

Portable Music and the Scalable Self

Performativity in Music Journalism
and Interdisciplinary Music Analysis

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Introduction

Music theory today is heavily influenced by information theory and the cognitive neurosciences, or could be if it tried.¹ The popular music theory favored by music journalism and interdisciplinary studies, on the other hand, takes its cues from a radical bastardization of Romanticism. Armed with today's ontological sophistication, proponents of pop lay claim to virtues they regard as Romantic; their music is "affective," while classical music is "absolute" or "transcendent" and thus doesn't exist and can safely be ignored. Pop theorists prove classical music's nonexistence by reference to Hanslick's *Vom musikalisch Schönen* (1854). The music of 1854 was pretty "affective" if you ask me – lucky for them, they never mention it. Serious music, in pop theory examples, is stuff like minimalism and Stravinsky. Anyway, the argument goes: Harmony is all about fractions, and math is beyond us, therefore our chosen subject of study employs elements we cannot take into account; the only legitimate way to consume pop music is to feel its feeling. Meanwhile – this is where it gets hairy – serious art should be dauntingly abstract, because feeling, when not pop, is kitsch. Conceiving of music *per se* as something rather complicated, and art as clever, pop theory evicts both into realms beyond its ken, making high culture the province of really smart people while the rest of us can hardly be distinguished from our clothing.

Sociologists of music used (as musicologists still do, mostly) to ignore the redundant melodies, predictable harmonies, and 1-2 beats of pop music because they considered them too boring to contemplate, arguing that its appeal must lie in its ever-varying timbre, somewhat as if the notion that people like monotonous music is just too depressing. Thus popular appeal came to mean timbre while the answer to the question "What is musical form?" became "Bach!" – an inconceivable, anti-sensual complexity predicated on textuality and/or the repertoire of free concerts in churches. "Sound" and the beat are seen as bypassing the mind and communicating directly with the body. The assumption that a pop song's success has little to do with its musical form remains: Even when that form repeats itself 45

¹ Cf. Meyer 1956.

times a day for 30 years, it's assumed to be comprehensible only to Bach-reading eggheads. When pop theory addresses form, it starts to sound eerily, uncharacteristically humble. But humility doesn't sit well with anyone, so pretty soon we are all enjoined to shut up and dance.

Particularly well-read readers may object that discussions of pop aesthetics have merely been subject to the same "performative turn" that has affected art criticism generally since the mid-1990s, partly inspired by Judith Butler's take on Austin's 1953 lectures.² That "turn" is not merely the familiar contrast between script or competence and performance, or the notion that practices exist only in performance, but a way of constituting the self. Butler writes, for example, that Rosa Parks' sitting at the front of the bus was "performative"³ – that is, an act authorized by the authority she conferred on the self she constituted by authorizing herself to act in violation of bus company policy. Parks, according to Butler, acknowledged no higher legitimating instance than herself – which is certainly a novel conception of civil disobedience, among other things. As a rule, the authors I will discuss get by without mentioning their putative sources in linguistics or gender theory or the coronation of Napoleon, or even sociology and ethnology⁴; they give little evidence of being aware that the repertoire of any given body has ever been regarded as limited. Far more compelling motivations now seem to be the fun fieldwork the notion entails whether one accepts it or not (e.g., Mark Butler's study of "Performativity and Ideologies of Liveness in Electronic Music," a pleasingly distanced analysis based on scholarly footage of some pretty cute DJs in action in the clubs of Berlin at odd hours of the morning⁵) and the ideological push, not toward monism,⁶ but toward an obligation to be reborn of the spirit *à la* John 3.

I will argue that there is such a thing as ear candy: Some sounds are appealing, such as octaves and major fifths. That sounds like a trivial enough

² *How to Do Things with Words*, in Germany most conspicuously advocated by Erika Fischer-Lichte of the FU Berlin.

³ Butler, 147.

⁴ See Bell's discussion of how the "body" embeds the individual in society (94-117), e.g., "required kneeling does not merely *communicate* subordination to the kneeler ... kneeling produces a subordinated kneeler in and through the act itself" (100).

⁵ Talk at the Ludwig Uhland Institut for Empirical Cultural Studies, Tübingen, Dec. 6, 2007.

⁶ For an elegant dismissal of the trend to monism, see Meyer 1956, p. 1.

claim, so you'd be surprised how much conservative ideology piggybacks on the contrasting claim that everything is cultural performance, or precedes it – or rather, you should wake up and realize that “performance” may be in bed with Ayn Rand. For instance, the sociologist Gerhard Schulze writes that although Bourdieu may have been right about 1970s France, 1980s Germany had completed the transition to a classless society where we are free to pick and choose our preferences and practices from a cultural smorgasbord, as if we were paper dolls. That superficiality is programmatic in “performativity’s” constitution of self. Ravers, the argument goes, go to raves to perform their beloved ritual of going to raves. Perhaps you never see them hitting on models in chi-chi discos, or at pool parties down at the yacht club, but only because they prefer parties where there’s nothing to eat or drink and a long line for the toilet. Plus cocaine is so much better if you have to pay for it with sex. You might think the only thing worse than cultural studies’ consumerist *amor fati* is its occasional urge to reconnect with the empiricist notion of the hypothesis by guessing what youth culture might be performing – generally, “youth.” But its crypto-fascism is even more horrifying, as I will show.

As for the “performative turn” in the fine arts, dating from the 1950s or more likely from *Death in the Afternoon*, readers will note its influence soon enough, to their sorrow. Possibly there are circus ponies better qualified to discourse on Romanticism than I. At least one of the professors present at my thesis defense seemed to think so. The scene resembled that of Tom Sawyer’s examination in Biblical scholarship, with the current dissertation playing the role of the nine yellow tickets, nine red tickets, and ten blue tickets, but without the curtain of charity.

I prefer to think that I have the strength of ten because my heart is pure, and I will propose that pop fans could just admit once and for all to liking simple musical forms. We never get tired of kittens or ice cream – why should we get tired of “More Than a Feeling”? Strangely, it is proponents of pop who insist that their modular, vernacular, instantly familiar music defies rational comprehension, while classical music’s partisans and detractors alike insist that art music makes rigorous sense, even if only to Claudio Abbado or coming generations of supermen. Having

meekly excluded music *per se* from its humble consideration by focusing on processes of performance and reception in a way suspiciously reminiscent of Marinetti, pop theory sees itself compelled to reinvent sex. I will suggest that if you admit to perceiving simple musical ideas, you can skip the new sexual order and all the other swirling paradoxes that arise in the confluence of intellectual vanity and math anxiety, plus you can take music into consideration when analyzing songs' effectiveness instead of just hunting for patterns as if they were the tappings of neighbors on your cellblock in the Chateau d'If. Furthermore, you will be spared the indignity of claiming that rock's chief selling point is its poetry. Divested of their melodies, lyrics generally lose a good bit of their appeal, but why divest when the melodies are so simple and so central? Besides, even musicologists are calling music "language minus semantics plus pragmatics" these days, so philologists need not feel so timid.

I will begin by examining popular theoretical writing about music, not distinguishing between journalists and academics, since many of the central figures in pop theory are both. After tracing music's unpopularization (like popularization, only backward) and its replacement by the body and work, I will confirm the repression (as opposed to return) of the repressed via an examination of critical approaches to the exceptionally popular music of Bob Dylan, showing that a hidden engine of the high-low dialogue encountered in both popular and postmodernist analysis is disdain for the middle, including popular music.

A survey of interviews with Bob will make the role of celebrity journalism in contemporary high culture painfully apparent. Media artists adopt "algorithms" to permit the endless generation of self-similarity, equated with identity, which thus becomes properly a property of objects rather than subjects (*e.g.*, "format" radio stations⁷). Aspiring to terminal emulation with the limited resources at the disposal of consciousness, Futurist-revivalist pop aesthetes train to pass the Turing test in reverse. But their belief that the human *Gesamtkunstwerk* is ideally (and if necessary, by fiat) a fast-moving parade (or in Benjamin's phrase, a conveyor belt⁸) of

⁷ Hagen, 333.

⁸ Benjamin, 208 ("*Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*").

found objects has been prefigured in rock star scholarship since the rise of audiotape: When they aren't busy putting new glitches in their mechanized Dada, net literati write like cornered pop stars talk. The performative act that reduces the self to a conscious process is that of becoming one's own biggest fan.

“Performativity” is, in short, a flimsy layer of camouflage over a project to abandon the idea that material conditions and history influence action or ideation. My discussion of art, media, and media art successively broadens the focus with the aim of making clear that while anything at all to do with music theory might be *prima facie* a tempest in a teapot, there's more at stake. Away from youth culture and art where self-creation (via felicitous performance in an authorizing milieu entered by choice) seems an accepted trope, the ambition of new media professionals to create (or assume) a new kind of subject becomes more jarring: “It is commonly known that ... humans have the potential for an extremely high degree of randomness,”⁹ the MIT Media Lab explains, which I guess is why some days I almost marry the Panchen lama, and other days I almost buy an apartment in the sixth arrondissement from my earnings as a neurologist. “Performativity” ditches irreconcilable phenomena like freedom and determinism or cognition and reality or capital and labor, substituting energy for matter and doing for being across the board, as if we were all little electrons of uncertain charge, flitting through a quantum society on wings of warmed-over existentialism – but now I'll drop the subject, quickly, to commence instead my disinterested scholarly inquiry into the popular theory of popular music.

⁹ <http://reality.media.mit.edu/user.php>

Chapter 1

The language of sales

Historically, devotees of classical music, equipped with academic hegemony if nothing else, have ignored pop as if it didn't exist. Pop fans, struggling for legitimacy (at least when they resort to writing books), have not had the converse luxury. Sadly, however, they equate classical music with music *per se*, so that music becomes pop music's implicit ineffable "Other." Its conscious ineffable "Other" becomes the human body, of all things.

A very brief example: "In the video, members of various highly regarded Chicago footwork battle cliques execute dribbles ... and ticks [dance moves] ... This is hip-hop's other side, the body plugged in and saying what words can't, and don't need to."¹ Take words away from a pop song, and you're left with the body. Something is missing from this picture. Why?

Becoming modesty

It has often been said that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." It would be more accurate to say that musicological writing is like waltzing about blueprints, while popular writing about music is like the things your best friend says to you when you're crying because you were too drunk and underdressed to get into the party where the musicologists were waltzing about the blueprints. Assuming its readers cannot read music, music writing for general audiences includes no examples in musical notation. The rather central component it cannot communicate graphically – melody – comes to be considered irrelevant to its mission, and ultimately to popular music itself. Popular music theory divides music into dancing (pop) and architecture (classical); pop is seen to run on raw emotion, while music *per se* becomes an abstraction whose comprehension requires special skills.

With the exception of minor, ideologically motivated detours, little progress has been made in the verbal characterization of music since

¹ Sasha Frere-Jones, *The New Yorker*, September 3 & 10, 2007, p. 30.

Hanslick called it “*tönend bewegte Formen*”² (sounding, moved forms; or forms moved by sounds; or forms that sound as they move around; or something – the nebulosity defies translation, ensuring the phrase’s wide acceptance; Hanslick speaks of endlessly sprouting arabesques). Forms sound spatial to us now, ready to have content breathed into them by usage, and so they are: As it was succinctly put in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 2001: “Formal analysis treats music as architecture”³ – one without sites, uses, a vernacular, or building materials. A literary critic in 1948: “A piece of absolute music is to be heard as music and nothing else. Like a piece of ‘abstract’ or non-representational painting, its point lies in its own pattern and effects, without reference to any external subject matter.”⁴ Formalism was necessary to get music out of the aesthetic basement where it had been languishing since Kant, in §53 of the *Critique of Judgment*, compared it to a bad smell,⁵ but pop never profited from the move. A sociologist writes in 1975, for example, that art music is “*konstruktivistisch*” and entails the “*Stilisierung, Disziplinierung des Ausdrucks*” and the “*Denken in Bildern*”⁶ required by engineering, but pop has no form to speak of: It gets by on sounds, “*angenehm klingende Töne, Ornamentik.*” Its ideas are expressed “*per Texte,*” while art music’s “*Ideen kommen durch die Musik selbst zum Ausdruck.*”⁷

For pop theorists, Hanslick is a soft target – he makes fun of dancing. Ubiquitous art music popularizer Nicholas Cook:

Hanslick described as “pathological” any experience of music in which the listener did not constitute the music as an imaginative object held at an aesthetic distance, but instead reacted to the sound in a directly physiological or psychological sense. Heard in such a

² Hanslick, 32.

³ Koopman and Davies, 266.

⁴ Brown, 229, s.a. Middleton, 27.

⁵ Kant, 272.

⁶ “Constructivist,” “stylization, disciplining of expression,” “thinking in pictures.” Karbusicky, 46.

⁷ “Pleasant-sounding tones, ornamentation,” “via text,” “ideas are expressed by the music itself.” Ibid.

manner, Hanslick says, music becomes no more than a drug: it “loosens the feet or the heart just as wine loosens the tongue.” In this way it degrades the listener.⁸

Dance floors in pop theory are the scenes of immanently political rituals of group identity and social hygiene, while just sitting there listening is bourgeois, narcissistic, and (given the necessary qualifications) improbable. The tone comes close to that of Mozart-hagiographies: The focus is on advertising the music’s therapeutic benefits – in the case of pop for social life rather than the introspective life of the alienated modern individual who, for some reason or other, even professed Marxists don’t seem to believe in anymore. In pop theory, we are seen to bond through ethically motivated terpsichorean praxis, as if music were a Sunday-school version of Bart Simpson’s “Go-Go Ray.”

Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* was published in 1996 by the Oxford University Press. Frith exercises a broad influence on music journalism and interdisciplinary studies. “English scholar Simon Frith has had more of interest to say about rock music than any other sociologist.”⁹ He is “the most prolific and consistently engaging academic writer on forms of popular music,”¹⁰ in obvious demand as an editor of handbooks and anthologies. Open the *New Grove* to *popular music – aesthetics*, and you will find Frith’s views, summarized by Richard Middleton.

Frith’s goal in *Performing Rites*, declared up front, is to establish that it is permissible to claim that some pop music is better than others. Given that few would disagree, it seems he intends to resolve an illusory dialectic the way Alexander solved the Gordian knot. In reality, his method more resembles one of piling sins on the head of “high” culture before driving it into the desert and closing the gates.

My goal (among other things) is to nail Frith to the wall. I don’t expect all my readers to approve. As one postmodernist primer for students of “the

⁸ Cook, 161; cf. Frith, 257 (different Hanslick quote, same point).

⁹ Peterson, 256.

¹⁰ Mitchell, 280.

New Historicism” puts it, “every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes,”¹¹ so there’s no point in putting up with kibitzers. (On the other hand, the same author feels that “discourses” are “involved more heavily in policing and bolstering the authority of the social order than the physical or military apparatus of the state,” and that “this removes the need for power to be repressive,”¹² which makes you wonder – was he raised by elves, or dolphins?) Rather than adopt the pose of being too fine a human being to stoop to such dubious practices as critique and opposition, I will say flat out that I regard Frith’s views as condescending – to himself – and that I believe their weirdness arises in quite an interesting way from one simple cause: exaggerated respect for music.

I am not the first to see a problem with Frith’s approach. As Gary Higgins, writer of an e-mail to the editor of the London-based avant-pop monthly *THE WIRE* (August, 2007), put it:

Post-PoMo, there’s been an unfortunate, reactionary strain of thought. Marked by relativistic associations and masterful turd-polishing, it seeks to rank pop music equally with high art, while missing Ellington’s timeless dictum that there are two kinds of music, good and bad. Perhaps the popcrit resents the weight of history, feels threatened by Brahms or Puccini and needs to overcompensate A great pop song exits the womb as high art, in no need of false laurels.

Where I diverge from Higgins’ assessment of “popcrits” is in my more rigorous rejection of the desirability of “high” art. Despite himself, Higgins rejects it, too. We’ve all been to the womb. It’s not an exclusive address.

¹¹ Brannigan, 172.

¹² Ibid.

Classical music is appreciated by specialists alone

For Frith, art music is not something amateurs should waste their time on.

Bourgeois or what I shall now call the art music discourse is organized around a particular notion of musical scholarship, a particular concept of musical talent, and a particular sort of musical event, in which music's essential value is its provision of a transcendent experience that is, on the one hand, ineffable and uplifting but, on the other, only available to those with the right sort of knowledge, the right sorts of interpretive skills. Only the right people with the right training can, in short, experience the real meaning of "great" music.¹³

He's not joking. It goes on: What is "the right training"? Whoever can't fluently read or write an orchestral score has no chance of understanding music: "The proper listener ... has to translate a temporal experience into a spatial one ... Structural listening is necessarily dependent on music's spatial representation, on the score."¹⁴ Frith demands active musical literacy and quotes a long list of snobby classical theorists in support.¹⁵ Historically, he says, no performance has ever been good enough for these insatiable idealists; eventually "recording technology ... allowed classical record producers to claim that their work represented the perfect (or impossible) musical object represented in the score."¹⁶ "Music turns out to be, after all, an imitative art: a performance is an imitation of a score,"¹⁷ he goes on. For Frith, art music is mimetic but reproduces just one thing – its own notation on paper; it is *per se* abstract and self-referential.

¹³ Frith, 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 255f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

Since Frith's aim is to establish aesthetic values for pop (in a previous book, he was content to define its goal as "fun"¹⁸), it is vital to his argument that he insist on a structural, spatial, difficult, different way of listening to classical music, because if classical music were generally accessible, it could be seen to promote exactly the same values as pop. Thus art music is hastily consigned to the exclusivity one associates with linear algebra and the odes of Pindar, while pop is "music that's available and that people can listen to without needing special education."¹⁹ Art music is heard with the eyes, pop with the body. The ear has been lost to science (Frith speaks of listeners with "eyes shut and bodies open"²⁰).

And who are these specialists who understand bourgeois music? "Cook quotes Schoenberg ... I'll quote Ned Rorem," Frith writes:

For myself [says Rorem], I no longer hear new music except visually: if it pleases me, I inscribe it on a staff in the brain, photograph that notation, take it home, and develop the film which can be preserved indefinitely. This manner of musical recall is not, I think, unusual to composers.²¹

Understanding music on this view is "not ... unusual" – it's a vaudeville act. Whether or not certain pop theorists are as gullible as little children, a mnemonic trick is not perception; Rorem knows whether "it pleases me" before he gets home to develop the film. But this is the text Frith lays down like a trump card to conclude his chapter on "The Meaning of Music."

The literature seems to indicate that Frith's hermeneutic deference to the imagined brainpower of technicians is no rarity in the humanities, which could just as well be called the humilities. A typical interdisciplinary essay on music puts it, "The 'music' part of popular music refers to a medium with its own specific properties, practices, limitations, and possibilities, which

¹⁸ Frith in *The Sociology of Rock*.

¹⁹ <http://www.furious.com/PERFECT/simonfrith.html> (a 2002 interview, just so you know he isn't working very hard on changing his mind).

²⁰ Frith, 125.

²¹ Frith, 267 quoting *Settling the Score*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988, p. 228.

musicologists are in a unique position to understand.”²² Musicologists alone understand music: That seems to me like a very odd claim coming from a non-musicologist, especially one who is writing about music at the time – like saying you need a pilot’s license to read *Vol de nuit* – an abdication of performance in the face of an unimaginable competence. A neighboring essay on musical “Form” opens with a humble reference to Hanslick’s “forms put into motion through sounds,” admits to being intellectually overwhelmed, and then asks how we might “escape this trap”: We can either “forget ‘form’ and focus on ‘content’ – on the music’s meaning, its expressive power, its effects,” or “redefine the issue” to “reconceptualize form as process,”²³ so that naïve formal analysis of music would become a parsing of its algorithmic patterns of repetition. The piece concludes with a plea to musicologists to pay more attention to pop instead of thinking “its schemata ... are just too basic.”²⁴ The same book’s chapter on “Text” concludes with a similar appeal to musicological *misericordia*.²⁵

Frith’s favorite classical-snob-theorist source and target is Adorno, who once (if not in the pages of Frith) distinguished eight kinds of music recipients: (1) the expert who reads music in silence, (2) the good listener who understands music “as he does his native language,” unconscious of its rules, (3) the “*Bildungskonsument*” (educated consumer) who fetishizes non-musical aspects, *e.g.*, reads biographies of composers, (4) emotional listeners happy to daydream and project, (5) those who listen to Bach and Palestrina out of resentment, (6) resentment listeners lacking the ascetic streak, who become jazz experts, (7) listeners for entertainment purposes only, and (8) the indifferent, unmusical, and anti-musical, who must have had very stern fathers.²⁶ A study conducted in Germany in the 1960s was able to identify not one single person (n=2,308) as an expert, a good listener, or unmusical on Adorno’s scheme.²⁷ The structural listening Frith demands, as Cook was

²² David Brackett in Horner, 139.

²³ Richard Middleton in Horner, 141.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁵ Horner, 176.

²⁶ Adorno, *Einleitung*, 13-31.

²⁷ Rotter, 97, quoting Dopheide, Bernhard ed., *Musikhören*, Darmstadt: *Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft*, 1975, p. 280-330, quoting Karbusicky, Vladimir, *Zur empirisch-*

not the first to point out (his 1990 book reporting findings that music theorists don't always notice modulations occasioned widespread *Schadenfreude*), is practically unknown.

To take someone who is well-informed and was presumably not raised by wolves but in a middle class household, even the well known Egyptologist Jan Assmann, author of an acclaimed book, packed with musical examples, on Mozart's use of Masonic symbolism in *The Magic Flute*, would be lucky to make (3) *Bildungskonsument*. You can see that "structural listening" must be a tall order, if a little fugue overwhelms even him:

*Das Fugato ist, wenn man so will, 'absolute' Musik, die durch ihre Schönheit, d.h., ihre rhythmische, melodische, kurz: klängliche Präsenz wirken will, aber nicht durch ihre 'Bedeutung', die es zu entschlüsseln und zu verstehen gilt. In einer Oper erfüllt die Musik eine doppelte Funktion: Sie ergänzt die sprachliche Sphäre der Repräsentation von Bedeutung durch eine Sphäre schierer Präsenz, die einfach Gegenwart ist, ohne etwas zu vergegenwärtigen, und sie verstärkt die sprachliche Sphäre durch eine zusätzliche Ebene der Verdeutlichung. Die Musik, von Haus aus asemantisch, steht einer sekundären Semantisierung nach vielen Richtungen hin offen, und Mozart ist in dieser Hinsicht besonders weit gegangen.*²⁸

soziologischen Musikforschung, in *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft* 8 1966, Heft 2, p. 215-240 – unfortunately missing from the library.

²⁸ "The fugato is, if you will, "absolute' music that seeks to work through its beauty, i.e., its rhythmic, melodic, sonic presence, but not through its meaning, which remains to be decoded and understood. In an opera, music fulfills a twofold purpose: It completes the linguistic sphere of the representation of meaning with a sphere of sheer presence that is present without presenting anything [German lends itself to such constructions] and reinforces the linguistic sphere with an additional level of clarification. Music, inherently asemantic [emphasis added], is open to a secondary semantization in many directions, and here Mozart takes the ball and runs." Assmann, 37.

Music, he says, is innately meaningless, and its “sheer presence” (a.k.a. immediacy) is characterized through naïve metaphors of motion that could have come straight from *THE WIRE*: Strings and woodwinds “*treten auseinander*” (step away from each other); the strings display a “*tastende, suchende Bewegung*” (palpating, searching motion) while the brass “throws” chords at them. Low volume creeps by as if on tiptoe.²⁹ Assmann writes as if instrumental music always has a program, even if it’s just a kind of reverse allegory (concrete events with abstract actors), the form of riddle favored by the sphinx, and I’m not saying he’s wrong, but “structural listening”? This ain’t it.

Conceptual shift

Pop theorists refer to active “structural listening” but do not presume to practice it. And why should they? If it were involved in music perception, music would be about as popular as organic chemistry. Still, they adhere to the term, greatly skewing their approach to pop tunes. Where art music is held to be difficult of access, pop becomes the opposite. It will always be understood immediately, by default. Frith writes that hearing pop and understanding it are “*the same thing.*”³⁰

That may seem like a straightforward claim, but the word “understanding” is vague, yet arbitrary. No demands are made of pop listeners, who hear whatever they happen to hear, while classical listeners must draw on a vast repertoire of parlor tricks to achieve a normative perception. In the case of classical music, Frith tells us, hearing is equated with *not* understanding. If you only hear, you understand nothing; it is necessary to add value. The socialist Eisler wrote that listening to a Bach fugue naïvely is like going to a lecture in Chinese – you can tell whether the speaker is angry or sad, but not what his topic is.³¹ Frith goes farther in disenfranchising the masses, eagerly quoting Hanslick to the effect that naïve enjoyment of music was *déclassé* from the start.³²

²⁹ Ibid., 35-36.

³⁰ Frith, 146.

³¹ Eisler quoted by Caroly Csipak in Stephan, 20.

³² Frith, 262.

“The world of classical (or art) music” is “the world of nineteenth-century high culture (and twentieth-century midcult),”³³ *Performing Rites* tells us (midcult is “high culture diluted for mass sales and consumption”³⁴); we understand the rhetoric of such music because of its conventional use in film soundtracks.³⁵ The musical high culture of the 19th century, in deference to bourgeois ethical preoccupations, was opera and choral music,³⁶ but Frith seems to feel it was the then-marginal symphonic and chamber music – the wordless, “absolute” music requiring “structural listening” – that eventually returned to dominate art music in the 20th century.

Pop cannot be art, and vice versa, because art cannot be understood. “Romantic individualism,” Frith explains, “helped define the ‘serious’ as the ‘unpopular.’”³⁷ He supports that claim by excerpting an 1802 essay on Bach (!) and a Cook citation of Schönberg (!). In between “the ‘unpopular’” and pop, there’s quite a bit of music he prefers to forget – to be exact, the 19th-century high culture and 20th-century “midcult” he had claimed was the object of bourgeois musical discourse. He glosses neatly over the fact that the rhetoric of “absolute music” was not invented in response to what he would call “serious” (that is, taxing) music, but in defense of things like the Moonlight Sonata. Deeply annoying music has quite another aesthetic: That of the 20th-century avant-garde.

As Daniel Chua has pointed out, structural listening may have been cooked up by the Romantics to protect their masculinity: Faced with swaying, swooning, responsive audiences, they came to regard allowing classical music to play upon one’s passive sensibilities as hopelessly effeminate.³⁸ But Frith won’t go so far as to admit such a thing is even possible – he literally can’t bring himself to call art music accessible to non-specialists. Art must remain an intellectual exercise so that pop can retain its monopoly on unexamined emotion.

³³ Ibid., 36.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Ibid., 122.

³⁶ Dahlhaus, 9.

³⁷ Frith, 258.

³⁸ Chua, esp. 145.

Accordingly, *Performing Rites* argues almost exclusively by reference to avant-garde and contemporary music. That is, the composers Frith employs as examples (the ones who didn't make it into the index just by being someone else's synecdoche) are: Babbitt, Bartók, Beethoven, Berlioz, Bernstein, Boulez, G. Brecht, Britten, Cage, Copland, Debussy, Elgar, Ellington, Fauré, M. Feldman, Gershwin, Glass, Ives, Liszt, S. Reich, T. Riley, N. Rorem, Satie, Stockhausen, Stravinsky, Wagner, and Webern. Non-pop becomes pop: Reich's *Drumming* is as "mentally absorbing" and productive of "bodily transcendence" as Kool and the Gang's "Get Down On It."³⁹ Stravinsky serves as an example of a composer of "symphonic jazz."⁴⁰ Wagner, strangely, becomes a proponent of absolute music and the most conspicuous exponent of its art religion, who therefore sought to "disguise the physical effort that goes into classical music-making"⁴¹ by hiding the Bayreuth orchestra in a pit. Solidly popular late Romantic composers like Tchaikovsky and Mahler are never mentioned – not even in other people's examples – and such omissions extend from the ubiquitous (*e.g.*, Mozart, Handel) to those who sell records while continuing to enjoy scholarly respect (Bach, Haydn) to the really popular "midcult" that ought to interest him most (the recycling of arias as pop songs) to newer composers who are actually pretty good (Ligeti). His treatment of classical music, in full: Beethoven reaps praise for a "reassuring" violin concerto.⁴² Notably, the archetypal Romantic songwriter (Schubert) is demoted to thankless insignificance as a borrowed example, perhaps because his role as a prophet of subjectivity would tend to undermine Frith's contention that Romanticism, as it supposedly lives on in rock, especially in the "mythology" of talent or genius lording it over a submissive "folk,"⁴³ entails the combination of bodily, verbal, and musical self-expression seen in singer-songwriters.

Frith must ignore Romantic art. Why? Because he makes Romanticism – independent of Romantic works – the source of the aesthetic values of the 20th century:

³⁹ Frith, 155.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 277.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28, s.a. 24, 31, 60.

Value discourses don't work autonomously either; their terms were developed in relationship to each other; each discourse represents a response to the shared problems of music making in an industrial capitalist society; each can be traced back, therefore, to the late eighteenth century; and each can be found in the ways all sorts of music have made sense of themselves in the twentieth century, whether in the Romantic mythology of rock ...⁴⁴

The gap between Romantic music's theory and practice has always caused problems, up to and including the poetry of Mallarmé (see Dahlhaus or Chua); here the conundrum is solved by simply dropping Romantic music from the canon. Frith's division of music among three discourses – bourgeois/art, commercial, and folk⁴⁵ – ought to make avant-garde music hard to explain, but for Frith, it makes Romantic music nonexistent; the avant-garde becomes Romanticism's latest manifestation, and Romantic music vanishes into (commercial) film soundtracks without creating a ripple. Frith's arguments would even allow the contention that rock is, rather than the latest, the *first* manifestation of Romanticism in music, since Romantic music in the historic sense (as his citations show) does not qualify as Romantic under his scheme!

He can get away with such arguments because they are so very confusing: One is forced to distinguish between his unspoken love of the Romantic virtues he co-opts for rock, and his insistence on declaring "Romanticism" the dominant false consciousness of today's art world. The Romantic, for Frith, is no longer art, or never was (that is, he's steeped in avant-gardism); but it's still, somehow, the persistent discourse that could hinder our adequate appreciation of the very music we are said to understand intuitively whether we want to or not.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 42.

To me, it seems truly odd to pin the equation of “serious” and “unpopular” on “Romantic individualism.” Romanticism goes over well, and people liked it even when it was new: *Lyrical Ballads* went into four editions in seven years,⁴⁶ and *Childe Harold* was “very popular.”⁴⁷ Even Beethoven made money. Frith may be forgetting that the critique of escapism as “individualistic” was never aimed at its reception. In any case, he wants to escape from all three – seriousness, unpopularity, and what he thinks of as Romanticism (*i.e.*, Bach and Schönberg).

The obvious alternative would be to define the serious as the popular, *e.g.*:

*Die Musik der revolutionären Arbeiterklasse ... ist ein Mittel zum Zweck. Die Arbeitermusikbewegung hat deswegen am wenigsten Leistungen oder Erfahrungen aufzuweisen auf dem Gebiet der sogenannten ‘absoluten’ oder ‘abstrakten’ Musik. Das Musizieren ohne Worte, ohne theatralische Vorgänge, ohne konkrete Anlässe ist ein Spezifikum der bürgerlichen Musik.*⁴⁸

For Eisler, proletarian music would be popular vocal music, as it already was anyway. It was Wagner – an operatic composer with a bourgeois following – who came up with the derogatory term “absolute” for Romantic music.⁴⁹ Bourgeois music had come first, had words and a moral, and had been acceptable to a bourgeoisie that later rejected instrumental music.⁵⁰ But as reasonable as it might seem to do so, pop theory cannot follow Eisler’s (or

⁴⁶ Ward, 164.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁸ “The music of the revolutionary working class is a means to an end. That is why the workers’ music movement has so few achievements or experiences in the field of so-called ‘absolute’ or ‘abstract’ music. To make music without words, theatrical occurrences, or a good excuse is an exclusive feature of bourgeois music.” Eisler quoted by Caroly Csipak in Stephan, 27.

⁴⁹ Dahlhaus, 24.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

Wagner's) lead, because it regards all tonal relations as abstract and all avant-garde music as serious. Period.

Frith's chapter on "Songs as Texts" doesn't mention art songs, arias, or *Lieder* – not once. He comes closest when remarking that "the theater song tradition," to which he later consigns all of pop in theorizing that stars win our erotic devotion by portraying characters, "is in part a celebration of the lyricist's artifice."⁵¹ Art songs may be lurking quietly behind a description in a chapter on "The Voice": He describes "the torch song, the elegy to unrequited love," as "an essentially narcissistic art" and refers to its female performers as "interpreters" in possession of "a highly disciplined skill." The classical song, in contrast, need only be sung "according to classical convention" to achieve its desired effect.⁵²

Songs are ferociously popular and are often assigned a meaning far in excess of their brevity and simplicity; that's the interesting thing about pop music, and what Frith, one would think, would want to explore. Since the days of Sappho, people have just loved poetry with a tune. But he prefers to head mankind off at the pass in a preemptive counterstrike based on the mechanics of English: Pop finesses the problem of melding text and music "by rhyming."⁵³ But "we as speakers create meaning through stress; music creates stress; therefore music creates meaning"⁵⁴ which cannot be abstracted from performance: "Rhythm" (volume) dictates "the preferred reading." (His example is the Beatles' "She Loves You.") Therefore, he concludes, a good lyric poem, on principle, can never be a good song text. "Lyrics aren't poetry and no song words, in my opinion, stand up as print texts."⁵⁵ That is an oddly conservative claim of genre autonomy, but then again, this pseudo-iconoclast's sole intent is to get pop standing on its own two feet. Or maybe he just wants to roll back the Norman conquest and re-institute Germanic alliterative verse – who knows.

⁵¹ Frith, 158-182.

⁵² Ibid., 199-200.

⁵³ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Communitas

A key concept in cultural studies is ritual. Frith calls his book *Performing Rites*, after all. The sociologist Hans-Georg Soeffner defines ritual (accurately) as any consistent, repeated series of symbolic gestures that functions to impose structure, order, and emotional distance.⁵⁶

Among Romantics, rituals have always been regarded with suspicion. As Mervyn Peake put it, “Ritual, like a senseless chariot, had rolled its wheels – and the natural life of the day was bruised and crushed.”⁵⁷ The word *Rite* suggests that Frith’s model for communication is not the Romantic era, but the Middle Ages. Consider the chart of three stages in the development of art (*Kunst*) that Peter Bürger reproduces in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*:

	<i>sakrale <u>Kunst</u></i>	<i>höfische [court] <u>Kunst</u></i>	<i>Bürgerliche <u>Kunst</u></i>
Verwendungszweck [use]:	<i>Kultobjekt</i>	<i>Repräsentationsobjekt [status symbol]</i>	<i>Darstellung bürgerl. Selbstverständnisses [depiction of the middle-class self]</i>
Produktion:	<i>handwerklich kollektiv</i>	<i>Individuell</i>	<i>Individuell</i>
Rezeption:	<i>kollektiv (sakral)</i>	<i>kollektiv (gesellig)</i>	<i>Individuell⁵⁸</i>

Although his aim of declaring some pop better than others initially seems borrowed from the art world, Frith will move pop toward the left-hand side of the chart, away from modern art, past *kollektiv (gesellig)* (the “fun” of his earlier work) into collective production and reception and quasi-religious rites. Music *per se* is considered too esoteric to make the trip: Instead, it moves to the right, off the chart, to join the avant-garde’s most exclusive moments.

Sadly, the cultural studies primer *Resistance Through Rituals* (Frith co-wrote its article on politics) leaves rituals out of its “definitions” section,

⁵⁶ Soeffner 1, 176-177.

⁵⁷ Peake, 181.

⁵⁸ Bürger, 65; I didn’t translate the cognates.

though it does say that the “modes for the generation of sub-cultural style” were once identified as “dress, music, ritual, and *argot*.”⁵⁹ One mod is quoted as saying he reserves Thursdays for “the ritual washing of the hair.”⁶⁰ Still, it is clear on the basis of the books’ titles alone that ritual in cultural studies has lost its life-crushing function. Instead, it is expected to perform some kind of useful service.

Apparently, it will bind us together. Since advocating a return to jolly feudal serfdom has not really been socially acceptable since long before Ruskin and is not terribly likely to meet with success today, cultural studies has its ciphers. Through ritual practice, we will attain “*communitas*” (a word from anthropological descriptions of pre-bureaucratic rites of passage; compare Bourdieu’s preference for the more accurate term “rites of appointment”⁶¹), entering a “liminal” space “betwixt and between.” Or at least the great unwashed will: They will adopt temporary collective dress codes and pastimes, while we university students further consecrate our solitude (from an article entitled “The Sacralization of Disorder”).

‘Communitas’ is signaled by ritualized symbols of group identity particularly in the beat of the music, in common fashions and through the star performer who acts as a sacred ‘totem.’ Lower strata ... emphasize ritual elements while higher strata develop the symbols of ‘anti-structure’ in an extreme individualist direction.⁶²

It’s almost as if, tacitly recognizing that Romanticism was a petty bourgeois phenomenon and thus exclusive, cultural studies resolved to develop a workable alternative for an unselfconscious *Lumpenproletariat* out of the goodness of its heart.

For Frith, ritual functions to create identity. Given postmodernist distaste for the self, identity is the manifest sense of group belonging.

⁵⁹ Hall, 54.

⁶⁰ Dick Hebdige in Hall, 90.

⁶¹ In *Ce que parler veut dire*.

⁶² Martin, 87.

Identity comes from the outside, not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover. ... Identity is necessarily a matter of ritual: it describes one's place in a dramatized pattern of relationships – one can never really express oneself 'autonomously.'⁶³

If you find the claim unobjectionable – perhaps you, like Frith, find young people in search of themselves annoying – recall that sociology is devoted to studying identities imposed from without, while experimental psychology studies those imposed from within, both on the assumption that the scientific method may “reveal or discover” things that phenomenology and introspection cannot. Here our identities are elective uniforms, and the increasing international popularity of commercial music will allow us to belong to ever larger platoons, sharing rituals worldwide. Music is uniquely suited to foster conformity and convergence: “What makes music special – what makes it special for identity – is that it defines a space without boundaries. Music is the cultural form best able to cross borders We are only where the music takes us.”⁶⁴ (Or as an earlier, more critical sociologist wrote: “*So präsentiert sich die Discokultur in ihrer Gesamtheit am Ende als eine Weltweit vereinheitlichte Superszene, in der die regionalen Unterschiede nahezu völlig nivelliert worden sind.*”⁶⁵) In the presence of music, Frith says, social determinants evaporate. Necessitating deliberate, visible participation, identity is a process that sets us apart from the animals, babies, sick people, the elderly, the poor, *et al.*: “Musical identity is both fantastic – idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits – and real: It is enacted in activity.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Frith, 273, 275.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁶⁵ “In the end, disco culture in its entirety presents itself as a homogeneous worldwide super-scene in which regional differences have been almost entirely eliminated.” Mezger, 55.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

To achieve performativity and/or avoid rejection by our chosen *communitas*, we must take care that our actions are the proper ones (“felicitous,” in Austin’s terminology). According to a typical high-end newsprint music critic, pop is unique among cultural phenomena in offering “*Individuationsmodelle*” into which the individual vanishes without a trace (“*aufgehen*”). Ideas in books you can take or leave, but because dancehall reggae, for example, is a “*dichtes Referenznetz*,” listening to it without condoning the murder of homosexuals would mean “*sich von dem zu distanzieren, was man eigentlich ist.*”⁶⁷ A recent interview with Thomas Meinecke (influential theorist, novelist, minimal techno DJ, member of FSK) concludes:

*Das ganze System Pop scheint mir auf Affirmation angelegt zu sein. «Gutfinden» ergibt hier viel mehr Sinn als «Schlechtfinden». Im Pop sagst du entweder «Ja!», oder du wendest dem zur Debatte stehenden Phänomen oder Künstler gar keine Aufmerksamkeit zu. Es, er oder sie fällt sozusagen durch. Es kann auch passieren, dass du als Hörerin oder Hörer durchfällst, weil du ein Ding nicht erkennst und es nicht lesen kannst. Pop ist eigentlich ein totalitäres System.*⁶⁸

You have to give him credit for being one step ahead: Few pop aestheticians, crypto-fascist or not, have gotten up the nerve to use the term “totalitarian” as meaningless frippery (a subculture you’re free to ignore isn’t awfully totalitarian) and implicit praise. Certainly pop music journalists must either

⁶⁷ “Dense network of references,” “to distance oneself from what one actually is.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 27, 2008, p. 11.

⁶⁸ “The whole system ‘pop’ seems to me to be based on affirmation. ‘Liking’ makes much more sense than ‘disliking.’ In pop, you either say ‘Yes!’ or you just ignore the phenomenon or artist under discussion. He, she or it flunks out, so to speak. It can also happen that you as listener flunk out, because you don’t recognize something and can’t read it. Pop is actually a totalitarian system.” *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, February 22, 2008, http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/pop_ist_ein_totalitaeres_system_1.675759.html

praise or ignore music they don't like, or risk losing access and advertising – unless they stay in the buyer's market of the “independent” fringes where there's no such thing as bad publicity – and academics are so committed to affirm/ignore that it's scary, but the notion that pop fans don't position themselves by practicing aesthetic discrimination and dispensing legitimate, constructive negative judgments, often very amusing in their rococo harshness, comes from a universe I've never visited. On the other hand, I'm perfectly willing to believe that some participants in the minimal techno, dancehall reggae, dubstep and other scenes aspire to totalitarian levels of control over their immediate environments. They're 18-year-old boys, after all – give them a large coffee or two, and they'll also tell you they can't see a fat girl without wanting to push her out a high window, and that their friend who took ketamine met “the gatekeeper.”

Rock as Romantic

Having made a case for music as a universal language (“the cultural form best able to cross borders”), Frith nonetheless claims it is wrong to judge pop music by the absolute standards of art music. In art music's alleged aesthetic, “good music is implicitly ‘original’ or ‘autonomous,’ and the explanation built into the judgment depends on the familiar Marxist/Romantic distinction between serial production ... and artistic creativity.”⁶⁹ (The term “Marxist/Romantic” stands out; it doesn't work in German.) By “originality” and “autonomy,” he means more than the avoidance of copyright violations. He means the aspiration to radical autonomy and novelty by individual works reflected in his characterization of “serious” music – his alternative to pop, since he flat-out ignores Romantic music. But for the last hundred years or so, “artistic creativity” has largely been composed of increasingly anonymous “serial production” – even in theory.⁷⁰ The most concerted efforts to achieve originality and autonomy, whether through chilly automatism or empty denial, came with the *machines célibataires* of the 20th century avant-garde as they attempted to escape from the Romantic *bête noire* of human frailty into the arms of the

⁶⁹ Frith, 69.

⁷⁰ Cf. Engel, 266; Theisohn, 191.

scientific revolution. For example, a theorist of the early 1970s writes: “Pop is sensitive to change, indeed it could be said that is sensitive to nothing else ... It draws no conclusions. It makes no comments. It proposes no solutions. It admits to neither past nor future, not even its own.”⁷¹ When an industry that both depends on, and carefully limits, participation in never-ending novelty as a lifestyle claims to share in an aesthetic realm that both depends on, and carefully limits, participation in never-ending novelty as a lifestyle, and both dispense theoretically with the autonomy of the self, it’s safe to say the pop rats left the sinking ship of Romanticism some time ago.

Unfortunately, a more dominant view is reflected in books such as *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism* (by Robert Pattison, Oxford University Press, 1989). From its preface: “Romanticism lives on in mass culture.”⁷² The author “forces the reader to think about rock as an idea inherited from the nineteenth-century literary Romantics.”⁷³ Thus for Keir Keightley, the “sincerity and directness” of “folk, blues, country, rock ’n’ roll” make them more Romantic (he must be the first theorist in history to call blues “sincere”), while “classical, art music, soul and pop” with their “irony, sarcasm, and obliqueness” are more modern (my examples: “*An die Musik*,” “Hot Pants”). Romanticism celebrates “tradition and continuity” over “radical or sudden stylistic change”; “elitism” becomes the hallmark not of Romantic genius, but of the avant-garde.⁷⁴

Certainly, one can regard rock music as an “*Erbe oder jüngste Inkarnation der Diskursformation Romantik*” that moves “*zwischen einem Ideal des unmittelbaren Selbstaushdrucks einerseits und den von der modernen Kultur für dieses Anliegen bereitgestellten medialen und diskursiven Möglichkeiten andererseits*,”⁷⁵ but why enlist Romanticism at all? The “ideal” here is unattainable (*i.e.*, the porous surface of the “ideal” pancake keeps the syrup from running off, just as real, existing classical

⁷¹ George Melly, quoted in Martin, 118; cf. Frith, 157 (on fashion).

⁷² Durant, 123.

⁷³ Bindas, 93.

⁷⁴ Keightley in Frith et al., quoted in Reinfandt, 328.

⁷⁵ “As heir to or most recent incarnation of the discourse-formation of Romanticism, rock music moves ... between an ideal of immediate self-expression on the one hand, and the media and discursive possibilities that modern culture provides for this intention on the other.” Reinfandt, 327.

“ideals” loomed over Romantic art,⁷⁶ but there is still debate as to the nature and purpose of the self). Having amassed evidence that rock music production is a collective enterprise in which self-expression is considered poor form,⁷⁷ the author leaves himself no option but to locate the “authenticity” required to evidence Romanticism’s survival in live performance (“*Mündlichkeit*,” orality),⁷⁸ for like any sophisticated person, he knows that self-expression is a “fiction.”

So unterlaufen die Songtexte von Bob Dylan beispielsweise durch ihren objektivierend-artifiziellen Metaphernreichtum die Unmittelbarkeitsfiktion direkter subjektiver Referentialisierbarkeit und sind somit tendentiell dem modernistischen Pol zuzurechnen, während umgekehrt Dylans Einstellung zu Schallplattenaufnahmen und Liveauftritten vollständig (und mit gelegentlich enttäuschenden Resultaten) auf romantische Spontaneität setzt.⁷⁹

Unlike “[the fiction of] immediacy,” both the “objectifying-artificial abundance of metaphor” that identifies the texts as modernistic and recording sessions are things on whose existence we all agree. As for Bob’s “spontaneity,” 20 years after Suckdog’s *Drugs Are Nice*, one has to admit that while Bob may not be *prima ballerina assoluta*, he does write songs in advance, play them from beginning to end, and sing in the general direction of the mike. My question becomes: Once it is framed as a pseudo-discourse for implementation by people who discount its basic assumptions, can Romanticism ever die?

⁷⁶ Cf. Chua, 11.

⁷⁷ Reinfandt, 331.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 353, 340.

⁷⁹ “Thus through their objectifying-artificial wealth of metaphor, the lyrics of Bob Dylan subvert the fiction of the immediacy of direct subjective referentiability and lean thereby toward the modernistic pole, while on the contrary Bob’s attitude towards recording and live performance relies 100% on Romantic spontaneity, with sometimes disappointing results.” *Ibid.*, 328.

A introductory *Guide to Romantic Literature* asks, “How does Romanticism manifest itself in the present age?” – as though Romanticism were obligated to do so. “One could trace it in any [!] of the major avant-garde movements of this century: in Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, postmodernism and so on – wherever the random or the aleatory speaks of a lack beyond the insistence of being.”⁸⁰ I’m not quite sure where they get it (the idea that Romanticism now manifests itself as something else entirely, like an axolotl), though around here Kittler’s *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* is a likely culprit. Kittler lets Romanticism (or any other discourse) survive as long as it wants, since it was never anything more than a collection of characteristic constellations of monadic tropes in the first place. He also cites Julian Jaynes,⁸¹ *i.e.*, he’s nuts. In any case, with history over and discourses free to roam, gathering conceptual detritus like snowballs but still sporting a bipolar architecture for the sake of analytic convenience, if too sophisticated to admit a nominal anchoring in the psyche like the Freud-Marxian *eros/thanatos* or geography like Frith’s Africa/Europe, even androgyny can represent a “Romantic” ideal, *e.g.*, the “Byronic, bohemian, feminised man.”⁸² What exactly about Byron made him feminine – his legendary snobbery? His insatiable sex drive? All the swimming?⁸³ Anything “Romantic” is also arguably “modernistic,” because today’s zombie Romanticism was new in 1800, but it leaned on classical models, so the only way to tell whether Dada is “modernistic” or “Romantic” is to poll your friends. Middleton, for example, lets drop that “for modernists, the very use of structural formulae is enough to condemn the music as reactionary”;⁸⁴ which “modernists” he means and what qualifies as a “structural formula” is up to you.

I would prefer to assume that past discourses are just plain over. A nice example occurs toward the end of D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* when the sculptor Loerke defends a new statue: “That is a *Kunstwerk*, a work of art. It is a picture of nothing, of absolutely nothing. It has nothing to do

⁸⁰ Philip Shaw in Ward, 39.

⁸¹ See Kittler 2007 (*Medien*), introduction.

⁸² Davies, 309.

⁸³ Cf. Theweleit, 256ff.

⁸⁴ Richard Middleton in Horner, 142.

with anything but itself, it has no relation with the everyday world of this and other, there is no connexion between them, absolutely none, they are two different and distinct planes of existence.”⁸⁵ The work depicts a “massive, magnificent stallion” on which is sitting, naked, a “mere bud” of a girl. A nymph on a fiery charger is not what we would now call abstraction, but not so long ago, in 1920, it was sufficiently outré to require defense by appeal to a parallel German universe.

When Robert Henri, a figurative painter and one of the organizers of the Armory Show, proposed in 1912 that art aficionados might rely on their own “insight, experience, knowledge, and sympathy”⁸⁶ in judging works rather than working from a checklist of academic (literally: in the U.S., those of the National Academy of Design) principles, he saw himself as espousing the anarchism of his outlaw heroine Emma Goldman, who went so far as to suggest that an ideal society might permit the cultivation of “individual tastes, desires and inclinations.”⁸⁷ Given the role individual liberty played in my upbringing, presumably far beyond Emma’s wildest dreams, she might as well be Lady Murasaki for all I can really identify with her. But there is nothing presumptuous about my calling *Die schöne Müllerin* the trippiest psychedelic concept album of all time: By anthropomorphizing Schubert – by assuming he is just like me,⁸⁸ which is all I can do – I at least apply standards I understand intuitively in appropriating him for my own ends, of which he would surely not approve. The anachronism would be for me to pretend, almost 200 years down the road, that I know what Schubert and Wilhelm Müller were up to, beyond kicking the Beatles’ sorry ass.

Argumentation by reference to discourse networks – the vocabulary of popular reception – is always unassailable; my own squabble with Keightley after a talk he gave in Tübingen (at a conference on “Romanticism Today,” October 6, 2007) included an interchange that neatly illustrates the problem. ME: “And when exactly did Nirvana become mainstream?” KEIR: “October,

⁸⁵ Lawrence, D.H., 486.

⁸⁶ Antliff, 34.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁸ Cf. Bourdieu, *Unterschiede*, 772 (beginning of paragraph before “Parerga and Paralipomena,” in the postscript) to the effect that all philosophical thinking deserving of the name is ahistorical and ethnocentric because it admits of no other given than lived experience.

1991.” ME: “The day punk broke?” He nodded with a look of weary frustration. For Keightley, a rock band does not become mainstream by adopting mass-marketable radio-ready aesthetics and investing in videos, but by having hits.⁸⁹ He began his talk with a citation from *The Gangster as Tragic Hero* (Robert Warshow, 1948) to the effect that it’s lonely at the top, but in his analysis, there was no bottom. I would suggest that the bottom is even lonelier.

The “Romantic” (said Keightley) pop star Eminem laments without irony that “since birth I’ve been cursed with this curse to just curse / And just blurt this berserk and bizarre shit that works,” and warns those who dare greet him in public places, “I’m lifting you ten feet in the air.”⁹⁰ An arguably Byronic pose, yes, but I won’t hold a gun to readers’ heads to make them see that a threat to exercise magical martial-arts powers against overeager fans (these are not affairs of honor; he’s talking about beating up children who want his autograph) is about as bizarre as it gets in the gritty naturalistic fantasies of Eminem, and that rhyming and blurting were no more identical for the infant Eminem than they were for Byron. The *de jure* aesthetic here is Lautréamont; the *de facto* mode is relentless, high-pitched, monotone, strident chanting, laden with striking assonances, dense internal rhyme (“*tension dispensing these sentences,*” *etc.*), and quantitative stress – unconscious echoes of the *Iliad*? Anyway, the Romantics seldom attempted anapests – too challenging.

On the other hand, calling mass-market commercial youth culture “Romantic” might help us forget the actual Romantics, like naming the new dog after the old dog.

Futurism?

Andrew Hewitt points out that for Futurism, “the conditions of possibility of a specific historically constituted discourse become simultaneously present and possible.” In both avant-garde and postmodernist art, “what had been taken to be historically determined artistic techniques became available synchronously: Gothic, Romantic, Classical, and so on lose

⁸⁹ Cf. Frith, 86 (top).

⁹⁰ “The Way I Am,” 2000 (example stolen from Keightley’s lecture handout, Tübingen, Oct. 6, 2007).

their value as historical periodizations and function (in the avant-garde) as alternative constructive possibilities in the present.”⁹¹ Such an understanding of history, in which the present can be specified as coordinates on past axes, Hewitt adds (and I agree), “though not teleological, nevertheless articulates a systemic movement towards historical plenitude and presence ... the completion and liquidation of historical sequentiality,”⁹² along with the coming of that day when we will no longer see as through a glass darkly, but face to face, *i.e.*, the apocalypse that is the only redemption postmodernism can imagine. (As Frith puts it, cheerily admitting his theoretical aim is sabotage in the interest of entropy, “I want to value most highly that music, popular and serious, which has some sort of disruptive cultural effect.”⁹³) Paradoxically (just kidding – there’s no such thing as a paradox), in suggesting that Romanticism lives on, pop theory is itself avant-garde: It relies on eclecticism for its effects, cherry-picking buzzwords from past ages.

Without Romanticism’s indefensible religious metaphysics, Romantic notions of creativity cannot be conceptualized at all; in postmodern ontology the artwork, like anything else, exists in reception alone. But rather than discard an “autonomy” he reasonably regards as fictive, Frith redefines it as the independence only money can buy: For contemporary art music, “truth-to-self ... depends on others’ approval until (just as in the pop world) one reaches a sufficient level of success (in terms of both esteem and earnings) to be ‘autonomous’”⁹⁴ – strangely, the reverse of the usual movement from youthful idealist to sellout.⁹⁵ In an earlier book, profiling Bob Dylan: “There’s no one who has been such a loved star while remaining so true to the bohemian ideal of being beholden to nothing but oneself.”⁹⁶ Frith presumably knows how many of Bob’s tunes are borrowed and how much of his success is owed to managers, but does that slow him down when it’s time to declare Bob recursively self-generating? Hell no! Keightley delineates the

⁹¹ Hewitt, 6-7.

⁹² Hewitt, 6-7.

⁹³ Frith, 277.

⁹⁴ Frith, 37.

⁹⁵ Cf. Bourdieu, *Rules*.

⁹⁶ Frith et al., 81.

ideals of singer-songwriters, “rather than simply aping the seriousness of ‘highbrow’ culture,” as including “freedom from mediation, a feeling of autonomy,” and “an insistence upon the integrity of the individual self” with “authenticity as its central value,”⁹⁷ but you have to ask what pop act has ever been marketed as putty in the hands of corporate stooges.

It seems more plausible to me that the caesura of note occurred in the mid-19th century with the beginnings of the conflation of art and life in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁹⁸ For the Romantics, fantasy was still a form of compensation for the bourgeois world’s disenchantment. “I’d rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,” as Wordsworth sighs in his sonnet on “getting and spending.”⁹⁹ The idylls and emotions that industrialization pushed to the margins of society returned from the repressed as an autonomous realm of art,¹⁰⁰ promising each of us a personal reality as a reward for submission to an increasingly dominant universal culture. As a commentator on the post-Romantic reactionary Adalbert Stifter put it very nicely: “*Als utopischer Entwurf der anderen Welt springt sie über die falsche Verklärung des Bestehenden hinaus, wengleich die Utopie die Wundmale ihres realen Gegenbildes trägt. So dürfte die Wahrheit darin beschlossen sein, daß sie als bewußte Utopie von der Bejahung des Bestehenden so weit entfernt ist wie ihre hilflose Gestalt von dessen realer Aufhebung.*”¹⁰¹ Death was a surefire solution. An armed rebellion could be as “inspired” as a poem¹⁰² and was generally about as effective, and the cult of honor and dueling was a consciously pagan “manly religion.”¹⁰³ Avant-garde art shifted the emphasis from transcendence to participation, aspiring openly to be an all-encompassing lifestyle,¹⁰⁴ a bit like the armies where post-post-Romantic heroes (e.g., Beau Geste, Max Demian) tended to end their search for

⁹⁷ Keightley in Frith et al., 132-134.

⁹⁸ Marquard, 17.

⁹⁹ Wordsworth, 120.

¹⁰⁰ Marquard, 20.

¹⁰¹ “As utopian design for the other world, it leaps past the false transfiguration of the status quo, if still carrying its stigmata. The truth is more or less that as a conscious utopia, it is as far from affirming the status quo as its helpless figure is from really changing it.” Stifter, 271.

¹⁰² Rosenblum, 251.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 265.

¹⁰⁴ Bürger, 72.

meaning but minus the flak – as if the major achievement of the culture of the 20th century¹⁰⁵ has been to come up with ways of losing oneself without actually dying. The notion of “individuation” through self-identification with self-identified communities is hardly a manifestation of some expired movement, but it does make you wonder what goes through its proponents’ heads, in here-and-now political terms.

Mediated collectivities

Unlike the compensatory fantasies of the Romantics, meaning as a lifestyle is not a solitary affair between man and nature. Art acquired additional ideological reasons to demand collectivity, as Odo Marquard argues: After Marx, a shift takes place from a modernist belief that the present represents the most advanced state known to a postmodernist, Gnostic¹⁰⁶ belief that the future will be radically different.¹⁰⁷ Obviously, the notion that art or a lifestyle now might reflect a future state is nonsensical on its face; “*die Postmoderne lebt allein durch ihre Inkonsequenz*”¹⁰⁸ (postmodernism lives by its illogic alone); but those who reject the present state of affairs as not liable to improvement are compelled to prefer either the past or the future. Frith, skeptical of modernity, chooses the past: “Ritual” is conspicuously pre-modern (*e.g.*, religion regularly requires men to put on long dresses), except (I assume Frith has excellent reasons for repressing this) in the military and the Boy Scouts, whose Native American dances and “Order of the Arrow” one suspects were important sources for pseudo-Shamanistic rituals of psychedelic rock and psy-trance nations.

Romanticism’s successors rejected it, realizing that posing as machinery through participation in rotating sequential -isms would allow their art, as well as their social lives, a real, existing autonomy that even heroic death cannot match. Bürger discusses the contradictions inherent in such a pose at length, though he starts from strange assumptions – that the avant-garde was sincere about collapsing life into art and, for some odd

¹⁰⁵ See Mandelstam, “The Century.” Borowsky, 423.

¹⁰⁶ Marquard, 13.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

reason, that it was on the left. Benjamin warned of the dangers of aestheticizing politics, as Hewitt reminds us:

In Bürger's genealogy, the Aestheticists and Symbolists, isolated from the political realm, experience the aesthetic as an alternative; an alternative, that is, to mundane concern with politics. Subsequently, however, this alternative begins to present itself as a *political* alternative, and a politics emerges that draws its strength directly from a lack of concern for traditional political pragmatics. The avant-garde – as a moment that seeks to reconcile art and life – would therefore necessarily run the risk of an aestheticization of politics, necessarily confront fascism as a political and aesthetic option.¹⁰⁹

That point will be worth remembering when we get to Frith's politicization of the aesthetics of disco dancing.

Pseudo-Romanticism, the language of sales

The inconsistencies of post-avant-garde "Romanticism" are readily visible in a 70th-birthday newspaper interview with Werner Spies, a prominent popularizer of avant-garde art, formerly the director of the Centre Pompidou. Asked if there are still geniuses today, he says that since the 1940s genius has become a "*banales Eigenschaftswort*" (banal characterization). And who were the geniuses of yesteryear?

Künstler. Man betrachtete sie als gottgleiche Schöpfer. Wenn wir bei dieser Definition bleiben, dann ist Picasso sicher das Genie par excellence. Weil er Formen schuf, die es nie zuvor in der Natur oder in der Kunstgeschichte gegeben hat. Wie ein Computer spielte er alle nur vorstellbaren Kombinationen und

¹⁰⁹ Hewitt, 6.

*Variationen durch und setzte so auch die bis dahin gültigen ästhetischen Maßstäbe des Schönen und Hässlichen außer Kraft. ... Er war der geborene Erfinder.*¹¹⁰

Spies rhapsodizes at length about Picasso's daily output and the film *Mystère Picasso*, in which the artist produces and paints over a valuable artwork every ten seconds or so. For Spies, the great achievement of the sublime genius of high art is best quantified as a compulsive work ethic. Cycling through arbitrary combinations like the cabalist Abulafia or a random-number generator, Picasso becomes a "godlike creator."

Wherever individual achievement is valued, avant-garde aesthetics acquire a Romantic veneer (except in the automotive section, where it's still *comme il faut* to quote Marinetti directly). The advantages are plain. When push comes to shove, even I would rather make my entrances as a "godlike creator" than as the overworked supervisor of 100 monkeys with typewriters, much less (as with the avant-garde) as one of the monkeys themselves. Such confusion is inevitable: There may be no middle term between *we* and *the void*, as Lévi-Strauss said, but the emphasis on individual accountability in modern society is hard to miss. In competition with the unique selling proposition (USP), interchangeability is at a serious evolutionary disadvantage.

¹¹⁰ "Artists. One saw them as godlike creators. If we stay with that definition, then Picasso is surely the genius par excellence. Because he created forms that had never existed before in nature or in the history of art. Like a computer, he played through all imaginable combinations and variations and thus invalidated traditional aesthetic standards of beauty and ugliness. ... He was a born inventor." *Süddeutsche Zeitung* weekend section, March 31-April 1, 2007, p. VIII.

Chapter 2

Like a cloud of fire

One need not look far for examples of pop theory's affection for avant-garde ideals taken from an empty rhetoric of pseudo-Romanticism. Pop yearns for autonomy and the absolute, perhaps because the available "*Gegenpol*" (polar opposite) in its thinking is sentimentality¹ (not actually as any kind of opposite, of course, but as an immediate danger if it slips up). Opening the newspaper at random, I find even the Flaming Lips, with "artistic freedom" their priority and/or privilege in the "cultural vacuum" of Oklahoma City, attaining "artistic autonomy."² Autonomous art offers the advantage that no background knowledge is required to understand it. A member of the San Francisco band Deerhoof put it this way, referring to psychedelic art rock: "*Pop gibt keinerlei Anhaltspunkte, wer sich die Musik anhört, wie sie sich anhört. Damit ist alles möglich.*"³ Seeking the broadest possible audience, pop insists it demands no attention, specialization, or even familiarity with earlier pop. The absolute is the language of sales: Back in 1983, the post-punk iconoclast rock critic Diedrich Diedrichsen sought to promote the black music of the South Bronx by calling it "*ohne Inhalt*" (contentless) and "*nicht referentiell.*"⁴ His own domain of expertise – pop – having exhausted its creative possibilities,⁵ had come to consist, in his view, of recondite collages of quotations and "cool" pop-cultural allusions; he didn't want to write himself out of a job. The atom of classical music, irrelevant for his purposes, remained the mysterious "*Ton.*"

It is apparent that for those who write about music, the absolute, the asemantic, and the autonomous become normative values – those qualities being manifested not in the music alone, but also in any proper appreciation. Selling music to us, they insist nonstop that it is self-explanatory. If it

¹ Reinfandt, 327, 122-129.

² *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 28, 2007, p. 12.

³ "Pop has no rules as to who will hear the music and how it will sound, so anything is possible." Ibid.

⁴ Diedrichsen, 178-183.

⁵ Diedrichsen paraphrased in Büttner, 81.

weren't, they'd have to spend time explaining it, and we might lose interest. That is, there is tacit agreement among popularizers that the music one happens to like is so extremely arcane, so impossible to explain or justify, that it can be appreciated by anyone (though it may be appropriated by only a few), an asemantic leftover like the rocks and flowers in Lévi-Strauss' paean to silence at the end of *Tristes Tropiques*. Meaning is out; doing is in. Significance would get too complicated.

How to do things with form

I never found formalism particularly fishy until recently. Then I read many novels and stories by Andrei Platonov in succession. Most were published in the late 1980s, though they were written 60 years before. Platonov died young of tuberculosis contracted from his only child: At 15, the boy was imprisoned for plotting to kill Stalin, and at 18, he was sent home, terminally ill. During that same sanguine, salubrious era, Russian literary theorists created a user-friendly formalism that took the western world by storm, spawning imitators from Bloom to Foucault. Art, it seems, is an unfamiliar, autonomous discourse, in dialogue with itself. I would suggest that whether that's true depends mostly on whether your chief aim in life is to outlive Stalin. It's as true as the rest of the insights on which we base our assessments of ourselves and the world, generally along the lines of the principle so eloquently formulated by Bourdieu (our indefatigable drive to make a virtue of necessity⁶). For example, under Mussolini, Italian hermeticism reinvented *poésie pure* and worked blithely through the war, surviving to collect a Nobel Prize – coincidence? The truth of formalism, like that of any analytic tool, is its utility. For example, it allows Bakhtin to ramble on about Rabelais for hundreds of pages without saying an unkind word; nothing in Rabelais is anarchic, puerile, or arbitrary. Rather, his endless litanies of grotesque violence and bestiality reflect a world systematically turned upside down in “parodic” form, a sophisticated tactic whose goal is “the re-creation of a spatially and temporally adequate world able to provide a new chronotope for a new, whole, and harmonious man, and for new forms of human communication,” “purging and restoring the

⁶ Bourdieu, *Unterschiede*, 585 (chapter 7).

authentic man.”⁷ That’s the beauty of dialectic: Nothing is wasted. Or to borrow a term from countless citations of Gramsci, the elite of literary criticism “recuperates” the rural, oral, proverbial-platitudinous, revolting Rabelais to facilitate its own acceptance by subaltern groups in order to be more persuasive, with the added benefit that ponies like Bakhtin hit all the highlights, so you don’t have to slog through Rabelais yourself.

Though not purged and restored like Platonov’s son, the dissident Bakhtin was himself subject to censorship: Scholarly journals had a habit of losing his manuscripts, and he died in internal exile. But formalism let him live. Did he dare make references to intellectual reality, however oblique? *The Dialogic Imagination*, for example, cites nothing written after 1915, although the translators’ footnotes helpfully provide suggestions – that is, what Bakhtin’s views on such contemporaries as Mandelstam and Kafka would have been, had he dared mention them. To initiate, each inclusion or omission of a scene from Apuleius may constitute a cleverly coded message, for all I know. For instance, this is how he characterizes Hellenism’s translation of human life “into a mute register ... something that is in principle invisible.”

In following epochs, man’s image was distorted by his increasing participation in the mute and invisible spheres of existence. He was literally drenched in muteness and invisibility. And with them entered loneliness. The personal and detached human being – ‘the man who exists for himself’ – lost the unity and wholeness that had been a product of his public origin.⁸

Charming as I find this preemptive rejection of Lacan’s insistence on the ineluctable misery that accompanies the *stade du miroir*, it does tend to remind one more of Soviet ideology than of, say, late antiquity where, after all, Bakhtin never spent a single minute of his life.

⁷ Bakhtin, 168f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

Common sense realism, as fealty to the *fable convenue*, is always collective, even when it takes place alone on the couch;⁹ fantasy adventures (Bakhtin's "I Was a Teenage Ancient Roman") are not. To operate on the assumption that other people resemble me in every meaningful particular – to anthropomorphize them, as I do – may be annoying and insulting, but it offers the clear scientific advantage that at least one term in the equation is itself a system (me). If you think cultural and personal differences are subtle and insurmountable and that terms like "hunger" are reductionist, you may be right, but you've obligated yourself to keep very quiet. Assuming others aren't like you, and then writing about what it would be like to be them, is the most blatant act of entropy imaginable: Postulate Otherness, spread it around to a population you've never met, and then pretend to understand it. Thus, predictably, pop theory's profound respect for the musically literate reduces them to space aliens straight out of *Childhood's End*, as with Frith's discussion-terminating reference to ex-Vicomtesse-de-Noailles-protégé Rorem's photogenic memory.

The new insincerity

If we enshrine formalism and insist we are too poorly educated to perceive form, as pop theoreticians do when dealing with art music, we are faced with a bit of a challenge. Two ways of getting rid of form while preserving it present themselves: machismo and infantilism.

Cook, the leading popular explainer of classical music, evades the mental demands imposed by form by doing away with it: "The extraordinary illusion – for that is what it is – that there is such a thing as music, rather than simply acts of making and receiving it, might well be considered the basic premise of the Western 'art' tradition."¹⁰ The notion that form plays a role in music requires listeners who can organize it mentally, and Cook feels that they are a tiny minority. While ridiculing those guilty of "snatching eternity, so to speak, from the jaws of evanescence," he dismisses music as an illusory abstraction, "an imaginary object that somehow continues to exist long after the sounds have died away" on account of that same evanescence,

⁹ Cf. Bourdieu, *Unterschiede*, 772 (beginning of paragraph before "Parerga and Paralipomena," in the postscript).

¹⁰ Cook in Clayton, 208.

as if it were a normative abstraction like justice or truth, rather than a transient phenomenon like hot coffee or sunset. Music is increasingly vulnerable to such claims; recorded music on portable earphones heightens music's intimacy (it is audible nowhere but inside your head) and anonymity (looking around, you can't hear where it's coming from).¹¹

If music is imaginary, what do we hear when we hear it? According to Cook, ourselves interacting. Social relationships are enacted according to a "script" provided by the score. "To call music a performing art, then, is not just to say that we perform it; it is to say that through it we perform social meaning."¹² The aesthetic forfeits its basis in sensual gratification and acquires a significance that is active and social, moving his theory toward "an avant-garde aesthetic that privileges performance over the finished art-object,"¹³ as Hewitt characterizes Marinetti's declared aim. As with Chua's gendering of absolute music as male (abstraction preserved masculinity for the Romantics by requiring active synthesis), an emphasis on performance puts music in a positive light: Excessive faith in go-go rays would leave theorists in the woodshed with Adorno, insisting that pop is not even sublimation, but mere "*somatisches Stimulans*."¹⁴ Like structural listening, performance is voluntary, thus more persuasively a suitable pastime for the lords of creation.

Given its firm belief in music's nonexistence, pop theory must hold that social meaning is to be got by socializing and in no other way. Lawrence Kramer, for example, addresses "a fairly innocuous remark" by Schumann that a piece by Chopin communicated "Sarmatian tones of defiant originality." Defiant originality, Kramer tells us,

has no unambiguous musical correlative, and nothing in the music mandates the use of the term *Sarmatian*, which refers to a legendary race of mounted hunter-warriors ... The metaphor is one that the music might

¹¹ Rotter, 71, 76.

¹² Cook in Clayton, 213.

¹³ Hewitt, 18.

¹⁴ Adorno, *AT*, 177.

well be able to convey, but could hardly be said to signify.¹⁵

I would point out that defiant originality has no unambiguous literary correlative either, and that nothing in the term *Sarmatian* mandates my knowing what it means. (That is, I don't think of Sarmatians when I hear the word any more than when I hear the music. I never think of Sarmatians.) Kramer's inflated opinion of written language's communicative power leads him to place very few demands on it. "The description is what constitutes the music as a particular kind of object, and allows that object to be experienced as meaningful in concrete ways."¹⁶ Language's "constructive description" of music's "semantic lack" benefits from an infinitely flexible interpretive context in the form of "prejudgments" (*Vorurteile*) borrowed for the occasion from Gadamer. I, on the other hand, think it entirely conceivable that Schumann heard something Kramer misses.

Performance, especially of social meaning, is understandably central to contemporary art: An avant-garde would be nothing without its cafés, and given the need to stay current with an autonomous realm of art consisting mostly of things one's acquaintances say and do, postmodernists must travel in packs. Thus the conceptualization of music as performance emphasizes public process over private product, and social over artistic performance (which, obviously, predates the performative turn in art by several thousand years). Yet we listen to music voluntarily, even when alone and depressed, so we must have some strange reason.

To find it, pop theory digs deep. Sublimation would be too individualistic; the solution it turns up, unattainable plenitude, might as well be called "antisocial meaning": "If the psychoanalytic speculations of Lacan and Kristeva are to be entertained, there is a common psychological desire to overcome a need for signification and to experience the immediacy of an imagined primordial union with the Other, without the *rupturing* [emphasis added] distance of the sign," as in "Rousseau's longing for a fictional paradise where music and speech were uncontaminated by the cultural

¹⁵ Kramer in Clayton, 127.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

control of writing or symbol, a time, that is, before the ‘fall’ into a need for indirect representation.”¹⁷ Is this an attempt to let in sentimentality through the back door? The sign doesn’t rupture or contaminate a statement like “Pass the salt,” but it can really fuck up “I love you,” especially for a bourgeoisie tortured by the forced banality of expressing its respective uniqueness in languages shared by millions. Romantics transfigure language as a repository of natural wisdom and fragments of myth¹⁸ instrumental to their efforts to re-institute pantheism on their days off; avant-gardists have no such luxury.

The Virgin Dynamo

But even they seem content to transfigure music at will. I was not the first to notice an odd strain of exaggerated idealism in naïve popular assessments of music – a refusal to consider even the simplest music a common household object. An entire anthology, 1999’s *Schreiben über Musik* (writing about music), takes the continued predominance of the trope of the wordless natural language¹⁹ of absolute music in the 20th century as its central thesis. “Where does one begin in defining ‘music’?” another primer asks accordingly. “‘Music’ seems at once self-evident and yet so ephemeral as to be outside of language, to exist in a sort of raw, pre-linguistic ether.”²⁰ Another confirms, “*Die romantische Auffassung von Musik als einer universalen Kunst, als einem Ausdrucksmedium des Unendlichen und des eigentlich Nicht-Beschreibbaren findet sich in jedem Versuch, Musik durch Worte nachzuahmen – auch noch in der Gegenwart.*”²¹

A pop theorist explains that this is just the way of the world:

Audiences at live music performances are regularly caught between two views of music and the proper ways to consume it. One sees music as the most

¹⁷ Cumming, 38-39.

¹⁸ Cf. Schulz, 115.

¹⁹ Käuser, 71.

²⁰ David Brackett in Horner, 124.

²¹ “Even today, the Romantic conception of music as a universal art, as the medium of expression for the endless and what cannot actually be described, is evident in every attempt to imitate music with words.” Vratz, 319.

communally festive of social forms, the backdrop to social games and rituals. The other casts music as the most pure and abstract of the arts, transcending the social forms of language and narrative to connect with a listener's emotional core.²²

In practical terms, however, music's "pure and abstract" lack of content is the basis of its usefulness for "social games"; the two are not mutually exclusive. Frith, for example, passes along Philip Bohlman's remarks that the "absence of specific meaning" in chamber music allows it to be exploited by Germans Jews in Israel as a way of "enacting a form of collective commitment ... to cultural values."²³ A related bewilderment is plain in Frith's regular alternation of insistence on the "absolute"²⁴ in Romantic music with formulations of Romantic self-expression and "lyricism."²⁵ For the Romantics, self-expression was the exclusive province of happily illiterate nightingales and skylarks.

Music theory in its popular incarnation is happy to keep music absolute, but one hesitates to call the strategy deliberate. Other soft sciences are a standing invitation to would-be revolutionary know-it-alls; musicology intimidates them. The calculus at music's core stops theory in its tracks, blocking the way to the Eden of universal expertise with the flaming sword of the ineffable. No amount of commitment to the idea that music is a performance of social meaning will make the sounds go away, and the sounds are what draws people to music in the first place, or that's what they tend to say about music they like. Sounds seem to transcend "social forms," just as smells and colors do, defying norms of abstraction. Therefore, when a pop musicologist gets up the courage to address form, it's always (to judge by the prose) after a few drinks – whether in an armchair listening to Rossini or bouncing in place at a rave is immaterial; the point is that the writer is alone with the music, off the clock yet vividly conscious of time, immersed

²² Will Straw in Frith, *Companion*, 56.

²³ Frith, 272, citing Philip Bohlman, "Of Yekkes and Chamber Music in Israel," in *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*, p. 259.

²⁴ Frith, 255.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

in society yet beyond its reach, and not only mute but inarticulate. Pen in hand, he says the technical details are beyond him, then lauds music in psychedelic terms straight out of *Hashish, Wine, Opium*.²⁶ Music may be a performance of a script, or a backdrop to games, or an ineffable beyond, but it is never legible. Dahlhaus cites Nietzsche:

*Bei den höchsten Offenbarungen der Musik empfinden wir ... die Roheit jeder Bildlichkeit ... wie z.B. die letzten Beethovenschen Quartette jede Anschaulichkeit, überhaupt das gesamte Reich der empirischen Realität völlig beschämen. Das Symbol hat angesichts des höchsten, wirklich sich offenbarenden Gottes keine Bedeutung mehr.*²⁷

The god in question is, of course, Dionysus; the orderly, attentive audiences at chamber music festivals, his Bacchantes. As counterexamples are impossible to find, a couple of recent examples from *The New Yorker*: The voice of the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson “had a wonderful way of materializing ... as if from the ether ‘Time itself stopped to listen.’”²⁸ “The remarkable performance ... was full of fluid warmth and muted fire.”²⁹ The only way out when the incense palls is to limit oneself to straightforward, blithely uninformative pastiche. *THE WIRE* recommends one especially fine recording as an “imaginative concept record about a sinister milkman who kidnapped children and hid them in the clouds.” Its music? “Pop melodies.”³⁰ Less lofty abstractions would be too obviously reminiscent of advertising: “the dubstep low-end is warm and pliable The

²⁶ I mean the book by Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire.

²⁷ “In the highest revelations of music, we feel the inadequacy of every representation ... as the last quartets of Beethoven put everything visible, and the entire realm of empirical reality generally, to shame. In the presence of the highest god as he truly reveals himself, the symbol has no meaning.” Dahlhaus, 22.

²⁸ Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*, Sept. 25, 2006.

²⁹ Ditto, August 21.

³⁰ *THE WIRE* 12/05, 58.

constant vibration offers womblike solace amid the dislocated and fragmentary experience of modern life.”³¹

Even literary love letters to Mozart (generally slender books in small print runs written late in life, with names like *Cecilia Among the Germans*; cf. *Steppenwolf*, *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag*, etc.; Middleton’s *Why Classical Music Still Matters* is a love letter to Bach), a genre all their own, don’t presume to say what they think Mozart was doing – too risky – preferring to speak of his far-reaching influence on our ethical priorities or inmost being. Shyness about music generally is counterbalanced by a linguistic license to ill. As one author puts it,

*Der Vielfalt der Verstehensweisen von Musik entspricht der Vielfalt der Gestalten, die die Musik in der Sprache annimmt: Musik erscheint personifiziert, als Sprache bzw. als Sprechende, als Bewegungsablauf, als visuelles Bild, als Organismus, als Kräftepfad, als formales Gewebe, als zeitlicher Prozeß etc. Keiner dieser Erscheinungsweisen der Musik kann der Vorrang gegeben werden, ebensowenig wie keine Verstehensweise von Musik den Anspruch auf Allgemeingültigkeit und absolute Richtigkeit erheben kann.*³²

Note that here the speaker is not a retired *Bildungsbürger* preparing an apologia for lifelong Mozart fandom while scanning the *Bäsle-Briefe* for double-entendres evincing the spirit that informs *Don Giovanni*, but a scholar who claims it’s valid to call music a vector! Or an organism, like yeast! Where one had expected expert help, one finds oneself stumbling over the many towels thrown in tribute to the ineffable Other. “*Über Musik zu*

³¹ *THE WIRE*, 5/07, 44.

³² “The diversity of ways of understanding music corresponds to the diversity of the forms it takes on in language: personified, as language, as speaker, as motion, as image, as organism, as vector, as form, as temporal tissue, etc. None of these ways of appearing can be given precedence, just as no way of understanding music can claim general validity or absolute correctness.” Brandstätter, 182.

schreiben grenzt ans unmögliche, denn dort, wo Sprache endet, fängt Musik an und umgekehrt,” a feuilleton book review begins in reverent despair under the misleading headline “*Ohne Weihrauch.*”³³

The result, in the words of someone else: a “*heillos wirkender Pluralismus.*”³⁴ “To call something a language is to say that it can be used for lying,”³⁵ Frith writes – not a strong recommendation of semantics generally, but a point in music’s favor when it comes to conveying (moral) “truth.” Adorno’s “Fragment on Music and Language” (1956) focuses on music’s untranslatability:

*Musik ist sprachähnlich ... Aber Musik ist nicht Sprache. Ihre Sprachähnlichkeit weist den Weg ins Innere, doch auch ins Vage ... Die Folge der Laute ist der Logik verwandt; es gibt richtig und falsch. Aber das Gesagte läßt sich von der Musik nicht lösen. Sie bildet kein System aus Zeichen.*³⁶

Music demands interpretation, Adorno says, but in the sense of performance (rendition as sound), not of understanding.³⁷

Die meinende Sprache möchte das Absolute vermittelt sagen, und es entgleitet ihr in jeder einzelnen Intention, läßt eine jede als endlich hinter sich zurück. Musik trifft es unmittelbar, aber im gleichen Augenblick verdunkelt es sich, so wie überstarkes

³³ “To write about music is nearly impossible, for where language ends, music begins, and vice versa,” “Without Incense.” Harald Eggebrecht, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Feb. 7, 2008, p. 15.

³⁴ “Pluralism that seems unredeemable.” Engel, 272.

³⁵ Frith, 217.

³⁶ “Music resembles language. ... But music is not language. The resemblance points to something essential, but vague. ... The succession of sounds is related to logic: There is right or wrong. But what has been said cannot be detached from the music. Music creates no system of signs.” Adorno, *Quasi*, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

*Licht das Auge blendet, welches das ganz Sichtbare
nicht mehr zu sehen vermag.*³⁸

On this model, music communicates “absolutes,” but like Schrödinger’s cat, perception affects them adversely. They resemble quanta and are grounded in the same Gnostic metaphor. Where others are content to abide by the notion that music is nonsemantic, Adorno rejects music as language on the more radical grounds that what can’t be said (what music is saying by saying nothing) is by extension the unsayable, which continuing the chain of association must be the name of God³⁹ – roughly, His brain-stem-hacking meta-language.⁴⁰

Adjectives

Of course, recognizing the forms in music is a bit like reading the score: It won’t tell you whether any particular performance is getting your attention. Finding the patterns is the performer’s job. At piano recitals I’m as sleepy and distracted as the next guy, until some performer convinces me that there is nothing more wonderful than piano recitals. So what are those performers doing differently? Thrift would dictate that it involve sound, since sound is one of music’s more conspicuous elements, to say the least. It’s all very well to insist that music operates by analogy to (or can be rendered in terms of) spatial metaphors, but then why the sounds? Aren’t the odds pretty good that it has more to do with language than with architecture, whether of Greek temples or (post-Benjamin⁴¹) Coney Island?

The composer Alexandra Pierce, in a keynote speech to the annual meeting of Music Theory Midwest (May 18, 2002), commences with effusive praise for Rolfing (the posture, she says, not the massage technique – something like the Alexander method) and then moves on to address musicality. Her concern is pedagogical: How can she stop her piano students

³⁸ “Intentional language would like to say the absolute in mediated form, and the absolute eludes each of language’s attempts, leaves each behind as finite. Music hits the absolute, which at the same moment is obscured, just as bright light blinds the eye, which is no longer able to see the obvious.” *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁰ Cf. Stephenson, 279.

⁴¹ Cf. Benjamin, 167.

from playing “mechanically” and get them playing “musically”? A central value for her is the perceived unity in the “streaming” of melodic phrases. She calls it “tone of voice, the succession of affects in a piece of music,” and describes how she has succeeded in improving her students’ playing by using techniques borrowed from theatrical training. She makes them sing the pieces and then brainstorm appropriate gestures and adjectives. Those aids are refined step by step: If a student’s first judgment on a phrase, based on the score, is that it seems “happy,” he may soon move on (deeper into himself, that is) to see that it is “pert.” After rehearsing a few pert gestures and singing some pert tunes, he plays with pertness, and a star is born. This need not mean that “the use of adjectives ... defines the musical experience,”⁴² but it suggests strongly that teachers and keynote speakers are likely to use them.

Deryck Cooke, in his standard, if dated, work *The Language of Music*, speaks of

formal and emotional impact, which are one and the same thing: In this way, one can explain how those who have a feeling for music but no technical knowledge can justifiably be said to ‘understand’ a piece of music – the form is apprehended as emotional shape, as it must have originally been conceived by the composer. And one should not need to justify this approach to music (though the present *Zeitgeist* is utterly against it).⁴³

The influential linguists Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983) agree, again in contrast to Frith *et al.*, that a “less sophisticated listener ... uses the same principles as an experienced listener in organizing his hearing of music, but in a more limited way.”⁴⁴ The ideal listener is “ignorant,” as the composer Wolfgang Rihm put it in a newspaper interview, but possesses a “kernel” that a work’s “arts of seduction” can “cultivate.” If not, why fight it? “*Wenn man einem Ochsen ins Horn pfezt, merkt er nichts Das spricht nicht*

⁴² Frith, 264.

⁴³ Cooke, 32.

⁴⁴ Lerdahl, 3.

gegen den Ochsen”⁴⁵ – a message of peace and tolerance for oxen everywhere. “*Eigentlich sollte Musik den ansprechen, der nichts von ihr weiß, den ‘Ignoranten’ im besten Sinne.*”⁴⁶ Rihm echoes Pierce in commenting on the premiere of his setting of a fragmentary text by Hölderlin for soprano: “*Selbst wenn ich für Schlagzeug schreibe, sind das Stimmen, menschliche Artikulationen: rufend, nennend, abwehrend.*”⁴⁷

Arnold Schönberg, on the other hand, proposed that the kabalistic possibilities of his mechanized music be exploited to create a golem ray comparable in force to the neutron bomb.⁴⁸ He was so convinced of the semantics of tonality that he warned composers, “the children’s children of our psychologists will have deciphered the language of music. ... Woe, then, to Beethoven, Brahms, and Schumann ... when they fall into such hands!”⁴⁹

One could ask: If composers who are not entirely out of their minds think art music is accessible, while apparently insane composers agree with frightening alacrity, whom shall we trust? Not sociologists, surely? Cooke explains that “music may also be interesting from the point of view of craftsmanship to the technically-minded, in the way that a poem, emotionally absorbed by many readers, may be dissected by a student of poetic technique.” No music can express concepts,⁵⁰ but it was prophets of atonality like Stravinsky, in full flight from Romanticism, who insisted it does not express anything at all. “It is an extremist theory,” Cooke comments, “the product of an intensely individual composer’s mind; but it has been widely accepted, as coming from such an eminent source.”⁵¹

The black box of unknowing

Where pop theorists of classical music go wrong is in assuming, with great self-effacement, emergent formal structures so complex that they could

⁴⁵ “An ox doesn’t notice when you pinch his horn, but that’s not his fault.” *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, March 7, 2007.

⁴⁶ “Music should appeal to a person who knows nothing about it, an ‘ignoramus’ in the positive sense.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ “Even when I write for drums, I write voices, human articulations: beckoning, naming, rejecting.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ In the play *Der biblische Weg*; see Theisohn, 198.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Cooke, 273.

⁵⁰ Cooke, xii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

never understand them themselves. As Cooke says, they got the idea from avant-gardists who went out of their way to suggest such structures, and may or may not have intended them to be perceived. Such complexity must be abbreviated – that is, projected as a unity that is not allowed to make sense, like the Holy Trinity or Lacan’s Klein bottles, religious and postmodern, simultaneous and paradoxical – and then ignored. Or as Marx said, “*Ein solcher Kleinbürger vergöttlicht den Widerspruch, weil der Widerspruch der Kern seines Wesens ist.*”⁵² Instead of lighting insincere candles to the mental rigors of musical ideas, I’m going to assume their rigors are minimal.

Soeffner demonstrates that the urge to write manifestos of inconsistency is not specific to art appreciation. No popularization can do without it.⁵³ He defines symbols as follows: “*Symbole sind kein Zeichen für etwas – sie sind selbst die Realität oder ein Teil der Realität.*”⁵⁴ His examples include the Eucharist and the rainbow (object of Wordsworth’s straightforward “natural piety”⁵⁵). Symbols provide their own exclusive context:

Symbole sind ... kein Abbild des Transzendenten, sondern dessen Gegenwart. Das Sakrale lebt in den Symbolen und erhält durch sie seine Leben: es ist in den Symbolen. Symbole lassen hier weder die Distanz des ‘künstlich’ ausgestalteten Allegorischen noch gar die des Diskurses und des Argumentes zu. Sie konstituieren Unmittelbarkeit. Und während jene die analytische Trennung unterschiedlicher Elemente herausarbeiten und in eine Abfolge bringen, verknüpfen diese das Widersprüchliche in der Gleichzeitigkeit: Was das Argument entfaltet und oft als unvereinbar darstellt und darstellen muß, zieht

⁵² “Such a petty bourgeois apotheosizes the contradiction because contradiction is the core of his being.” Marx, 462.

⁵³ For a more sober account of the role of symbols, see Bourdieu, *Unterschiede*, 150 (paragraph before “the two markets”).

⁵⁴ “Symbols are not signs for anything – they are themselves reality or a part of reality.”

⁵⁵ Wordsworth, 106.

*das Symbol in struktureller und inhaltlicher Ambivalenz zu einer widersprüchlichen Einheit zusammen. ... Wo das Symbol seine Wirklichkeit postuliert, zielt es darauf ab, dem Argument das Recht zu entziehen. Es muß und kann – dem Anspruch nach – nicht mehr erklärt oder begründet werden. Es ist, was es ist.*⁵⁶

Symbols are “*Erfahrungskristalle*” (crystals of experience), representing not only different types of communication, but also different “*Erkenntnisstile*” (styles of knowing) which mankind must learn to employ “*spielerisch*”⁵⁷ (playfully). The phrase “– *dem Anspruch nach* –” (it claims) is the only element of the text that distances Soeffner from his definition of the symbol; any application is denoted an “emblem” and discussed separately. Here Soeffner makes no sense at all, but he says so himself: The symbol is “a *contradictory* [emphasis added] unity.”

The sacred is a fictive category made normative; the symbol signifies nothing and embodies the sacred, *i.e.*, nothing – I think it’s safe to assume that Soeffner doesn’t believe the rainbow represents God’s promise to Noah. Contemporary intellectuals who cling to the sacred always seem to me to be avoiding a confrontation with ethics: That one little scrap of religion keeps their nihilist immune systems in tip-top shape, ready to reject cultural imperialism in all its forms. Or was Soeffner just afraid that without a nod to paradox his theories would be dismissed as outmoded? Nothing is sacred; we would all step on consecrated hosts to avoid a mudpuddle. But that doesn’t mean we would step on people; religion has nothing to do with it. A *mauvaise foi* category of the sacred returns the locus of inviolability to the

⁵⁶ “Symbols are not a depiction of the transcendent, but its presence. The sacred lives in the symbols and receives its life through them; it is in the symbols. Symbols prohibit the distance of the allegorical, discourse, and argumentation. They constitute immediacy. And while the latter separate different elements analytically and bring them into *series*, symbols link the contradictory into *simultaneity*: What argumentation develops and represents, or must represent, as irreconcilable, the symbol combines into a contradictory unity, ambivalent in both structure and content. ... Where the symbol postulates its own reality, it asserts its claims over argumentation. It must and can – it claims – no longer be explained or justified. It is what it is.” Soeffner 1, 162-163.

⁵⁷ Soeffner 1, 184.

subject and his beliefs, making such a distinction arbitrary and turning ethics into a fetish – or, to keep to my topic, a performance.

Frith makes exclusive claims of superficiality for pop (“hearing is understanding”). There are historical grounds to dismiss what he says out of hand: So many snobby critics, while ignoring pop completely, have spent so much time running down the mindless enjoyment of serious music that we may safely assume it exists. So let us assume for a moment that Frith’s claims are implausible. We can then ask what exactly he is trying to get away from. It isn’t classical music; no one denies that classical music is potentially as shallow as pop, whether the denial is based on the assumption that some pieces with pretensions to seriousness are shallow, the reality that much classical music is meant to be light entertainment, or the claim that most people listen to ambitious music as if it were wallpaper. What bothers him is music’s indeterminacy – for him. Frith writes about something he claims he has never experienced, “structural listening.” He will never understand music, because it’s too late for him to start over and get “the right training.” So the standards he names, whether to damn or praise them, can have nothing to do with music – a problem *Performing Rites* never attempts to solve; pop music acquires functions from theater to therapy, and it has a sound that speaks to the body, but it never once has a tune. As Frith says, “the song is about a use of language.”⁵⁸ “What remains obviously true is that in everyday terms a *song* – its basic melodic and rhythmic structure – is grasped by people through its words”⁵⁹ (which I guess is why no one can hum “*Für Elise*,” but everybody knows the words to “A Taste of Honey”). Or as an essay in 1990’s *Music as Social Text* put it, “Popular-music studies are the domain of cultural critics and sociologists, who treat music as an inscrutable black box.” Musicologists examine the text and sociologists the context and “the effect of music on listeners,”⁶⁰ and never the twain shall meet.

Thus, for its pioneering aestheticians, academic or otherwise, pop music is *de jure* formless – its uses and gratifications can have nothing to do with musical ideas – while music itself, what happens on every track of

⁵⁸ Frith, 174.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁰ Covach in Shepherd, 206.

every pop recording except in spoken lead vocals, is absolute. I would suggest that the lapse occurs because some pop theorists accept the high-culture snobs' arguments, while the others are themselves snobby. Frith does not believe he's qualified to think about music *per se*,⁶¹ partly because even theorists who do allow musical ideas in pop take care to remind us that they know those musical ideas are repetitive kitsch that fails to merit the attention of intelligent persons. Pop uses the "*trivialsten, allgemeinsten, allbekanntesten Melodietypen und Formeln. Die Evergreens weisen meist die einfachsten Strukturen auf. Eine Analyse entdeckt in der Regel das Geheimnis ihres 'ewigen' Erfolges in der elementaren skalenartigen oder akkordischen Idiomen.*"⁶² That is, once you realize "Aloha Oe" is a typical Bohemian orphan ballad,⁶³ nothing remains but to pass on in silence – or in this case, having clinched the case for the central importance of tunes ("the secret of their 'eternal' success"), to return to insisting that pop's sole conceivable source of appeal is its timbre and ornamentation!⁶⁴

Non-musicologists do occasionally find the brazenness to speak of musical ideas; unfortunately, they do it in what passes for musicological terms, resolutely ignoring voices (in the melodic sense), gestures (melodic ones), and melodies. (If musicologists didn't use bodily metaphors, they could defend themselves from pop theorists a lot better!) A *New Yorker* profile of Bob Dylan described a particular chord progression as original and baroque,⁶⁵ when a musicologist of my acquaintance played it on the piano, I immediately recognized it as that of "Heart and Soul." The risk to the author's dignity was minimal, because those implicated in failed attempts at Schenkerian analysis are consoled by the recollection that about 99.999% of us wouldn't know the circle of fifths if it bit us on the butt. With no one competent to notice errors, amateur exploration of implicit chord sequences acquires a self-perpetuating opacity. One naïve but ambitious academic

⁶¹ Frith, 253.

⁶² "Most trivial, general, familiar melody types and formulas. Evergreens usually have the simplest structures. As a rule, analysis discovers the secret of their 'eternal' success in their elementary idioms of scales and chords." Karbusicky, 36; cf. Frith, 252 (citation of Anthony Storr).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁵ Reprinted in Hedin, 307.

analysis of the Madonna song “Justify My Love” involves a staff with three sharps and a little chart explaining how and when the synth wash moves from F-sharp minor to B minor and back again.⁶⁶ Does the author really think Madonna is some kind of Messiaen-like synaesthetic musical genius who chooses keys with attention to their tone color and music-historical implications? Schubert gets through three major song cycles without F-sharp minor, and now we have to learn it from Madonna? Wouldn’t it be more useful to transpose the example to the familiar E minor and A minor, so that at least amateur pop musicians who play guitar would know what’s going on? Given the text’s otherwise ultra-popular bent, I would guess that the examples are in F-sharp minor for one simple reason: The sheet music was in F-sharp minor, presumably because the master tape was (audibly – it sounds like a mellotron in a brownout) slowed from G.

⁶⁶ Whiteley, 263.

Chapter 3

Lager and ecstasy

If Bach and by extension Madonna are too complicated for us, what *do* we understand? Pop theory has an answer: The anti-elitist elitism of authenticity is rooted in the body, a mute, inaccessible substrate, given to inarticulate gestures and always on hand to take the blame.

A leading pop theorist: “Music per se is not only nonsemantic, but ‘unsemanticizable’: even the simplest interpretations of it rapidly exceed anything that might conceivably be *encoded* [emphasis added] in its stylistic and structural gestures.”¹ Back when the Name of God was ineffable, that was a good thing, but here music no longer exceeds language. It limps along behind it, a semantic failure analogous to matter – or rather, to unidentified matter out of context. “The contemporary performance studies paradigm ... seeks to understand the body in the same way as it understands sound, as a site of resistance to text, for as Charles Bernstein ... puts it, ‘Sound is language’s flesh, its opacity, as meaning marks its material embeddedness in the world of things,’”² writes Cook. For pop theory, sound communicates (as in Barthes’ essay on “the grain of the voice” which “quickly became canonic within pop studies”³) the erotic qualities of the performer’s body. Thus, it’s not only absolute music that deals directly in the *je ne sais quoi*. We are apparently under intense ideological pressure to convey immediacy and presence – “the old values,”⁴ as Frith calls them.

Even the invention of the microphone, an intervention of technology between performer and audience, is seen as having inaugurated the “*Möglichkeit ... Unmittelbarkeit und Intimität zu suggerieren, zu verstärken und aufzuzeichnen*,”⁵ lending pop recordings an immediacy of which art music can only dream. Beyond the risk “immediacy” ought, in a more consequent world, to pose to the idea that pop reception is performance and

¹ Kramer in Clayton, 126-127.

² Cook in Clayton, 209.

³ Richard Middleton in Frith et al., 220. Barthes’ essay is included in Frith and Goodwin.

⁴ Frith, 227.

⁵ “The possibility of suggesting, reinforcing, and recording immediacy and intimacy,” Reinfandt, 339.

activity, the proposed distinction happens to have little to do with reality; pop vocal delivery virtually eliminates dynamics, and its language is heavily stylized. Lines are delivered with a steady, emphatic conviction that emphasizes nearly every syllable, often pausing to re-emphasize the same syllable before moving on to the next. Whether the monotony originates in radio's need for a steady signal, the drawls of the American south, or Gregorian reforms⁶ is not mine to say, but rock singing is like honky-tonk piano playing – regular and percussive – rather than a form of naïve *Sprechgesang*. Wordier, more expressive singer-songwriters are obscure for the same reason Schubert's settings of Schiller are obscure: Too much verbiage. Successful songs, regardless of genre, share a conspicuous verbal economy (e.g., “*Se vuol ballare / Signor contino*,” “Come on baby / Don't fear the reaper”) and when they don't, words are arranged in a “flow” so regular that comprehension becomes a task for the most dedicated fans; the economy of expressive means – the regularity of the delivery – remains unchanged, but becomes a major deterrent to comprehension when the rate of verbiage climbs. Generally speaking, pop lyrics share the priorities of libretti.

Nonetheless, Frith goes into detail about the liberating power of the microphone and how it brings us closer to touching singers' mute substance:

The star voice (and, indeed, the star body) thus acts as a mark of both subjectivity and objectivity, freedom and constraint, control and lack of control. And technology, electrical recording, has exaggerated this effect by making the vocal performance more intimate, more self-revealing, and more (technologically) determined. The authenticity or ‘sincerity’ of the voice becomes the recurring pop question: does she really *mean* it?⁷

⁶ Cf. Brünger.

⁷ Frith, 210.

Admittedly, listening to a singer on headphones in bed is more intimate than seeing her a hundred yards away on a stage, but amplified music is electronic music; you hear what the microphones pick up, which sometimes isn't much. Crank your mind back a few years more, to a time when the "presence" of the voice and the body were not matters of philosophic debate: If the voice was present, the body was not far off, and if you could hear it, you could probably smell it. There are less approving ways to regard the microphone:

Mit Erfolg bietet die Schallplatten- und Cassettenindustrie eine Fülle von Produktionen an, die die Funktion der Mutter übernehmen können. ... Diese unterscheiden sich von der natürlichen Stimme der Mutter neben psychischen Qualitäten dadurch, daß sie technisch manipuliert sind. Kinder können sich mit Lautsprecherstimmen identifizieren, d.h., sie können sich wünschen so zu singen wie die Lautsprecherstimme. Sie können sie aber niemals imitieren, da der menschliche Körper über die notwendige Technik nicht verfügt. Diese frühe Prädisposition für die Singweise von Lautsprecherstimmen wird in der zweiten Phase der Singentwicklung, in der das Kind beginnt, sich beim Singen zu schämen, weiter stabilisiert. Weil Eltern und Geschwister dem Kind nicht vorsingen und nicht mit ihm singen, erfährt es den eigenen Ausdruckswunsch als unangepaßtes Verhalten und schämt sich. Des weiteren muß angenommen werden, daß Kinder in diesem Alter die Diskrepanz zwischen ihrem eigenen Stimmausdruck und der Stimmqualität des Lautsprechersängers zu erleben beginnen. Eigenes Singen wird infolgedessen als minderwertig erfahren und ist mit Schamhemmungen verbunden. Der Wunsch, sich mit der Stimme auszudrücken, wird daher mit dem Hören von Lautsprechermusik

*gekoppelt, d.h., Kinder singen häufig nur noch zu Lautsprechermusik.*⁸

In the age of the microphone, the act of singing itself becomes intimate – revealing and thus potentially shameful and embarrassing – because human beings, lacking built-in pre-amps and reverb, think they sound like crap.

Under such conditions, only surrogate third-hand performance by technology can save us. Accordingly, Frith writes that pop videos “foreground performance-as-seduction and forestall performance-as-embarrassment.”⁹ The latter is live “over-the-top” “camp”¹⁰ as embodied by Judy Garland or Prince, which he equates with performance art because both cause him “anxiety.”¹¹ Real performance even looks like crap: “Singing is not ... pretty – singers sweat, singers strain ... ‘Singers look like freaks.’”¹² Thus “video is now a key component in our understanding of music as erotic,”¹³ especially for those of us whose notions of the erotic are taken from the odalisques of Helmut Newton.

Pop music and bare life

If classical music is cerebral and pretentious, pop music must be corporeal and working-class. It will surprise no one that conservative musicologists can be found to provide encouragement, writing for example, “Traditional musical aesthetics is concerned with form and composition, whereas rock is concerned with the *matter* of music By ‘matter’ I mean

⁸ “The recording industry offers a broad variety of products that assume the role of the mother. They differ from the mother’s voice, beyond the obvious psychological angle, in that they are technically manipulated. Children identify with the voices and want to imitate them, but they cannot succeed, since the human body lacks the technology that gives recorded voices their resonance. This early preference for amplified voices is further stabilized in a second phase, when children begin to be ashamed of their own voices. Because their parents do not sing with them, they experience their wish for expression as deviant behavior and feel embarrassment. Older children become conscious of the difference between amplified voices and their own, experiencing their own voices as inferior. The wish for vocal expression is thus linked to listening to loudspeaker-music, i.e., young people don’t sing; they sing along.” Brünger, 35.

⁹ Frith, 225.

¹⁰ Ibid., 215.

¹¹ Ibid., 206.

¹² Ibid., 214.

¹³ Ibid., 225.

the way music feels to the listener, or the way that it affects the listener's body."¹⁴ Frith: "A good classical performance is measured by the stillness it commands.... A good rock concert, by contrast, is measured by how quickly people get out of their seats, onto the dance floor, by how loudly they shout and scream ... How does the musical mind/body split work? Why is some music heard as physical (fun), other music as cerebral (serious)?"¹⁵

Frith's answer: The distinction is racist, in a positive sense. *Resistance Through Rituals* had put it 20 years earlier, "like all folk music, black music is an *affective* music as opposed to the increasing rationality and 'mathematical' logic (and illogic) of contemporary Western classical music."¹⁶ (An emotion-logic distinction is reflected in the book's avowedly "Marxist" view of sociological method as well: "Vulgar positivist methods produce under the banner of 'scientific empiricism' ... the idea that there is 'out there' an objective social reality which has the ability to represent itself directly to the experience of a clear-minded and careful observer"¹⁷ – such as, I would very gently suggest, Karl Marx, who after all did call himself a "materialist.") In 1996, rhythmic dance music is still regarded as having African origins, yet (thankfully) "one can begin to see clearly why 'African' and 'European' are somewhat arbitrary labels. The musical differences at issue (the focus on performative participation [dancing]; [vs.] the emphasis on structural cognition) are really differences in ideologies of *listening*."¹⁸ You can't blame Frith for its having taken until 1989 for a clear-minded musicologist to write a sensible book about pop that acknowledges the presence of musicians from regions other than England and sub-Saharan Africa in the U.S.,¹⁹ though you might fault his oblivion *in re* Asia. Meaning inheres in European music: Its "meaning" is "embodied 'within' it, formally, structurally, and syntactically ... Interpreting, feeling, and evaluating thus

¹⁴ Baugh, 23.

¹⁵ Frith, 124-125.

¹⁶ Hall, 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁸ Frith, 142.

¹⁹ Van der Merwe. For an example of a silly book, see Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: Norton, 1983) which says things like that the three-line stanza is an "apparent throwback to African origins" because it is "uncommon in European and American folksong repertoires" (333), assuming you ignore rounds, hymns from the *Stabat Mater* on down, and anything German.

constitute a single process.”²⁰ Recall that for Frith an adequate emotional response to art music can take days, until one has time to download and print the music inscribed on the staves in one’s brain. Listening under such circumstances is difficult; improvisation, impossible (for proof, he cites Boulez²¹).

“African” music, on the other hand, is “a permanent *presence*; there’s no time to wonder where it’s going, where it has come from; the only thing to do is indicate where one is, now;” what keeps it going is a shared “ethical commitment to social participation.”²² It emphasizes performance over composition, so that “the combination of feeling, interpreting, and evaluating here depends on listeners entering into the *performing* process ... the only response that matters here is the first response: what we feel about the music is what it means; like the musicians, we don’t have time to interpret the sounds first, and respond to them later.”²³ Thus its content – the content of all music²⁴ – is not “embodied meaning” but “engendered feeling.”²⁵ The feeling is not the musicians’ performance alone, but also the audience’s. For Marinetti, “the futurist ‘text’ *is* the performance”;²⁶ Frith takes it a step farther: A collective emotional performance is incumbent on all involved. The desideratum is social participation, and wiggling in time to the music is necessary and sufficient: “It is through rhythm, through decisions regarding when to move ... that we most easily participate in a piece of music ... if only by tapping our feet. ... ‘Artless’ movement (idiot dancing) involves as significant a statement about what music means as artful dance (like ballet).”²⁷ That is a strong statement indeed: The New Yorkers you used to see prancing down the aisles with dollar bills at Qawwali concerts because they had read somewhere that Pakistanis not only get up and dance, but slip banknotes to the musicians during sets, were on Frith’s view in equal command of the meaning of the music as Urdu-speaking Sufis. Is a more

²⁰ Frith, 138.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁶ Hewitt, 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

programmatic manifesto of absolute music even possible? To raise your ethical standing, trail a Sufi down the aisle: “It is in learning how to dance to a music – watching what other people are doing and *copying* them – that we learn how *best* to listen to it [emphases added].”²⁸ Nonconformists apply elsewhere; in Frith’s sociological *Through the Looking Glass*, necessity is virtue; culture, the will to strike a pose.

It is naïve, “bodily” reception through visible performance that absolves music of the absoluteness Frith persists in ascribing to it. Among the sentences that conclude *Performing Rites*: “The sounds on that ... dance floor ... are at the same time rootless, cut free from any originating time and place, and rooted, in the needs, movement, and imagination of the listener ... the *memories of what we once wanted to be* [e.g., Sufis – emphasis added] that make us what we are.”²⁹ Nerdy mid-life crisis as solipsist metaphysics: Here, once again, the body (“movement”) proves very useful for anchoring a maverick autonomy in contingent reality, which is not an accident of birth, but a product of our desires. Frith’s positioning of emotion in the body, indistinctly redefined as contingency itself (a common strategy), begs the question of meaning in music generally, since meaning is never absolute: “I’ve used these two anti-pop thinkers [Roger Scruton and Anthony Storr; he cites their use of the musicological term “gesture,” which refers to melodic phrases] to show that even for them the meaning of music comes back to emotion, the body, movement, dance (all the things that are supposed to characterize African rather than European musics).”³⁰ What a distressing list; the assumption that particular emotions might be linked to particular bodily movements seems to have wandered in from a study of animal behavior, and a brief look at Kant’s *Prolegomena* ought to be enough to remind him that time and space – taken together, movement – are unavoidable in any phenomenological discussion, even where abstraction is deliberately maximized; witness Hanslick.

Frith’s argument is eminently circular: If participation – seen through the prism of a definition of ritual in which its function is to manifest group identity – is to be visible to the group and available for instant imitation, it

²⁸ Ibid., 223.

²⁹ Ibid., 278.

³⁰ Ibid., 267.

cannot be “cerebral.” Yet even after the bourgeois vice of “structural listening” has been exposed as a charade except among select composers with uncanny powers, listeners must remain active participants in music, passivity and bourgeois anomie being way out of style, and even unethical. Thus we wiggle. Our “willed and unnecessary” wiggling is “an end in itself.”³¹ Even our most private responses must be public and visible, leading one critic, faced with the challenge of rendering rock corporeal without recourse to the dance, to link it to injury and illness. A concert “*schmeckt nach Nasenbluten*” and employs “*Herpes-Bläschen Feedback*.”³²

Work

The body, not content with its role as vehicle of musical meaning, dominates the supply side as well. Frith compares pop music to sports: “What’s valued here is not (as in high culture) seeing something *unique* [emphasis added], but seeing something difficult, something that *takes work* [emphasis in original].”³³ Performance-as-seduction becomes an inadequate alternative to performance-as-embarrassment when middle-aged men take the stage: Suddenly “rock performers are expected to revel in their own physicality too [like their audiences], to strain and sweat.”³⁴

For rock critics, typically, “painstaking effort” is audible in all superior music, even if the same piece becomes “simple” and “ramshackle” three sentences later.³⁵ I followed a somewhat circular discussion of the dignity of labor in four pop kingmakers’ blogs on December 15, 2005: A critic from the *New York Post* had posted a long text suggesting that classical music could increase its popularity by moving to smaller, less formal venues that serve drinks.³⁶ Alex B. (wellsung.blogspot.com) went on the attack:

³¹ Ibid., 221.

³² “Tastes like a nosebleed” and uses “herpes-blister feedback.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 28, 2007, p. 12.

³³ Frith, 207.

³⁴ Ibid., 124.

³⁵ Sasha Frere-Jones, *The New Yorker*, Feb. 19 & 26, 2007, 182.

³⁶ Having seen Patricia Kopatschinskaja solo at Bix Jazzclub, I now feel that drinks should be required at every concert at all times (nobody coughed), but you’d have to do something about all the appliances putting out 60-cycle hum.

Popular music is ... different than art music, and that's how it should be. ... I need to let the air out of his rock music=authentic experience/classical music=fake elitist experience construct. If he thinks rock music is all about an authentic passion that somehow eludes classical music, I would invite him to come to one of our many fine clubs ... and prove to me that 50 percent of the experience isn't just feelin' cool ...

Alex R. of *The New Yorker* (therestisnoise.com) damned or praised B. (with professional bootlickers, it's hard to tell – that's just a statement of fact based on plentiful firsthand experience of music journalists) with the words, “Read this massively intelligent post ... I don't agree with much of it [sic]. ... Douglas [W.] no less intelligently responds to Alex's neocon swipes at pop.” W., a freelance pop critic, sees R.'s praise of his intelligence and raises him one. “You know, just when you think that the idea of the classical music snob who disguises his contempt for lower-class music as amused tolerance is nothing but a strawman, along comes a blog post like this one from [B.]” Miffed, W. defends pop music with the claim that it *takes work*: “Is the idea that all popular music ought to be totally spontaneous, proceeding from ‘talent’ that doesn't take any effort to hone, and not from, say, artists working incredibly hard to make something that's meaningful and powerful, even if it comes off as effortless? Do you think U2 just kind of show up at the recording studio every couple of years ... and then go home to count their money?” Labor is value, so craft is art: U2 is serious music, and thus by extension “incredibly hard.” He may be right that pop musicians have to work harder; you seldom hear of orchestral musicians trying to learn new pieces by ear while drunk. Conversely, where session musicians might pull off a convincing imitation in minutes, U2 may work “incredibly hard” to keep sounding like U2 – that is, to vary their sound within parameters on which they, as authors, have a monopoly, doomed to performativity (that is, to create the sound of U2 records by putting out U2 records). But note how even in music for which “hearing is understanding,” lacking in abstract content, some transcendent element must remain to classify it as art – in this

case, *work*, even for bands that make it look easy. The pop song, for all its “immediacy,” may yet become the tip of an iceberg of labor, a fragment from a lifetime of toil.

That would be consistent with W.’s book on comics, which repeatedly points out that they take a mighty long time to draw, unless you are a master of “craft” who makes “every mark do the work of many” like the aging purist James Kochalka. “Performing” (of “comics reading” and “womanhood”) is rightly dismissed by W. as “grad school speak,” but the body as locus of naïve reception thrusts its ovipositor yea, even unto the minds of under-undergrads: He claims that organ- and orifice-free “mainstream” comics for children are “designed to provoke the strongest possible somatic response” and are “meant to work on the body, in a way that ducks around the brain”³⁷ in a book whose illustrations of more cerebral (as in adult but not “adult”) comics include a woman looking over her shoulder in a cold sweat at the lover who just broke off her tail.

Possibly, the writers’ unspoken motive is to argue that bands should be paid. Pseudo-Romantic authenticity, while abjuring genius (talent), nonetheless demands that a true artist feel motivated to work regardless of possible compensation. “Craft” thus stands for those aspects of music under the influence of the musician rather than his muse.

Sleep

Given the undesirability of nosebleed and the improbability of “structural listening,” how can pop theorists interact with art music at all?

New Music, which Frith seems to rather like, is seen to require an approach reminiscent of Benjamin’s observations on architecture, if Benjamin’s work had involved the Mall of America and LSD. “Both chance [*Aleatorik*] and minimalist music require ‘aimless’ listening. The listener is placed in a virtual time which has no history (no story line), no architecture

³⁷ *Reading Comics*, Cambridge: Da Capo, 2007; pp. 207, 70, 50, and 55, respectively. In an interview online, W. gets really fascinating, speaking of “‘ugly’ drawings – by which I don’t mean cartooning that’s inept, or that tries and fails to be pretty, but artwork that deliberately refuses to give the sort of easy pleasure associated with ‘good drawing’ and the mainstream cartooning tradition, so that you have to think about it in order to enjoy it” (http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2007/07/book_notes_doug_1.html).

(no outline), no apparent beginning, middle, or end; there is neither musical resolution nor musical expectation, nothing to help us make narrative sense of what we hear.”³⁸

The “virtual time” he describes has none of the qualities of time, but it isn’t timelessness (that can only be achieved by dancing – though it’s not clear why sleep would be a less valid or less “timeless” response to music, especially after a round of aimless listening). “Virtual time here describes an experience of bodilessness, an indifference to materiality.”³⁹ Such “ontologically thick” works (a pop theory term for works whose authors exert maximal control or employ minimal redundancy, moving them on a continuum from “thin” abstraction toward the concrete in which the performance becomes its own shortest possible description – “ontology” is the pop theory word for positivism, the pre-Kantian dogmatic slumber; its opposite is “constructivism,” the slippery metaphysical bathwater in which babies such as “music” are flung out the window in the interest of science) may be subject to software glitches, or the musicians may miss a cue, but no one notices: The indifference is just too powerful.

That is, in order to deal with 20th-century composers he almost likes (those whose aesthetic resembles that of downtown improv), Frith turns to “absolute” music in an especially mystical incarnation. He considers art music with elements conducive to accessibility such as expectation and resolution not popular, but old-fashioned. Needless to say, he never makes that argument against pop.

Frith equates bodiless thought – a naïve access to the “serious” and “cerebral” – with a radical passivity, “aimlessness.” In my view, it is more like the radical withdrawal associated with chronic frustration: If the listener can’t “make narrative sense” out of some mess of sounds, he will be distracted more than anything else, and his aesthetic transports may have very little to do with what he hears. But more importantly: Even if a person does achieve attention to something that is deliberately meaningless, he will still be informed at every step by his aims, conscious and unconscious.

³⁸ Frith, 154.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

Frith is not alone in his denial of the existence of the brain – that none-of-the-above remainder, uneasily situated between the mind and the body, known to Romantics as the unconscious or nature.⁴⁰ The musician originator of “Ecosonic Improvisation” writes of music in which

instruments are treated as simple sound-producing objects lacking an historical accumulation of specific cultural/technological sound producing functions, traditionally developed techniques, conventions of use or performance styles ... Players may produce any sound in any way they feel communicates their immediate feeling state. The aim is to mitigate the problem of acquired cultural reactions and entanglements, enabling spontaneous communication unmediated by conscious/unconscious ‘musical’ constraints. Improvisations are enabled/constrained by simple rules and systems.⁴¹

The text makes the nihilist surrealism of “bodilessness” obvious by analogy: I can’t pretend to lack a body any more than I can pretend I’ve never seen my trumpet before. And what can “spontaneous” possibly mean when applied to a group of performers who fully intend to stay onstage for whatever length of time is stipulated in their contract?

Making time

But wait – bodilessness turns out to be a sin. Frith doesn’t approve of New Music after all: Even “aimless listening” is too cerebral. Recall that for Frith, the naïve attention Rihm wants is impossible; serious music requires structural listening, which none of us have learned. Music must speak to the ethical keratin in us or not at all: And so it does, with crystals of bodily pop experience. To “virtual,” disembodied time he opposes “ideal” time, the time in which we wiggle along to the beat.

⁴⁰ Marquard, 41.

⁴¹ Var. (Cambridge conference), 61.

Frith writes of his approved mode of music reception, disco dancing:

Music is not, by its nature, rational or analytic; it offers us not argument but experience, and for a moment – for moments – that experience involves *ideal time*, an ideal defined by the integration of what is routinely kept separate – the individual and the social, the mind and the body, change and stillness, the different and the same, the already past and the still to come, desire and fulfillment. Music *is* in this respect like sex, and rhythm is crucial to this – rhythm not as ‘releasing’ physical urges but as expanding the time in which we can, as it were, *live in the present tense*.⁴²

Since I’ve never had sex (by Frith’s definition), I won’t attack his comparison, but in any case I don’t see how a momentary lack of interest in various antinomies constitutes their “integration.” Yes I will: Isn’t it kind of creepy that a sociologist equates what sociologists since the dawn of time have been calling either the attainment of true communism⁴³ or primordial symbiosis with Mom with *sex*? Say I call it reading Lord Dunsany while eating cookies – if I leave crumbs all over the table, have I successfully “integrated” the individual and the social? Is it not rather pruderie that turns enjoyment into sex, prudery that turns sex into the sublime, and pedantry that turns concentration on the task at hand into a dialectical synthesis of everything but the kitchen sink?

Anyway, Frith protests that “the pleasures of rock music continue to be explained by intellectuals in terms of *jouissance*, the escape from structure, reason, form, and so forth,” whereas

the erotics of pop ... is an erotics of the orderly. The sexual charge of most pop music comes ... from the tension between the (fluid) coding of the body in the

⁴² Frith, 157.

⁴³ Cf. Agamben, *Mensch/Tier*.

voice ... and the (disciplined) coding of the body in the beat. ... Music is ‘sexy’ not because it makes us move, but because (through that movement) it makes us feel ... (like sex itself) intensely present. Rhythm ... is ‘sexual’ in that it isn’t just about the experience of the body but also (the two things are inseparable) about the experience of time.⁴⁴

Frith keeps his word: Dancing becomes suburban tantric yoga, erotic totality cleansed of both the bourgeois subject and its momentary loss. To the untrained eye, disco-dancers may appear to be showing off their fitness for reproduction, with mixed results; for Frith, they are happy salmon trapped below an insurmountable waterfall in a state of unending, impotent bliss. “Popular music works to stop time, to hold consumption at the moment of desire, before it is regretted,”⁴⁵ *i.e.*, before consumption takes place: the ethical aesthetics of petty bourgeois asceticism.⁴⁶ Fun should not be goal oriented, the moralist tells us – anything to get rid of individual consciousness and its reputation for anxiety, voyeurism, and vanity. Superficially, Frith evokes Keats’ Grecian urn; but where Keats knew that only a static representation can stop time, Frith feels it will stop when we all turn (pre-Viagra) 56. More amusing is the contrast provided by Werner Mezger’s 1980 evocation of “*Discokultur*” as “*Sex-Leistungsterror*”: “*Es ist kein Sex zum anfassen, sondern der sterile Sex des Peepshows ... Manche Mädchen machen sich geradezu einen Spaß daraus, Männer zunächst anzulocken, um ihnen dann eine Abfuhr zu erteilen.*”⁴⁷ By the mid-90s, men had learned to say they go to discos to dance.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 144.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁶ See Bourdieu, *Unterschiede*, 528 (just after table 24).

⁴⁷ “Sex-performance-terror”: “It’s not sex you can touch, but the sterile sex of a peepshow ... Some girls make a game of luring men just so they can reject them.” Mezger, 131.

⁴⁸ David Mancuso’s legendary Loft, where men supposedly went just to dance, doesn’t count; its rightful heirs are dance studio sock hops and the contact improv movement (cf. Lawrence, T.). Also, it served no alcohol, which tells you just about all you need to know.

Beyond the obvious objection⁴⁹ that “immediacy” or “living in the present tense” is (in a relativist, constructivist world) unthinkable, it functions in this discourse mostly to deprive sensuality of particular objects, making parties more “orderly.” But as far as music reception (or anything else) is concerned, it is safe to assume that the mostly hidden mind is always hard at work, even when it’s insisting the body (or lager and ecstasy, or an ethical commitment to disco dancing, or whatever) has shut it down in favor of an “immediacy” I don’t think is any more common than snipe on a snipe hunt. For that reason, I wouldn’t agree with pop-bashers who call techno parties a “*Feier der eigenen Langeweile und Austauschbarkeit*”⁵⁰ (a celebration of one’s own boredom and interchangeability) or rock concerts routinized rituals that preclude genuine ecstasy.⁵¹ Sometimes they are; sometimes they aren’t; but men and women wiggling decoratively, whether drunk or wired, can be fascinating, even to themselves, for reasons we can all imagine if we try, when they’re not thinking about something else entirely. What’s so odd is that anyone would assign them a role, positive or negative, in the liberation of humanity.

Sexuality, the construct in which Frith anchors the “intensely present” meaning of music, played a prominent role in literary modernism’s attempts to expand its audience. The New Criticism is justifiably regarded as a formalist movement, but a vital aspect was its reintegration of the body into literary reception. By incorporating a “sensibility” that responds to “shock” and “sensation” into the techniques of “close reading,” T.S. Eliot even succeeded in legalizing Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

The reader must embody, or take into the body, the text. As [F.R.] Leavis said, ‘Words in poetry invite us, not to “think about” and judge but to “feel into” or “become”’ ... This reading practice, which incorporates the body into the reader’s imaginative reflections, is little different from the bodily interrogation as incitation that is the practice of the reader of

⁴⁹ E.g., Jameson.

⁵⁰ Büttner, 306.

⁵¹ Ibid., 378.

pornography. The body, and a bodily response, is a necessary constituent of the modern reading practice. To avoid a purely pornographic reading, then, the body had to be attached to a greater ethical project. That project was ... the equation of sex with health.⁵²

Frith similarly finds a “greater ethical project” to which he can attach the bodily self-interrogation that accompanies disco dancing: Putting an end to *le temps perdu*. Getting laid was then; this is now.

Avant-gardists have never felt qualms about redefining sex. It seems rather a key aspect of their mission.⁵³ Andrew Hewitt writes of Marinetti’s manifesto of Tactilism, a kind of conformist polymorphous perversity:

Again, it is with reference to the organizing metaphor of the machine that one can begin to understand the shift to a celebration of a degenitalized sensuality. ... Thus the “dispersed” sexuality of the Tactilism manifesto ... gives expression ... to an ideology of control at the level of the body. The “efficiency” of the body does not consist, here, in its productivity, but in its full utilization, its functioning at full capacity.⁵⁴

As with Frith, the body has a job to do. By integrating “the individual and the social” and all the rest, we become components of the entertainment machine, less likely to disturb its proper functioning by forming social bonds not pertaining to an entire milieu. As Frith points out, we need not do this voluntarily, but our success will reflect our “ethical commitment to social participation.”⁵⁵ The individual preference for certain other individuals, a conspicuous feature of post-pubescent life, is missing from Frith’s fantasies of “integration” just as it is missing from Marinetti. His collective sexuality dresses up, goes out, finds a spot on the dance floor, and seeks to be “held at

⁵² Pease, 191.

⁵³ Cf. Bourdieu, *Unterschiede*, 573ff in re progressive lifestyles.

⁵⁴ Hewitt, 152-153.

⁵⁵ Frith, 139.

the moment of desire, before it is regretted.”⁵⁶ The social integration it performs also helps get it past the bouncers.

With such impressive ethical aims in mind, music would merely constitute a distraction. And so it is: “Because *all* our experiences of time are now fragmented and multilinear, fragmented music is also *realistic* [emphasis added] music One aspect of this is, in Hosokawa’s words, to direct ‘the listener’s attention to “sound,”’ what is heard immediately, rather than ‘music,’ notes as they make sense in a structure.”⁵⁷ We hear pop in snatches, and that’s as it should be, since it’s not music (!). That is, the structure of “Aloha Oe” is too lowly to qualify as a “structure,” so what matters is the ukulele – even when hearing the ukulele summons the song immediately to consciousness. But what I’d really like to know is: If time “now” is fragmented and multilinear, when exactly was our experience of time the unitary, continuous vector that the dance floor/Grecian urn experience of totalized anal retention is said to recreate? When we were dolphins?⁵⁸ Certainly not when we were caring for small children (the media-age discourse on distraction and multitasking has a long history in feminism). The unitary ego is the grail of psychoanalysis; the fragmentary ego is the grail of psychedelic experience.⁵⁹ Neither plays a notable part in life, except in prescriptive phenomenologies of idleness like Frith’s.

Performing information

Emotion and Meaning in Music, Leonard Meyer’s 1956 classic, makes programmatic formal frustration music’s means of evoking emotion: Music works by raising expectations and disappointing them. That is, music can create the conditions for consciousness even when one is sitting still, allowing one to be alert rather than bored without risking injury by moving. Never underestimate the challenge of navigating 50+ kilos of vulnerable flesh through a hard and pointy world! And as the psychologists say, it’s more fun to be alert. Music lets you sit still and mind your own business without getting restless because you don’t have a business to mind.

⁵⁶ Frith, 157.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁵⁸ Cf. Agamben, *Mensch/Tier*.

⁵⁹ Büttner, 455.

Frith cites Meyer only to call him a racist⁶⁰ (for enjoying the ornate complexities that arise in cultures of long standing – if he had read Meyer instead of borrowing the citation, he would know they include interlocking polyrhythms), but he accidentally conveys Meyer’s main idea in a quote from the L.A. Motown session bassist Ron Brown, remarking on another Motown bassist:

He had a unique ability to set up your ear in terms of listening to music ... he’d start you off at a nice galloping pace ... all of a sudden, he’d take a right turn ... and you’d be out flying in space not knowing where you are ... He had the ability to suggest to your ear where he wanted you to think that he was going ... but then he wouldn’t go there.⁶¹

For Frith, sadly, the references to “listening,” “galloping,” and “flying” serve to illustrate the proposition that “the ideal way of listening to music is to dance to it, if only in one’s head”⁶² – he might as well say that the ideal way of thinking is to employ metaphors, if only in one’s head.

The popular science writer Bob Snyder, in *Music and Memory*, cogently formulates a currently trendy post-Meyer deep grammar of motion to explain how music works: He explains that abstract, kinesthetic, non-verbal, schematic metaphors of movement underlie our enjoyment of music. Music is not a medium, but a pleasure – that is, alertness. Musical performance is conceptualized as a publicly available “message” intended to “influence the state of mind of listeners, to get us to think and feel some things rather than others.”⁶³

Snyder defines musical form largely as pattern and repetition, a choice that tends to facilitate its perception by artificial intelligence, his model for brain function, as well as by timid interdisciplinarians. (For what it’s worth, a composer recently pointed out to me that a successful AI model for music

⁶⁰ Frith, 133.

⁶¹ Ibid., 140.

⁶² Ibid., 139.

⁶³ Snyder, 207.

cognition might ensure the survival of the human species, as machines with an aesthetic sense will surely be more merciful when they take over – this was before he had a deeply troubling experience involving Furtwängler and the *Meistersinger*.) In any case, pattern is seen to arise through recurrences both of the primary (absolute) parameters pitch, harmony, and rhythm, and of a practically unlimited number of secondary (relative) parameters such as volume, tempo, duration, timbre, sonority, pitch range and register. Just about anything quantifiable can become a secondary parameter.⁶⁴

As we have seen, theorists claim that for pop, because its use of pitch, harmony, and rhythm is relatively uninteresting, Snyder's secondary parameters are primary: They convey pop's "sound." Syntax is then the set of relations between patterns: learned rules and conventions, all the patterns to which we are habituated – *e.g.*, the convention that a turn to longer, lower pitches probably constitutes a cadence and thus the end of a piece. Repetition and observance of convention permit an unceasing stream of sound to be organized perceptually into manageable chunks of information, while a "maximally informative message" (the no-repetition aesthetic of downtown improv and New Music, what Frith claims leads to "bodilessness") quickly overloads short-term memory:

Indeed, an unstructured message of this type would be referred to as "nonsense." It would use memory in a maximally *inefficient* way, having no meaningful chunk boundaries, no natural units by which it could be stored; nor would it be easily relatable to any organized context already present in memory. In short, its maximal informativeness would merely create confusion. To be coherent and memorable, a message must have a certain amount of *non-informative repetition*, or *redundancy*.⁶⁵

It is worth recalling that live music has performers, whose presence reduces informativeness to redundancy by allowing sounds to be ascribed to

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 196ff.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

particular sources, if nothing else. Snyder simplifies his analysis quite a bit by keeping his eyes closed and flatly refusing to project the specter that haunts pop theory (the body).

Snyder suggests we distinguish between “(1) music that attempts to exploit long-term memory by building up hierarchical and associative mental representations of large time structures; and (2) [high information] music that attempts to sabotage recognition and expectation by frustrating recollection and anticipation, thereby intensifying the local order of the present.”⁶⁶ There’s an ideology lurking in there: With (2), avant-garde music incapable of holding our attention acquires a respectable hippie *raison d’être*, the here and now. Dance tracks and other minimalism belong to a third category: “low information music.” Gestures are repeated and most parameters are kept constant, while others may indeed change slowly, as in religious “chanting to focus on the present.”

Because these syntactical nuances are all instances of the same category, they are subject to interference effects, or confusion of similar instances in long-term memory. Being within-category distinctions, they are perceptible but not well-remembered. Such nuances often give us the sense that the present is somehow “varying” in relation to the past, but we cannot remember exactly how.⁶⁷

That is, on Snyder’s model, dance music creates a sense of the here and now by making it difficult to tell right now from three minutes ago.

Unfortunately, with his professed weakness for AI, Snyder takes formalism far enough to risk divesting art music of its character as performance, playing into the hands of the more sinister pop theorists. He discusses music in light of recent advances in cognitive neuroscience; thus a “sequence of memory cues” can activate a “a *repertoire* of schemas and categories.” Emergence, construction, and other metaphysical strategies, one

⁶⁶ Ibid., 234.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 236.

will note, are thankfully absent. The self is not the still point in a turning world, but a complex and poorly understood brain. The information music conveys is defined as “novelty, and the removal of uncertainty” – though Snyder prefers the term “informativeness” to “information.” “Informativeness” entails a psychology, sidestepping the denial of context that plagued old-fashioned Shannon-and-Weaver information theory. Human awareness is a delicate flower: “The amount of new information (change) we can process at a given time is small We need information, but within certain limits: Not too much and not too little.”⁶⁸

An easy example (mine): Minimalist art is always very large or very long. You never see little tiny minimalist sculptures. Who would buy them? – That’s an at once facetious and totally serious example (Al Franken calls my favorite rhetorical device “kidding on the square”). When informativeness is in short supply, we give way to distraction or start filling in the blanks. Or we compete, showing off our powers of concentration to others in the gallery. As Snyder says, the total information flow necessary to maintain alertness might well be a constant; it’s just that when that flow fails, our personal “someone” steps in, whether distraction or our social ambition, and whether or not you call it “art religion,” there’s no point in underestimating the role played by the downward mobility of solemnity, a.k.a. ritual, in establishing boredom as a vital component of serious art. *E.g.*, growing up in the 1980s, when college kids would sit in folding chairs staring fixedly at a nine-minute film of a cat eating herring, followed by 14 minutes of a dripping tap, I was somewhat dismayed to see footage of a 1950s performance by John Cage: The piece in question was reputed to be silent, but the black-clad audience was laughing, probably because Cage was crawling backward down the center aisle on his hands and knees, smearing multicolored paint on a long roll of brown paper with his necktie.

Steven Paul Scher (German music-and-language linguist) locates a dynamic impulse toward abstraction elsewhere than in the inner workings of the brain: Upset by the inherent tawdriness of mimesis (workers’ choruses, coconuts as donkeys’ hooves), the programmatic Marxist pursuit of realism was moved by purely aesthetic considerations to find it in abstract, schematic

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

dialectical movement. Those dialectical schemata seem to differ only trivially from the schematic metaphors of movement in ascendance today as per Snyder.

*Was schon dem Musikkapitel in Hegels Ästhetik als zentrale Einsicht zugrunde lag, nämlich die unmittelbare Zeitbedingtheit und Prozessualität der Musik als dialektischer Bewegungsvorgang, wird am Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts auf psychologischem Umweg wiederentdeckt und später zum theoretischen Fundament der marxistischen Realismus-auslegung umfunktioniert.*⁶⁹

Though form is real, formalism is always suspicious, especially when Soviet subjects cleverly rename it “realism” – but note at least that whether music is accounted as exploiting innate (in adults, that is) forms of perception and attention as for Snyder, or the abstract forms of dialectical materialism, non-pop-theorists consistently espouse formalism as a kind of realism.

But the performative turn – the drive toward concretism, not just for Alzheimer’s patients anymore – is *en vogue* even in musicological circles. For instance, a musical gesture may communicate “an *emergent* [emphasis added] person, in its provisionality and affective complexity,” not a proposition such as “the passage expresses sorrow or grief.” The shift in emphasis from expression to speaker is subtle, but significant. Thus, for Koopman and Davies, “progress and structure within musical works can be explained in terms of reasons such as those that justify human actions.” Their understanding of “experiential formal meaning” is the “coherent dynamic content the listener discovers by focusing on the music's formal progress.”⁷⁰ Their conclusion: “Music is more like a person in his or her actions that it is like a machine in its movements. Being programmed by

⁶⁹ “The central insight of Hegel’s chapter on music, music’s immediate temporality and process-like nature as a process of dialectical movement, was rediscovered in the early 20th century in terms of psychology, becoming the theoretical foundation of the Marxist interpretation of realism.” Scher in Scher, ed., 93.

⁷⁰ Koopman and Davies, 271.

evolution to be especially interested in understanding actions as forming coherent patterns, we respond to the dynamics of music in a way that parallels our reaction to human behaviors.” That is, we project an “emergent person” on the basis of hypothetical motivations for heard changes in form. To their credit, the authors show that it is possible to divest language of its post-Freudian honors as the gatekeeper of consciousness, not as if one were pulling the plug on one’s own life-support, but with genuine calm. (Recall that the chic paranoid Gnostic Zizek compares doing this to a Hitchcock horror movie scene where a car window goes down and nothing is outside but monstrous blackness.) Music (like most things) will necessarily be ineffable, as it is “more complex than linguistic concepts and propositional structures are.”⁷¹ Something will always be left over, something “finer-grained,” in any attempt to describe it, but that’s no reason to assume music therefore refers to ineffable experiences any more than buttered toast does. They reject semiological interpretation: Music need not convey anything, especially not “ineffable truths about the emotions.”⁷² They elide levels of analysis – if you’re willing to reduce language to words on a page, you could reduce music just as easily – but the basic point is valid: “That is no fault in language, though, which can perform the function of mediating and categorizing the world only because it is not isometric with the direct perception of the world.”⁷³ Language’s limits are neither a threat nor a promise. Identification is therefore seen to take place through empathy with music’s gestures, rather than through its personifications: Mentally, we appropriate the gestures for ourselves.⁷⁴

A defensible aesthetics

Thus even outside pop theory, performance and participation, a.k.a. work and sex, serve as guarantors of ontological correctness. Any portrayal of character – of specific reasons justifying specific actions – would necessarily be bound to a specific context; theoretically, it could retain its meaning over time – so that by acquiring a context, an interpretation

⁷¹ Ibid., 272.

⁷² Ibid., 265.

⁷³ Ibid., 265.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 272.

simultaneously acquires an unwelcome whiff of positivism. A verifiable contingency, an “objective” fact, is as close as we get these days to an eternal verity, and eternal verities are something sophisticated thinkers prefer to avoid (witness the shunning of “objectivity”). Any abstraction is more flexible and thus more durable. The self is the most flexible and durable abstraction ever, but it must perform – or risk arrest for possession of an ontological substance.

Chapter 4

Poking Bob

As readers of Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog" will recall, the blessings of civilization and technology, like the wonders of nature, have long inspired consumers to outbursts of creativity aimed at uncovering their own potential operant roles. The most likely posture when faced with gifts of unknown origin (*e.g.*, bowls of food that appear from nowhere) is careful attention to one's own activity, focused on revealing its causative link to the desired outcome. The second likely posture is worship.

The following two chapters will turn their attention to cargo cultists' behavior in the presence of two especially bountiful deities: Bob Dylan and computers. Pleasing and appeasing Bob is hard – he defies input – which makes his output all the more beneficent. Bob reception succeeds even for those half-asleep or drunk. Computers, by contrast, although conceived as labor saving devices, not only issue commandments – they enforce them. Thus it is somewhat alarming to see how much resentment and aggression Bob unleashes in many of his most satisfied customers, while computers keep us all prancing frantically on our hind paws, waiting for some invisible agency to proffer the hoped-for dish of entrails.

I will show that attempts to formulate high praise for a popular artist force predictable conceptual detours. Here they also provide an unexpected glimpse deep into hidden microscopic recesses of Bob's body – the niche into which he sidesteps in retreat from the masses. P.R. is all we know of Bob; the discussion of online and algorithmic art that follows in Chapter 5 will sketch its functioning as an aesthetic norm. I will suggest (roughly speaking) that the frenetic activity and disdain for the self that characterize online life are not homologous to anything about postmodernity (a lazy, slow-moving place where you can work in bed and order out for clean clothes), but direct borrowings from the only interaction we know with its most prominent members, and rhetorically reliant on a 100-year-old aesthetics. It is hardly necessary to ask how computers took the moral and aesthetic high ground, or why the cargo-cult mantra "digital" seems to hold

such promise (whether of music portable to any cultural platform whatsoever, or of massively parallel, scalable societies), when you can reach the global dance floor by steam engine.

Bob

A brief review of inaccessibility: Varieties of inaccessibility range from

- *The Art of the Fugue*, biochemistry, Finnish (accessible to the skilled); to
- the black hole at the center of the Milky Way, avant-garde art, nature for postmodernists (inaccessible); to
- God (inaccessible, except that He can manifest Himself to shepherdesses whenever He feels like it).

You can guess which type is most commonly encountered in pop culture. Bob still sells like hotcakes after 40 years, but, if the critics are to be trusted, not because he's marketable. *Au contraire!* It's because in the eternity for which Bob will be famous, 40 years is the blink of an eye.

In the 1960s, Bob was quickly, as well as self-, identified as the long-awaited messiah. He has written hundreds of three- and four-chord songs with melodies that are instantly familiar and texts in the vernacular – that is, popular music that sells well. So how exactly did he get to be, in the minds of journalists and scholars, a creative genius as well as a savior?

An entire industry is devoted to Bob's glorification, but it is important to distinguish between fanatic and academic apotheosis. Fans' assessments of his work are sometimes arguably Romantic; like Bob himself, many believe in spiritualistic ideas that intellectuals dispensed with years back. Asked to characterize their hero, fans suckled in a creed outworn evoke the deity, as if Bob were Moth-Ra come from Monster Island to set things right. But because Romanticism long ago ceased being a modernism, it is impossible, for practical purposes, to call Bob an artist – to elevate him above the popular – without recourse to more contemporary standards, even for Bob. Romanticized fandom figures in pop theory as a source of epigrams at most. No matter how hard Bob tries to be Romantic, he will be interpreted as avant-garde.

Religious antecedents are certainly relevant. Bob's apocalyptic Christianity undermines his attempts at Romanticism from within. Jesus courts an exclusive audience by speaking in parables, then bitches about his lack of popularity (Matthew 13:10-17, 57), more a proto-Futurist than a Romantic: "Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, nay" (Luke 12:51). Even his death, an orgy of violence, lasts only a day and a half before he is reborn unrecognizable (cf. Luke 24). God the Father, especially, puts Marinetti in the shade: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind" (Isaiah 65:17). As a foundation for Romanticism, the pantheism of Japanese monster movies works much, much better.

In any case, Bob is immortal. The September 7, 2006 issue of *Rolling Stone* featured a long interview, "The Genius of Bob Dylan: The legend comes to grips with his iconic status," conducted, compiled, and with commentary by Jonathan Lethem. Many months later, the interview was still making waves, mostly on account of Bob's claim, picked up by Reuters, that the production techniques prevalent in the last 20 years have created an endless stream of records with "atrocious" sound, deserving of their fate (illegal file-sharing) as they are "worthless." (*In re* Bob's "iconic status": The lead editorial of the 2007 "Anniversary Issue" of *The New Yorker* [February 19 & 26] suggests his face for the new five-dollar bill, though the move "will have to be deferred" for a while: On their short list of proposed honorees, Bob is the only one still living.)

Lethem describes himself as "a forty-two-year-old moonlighting novelist," too young to have experienced Bob's "Sixties apotheosis." But Bob is "the greatest artist of my lifetime." Even his outtakes and discards, the crumbs that fall from Bob's table, are "a towering body of work" that, as the author of *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* has the goodness to point out to Lethem so he can quote it, would be sufficient to establish him as "the pre-eminent singer-songwriter and performer of the age and one of the great artists of the twentieth century," even had he never published anything voluntarily. You could object that Bob may require such language from the press, as Michael Jackson will not speak to anyone who refuses to call him "the King of Pop," but Lethem goes the extra mile, reinforcing his claims

with nonstop tropes of avant-garde genius: Bob is a finely tuned machine. “Mercurial responsiveness – anchored only by the existential commitment to the act of connection in the present moment – was the gift of freedom his songs had promised all along,” *etc.* Yet Bob is Romantic: “You want every line to be clear and every line to be purposeful,” he tells Lethem. Lethem in turn takes this to mean that Bob is limiting his artistic means with such efficiency that he will eventually pass backward in time to before his own birth and become an old-time blues guitarist: “With each succeeding record, Dylan’s convergence with his muses grows more effortlessly natural.” It doesn’t get any more organic than that; his growth – or rather regression – as an artist is regular as a pinecone. Bob himself says it’s “in his genes.”

Lethem adds that Bob sees the songs as “artifacts of music” and betrays little interest in “analyzing lyrics,” but the interview, conducted over sugar cookies at a beachfront hotel, itself partakes of Bob’s art: “Later when I transcribe this tape I’ll find myself tempted to set the words on the page in the form of a lyric.”

In the interview, Bob isn’t above exalting himself. As he “muses on the fate of art in posterity,” he claims that reaching a small audience is better than reaching a large one, assuming you do it longer – straight out of *Les règles de l’art*. Eternal fame was his goal when he launched his radio show: “I wanted to be somebody who’d never be forgotten.” No one is immune to virtue/necessity. Bob’s biography fairly oozes with it: He is said to have given up rock for folk merely because folk singers don’t need backing bands. Lethem knows the rules of art as well: Bob’s new record may reference hurricane Katrina, but “anyone looking for a moral ... should be shot.” Bob laughs at Lethem’s mentions of his “myth of inaccessibility” and his “savior’s role,” but he feels he spends his time “crying in the wilderness,” an activity associated with John the Baptist. The wilderness is a lonely place, even for individualists. “It’s a lost art form. I don’t know who else does it beside myself. ... I’m talking about artists who have the willpower not to conform to anybody’s reality but their own.” His examples include Plato and Whitman. When Lethem suggests that the pop singer Alicia Keys may have made Bob’s “pantheon” because he mentions her in a song, Bob intimates that her allure is other than artistic. Having spoken of Bob’s “eternal

authority,” Lethem concludes his *laudatio* with a prayer: “May the Never Ending Tour never end.” Bob, 65, agrees.

Bob’s apotheosis is not of recent date, and its religious overtones have actually lessened over time. “For years, [Bob] has been worshipped, and deservedly so. His songs are miracles, his ways mysterious and unfathomable. In words and music, he has awakened, and thereby altered, our experience of the world,”¹ *Rolling Stone* declares in 1978. A 1971 biography describes how “the intense pressures of being worshipped as a public deity”² are making Bob increasingly Christlike – meaning not that he’s a nice guy, but that all his most loyal fans are convinced he will be killed. That is, were he to confess publicly to being the greatest artist in history, that claim would pale in comparison to the things people have written about him.

Even with hit singles on the charts, Bob maintains that his music is not for dancing. It’s “not that kind of music,” he says. “It is,” a young interviewer contradicts him.³ In a 1986 interview, Bob offers a theory of pop linked to the passivity of the masses in the face of a personified entropy: “They like where they’re at. They like what’s going on, and music is just an extension of that, so they like it, too The mass monster ... seems to want to make everybody the same.”⁴ *I.e.*, if Frith and Bob were single and lonely, I wouldn’t set them up. Fans should be willing to contribute a mental effort: “In India, they show twelve-hour movies. Americans are spoiled. They expect art to be like wallpaper with no effort, just to be there,”⁵ he tells another in 1978 in defense of having made a four-and-a-half-hour movie.

But “even at first,” Robert Christgau writes, “he was thought to embody transcendent aesthetic virtues.” The “pioneers of youth bohemia ... elevated Dylan into their poet laureate.” Consciously or not, the young Bob is conversant with Symbolist aesthetics: “a song is anything that can walk by itself / i am called a songwriter. a poem is a naked person ... [sic] some people say that I am a poet,” he writes in the liner notes to *Bringing It All*

¹ Cott, 171.

² Scaduto, 281.

³ Cott, 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 327-328.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

Back Home. Bob’s music belongs to an autonomous realm: “Compare this album to the other albums that are out there”⁶ by other artists, he begs in 2001 – not to his own earlier work, nor to “America at this time,” a certain historical time and place, as the interviewer hopes to do. “Like the writing of Shakespeare, the full significance of Dylan’s work may not be understood for centuries,”⁷ a besotted interviewer objects.

For those close to Bob, it’s the lyrics and their centrality that initially make Bob folk, that is, not a poet but something less pretentious – a bard, a folksinger, a protester against war and greedy landlords. Bob’s publisher claims to be “the only person in the music business who listened to the words,”⁸ and the trouble with his going electric was that “you couldn’t hear the words.”⁹ Bob entered the art and rock worlds by obscuring his message, both acoustically and by switching to less readily comprehensible lyrics, many of which the composer John Corigliano has set to music (!) for orchestra and amplified soprano. The benefits of vagueness can be substantial. For example, Pope John Paul II is on record as believing that “Blowin’ in the Wind” is about the Holy Ghost.¹⁰ “Great” songs, the ones that elevate Bob into the realm of art, make no sense to anyone: Incoherent ravings shake off the onus of “craft,” leaping exultantly to the stage of high culture, tenth-level Masonic lyrics piggybacking on a Papageno melody. “Who understands ‘Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands’?” one interviewer wants to know. “I do,” Bob replies.¹¹ Bob’s greatest hit, “Like a Rolling Stone,” confuses even the expert Greil Marcus (see below), becoming the great riddle of his culture, like *The Magic Flute* for Assmann.

Academic adulation

Bob’s significance is not lost on academics. *Rituals of Resistance* begins its chronology of the British counterculture with his 1965 tour.¹² Christopher Ricks recently published a thick tome on the poet who

⁶ Ibid., 425.

⁷ Ibid., 369.

⁸ Scorsese, DVD 1, 1:31.

⁹ Scorsese, DVD 2, 0:58.

¹⁰ *Süddeutsche Zeitung, Feuilleton*, March 13, 2007.

¹¹ Cott, 196.

¹² Hall, 58.

apparently enjoys his longstanding idolatry: *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. He relates Bob's lyrics to Catholic doctrine, of all things. Eagerly, I looked up "warehouse eyes," but Ricks, too, is stumped. His analysis of "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" is mostly concerned with its possible borrowings from Swinburne. He feels the eyes may be analogous to bedroom eyes, or evoke certain whorehouses in the prophecies of Ezekiel.¹³

A review of *Dylan's Visions of Sin* in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: "Throw a rock at a convention of the Modern Language Association or the American Historical Association ... and you'll hit a Dylanologist. ... There are plenty of credentialed scholars who think that Bob Dylan is not only a rock legend but also a canonical subject."¹⁴ Yet even that author makes fun of Ricks largely on the grounds of his inadequacy as a Bob fan, spicing his essay with quotes and allusions and what purports to be inside knowledge of Bob's popular musical influences, as against Ricks' pursuit of the embarrassing "culture-climbing" project of equating Bob with Keats. "Ricks demonstrates his prodigious reading – whether or not it actually bears any relevance to the development of Bob Dylan's art – but shows no interest in any Dylan sources that would not be found in a Norton anthology," the author sniffs.

Ricks has published his views early and often, leading to a "celebrated incident on BBC TV's *Late Show* in October, 1991" in which "the playwright Sir David Hare warned against ranking Dylan alongside the poet Keats."¹⁵ To my mind, Keats is an obvious choice. After all, he wrote a derivative ballad, "*La belle dame sans merci*," in one sitting, just like Bob, and was never known for promulgating the work ethic. Plus, he did his best work in his early 20s. However, since Bob's hit songs occasionally take a break from the vernacular to refer to "Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot" or "Verlaine and Rimbaud," those are the sources that draw the attention of pre-Ricks scholarship. One author who finds Bob's use of idiom challenging obtains ingress through Pound's concept of *logopoeia*: Interpretation must take into account the "tone behind the language," as Bob has apparently called it, and not merely words' "direct meaning." *Kick the bucket*, for

¹³ Ricks, 107.

¹⁴ Yaffe.

¹⁵ Thomson, 317; s.a. Frith, 177f.

example, refers “not to a kicking event but to a dying event,” and *hit the road* “to a leaving event rather than a hitting one.”¹⁶

Scholars responding to Ricks – that is, leaping on the bandwagon his authority has set in motion – are not so circumspect in their positive assessment of Bob’s achievement.

Bob Dylan invented a new creative medium when he fused poetical lyrics and rock ‘n’ roll to form what became known as ‘rock music.’ It was The Beatles who made rock music accessible to the masses, but the idea of marrying significant words with popular music was Dylan’s. ... The whole point of Bob Dylan’s songs is not whether they can be compared with Keats and viewed as great poetry, but what they mean and what they can tell us about the human condition, about the nature of reality as it concerns Man, which is the very definition of art.¹⁷

Since Bob succeeds in reflecting reality rather than just the “fetishes” of academics, Bob “is not just the creator of an artistic medium that has dominated world popular culture for the past half century, he is also an artist of rare quality.”¹⁸

The dialogics of middle-class self-hatred

Bob is a snob about being folksy, but he is aware of the origins of snobbery: “for the first time / in my life / i’m proud that / i haven’t read into / any masterpiece books,”¹⁹ he writes in the liner notes to *Another Side of Bob*. He describes in *Chronicles* seeing his first private library in an apartment in New York in 1960: “The place had an overwhelming presence of literature and you couldn’t help but lose your passion for dumbness,”²⁰ he puts it.

¹⁶ Gezari, 484.

¹⁷ Karkowski, 346.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁹ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 408.

²⁰ Dylan, *Chron*, 35.

For what it's worth, Bob's obvious textual influences – as I see it – are:

- the wisecracking cowboy sage Will Rogers;
- Don Marquis, who popularized “vers libre” on the comics page with archy, a newsroom cockroach unable to hit the shift key on the typewriter. If you allow archy the cockroach, you don't need the Beats: The resemblance (especially to Corso, whom Bob openly admires) is reciprocal;
- Walt Kelly's comic on the sufferings of Pogo, a gentle opossum outwardly resembling the young Bob (shabby clothes, big head), trapped in a world of surreally blathering alligators;
- ballads one reads in school, such as “Bishop Hatto” (eaten alive by rats) and “Lord Randal” (fed lethal worms by girlfriend);
- interminable American children's songs (reminiscent of Passover songs) such as “I Know An Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly”;
- the very cheesiest Victorians. Bob freely claims the influence of Kipling,²¹ a butch and towering figure in the trite world of pat twaddle like one too many of Bob's songs, and confesses a weakness for Kahlil Gibran,²² the poor man's Hafez. His way of (e.g.) writin' in di'lect was widespread in now suppressed American children's literature from *The Yearling* to the poem (not the comic!) “Lil' Orphan Annie.” Other, healthier influences are audible, e.g., Robert Service, author of “The Face on the Barroom Floor,” a master of Bob-style internal rhyme (most famously, “Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm”).

My point is that I can easily piece Bob together from things that used to appear on the entertainment pages of newspapers and in the libraries of elementary schools, while the estimations of fans and scholars, whether in homage to Bakhtin's dialogics or to academic horror of middlebrow culture, seem to oscillate between the Pound-Eliot axis and elderly blues singers whose names start with “Blind.” Bob can name-check Woody Guthrie (best

²¹ Cott, 428.

²² Ibid., 118.

known for “This land is *your land*, this land is *my land* / From California, to the New York *aye-land*”) from here to Kingdom Come – for scholar fans, he’s Byron crossed with Leadbelly.

On the subject of his literary antecedents, Bob himself is inconsistent. At 60 he claims that in his youth he was into “hardcore poets” including Byron, Keats, and Donne;²³ in his youth, he remarks that “poetry is just bullshit, you know? I don’t know about other countries, but in this one it’s a total massacre. It’s not poetry at all You read Robert Frost’s ‘The Two Roads,’ you read T.S. Eliot – you read that bullshit and that’s just bad, man.”²⁴ He tells Robert Shelton, “I would really like to think of myself as a poet, but I just can’t because of all the slobes who are called poets ... Carl Sandburg, T.S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, and Rupert Brooke ... Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Louis Stevenson and Edgar Allen Poe and Robert Lowell.” Allen Ginsberg is a true poet, along with “one of those truck drivers at the motel” who “talks like a poet.”²⁵

While Bob’s seriousness about what he does cries in the wilderness and he hopes for eternal fame, he is equally open about his lack of artistic ambition. He sees himself as a folk musician exploiting traditional forms, even as his autonomy increases. “I’ve stopped composing and singing anything that has either a reason to be written or a motive to be sung,” he tells *Playboy* in 1966 in defense of having made the hit parade; his new songs are “about nothing,”²⁶ he adds, echoing Flaubert. But “a song has to have some kind of form to fit into the music.” Writing songs makes him feel “confined,” while “poetry can make its own form.”²⁷ He regularly insists he writes no music. “The melodies in my mind are very simple ... they’re just based on music we’ve all heard growing up.”²⁸ Music “that is being thought out and preplanned” is “way beyond me.”²⁹ “My melodies are simple anyway, so they are easy to remember.”³⁰ “I am not a melodist.”³¹ Or back

²³ Ibid., 434.

²⁴ Ibid., 39.

²⁵ Ibid., 86.

²⁶ Ibid., 101.

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

²⁸ Ibid., 371.

²⁹ Ibid., 331.

³⁰ Ibid., 382.

in 1965: “I don’t care about the melodies, man. The melodies are all traditional anyway.”³² Accordingly, Lethem writes in 2006 of “a rollicking blues you’ve heard a million times before and yet which *magically* [emphasis added] seems to announce yet another ‘new’ Dylan.” An academic constructs a full-page, vaguely (but not quite) Schenkerian chart of the A, B, and C sections of Bob’s song “Licence [sic] to Kill,” which he insists is “quite unlike a pop song, however much it may sound like one.”³³

Bob tries his best to be Romantic: In his work “there’s nothing that’s exploited,”³⁴ neither tunes nor lyrics. But Romanticism is obsolete, so he is given only the options of avant-garde novelty and folk authenticity. He chooses folk – but an alienated, middle class, novel kind of folk. As an outsider artist, Bob is aware of the existence of legitimate art – interviewers never stop reminding him of it – and has no choice but to assume a dismissive stance to protect his own legitimacy. There must be such a thing for him to be an artist at all, but it can’t be exhausted by the canon or the avant-garde either one. And the appeal of folksiness can’t be its authenticity; in that case, Bob the auteur would be out in the cold.

So folk music “isn’t simple. It’s never been simple. It’s weird,”³⁵ from a “parallel universe,”³⁶ “too unreal to die.”³⁷ “Lyrically they worked on some kind of supernatural level and they made their own sense. You didn’t have to make your own sense out of it.”³⁸ They achieve that directness by mirroring humanity: “Folk songs are evasive – the truth about life, and life is more or less a lie, but then again ... we wouldn’t be comfortable with it any other way.”³⁹ Nonetheless, weirdness is what once united the folk movement and the avant-garde, and “mass communication killed it all. Oversimplification.”⁴⁰ A reading by Allen Ginsberg, he says, may be weird,

³¹ Ibid., 437.

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ In Thomson, 262-264.

³⁴ Cott, 56.

³⁵ Ibid., 50.

³⁶ Dylan, *Chron*, 235.

³⁷ Cott, 98.

³⁸ Dylan, *Chron*, 240.

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰ Cott, 204.

but it “is not as weird as it should be. Weirdness is exactness.”⁴¹ He praises the “chilling precision”⁴² of old songs and the effectiveness of symbolic language: “I’d never seen a robin weep, but could imagine it and it made me sad.”⁴³ For Bob, tradition is multi-layered and symbolically compelling: Folk music becomes what they used to call art.

P.R.

One popularization attempt quickly falls into publicity: Martin Scorsese’s 2005 biopic *No Direction Home* traces Bob’s stylistic path from the popular to the unpopular, from low to high, generally through media images. Today’s Bob appears modest and unassuming throughout. His A&R man at Columbia praises his use of “contemporary ideas in traditional forms which I understood,”⁴⁴ and Bob agrees that he was “just working with an existing form that was there.” Folk songs are in the public domain, so “Masters of War” could borrow the tune of “Nottamun Town” with impunity. However, that modest sensation of exploiting tradition faded. After a while, “I felt like I had discovered something no one else had ever discovered, and I was in a certain arena artistically that no one else had ever been in before, ever.”⁴⁵

What arena? Scorsese has an answer: poetry. An elderly Allen Ginsberg speaks of weeping because “the torch had been passed to a new post-Beat generation.”

For others, Bob became a conduit to a spiritual realm. One fellow folksinger says that Bob “had no need to be a definitive person. He was a receiver. He articulated what the rest of us wanted to say but couldn’t say.” Another suggests that he was picking up “resonances” from the “American collective unconscious.”⁴⁶

By the second DVD, Bob’s transition to the self-justifying existence of a lyric-generator is complete. He is seen “riffing” on shop signs in London. Addicted to autonomy, he resists being instrumentalized, even by

⁴¹ Ibid., 192.

⁴² Dylan, *Chron*, 51.

⁴³ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁴ Scorsese, DVD 1, 1:16.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1:49.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1:21.

the civil rights movement. “I’m trying to go up without thinking about anything trivial such as politics,” he tells the Emergency Civil Liberties Union while accepting their annual award⁴⁷ (“going up” is a central aim for Bob: For the liner notes of *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, he writes, “i realize gravity / is my only enemy”⁴⁸), upon which Ginsberg is shown praising him for being “not a nice trained seal.”

Nonetheless, Scorsese shows Bob performing in solemn montages with Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy. Soon he is a “genius,” writing “poetry born of painful awareness of the tragedy that underlies the contemporary human condition”⁴⁹ – which would be a fair enough thing to say about Mandelstam, but it’s from an article on Bob in the trade journal *Billboard*, quoted by Steve Allen on network TV and included by Scorsese. Friends in the film call him “unique in the history of American music,” or say “he’s got the Holy Spirit about him.” He resists such praise: “For some reason the press thought performers had the answers to all these problems in society, and what can you say to something like that? It’s just kind of absurd.”⁵⁰ The film provides early interviews in illustration:

– You’ve never heard me sing? And here you are
sitting here asking me all these questions?

It’s my job. ... Why do you sing?

– Just because I feel like singing.

Anything to express when you sing?

– No.⁵¹

Do you care about what you sing?

– How can I answer that if you got the nerve to ask me?⁵²

Bob gives his press conferences unprepared; interviewers seem equally unprepared, most significantly in the area of basic common sense. Whether

⁴⁷ Scorsese, DVD 2, 0:8.

⁴⁸ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 408.

⁴⁹ Scorsese, DVD 2, 0:11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:05.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1:14-16.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 0:35.

or not Bob tacitly agrees that he “should be the leader of singers with a message” or is “the ultimate Beatnik,” it seems odd to expect him to say so on TV. The appearance of an “ultimate Beatnik” in a mass medium would do enough damage to his credibility without his laying claim to the title. “They’d ask me why I write surreal songs,” Bob recalls. “That kind of activity is surreal.”⁵³

Scorsese himself is the target of a more jocular version of Bob’s disdain:

What about the scene were you sick of?

– Well, you know, people like you. Just being pressed and hammered and expected to answer questions. It’s enough to make anybody sick, really.⁵⁴

The obvious irony is even more obvious in Scorsese’s omissions: He uses archival material in combination with testimony from people who knew Bob, and the juxtaposition creates a series of apparent contradictions – a dialogue, as it were. The public genius is privately goofy; public aggression, private gentleness; public arrogance, private modesty; public honesty, private duplicity; and so on. It is the available film footage that sets the themes, and Scorsese’s “closeness” to his subject (the position of anyone who hopes to preserve his access to a celebrity) keeps others taboo. One that occurs to my banal imagination is Bob’s legendary puniness; you won’t see him pictured standing next to anyone but Joan Baez. Today’s Bob appears only in close-up. You can’t even see his shoulders.

It is reasonable to ask what Bob’s media image is doing playing the lead role in a film purportedly about Bob, seeing as how Scorsese did not make his film as a thesis in Media Studies, but as a portrait. Today’s Bob and friends seem to have been included merely to counteract the public record of the time in which the film plays chronologically, the early 1960s. Come to think of it, what is Today’s Bob doing in the film at all, beyond

⁵³ Ibid., 1:05.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1:10.

providing spin? You could call it a formal experiment: Bob is now Bob, and the young Bob was a media personage – just as Bob did in his extremely long film, in which he appeared as himself onstage and was played in dramatic scenes by an actor weighing 300 pounds. Back then, *Rolling Stone* equated the work with that of Buñuel.⁵⁵

Songs

Bob's melodies, as opposed to their lyric sheets, are vestigial phenomena of no particular interest to anyone. The hardest-working rock journalist in show business, Greil Marcus, quotes Phil Spector to the effect that "Like a Rolling Stone" is a reworking of "La Bamba" and, as a pop production, rather sketchy – more "an idea" than "a record." Marcus adds, "Across nearly forty years of trying, I've never understood Phil Spector's theory."⁵⁶ Marcus' analysis of why the song works is way off – he demotes a conspicuous piano to the rhythm section, and glorifies an overrated guitar hero and a ragged organist who are seldom in the mix. More pertinently, while scoffing at the notion that power chords (tonic + subdominant + dominant = "La Bamba") sell records, he focuses intently on the lyrics, which gives him the opportunity to conclude a book subtitled *Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* with six solid pages on the Village People and the Pet Shop Boys, icons of disco. "Like a Rolling Stone," Marcus believes, commands us to "Go West."

Marcus boasts outright that music is over his head. Strangely enough, his analysis of the lyrics is also willfully obtuse. Readers will recall that they portray a graduate of "the finest school," forced "to live out on the street" because of presumably drug-related obligations to a "mystery tramp." Once amused by the language of "Napoleon in rags," she should now "go to him" because she is "invisible" and has "nothing to lose." Whether Napoleon is a very sarcastic Bob himself or just some pimp, Marcus interprets the song as promising "the sheer exhilaration of adventure"⁵⁷ while leaving listeners "justified, exultant, with a world to win."⁵⁸ By way of contrast, he offers the

⁵⁵ Cott, 175.

⁵⁶ Marcus, 34.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 128.

bitter, unredeemed “rage and fear”⁵⁹ of the later song “Idiot Wind,” “made of curses.” Readers may recall that “Idiot Wind” concludes with a declaration, addressed to a “sweet lady” conspicuous for her “holiness,” that the speaker has “kissed goodbye the howling beast on the borderline which separated you from me.” That is, Marcus is not especially literate or imaginative, as he freely admits: While, in his opinion, “when you ain’t got nothing, you got nothing to lose” belongs on cross-stitch samplers, “You’re invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal” (the last line of “Like a Rolling Stone”) “is not obvious, it is confusing.” As a foster-child of elves (that is, as a citizen of the utopian fantasyland he once labeled the *Invisible Republic*, echoing the “Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan” and necessitating a title change for the book’s second edition), he may be thinking of Frodo’s cloak of invisibility rather than the Invisible Man: Invisible in pulp fiction meant transparent, where Marcus seems to take it to mean going underground or at least melting into the scenery – which would make concealing secrets easier, not harder, while confusing satisfied customers who consider a touch of confusion the *sine qua non* of legitimate art reception. Luckily, “confused ... is exactly where the song means to leave you.”⁶⁰ “In denial” is where Marcus means to leave himself: Bob goes to great lengths to put down some bitch he can’t stand, but Marcus’ only concern is that his analysis reveal a hippie *Marseillaise*.

Marcus’ description of “Like a Rolling Stone” never mentions the conspicuous melody in the bass line: from the tonic upward by steps in the major key or Ionian mode or whatever you want to call it, 1-2-3-4-5, followed by 4-3-2-1. In the traditional, old-fashioned affective “language” of tonal music, such a tune functions “to express an outgoing, active, assertive emotion of joy,” followed by “a sense of experiencing joy passively, i.e., accepting or welcoming blessings, relief, consolation, reassurance, or fulfillment, together with a feeling of ‘having come home.’”⁶¹ That is, “Like a Rolling Stone” is a happy tune with bitterly bitchy lyrics, like the classic example of singing “*Crucify Him!*” to the tune of the Hallelujah Chorus⁶² – a

⁵⁹ Ibid., 194.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 128.

⁶¹ Cooke, 115, 130.

⁶² Ibid., 14.

common characteristic of Bob's early hits (compare "Positively 4th Street" or "It Ain't Me, Babe"). Unconsciously, Marcus knows that, so he warps the lyrics to fit.

Sapphomorphism

The pseudo-Romantic standard of total 24/7 self-expression demands that singer-songwriters produce both lyrics and melodies, whether or not they feel called upon to do so. Bob says he leaves writing melodies up to other people, while others say they do nothing else all day long; neither can expect to be believed. A nice example appears in the 2007 Oscar edition of *GALA*, under the rubric "Life [sic]" "TrendTalk [sic]." The theme is "*Die Poesie*" ("*immer mehr Künstler entdecken die Macht der Poesie,*"⁶³ more and more artists are discovering the power of poetry) and the featured artist, the pop singer and musician – but not lyricist – Udo Jürgens. Main headline: "*Ich habe selber ein paar schöne Texte geschrieben*" (I've written a few nice lyrics myself). It reads like modesty, but he's actually bragging, as the article strangely reveals.

The interviewer initially believes Udo to be a singer-songwriter as he ought to be, and *GALA* accordingly arranges a photo shoot unshaven and out of doors. The photo caption (I'll skip the German, as *Poesie* is not its strong point): "Songs full of poetry: The native Austrian Udo Jürgens has written more than 900 songs." The lead-in is about how Udo's latest CD booklet includes interpretations of his lyrics by the pop philologist author of *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod*, a wacky German grammar primer in the vein of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. The lyrics of the songs are as important as the music, we read in the introductory paragraph. Then the interview begins: "Mr. Jürgens, how important is poetry for your songs? ... What makes songs poetic? ... Could your lyrics stand on their own as poems, without music?" That last question moves Udo to correct an editorial misapprehension about his way of working: "I've written a few nice lyrics myself. But mostly I've concentrated on my music and worked with excellent *Textern* [an advertising industry word]." The interviewer: "So you do it the way Elton John does?" "Exactly," Udo replies. "[Elton John's] career has gone on so long because

⁶³ *GALA* #10, 28 Feb. 2007, p. 96.

he does what he does best – compose – and leaves the lyrics to others. Bob Dylan is a great poet, but not a gifted composer. He would have been well advised to hire good composers. Then his songs would really be immortal.” In his final response, Udo praises his *Texter*, who “always finds an appropriate image,” whatever the rhythm.

Udo doesn't mention Bob's delivery; he thinks better tunes would lend immortality to Bob's songs, not to Bob as a performer. To Udo's mind, songs become classics on the basis of their melodies. Bob clearly feels the same – that's why he steals tunes from the public domain. That either is allowed to say so is a neat demonstration of hegemonic discourse's lax and sleepy tyranny. Let your freak flag fly – who'll notice?

Bob's body

The Bob archives were recently augmented with an original manuscript, *Chronicles: Volume One*. Instead of an introduction, the autobiographical volume commences with more than twelve pages of excerpts from rave reviews. Readers will be “weeping with gratitude” for his “flashes of poetry.” “It may be the most extraordinarily intimate autobiography by a 20th-century legend ever written,” says *The Daily Telegraph*. The general insistence that the work is “intimate” seems a bit far-fetched to me. “Intimate” by my standards would be, for example, the memoirs of Alma Mahler, in which she blames a miscarriage on rough sex with Franz Werfel. With regard to Bob's repetitive reminiscences (the book opens and closes with two versions of the same story, leading one to wonder if it was edited together from audiotape), I wouldn't even go as far as “candid,” a word favored by the reviewers. Bob's wives, for example, figure in the book merely as “my wife.” That is, vociferous insistence that he has let it all hang out notwithstanding, Bob keeps the same distance from his public that he has always kept.

Bob's self-exaltation takes an interesting Rilkean (retroactive genetic social-climbing *à la* Malte Laurids Brigge) turn. On page 5 of *Chronicles*, his A&R man becomes “legendary, pure American aristocracy. His mother was an original Vanderbilt.” One glamorous friend “came from a long line of

ancestry made up of bishops, generals, even a colonial governor.”⁶⁴ New Orleans is full of “bluebloods” and “very old Southern families.”⁶⁵ Another friend “had a Puritan ancestry, but some of his old relatives had been from the early Virginia families.”⁶⁶ The poet Archibald MacLeish “had the aura of a governor, a ruler – every bit of him an officer – a gentleman of adventure who carried himself with the peculiar confidence of power bred of blood.”⁶⁷ Mike Seeger, a “duke” with “chivalry in his blood,” is a better folksinger than Bob will ever be because “what I had to work at, Mike already had in his genes, in his genetic makeup. Before he was even born, this music had to be in his blood.”⁶⁸ Pete Seeger’s ancestors came over on the Mayflower.⁶⁹ Joan Baez, on the other hand, is “both Scot and Mex,” “a true loner”⁷⁰: Her blood can’t help her, and he exalts her art in purely religious and aesthetic terms. The “blood” in question is clearly ethnicity; the class system in England revolts him.⁷¹

So where does that leave Bob, an old bluesman and self-styled heir to Woody Guthrie⁷² who sings melodies based on “Green Grow the Rushes O”? He begins his career as an “orphan.” He was “not even born to the right parents,” he explains to Scorsese.⁷³ To belabor an obvious point, he changes his name. Whether he also changes his eye color to a whiter shade of blue, no one seems to know. Online forums are definitely no help: The rules of evidence allow Bob’s having stared intently past the spotlights into one’s eyes for the duration of a love song over a distance of 150 yards, or his having appeared unbidden in one’s bedroom, swathed in golden haze, his crystal blue eyes piercing one’s soul, but older photos in which his eyes appear to be some other color are inadmissible. I became idly curious after being lent the September, 2006 issue of *Mojo*, in which Bob’s eyes are their official brilliant blue in a weirdly not-quite-Julius-Streicher-esque – on

⁶⁴ Dylan, *Chron*, 26.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-71.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁷¹ Cott, 54.

⁷² Dylan, *Chron*, 246.

⁷³ Scorsese, DVD 1, 0:04.

account of the eyes – caricature on page 61, quite pale in a recent black-and-white portrait on page 59 in which he appears to be wearing contact lenses, and greenish brown in every photo in color. Scorsese’s film shows them blue today and green in archival footage. But online, they’re blue, and as Bob declares in a 1978 interview, “Listen, I don’t know how Jewish I am, because I’ve got blue eyes. My grandparents were from Russia, and going back that far, which one of those women didn’t get raped by the Cossacks?”⁷⁴ – a line he may have picked up from Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*.

However, the unreality of Bob is only marginally relevant to the current thesis; more relevant is his ambition to better himself socially. Bob provides some clues as to where he picked up his racial ideas in an explanation of why he never tried to fulfill a boyhood dream of attending the U.S. Military Academy at West Point: His father told him “that my name didn’t begin with a ‘De’ or a ‘Von,’”⁷⁵ quite a strange thing to be saying in 1950s Minnesota, if you think about it. He soon gave up trying to improve his past, concentrating on his future. “He likes to see himself as part of a brotherhood,”⁷⁶ *Rolling Stone* writes in 2004; Bob has already explained to the interviewer that folk music around 1960 “was an identity.”⁷⁷ He takes comfort in how U.S. 61 and the Mississippi River, conspicuous in delta blues a thousand miles farther south, both ran near his childhood home. “I was never too far away from any of it. It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood,”⁷⁸ he writes. Obliging, Scorsese’s film opens with a still of the schoolboy Bob and the singing of Muddy Waters.

I don’t want to run this into the ground, but one little self-interview from *Chronicles* casts an interesting light on Bob’s quest for obscurity: Hounded by the “Woodstock Nation,” Bob longs to divest himself of his fame. “What kind of alchemy, I wondered, could create a perfume that would make reaction to a person lukewarm, indifferent, and apathetic?” His

⁷⁴ Cott, 263.

⁷⁵ Dylan, *Chron*, 42.

⁷⁶ Cott, 431.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 424.

⁷⁸ Dylan, *Chron*, 241.

answer: “I went to Jerusalem, got myself photographed at the Western Wall wearing a skullcap.”⁷⁹

“Genes” and “blood” are body parts. They are also Bob’s terms for one’s upbringing and origins, for the things one can’t help about oneself. For Bob, as for pop theory, the body plays the role of unconscious contingency, the determining factor in an egalitarian modern life in which determinism is supposed to play no part.

Against that background – the “body” as sole determinant – sincerity and authenticity have no option but to appear racist. So it’s no wonder pop theory insists “identity” is something you can put on like a party dress. Bob, an individualist, believes it must inhere in the body as history. That stance confronts him with the long-term challenge of acquiring a new body, but he masters it easily.

For all his nebulous rhetoric, Bob makes more sense. Where, for example, Frith complains that the body has been shortchanged by social forces but may achieve a normative experience of them through disco dancing (“‘Transcendence’ is as much part of the popular as of the serious music aesthetic, but in pop transcendence articulates not music’s independence of social forces but a kind of alternative experience of them”⁸⁰), Bob accepts the social forces and reinterprets them. Intent on making the unconscious conscious, Frith is forced to dumb it down. Bob knows the mute machine present in each of us is a unique, sensitive machine, perhaps even a machine that has issues with being a machine. But both are wise to turn to the body; identifying oneself with one’s mind is pretentious – a kind of internal social climbing – and risky. Bob fails to become an army officer, but he finds other means of establishing the legitimacy of his Romantic identity, including a value system that admires sucking up to genetic superiors as a knightly virtue.

Irritability as an aesthetic category

Bob’s recent surge in popularity led to the publication of an anthology of 35 years of interviews, *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 121-122.

⁸⁰ Frith, 275.

When I first set out to describe them, I thought I might be able to score individual questions factor-analytically on two axes: B-I (background or Bob vs. interview or I), and Q-S (questions vs. statements). A question that reflects some kind of subjectivity on the part of the interviewer or arises from the interview context – that is, a question that requires listening to the previous answer – is an IQ, while a statement about Bob’s past is BS.

For example, the beginning of a 1962 radio interview by Cynthia Gooding of WBAI, the first in the book:

Bob Dylan, you must be twenty years old now.	BS
You were thinking of being a rock & roll singer.	BS
Have you sung at any of the coffee houses?	BQ
What got you off rock & roll and onto folk music?	BQ
I heard you doing Johnny Cash.	IS
No, they’re healthy ones [her cigarettes].	IS
What’s it going to be called?	IQ

On first reading, I decided that the more annoying interviews generally were the ones in which interviewers confront Bob with his media image or lyrics and demand a reaction: definitely B, and mostly BS. The most appealing were those in which “I” statements abounded, such as that conducted by Studs Terkel:

Has it occurred to you that your own songs might be considered folk songs? We always have this big argument: What is a folk song? I think “Hard Rain” certainly will be one, if time is the test.	IQ + IS
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Dutifully, I scored a number of interviews. Studs scored 31I, 11B against Cynthia’s 14I, 7B (she gets better as she goes along, eventually quizzing Bob by reference to her own interest in tarot). A 1984 radio interview with music industry people who know Bob relatively well scored a friendly 54I, 8B.

They betray a certain willingness to react to hesitant answers with more precise indications of what they're actually curious about. A *Rolling Stone* interview in 2001 had degenerated to 14I, 22B, and briefly, I hoped I might discover a broad and general deterioration over time.

The ICQ

But then a mostly readable 1991 interview for the American Academy of Songwriters' magazine *Song Talk* scored 30I, 36B, and I began to notice that I needed a fifth category, the ICQ: internal context-dependent questions for purposes of clarification.

The trouble was, ICQs were equally common in the very best interviews and the very worst – plus you never know whether they've been edited out to save paper. When someone follows up, whether to clarify an answer or his own question or to append a joke to a remark of Bob's, he may sound wide-awake and interested. The 1984 music-industry types chatting on the radio, for example, mine an anecdote for insights over the space of several questions:

Do you remember that time you were down in San Juan ... ? They wouldn't let Bob in the hotel

And Lieberson, to his credit, told the hotel manager either he comes in the hotel or I'm pulling the whole convention out of here. Have I told the story right?

And [in response to Bob's mention of 'people back then who were more entrenched in individuality'] also not as insecure in their jobs.

Did you get along with Lieberson okay?⁸¹

On the other hand, he may incorporate elements of the previous answer without regard to semantics. One follows Bob's saying he guesses he'll just keep doing "different things" with the questions, "Such as? ... What else? ... Including theft and murder?"⁸²

⁸¹ Cott, 313.

⁸² Ibid., 106.

Arlo Guthrie recently said, ‘Songwriting is like fishing in a stream’

Any idea how you’ve been able to catch so many?

What kind of bait do you use?⁸³

The interviewer admits up front that his aim is to find out how Bob writes his songs: Apparently he wants an honest, pragmatic answer that will help other songwriters emulate Bob’s success – something like, “I drink vodka and watch cooking shows in Hindi.” Bob provides an answer in *Chronicles*: “The song rose up until I could read the look in its eyes,”⁸⁴ but at this point we suspect that any self-respecting journalist would follow up by asking, “How many eyes did the song have? How high did it rise up?”

You can’t help but feel affection for the more inept interviewers, like the reporter from *Playboy* who asks Bob to confess in print to distributing illegal substances in JFK airport, although those who demand he explicate lines from forgotten songs are almost as absurd. Generally speaking, there are plenty of ways to screw up an interview and it would be very boring to describe them all, plus it would require an amount and degree of quotation that will soon go beyond “fair use” into unfair use, if not abuse of the kind to which I subjected Frith. Most of the interviews aren’t that bad.

The most interesting kind of flaw, for my purposes, is the bad ICQ. “How does death creep in?” one interviewer asks, in response to Bob’s having said, “Just by our being and acting alive, we succeed. You fail only when you let death creep in and take over a part of your life that should be alive.”⁸⁵ A guy whose response to a standard Romantic metaphor (the second death, death-in-life) is to want to know death’s mode of locomotion is neither a writer nor a reader, but something between a robot and a sassy ten-year-old. When Bob claims it’s warmer to have long hair and that Abraham Lincoln had longer hair than his assassin, Nat Hentoff (for *Playboy*) replies, “Do you think Lincoln wore his hair long to keep his head warm?”⁸⁶ The

⁸³ Ibid., 370.

⁸⁴ Dylan, *Chron*, 171.

⁸⁵ Cott, 218.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

most stunning examples come from the most prominent publications; it takes a certain amount of pretension to want to be that clever.

Within minutes, I realized that I couldn't use a chart to explain what's so awful about interview strategies as diverse as flattery, outright unfriendliness, and dogged mechanization, and more than four categories would entail more than two axes or one of those pseudo-Cartesian coordinate systems where qualitative differences hover in clusters. With any more elaborate analytical scheme, I would be aiming over all our heads and contributing materially to the dubious causes of pseudo-objectivity and obfuscation. Furthermore, I would undermine my own unerring unconscious instinct as to what's good and bad, and besides, Bob himself anticipates my criticisms in a 1968 interview with his pal John Cohen: "Ridiculous answers" to "idiotic questions" and closed-ended inquiry provide interviews with their "great moments," Cohen feels. Bob suggests rather that such activity becomes a self-perpetuating game in which even "housewives who might be asked certain questions" will inevitably take part.⁸⁷

I will distinguish the good interviewers from the bad as follows: The good ones ask questions that Bob, and no one else, can reasonably answer. In one way or another, they inquire into his present state of mind, rather than the past, and thus avoid the unabashed waste of everyone's time. It seems odd that fans, permitted rare opportunities to bask directly in their idol's halo, should want to provoke monosyllabic answers by demanding to know things such as:

In 'Wedding Song,' you sing: 'I love you more than ever / Now that the past is gone.' But in 'Tangled Up in Blue,' you sing: 'But all the while I was alone / The past was close behind.' Between these two couplets lies an important boundary.

So what are the songs on 'Blood on the Tracks' about? Why did you say, 'I love you more than ever / Now that the past is gone'?

⁸⁷ Ibid., 119.

And what about ‘And all the while I was alone / The
past was close behind’?
... What about ‘Idiot Wind’?⁸⁸

The interview takes place in 1978; *Blood on the Tracks* dates from 1974. The next question, unsurprisingly, is “Why have you been able to keep so in touch with your anger throughout the years?” A similar debacle, equally easy to foresee and summarized in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2004: “Few in American pop have consistently written lines as hauntingly beautiful and richly challenging as his ‘Just Like a Woman,’ a song from the mid-’60s. Dylan stares impassively at a lyric sheet for ‘Just Like a Woman’ when it is handed to him.”⁸⁹ You have to wonder what is going through their pea brains. Some questions seem to have strayed in from an awkward first date: “Have you read ... ?”

Those who choose not to fawn often resort to rudeness. Feeling out of place in the presence of a social superior, they trade shyness for aggression. For example: “According to a couple of recent biographies ... your drinking was interfering with your music.” Bob replies, “That’s completely inaccurate,”⁹⁰ so you can see that the pull-no-punches approach hits pay dirt. One interviewer follows the pointless question “Who are your friends these days?” with “What kind of relationship do you have with women?”⁹¹ Another (*Playboy*, 1966) quotes a negative critique at length and asks, “What’s your reaction to that kind of put-down?”⁹² But don’t feel sorry for Bob; there are plenty of nasty enough stories about him. Feel sorry for mankind! Such volatile familiarity is well known, if to no one else, to girls. “Hi!” young men will call out gaily. “Stupid cunt can’t even say hi!” they add five seconds later. Talking to strangers has its shortcomings even when they fawn over one, as becomes clear in a 1991 interview with Bob: “Van Morrison said that you are our greatest living poet. Do you think of yourself in those terms?” The follow-up: “People have a hard time believing that

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 432.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 102.

Shakespeare really wrote all his work because there is so much of it. ... Might they think that of you, years from now?"⁹³ There's a fine line between fawning and baiting.

Rameau's nephew

As Jann Wenner, the anthology's publisher and asker of many obnoxious questions, puts it, "The purpose of any interview is to let the person who's being interviewed unload his head." When Bob expresses delight at the latter phrase and says it ought to be the title of a song, Wenner chides him, "You said in one of your songs ... 'I need a dump truck, mama, to unload my head.' Do you still need a dump truck or something?"⁹⁴ You might think he's trying to draw out information about drug use, but actually he just wants gossip about Bob's private life in the late '60s, as he eventually admits. He doesn't want to talk; one might think Bob could save him a lot of work by publishing a tell-all autobiography, but his ambition seems to go farther than that: Head-unloading, making the unconscious conscious, is the professed aim of psychoanalysis – and maybe if Bob were willing to lie on a couch for 200 hours on sodium pentothal, it could even work. The whole idea of a conversation in which one partner asks brief questions while another is expected to go on at length is reminiscent of psychotherapy or demographic research. In the dialogues of Plato, after all, it's the star who asks the questions and steers the conversation, which seems to me like a more promising approach altogether, and has certainly stood the test of time.

Lethem seems tacitly to agree: Compare his fantasy of being interviewed by a famous artist, or rather a short story in the first person in the March 19, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*. Under the WASPy name of Grahame, he befriends a famous retired theater director named Sigismund (the Polish king who more or less emancipated the Jews) Blondy (!) by attending all the same art-house matinees for months. Their first contact comes when the director quizzes him with a questionnaire he says is taken from Max Frisch: "Are you sure you are really interested in the preservation of the human race once the people you know are no longer alive? ... Whom

⁹³ Ibid., 373.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 152.

would you rather never have met? ... Would you like to have perfect memory?” The story concludes with two more questions, apparently addressed to the reader, one regarding one’s history of homicide, and the conclusion: Would you rather die, or live on as a healthy animal? If so, which animal? Blind dates, one suspects, were a little different that April in New York.

Many challenges posed to Bob have an air of the misnamed diagnostic method “free association”; there’s nothing “free” about being asked to rate Dylan Thomas, Blake, and Nietzsche in quick succession,⁹⁵ or giving the wrong answers because you’re psychotic. The common interview tactic of going down a checklist of questions, resulting in an exchange made up entirely of non sequiturs (the thankfully discontinued *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin* series “100 Questions,” for example, also seemingly modeled on psychological testing), doesn’t happen much in *The Essential Interviews*, although it is quite accepted to go down a checklist of favorite lines from Bob’s songs and favorite authors one thinks Bob might like.

Bob’s accessibility to artificially compromised pseudo-communication fosters the unceremonious ritual of poking him to see if he squeaks, if need be with questions like “Do you have a rhyme for orange?”⁹⁶ His reputation as a vicious, yet taciturn interview subject precedes him;⁹⁷ perhaps Wenner no longer believes that a conversation can provide any clue as to what Bob is like, and chooses on that account to prod him like a zoo animal. *Interview* magazine sought to remedy the problem by getting celebrities to interview each other; *The Essential Interviews* includes a relatively readable piece by the playwright Sam Shepherd.

When did interrogation replace conversation? Conversations were once a staple of fandom, after all. The quotes in a Goethe desk calendar are always straight from the pen of his adoring amanuensis: Eckermann’s Goethe is more popular than the real thing. Kafka fans read Gustav Janouch, who makes Kafka sound like a really great guy, perhaps because Janouch was an impressionable adolescent. (The grownup Milena Jesenská describes him going into boring raptures over a typewriter and demanding a beggar

⁹⁵ Ibid., 261f.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 68,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 150.

make change.) Those who wonder what it might have been like to get drunk with Robert Walser can read Carl Seelig. Without Boswell, would Johnson have fans at all?

Then someone invented audiotape. Stenography had been in use for eons, but required skilled labor. Suddenly there was an easy, flexible way to generate reams of content for expanding, ever-voracious postwar media, well positioned to gratify readers eager for personal contact with stars: the verbatim interview transcription. The word *interview* alone ought to make us all nervous. Where else does one hear it, after all? The job interview: a lesson in mendacity. Potential employers wanting to know whether I think my work will be “fun” – haven’t these people ever gone canoeing or eaten chocolate brownies, or are they too fresh from the pod? Verbatim interviews in indie-rock fanzines can be nice; fanzines lean toward group interviews involving entire bands, so that even in a verbatim transcription, no one is ever hard up for a witticism, and the interviewees feel comfortable, since they are talking with friends. Interviewers don’t have to say much. Unknowns are happy to appear in magazines, perhaps because nobody cares to read about their sex lives. An insider audience knows all that anyway; in an intact, insular scene, gossip never has to appear in print. The only mass-market interviews I’ve read that were nearly as amusing were with pathologically indiscreet and blowsy borderline narcissistic personalities along the lines of Lady Di: Courtney Love’s drug-abuse revelations to *Vanity Fair* got her child taken away, but she’s always a gripping read, whether attacking Steve Albini’s taste in women in *Musician* or telling *Rollerderby* that one-night stands stopped farting in her presence after she lost weight by giving up melted cheese. You have to be very loosely wound to want to be that amusing in a public forum: Rameau’s nephew is still the ideal interview subject. Trying to pry personal details out of hostile, overexposed superstars (I presume that to have been the goal of the *Blood on the Tracks* questions above), or indeed anyone who is relatively sane, is a whole different ball game.

The verbatim transcription dramatizes every flaw in the interviewer’s approach, as well as the imbalance of power: When Bob speaks on the record, he has a hostage – himself. Any unwelcome line of questioning can

be punished with silence. And like hostage negotiators, interviewers have absolutely nothing to offer Bob beyond a reduced sentence as they struggle to convince him to release his prisoner from seclusion.

The verbatim interview must have started life as a well-meaning alternative to the radical mediation of a reporter with a steno pad, free to cherry-pick and reformulate. Verbatim transcribers even include such stage directions as “[pause]” and “[much laughter]” as if they were doing sociological field work, focusing attention on the (fictive) expressive potential of a transcript – while forgetting that the prose author who sprinkles quotes among his own impressions is free (here Robert Shelton in 1966) to write things like, “Dylan and I sat face-to-face His eyes were slits ‘It takes a lot of medicine to keep up this pace,’ Dylan said. ‘It’s very hard, man.’ “Twisting restlessly, Dylan was getting angry.” “Like Lenny Bruce, he was riffing.”⁹⁸ A free-prose writer like Shelton is under no obligation to include his own silliest questions and Bob’s most irritable reactions, but apparently few shrink from the task. A silly question can be edited into something more bold and incisive before publication. Irritable answers, unretouched, soon become Bob’s stock in trade.

There’s no reason a journalist couldn’t talk to Bob like a human being; Studs Terkel manages it. But the journalists seem to see themselves increasingly as media, vehicles through which interview subjects will be manifested – self-styled nonentities, quite a weird pose for a human being to want to assume, and one that (in my view) leads inevitably to the old-fashioned Turing test interview style. Turing proposed that if a computer could pass for human in a talk room, it would be conscious for all intents and purposes; not long after, mainframes were offering psychotherapy. No matter what you typed, some smart-ass’s program would respond, “And how does that make you feel?” – which would make it a pretty good interviewer by the standards of *The Essential Interviews*. At least it never asked, “Camus said that chastity is an essential condition for creativity. Do you agree?”⁹⁹ (I use the term “old-fashioned” because the most sophisticated new NLP [“natural language processing”] chatterbots can’t even pass for three-year-

⁹⁸ Ibid., 83-85.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 228.

olds.) It's like Philip Rieff's *Triumph of the Therapeutic* in reverse: Instead of patients on the couch, western civilization will become a pack of probing, know-it-all post-Freudians.

Good interviews

Is conversation under conditions of celebrity possible at all? Maybe: The book's most charming interview originates in Australia in 1986. Each question is attached to a qualifier and formulated in the present tense, in variations of "it seems to me" and "do you think?" From the first to the last question: "it must be," "seem," "tend," "slant," "seem," "do you think," "what's the solution," "seem," a remark that Bob's last few years have been prolific, a question whether he is "pleased," a modest compliment on some "really nice instrumental passages," a "why?" followed by a "seems," another "seems," and an "it sounded to me," a "seem," "do you feel," "do you think," "what do you think," "seems," a remark that "People hold up an image of a star and hope to attach themselves to that image," "you must have," "has it been all it was cracked up to be?"; "I was thinking," "do you feel," "seems," "seem," "seems," "there's been red-baiting," "seems," "So it doesn't really change?" and the final question: "What's the perspective like?"¹⁰⁰ Especially with that last question, the author, Toby Creswell, outs him- or herself as someone accustomed to taking him- or herself down a peg, or at least capable of acknowledging that Bob is in a meaningful sense someone other than Creswell or Creswell's image of Bob – as opposed to the posers of questions like, "What do you bother to write the poetry for ... if we don't know what you're talking about?"¹⁰¹ or all the amateur neurologists intent on diagnosing synaesthesia.¹⁰² Bob's responses to Creswell are long, vague, general, and philosophical: He is as little interested in divulging specific details as Creswell seems to be in finding them out, but anyone interested in how Bob thinks will be happy with the results.

Several older interviews, through the 1960s, take a similar tack to Creswell's, refraining from unanswerable inquiry into the past, though still tending to confront Bob with doubtful media myths and random quotations

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 326 ff.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰² Ibid., 222, 375.

from culture heroes. But as of Bob's mid-'70s return from self-imposed obscurity, many are intent on finding out what he was thinking on some certain day ten or 15 years earlier. Interview quality flags precipitously.

Creswell's "I think" and "it seems to me" are not phrases teachers encourage one to write. They are considered entirely redundant, as well as feminine. Perhaps one culprit in the apparent cocky self-certainty of interviewers' questions is the overly lean prose style that secondary-school teachers encourage, with its odor of objectivity. Efficient communication within public discourse as a system and utter banality are two sides of the same coin. As if by extrapolation, interviewers seem to assume that if communication can be avoided, banality will be avoided as well.

Chapter 5

The autobiography of presence

Music has often been characterized as “language minus semantics,”¹ and thus rather mysterious. As we have seen, writing about music and musicians is not long on semantics either, and does its best to abandon pragmatics as well. Publicity demands pseudo-Romanticism, and purely commercial works can afford (with the aim of publicizing themselves) to convey a similar enthusiasm. Serious art and artists with pretensions to seriousness, at constant risk of becoming too transparent for truly humble admiration, are seen to abandon communication entirely: They and their works just happen – fast. “We don’t have time to interpret ... first, and respond ... later,”² as Frith put it.

Would-be daemons who hang around online continue the avant-garde tradition, but since cybernetic self-recognition is best achieved as an interview subject (its artistic treatments are understandably unpopular), silicon cargo cultists avidly mirror the sad fate of Bob.

Babel

One variety of language weak on pragmatics is understood by quite a few: The pseudo-objective language written and spoken in public by educated people of similar backgrounds is regarded as a superior kind of ordinary and normal system of signs – one of steadily increasing precision, the modernist tradition tells us.

Communication between people who know each other well, lacking that air of objectivity, is closer to genuine systemhood (in the system-theoretic sense) than is standardized language, as Luhmann points out. “*Die Normalsituation wird unterbrochen, wenn es zu schriftlichen Kommunikationen kommt.*”³ As communication presupposes an active, anticipatory desire to understand, Luhmann is hard put to imagine in what

¹ Cf. Adorno and his many fans, incl. D. Cram, in Var., 57.

² Frith, 139.

³ “Written communication constitutes an interruption to the normal state of affairs.” Luhmann, 306; s.a. 2 Corinthians 3:6.

sense written language, lacking a self-corrective dynamic, is a system at all, blaming the lasting authority of de Saussure, who was so certain language is a system of signs, and Searle,⁴ whose theory of speech acts can be applied to utterances never understood by anyone. The language of the lower classes, Luhmann adds, “*diese typische Unterschichtensprache, diese nicht-Schrift-Kultur,*”⁵ relies explicitly on momentary context with its vocabulary of all-purpose nouns and its random dispensing with subjects and verbs. Familiar conversation, like music, is language minus semantics. As Tolstoy put it:

Natasha and Pierre, left alone, began to talk as only a husband and wife can talk, that is, with extraordinary clearness and rapidity, understanding and expressing each other’s thoughts in ways contrary to all rules of logic, without premises, deductions, or conclusions, and in a quite peculiar way. Natasha was so used to this kind of talk with her husband that for her it was the surest sign of something being wrong between them if Pierre followed a line of logical reasoning The words themselves were not consecutive and clear, but only the feeling that prompted them.⁶

Tolstoy doesn’t mention the lower classes, body language, tone, abbreviation, or even conscious consensus: For him, incoherence alone is enough to establish the presence of sustained communication between these two somewhat absent-minded characters.

That simplifies the matter of figuring out why people are so eager to have meaningless conversations with Bob: They aspire to the music of familiarity, but lack its vocabulary. Where Luhmann attributes the distinction to class, pop theorists tend to credit the phenomenon to culture, as with the African/European distinctions of Frith *et al.*, analogous warm/cold distinctions,⁷ and the like. But we all avoid significance when we can, and

⁴ Ibid., 280, 284.

⁵ “This lower-class language, this illiterate culture.” Ibid., 313.

⁶ Tolstoy, 1297.

⁷ Büttner, 92

that's as it should be, as the poet William Empson pointed out in the classic *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930): Irrelevant, tautological, and otherwise meaningless statements give readers room to substitute their own statements⁸ (type 6), or at least enjoy their own "fortunate confusion" (type 5). Nonetheless he laments both that English grammar and syntax have lost much of their power, and what he characterizes as an increasing resemblance of English to Chinese – his example is the headline "ITALIAN ASSASSIN BOMB PLOT DISASTER" – the "journalist flatness" in which a single word is used,

at a distance, to stand for a vague and complicated mass of ideas and systems which the journalist has no time to apprehend English is becoming an aggregate of vocabularies only loosely in connection with one another, which yet have many words in common, so that there is much danger of accidental ambiguity, and you have to bear firmly in mind the small clique for whom the author is writing.⁹

Pierre and Natasha are a very small clique. Do readers feel Bob's songs and confessions are profound and intimate merely because they can't understand them? No fan wants to feel Bob is lecturing to him, after all. He'd presumably rather aspire to the feeling that Bob is whispering sweet nothings in his ear or doing bong hits with him on the sofa.

Poets and musicians are under no obligation to make sense. As Empson points out, it would hardly be desirable. It is also quite clear that Bob's fans and interviewers have little desire to see him make sense. They work hard at deterring him from making sense, which is just as well, given that with neither a workable context (their knowledge of Bob can only come from earlier interviews), nor a relationship of any kind, the establishment of communication, or even of pragmatic motivations that might eventually permit interpretation of their utterances (they seemingly can't make up their

⁸ Empson, 176.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

minds between insults and flattery), is unlikely. The collision between modernist aesthetics and helpless emotion results in ritualized (under the ambivalent Romantic definition, cf. Soeffner) spontaneity (quite different from the unceremonious kind) that occasionally precludes meaning entirely – but in any case, as a legitimating context, the situation of interviewing a tortured celebrity for publication hardly authorizes normal behavior. Its contradictions are too plain. One must take the stage as the godlike Bob’s ontological equal, and somehow or other that requires acting like an apprentice Marx brother with caffeine poisoning.

Performing art

Because unconscious wishes are fabulously trite, the conscious effort to avoid making sense generally leads to sentimentality, which is still rather subaltern if not as downmarket as it used to be. Surrealists and performance artists were able to establish distance from inappropriate lofty emotions through graphic sex and violence, but their mass-market successors needed less problematic means of sidestepping kitsch; sex and violence can hinder the marketing of a discrete product, and if either attains presence in performance, the police may not be far off. Competing anti-kitsch techniques – borrowings from math and machinery – thus rose to a comfortable prominence and artistic legitimacy.

The introductory text to a recent exhibition at the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe refers to an “algorithmic revolution”¹⁰ in art since 1960 (presumably the same one others locate in 1900¹¹), citing the recent print/online tome *A New Kind of Science* in support. (“The NKS book” predicts that future science will no longer describe reality as it is perceived, but instead identify the recursive processes by which it arises. Successes to date include analyses of the arrangements of leaves on stems and patterns on seashells.) Thus Peter Weibel of ZKM calls the rise of algorithmic art an “*anthropologische Wende*” (turning point), the gravest insult to human autonomy since Kepler, Darwin, and Freud. Gone is the autonomous subject, “*in dessen Mittelpunkt immer noch die Fiktion von Autonomie und*

¹⁰ <http://www.zkm.de/algorithmische-revolution/>

¹¹ E.g. Theisohn, 191.

ursprünglicher Kreativität steht” (at whose center still stood the fiction of autonomy and original creativity).

The “algorithms” of non-computer based art are “*Handlungsanweisungen*” (instructions, e.g., Fluxus); an artwork may be “*manuell oder maschinell steuer- oder programmierbar, also algorithmisch*” (manually or mechanically steerable or programmable and thus algorithmic). Such art transfers activity from the artist to the recipient and from humans to machines; “*Die Romantik des anthropomorphen Entscheidbarkeit und der Souveränität des Individuums wird gedämpft.*”¹² Citing an earlier author’s paraphrase of Tristan Tzara that substituted the word “machine” for the word “Dada” (“No one can escape from the machine. Only the machine can enable you to escape from destiny”), Weibel adds that such an observation is truer than ever in the “*Zeitalter der digitalen ‘universalen Maschine’*” (age of the digital all-purpose machine).

A certain pedagogic cast is understandable (ZKM is a museum, after all), but the manifesto seems to go farther: The “anthropological turning point” would be a highly significant event, transforming consciousness to an awareness of its own nonstop micro-geneses. On Weibel’s model, a baby’s first scream would fork through endless fractal recursions to become, 22 years later, its first novel – not through trial and error, but through an as yet undiscovered “*automatisierbare Eigengesetzlichkeit*” (automatizable autonomy). Thus mechanical procedures we fail to understand, even in the relatively simple artificial systems that serve as its models, are made the foundation of a supposedly novel aesthetics. It’s so novel, you might think it was invented by space aliens who just wandered on to planet Earth and haven’t got it figured out yet (for example, Weibel claims online pornography undermines sexuality’s status as the last bastion of “tactile experience”¹³ as if people used it by staring), if it didn’t quickly become apparent that it seems new because it went way out of style around 1945.

The introduction to *The Aesthetics of Net Literature* (conference proceedings, SFB 615, University of Siegen) tells us,

¹² “The Romanticism of anthropomorphic decidability and the sovereignty of the individual is weakened.”

¹³ <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/25/25704/1.html>

Media technology [in net literature] ... withdraws individual control ... enabling a transfer *necessary for cultural evolution* [emphasis added]. This transfer to systems becomes necessary because these systems are the agents that guarantee the survival of society and not foremost that of individuals. Aesthetic processes in their turn comment on and reflect this disinterest in individual concerns, be they imaginary self-positionings or physical needs. ... They activate or intensify, they condense or focus those perceptions that take place in processes of socialization, be they the most sensitive feelings or the most brutal, traumatizing pain.¹⁴

Clearly, Marinetti did not live in vain; not only in the “BMW World” is it still possible to be fascinated by industrialization. Is such a notion of “enabling ... cultural evolution” towards a “disinterest in individual concerns” scandalous, or am I missing something somewhere? As Hewitt says, “protofascistic impulses derive from a desire to accelerate ... the march of progress.”¹⁵ For the editors of *The Aesthetics of Net Literature*, modernity started with the caveman-monolith scene in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and will end when mankind attains conscious technical control over its behavior:

Of course such experiments [with software agents] trigger off the primordial fears of the replacement of the species by their own technical creations. ... As if the species had not already replaced itself with its first scream and its first carving of a line into a branch by articulating or inventing signs through which it could invent itself away from its present state into an open future. Of course, the species believed it was talking about something that already had to be there,

¹⁴ Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer in Gendolla, 28.

¹⁵ Hewitt, 12.

something that gave reason and coherence to things In our present time, however, with the possibilities of media ... this illusion is dissolving more and more. The fact that we rigidly hold on to it probably rather proves the fear of individuals and of societies to have to take over the responsibilities for their own designs instead of leaving them forever to other, “higher,” metaphysical authorities. At the present time, under the socio-technological conditions of a species that could through its media to all intents and purposes become aware of its activities, the fact that it is holding on to such metaphysical illusions of a different, higher will cannot lead to any other than a grotesque fundamentalism with all its atrocious consequences.¹⁶

Widespread “cohabitation” with new media and its radical idealism – its exposure of the “illusion” that “something ... gave reason and coherence to things” – could help avert “technophobia and aggression, which is nothing but a denial of our own capacities, nothing but self-blinding regarding the notion that somebody else, outside of ourselves, is controlling and directing our own activities.”¹⁷ As with surrealism, play with unpredictable media will provide therapeutic benefits, but instead of revealing unconscious motivations, it will reveal a hitherto disavowed conscious self-control, pulling down false idols such as continuity and reliability. But I’m soft-pedaling; Gendolla *literally* writes that through its media, the human species could become self-aware – which at least has the virtue of being an even weirder variant of Hegelianism than Kittler’s. The world consists of our collective freedom; Reality Mining will help us squelch the “different, higher will” that separates the Ego from his Own. Eek!

Note, generally, the clear influence of having been raised by elves (immortal, infertile, accustomed to such a stable environment that the

¹⁶ Gendolla, 32.

¹⁷ Ibid.

coming of the ungrateful biped to Middle Earth goads them into boarding launches to Avalon never to return) or dolphins (loquacious, defenseless, unaware of the existence of uncontrollable natural forces such as weather and health, highly adaptable assuming you neither remove them from the water, nor hold them under it too long).¹⁸ To say these authors reject post-Marxist or sociological analysis would be a major understatement: They seem to find notions of history, determination, and even physics ridiculous, somewhat as if they had never been raised at all, but sprang fully armed from the forehead of Zeus.

With their faith in the power of discourse, the editors have a fabulously high opinion of literature in general: It was “literary texts on the so-called Jewish world conspiracy” that “equipped the bio-politics of fascism with quite practical goals. And without the dissolution of traditional role models in women’s literature from Virginia Woolf to Margaret Atwood the development of the questions regarding gender, family or career in at least Western cultures would have been quite improbable.”¹⁹ Woolf is best known for her suggestion that aspiring writers inherit annuities (“£500 a year and a room of one’s own”), and as I recall, the bio-politics of fascism strayed significantly from its literary sources, which the ghettos and the blood libel predated by quite a bit. What I wish to emphasize is that the authors propose cultural evolution from the top down from the bottom up – literally! Ideas are seen to rule, but those ideas, almost out of politeness to their underprivileged authors, whose lives are hard enough already, are imposed from below. It might be seen as rude to credit fascists with seeking to restore an institutionalized discrimination against Jews that had only recently been disestablished, or to bring up Shelley’s advocacy of co-education so that women wouldn’t be so boring – or the role of men generally in deciding that effective birth control and girlfriends who earn lots of money, the paradigmatic feminist issues, are truly magnificent ideas.

Anyway, fortunately, the book’s ostensible topic is literature. “Generative literature, defined as the production of continuously changing literary texts by means of a specific dictionary, some set of rules and the use

¹⁸ For a less graphic account, see Bourdieu, *Unterschiede*, 24-25 (towards the end of the introduction).

¹⁹ Gendolla, 18.

of algorithms ... is completely changing most of the concepts of classical literature”²⁰ and thus can hardly expect to acquire its audience. For instance, the installation *Text Rain* “picks up on Apollinaire’s concrete poem ‘Il Pleut’ (1918)” with a 1993 source text (“each part / of my body turns to verb / ... We are synonyms / for limb’s loosening / of syntax / and yet turn to nothing”) that never becomes legible. *Ça veut dire*, by dividing a poem on the necessity of performance into individual letters, “The installation frees the text of its representative function letting it become pure self-sufficient presence,”²¹ much as a cat is pure self-sufficient presence after you run over it with a car. The prevailing theory of cybertext identifies 575 varieties of mechanized annoyance:

In cybertext theory the elementary idea is to see a text or a work of art as a concrete (and not metaphorical) machine for the production and consumption of signs, and consisting of the medium, the operator and the strings of signs. These latter are divided into *textons* (strings of signs as they are in the text) and *scriptons* (strings of signs as they appear to readers/users). The mechanism by which scriptons are generated or revealed from textons ... can be described as the combination of seven variables (dynamics, determinability, transience, perspective, links, access, and user function), and their possible values. This combinatory approach gives us a heuristic map of 576 [presumably $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 4$] different media positions ... It is important to notice that the relation between textons and scriptons is arbitrary in digital media: That’s the “essence” of its unique dual materiality – which stems from the separation of the storage medium from the interface medium.²²

²⁰ Jean-Pierre Balpe, “Principles and Processes of Generative Literature,” in Gendolla, 309.

²¹ Roberto Simanowski, “Holopoetry, Biopoetry and Digital Literature,” in Gendolla, 52.

²² Markku Eskelinen, “Six Problems in Search of a Solution,” in Gendolla, 204.

Thus, “The power of cybertext theory ... stems from the fact that even the state-of-the-art literary theories of today are ultimately based on literary objects that are static, determinate, intransient, and random access with impersonal perspective, no links and utilizing only the interpretative user function.”²³ The theory of cybertext, like much that is PoMo, persistently raises the question of elf and dolphin involvement in the upbringing that led theorists to develop their profound faith in life’s ease and our culture’s benignity, to which they aspire to present a more challenging alternative:

The ‘new’ cybertextual media positions may constrain and limit the reader’s freedom of movement and his control over reading time ... setting new demands for the reader’s attention span while requiring much more than interpretative involvement from her. As the text sets conditions for its reading, it doesn’t make much sense to keep clinging on to traditional values and habits of reading for much longer.²⁴

What milieu exactly offers reading as an activity that is never performed under pressure, never interrupted, requires no concentration, and allows free movement? Can I get my doctorate there instead? “The ‘new’ cybertextual media positions are typically used to diminish the reader’s autonomy over his reading time and habits,”²⁵ somewhat like the policies of non-circulating libraries, the hazards of translation, and life generally for those who have not yet inherited their annuities.

Like the mathematical methods of avant-garde music, “cybertexts are machines for producing variety of expression,”²⁶ where “variety” could be characterized as a chilly formalist avoidance of expression. The author identifies four strategies that lead “the deep-rooted humanistic fear of variety” into “hypertext whining”: reading “for plot” (as do “critics” with

²³ Ibid., 179.

²⁴ Ibid., 194-195.

²⁵ Ibid., 199.

²⁶ Ibid., 197.

“mainstream expectations”); “reading for pleasure” to satisfy one’s neuroses, see Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*; “reading for metareading as the connoisseurs of experimental literature do and cherish intertwining epistemological, ontological, and ergodic challenges to the doxa of the day”; and “balancing reading with playing,”²⁷ that is, using game rules to reduce variety. “Unreliable narration,” he explains, “only makes sense if there’s a completely accessible and static textual whole against which background the reader can finally understand and verify how the narrator was positioned ... and how reliable he actually was.”²⁸ Echoes of the PoMo insistence that pre-PoMo perception relies on naïve common sense mashed up with logical positivism (“ontology”) are clearly audible in the notion of a “completely accessible and static textual whole,” something literature ditched around 1750. As a deep-rooted humanist, I wonder whether this particular author has ever seen a book outside the rack in the supermarket. Another artist, having provided 31 pages of exclusively formal discussion of his algorithms for generating nonsense texts, reveals the nature of the artwork that resulted from his efforts: It is a web site that links false news stories on the bombing death of Saddam Hussein to excerpts from the Warren Report on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.²⁹ Are politicians the new women? I mean: Whereas (cf. Xavière Gauthier) surrealism could rely for its shock effects on the dismemberment of images of women, dismembering women now being out of style, is it now JFK *et al.* who must sacrifice their bodily integrity for the empowerment and relevance of mechanized Dada?

Net literature rediscovers the “scriptural logic of letters” that was displaced by the “phonocentrism of the Goethe era,” pointing as an influence to the rediscovery of the anagram “by various 20th century avant-garde movements”³⁰ – as if the word “scriptural” had no meaning at all, but were merely decoration. Thus it tends toward “language art,” “allowing for a self-referential presentation of cultural distinctions.” Symbolic forms to be deconstructed include “man/machine,” “0/1,” “analog/digital, hardware/software, code/interface, natural/artificial language,

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 180.

²⁹ Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “Playable Media and Textual Instruments,” in Gendolla, 245.

³⁰ Jürgen Schäfer, “Gutenberg Galaxy Revis(it)ed,” Gendolla, 126.

interactivity/(inter-)passivity, control/autonomy and last but not least: male/female. Distinctions such as these are raised artistically when technology is staged in a self-referential way.”³¹ For example, having listed the words for “mother” in 27 languages, one poet fascinated by the arrays presented by the “sum of variations of a single word in different languages” adds that “such a vision of the sum of the parts being greater than the whole is, *coincidentally* [emphasis added], not unlike Cubism.”³² I repeat: “coincidentally.” He or she adds,

The modularity and mutability of language was especially noticeable at the cafeteria of the University of Siegen on November 26, 2004, when the feature of the day, Seelachsfilet ... ran out and ... instead of making a new poster they simply crossed out the “see” portion of the word, converting “Seelachsfilet” to “Lachsfilet” and thus “pollack” to “salmon.” This was a more meaningful mutation [than the essay’s title ‘Code, Cod, Ode’], and one that gives a better sense of movement through changes in, or loss of, letters.³³

Here anagrammatic techniques, in creating salmon where there was none, go far beyond Adamic naming responsibilities into territory previously occupied by God. With “Biopoetry,” the usurpation is complete: It creates genetically manipulated poetic organisms – for instance, bacteria whose mutations, accelerated by ultraviolet light that can be turned on remotely through a website, are sequenced to reveal typographical errors in a Bible verse that was implanted in them using an algorithm that defies comprehension:

Kac transferred the sentence into Morse and then replaced its signs with the letters of a genetic code: the periods [dots?] were replaced by C (Cytosin), the

³¹ Friedrich W. Block, “Humor-Technology-Gender,” in Gendolla 162.

³² Loss Pequeño Glazier, “Code, Cod, Ode,” in Gendolla, 322.

³³ Ibid., 320.

lines [dashes?] by T (Thymine), gaps between words by A (Adenine) and spaces between letters by G (Guanine). From this results an AGCT-Chain representing a gene nonexistent in nature. Kac connected it to fluorescent protein and injected it into E. Coli [sic] bacteria.³⁴

The work “reminds us of the confusion of tongues inflicted by god [sic] as a reaction to the tower of Babel, another famous symbol for human hubris,”³⁵ in more ways than one. Confusion and hubris, the work’s aim and content, are styled satiric targets.

Bürger writes, of avant-gardism as a leftist movement, that “*Der totale Protest gegen den Moment des Zwanghaften führt das Subjekt nicht in die Freiheit der Gestaltung, sondern nur in die Beliebigkeit. Diese kann dann allenfalls post festum als individueller Ausdruck gedeutet werden.*”³⁶ True enough – except that here, the intent is not protest. Oppression is to be celebrated. Labor (by readers, not authors) is the key to net aesthetics; not yet having completed their “cultural evolution,” readers must suffer for authors’ art. Net literature calls for something other than the mental synthesis of “active” “structural” reading. “Nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text,” so that “ergodicity” integrates the reader “on the basic level of the medium’s materiality,”³⁷ which is not where most people want to be, leading one hard-working artist to ask ruefully, “How many readers of net literature do I know? ... Are there something like normal readers in the net, i.e. people who are neither looking for contacts nor writing themselves?”³⁸ Another theorist, concerned that the audience for digital literature is not yet measured in the millions, actively seeks distance from an avant-garde that would foreground code:

³⁴ Ibid., 59.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Total protest against outside influences leads the artist not to increased freedom, but into randomness. When the party’s over, this can be interpreted as individual expression.” Bürger, 91.

³⁷ Frank Furtwängler, “Human Practice,” in Gendolla, 71.

³⁸ Susanne Berkenheger, “i’m dying, honey,” in Gendolla, 357.

With computer games and avant-garde literary experiments, digital textuality has conquered both mass audiences and academic readers interested in theorizing digital art, but it has not yet reached the middle of the cultural spectrum, namely the educated public who reads primarily for pleasure, but is capable of artistic discrimination. ... To me an artistic medium only becomes truly significant when it is able to conquer the center of the spectrum.³⁹

Victory over the readers of “Günter Grass, Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Umberto Eco or Michel Tournier, all brilliant storytellers”⁴⁰ may be long in coming. In my opinion, it will be delayed until e-text reading hardware is made two-sided, displaying titles in big letters on the reverse where other people can see them.

Eternal fame in real time

Writing online is like anything at all, obviously (net literature aside, people still post conventional forms of all kinds), but I will concentrate on the online diary and self-presentation variety: conventional prose heavily influenced by the net literature aesthetic, although the locus of the algorithm shifts. I won't generalize, since everybody knows what social networking sites are like at this point. One of their more characteristic features is participants' “profiles,” their answers to survey forms. The web is populated almost entirely with interview subjects – interviewed by machines: Blanks appear on the screen, and the youth of today types its inmost secrets. Help! But instead of aiming for the really soft target, I will concentrate on self-interrogation as it occurs more subtly in the work of adult cyber-glitterati. My example is *www.riesenmaschine.de* (“giant machine”), an aggregate blog by German hipsters. One of them won a prestigious literary prize in 2006. She was later quoted as an expert futurologist in a newspaper weekend

³⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality,” in Gendolla, 257-258.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 257.

supplement⁴¹ saying time is too valuable to waste in libraries, and that both copyright and non-digitized books will become irrelevant. An article by a colleague of hers, an astronomer, appeared previously in the paper's weekend edition.⁴² He brags about his troubles dealing with PINE (a primitive e-mail program for UNIX terminals) and writes, among other things, "*Der erste Absatz ... strahlte in seinem Enthusiasmus wie der todeskranke Heine und schillerte wie Kafka nach dem Bade in einem Ölsee*" (the first paragraph radiated enthusiasm like the terminally ill Heine and shimmered like Kafka after a bath in a lake of oil), which is really extraordinarily awful writing in any language. Now that even Kool Keith is down on the web ("People aren't communicating anymore. They got Myspace now. People aren't talking"⁴³), the latter author takes care to intimate that he and the other gifted people (identified only by their first initials, like secret agents), all close friends, meet frequently at each other's apartments.

The *Riesenmaschine* coterie's devotion to the interactive aesthetic is clearly evidenced in the modules "god of the good idea that came too late" and "god of frictionless traffic." The former is "*zuständig für schlagfertige Antworten, die einem erst Stunden später einfallen*" (responsible for snappy comebacks that first occur to you hours later). The latter keeps an eye on technology and "states of sexual emergency." He "*unterscheidet nicht prinzipiell zwischen Serverabfragen, Körpersäften und Metaphysik, solange 'alles fließt'*" (does not distinguish between server requests, bodily fluids, and metaphysics, as long as everything keeps flowing), *i.e.*, he is too vulgar to contemplate. The invocation of the "god of entertaining eventlessness":

Dieser Schutzpatron aller Blogger sorgt dafür, dass einem Berichtenswertes zustösst, obwohl man nie vor die Tür oder wenn, dann nur bis zum Supermarkt geht.

⁴¹ *Süddeutsche Zeitung* magazine, Dec. 8, 2006.

⁴² *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23-24 September, 2006.

⁴³ *THE WIRE*, 9/06.

Kann er das nicht gewährleisten, hilft er wenigstens dabei, die Leere mitreissend zu schildern.⁴⁴

One or two of my readers are possibly thinking, “All bloggers?”

Before leaving the very boring site, I took a look at the online works of the literary prize-winner. Hers is a classic blog – not a diary, but links with commentary. The style aspires to emulate the old suck.com, or slashdot – nerdy creatives up close and impersonal. Most of the links are to pages advertising products (book titles link to amazon), as if what “happens” in this life is that new products are launched. A recurring mode is ridicule of the overeducated and undercapitalized who have naïvely chosen to cast their lot with industrial design.

Eigentlich ist der Tentakelsitzdonut Snork ein weiteres Produkt, das die Welt a) nicht braucht, b) schon gar nicht braucht, weil es gehäkelt ist und c) auch gar nicht kaufen kann (Preis auf Anfrage, say no more). Aber "Tentakelsitzdonut Snork"! Hat von der Herstellung des ersten Faustkeils bis heute je ein Produkt einen so herrlichen Namen getragen wie "Tentakelsitzdonut Snork"?*

**Deeplink-unfähiges Flash, auf "Möbel" klicken.⁴⁵*

In another entry she advertises a liquor-delivery service in Berlin, concluding, “*Es gibt Religionen, die einen schlechteren Himmel vorsehen als einen, in dem man nachts um drei noch Bier in den Park geliefert*

⁴⁴ “This patron saint of all bloggers makes sure that things worth reporting happen to one, even though one never leaves one’s home except to buy food. Failing that, he aids in creating fascinating portrayals of nothingness.”

⁴⁵ “The tentacle-seating-donut Snork is one more product that the world a) doesn’t need, b) so totally doesn’t need, because it’s crocheted, and c) cannot purchase – price on request, say no more. But tentacle-seating-donut Snork! Was there ever a product, from the time of the earliest hand-axe, with a lordlier name than ‘tentacle-seating-donut Snork?’” (The footnote contains instructions for seeing the animation on the designers’ website – something about their Flash isn’t quite *au courant*.)

bekommt.”⁴⁶ The new, larger M&M candies are a female aphrodisiac, she writes in a stunningly crass passage from which I will not quote. But that’s her right: The site is, among other things, the portal for her P.R. agency.

I know what you’re thinking – “This dumb bitch got a *prize*? Who did she fuck?” But that would be blaming the victim. Ask instead: Who’s she related to? Just kidding. Ask instead: How bad were the other entries? This is Germany, after all, the land that invented mind-numbing tedium (if *Buddenbrooks* and *Effi Briest* are to be believed), a country where dull naturalism is still regarded as a challenge worthy of the attentions of ambitious young authors. (A sample from the March, 2007 *Lift*, a sort of *TimeOut Stuttgart* – the original German is irrelevant, since this is Writing Degree Zero – from an author of three published novels scheduled to read at the *Literaturhaus*: “‘We could have been happy –,’ he bit his lower lip, looking at Edith thoughtfully, then said: ‘Shit, it’s just not going to work out with us.’ He laughed as though his statement amused him, and Edith laughed, too. ‘Everything okay?’ he asked, and she said, ‘Yes, everything’s okay,’ and had to laugh yet again. He had begun to put on his shoes.”) The winner’s entry, by contrast, is reported to have been funny.

The *Riesenmaschine* site is equal parts advertising and scorn. There are no descriptions, only mentions. The seating donut’s name is “*herrlich*” – say no more. But the author is under pressure, she writes, yoked to the grindstone and inadequately protected by the gods of full speed ahead. Racing through the modern world like a rabbit with its tail on fire, but without actually moving, she pauses long enough to associate beer with heaven and make fun of a chair. The site is crowded with comments on products and packaging. That’s perfectly natural; it’s what P.R. people do for a living, I suppose. The site exclusively addresses popular subjects: Beer is a mass-market product, and every weird new chair or web site would like to be. It’s only the style that’s superior and hyperbolic (“*des ersten Faustkeils*”), anything but unpretentious. In short, the giant machine is devoted to the inescapably banal, routine life of a consumer, as digested by minds like steel traps. While pop aesthetes with vestigial technical skills

⁴⁶ “There are religions that anticipate a worse heaven than one in which you can have beer delivered to a park at three in the morning.”

write algorithms to generate annoying content, the giant machinists post as human algorithms – or rather, they designate themselves wits with the Midas touch. Anything whatsoever can benefit by being elevated into their discourse, becoming at once simple and lifeless. As Bürger put it, “*Inzwischen hat mit der Kulturindustrie die falsche Aufhebung der Distanz zwischen Kunst und Leben sich ausgebildet, wodurch auch die Widersprüchlichkeit des avantgardistischen Unterfangens erkennbar wird.*”⁴⁷ The giant machine no longer has to choose: It is industry, avant-garde, and lifestyle all at once. Net literature need not aspire openly to be art; it is part of a “*befreiende Lebenspraxis*”⁴⁸ (liberating lifestyle) that just somehow happens, in weak moments, to aspire to a mass audience and millions in royalties.

This new variety of authorship is not intended to move the masses; it imitates the form of inside jokes, but aims them at a large clientele – not the old white-collar proletariat, but its densely populated, self-perpetuating avant-garde of godlike creators who spend their lonely hours churning serially through superficial impressions of each other. The artist class that once drank absinthe in bars now drinks coffee alone, hard at work on a Garbage In=Garbage Out pyramid scheme whose mountains of garbage will touch the sky. You can try to fight P.R., but it’s bigger than both of us: Even the unregenerate modernist Lev Manovich, who has described media art as a rehash of the forgotten triumphs of 1920s Soviet cinema, experimentation in painting after 1870 as “psychosis,” and the work of up-and-coming young marketing professionals as “the most innovative cultural production done today,”⁴⁹ clutters up his site with advertorials for “coolhunting” and other loci of nifty industrial design. His program may be a workers’ utopia, but follow his links and you’ll end up doing battle with tentacle-seating-donuts.

⁴⁷ “Meanwhile, with the culture industry, the fake suspension of the distance between life and art has developed further, through which the contradictoriness of the avant-garde project also becomes apparent.” Bürger, 68.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁹ The Soviet part is the main thesis of *The Language of New Media*. The quotes that follow are from his newer book on software studies (online as a draft, with a title that might be tentative, but you can get there from www.manovich.net).

Fame is a cruel mistress who has always depended on the kindness of strangers

Roland Barthes, known for promulgating “the death of the author,” was a famous author:

With the alibi of a pulverized discourse, a dissertation destroyed, one arrives at the regular practice of the fragment; then from the fragment one slips to the ‘journal.’ At which point, is not the point of all this to entitle oneself to write a ‘journal’? ... Yet the (autobiographical) ‘journal’ is, nowadays, discredited. Change partners; in the sixteenth century, when they were beginning to be written, without repugnance they were called a *diary*: *diarrhea*.⁵⁰

As Barthes says, when you’re famous, people care what you have to say. You can publish it in books, and people pay money for them. He was privileged to regard the “fragment (haiku, maxim, *pensée*, journal entry)”⁵¹ as a literary genre, since his reputation was firmly established: Whenever Barthes stopped in the middle, editors called to pester him.

How can we characterize the pose that would lead an unknown to post to the web not as a diarist or essayist, but a compiler of fast, fragmentary reactions to questions no one asked? Who can earn our gratitude with oblique rudeness and nervous apathy?

It’s not just anyone. The web’s endless interactively personal modular texts are a simulacrum of celebrity. People want to be famous (call it Romanticism if you insist, but not while I’m around) and the web makes fame instantly attainable, in theory and occasionally in practice. Literature, even notebooks and marginalia and the pseudo-posthumous essayistic flotsam that once made up diaries, is out of style. What we want to know about famous people now is how they do it. The mantle of fame is as

⁵⁰ Barthes, 95.

⁵¹ Ibid.

magical and easy to put on as the expensive handbags carried by struggling secretaries in New York: Write as if you were being interviewed.

The model that inspires all this exposure is not personal acquaintance, which seldom involves exchanging book-length accounts of one's chronic irritability, but imaginary friendship, the inner social climbing of aspiring artists everywhere: Sylvia writes an exemplary diary, Ted lets the idly curious world pry it out of him, and Anonymous, consciously or unconsciously, decides he can rise straight from obscurity to the Elysian Fields where Ted and Sylvia sport among the fauns by imitating them. It's really no different than if he started wearing tweed jackets and moved to Cambridge – he wouldn't be the first.

Bloggers lament and critics jeer that compared to traditional media, their readership is paltry. For example, with 450 readers a day, you might make the Top 100 of German blogs;⁵² therefore, the theory goes, bloggers are wasting their time, since they could have more readers by publishing in their bowling league newsletters. But bowling leagues have a glass ceiling. For those who aspire to the visibility, if not the financial rewards, of the mass market and might suddenly experience them at any moment, the quiet humiliation of reading their own site statistics is a small price to pay for entry.

Traditionally, the gaps that invoked the *ex-post-facto* muse, consecrating vague, unmotivated fragments as the most interesting reading because of their authorship, could just as easily consist of excess information as of empty space. Too much information or too little: Reception will be fragmentary either way. Older music and film media (radio, TV) are easily able to overwhelm us, because they set the pace of reception. We absorb what we can, and excess information is lost. Writing had a harder time swamping us with its excesses, since it just sits there; prose authors flatter themselves that with patience, even their most cryptic or voluminous utterances will be deciphered. Online, too, reception sets its own pace. There is no need for high-informational gaps to arise: Any digression that might constitute a distraction can be banned to a separate page, MLA-style, like the foot- and endnotes one finds popularizing texts as they happen. Authors are

⁵² *Süddeutsche Zeitung* jetzt.de youth page, Dec. 4, 2006.

free to ramble encyclopedically. Online, even film and music can be consumed over and over.

For reasons of Futurism, such relaxation and liberty upsets net aesthetes, who aspire to the urgency and novelty of a wire service feed. It is, furthermore, not the ambition of those who voluntarily maintain large web sites to be compared to aging hobbyists who maintain 1,400-page manuscript lexicons of narrow gauge railways or the wildflowers of coastal Maine: They aspire to a certain topical relevance. How can online self-publishers, of all people, impose the breakneck pace that will guarantee continual, irretrievable information loss or absence, and with it the aura of inaccessibility, in a medium without space constraints? There is no way to force clock time on written text reception, unless one's medium is the teleprompter. But one can easily impose clock time on production: Write in "real time." Demand the Aristotelian unities in composition rather than reception – for example, by posting downloads "for a limited time only" or offering a "live chat." By borrowing the aesthetic of interactivity from the verbatim transcription technique of the celebrity interview – communicating under pressure, as if one's manager were already shooing the interviewer away – any website can become improvisational. Its content is its author's responsiveness and spontaneity in performance.

With its repetitive, recursive, and random elements and large scale, avant-gardism makes both the fragment and the person appealing options; algorithmic art is exhausting even for its producers, unless they are in a position to hire assistants or otherwise impose a division of labor – traditionally, among assorted movement members without specific responsibilities, whose star status is a matter of attitude. As one memorable teen, whom I don't know but whose online diary anyone may read for his or her idle amusement (her name may or may not be "Suzi"), remarks of a supervisor who offers condolences on the death of a close relative, "Who the fuck is he to act like my life is his cup of tea?" That might be a perfectly sensible thought for Bob to have around the time he is asked on live TV, with millions poised to listen, "What is the weirdest thing that ever happened to you?"⁵³ but it certainly is an odd question to direct at readers of one's

⁵³ Cott, 79

intimate public diary. Another press conference attendee (of Bob's) wants to know, "You were quoted as saying when you're really wasted you may enter into another field. How wasted is really wasted, and do you foresee it?"⁵⁴ Those are questions people answer online all the time, as arrogantly and evasively as any superstar, with the not-so-trivial difference that they're not famous and that nobody asked them.

Where urgency is patently absent – for instance, in a blog's archive – the only way to avoid kitsch is by fiat. "My early posts were ... in an unedited, fluid style ... very personal and most of those early posts persist on my blog today, even though the audience is much larger now. I made a conscious decision not to be embarrassed by those posts,"⁵⁵ the highly regarded social-networking theorist and software industry consultant danah boyd writes in her "bitty auto-biography," shortly after referring to her mother as "roots," the internet as "wings," and herself, for the third of five times in 3,000 words, as "smart." Card-carrying members of the human species will envy her control over her emotions, while dumb people will ask her to make key decisions for them – unless, of course, they first read her description (December, 2007) of trying on 150 pairs of pants without buying any.⁵⁶ "People need to embrace the world we live in"⁵⁷ (a world where "there's no reason to ... spend more than \$20 per week"⁵⁸) by creating personal homepages and updating them regularly, she writes (by the way, this is what I meant by consumerist *amor fati*; for flitting on wings of existentialism, see the "conscious decision" above), a world where strangers know all and her only defense is to generate a daily barrage of new information. Or not – the truth is that she immediately backs down and says the only defense is for everyone else to be a model of discretion and delicacy: "The *best* thing [emphasis added – she said it, not me!] about being an active blogger is that stuff gets buried by repetitive blogging. My new stuff goes to the top of the search engines, my old stuff fades away. And we have a name for anyone who goes out of their way to find that old stuff:

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁵ <http://www.danah.org/aboutme.html>

⁵⁶ http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2007/12/28/all_i_need_is_a.html

⁵⁷ http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2007/09/07/controlling_you.html

⁵⁸ <http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/meditations/>

stalker. And we don't really wanna work for, date, or befriend genuine stalkers. If it's public, but not easy to find, it's creepy that you went out of your way to find it."⁵⁹ Since I merely followed links on her homepage, I may still employ danah boyd, have sex with her, or be her friend – lurker, stalker, whatever she wants to call me, she believes it's my responsibility to shrink from knowing too much about her, although she published intimate letters to two close friends (as she says her blog initially was⁶⁰) with a vanity press instantly accessible worldwide, in effect stalking herself, a latter-day Lady Godiva whose ride has lasted ten years. (Disclosure: I almost deleted that paragraph when I realized she's getting a Ph.D. in library science [now known as "Information"] because you shouldn't kick people when they're down, but then I realized not kicking them is even more disdainful – as if you don't formally recognize their self-identification as "up."⁶¹)

Any theory of the avant-garde that assumes its goal is liberation can only stumble over such eagerness to please the machine. Bürger writes, for example, "*So kann der Zufall, der doch den Menschen dem ihm ganzlich Heteronomen unterwirft, paradoxerweise als Chiffre der Freiheit erscheinen.*"⁶² Such an insight will certainly help you understand the old-fashioned post-Walter-Pater⁶³ avant-garde, where arbitrary or chance operations were employed to break through the force of habit in hopes of changing the world, but it is no particular help in addressing art for which custom and routine are the last reservoirs of a pleasing arbitrariness in a world whose organization, as yet ungrasped, it extols.

Self-application

If the mutual unmasking of various once hermetic social groups' "backstage areas" accomplished by TV sitcoms was enough to facilitate the upheavals of the 1960s,⁶⁴ then the unmasking of the inner lives of sheltered

⁵⁹ http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2007/09/07/controlling_you.html

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ I say this advisedly, conscious that any suggestion of jockeying for status between Information and Media Studies will call to mind rats in a bucket.

⁶² "Thus coincidence, which subjects man to something entirely alien, can paradoxically appear as a cipher for freedom." Bürger, 90.

⁶³ See Pater in Allen, 528. "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame ..."

⁶⁴ Cf. Meyerowitz.

suburban maidens, both before and after they go into P.R., is surely enough to facilitate something. When Meyerowitz wrote, “Gone are the great eccentrics, the passionate overpowering loves, the massive unrelenting hates, the dramatic curses and flowery praises,” he had never seen jaded adolescents place terse solicitations for one-night stands on after-school TV,⁶⁵ nor yet the video game “Super Columbine Massacre,” so on some level he had no idea, but on the other hand, people may have seemed more eccentric back when there were fewer of them.

The apparent frontal-lobe damage – that inability to switch horses in midstream – of especially the more prestigious Bob-interviewers, with their algorithmic tenacity, seems to have been modeled on either stalking (the original Dylanologist, A.J. Weberman, got his start going through Bob’s garbage⁶⁶) or academic scholarship: The interviewers work hard. They prepare by reading background information, so that they can second-guess virtually everything Bob might say about himself. If he says “my wife,” they know he’s been divorced. If he says “my house,” they know it’s a villa in Malibu with some really creative brickwork in the patios. Thirsting for information on Bob’s present state, they do their best to deny him one. No wonder they call him “mercurial.”

In self-interrogation, scholarly preparation is even better. It is incomparable. No journalist can compete, and no work is involved – just presence. On the subject of himself, everyone is a born expert, assuming he rejects determinism, as most of us do (recall Frith’s will-and-idea “memories of what we once wanted to be that make us what we are”⁶⁷). No one will contradict him, unless he stumbles into lasting fame as an object of surveillance like Freud’s Wolf Man or Star Wars Boy. But Bob’s interviews make the fallacy of self-interrogation painfully obvious: Bob lacks encyclopedic knowledge of Bob. He doesn’t even recognize well-known lines from *Highway 61 Revisited*. When he finally interviews himself, in *Chronicles*, he leaves gaping holes. No one has encyclopedic knowledge of himself; all we have are narratives that tend to appear seamless. Obnoxious siblings and ex-spouses will occasionally insist on correcting us, but people

⁶⁵ This might be just a German thing.

⁶⁶ Cott, 162.

⁶⁷ Frith, 278.

generally let our errors slip by unremarked. Self-interrogators seldom have anyone pointing out that events really happened quite differently. Celebrities are plagued with hordes of experts – thousands of would-be siblings and ex-spouses scattered around the globe – while nobodies flee to public private islands to harass themselves for the edification of inconceivably vast exclusive coteries.

The behavior of Bob's interviewers follows from the pop theory rejection of "structural listening": Since listening is considered an impossibly cerebral task and so time-consuming that it would bring reception to a standstill, they meet Bob halfway as if cornering a rat. Likewise, what net aesthetes demand of us is not "structural" reading, but self-persecution. If you don't get the beat, it's because you don't have the right moves. Properly carried out, your participation would constitute the work's missing presence, as well as your own. However (I would add), your stolidly relativist metaphysics (that life is a slippery, malleable affair and that your existence not only precedes your essence, but precludes it) results from your studied spontaneity – not vice versa.

Never touch a running system

Art, to acquire a reputation for exclusive accessibility to an undercapitalized intellectual elite despite broad distribution through media and museums, must take steps to scare even its own overeducated audience away. Sex, violence, and blasphemy haven't shocked educated people in a while; with sources in popular culture, they are the stock in trade of hipsterism (the aesthetic that avoids the middlebrow by mixing the high and the very, very low). To stay revolting, today's avant-garde must borrow its aversive qualities from the wearying complexity of recursive algorithms and machinery. Being effectively frightened off means giving up and resigning oneself to having lacked the persistence necessary to learn the cultural techniques for normative reception. Despite its privileges, even an educated audience can become one of ignorant, admiring outsiders whose aesthetic resembles Futurism to a degree that is truly eerie.

Under the influence of that aesthetic, and in awe of the complexities of musical form, pop theory makes art music reception a specialized expertise,

and its analyses make music such a subordinate element in songs that in the end they are seen as getting by without it. Unfortunately, the conception of pop that remains – as locus of collective identity – has side effects. While reception of music *per se* is made contingent on belonging to a tiny subculture of musicologists and composers, what remains to the hoi polloi is mindless (“timeless”) enthusiasm contingent on the will to reproduce dance moves. Enthusiasm for individual performers is characterized as “Romantic,” but because Romanticism is disallowed as too individualistic (in reality, it’s too political), collective enthusiasm for group activities becomes an ethical norm, ending in inward genuflection before “what we would like to be, not what we are,” as Frith writes: “Musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy – it is not mediated by daydreams – but is experienced directly: music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be,”⁶⁸ in this case “the immediate *experience* of collective identity.”⁶⁹ Forget democracy, pluralism, solidarity, all the human rights abstracted from the inescapable fact of individuality and the arbitrariness of the social order: All we ever really wanted to be was a litter of puppies in a basket.

A comparison of disco fever to net aesthetics is informative: While it is socially acceptable to misapprehend music and dismiss its practitioners as eggheads (*i.e.*, one can do so without branding oneself as stupid), not nearly so many people are eager to advertise their ignorance of computers. Instead, information technology with its invisible automata attracts cargo cultists in droves, observing rituals whose aims and effects no one pretends to know. Algorithms are something programmers don’t bother with (as the saying goes, computers are binary, so you never have to count past one), but their imagined character becomes the role of choice for artists wishing to find a voice in an inhuman medium. Whatever else they are, algorithms are fast. Where they are seen to extend natural law, dictating what functions will be performed in a given situation, they are not merely fast but instantaneous.

As pop’s sales function is increasingly “Romanticized” as emotion, “serious” art and music, whatever their *de facto* methods, must become process. The artist and the artwork vanish, taking with them all hope of

⁶⁸ Frith, 274.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

conveying experience by indirect means, replaced by a performance that becomes the task of the recipient. Indirect representation is suspect for postmodernism, but since direct representation is a contradiction in terms, what remains is performance – that is, no representation at all. Successful performance is so labor-intensive that it can only be realized as a lifestyle (of focus on presence – compare “mindfulness”) while life itself is considered so banal – best reflected by pop songs – that the hallmark of “realism” has become “magic.” As a result, pop culture finds only one admissible model for its seriousness: the avant-garde of Marinetti. The lifestyle it espouses is one of endless effort. Performance becomes the locus of identity and legitimacy – no symbolism, no incarnation, just the burden of performing whatever task might enable one to get into the state of mind in which one can feel the presence of the emergent collective puppy before moving on to the next basket.

Executive summary: Portable music and the scalable self

When The Entities Formerly Known as People try to become their own participation in cultures of identity congruent with its representations aimed at total strangers who have better things to do, they don’t suddenly become thrillingly disruptive mass cultural saboteurs: The scalable self is familiar – it’s the famous self. There’s nothing Romantic about any of it. If Whitman’s noiseless, patient spider went to an LGBT Pride parade, he’d just get stepped on. Music, the art once dearest to Romantic hearts, can’t possibly survive the transposition to performativity, and it is amusing (or at least I find chapters 1-3 extremely funny) to see the things people will do to make sure nothing noiseless or patient is considered for inclusion in their *Discourse Networks 2000/2100*.

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