance – her costume – as if it were the chief sign of authenticity, the chief means of ownership. In a promotional interview for EMI, Murphy said the “Overpowered” video showed

kind of the loneliness and the mundanity of actually what it is to be a flamboyant, eh, performer, you know? And my life is often very mundane. The visual side of it shows something that I do believe in, which is flamboyance. And kind of showing off isn't necessarily a lie, it's not necessarily a façade. Sometimes it's just an extension of actually the truth. And for me, certainly when I'm performing on stage, the way I use costume and lighting and dramatic effect, those are just extensions of who I truly am, they're not lies (Murphy).

To complain that spectacle is emphasized at the expense of the music here would hardly be to register a new criticism; nor would it be particularly relevant. I do not mean to suggest that Murphy's music, in itself, is “bad” or that it is undermined by the images that promote it. Rather I mean to suggest that the very lack of an “in itself” is what problematizes the work. In popular music, the mastery that escapes the listener – in the form of the ability to master the recording itself, since this has been done by someone else, often hidden from view – can both make it vital and undermine it. Flamboyance can

⁵ They may also feel flattered that Murphy takes the same kind of route home that they do. That the video opens with a drop of sweat falling from Murphy's face and bursting on the stage floor suggests that this performance is, after all, a job – hard work. But to the extent that this undermines the song's fantasy of desire, it cannot do so without fetishizing something else: the costume.

easily be “authentic” because it has no de facto content, but the current employment of the means of production does not guarantee this flamboyance will be given full range.

CODA

Two years ago I inherited my first iPod from my father, who had bought himself a newer model. At first when he offered me the player, I was not interested: I was attached to the album as an object and devoted to maintaining a real, not a virtual library, and I had seen my father's CD collection collecting dust downstairs (to say nothing of the LPs warping in the basement). Furthermore, I liked my music in the open air, not plugged into my head: real speakers both seemed less antisocial and gave me ownership of the spaces they occupied — for instance, the kitchen. Growing up, I was the resident dishwasher, and my parents tolerated my taking forty-five minutes to do a job they would have accomplished in ten. They stayed out of my way for the most part as I sang, danced (disastrously for the occasional glass or plate) and read liner notes. Perhaps they understood, as well or better than I, that this was the only exercise I was getting at the time.

Ten years later, living with my parents again and working as a special education aide at the high school I had attended, I had plenty of time to ask myself how much progress I had made in the intervening years. Despite having a fairly successful undergraduate career behind me, including a year abroad, the answer seemed to be “not much.” (If Adorno was concerned about a regression of listening, I was concerned about a wholesale regression of *being*.) Something needed to change, and while grad school was pending it wasn't guaranteed. So I decided to accept my father's iPod offer after all and take up running: if I couldn't improve my mind, perhaps I could improve my body

— though I struggled to unthink this dichotomy, especially in my most heaving moments. Through this exercise I came to embrace the iPod, which to date has not supplanted but supplemented my “physical” collection, while diminishing an awful self-consciousness about my own physicality.

iPods are emblematic of mobility, and mobility means being surrounded by noise, so these devices need to drown that other noise out. Consequently, the more steadily loud the music is, the better. Despite the sound check function mentioned in Chapter Two, iPods can’t fully match up the volume of older recordings with newer, more dynamically compressed ones, probably because the peak levels of the older recordings are about equal to the average levels of the newer ones. Consequently when I went running across the meadow out beyond my parents’ backyard, I experienced significant variation in volume when I set the player to shuffle (generally my preferred listening mode: when I run, whatever little thing that makes the future seem like it’s *not* laid out in advance, to recall Attali – even if it actually is – helps).

So when running, subtlety is not the point. In fact, some of the music that sounded best on the player was that which (like a pop ambient music) had an *absorbent* quality, for which the sounds outside my head might just as well have been one with those emerging from the earbuds. This was particularly true when a track from the 2006 reissue of a 1983 Lizzy Mercier Descloux album, *Zulu Rock* (originally self-titled), came on. *Zulu Rock* is one of several Western-artists-in-South-Africa albums of the eighties that included Paul Simon’s *Graceland* (1986) and Mick Fleetwood’s *The Visitor* (1981), but Descloux’s sounded more vibrant than the competition to me, perhaps because her

voice was already raspy from years of smoking, perhaps because she didn't seem merely nice about it, because she seemed genuinely enthusiastic and, well, exotic herself: singing in French, in English, whispering and yelling over the horns, clackety percussion, and guitar.

This reissue is the only version of the album I had ever heard, so I have nothing to compare it to, but the remastering certainly does stretch reverb out over all the instruments and vocals so that they blend; when running, it really *was* difficult at times to distinguish Descloux's vocals from the other instruments (say, the clicking of her tongue from the percussion) or even from the birdsong over my head. Dynamic range compression appeared to be in full effect.

After I'd been in graduate school a year and, with great pride in my boldness, taken myself out in public to do my running, I was still enchanted when Descloux's music appeared, even if I'd been reading my Adorno that day and should have known better. I would be particularly gleeful if "All the Same," the album's buoyant closer, came on, and Descloux sang

The moon and the sun are the same
The shadow and the light are the same
But you and me, we are not the same
But you and me, we will never be the same.

Except, of course, that it was not Descloux singing, but a representation of her voice, removed how many times I don't know. As heard on my MP3s, through my earbuds, the sounds *did* all become the same, both those on the recording and those around me. At the same time, Descloux was different, separated from herself and from me, both by the boundaries of technology and those of mortality (she died in 2004). And as I grew more

accustomed to the particular patch of pavement I was running on, I hoped that I would never be the same, either.

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