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Pushing the Popular, or, Toward a Compositional Popular Aesthetics

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In this essay, I explore the possibility of a refashioning of the broader category of "the popular," and further, of "popular music," which, because of its obvious link to mass consumer culture, presents a challenge for any claims as to its transformative potential and capacity for resistance. This effort must follow the lead of various cultural theorists, who espouse something of an aesthetics of the popular, beyond, above, but also what we witness in contemporary pop and commercial artifacts, not only in terms of what's "hot" and what's not, but also in terms of the genres and artists themselves. This inevitably involves a peculiar paradox whereby we valorize, but also undermine, the popular. We embrace it, but also push its limits. To this end, I draw upon both Chris Cutler's taxonomy and criticism of the more traditional approaches to assessing the popular with respect to music and Jacques Attali's notion of "composition" to show how a reconstituted "popular" music is not only applicable to a broad understanding of music's situatedness, but can also have a significantly transformative social and political impact as well.

Introduction

Among other topics, in his book *File under Popular*, Chris Cutler—also a mainstay musician/composer/drummer on the British progressive and experimental rock scene for years[1]—attempts to answer the basic question "What is popular music?" He does this through brief expositions and criticisms of different theoretical approaches to apprehending "the popular." The first of these approaches he calls *"Popular" by Numbers*, where the guiding criteria for judging the popular amount to numerical and statistical analysis. What music is listened to the most? What music has been bought the most? The second of these approaches is *"Popular" as "Folk,"* where Cutler explores implicit claims with respect to certain music—namely, folk—being supposedly "of the people." The third of these approaches is *"Popular" as Genus,* which suggests the popular as, in Cutler's words, "a genus, definable ultimately by its means and relations of production, circulation, and consumption" (9). Finally, the

fourth of these approaches is what Cutler calls the *Mode of Production*, which will be his preferred approach to understanding the popular—if, that is, "the popular" is still a viable notion in light of his analysis. In a sense, whether it will, in fact, remain a viable notion and, if so, how fuel the primary impetus for the present essay, the crux of what is at stake. Are we forever relegated to Adorno's dichotomous, if dialectical, model—that hammer stroke otherwise called the "culture industry"? Or are there other models? Following Cutler and others, I hope to show how different musics demonstrate what we might take to be the best of what is popular, of what drives the popular aesthetic—not merely those kinds of music that we commonly call "pop" or "popular," which will, it is hoped, also be reconsidered as a result of our exploration. These musics achieve the popular largely through their identification with, integration of, and "commitment to electric and electronic technology, radio and the gramophone record, and to what we might call a demotic usage and language" (Cutler 4).

I will first discuss each of these four approaches briefly. This will be followed by an exploration as to why Cutler not only prefers the *Mode of Production*, but why he sees it as, really, a matter of necessity. To this end, Attali's "composition" provides a useful backdrop and foundation for Cutler's project, with an eye toward how his preference for the *Mode of Production* has to do, in large part, with an allowance of: 1) a mixing, a blurring, of musical genres and styles, 2) musical confrontations between improvisation and composition, spontaneity and arrangement, and 3) social confrontations between the human and the technological, individual and collective action.

"Popular" by Numbers

The *"Popular" by Numbers* model has to do quite simply with assessing the popularity of music in terms of numbers and statistics—and Cutler dismisses it rather summarily. Why? Because, as he states quite clearly at the outset, we are seeking to uncover "the popular," which, as Cutler says, should have something to do with the "life of the music itself" (5). Here, I understand Cutler's rather suggestive description to entail an emphasis on what music *means* to people. Thus, apprehending music in terms of numbers and statistics simply will not do. On the contrary, if we proceeded in this way, what we would actually be studying is the *market*—nothing more, nothing less. This is not to say that we should, in turn, summarily dismiss the study of how much, and what, music is bought and sold. Rather, the obvious problem here—as we look toward a critical assessment of music's popularity—is that the music itself is fairly incidental to this market process, unless we define music primarily in terms of the ways in which musical expressions can be subsumed by commercialism and the market, and manipulated as commodity, into commodity exchange, which Cutler will clearly not accept.

Richard A. Peterson suggests something similar, albeit in perhaps more general terms, in highlighting the distinction between "mass" and "popular." He counts

himself among "a number of researchers [who] found little empirical evidence for 'massification' and purposefully used the term 'Popular' rather than 'mass' culture to stress the *voluntaristic* nature of popular culture choices" (Peterson 53–54). Moreover, in further distancing himself and others implicitly from the culture industry model famously associated with Adorno, Peterson argues that any critical speculation with respect to the ramification of popular culture should not appeal to "some abstract force of massification [another way of describing the culture industry?] but in clearly identifiable elements of the structure and operation of the music industry itself." And finally, as if to, yet again, steal a page from Adorno, but toward vastly different ends, Peterson remarks that "rather than show some *linear trend* toward massification," what we would actually discover in our foray into the popular are "dialectical cycles in symbol production" (54).

Again, what we are attempting to articulate here is the problem of defining the popular in terms of corporate culture in general, and the market more specifically, which, although it is surely a part of music's social situatedness, does not at all constitute the breadth of music's connection to society. In other words, undermining the role of the market with respect to defining and situating music does not at all mean that music is an asocial phenomenon. As an example, Cutler shows how it is precisely as a result of music's being irreducible to market figures and commodification that the *"Popular" by Numbers* model is often mistakenly applied to folk music.

"Popular" as "Folk"

Describing folk music as "any indigenous, collective, relatively unalienated expressive cultural form … never produced primarily as a commodity" (6), Cutler nevertheless assesses the usual attribution of folk music characteristics to be confused. Quite simply, for Cutler, the music circulating within a particular community *is* the popular music of that community. Thus, there is, in a sense, no "unpopular" music to speak of. This would seem to suggest a useful direction for our purposes. However, what also follows, then, is that there is no choice either. There is only *that* music—i.e. the music "of the people." Now, this might seem like an acceptable situation. It might seem as though we have suddenly isolated the popular, that we have at least concretized our goal—but we have not done so.

Given that folk music is, in a manner of speaking, its own popular music, the crucial issue is whether we can utilize the traditional signature of folk music—that is, its populism—toward a more general inquiry as to what might constitute the popular in music. However, we can already infer the shortcomings of this approach from what has been said. That is, it is precisely because folk music must fulfill the conditions of a music *of* the people versus a music *for* the people that it cannot be utilized toward any real further understanding of the popular. Why is this? Why could folk music not occupy both of these realms at once—i.e. "of the people" *and* "for the people"? Here, Cutler gives the example of the English industrial folksong,

in which the music is simultaneously ''[sprung] directly from the concerns, consciousness and indigenous cultural background of the people amongst whom it circulated'' and, in being ''altered to suit the broadsheet buying public,'' simultaneously commodified (7). Would this not satisfy both criteria? No, says Cutler. The result of this dichotomy nevertheless still implicates issues concerning class difference and struggle. On the one hand, the music is relevant for those for whom it provides an opportunity for creative expression. On the other hand, the music is relevant for those for whom it provides an opportunity to consume. Thus, even though Cutler does admit that the *formal* (i.e. harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, lyrical elements) characteristics of the two types of folk music are often quite similar (and seemingly reconciled in the English industrial folksong), ''their deeper meanings are irreconcilably opposed,'' which is to say that they are borne of different social circumstances (7). Thus, we cannot call both types popular.

I might offer another, perhaps more complicated, example related to folk music. This is that of the contemporary singer who utilizes the musical material and ideological populism often associated with certain folk traditions (exemplified perhaps by the far-reaching ramifications of ''This land is your land…'') to sustain an overtly political and social message, where someone like Ani DiFranco situates herself, in part, as a direct descendant of musical folk heroes like Woody Guthrie and Utah Phillips. On the one hand, this example does, in fact, retain the ideological roots in which the musical material is grounded. On the other hand, the appropriated musical material cannot strictly be said to be *of* the people—which is to say, of the people for whom the initial song or tradition fulfilled an immediate use-value. This is, of course, not meant to pass judgment on this kind of music. On the contrary, as Cutler says, ''it is the chosen milieu of many 'politically' committed musicians.'' ''But,'' he continues, ''how could we call it popular?'' (8).[2] Of course, there is, in fact, the unlikely possibility that such a contemporary rendering of folk material or a folk song might become a fully commercial, marketable ''hit''—which is to say, a hit ''in spite of the fact that in both form and content it is quite unlike other popular hits, and in spite of the fact that it is in every way the product of another time, place and sensibility'' (Cutler 8). However, such a rare phenomenon, Cutler fears, would only serve to exacerbate the more general discrepancy concerning the matter of what constitutes the popular. We still need ways to distinguish the various modes through which the notion of the popular is employed.

Perhaps, then, there is some sense in which, although *not* constituting the popular, folk music can still guide us toward understanding it. If so, distinguishing the popular cannot be a matter of simply distinguishing between the two versions of folk music above—traditional and contemporary, or ''of the people''-popular and ''choice''-popular (as Cutler also describes them). It must also be a matter of distinguishing the ways in which the folk songs associated with these traditions exhibit the tensions between ideology and commodity. These include: 1) the song as expressive currency; 2) the song in ersatz form as a commodity, with its class-ideology subverted; 3) the song as a specialized commodity, with its class-ideology

retained; and 4) the song as "pure" commodity, with its class-ideology formally intact, but its meaning basically absent, thus commodified (Cutler 8).

How do we sift through these tensions in our quest for the popular? Cutler's initial suggestion is that we distinguish quite simply between the basic operativity of the broader categories of "folk" and "popular." Thus, folk must always be "based on its modes of production, circulation, and consumption and by its deep relation to the community in which it lives," whereas popular entails "musics circulating as commodities" (Cutler 9). So, although Cutler would surely not want to discount the efforts of *contemporary* folk singers as a political force, the fact that their music is potentially commodifiable necessitates that it be considered as much a popular form as a folk form. Again, the popular cannot be completely severed from commodification. However, as Cutler clarifies, although

> in every case then popular music exists as a commodity, that is not to say that every music which takes a commodity form is popular. This would be plainly absurd. It would mean that field recordings of ethnic music, bird and whale song, Gesualdo, LaMonte Young [avant-garde minimalist composer] and Evan Parker [free improvisation instrumentalist], to name but a few, were all popular. *Though popular music always describes a commodity form, it must be defined by more than that.* (9, emphasis added)

This is clearly an important point for Cutler, and it is precisely this "more than that"—i.e. more than commodification—that brings us to his third model for apprehending the popular: *"Popular" as Genus.*

"Popular" as Genus, Part One: Beyond Genre

Initially, it seems as though the *"Popular" as Genus* mode would be ideally suited for Cutler's goal of reaching this newer understanding of the popular, and this because of its rootedness in a music that exists, quite simply, in and for the populus. Let us assume this for a moment. If so, however, Cutler clarifies that our discovery must not be confused with the proclamations of certain cultural and sociological theorists who argue the now common line that popular music—and, implicitly, the popular music industry—simply "gives the people what they want." In contrast to this top-down philosophy, the *"Popular" as Genus* notion, as Cutler frames it, implies a bottom-up groundswell. In opposition to the somewhat specialized activities and marketing strategies of the commercial industry, here, the notion of the popular broadens further, from the "hits" to that from whence the hits are drawn—"and even beyond this," Cutler says, to "*any* music which employs electric instruments or non-operatic singing styles… . In fact, popular opposes itself immediately to 'classical'—and classical includes all composed concert music, however modern" (9). So, with respect to genre, "popular" is *not* "classical." A simple enough point.

Of course, in this discussion we must not forget the market, which lurks in the background, still imposing its will in guiding the criteria for reception. The distinction between "popular" and "classical" aside, we do, after all, still have

sub-categories for various musical genres, in which "the popular," as a kind of market pitch prefix, creeps in. Beyond the "popular classical" examples, exemplified by pieces like Pachebel's "Canon," Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," or Beethoven's 5th Symphony, there is "popular folk" music as well, e.g. songs like "Puff the Magic Dragon," "Blowin' in the Wind" and "If I Had a Hammer." Meanwhile, a somewhat more recent phenomenon presents itself, where, for better or ill, the marketing behind classical music, the classical music image, becomes increasingly geared toward attracting "popular" (there's that word again) audiences. Album covers come to resemble more those of pop and rock music album covers, with younger stars, in particular, done up in more risqué garb, at least compared to the typical formal attire conventionally associated with classical music performers.[3] At this point, we must ask how far the appeal to genre distinctions for a sense of the popular can take us.

Not useful here is the fact that, in terms of distinguishing the focus of our discourses on the popular, what is taken for granted as our common usage with respect to genres can be further divided into the categories "popular" and "pop," in which the former, according to Cutler, is "always market-oriented and always entertainment," but the latter "not only covers rock and roll and post rock and roll youth music, but *any* music made with electric instruments by small groups" (10). As we will soon learn, Cutler is particularly interested in this latter category, which, especially for the younger generation, he places under the general heading of "Rock." Granted, this overall distinction between "popular" and "pop" will prove quite malleable for Cutler, and, ultimately, appear to collapse again. For instance, he will go on to argue that this broader notion of "pop," as described above—which translates to "Rock" in youth culture—is actually the ideal breeding ground for a truly *popular* music. So, here, popular = pop. Or does it? Does it matter? This suggests our basic problem as far as what is at stake in reconstituting the popular. If we are successful, what might be the manifestation of our discovery in any real, "everyday" sense? Regardless, we are clearly not yet ready to articulate a positive critique. At this point, suffice it to say that, for Cutler, the popular forms sought will not in any way be linked to numerically popular forms, or, in any concise way, to folk forms, or to commercial forms. Rather, Cutler describes these forms as "transitional" (10).

"Popular" as Genus, Part Two: Cultural Trajectories and Resistance

In *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith links popular music to a "culture of transformation," which he distinguishes from a "culture of reconciliation." Where the latter is marked by an engagement with culture that is escapist, temporary, and ultimately withdrawn, the former is marked by an engagement with culture that is potentially disruptive yet empowering, potentially subversive and yet bringing people together to change certain social conditions.[4] Here, I understand Cutler's use of the term "transitional" to be akin to Frith's notion of transformation. So, to tease out the implication further, "transitional" may refer not only to a kind of actual historical

and aesthetic development, but also to a certain transformative potential or resistance.

Indeed, for Frith, the very question as to how culture becomes transformative implies the notion of *resistance*—that is, resistance precisely to culture as reconciliation, to escapism, to that old secret agent of capitalism of which Marx spoke, false consciousness. For our purposes here, we can apprehend false consciousness from the standpoint of the consumer, and in terms of the belief that the ''choices'' given to us by corporatized and commercialized media actually represent, in fact, true and abundant freedom of choice in cultural expression. Again, ''give the people what they want.'' Undoubtedly, through another study perhaps, we could spend time attempting to refute this general claim, but we will not pursue this issue presently. Meanwhile, we should avoid the other extreme as well. That is, we still pose the problem in a somewhat defeatist way if we, instead of ''giving the people what they want,'' emphasize, as Adorno and Horkheimer do, the primacy of a culture industry, where there is such a stark dichotomy between mass culture and alienated subjectivity. Clearly, mass culture and alienated subjectivity exist, but there are various discourses and practices in the interstices of these poles that create a much more complicated picture. In my view, Frith's postmodern slant on the matter rightly describes the problem of resistance as situated beyond an ''either/or'' dilemma. '''Resistance' shifts its meaning with circumstance,'' says Frith, ''but it's also a question about where oppositional values come from, and how people come to believe, imaginatively, in something more than resistance. Culture as transformation, in other words, must challenge experience, must be difficult, must be *unpopular*'' (Frith 20).

But wait. Why now the ''unpopular''? Are we not seeking the *popular*? I can only ask that the reader bear with me as I attempt to clarify Frith's seemingly strange suggestion here. The apparent digression will come back to our main argument again.

How does the popular itself actually become unpopular? And why would we want it to do so? In his essay ''Not the Same: Race, Repetition, and Difference in Hip-Hop and Dance Music,'' Russell A. Potter writes:

> Among the fans of many current pop music genres, the awareness that their music constitutes noise to others has become a definitional aesthetic and driving force. For if 'noise' means a good loud beat for the fans to dance to, it also signifies a delight at the irritation the same noises produce in those unsympathetic to the form (38).

Here, Potter is arguing not only that the popular, or, ''popular taste,'' is itself discriminating, varied, fragmented, but also that its own popularity can be utilized (self-referentially? parodically?) as an oppositional force to anything that might be held up as unequivocally popular. This recalls yet again Frith's distinction between the two ideas of culture. Thus, we might say that the ''unpopular popular,'' similar to culture-as-transformation, is opposed to what we might call the ''mainstream popular,'' similar to culture-as-reconciliation. Here, we might offer, with caution, two better-known examples, where someone like Björk would represent the first

category, while Britney Spears might represent the second category. In the case of Björk, for example, we can no longer draw, as Adorno did, such an easy line between the huddled, numb masses inundated by the commercialism of *a* culture industry, on the one hand, and a small, marginalized avant-garde that can function, paradoxically, only in the context of its own marginalization on the other.[5] Björk's musical experimentalism—although undoubtedly just one part of a rather expansive creative *oeuvre,* which also includes theatrics, videos, and an overall aesthetic indebted to surrealism—is, shall we say, now conventional wisdom, which is to say, popular. But it is nevertheless still experimental. This is not to say that some aspect of the culture industry distinction no longer holds any currency, even with respect to Björk. Rather, we can now see these concerns along what I would call a spectrum of cultural movement, instead of seeing them in simple, stubborn, dialectical opposition. As Andrew Goodwin writes in ''Drumming and Memory: Scholarship, Technology, and Music-Making'', ''The music industry is too fond of gimmicks for us to deny the pertinence of Adorno's notion of 'pseudo individualization' [similar to the idea of false consciousness], but it is clear also that we individualize pop through more personal narratives that continue to elude the culture industry,'' which, he adds, is ''a result of music's peculiar ability to trigger memories'' (132–33).

Seen in this light, Potter's present challenge, in particular concerning the popular as an oppositional force, exposes the failure of the culture industry model to consider these very possibilities with respect to popular music. What could Adorno ever make of the intersection, however hypothetical, or, for that matter, literal, we might deem it, between Björk and free jazz, or Björk and hip-hop, for example? Enter the advent of what some might call a musical postmodernism, where, as Garth Alper describes, composers, in the broadest sense imaginable, ''attempt to reflect in their music the manner in which incongruous ideas and information are broadcast in the present-day media,'' and where an ''increased integration of diverse musical practices'' and a ''fading distinction between 'high art' and popular culture'' become visible (2).

It is with this sensibility in mind that we apprehend Potter's specific examples of the possibilities of a music using the sounds and signs of popular culture in a decidedly subversive way. He highlights the various ''noises'' of hip-hop, techno, and industrial music—e.g. the ''air-raid sirens, phase-shifted and distorted banjo notes, the speeches of Louis Farrakhan, back-masked vocal chants, explosions,'' employed by a group like Public Enemy, or KMFDM, ''whose live concerts have featured a drummer perched atop a drum machine, the machine dictating and punctuating the human rhythms'' (Potter 38). What we discover here is the popular, and its situatedness in musical culture, as a mode—indeed, as a *mode of production* in a fairly direct sense: the popular as its own method, as a kind of *assemblage*—i.e. a diverse and multi-layered social and cultural phenomenon. This assemblage not only engages, but ultimately defines itself through a breadth of other social and cultural phenomena (e.g. other arts, community, politics, style, technology, etc.). Lawrence Kramer's discussion of the relation of music to ''mixed media'' is apt here:

> Throughout the history of modern mixture, music has played a special role as the medium of mixture par excellence. In some sense, a theory of mixture is always also a theory of music. Text and images may be amenable to mixture, but music seems actively to seek it …. Music is almost always part of a mixture, a something added or blended into another circumstance, the source of a solution, suspension, or precipitate …. Music, often with terrific libidinal or affective or rhetorical force, is preeminently that which mixes, the master solvent among the arts (178).

Thus, bands like Public Enemy, argues Potter, "are bands for whom aural assault—via repetition, distortion, and sheer volume—has been rendered into performance technique; whether it elates or offends, it succeeds" (38). But what, we might ask, does it succeed at doing? On one level—the level of the discriminating fan—we must re-emphasize Potter's first point: this music succeeds because it makes the popular form a source of unpopularity, of resistance, of defining itself against the mainstream popular. On another level—the level of the actual performance aesthetic of these musical groups—there is this sense of integrating the unpopular into an overall presentation that has popular appeal. Thus, we have come around again from our digression. Through the samples, scratches, effects, etc., the popular unpopular has become popular again. It succeeds, meaning it disrupts, perhaps even disturbs. It affects. It moves. These disruptions are, if not the only criteria, the fundamental criteria for the possibility of musical movement within the culture-as-transformation that Frith described, and Cutler sees these transitional forms as being at the forefront of this movement.

Mode of Production as Composition: Theory

I would describe Cutler's exploration of popular music forms as leading us toward a "compositional" model because of its kinship with Attali's conception of *composition*, which can be applied heuristically to the movement of music in society.[6] Composition is the culminating gamble of Attali's *Noise*. In this study, Attali insists upon music and what he calls "noise" as being not only socially situated, but also capable of signifying social transformation. On his account, music and noise are given a fundamental role as matrices of power and change in society. In particular, "change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society" (Attali 5). Still, we must look at these terms more clearly in order to more precisely assess what Attali has in mind.

First, I would distinguish between two different meanings Attali seems to give for the concept "music." This distinction between the two meanings of music will then have ramifications for the general distinction Attali makes between "music" and "noise" as well.

In one sense, music, for Attali, designates a *broad* category. It entails any conceivable creative sound production, encompassing all genres and movements—i.e. what we quite simply call "music" in our everyday lives (e.g. rock, pop, jazz, rap, hip-hop, etc.). Thus, in this context, the "political economy of music" refers to the

contextualization of, and issues surrounding, any music, or musical expression, actually being made, or yet to be made.

In another sense, however, Attali also suggests music as being more of a *succinct* category. Here, music is that which is marked by an organization of sounds received and understood by the dominant network (which in the present day we might call commercial culture) as acceptable. This dominant network has the power to designate what is and what is not acceptable creative sound production. However, this acceptance is precisely what suggests Attali's addition of the category "noise," and what differentiates this category from music.

On Attali's account, noise, in contrast to music, is precisely any production of sounds that exists as yet *outside* the prevailing dominant network. But here a point of clarification relevant to my linking Attali to the present exploration of Cutler is needed.

Although I believe that Attali's theorization of music and noise entails a useful and still contemporary approach to understanding the social situatedness and destiny of musical production *and* consumption, I also believe that he misses a crucial factor in his ultimate assessment, which might actually have lent an even more subtle, profound, and pragmatic strain to his overall thesis. With Cutler in mind, I would argue that Attali neglects the deceptively simple possibility that music, even in his own broad sense of the term—i.e. as signifying a genre or style, for instance—can itself be capable of noise. Even what we take to be the most commercial and superficial kind of pop music might yet contain certain "noisy" elements—e.g. in its production, in the transparency of its very superficiality, in its democratic use of musical technology, etc. On another level, these very elements might be "co-opted," pulled out of their usual context, via other kinds of musical settings.

Similar to Cutler's assessment of the contemporary musical state of things, Attali's composition is characterized by the situation of music as a free and autonomous activity which is decentralized and uncensored, having all but broken away from its former role as commodity and endless reproduction (what he calls "repetition"). With composition, musicians and consumers may yet, as a result of a crisis of proliferation in repetition, be able to subvert certain aspects of repetition, taking control more fully over their own production and experience of music. According to Attali, repetition ensured a system of increasing profit not only by commercializing and standardizing music as a commodity, but also through the mass replication of the musical commodity. However, one curious result of this was that, though commercialized and standardized, music became infinitely more accessible. In one sense, this accessibility was, to a great extent, what repetition wanted: the more consumers (whoever they are), the better, and the more technology with which to consume, the better. Nevertheless, once this accessibility becomes unbridled, the various modes of reception for experiencing music (e.g. word-of-mouth, festivals, concerts, cafés, coffeehouses, restaurants, radio, TV, etc.) that are potentially available to different coalitions of listeners take on a new form. They become the breeding ground for an increasingly diverse spectrum of musical meanings and activities.

Mode of Production as Composition: Practice

Clearly, Cutler seeks to push the ramifications of Attali's speculation even further. On his account, these possibilities are driven by an even greater emphasis on improvisation—which is, I would suggest, itself something of a nexus between theory and practice.

With his typical wit in social commentary and absurdist humor, Frank Zappa once said that "jazz is not dead … it just smells funny" (Zappa and the Mothers, 1995). But there was, of course, as always, some thoughtful and critical sentiment in Zappa's barb. In fact, in my view, Cutler's stance, though seemingly tethered to rock forms, is, unlike Attali's, actually more keen in its hesitating to announce the complete death of free jazz. Regardless of what we might call the final *product* of these developments, and notwithstanding Cutler's own persuasive personal anecdotes, what is most significant is, in fact, the *mode of production* he proposes, which would involve the integration of certain elements of free jazz with these more progressive (which also means *technologically* progressive) forms of rock.[7] Again, it is in this context that free jazz can, and perhaps must, at least partially shed its old skin as a largely *acoustic* music (though I hesitate to call free jazz *a* music, due to its extreme diversity) in terms of instrumentation, which it was in the 1960s, and adopt a fresh skin as a result of its exposure to electronic means.

Of course, on this score, I might take issue with Cutler with respect to his apparent complicity with Attali's reading of the free jazz movement of the 1960s, in which Attali, though initially hopeful, ultimately dismisses this music as a result of its failing to sustain its own political economy.[8] I would argue that the cultural and political force and sustainability of a music cannot be judged by its economic merits alone, if at all.[9] Likewise, Paul R. Kohl writes: "What is important [to look] at here is that not only does music foreshadow economic and political systems, as Attali suggests, it also resists and reacts against them" (7). However, like Cutler, I too would suggest that free jazz must, in some way, if it is to touch the popular, confront the tools of repetition—e.g. electronics.

For example, in his essay "Rationalization and Democratization in the New Technologies of Popular Music," Andrew Goodwin argues that a series of new musical technologies that came to be utilized in pop music, in particular, created what amounted to nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in the musical experience, in the ways in which music could be created, produced, and listened to. Now, although one might argue that other, perhaps more experimental efforts were pointing in this direction already, what is most important for our purposes is how the ramifications of this shift have, theoretically speaking, instigated a *democratization* of musical production and experience, which, as Goodwin argues, trumps the argument from *rationalization*, one particular casualty of technological advancement according to the proponents of the culture industry model. In contrast to rationalization, the argument for the democratization of music as a result of the new technologies is markedly more optimistic, to the point where the new

technologies offer potentially an opportunity for social and cultural resistance to rationalization.

Goodwin gives some fundamental early examples. Cheap recording equipment, for instance, proved invaluable to the punk rock explosion of the 1970s. Also, cassette recorders and, later, compact discs allowed for increased consumer control of music. Of course, as Goodwin clarifies, the issue at hand is much more complicated. That is, we must be wary of what Goodwin calls "technological determinism" (77). Contrary to the deterministic view, technological forms do not dictate social and cultural meaning, even though they may set certain pressures on production and consumption. Rather, social and historical circumstances determine how technology will be used.

Today, the confluence of social and historical circumstances dictates that, as Richard A. Peterson argues, "popular music is plural." Of course, the primary context for Peterson's claim is a rather broad, if enlightening, discussion about what might be called the macro-level of this plurality, exemplified by "the minutely differentiated segmentation of the contemporary commercial music market, given the great number of CD reissues of every kind of music in the 20th century, and given the proliferation of modes of distribution from cable television to the Internet" (55). Goodwin's argument, though aligned with Peterson's, works with the micro-levels of this plurality, and in terms of music in particular, whereby, for example, "the old image of musicians rehearsing music and then trooping into a studio to record it is increasingly out of date. Indeed, the concepts of *musician* and *music* are rapidly changing" (77). As testament to this development, he cites the *sequencer*, the *sampler*, and the *musical instrument digital interface*, or *MIDI*, as three initial developments in music technology that have contributed to this change. But further, when integrated with certain technological advancements, such as multi-tracking and stereo imaging (i.e. manipulation of the stereo field), we now have the possibility of a radical placement (or displacement) of sounds, what I would call a "democratization of listening." Even the musical devices and technologies that we would now take for granted here at the beginning of the 21st century offered a glimpse of this democratization. The Walkman and headphones allowed the listener to essentially be right "inside" the stereo mix, saturated in the overall spectrum of the recorded sound. Car stereos have buttons whereby you can move the stereo image from left to right, front to back, etc. Compact discs emphasize the ear-to-ear effects made possible by the clarity of digital sound, which, in turn, makes the stereo image sharper (Goodwin "Rationalization" 87).

In turn, musical groups have increasingly utilized rehearsal spaces as pre-production studios to program their own drum machines, sequencers, and samplers. Moreover, "amateur" and semi-professional musicians can now produce professional quality recordings at low cost as well:

> The relative breakdown between professional and semi-professional technologies is often seen as *democratizing* pop production in new ways. But it may also be read as

more grist to the mill of a Weberian pessimism, in which bureaucratic efficiency triumphs over creativity. It is not ….

Seemingly a tool of greater rationalization, the new technologies in fact thus enable the composer/producer to react to other parts and then change the original part in order to take account of the reaction. Alterations can be effected by pushing a few buttons on a computer terminal. This is musical interaction between the parts, regardless of whether or not more than one musician is playing. (Goodwin "Rationalization" 90)

Like Cutler, then, Goodwin clearly seeks to demonstrate here a way of seeing the possibilities of music—in this case, pop music—and musical technology under a slightly different lens, a lens not beyond production and consumption, but rather beyond the merely commodifying gaze of repetition:

There are clearly dangers in thinking about music as though it were a free-floating mystery, a social practice unconnected to actual conditions of production. As students of pop we need to know exactly how the means of musical production impact upon the sounds themselves. But in undertaking *that* task we have to recognize that definitions of *music* and *musician* can change. The new technologies of pop music have not created new music. But they have facilitated new possibilities. (Goodwin "Rationalization" 90)

A paradox: at once, we acknowledge repetition as we seek to move beyond it. "Can we have it both ways?" asks Paul R. Kohl. "Using Attali's notion of composition, the suggestion would seem to be yes, and there is no reason to believe that we haven't had it both ways all along …. Despite whatever attempts might be made, music, and especially its meanings, cannot be controlled" (8). And later, echoing Richard A. Peterson's resistance to "massification":

Controlling concerns do use music for hegemonic purposes, but record companies, and certainly musical artists, should not be universally characterized in this manner. Neither do all listeners use music to resist domination. But elements of this schema do exist in the production, distribution, and reception of popular music. The complexity of these interrelationships demands more understanding of what meanings are created as these aspects of musical creation and appreciation are conjoined. (Kohl 15–16)

Pursuing their own sense of the "new possibilities," as well as the joining of "musical creation and appreciation," Cutler and Goodwin thus provide correctives to Attali. Cutler wrests free jazz from Attali's proclamation as to its failure in economic terms, even before it might envision a confrontation with electronics. Rather, he emphasizes the confrontation currently under way, involving a complicated blend of improvisation, composition, and electronic technologies.[10] Goodwin finds signs of freedom in repetition via pop music's engagement with different technologies—something that Attali, here like Adorno, would never concede.

But improvisation is especially curious here, as it is not an element typically tapped for any popular music contexts. However, the importance of improvisation has been manifested historically in a variety of ways—for instance, in rock groups in the late 1960s and 1970s, in which, as precursors to Cutler's transitional forms perhaps,

"building music simply from bass riffs, chord sequences and drum patterns allows for a degree of variation and embellishment which reduces the role of advanced planning in musical arrangement, and results in a constantly changing balance between material planned in advance and spontaneous extemporization," writes Alan Durant. "Coupled with the changing creative possibilities presented by recording, mixing, and editing… this alternative tradition of music-making works extensively through extrapolation from minimally worked-out forms" (Durant 267–68). For his part, Cutler deems rock forms as the most suitable for this blend. But the significance of what we might call Cutler's "compositional rock" lies more in how it marks the promise of Attali's notion of composition pushed to further inquiry. To his credit, Attali is hesitant to offer a distinct kind of music as being exemplary of music-making under composition—"not a new music, but a new way of making music" (134). Thus, to assess the rightness or wrongness of Cutler's assertion about rock music—that is, as opposed to jazz, pop, world, etc., etc.—would miss the mark. After all, similar arguments can be, and have been, made with respect to, arguably, much different musical milieux.

For instance, in "Making Noise: Music from the 1980s"—an era which might, for certain readers (like myself) more than others, I suppose, bring to mind certain rather distinct synthesized musical surfaces, glossy threads, and vertical hairdos—Andrew Blake describes a scene whereby five participants are:

> liberated by technology from the constraints routinely imposed by their keyboard, wind, and percussion instruments and the *reactive* mixing desk… swapping licks and sound processes whose provenance can't be tied to any particular sound producer and processor. The mixing desk, controlling levels and effects in both real and immediate-past time, becomes an acute part of the collective process, especially of continuity, storing and reproducing sounds while others program sequences or load samples from disk. Drum machine patterns chatter across each other, deep bass grumbles like the dragon Fafner newly awoken, samples and synthesizer patches holding the middle ground sound now like a wolfpack, now a fairground organ. (19)

Now, remember—this happened in the '80s. Why is this so important? Because, although the particular setting here was a group improvisation, it is the climate from which such an exploration was borne, the elements associated with that climate and how these elements fed this musical expression that speak volumes. Suggesting, similar to Cutler, both a more expansive and complicated notion of the popular, the climate for what is, in this case, seemingly rather adventurous musical journeying is nevertheless spawned from the musical signs of the times, the surfaces of popular (here, '80s) culture:

> Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan are in the pomp of their dangerous double-act…. Punk is already a burden of pop history …. Disco's high time has passed …. Guitar-based stadium rock is already out of its time …. Early hip-hop has twisted the drum machine beyond its makers' nightmares …. Synthesizers—analogue only, so far—are ubiquitous, but sampling and computerized sequencing are in their infancy. (Blake 19)

And what of Blake and his cohorts? Where did they come from? Despite resulting in what, to many perhaps, would seem to be bizarre musical practices, all the musicians, we are told, had "lived through pop" (Blake 22). What I like about this description is how it seems to suggest pop as not merely a genre—perhaps ultimately not a genre at all—but as an experience, an aesthetic. Again, and with Blake's anecdote in mind, we emphasize that what is most significant in Cutler and others is less the end result or preferred genre that his discussions on music might yield than the musical approaches and practices themselves that might be conjured. What musics might they bring together? What peoples might participate? What coalitions might they spark? Cutler's compositional rock exhibits these very same concerns, even though he seems to prioritize a particular genre over others at times.

Conclusion

Integrated with Cutler's vision of the emerging mode of production, then, the profound status of improvisation, in both the formation and the re-creation of musical material, joins other key movements, all demonstrative of a refashioned aesthetic of the popular, including: 1) a "commitment to collective work, especially collective composition"; 2) a preoccupation with "the new means of music production, particularly with electric instruments, electrification and the use of recording equipment"; 3) an "elision of composition and performance, composer and performer," and 4) a rootedness in "a transformed folk music, the music of an oppressed people …" (Cutler 10).

In a curious simultaneity, this aesthetic inherits two major legacies: 1) the legacy of "the popular," as inevitably, but not exclusively, linked to certain technological developments and market (i.e. commodity) repetition and 2) the legacy of improvisation, which, in many ways, seeks to surpass certain limitations associated with repetition. Differently put, it announces the transition toward the more radical possibilities of a music that actually *dares* to be popular, an audacious and promiscuous musical and social form. A form that would

> bring into relief elements which are significantly new and important and which, taken together, constitute a new genus or mode of music making, a mode as qualitatively unique and historically important as Folk and Art musics were before it. Moreover, this kind of "popular" music, at its furthest and most clearly developed, is manifestly at odds with the commodity form; *and it is precisely in this opposition that its claim to popularity resides.* This is a political claim … a claim that rests on an analysis of qualities innate in the new productive media and on *immanent and visible socio-political tendencies in industrial societies as a whole.* (Cutler 10)

The direction indicated here is, at the very least, a refreshing one. At the most, it audaciously seeks to bring to fruition the musical, social, and political ramifications of Attali's predictions via composition, in which:

> the liberation and development of the revolutionary new musical means, the aestheticization and manipulation of the sonic experience of contemporary life, and the over-vaulting of the impasse reached by mainstream "Art" music, can only be accomplished through the mode [of production] …. The old tools and the relations they make necessary cannot do the new work; the new tools demand different relations. (Cutler 11)

What, then, are the principles behind these "revolutionary new musical means"? I would suggest two:

1. the immanently utopian value of different modes of music (e.g. folk, art, popular, rock), which themselves necessitate different ways of understanding music, and
2. the utilization of different musical tools (e.g. improvisation, composition, electronics, sampling, appropriation, etc.) at our disposal.

Criticism responds to this as well. It begins to demonstrate what John Corbett called a "Katzenmusikritique," which "unlike Adorno's… should be very noisy, a theoretical racket… a clamorous, disquieting analysis dissonant with the prevailing uncritical abandon, but also strident with those who would dismiss popular music out of hand" (52). Again, this is to say that, to a great extent, the actual sound product, as well as how we might designate it, becomes less important than the spaces for musical creation and experience that these innovations provoke. For his part, Cutler opens up a great many vistas for critical inquiry by his broad analysis of the popular, which ends up being a much more profoundly problematic subject matter than perhaps even Cutler himself had anticipated.

The value of this mode of inquiry is that it *localizes* the ramifications of the popular for us. It suggests a more amenable space for exploration that extends beyond the dialectical pessimism of someone like Adorno, beyond the untenable situation where music occupies either a transcendental or an ordinary role in society, beyond the dichotomy of elites/masses. It moves toward a more immanent and communal sense of musical situatedness.

Notes

[1] Founder, co-founder, and/or participant in such bands as Henry Cow, Art Bears, Biota, and News from Babel. Also co-founder of ReR Records.

[2] Of course, Ani DiFranco would, for many reasons, ultimately not be the best example with respect to this particular assessment at least. In fact, in terms of a grassroots popular localism attached to music, she exemplifies the popular aesthetic we are seeking in this essay.

[3] For a worthwhile exploration of this very issue, see Brackett (207–34).

[4] Of course, no doubt the term "engagement" is, at the very least, somewhat problematic. Adorno distrusted the term not only for its utilization in the cultural numbing of "the masses" but for what he felt to be its careless use by the intellectual Left. Still, it would seem the term best suited to Frith's ideas here, however much we might attend to Adorno's skepticism on this broader matter.

[5] Of course, a strong argument could be made that such a line should never have been drawn in the first place. This is, however, largely beyond the scope of what I wish to address here. Also, I realize that I may actually be oversimplifying the image of Britney Spears here. Despite my using her in the present context as exemplary of precisely the commercialism I

hope to move a bit beyond, I welcome any attempt to retrieve possible subversive re-mappings in Spears's brand of pop.

[6] Focusing on the heuristic application of Attalian composition was the guiding approach behind my dissertation. See Székely, "The Political Economy of Music and Musical Discourse: After Attali's 'Composition'."

[7] Now, this should not necessarily be confused with the musical genre called "progressive rock," although it is quite clear that Cutler sees many of the seeds of this new music in that genre. Indeed, his own band, Henry Cow, strikes one as attempting precisely this kind of negotiation between improvisation, composition, rock, and electronic experimentation. The reader might also find the "Annotated Discography" of Cutler's book useful for a first-hand sense (by way of musical examples) of what he has in mind (see pp. 137–40).

[8] See the section on "'Uhuru'—The Failure of the Economy of Free Music" (Attali 138–40).

[9] John Corbett (3-4) addresses this issue nicely.

[10] Of course, there are countless existing examples along these lines here at the start of the 21st century. Of particular note would be Evan Parker's Electro-Acoustic Ensemble, which blends an acoustic saxophone/bass/drums trio with three, sometimes four, musicians who play live electronics and signal processing. Some performances will begin with a solely acoustic trio section, followed by a transformation of what had just been played by the acoustic trio by the electronic musicians through sound processing, followed by a section featuring both groups. See "Toward the Margins" and "Drawn Inward." Meanwhile, from a somewhat different musical vantage point, the postmodern soundscapes of Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid—such as those heard on "Optometry" fuse electronics, free jazz, hip-hop, and poetry. As epic documents that bring together the vanguard of different musical approaches, Spooky suggests that we apprehend these truly hybridized efforts as "laptop jazz… a new way of thinking about something that's in all of our lives everyday: patterns, codes, ciphers… whatever angle you look at it from, it's all about speaking with the invisible and letting the conversation become total media, total text" (liner notes).

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