

Music is Power  
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**The oldest song....**

Not only may music be the oldest art form; it has some claims to be *the* primal cultural practice. Some anthropologists and philosophers, including Rousseau, have speculated that the distinction between speech and song may have been non-existent at some point in our evolutionary history, arguing that the modulation of sound for expressive purposes may be the common matrix from which both music and language have emerged. If, as is generally assumed, the oldest cultures have been at once oral and musical, then from the earliest times music has surely played a constitutive role in the organisation of common memories. After Derrida, we might speculate that it was music which lent speech the qualities of *writing* long before physical scripts were invented: the metre, melody and rhythm of song making it possible for large chunks of 'text' to be remembered, repeated and passed on (or, perhaps, misremembered, corrupted and transformed) long before they could be written down. If it is our technological relationship to the world which makes us human - a thesis which, most recently, Bernard Stiegler has played with - then the ancient prehistoric flutes recently discovered in Germany, probably pre-dating the earliest cave-art, stand as some testament to the intimate connection between musicality and humanity itself.

Yet it is perhaps only when we consider the very difference between music and language, and the ways in which the experience of music is not limited necessarily to the experience of being human, that we begin to open up the most productive avenues for thinking about music and its peculiar powers. No tendency in 20th century thought did more to elevate language to the central status it acquired in the study of culture than structuralism; yet we can cite two of structuralism's most influential thinkers in identifying something in music which is not of the order of signification. In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss wrote that 'Below the level of sounds and rhythms, music acts upon a primitive terrain, which is the physiological time of the listener...The inner, or natural grid, which is a function of the brain, is reinforced symmetrically by a second and, one might say, still more wholly natural grid: that constituted by the visceral rhythms.' That other great mythologist, Roland Barthes, wrote of the centrality to musical experience of timbre, sonic texture, which Barthes called (in the title of his famous essay) 'the grain of the voice': "the grain is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs".

**The Politics of the Body**

It is observations such as these which have led some critics - such as the influential feminist musicologist Susan McClary - to suggest that in trying to understand the politics of sound, we do well to look past the most obvious indicators of political significance which a piece of music may have. From this perspective, we should not look for the politics of music in the lyrics of songs, the slogans on album-sleeves or in the tribal affiliations which particular artists claim or engender, but in the formal properties of musics as they are experienced within interlocking sets of cultural contexts, and in particular in the experiences of the body which they either make possible or foreclose to their potential listeners.

One way of understanding what is at stake in these arguments is to refer to Richard Dyer's classic 1979 essay 'In Defence of Disco'. Dyer, a pioneer of politicised film studies in the UK, wrote this

classic exposition from his perspective as a gay man active on the socialist left, tired of the dismissive attitude to disco which was typical of that milieu. Dyer argued that the politics of disco were to be understood in terms of the 'all-body' eroticism which it made available to dancers, an eroticism which escaped the strictures of the overly-gendered modes of bodily experience afforded by other genres of music (the feminised self-consciousness of pop, the overt phallicism of rock). Subsequent writers have tended to follow this logic either by celebrating the power of dance musics to liberate the masculinised or feminised body from its habitual routines, or in terms of a rather crude understanding of musical forms (in particular rock and classical forms) as formally 'gendered'. Closely mirroring the analytic approach of the early Luce Irigaray, McClary's *Feminine Endings* (1991) identified the emergence of the classical symphony at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the subjection of musical form to 'phallic' tendencies, as the linear and climactic forms pioneered by Beethoven displaced the more cyclical and polyvocal tendencies of the baroque. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press' *The Sex Revolts* (1995) mapped the field of rock music in terms of a psychoanalytic understanding of different modes of masculinity expressing themselves in different musical styles, drawing loosely on the early writing of Julia Kristeva.

Not long after this, writing in the wake of the emergence of rave culture at the end of the 1980s, young British commentators such as myself (writing with Ewan Pearson in our 1999 book, *Discographies*) and Maria Pini (*Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity*, 2001) came to see in rave the potential realisation of Dyer's utopian vision of disco, as a space in which the destabilisation of ordinary masculinity and femininity might make possible an imaginative reconfiguration of wider gender relations. I hope readers will forgive me for drawing on this rather parochial example - about which I have written in detail elsewhere - but the fate of British music culture in the 1990s remains an ideal study in some of the issues which concern us here. There was a widespread perception around the middle of the decade that a cohort of young British men were being 'feminised' within the intense matrix of ecstasy, techno, house and rave culture in the early 1990s: socialised into a more tactile, emotive and sexually egalitarian mode of sociality than previous generations. This perception provoked a significant cultural backlash in the second half of the 1990s, during which time a range of media outlets rushed to celebrate the return to popularity of more traditionally masculine leisure pursuits - football, beer, soft porn and rock'n'roll - as the funkless football-chant swagger of *Oasis*, heroes of the 'Britpop' movement, came to define the sonic landscape of Blair's Britain.

This wasn't only an assertion of conventional masculinity. The mid-1990s was the moment of the UK's most intensely cosmopolitan period of musical experimentation, as the mutant sound of drum'n'bass synthesised house, techno, ragga, dub and hip-hop into a wholly new musical form, emerging from some of the poorest and most multicultural urban districts of London and Bristol. The resurgent popularity of white rock which followed - and which saw *Oasis*' banal nationalism feted by supposedly liberal journalists and broadcasting executives - was as much about the British middle-class's fear of a black planet as it was about their anxieties over the feminising impact of rave and the wider threats to normative masculinity posed by the long sexual revolution of the previous decades.

This historical example echoes another. McClary's ground-breaking essay 'Same as it Ever Was' (In Rose & Ross eds. *Microphone Fiends*, 1994), explores the proposition that Afro-American dance music offered young white Americans in the 1950s and 1960s an experience of the body which was not limited by the constraints of 'white' culture. We might take this a little further and suggest that the emergence of the syncretic musical genre of rock'n'roll in the 1950s created for the first time a

*common* corporeal experience for white and black youth which could make it possible for the former to imagine a de-segregated culture and polity without fear, delineating a common experiential terrain upon which the gains of the Civil Rights era would be built.

## **Refrains and Affects**

These examples are easy enough to comprehend, but how do we really understand the mechanisms by which they operated? How can we conceptualise the fit between musical forms and the actual experiences of particular social groups? Let's start by recalling that the experience of the self is always also an experience of a social context, and that what mediates between the inner world and the social sphere is always a particular way of inhabiting one's *body*. Even as determinedly prosaic a thinker as Pierre Bourdieu can lend us some help here: for Bourdieu, the individual's *habitus*, their set of socially-inherited predispositions, is primarily a matter of their physical postures, their aesthetic tastes and sensitivities, their dress, gestures and deportment. Let's reflect also that our experience of the body in space and time is - much more than we often realise - from the very outset a *sonic* one. We orient ourselves in space as much through sound as through vision. Children in every known culture learn to move, to organise and direct their physical relationship to the world, by means of songs, rhymes and little dances. It follows then, that although we may not realise it (in part because we inhabit a culture which has mistrusted both sound and the body for millennia, drawing on the apparent incorporeality of vision and light to provide its favourite metaphors for truth and divinity), we become who we are - personally, but also as men, women, Europeans, metropolitans, white, black, old or young - through mechanisms which are as much sonic and kinetic as they are visual or intellectual. The tiny habits which enable us to sit, stand, walk, run, speak, sing and dance are the material from which the fabric of our selves is woven, and they are intimately connected with ways of hearing and making sounds.

The importance of these habits is evoked in the weight which Deleuze & Guattari give to their concept of the *refrain*. In *A Thousand Plateaus* refrains (later described by Guattari as 'existential refrains') are identified as those repeatable fragments of experience with which not just songs, but 'territories' are delineated and given substance: 'territory' being a concept which here covers not just geographical spaces, but social identities, stable cultural milieux and even political institutions. A bird using its refrains to delineate its territory is not only mapping a space, but organising a whole set of relationships to the world.

It is no surprise, perhaps, that of all the great philosophical works of recent decades, it is *A Thousand Plateaus* which makes the most explicit and frequent references to music, as concerned as it is to elaborate a politics of the body and of the aesthetic which is not limited by any of the preconceptions either of structuralism or of the entire Western tradition. Despite the conservatism of their own musical tastes, music seems for Deleuze & Guattari to manifest both the power of culture to organise experience, and the power of experimentation (or 'art', if we prefer that term) to displace previously-organised experiential patterns. Music's power to seize us, to transform us, to intensify our sense of difference from ourselves and our sense of what we might become - and what we might yet go beyond - is here conceptualised in terms of music as a site of multifarious 'becomings' (becoming-child, becoming-animal, becoming-woman, etc. etc.) which are always necessarily modulations of our experience of the body in the world.

In recent years, Anglophone cultural theory has looked to Deleuze & Guattari as key theorists of 'affect' - that dimension of experience which links corporeal sensation to emotion and cognition. To

understand the specificity and importance of this notion, just consider how much is conveyed by the tone of a voice, irrespective of the semantic content that it carries. The precise corporeal-emotional charge conveyed from one body to another by the relative tension of mouth and vocal chords is exactly what the term 'affect' best designates, and this is also exactly what the 'grain of the voices' confers. It is clear enough that affect is precisely music's domain, while music is the cultural practice which deals most directly in the production, orchestration, repetition and interruption of affects.

This usage of the term 'affect' derives from Spinoza, and it is perhaps still Spinoza who can offer us the best understanding what is at stake in an art of affect. For Spinoza, what is always at stake in the question of affect is a question of *power*, of "an augmentation or diminution of that body's capacity to act" in Brian Massumi's classic phrase (from his English translator's introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*). To translate this concept for our purposes here, we can say that music makes us able - individually, collectively - simultaneously to do and to feel certain things and not others. It is here that its force and its power reside.

### **Possible Worlds**

So music has - indeed, music arguably *is* - the capacity to create a set of common affects, enabling otherwise disparate bodies to resonate in harmony, with political consequences that can be either progressive or reactionary depending on circumstances. The white and black youth of late 1950s America found those few elements of their everyday experience which they shared intensified and brought into a certain harmony in the process of becoming-rock'n'roll, as the pleasures of dancing, lovemaking and being-young converged upon a momentary point of common intensity, delineating a shared existential territory. On the other hand, other forces - capital, racism, patriarchy - would quickly segregate, striate and re-map this space, to the point where several decades later, rock in the form of 'Britpop' could become the point of common resonance for a generation of white British men wishing to shore up their hegemonic status against a range of threats.

The point to understand here is not that particular musical forms are inherently reactionary or inherently progressive, because clearly that is not true. The point is that music plays an active role in the creation of these affective events, which respectively reveal or foreclose certain new possibilities. Music, perhaps better than any other form, works at the level of the 'virtual', as conceptualised by Deleuze, after Bergson and Leibniz: in the realm of those infinite 'possible worlds' which collective creativity engenders and which capitalism, as Maurizio Lazzarato has convincingly argued (see *Les Révolutions du Capitalisme*, 2005) must at once enable and curtail if it is to thrive. It is therefore *not* in its capacity to express our existing situation, or to give voice to our pre-established identities (social or personal) that music's power resides: it rather in its capacity quite literally to make us *feel differently* while also *feeling the same* as certain others whom we did not share feelings with before. Music simply *is* this force, this potential, this power, to experience new possible worlds.