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Iain Chambers

*Popular Music*, Vol. 2, Theory and Method. (1982), pp. 19-36.

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Wed Sep 26 13:26:58 2007

# Some critical tracks

by IAIN CHAMBERS

. . . it is not a question of introducing out of nowhere a science of everyone's individual life, but of innovating and rendering critical an already existing practice. (Antonio Gramsci)

Some years ago the concept of *ambiguity* was proposed as a central category in the analysis of everyday life. Henri Lefebvre, unorthodox French marxist and sociologist, suggested that precisely there, in the 'explosive chronicle' of daily life, it was both possible and necessary to find common ground between what was socially and culturally familiar and its eventual critique (Lefebvre 1958). The study of pop music, although rarely given attention in this context, brings us up immediately against the oscillating tensions of that cultural ambiguity which Lefebvre considered the heart of everyday life.

Let me explain this further. Pop songs and records, concerts and club performances, are small, individual moments and, simultaneously, complex social forms and practices. This suggests that there exists a peculiarly instructive connection between the way that, considered as transitory events, these phenomena are regularly perceived, and the way that, considered as structures and relations, they can be explained. Generally represented in terms of its role in the vacuity of free time and leisure, pop music is often considered one of the more powerful expressions of the 'culture industry'. However, the study of the genealogy of amusement, distraction, social use and pleasure involved in pop music – the particular constellation which permits pop to appear initially as the pap of relaxation – also, I would suggest, opens up the possibility for an alternative, more complex and richer explanation to emerge. I would go even further than this and argue that an examination of the cultural heterogeneity involved in pop music (*these* pleasures, *those* uses) also reveals the hint, the semi-articulated statement, of one of the potential means for the appropriation and conquest of daily life.

To move against the consensual drift and successfully illustrate the force of that last argument involves, as a minimum, the conquest of a critical space. In particular, it calls for a confrontation with the defini-

tions and explanations that have tended to monopolise analyses of pop music. The most conspicuous barometer of the formation and range of these definitions is, of course, on weekly display in pop music journalism. I want to step behind that immediate situation for a moment to look at a series of more theoretical contributions. I have chosen to look at the most significant statements on pop and popular music that have either appeared or experienced renewed popularity in the last fifteen years. It is these which have largely laid down the basis for subsequent critical study. But while I will be mainly concerned with the differences, agreements and contradictory tones and gaps in these various theoretical formulations, it will be noted that such apparently rarified debates have also had a profound (albeit often unconscious) fall out: in several cases (particularly Adorno's) they have filtered down and sedimented in widespread popular verdicts and commonsensical attitudes towards pop music.

The discussion that follows virtually divides into two halves. The question of musical and aesthetic specificities involved in pop music and their eventual social and cultural evaluation, revealed in an important debate in *New Left Review* in 1970, is subsequently deepened by considering the heritage of Adorno's 'negative sociology' of music; it is then succeeded by a critical examination of diverse proposals – semiological, structural, ethnomusicological, subcultural – which have emerged in its wake.

### *Aesthetic object or cultural product: the Chester–Merton debate*

Towards the close of the 1960s the journal *New Left Review* carried, for the first (and last) time, a series of articles on pop music (Beckett 1966, 1968 and 1969; Chester 1970A and 1970B; Merton 1968 and 1970; Parsons 1968). These, together with Dave Laing's *The Sound of Our Time* (1969), represent the first serious approach to a study of pop music in Britain since Hall and Whannel's pioneering venture, *The Popular Arts* (1964). Beginning with Alan Beckett's attempt to dissipate some of the critical pessimism towards popular music sown by Theodor Adorno's influential article 'On popular music' (1941), these contributions culminated in a significant exchange between Andrew Chester and Richard Merton.

This particular polemic found Chester arguing for an autonomous rock music aesthetic, while Merton insisted that the sociocultural and political significance of pop music was the key to its analysis. Today, the terms of that debate are worth recalling not only as an important symptom of the cultural upheaval associated with the late 1960s, but for the range of discussion in which many of the arguments employed still await a satisfactory confrontation.

Chester's first contribution opens by considering the concept 'pop'. He argues that existing cultural connotations of the term block any serious consideration of the music as 'an aesthetic object' (Chester 1970A, p. 83). To overcome this problem, he suggests, it is necessary to separate off aesthetic criteria and set them apart from cultural relations: 'The acceptance of a cultural definition of the object of criticism leads inevitably to a cultural as opposed to an aesthetic criticism. Musical form and musical practice are studied as an aspect of social relations, and significance is determined by social, not musical criteria' (ibid. p. 83). Reviewing recently published British and American accounts of pop music (Mabey 1969; Cohn 1969; Eisen 1969; Marcus 1969), Chester demonstrates the crippling lack of attention paid to musical specificities wrought by the prevailing, and, it must be said, extremely vague, cultural tone of those approaches.

His criticisms become exceptionally telling when he admonishes writers for evaluating pop by indiscriminately drawing upon imported critical tools: resulting, for instance, in the literary analysis of Bob Dylan's lyrics or the snobbish endorsement of the almost 'classical' sophistication of the later Beatles' music. He reminds us: 'No pop critic is interested in Dylan as a rock vocalist, even though his stature in this field is now comparable only to Presley . . .' (Chester 1970A, p. 84). Chester's own argument revolves around a call for the rigorous study of the specific musical devices of rock music, and he raises a set of important considerations in this respect: the commitment of rock to dance, its domination by the vocal. He concludes by reiterating the need for an autonomous aesthetics of rock music in which it 'must be understood that aesthetics is the politics of art'; the history of rock music then becomes the history of a 'struggle for artistic autonomy' (ibid. p. 87). Faced with a widespread tendency, in many quarters, to see in pop music simply an index, a reflection, of wider social circumstances, Chester's arguments were often incisive, but his own counter proposal remained precariously established.

The 'Comment' by Richard Merton that immediately followed criticised Chester for abstracting the aesthetics of rock music from 'the social formation of which they are one of the effects' (Merton 1970, p. 88). Offering what is indisputably a firmer initial foundation for the critical study of pop music, Merton writes: 'An aesthetic and a cultural criticism of contemporary music are complements, not opposites. More than this: a cultural criticism, as I shall try to show, is a condition of possibility of the discovery of the specific *novelty* of rock/pop for an aesthetic reflection upon it . . .' (ibid. p. 88). Taking his cue from Chester's rejection of the term 'pop', Merton poses the question of what is the 'people' in order then to highlight the interdependence of the

definitions of popular and pop music. Proposing that the term 'people' refers to a conjunctural formation produced in and through 'the conflict of *classes* and their culture', popular music is then defined as

> . . . the product of concrete social classes and groups in different social formations, and the *history* of it over the last ten years is largely that of the permutations and displacement of its locus between all of these. Not in spite, but *because* of these very variations, the 'people' who have produced and appropriated this music define and legitimate its character as 'popular'. (Ibid. p. 89)

So, Merton restores the concept of 'pop', making it central to his own analytical strategy. However, there are some serious flaws in what he then goes on to suggest. In particular, he fails to consider the cultural apparatuses through which pop music is produced and many of its popular effects generally secured. This leaves the historical dimension of his own argument rather hollow. The geographical, historical and cultural coordinates that he mentions – the 'roots' of pop music in the southern rural United States; a British form that emerged amongst urban, white, British working-class youth – are acceptable. But, moving through these overarching formulations, he leaves unexamined the dynamic of their more precise forms and variations, and, above all, their complex impingement upon the particular formation of pop music as a specific musical and cultural practice.

To put it bluntly, we are faced with a history of musical forms explained simply by referring back to sociocultural points of origin or 'roots'. Running an explanation at this level, the successive history of mediations generated in the increased economic and cultural institutionalisation of pop music is inevitably overlooked. It tends towards a 'reflection' theory of music. This is clearly in evidence in Merton's own class reading of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The objection that arises here is not with Merton's desire to analyse music politically, but that in directly reading off class positions from musical practices (petit-bourgeois Beatles versus proletarian Stones) it directly obscures the cultural complexity and richness of the situation. Moving horizontally along an overt political axis, Merton fails to permit his gaze time to glance into the vertical depths of the musical and cultural relations which support the overt ideological tokens he is so intent on locating. This foreshadowed perspective becomes clearer still once his comparison of the Beatles and the Stones (reminiscent of Adorno's Stravinsky–Schoenberg comparison) is completed. For the rest of pop music there awaits only blanket verdicts. The whole of the 1960s soul music tradition is consigned to oblivion and Dylan despatched to an aesthetic nadir. Apart from indicating the personal predilections of the author it is all rather unhelpful.

In Merton's case, pop music became reduced to the music of the overtly oppressed – American blacks and rural whites, British working-class youth – who inhabit the metropolitan centres of imperialism. As a structural guide to the critical analysis of pop music, it frankly opens and closes the analytical breach in the very same breath. So intent is Merton on indicating the massive historical levers which, undeniably, have dramatically affected pop, that the significance of the daily minutiae of pop music completely passes him by. Somehow, between the effects of the former and the pertinence of the latter, a whole set of crucial mediations have gone missing.

### *Music as fetishism: Theodor Adorno*

One person who, notoriously, had no doubt about the critical importance of the mediations that can be shown to exist between popular music and society at large was Theodor Adorno. Adorno's emphasis upon the determining role played by the cultural apparatuses in the production of twentieth-century music in Western Europe and the United States has come to play a decisive, often a central, part in critical common sense.

From his first article in 1932 to his final writings in the 1960s, Adorno's thoughts on music all revolved around the imputed fetish character of contemporary music. In his, by now, famous view it was not simply 'light music' that consisted of 'musically standardised goods', but also 'serious', or 'classical', music that fell under the sign of the commodity (Adorno 1974). For Adorno the domination of the market had welded the two musical spheres into the unity of an insoluble contradiction. His attack is against the fetishising properties of contemporary music *tout court*, of which light music is only the more obvious, for being the less opaque, example. In his 1932 article 'On the social situation of music', he writes: 'The role of music in the social process is exclusively that of a commodity; its value is that determined by the market. Music no longer serves direct needs nor benefits from direct application, but rather adjusts to the pressure of exchange of abstract units' (Adorno 1978, p. 128).

The crucial marxian distinction between use-value and exchange-value has, according to Adorno, been obliterated by the commercial monopolies who 'have taken possession of even the innermost cell of musical practice, i.e. of domestic music making' (ibid. p. 129). The result is that 'the alienation of music from man has become complete' (ibid. p. 129). Adorno continually referred to a music that was 'standardised', produced in series. Chord diagrams on song sheets were 'musical traffic signals' for consumer flow. 'Light music', a categ-

ory for which Adorno reserved few internal distinctions, became the 'torrid zone of the obvious'. The music that resulted was 'stream-lined' and 'custom-built', its languages 'galvanised'. New developments became mere novelty gimmicks. In Adorno's opinion, the significance of the unforeseen arrival of bebop in the history of jazz was just a publicity slogan, one more sign of that music's commercial absorption. In short, music had become a particular type of social 'cement', presided over by the cartels and monopolies of the 'culture industry' and propagated by the 'authoritarian' radio networks.

The only relief that Adorno managed to provide in this dismal, monochromatic picture lay in the music of the European classical avant-garde. In the music of Arnold Schoenberg, Adorno argued, it was possible to see how the persistent rationality of certain musical devices, encapsulated in Schoenberg's deployment of the twelve-note scale, partly reconquered alienation – it being these rational devices that clashed with and exposed the irrationality of bourgeois society. 'The terror that the music of Schoenburg and Webern spread . . . does not derive from the fact that it is incomprehensible, but from the fact that it understands exactly too much: it gives form to that anguish, to that terror and to its vision of a catastrophe' (Adorno 1974, p. 51, my translation). It becomes a music which 'presents social problems through its own material' (Adorno 1978, p. 130). But even the initial insulation of the avant-garde from fetishism, as Adorno himself points out, appears able to sustain its momentum only through an isolation constructed upon formalistic devices. These, in turn, can rapidly become ambiguous as they slip into the predictability of programmed effects. Faced with a seemingly unavoidable degeneration, the musical avant-garde can only hold out a promise: not for the present but for a future reality.

Music as alienation is hence the compass that guides Adorno's critical survey of all types of modern European and North American music. From this central observation two further aspects, each bearing directly upon Adorno's construction of the problem of 'light music', now emerge. The first of these involves the way that Adorno thinks through the relation between musical material and the commodity form. The second is his explanation of the 'consciousness' of the music listener. It is the interlocking of these two dimensions, under the canopy of alienation, that effectively comes to bar any positive evaluation of popular music in Adornian criticism.

The commodity form of music and the consciousness of the listener are, in Adorno's design, both tailored from the same cloth. Across the moment of exchange he draws a tight correspondence between economic forces and musical practices, any vestige of use-value being forever expelled.

Whatever were the merits of his disagreement with Walter Benjamin, it was characteristic of Adorno to criticise Benjamin for 'subjectivising' Marx's category of commodity fetishism (Adorno 1973). Adorno's own view of the objective structure of commodity exchange denied him the possibility of considering the *contradictory* implications of what is also a social act. That the movement of objective forces have their effect through subjective passages could only mean one thing for Adorno: alienation had entered the innermost cell of social activity. With use-value vanquished, exchange-value fills the vacuum and re-emerges as a false 'use-value'. The music listener becomes a prisoner who, like a person unable to conceive of any other possibility, willingly welcomes his or her cell. In Adorno's scenario the marxian axiom that production determines consumption takes on the grotesque shape of a hammer that unremittingly beats out the pattern of consumption and the subject of the consumer in the very same blow.

Adorno's purpose may well have been to query the degree to which his friend Benjamin argued the optimistic possibilities embodied in the contradictory reproductive techniques and technologies of the mass cultural apparatuses (Benjamin 1970). But the direction of that argument, to which Adorno's 'On the fetish-character in music and the regression of listening' (1974) was a self-admitted reply, sets in movement a discussion far more adequate to the possibilities of the present (and hence the future), and one to which Adorno, and much critical work that has followed, has been unable to respond effectively.

These seemingly abstract considerations help us to understand better the deeply ambiguous inheritance of the crucial, and in many ways pioneering, attention which Adorno gave to the position occupied by the cultural apparatuses – the songwriting and music publishing industry, the record companies, the radio – in securing the relation between social forces and musical practices. But, in pushing an observable tendency – the commercialisation of music practices and the, as it seemed, inevitable congealing of music in fetishised forms – to its logical extreme, he reintroduced through the back door, if not a direct economism, at the very least a positivist determinism.

If we now turn to look more precisely at the way alienation is said to pass, through fetishised music, into the consciousness of the music listener, the nature of Adorno's critical architecture can be seen at close range. In his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Adorno divides up the music listening public into six categories. Each category is understood to represent a different sector of the overall cultural force field produced by the commodity pressures of the capitalist market. His verdict on these divisions is that the typology 'rests on the fact that a true consciousness is not possible in a false world and; further, that the

modes of social reaction to music exist under the sign of false consciousness' (Adorno 1971, p. 24, my translation). The largest category is that of the passing time or 'entertainment listener'. It is here, with the listener to 'light music', that the 'culture industry' is to be found involved on a vast scale: a capillary network runs between record, piped music, juke box and radio. It is the reception of this music that, in Adorno's opinion, most clearly demonstrates a passive type of listening conditioned by mass production in series. 'The structure of this type of listening is like that of smoking, and is defined more by discomfort when one turns the radio off than by enjoyment . . . while the radio was on' (ibid. p. 20).

Adorno's certainty about the alienation of music was, therefore, also based upon a concept of psychological passivity. The listener consumes the music in order to pass her or his time in fulfilling desires already implanted by fetishism. In Adorno's view, the contemporary function of music is to prepare the unconscious for conditioned reflexes. For this to occur it is obviously necessary that the individual listener should recognise him or herself in popular music. The listener

> must always have the sensation of being treated as if the mass product was personally directed at him. The means for attaining this, which is one of the fundamental ingredients of light music, is the pseudo-individualisation (which in the mass product recalls the halo of spontaneity) of the buyer who freely chooses in the market according to his needs, while it is this very halo that obeys standardisation and ensures that the listener is not aware of consuming products already thoroughly digested. (Ibid. p. 39)

This, finally, is the neuralgic centre of Adorno's critical system. Rejecting any possibility of a positive evaluation of the contradictory cultural forces at play within the folds of contemporary capitalist societies, the fabric of Adorno's thought is stretched out between the present fragmented, alienated, elements of everyday life and their eventual, future, realisation in a change engineered by pure negation. With Adorno, capitalism has shifted from being considered as a specific mode of production to becoming a historical totality in which is played out the bleak drama of man's total alienation. A heterogeneous structural complexity gives way to a homogeneous determinism.

With this displacement, theoretical enquiry is now unable to indicate the suggestive steps on the path towards a liberating struggle within the given relations and practices of society. That prospect is replaced by the philosophical injection of a bitter truth from the dark isolation of a position somehow held outside the, by now, totally fetishised domain of contemporary capitalism. Brooding in that twilight, Adornian theory begins and ends with the philosophical fate of Man – rather than with men and women in specific social and historical relations. As

we have seen, the result is to over-read the ascribed aims and effects of capitalism as achieved results. The assumed fetishism of music is then understood to be effected through a direct, non-contradictory imposition of the commodity form on the music listener's consciousness. From here there is no escape.

### *Looking for a mediation: from a text to a scream*

From the preceding discussion it is possible to map out three analytical levels which, like concentric circles, move outwards from the specificities of particular musics, to provide an overall critical topography. The first, coming from Chester, underlines the need for a specific aesthetics of rock music. The second introduces determinations arising within sociocultural formations which play an effective part in the forging of musical forms and practices. The outer limit is provided by Adorno. He emphasises the relevance of cultural apparatuses in providing the determining passage between musical forms and capitalist relations in contemporary society. All three proposals, it should be noted, have an extremely vague commitment to historical argument.

At the same time, the importance that Chester attaches to the musical level of analysis introduces a further dimension: the traditions of musicology which orbit around the study of music's internal relations. Almost exclusively restricted to the study of notated music, these find a parallel and sometimes an inspiration in the literary practice of textual analysis. This convergence reinforces the relegation of the non-notated (that which is not 'textualised') to the secondary analytical order of 'context' or 'background'. Particularly after the extensions offered by European semiotics, this tendency has led to an enrichment of the traditional concentration on the musical 'text'.

The critical imperative of attending to musical specificities has consistently posed a theoretical dilemma. To what degree can specific music forms, styles and relations be argued to contain immanent cultural values and social meanings? Treating music as a particular sign system (Stefani 1976) or language (Pousseur 1972), is it then possible to assume that the step to wider, non-musical but pertinent dimensions is unproblematical? Or does the particular identification of a precise organisation of musical signs and relations require fitting into a wider, more flexible framework?

One approach is simply to ignore the existence of these problems. The argument then remains the prisoner of a methodological technicism, an inventory of musical devices, even if this positivistic enterprise is subsequently given the semblance of cultural flavour by the addition of a certain amount of speculation: colour for the grey analytical struc-

ture (see Pagnini 1974). Others are far more circumspect in their approach and reluctant either to shield behind formalism or to over-indulge in semiotic flights of fancy. Instructive illustrations can be found in certain tendencies within Italian musical semiotics. Mario Baroni, for example, has recently argued for the need to confront the semiotic model with its sociohistorical exterior, suggesting that the interpretative codes which the listener uses are historically formed and subject to alteration as the codes that circulate within contemporary culture shift and realign (Baroni 1980). In more forceful tones, Gino Stefani associates himself with a 'referential semiotics', insisting that what remains external to any particular musical code remains analytically pertinent. Putting forward the position that musical codes are culturally organised and socially positioned, he states that 'the object of a scientific musical criticism should not be a sonorial event, but the point of view under which it is considered by its normal users' (Stefani 1976, pp. 56–7). It is this semiotic strain, with its recognition of the cultural, social and historical dimensions as integral to an effective reading of musical signs, that introduces the possibility of a common purpose with a wider critical strategy.

Still, even here, fundamental problems, sometimes displaced, often obscured, remain firmly in play. An almost pathological drive to press semiology beyond its bearings often leads to an unavoidable engagement with its positivist desires. It often, though inadvertently, reveals an intellectualist illusion: here is the world reduced to the globe of signs, and here is the method eager to cut and tailor the former to its own design. But these attempts at a logical, pre-emptive explanation of all the possible meanings that any particular signifying practice might engender – what Umberto Eco, for instance, offers as a global semantic model which he calls Model Q (Eco 1975) – become just a little too neat and, ultimately, far too closed to historical complexity. Overwhelmingly wedded to a 'rationalist criterion of *coherence* for its theory of truth' (Lovell 1980, p. 19), much semiology runs the risk of sharing common ground with far older forms of theoretical closure. Mistaking the logic of a particular rationalist operation (the semiological analysis) for the diverse and heterogeneous 'logics' of multiple social relations and practices, both modish and traditional methods are driven together into an epistemological and analytical cul-de-sac.

If we overstretch textual or semiotic analysis, we rapidly arrive at a paradox. The sociocultural relations that went into the formation of a particular music come to be recognised while simultaneously being methodologically blocked from fully registering their pertinence. In other words, the historical and the cultural are so displaced that their recognition occurs only within the singularity of musical/semiotic

logic. This straining of semiology's analytical frame to account for the multiply determined, culturally heterogeneous situation of musical (or other) practices helps to explain the propensity of such approaches to oscillate continually between the apparently antagonistic poles of intuition and formalism.

How, then, to conceptualise the specificity of musical forms without the danger of ignoring their historical production and presence, and hence their cultural use and sense? In his second discussion of the aesthetics of rock music, Andrew Chester opened up a dimension which has a direct bearing on this problem (Chester 1970B). While continuing to employ a division between 'aesthetics' and 'culture', he once again mounted a convincing attack on studies that separated out for individual attention the various components of rock music. It is this type of abstraction, he argued, that loses the precise interconnections which a musical performance welds together. Once again the result is that the specificity and particular import of rock music as a historically formed cultural practice is hidden.

With this in mind, Chester takes Merton to task for his 'political' interpretation of the music of the Rolling Stones on the *Beggars Banquet* album (1968). His reading, Chester suggests, can only be sustained by treating the lyrics and the ideological themes they are supposed to support 'as dominant in the complex musical totality' (ibid. p. 77). Although Chester mistakenly uses this opportunity to berate Merton's description of pop as a 'people's music', he does put his finger on the implicit reductionism that we have already noted in Merton's use of that argument. And it is at this point, while attempting a better answer to Merton's polemic against his own 'autonomous aesthetics', that Chester's approach experiences an important shift.

Discussing the particular complexities of rock music, as distinct from the different mode of complexity associated with Western classical music, Chester introduces the conceptual dyad of *extensional* and *intensional* musical forms. He explains this binary opposition thus:

> Western classical music is the apodigm of the *extensional* form of musical construction. Theme and variation, counterpoint, tonality (as used in classical composition) are all devices that build diachronically and synchronically outwards from basic musical atoms. The complex is created by combination of the simple, which remains discrete and unchanged in the complex unity . . . Rock however follows, like many non-European musics, the path of *intensional* development. In this mode of construction the basic musical units (played/sung notes) are not combined through space and time as simple elements into complex structures. The simple entity is that constituted by the parameters of melody, harmony and beat, while the complex is built up by modulation of the basic notes and by inflection of the basic beat . . . All existing genres and

sub-types of the Afro-American tradition show various forms of combined intensional and extensional development. (Ibid, pp. 78–9)

Clearly, there may be disagreement about the manner in which Chester deployed this conceptual division (note too that similar arguments, prefiguring Chester, can be found in Keil 1966 and Middleton 1972). The internal distinctions of the respective musical traditions could doubtless have been more attentively explained (for more discussion of these see Vulliamy 1980). None the less, Chester's contribution at this point marked a critical landmark in pop music's analysis. As he himself observed, the redrawing of the musical landscape that his theory proposed represents a 'step towards constructing a matrix for critical examination of the contemporary rock scene, and obtaining a purchase on the strictly musical levels of the total product' (ibid. pp. 79–80).

Through a very different and more subtle route, Chester arrives at Merton's underlying position about the pertinence of sociocultural formations in the production of specific musical languages or genres. He acknowledges that there exists a 'relation of compatibility' between certain musical particulars and a historical formation, though, he rightly insists, the relevant social and cultural coordinates must be understood to be articulated in musical forms in a non-mechanical way. For musical practices, as Chester puts it, have a 'relative autonomy'.

This returns us to the problem posed and then subsequently blocked in Adorno's speculations on the analogy or set of homologies between musical forms and the nature of society at large. Chester proposed to put that problem into a clearer light through an analytical division whereby one half illuminated the differences displayed by the other, and vice versa. The diverse musical practices of Afro-American and Western classical music are then referred back to the different cultural formations of the two music traditions. However, this decisive critical intervention, while offering greater specificity in handling the music, still suffers from its reliance on an explanation referring to genesis from historical 'roots'. It provides us with an important guideline but leaves the problem of effectively analysing contemporary pop music some way off.

As Chester himself noted, if there was ever a music caught up in the historical dynamic created by the relationships between the musical languages of diverse cultural formations, it is pop music. For it is the complex interactions produced in the cultural clash of these musics (black Afro-American and white European), and their increasing encounter within the same set of institutional practices (the club, the dance, the concert) and shared cultural apparatuses (the record industry, radio, television), that have marked and shaped pop music's

thirty-year history. And it is the history of that interpenetration, in all its detail, which remains to be recovered.

### *Pop music as a cultural practice*

Probably the central theme to have emerged so far is that critical considerations of pop music have tended to be organised around the idea that there exist sets of 'correspondences' or 'homologies' between musical forms and social relations. We have seen how this kind of reasoning formed the cornerstone of Adorno's views on music, just as, in a different way, it did of Merton's political interpretation of pop. These examples could be multiplied, both in the theoretical and more everyday realms of pop music comment, criticism and analysis (see for example the very different approaches represented by Melly 1972, Marcus 1977 and Burchill and Parsons 1978).

The marxist tradition has insisted on the historical structuring of the relations between cultural forms and a particular mode of production. The more precise and restricted sense of causality embodied in the concept of homology, and its application to pop music, has, however, been further encouraged by the pivotal role it has occupied in ethno-musicology. In *Enemy Way Music* (1954), McAllester talks of a series of marked correspondences between the apparent values expressed in Navaho music and those found elsewhere in Navaho culture. According to Alan Merriam, McAllester's work demonstrates that the 'general values of the culture are found in music, that these general attitudes shape music as they shape other aspects of cultural behaviour, and that since music embodies the general values of culture, it reinforces them and this in turn helps to shape the culture of which it is a part' (Merriam 1964, p. 248).

This type of argument, one that is sensitive to felt correspondences between musical practices and social relations, and to the ways these are lived out at the level of cultural symbols, has had a direct repercussion in some writings on pop music, the work of Charles Keil (1966) and Paul Willis (1978) being probably the most representative. In Britain, amongst the most widely discussed homologies between a particular music and a specific social group are those that Willis explores in *Profane Culture*: rock 'n' roll and rockers, 'progressive music' and hippies.

However, shifting the structural analysis of music from an ethno-musicological to a finely delimited subcultural perspective raises some substantial problems. In particular, there is an obvious movement in the subject-matter away from the ritualistic functions and social homogeneity of musical performances typically found in tribal

societies (which ethnomusicological research tends to concentrate upon) to the heterogeneous musical practices that coexist within the social and cultural structures of advanced industrial society. This dramatic difference is probably most starkly illustrated by the important role of music now within the social construction of leisure, patterns of consumption and connotations of pleasure. A further problem is that once the study of pop music takes into account the music's relation to other cultural practices it needs also to examine the formation of contemporary popular culture itself. Finally, there is the qualification that a subcultural analysis of the type carried out by Willis, with its sharp attention to the connections between the inferred logic of a subculture and its chosen repertoire of cultural options (clothes, pop music, argot, drugs, body talk, transport) necessarily produces a tangential approach to the specificities of pop music as a cultural practice in its own right.

While it has not been the intention of subcultural accounts to privilege analytically the *specific* cultural domain of pop music, it remains the case that they have had a profound influence on discussion of British pop music. In subcultural research it has been generally agreed that between the social relations of certain, predominantly male, youth groups and certain possible strategies of consumption, an imaginative, but none the less real, series of correspondences can be seen to be at work (see Hall and Jefferson 1976, and, for later modifications, some of them substantial, Hebdige 1979, Brake 1980 and McRobbie 1980). It was this idea that seemed to offer a significant move forward in the study of pop, one that respected the music's commodity form together with the contradictory activities involved in its appropriation. But, as the outcome of these contradictory appropriations, subcultures also display an internal 'absence of permanently sacred signifiers' (Hebdige 1979, p. 115). This suggests that even in the presence of the sharply delineated relations of subcultures to certain styles of pop music – mods to American rhythm and blues and soul music, punks to minimalist sonorities and reggae – apparent homologies appear to be rapidly swamped by a more complex web of cultural articulations. Moreover, these musical styles are rarely the exclusive property of these groups.

What is often obscured – and this has important consequences for the deployment of the homology argument in pop music analysis in general – is that the *bricoleurs** are not actively constructing their

* From *bricolage* in its structuralist usage (adopted by some subcultural theorists): an improvisatory putting together of materials and meanings so as to form a new, coherent whole. See Hebdige 1979, pp. 102–6.

subcultures from 'raw materials' but are busily reworking existing consumer items, translating them into even more complex 'social hieroglyphics'. This implies that the structure of a subculture (its class, gender, race, age, education and locality) has also to be perceived as travelling a particular path through the contradictory reproduction of existing cultural goods and practices, traversing as it does so, the potential social uses of these goods in a spectacular trajectory. It is this that both separates off and, simultaneously, binds subcultures to the much quieter networks of generalised cultural production and reproduction. For example, the far-reaching repercussions of punk for British pop music, and youth culture in general, cannot be put down simply to the direct, non-mediated, effect of the few thousand full-time punks whose blanched features provided a ghostly glow to London's music pubs and venues in 1976. The way that punk, *both* symbolically and commercially, caught a far wider imagination leads to the suggestion that its spectacular presence was neither simply dissipated nor forever locked away within the original subculture.

In the same sense, it is the heterogeneous use made of the same cultural commodities, where subcultural style represents one of the more spectacular fixings, that points our attention towards the complex density of mediations involved in the production and reproduction of pop music. The success of any musical form, style or performer, whatever the initial cultural focus, runs outwards in many directions. And these need to be recognised as an integral part of that music's history. Setting itself down firmly in the passageway between musical forms and social relations, the direct causality implicit in the homology argument tends to short-circuit the importance of considering these multiple articulations of pop music. This permits the resulting analysis to maintain a neat structural logic (linking subgroup and musical form), but seriously skews an understanding of the cultural import of pop. With all attention concentrated on the point of a *particular* consumption of the music, the production of the cultural field, in particular by the record industry, is acknowledged only in passing, its pertinence largely unexamined.

Clearly, in all this, the everyday and profounder social texture of pop music as a cultural practice still waits to be fully explored. Yet, it is against this (largely unacknowledged) 'background' that the exceptional moments in the history of pop (often shadowed by particular subcultures) take on their full meaning. While rock 'n' roll or punk certainly induced important changes within pop's musical and cultural repertoire, these changes have always been partial and incomplete, remaining open to accommodation with what already existed within pop. The overall institutionalisation of pop music through the record

industry and radio, and its subsequent susceptibility to the daily deployment of the common-sense categories of 'leisure' and 'pleasure' in its reception and use, means that, whatever the headlines and outrage that sometimes accompany innovations in pop, these rarely manage to constitute a direct break or revolution.

In particular, to concentrate *solely* on the exceptional means to ignore, or to dismiss too rapidly, the differential, and by no means predetermined, effects of those cultural apparatuses in which the contradictory production and reproduction of pop music takes place. This would suggest that it is imperative to locate the relationship between musical forms and their cultural uses within the further dimension constituted by the institutional powers and practices, together with their technologies and techniques, that tend to organise and articulate this relationship: the record industry, radio and television, music journalism and criticism. This would begin to lead to an understanding of pop music as a cultural practice which is organised through multiple points of cultural power and which is potentially susceptible to a whole range of social pressures arising from class, gender, race, age, locality and education.

It is at this point that the analysis would draw us into wider questions of contemporary popular culture – the historical shifts in cultural topography and the changing organisation of the social formation – changes which, in one direction, point towards shifts in the capitalist organisation of production, and, in another, towards alterations in the social construction of leisure and pleasure. And it is in these objective shifts, and the ways they come to be lived out, that the historical reality of pop music – and the analytical strategy I would propose – begin to take shape. Simple ideological distinctions between good and bad, or positive and regressive pop music would have to be replaced by a historically informed, hence more subtle, analysis of pop music's complex cultural presence and potentially multiple ideological configurations. The analytical panorama that this opens up – obviously in opposition to Adorno's pessimistic closure – is naturally another story (for which see Chambers 1981, which in a sense is a companion piece to this article, this time written in affirmative critical tones). Hopefully, the negative tone adopted with respect to previous critical approaches has already etched the outline of what could eventually be a positive critical strategy for the analysis of pop music.

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