

# **Music, Desire and the Social**

**I a n A n d r e w s .**

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What is the position that music occupies in relation to language and social processes? Has music a subversive role in confrontation with language and signifying formations? What is its relation to the unconscious and, to what in primitive societies is called "the sacred," and to what modern capitalist society puts aside as schizophrenia? This essay will be an attempt to answer these questions in the light of recent psychoanalytic and post-structural theory. In theorizing music, a most useful tool has proved to be Julia Kristeva's practice of semanalysis which describes signification while at the same time analysing, criticizing and dissolving meaning. Semanalysis combines theories of language with theories of subjectivity. Kristeva draws from

many diverse fields, from the semiology of Saussure and Peirce with the philosophic premises of Hegel's logic and Husserl's phenomenology, to Benveniste's linguistics, and to Lacan's theories of the unconscious, giving us a critical theory based on desire, heterogeneity, otherness and distance, which seems most suitable to the study of music.

## **Music Signification and Femininity**

For Jacques Attali,<sup>1</sup> music has always signified, even prior to the cultural/economic codification which eventuates with music's entry into the market economy and subsequent commodification which destroys its ritualistic use value, abstracting it into exchange value. Before exchange, in ancient societies, music operates according to a code that Attali calls sacrificial. Music, given meaning by the codes of the sacred, forms, domesticates and ritualizes noise. Music is not innocent but, through ritual, structures power relations, enforcing and legitimizing the dominant code. Attali stresses, however, that music cannot be equated with a language because it never has a stable reference to a code of a linguistic type. Music is incapable of referring to a signified object. Following Claude Levi-Strauss, he argues that it is instead a language without meaning.

This absence of meaning has been theorised, in the past, in terms of a general lack; as a metaphorically feminine object, in a negative or surplus relation to language, it rests outside any discursive social order. Psychoanalysis, since Freud, has established certain theoretical affinities between music, the unconscious and the feminine. Music has continually been regarded in the negative sense, as other, desired yet feared. More recent psychoanalytic theory, however, has shifted the emphasis from that of lack and absence to an association with reproduction and the maternal body.

Theorists such as Claude Bailble<sup>2</sup> argue that the arrival of the subject is effected by auditory rather than visual associations, in opposition to Jacques Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage<sup>3</sup> in which the child begins to resolve itself as an I and function as a subject in response to a reflected image of itself. Bailble argues that the sounds occurring through the body to body contact of the foetus and mother (heartbeat, breathing, voice etc) establish the subject's consciousness of its other. The child learns to *be* in response to sonorous rather than visual cues.

Carol Flinn, in an essay entitled *The Problems of Femininity in Theories of Film Music*, states that music's metaphorically feminine position has allowed feminist writers, such as Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous, to celebrate music as a potentially subversive force which reclaims the realm of female desire. "In its so-called failure to produce concrete meaning, in its inability to conduct the listener to fixed references, its irrationality and emotionalism, its very invisibility, music challenges some of dominant representation's most cherished axioms, such as its impulse towards rationalism and the epistemological privilege awarded vision"<sup>4</sup> However, she is quick to point out that these theories become problematic when, "the traditional claim of music and femininity's ontological, 'natural' link is extended,"<sup>5</sup> sometimes leading to an argument that suggests that women and music function beyond patriarchal inscription. For Kristeva, music is heterogeneous to meaning and signification and is synonymous with what she calls "poetic Language," (after a concept introduced by the Russian Formalists) which she says is constructed on the basis of two opposing modalities, the *symbolic* and the *semiotic*. The semiotic precedes and transcends signification; anterior to any social formation; it is both pre and extra-linguistic; both prior to and necessary to the acquisition of language but not identical to language. It

concerns the Freudian notion of the drives (*Triebe*).and the primary processes (displacement and condensation) which connect empty signifiers to psychosomatic functionings through metaphor and metonymy. The semiotic is generally located within and in relation to the pre-oedipal (pre-predicative) subject. On the other hand, the symbolic is the place of language and social organization; sign, syntax and the paternal function; position and judgment. It involves thethetic phase, the identification of the subject and her/his distinction from objects, and the establishment of a sign system. Kristeva says that poetic language is the result of a particular articulation between the semiotic and the symbolic. Even non verbal signifying systems, such as music, that are based primarily on the semiotic, have recourse to the symbolic. They function in a dialectical movement involving both modalities because the listening subject is ultimately constituted by both semiotic and symbolic organizations. For Kristeva music operates according to two distinct modes of the signifying process; the *phenotext* (communication and logic) and the *genotext* (semiotic rhythm).

For Levi-Strauss also, music is determined by a system composed of two grids; <sup>6</sup> one physiological, of natural organic rhythms; the other cultural , involving hierarchical relations between tones and the culturally accepted meanings attached to certain combinations of notes and temporal relationships. According to Levi-Strauss, music has the "power to act simultaneously on the mind and the senses, stimulating both ideas and emotions and blending them in a common flow" <sup>7</sup> So it can be seen that while the place of music, in its "pure" state, is largely that of the semiotic, it does, however, operate according to a cultural logic that rests within the symbolic.

## Music and Sacrifice

According to structural anthropology, the sacrificial act regulates semiotic pre-symbolic violence, and by focusing violence (or a representation of violence) on a victim, displaces it onto the symbolic order maintaining the social norm. As the social order is founded on representation, sacrifice shows that representing violence is enough to stop it and impose social coherence. The sacrifice is not a celebration of violence itself but rather a positioning of violence within the socius. Lying within the realm of substitution and metonymy it resembles the unconscious and is thus structurally indispensable to the systemization of language. Attali states that music organizes society and creates political order because it is a minor form of sacrifice. For Attali, noise is violence, destruction and original chaos, a primordial threat of death, and music is a channelization of noise. It is, in a strategy which runs parallel to religion, a simulacrum of ritual murder which serves to integrate and channel anxiety, violence and the imaginary of society, contributing to the socio-symbolic order. Music orders, domesticates and ritualizes noise, tying it into the cultural matrix of the dominant order. But music is also transgression. Kristeva believes that music, along with art and theatre, as a practice which precedes and accompanies the sacrificial act, deploys an expenditure of semiotic violence which transcends the symbolic and dissolves the logical order. Music produces an uneasiness which goes with regressing to a time prior to the mirror stage. By reproducing gestural signifiers the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches what Kristeva refers to as the "semiotic chora;" an economy of the drives and primary processes, which articulate a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process of rupture and articulation (rhythm) that both precedes and transcends language. It is

the underlying force of figuration, a place of no thesis, the antithesis of judgment, for Plato, nourishing and maternal.

Music then, as a process, as a semiotization of the symbolic, permits a flow of *jouissance*<sup>8</sup> into language cracking the socio-symbolic order and revealing the facilitation of the drives in the linguistic order itself.<sup>9</sup>

## **Music and Narrative**

This idea is taken up by Deleuze and Guattari, for whom music is a block of becoming at the level of expression: a becoming woman, a becoming child, a becoming animal, a deterritorialization of the socius, producing dangerous pleasures in a multiplication of the senses, veering towards destruction, breakage and dislocation. Music through the cultural constructs of melodic and harmonic coordinates, reterritorializes upon itself. The tendency of Western diatonic music is to plunge us into negativity but then immediately return us to the safety of thethetic, that is to the tonic, the original tone, the refrain. Dissonance is introduced to produce anxiety which will quickly be overcome with a return to harmony and order. Such music aims for closure in the narrative sense, obliterating differences and producing a sealed text. In this music the death wish is sublimated. Attali suggests that in this way music mimics the ritualization of murder and thus participates in the imposition of theological constraints. Music provokes disorder and then proposes order, it is a form of myth whose code, governed by the rules of narrative, simulates the accepted rules of society, semanticizing kinship and social relations and reducing the social organism to the structure of the family. So it can be seen that while music, as a threat of death, has the potential to penetrate the socio-symbolic order with *jouissance*, thus threatening the unity of the subject and the social realm, it

has, instead, historically, engaged in its own reterritorialization through cultural (political and economic) codification simulating and fulfilling the role of religious prohibition and the denial of jouissance through social constraints. Music, however, continually escapes codification and reterritorialization by introducing noise (interruption, interference, disruption) into the structures of the dominant musical networks. Many modernist movements in music constitute noise to traditionally accepted musical forms. Atonal music and Musique Concrete challenge the authority of tonality. The indeterminant theories of Cage, Ashley and Wolff, disrupt the traditional notions of composition and performance. Avant garde jazz, with its disregard for apriori key relationships, breaks with traditional diatonic jazz and becomes an unsatisfied process rather than a closed text. With the advent of sound recording technology the very conception of what constitutes "music," the distinction of music from noise, is further put into question.

## **Music and Rhizomes**

As with the music of high culture, popular music develops according to an internal dialectic where musical movements or styles define themselves in response to what has gone before. Punk was a direct attack on the modes of production of the rock industry as a social economic apparatus. Punk and post-punk musical forms functioned as anti-music, (or more precisely, the anti-symbolic in music) and pointed to a return to the void, noise, death, the semiotic, shattering the cultural-symbolic grid, and obliterating meaning. Rhizomatic<sup>10</sup> music of transformational multiplicities and transversal movement; of ruptures and malfunctions; anti-genealogy, anti-memory; heterogeneous; played by amateurs and incompetents. Music of plural dimensions, that overturns the very codes that structure it in a moving play of

signifiers; non hierarchical, abstract, disembodied and decontextualized, defined solely by a circulation of states and becomings. Musical movements such as musique concrete, cut-up, punk, dub and hip-hop, are involved in a signifying process which escapes the constraints of the symbolic and break through to a topology of the body and the drives. These are musics of process, as opposed to musics of completion. The structure of Jamaican "dub," for example, in direct contrast to traditional Western musics, has no culmination and termination points, but is rather a continuum with multiple entry and exit points. It is a heterogeneous assemblage, against a false conception of voyage and movement. Dub foregrounds negative spaces and brings attention to silences which function as important structural elements of the music (as in Cage and traditional Japanese music). Dub is essentially, in its methodology, a music of subtraction, a succession of plateaus.<sup>11</sup> Black rap or, hip-hop, Africanises<sup>12</sup> American popular music by accentuating polyrhythms and grafting pieces of already produced music together (by scratching and sampling other records) extending the creative and rhythmic possibilities to create a composite. assemblage of conflicting elements in a dialectical relation (as in the sense of Eisenstein's Dialectic Cinema). Raw uncommercial hip-hop, as musical montage (in the tradition of musique concrete and cut-up) favours disruption over unity; collision over linkage; noise and atonality over harmony. It is a music of fissure and contradiction in which the subject/listener escapes the judging consciousness of the ego cogito and losses him/herself in the rhythms of the semiotic and the body.

## **Music and Myth**

In capitalist society strategies of negation quickly become commoditized and mythologised. All apparently spontaneous

rituals and manifestations are dehistoricised, naturalized and converted into myth. Society protects itself from negativity by the creation of myth and commodities. In popular music, negativity is soon sublimated; rupture and dislocation are smoothed over; power is restored to the signifier and the subject is reconstructed in her/his rightful place within the structure of the family state and religion. Music is thus reterritorialized (or oedipalized) The anarchic destructive energy of punk is channeled into a homogenous prepackaged spectacle of encased negativity. This process of reterritorialization involves a normalization in which multiplicities are reduced to singularities, gestures of dissent are disarmed and classified, and signification proceeds according to the dominant ideology:- "so its come and get your punk in Woolworth's...it always comes around... they make it safe." <sup>13</sup>

## **Music and Reterritorialization**

In disco, and more recently "dance music," the raw semiotic rhythms of Afro-American music (funk, soul, hip-hop go-go etc) are filtered and homogenized. The jarring disruptive elements, such as the scratch and the cut, are normalized. In packaged disjunction; redefined and confined by context; in a supplementary relation to the constant beat; differences, interruptions and gaps disappear. The scratch, once functioning as noise, rhythmic device and reference to the means of production (making music directly from other records), becomes instead superficial decoration; a mere commodity; "another patch on the synth." <sup>14</sup> The dance floor is the site of harmonization and reterritorialization; simulated jouissance, sampled, placed under glass, commodified and reified. It fashions a consumer fascinated by her/his own identification with others; with the image of success and

happiness. The lost connections to the body are restored through the drives only to be commodified through a false integration. In ritual consummation and identification, sensual energy and expressiveness becomes a mere simulacrum and the restraints of religious prohibition return. In the nightclub we experience continuity; the return to harmony; the exclusion of noise; the channelization of the anarchic libidinous activity of the drives into the order of silence. Music, in my opinion, is a signifying phenomenon which produces meaning on two fronts; on the semiotic or physiological axis, and on the symbolic or cultural axis. Although the ambiguous and ineffable characteristics of music are often claimed by feminists to represent, in a positive sense, the subversive currents of the feminine, music should not be considered in isolation language and cultural formations as it cannot, ultimately, escape patriarchal and economic codification. In other words, although it is considered as language's Other, there is no music, which can be said to operate entirely within the bounds of the semiotic. Music's role in society seems to oscillate between regulation and subversion, and these codings and recodings occur in different ways. On one hand, within the paradigm of social conditions preceding music's transformation into an object of exchange, music is reterritorialized upon itself through the operations of religious ritual, the restraints of a cultural logic and the conventions of tonality. On the other hand, as the production of music is bound more closely to the economic networks of mass consumption, music is reterritorialized through the cultural logic of capitalism, producing a consequent shift in meaning. Marginal musical movements such as punk and black music, even though they may quickly be reterritorialized and normalized, do have a profound effect on the listener/subject by means of a destructuring/restructuring process. The subject always returns to the order of the symbolic but this new subject is never quite the same as before.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Trans. Brian Massumi, (Manchester University Press), 1985

<sup>2</sup> Claude Bailble, "Programming the Ear," Trans. Noel Sanders, University of Technology, Sydney, 1987

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, Tavistock, London, 1977, pp. 1-7

<sup>4</sup> Carol Flinn, "The Problem of Femininity in Theories of Film Music," *Screen*, vol27 No.6, 1986, p61

<sup>5</sup> Ibid,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p61. Claude Levi-Strauss, introduction to *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman, Harper and Row, New York, 1969

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.28

<sup>8</sup> The French word *jouissance* has no direct substitute in English. It means both enjoyment, in the sense of legal rights and political privileges, and pleasure, as the shattering pleasure of sexual climax in which the cultural logic of the ego-cogito is dissipated in a totality of enjoyment.

<sup>9</sup> According to Kleinian psychoanalysis, the drives involve pre-oedipal semiotic functions and energy that orient the body to the mother. The unconscious, facilitated by the drives and primary processes (displacement and condensation) connect empty signifiers to psychosomatic functions (or, at least, link them through metaphor and metonymy).

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, "Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus*, Trans. Brian Massumi, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis) 1987, pp 3-25

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari use the word "plateau" to describe self-vibrating regions of intensities whose development avoids any orientation towards an end. Hence they describe their book, *One Thousand Plateaus*, as an open structure, which can be accessed at any point, ie. as a succession of plateaus.

<sup>12</sup> Cornell West, "Out of Motown," *Oasis, Semiotext(e)* 12, vol IV No3, (Columbia University, New York,) 1984, p94

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Fitzgerald, "Make it safe," *Grubby Stories*, (Small Wonder Records) 1979

<sup>14</sup> Anna Munster, "The Cutting Edge," *Earshot*, 3rd Degree No 4, 1988.