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Sonic Retro-Futures: Musical Nostalgia as Revolution in Post-1960s American Literature, Film and Technoculture

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
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by

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Finally, I thank the "fair use" protections of the U.S. copyright code, section 107; all images contained within this dissertation are in the public domain and used solely for the purpose of scholarly research.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Sonic Retro-Futures: Musical Nostalgia as Revolution in Post-1960s American Literature, Film and Technoculture

by

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This dissertation examines the ongoing influence of retro music cultures on post-1960s American artists and their representations of social, political, and economic change. Through a roughly decade-by-decade analysis of poetry, novels, film, and emerging technocultures, I make the case for a pendular dynamic of nostalgic art in the wake of the Civil Rights era—namely, a hope for revolutionary futures based on the past coupled with a backward-looking dirge for a Rubicon crossed, a moment of potential irretrievably lost. These twinned poles of optimism and pessimism share a nostalgic center in the music cultures of the past, emblematized in American art as agents of change and revolution, high water marks against which artists measure progressivism or cultural regression.

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Introduction

The man who has no self-respect … will imitate anybody and anything; sounds of nature and cries of animals alike; his whole performance will be imitation of gesture and voice…. And when one of these polyphonous pantomimic gentlemen offers to exhibit himself and his poetry we will show him every observance of respect, but at the same time tell him that there is no room for his kind in our State.
—Plato, *The Republic*, Book III, c.380 BC

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," 1836

We live in a pop age gone loco for retro and crazy for commemoration: band re-formations and reunion tours, expanded reissues of classic albums and outtake-crammed box sets, remakes and sequels, tribute albums and mash-ups.
—Simon Reynolds, *Retromania*, 2011

Cultural memory is a fire in need of tending—a communal beacon, a spark of inspiration, or the ashes of an extinguished flame. As the Frankfurt School cultural critic Walter Benjamin once wrote, the way we theorize the past requires perpetual vigilance, through which "the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (255). Yet a curious orthodoxy now reigns in the major theories of postmodernist literature and technoculture—one which limits the conception of how contemporary artists engage with and represent the past. Trailblazing postmodern scholars like Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, and Brian McHale, for example, all share an "ocularcentric" approach to the subject, a preoccupation with the visual dimensions of contemporary art and media. This approach, of course, has yielded important insights about the correspondences between film, television, advertising, and arts like literature and architecture, especially in regard to the intensification of early twentieth-century themes of fragmentation and visual collage. It has also led, however, to

a negative model of nostalgia that either faults postmodern artists for inadequate representations of the past, downplays the existence of nostalgic themes, or disavows any productive connection between the past and the future.

The overall purpose of my project is to revisit the uses of nostalgia in post-1960s American literature, film, and technoculture by employing a sound studies paradigm—*listening*, if you will, to what previous scholars have *overlooked* in their assessments of contemporary culture. By sound studies, I mean the scholarship of aural media and music culture, like that of Jonathan Sterne, who has both championed the need to historicize sonic technoculture and called for a reassessment of post-Enlightenment reason as an "Ensoniment"—a social and philosophical history of thought from an aural, rather than a visual, perspective. My project extrapolates from and augments these insights by bringing them to bear upon American literature , film, and technoculture after 1960. More specifically, I investigate the cultural fallout of the Sixties-era music culture and its long, nostalgic half-life within contemporary artistic productions. This approach leads to a new understanding of how contemporary authors not only engage in jeremiads of sonic nostalgia but also rework and remediate the musical past to imagine revolutionary pathways into the future.

While a growing body of research has explored sound and aural culture in relation to American architecture, film, sociology, neuroscience, anthropology, art history, and Afro-modernity, very little book-length scholarship has yet considered the impact of aural media on postmodern and contemporary literature. Though two recent projects employ a sound studies approach to postmodern literature—namely, Phillip Schweighauser's *The*

Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985 (2006) and Justin St. Clair's *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature* (2013)—my project aims to both expand their coverage of sonic postmodernity and offer a case study in an alternate conception of it. While Schweighauser and St. Clair quite usefully import the Frankfurt school insights of Adorno and extrapolate from the "ocularcentric" treatments of postmodernity found within the work of Jameson, Hutcheon, and McHale, their conclusions remain conceptually bound to their predecessors, placing an aural skin, if you will, on a familiar visual-cultural dominant. While this work is necessary and usefully reinforces the prevailing orthodoxies in the field, I aim to develop another, perhaps more heterodox, conception of sonic postmodernity based on nostalgia for bygone music and aural media. Indeed, no full-length study yet exists to parse the connections between musical media and nostalgia within the formal aesthetics and politics of American artists after 1960.

My interdisciplinary research thus breaks new ground and digs deep enough to not only clarify the legacies of American artists but also offer new scholarship to a range of fields: sound studies, film studies, postmodern literature, science fiction studies, and cultural history. Questions germane to this project include the following: What role does sonic nostalgia play in structuring the formal rhetorics of contemporary fiction?; What sociopolitical impact does nostalgic art have on the contemporary public sphere?; What modes of progressivism emerge from the cultural nostalgia for bygone music and musical media?; and As contemporary cultural and theoretical models shift into metaphors of a networked world, how does musicality and its representation change within literature and other media?

The idea that music can exert a kind of revolutionary force to spur social change has a history as long as the suspicion of nostalgic imitation. In Book III of *The Republic*, Plato identifies the musical modes that ungracefully incite passions incompatible with state ideology and for this reason argues the necessity of preventing musical training for the underclasses, whose inharmonious souls might sow discord and erode the hegemony of the elite. Echoes of this power of sound to delight or "deform" warble into the contemporary era with the force of teleology, inspiring the notion that our age is either at a monumental tipping point or has missed the chance for progressive transformation. In other words, my chapters parse two distinct but contrapuntal lines of thinking in the literary and technocultural engagements with music and the evolving machines influencing its production, mediation, and reception since the 1960s: a nostalgically optimistic belief in musical revolution yet to be, or a backward-looking wistfulness for moments of musical power and potential now lost. The poles of this twinned dynamic I dub, respectively, "generative" and "degenerative" nostalgia.

In using these terms, I take inspiration from film scholar Caryl Flinn's *Strains of Utopia* (1992), which analyzes the musical scores of several early Hollywood films noir and maternal melodramas to identify a thread of nostalgic utopianism in the critical treatment of bygone cinema. Flinn expertly dismantles the Platonic tradition of musical transcendence, the ephemeral quality of sound to act as an affective free agent unbound by sociohistorical context. She also takes to task Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Theodor Adorno for harboring strains of utopian nostalgia in their respective theories of sound. As an alternative, Flinn endorses Ernst Bloch's theory of future-oriented "traces"

within art waiting to be activated by the critic. To her credit, she carefully highlights her own critical desires in this process of looking backward, valorizing the politics of reshaping the past in order to serve a progressive scholarly agenda—in her case, recuperating early-sound-cinema film-score dialectics between the diegetic and nondiegetic spaces of the maternal melodrama in order to highlight moments of micropolitical female agency.

In spirit, my work takes a similar approach to the realm of contemporary American literature, film, and technoculture. What is it about recent artistic culture, I ask, that looks to the musical past in order to reactivate a dormant and heretofore unidentified moment of revolutionary intervention? I argue throughout that artists and audiophiles from the Sixties to the present suffer from a case of nostalgia for a curious retro-future that never was—one they believe either *may yet* emerge through the power of art or must remain forever behind, a golden road not taken.

Successive generations specifically engage in a nostalgic musical dialectic with the cultural products of the postwar period because, in a Deleuzian sense, sturdy cultural "plateaus" were established in the popular musical revolutions of electric blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock-n-roll, their various and iterative hybridizations, and the attendant technological advances influencing their production, performance, mediation, and reception. That is, the deployment of mid-century sonic innovation throughout mainstream America caused a stir so profound as to ingrain itself into the cultural memory—indeed, into the affective cultural mythos. It set a new origin point in terms of what it means to be a modern American in an era of suburban "conformism"—rebellious,

transgressive, innovative, and forward-thinking, even "futuristic." The irony is that we still harken back to these moments, now preserved within the wax museum of LP grooves (or digital archives) to assuage a lost sense of revolutionary affect—a deep nostalgic longing for a phantasmic future "home" in revolutions past. (According to the OED, nostalgia names a psychological condition akin to "homesickness:" *Nostos* [homecoming] + *algia* [pain].) American artists have been continually seeking—or lamenting the impossibility of—a strange retro-future, a path to the political future built from emotional connections to the musical past and its media. Quite clearly, the impact of new music and musical technologies in contemporary culture has been transformative in myriad ways, but the focus of this dissertation is to explore the many ways those histories—and our popular and artistic conceptions of them—get continually expressed as nostalgic reenactments of, or requiems for, the musical past.

Given this focus, my project draws from the long history of Frankfurt and Birmingham school scholarship theorizing the merits, dangers, containments and mobilizations inherent in musical technoculture since the gramophone. I argue, however, for neither an Adornoesque foreclosure of music's potential—that is, for all but the most avant-garde composer or ex-centric connoisseur at the consumerist periphery—nor the adoption of a permissive theory of retro pop-music appreciation as a mode of progressivism. I aim for a critical ground situated between the poles of theoretical foreclosure and cultural fantasy, aiming for a clear-sighted appraisal of artistic desires situated in their respective sociohistorical contexts.

I include a robust assortment of science fiction (SF) texts in addition to more canonical ones in order to explore themes of "musical futures" and fantastical musical machines, which since the 1960s have become a staple of the genre: nostalgic conceptions of music and musical technologies as effectors of cultural change. New Wave SF authors such as Michael Moorcock, Norman Spinrad, and Robert Silverberg offer alternative visions of the Sixties counterculture—some lurid and fantastical, others satirical—and by plugging into this strain of utopian musical thought, I hope to more fully capture what historian David Farber calls the "great dreams" of American culture during that era, as well as the generational after-effects of their enshrinement in artistic productions since then.

This sets up the inclusion (in Chapter Two) of the next wave of SF writers, the cyberpunks, whose visions of futuristic musical machines and projected sound-cultural trends can be compared against those of the preceding generation. Though critics such as Rob Latham have quite rightly noted the polemical, near-Oedipal relationship between the cyberpunks and New Wavers, I'll argue that writers such as Pat Cadigan, John Shirley, and Bruce Sterling share with their New Wave forebears a satirical ear for changes in musical culture and media.

In short, as this study considers the cultural role of imaginative literary futures involving music and its attendant technoculture, the inclusion of the science-fiction genre—which routinely takes the future and its technologies as subject matter—seems central.

In addition to the class-based and gendered aspects of musical retro-futurism, one of the most interesting and challenging dimensions that must be addressed in the course of this study is the racial dynamics inherent in such a discussion. In his seminal essay "Black to the Future," cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism to name a trend in music, technoculture, and literature in which black artists since the Sixties have imagined progressive, often fantastic futures through techniques of cultural bricolage and technological repurposing. Since then, many scholars have continued the project of chronicling how Afrofuturists raise issues of technological access (the analog and digital divides) while making innovative art from the materials available to them, particularly within musical culture. DJ Scratching, toasting, rapping, and sampling, among other innovations, engage in a class-based "hack" into musical culture in a way that has inspired black authors since the injection of these techniques into the mainstream. And before that, the musical forms of Plantation Songs, Gospel, Blues, Ragtime, Electric Blues, Rhythm and Blues, and Jazz all expressed a historical and musical connection to the larger American culture, oftentimes carrying within lyrics and musical tambour the emotions, hopes, and fears of an ethnic group facing colossal adversity. Thus, the connection between black American authors and their affective investments in musical forms and technologies requires careful attention (Chapter One), as does the use of black musical tropes within white literature (Chapter Three), if we consider the work of Eric Lott (*Love and Theft*) and Michael North (*Harlem Renaissance*), among many other theorists and ethno-historians. Throughout, I attempt to map the literary terrain of differences and similarities between white and black authors and artists since the Sixties

in their differently-inflected, but perhaps mutually-informing, responses to the musical past.

The dissertation consists of four main chapters and a speculative Coda, and in a general sense, these sections represent a thematized interrogation of Past (Chapters One and Two), Present (Chapters Three and Four), and Future (the Coda). As the sections progress, they follow a loosely historical arc and explore how artists respond to major musical-media innovations as they appear in mainstream culture. Proceeding roughly decade by decade, the chapters track emerging patterns of musical production, mediation, and reception, focusing especially on the cultural fallout of major musical-media innovations such as the LP, the MTV network, and the MP3 format, correlating them with their representation by artists and highlighting the nostalgic investments and interventions in musical revolution—whether generative or degenerative— these representations express.

Chapter One, "Audio-didactic Postmodernism: Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*," sets an origin point for the thematic arc I'll explore throughout the remaining chapters and further considers the reasons why literary artists and critics continually harken back to the American musical past when searching for moments of revolution. Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961) represents the visual and textual rhetoric of LP audition and invites readers to "listen" to Marxist history lessons, while sampling the diverse soundscapes of Harlem and registering its otherwise muted voices on the eve of the Civil Rights Movement. More specifically, I claim that the author juxtaposes past narratives of musical possibility with

the present realities of pan-African decolonization efforts and the formal rhetorics of musical media, crafting an aesthetic of "audio-didacticism"—a sonic historiography that attempts to make forward-thinking, globally-conscious interventions into American Civil Rights-era politics.

The benefits of this analytical project are many. It begins to trace a genealogy in American literature from the early 1960s into the present of what I call generative nostalgia—a more positive and future-directed strand of what I have dubbed "sonic retro-futurism." As my chapters progress, I juxtapose this artistic strategy with the work of authors exemplifying an opposite impulse toward degenerative nostalgia—a more wistful and backward-looking lamentation of moments of musical potential squandered, co-opted, or otherwise foreclosed. This chapter not only lays the groundwork for the remaining chapters but also provides new insights into the late-career literary contributions of Hughes. By looking closely at his formal innovations in *Ask Your Mama*, I make the case that critics have unfairly overlooked not only the author's formal virtuosity but also his contribution to a black postmodern aesthetic.

Chapter Two, "SF's Degenerative Nostalgia in the MTV Era," traces the influence of New Wave science fiction writers of the Sixties and Seventies upon the next generation of so-called cyberpunks, whose critical responses to changing musical media dominants fulminate against a growing corporatization of the music business exemplified by the rise of the MTV network in the early Eighties. Through close attention to how the New Wave satirizes the most garish aspects of countercultural rock-n-roll optimism, I highlight a strain of disillusionment in the concept of musical revolution passed on to the

cyberpunks—a genealogy often overlooked by SF critics, who more commonly align the latter camp with the pyrotechnic visual stylistics of the MTV aesthetic.

In his essay "Literary MTV," for example, George Slusser offers an unfavorable assessment of cyberpunk authors, such as Bruce Sterling and John Shirley, through a critique of what he sees as their adoption of the network's audiovisual aesthetics. I'm less interested in Slusser's argument—which clearly amounts to a cantankerous hit-piece—than his identification of a literary movement deeply affected by (indeed, partially-defined by) changing musical-media trends and an expression of nostalgia for an earlier, "better" time in both musical and literary culture. What I argue is that, contrary to Slusser's belief, cyberpunk-era writers—despite their clear (and avowed) stylistic indebtedness to MTV's aesthetics—engage on the level of *content* in quite nostalgic, even reactionary ways with the musical past that complicate their critical alignment with music video culture. Norman Spinrad's *Little Heroes* (1987), John Shirley's *Eclipse* (1985), and Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991), for example, all explore the failures and dangers of new musical media and/or glorify the musical revolutions of the Sixties as the halcyon days of popular political power. In their respective imaginaries, MTV-like corporate entities have changed musical cultures for the worse: weakening artistic control, eroding analog instrument training, and eradicating traditional "live" performances. These visions of the near future tie such developments to diminishing democratic involvement and increasingly dystopian conditions, but their characters' nostalgia for a once-great Sixties music culture cannot effect meaningful change within their respective worlds. I argue, in other words, that the Eighties- and Nineties-era SF

writers display a *degenerative* nostalgia for a past forever lost—a moment of emancipatory Sixties musical glory, whose time they believe—with pain and misgivings—will never come again.

Chapter Three, "Faces of Orpheus in Twenty-first Century American Literature," focuses on contemporary literature, in which the pendulum swings toward a generative nostalgia focused on reimagining past music cultures through new media technologies. In this chapter, I survey three contemporary novels—Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2013), and Nathaniel Mackey's *Bass Cathedral* (2009)— and provide an analysis of how each writer uses the Greek myth of Orpheus to fashion what Svetlana Boym has called a revolutionary "past perfect" out of golden age nostalgia, with the musical past reimagined through either the affordances of contemporary technoculture or through syncretic, cross-cultural exchange.

Egan's character of Scotty, I argue, represents a remediated Orpheus, providing an emblem for a future founded upon greater harmony of the past and present, as well as a concert-going live presence balanced with virtual experience. Like Jennifer Egan, Chabon uses musical culture and the myth of Orpheus to dramatize the changing social and economic climate of global capitalism in the neoliberal era and the struggles of ordinary people to adapt to its realities. Much like Egan revalorizes the live concert performance through its interplay with social media, Chabon stages the rejuvenation of the independent record shop through its hybridization with the digital platforms of e-commerce. I argue that for Chabon, the musical and pop-cultural past provides a virtual language network, through which black and white affects and histories can circulate and

hybridize—an antiphonic call and response through bygone media. Brokeland Records provides an emblem of the remediated musical-cultural past and represents the next important iteration of that dialogue, with its web-based LP shop curator as a cultural Orpheus poised to retrieve and respin the interracial, intergenerational records of sharing. Mackey, too, focuses on the concepts of hybridity and recontextualization, using the Molima m'Atet's new album "Orphic Bend" as the focal point of a multi-temporal, multicultural mash up, with the western myth of Orpheus in dialogue with the traditional Ghanaian concept of the Sankofa—two icons of retrieval whose combination suggests the benefits of a cultural/historical blend. Mackey's work explores the political dimensions of "listening" backward—a sonic retrieval whose goal is the destabilization of cultural hierarchies for the benefit of all peoples and for the sake of moving inward and onward through the global archives of the long-forgotten and the actively-suppressed. Throughout Bass Cathedral, Mackey fashions this powerful message through what I'm calling an "Orphic Blend"—a globally-inflected synthesis of Orphic (Western) and Sankofic (African) retrievals.

Chapter Four, "Aural Media and Neoliberal Time in Shane Carruth's *Primer,"* continues the larger analysis of the twinned phases of sonic retro-futurism by considering a more pessimistic assessment of sound-based cultural retrieval in the twenty-first century. By looking closely at Shane Carruth's time-tripping, paradox-filled debut film, *Primer*, I argue that it evokes the affective conditions of neoliberal time not only through its characters' precarious work life and dreams of get-rich-quick tech entrepreneurship but also through their invention of a time machine that they hope will change their

fortunes and enable them to re-establish the equivalent of a postwar middle class American dream. Throughout, Abe and Aaron's use of the machine gets juxtaposed to the use of aural media storage and playback technologies, which suggests a curious, "xenochronic" timeclash at the junctures of sonic posthumanism, neoliberal subjectivity, and vestigial postwar ideology.

The character's use of MP3-based musical media, I argue, echoes the lived realities of the neoliberal era—a set of conditions that curiously applies to not only the increasingly indeterminate character actions in the film's diegesis but also the film's fan reception and even Carruth's production constraints as director. To make such an argument, I draw from an interdisciplinary cross-section of contemporary theory from various fields, including economics, cinema, media studies, science fiction studies, and the growing body of sound-related discourse aggregating under the aegis of sound studies. Ultimately, I make the case that Carruth's *Primer* represents a subtle and sophisticated argument for a kind of degenerative nostalgia—in which musical media "time machines" cannot revolutionize efforts for rapprochement with a bygone era.

In the concluding Coda section, "Digital Aurality and the Science Fictional Public Sphere," I consider a more optimistic, alternate view to that of Carruth and indulge in a kind of speculative exercise, historicizing a trajectory of sonic technoculture from the Sixties into the present to articulate a theory of a "science fictional" model of public subjectivity. To form the foundation of this theory, I show that aural technoculture and science fictional aesthetics have been merging—first in the realm of classic SF cinema sound design and onward into mass market aural media—to set the stage for a science

fictional public sphere. More specifically, I focus my discussion along six key vectors contributing to public transformation: a growing cultural desire for science fictional sound signifiers; a defamiliarizing "Walkmanized" *flâneurie* in the era of networked soundscapes; the remediated vestiges of a global *magnitizdat* economy of exchange; science fictional theories of posthuman subjectivity; and the potentials of a newly-mobile and affordable digital sound design production. By articulating these connections, I hope to participate in the futurological dynamics I've sketched throughout this dissertation by considering how contemporary practices of looking back to previous musical cultures and sound signifiers can suggest alternative futures.

Though critics like Rebecca Leydon have usefully suggested a lifecycle of sorts for sonic signifiers, with their novelty fading quickly into exhaustion—say with the initial "otherworldly" impact of the Theremin devolving into a marker of kitsch—I qualify her point to argue that the designation of "new" sounds must include the postmodern reworking or recontextualizing of previously "exhausted" sounds, in effect positioning the sonic megatext for perpetual recycling, recombination, rejuvenation—and even revolution.

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Chapter One

Audio-Didactic Postmodernism: Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*

Abstract**:** This piece considers Hughes' late-career (1962) book of poetry as a meditation on the LP format and its connection to not only a growing revolutionary affect in the US and abroad during the late-Fifties but also a problematic disconnect between early Civil Rights-era American listenerships and the global decolonization efforts resonating throughout the world. In *Ask Your Mama,* Hughes both juxtaposes the revolutionary affects of global decolonization with the US's passive LP audition and remediates them into print in an attempt to rhetorically align them, building what I call an audio-didactic aesthetic in an attempt, ultimately, to further awaken a domestic civil rights consciousness through nostalgic valuation. Scholars, I argue, have thus far overlooked Hughes' framing device of the LP and therefore miss the full significance of the author's commentary on the potentials—and limitations—of musical media to spur social change. In addition, I contend that a sound studies approach to *Ask Your Mama* affords a reappraisal of both Hughes' late-career experimentalism and his contribution to a postmodernist aesthetic.

In this chapter, I listen to the neglected postmodern aesthetics in the work of Langston Hughes, who not only engages in sonic nostalgia but also reworks and remediates earlier musical technologies like LP turntables to imagine revolutionary futures. More specifically, I concentrate on Hughes' *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1962) in order to claim that the author draws from past narratives of musical possibility, as well as the formal rhetorics of musical media, to craft an aesthetic of "audio-didacticism"—a sonic historiography that attempts to make forward-thinking, globally-conscious interventions into American Civil Rights-era politics.

The benefits of this analytical project are many. In the 2009 Art Farm reissue of *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes scholar and biographer Arnold Rampersad stresses that the collection "is easily Hughes' most neglected book of poetry" (v). Though a handful of recent scholars—including James Tobias, Josh Kun, Günter H. Lenz, Robert A. Lee,

Meta DuEwa Jones, Thomas Scanlon, and W.S. Tkweme—have revived some interest in Hughes' later book-length collections, including *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and *Ask Your Mama* (1961), my work extends the conversation by considering how the poem's formal device of the LP record resonates with the book's content and further illuminates its intervention. I show that Hughes channels the revolutionary affect of the late-Fifties music culture and remediates it into print, essentially preserving its productive energies against what he felt was the threat of commodification and affective dispersion. Through this analysis, I argue that 1) Hughes' vision of multi-ethnic civil rights in *Ask Your Mama* invests deep hope in the transformative cultural and political impact of past musical media technologies; 2) that his engagement with the formal rhetorics of musical technology in *Ask Your Mama* sets the high water mark for the poet's experimentalism; and 3) that his strategies of audio-didacticism afford a re-evaluation of his late-career work as a herald of what critic W. Lawrence Hogue has recently dubbed a "planetary postmodernity" (143).

Ask Your Mama and Remediated Revolutionary Affect

During the July 4th weekend of 1960, Langston Hughes began *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* in a hotel room above the streets of Newport, Rhode Island, inspired by the unlikely riot raging in the streets below (see fig. 1.1). A largely-white group of college-aged would-be patrons of the seventh annual Newport Jazz Festival—some 12000 strong—had grown restive upon being refused entrance to the sold-out event and began to clash with overzealous local police (see fig. 1.2). The streets erupted in brawls

and bottle-throwing, cars were overturned, and the thunderstruck governor phoned the state police, national guard, Navy, and Marines to disperse the crowd with the violent tactics that would set the tone for the remainder of the decade: truncheons, tear gas, and high-powered hoses (see fig. 1.3). The popular press dismissed the importance of the event, describing the mayhem as youthful hijinks and the unfortunate consequence of excessive beer drinking. Time magazine's article "Newport Blues," published on July 18th, 1960, echoed earlier accounts that went out on the wire of a drunken fraternity romp that got out of hand—a characterization that prevails to this day. Marc Myers' 2010 Wall St. Journal retrospective "Riot in Newport, 1960" commemorates the melee not by questioning the assumed cause (non-admittance) or catalyst (the alcohol), but by suggesting the unexpected overflow itself was the result of a trio of movies released prior to the event—*Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1958), which "glamorized jazz and [the Newport festival's] hip audience," *Gidget* (1959), which "established the beach as a teenage proving ground," and *A Summer Place* (1960), which pit summer-love teen sweethearts "against hypocritical parents" (Myers).

Upon closer inspection, some grain of truth may be found in Myers' glib formula. In *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, director Bert Stern, himself "no jazz fan" (Kurtz), misses a number of legendary performances from the 1958 Newport show—chief among them, the never-to-this-day filmed Miles Davis sextet that would go on to record *Kind of Blue*—devoting instead a large portion of screen time to yachtsmanship and breezy summertime revelry, with gratuitous shot after shot of Caucasian beer-drinking, modish afternoon roof

Figure 1.1. Newport Jazz Festival revelry gives way to rioting. Photo by United Press International.

Figure 1.2. Police lay down the law during the Newport riot. Photo archived at: www.berkshirefinearts.com.

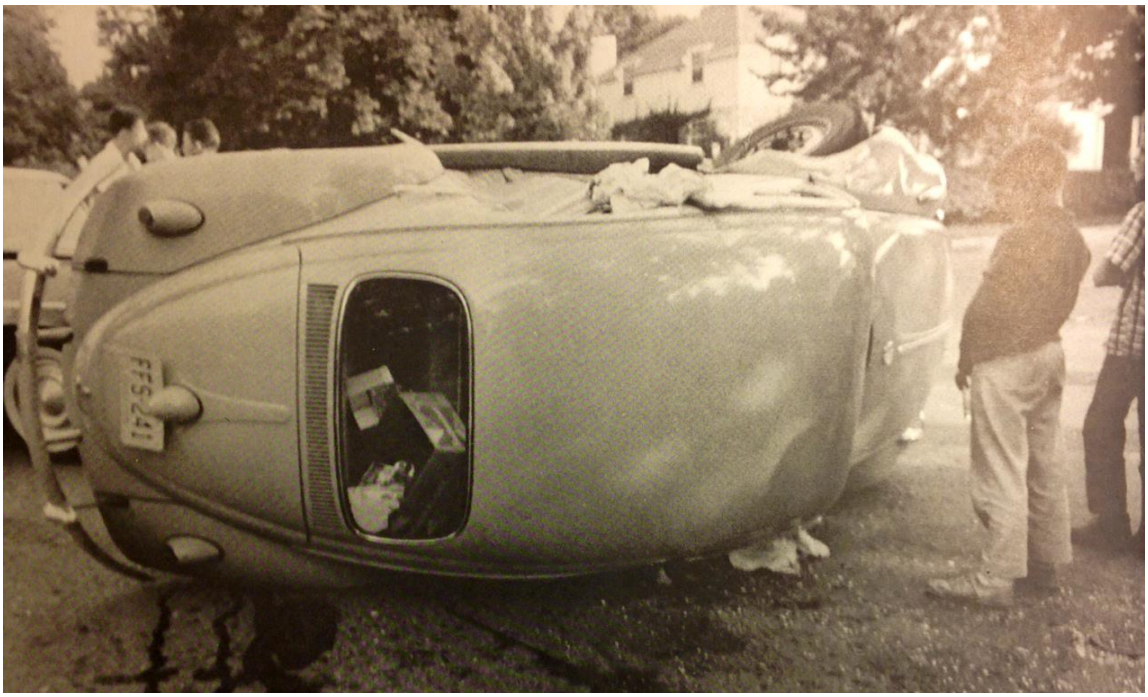


Figure 1.3. The aftermath of the riot. Photo source: Goldblatt, *Newport Jazz Festival*.

Figure 1.4. Hipsters get "jazzy" with beer on a mansard roof in Newport, 1958. Still from *Jazz on a Summer's Day*.

dancing, and their head-lolling aftermath in the midnight hour. Perhaps delicacy prevented Myers from spelling it out, but *Jazz on a Summer's Day* celebrates the very white hipster drunkenness that would two years later supposedly draw thousands to Newport in hopes of recreating the celluloid party for themselves (see fig. 1.4).[1]

To further clarify Myers' analysis, it was musical media technologies—including the above-mentioned films and their best-selling soundtracks—that seem to have been partially responsible for inciting the passions and imaginations of these impressionable youths and provoking their disobedience in Newport. But as I sift the data, a question lingers: could all of the ensuing blowup fit into a narrative of a thwarted teen blowout?

Langston Hughes scholar and biographer, Arnold Rampersad, offers an alternate take on the more familiar remembrances of the riot in his introduction to *Ask Your Mama*. To him, the clash signifies the first stirrings of the civil unrest that would come to mark the remainder of the decade, it offers evidence of the power of blues and jazz music to unite the lower classes in opposition to a moneyed elite (here embodied in the Mansion-dwellers of Newport), and it showcases the frightening blitzkrieg of the masses in spontaneous protest (vi-viii).

I believe these two positions—Myers' assessment of musical media influence and Rampersad's view of budding revolutionary affect—can be usefully combined to provide an analytical entry point into Hughes' poem. In *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes seized the opportunity to direct what he saw as a powerful, but as-yet-inchoate, revolutionary affect in danger of being channeled into increasingly commodified—and sanitized—representations of jazz culture. Around the time leading up to the riot, films like Sterne's

Jazz on a Summer's Day and Ranald MacDougall's adaptation of Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* (1960) served to downplay the importance of the black American experience, representing jazz as the backdrop to emerging white cultural stereotypes of the "beatnik," whose buffoonish, malingering on-screen prototype can be found less in the writing of the Beats themselves than in the character of Maynard G. Krebs of the popular television program *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-1963). Though the images, sounds, and meanings of jazz history were imperiled by the very mediated forces that sought to popularize and disseminate them, Langston Hughes, as I show below, sought to preserve and reassert the revolutionary histories and emancipatory thrust of jazz culture in *Ask Your Mama*.

Hughes' impression of the Newport riot awakened a new, more inclusive sense of how black music broadcasted to and affected larger racial frequencies—a more multiethnic underclass whose disaffection was, in the words of Rampersad, "dry tinder, to which black jazz had been a lighted match" (*Biography* 316). The revolutionary possibilities suggested by such powerful—though ideologically precarious—affective responses to black music were not lost on Hughes, who in the drafting stages[2] of *Ask Your Mama* chose the musical media technology of the LP as a formal device and central metaphor to express an angry, elegiac, and yet hopeful vision of civil rights in the early Sixties that highlighted the cross-racial call and response—or antiphony—of musical exchange. *Ask Your Mama*, in short, represents Hughes' attempt to use the print equivalent of LP audition as a means for ideological readjustment—a mediated Trojan horse for black history lessons at a time of increasing likelihood they would be heard.

This insight requires some unpacking of the cultural and historical contexts leading up to the riot and Hughes' own on-record responses to it. To be sure, Hughes, who served the role of guest emcee for parts of the festival, initially expressed bewilderment, sadness, and even anger at the turn of events, rather than any clear acknowledgement of their potential. Sunday afternoon, in the sober aftermath of the wreckage, after which the city council voted 4 to 3 to cancel the event—perhaps for all time—Hughes took the stage to lead an impromptu ensemble of musicians, including Otis Spann, who sang the text of Hughes' blues-inspired dirge for the Newport Festival (Goldblatt 86):

> It's a gloomy day at Newport,
>
> It's a gloomy, gloomy day,
>
> It's a gloomy day at Newport,
>
> It's a gloomy, gloomy day,
>
> It's a gloomy day at Newport,
>
> The music's going away.
>
> What's going to happen to my music?
>
> What's going to happen to my song? (Goldblatt 86)

The plaintive note of uncertainty in Hughes' initial response expressed a feeling shared by many of the artists and musicians associated with the Jazz Festival: what next? Drummer Max Roach called the riot "a tragedy….the worst thing that could have happened to the jazz world," a sentiment echoed by saxophonist Coleman Hawkins: "It's terrible. Nothing worse could have happened" (qtd. in Goldblatt 86).

Begun in 1954, the event created an aura of high-culture respectability and patronage that opened new vistas for jazz musicians in terms of performance and financial gain, not to mention the positive cultural ambassadorship that accompanied the show. The integrated ensembles and inspiringly virtuosic black role models offered a glimpse into a more unified and equitable future America at a time when many areas of the United States (including the virtual spaces of the radio and television media) conformed with *de facto* segregation, and the civil rights movement had not yet reached its tipping point. All the artistic, financial, and political gains engendered by the event over the preceding six years, however, seemed to crumble in an instant under the weight of the enormous fiasco. The city pulled the festival's permits, the festival organizers, in turn, sued the city, and the once-comfy relationship between the jazz world and the city of Newport seemed suspended in air like the final note of a muted trumpet[3] (Goldblatt 91).

The intense disappointment and complex emotion of the time would lead many in the jazz world to begin assigning blame for the festival's collapse. For Elaine Lorillard, one of the former financiers of the event, the new festival board was the culprit: "they were advertising tickets, although they knew they were sold out days before….It was greed, absolute greed on the part of the people who put on the Newport Jazz Festival" (qtd. in Goldblatt 86). For the bassist Charles Mingus, who had boycotted the event and staged his own jeering counter-festival down the street, the downfall of the Newport Festival was a long overdue comeuppance for the organizers: "That's the way it should be. They did it themselves. They deserve it because they confused rock 'n roll with jazz.

They lost their identity with jazz" (qtd. in Goldblatt 86). These post-riot responses further highlight the sense within the jazz world that its adulterated meanings and commercial entanglements were becoming a clear and present danger.

In *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't,* cultural critic Scott Saul latches closely onto such sentiments in order to take his measure of *Ask Your Mama* and the contexts leading up to its production.[4] Saul spins a narrative of increasing white teen consumer entitlement in the late 1950s that, when thwarted, as in the case of Newport, erupted in a petulant frenzy. The increasingly commodified wrapper placed around the jazz festival by its organizers, he argues, packaged jazz as a hip new set of kicks for a generation coming to age in an era of rock and roll—with its promise of exotic abandon associated with primitivist notions of the black experience. In other words, he characterizes the young white rioters as hedonists in invisible blackface, losing themselves and their middle class manners in a jazz imaginary all-too-traditionally linked in their minds to the bodily abandon and improvisatory freedom of the minstrel mask. Saul's critique centers on racial masquerade—the practice of borrowing racial gestures, dialects, or artistic practices for the purpose of temporary reinvention, allowing the "wearer" to express him- or herself outside the stultifying mores of his or her own race and class.[5] This leads Saul to read Hughes' *Ask Your Mama* as an angry and sardonic rejoinder to the white rioters through the vernacular device of "the dozens"—a corner barbershop contest of verbal one-upmanship using increasingly garish "your mama" insults.

Saul's work is exemplary on a number of fronts, and his history of the Newport Festival—and, indeed, of the many interwoven strands of jazz throughout midcentury

culture—represents the most detailed scholarly narrative as yet written on the subject. [6] Nonetheless, by enlarging his focus to include the larger context of the 1950s music culture leading up to the Newport riot, we can more clearly see Hughes attempt to not only combat a more commodified strain of black musical understanding but also rework past revolutionary moments, reach across racial lines, and balance strong affects with historical awareness.

The crucial histories germane to this analysis include a number of interracial and even international rock and jazz riots leading up to the Newport blowup. The first and most well-known of these erupted at The Moondog Coronation Ball of 1952, an integrated dance event featuring prominent rock and roll bands, hosted by the radio deejay most renowned for the nationwide popularization of rock music: Alan Freed.[7] The first on-air personality to use the term "rock and roll" to describe the "race records" he spun during his non-segregated radio program,[8] Freed also planned this first major rock and roll concert, only to have it—as with Newport—oversold, with an overflow crowd of thousands eventually crushing their way into the already-packed house (see fig. 1.5). Two years before the landmark Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, Alan Freed's event provided a transgressive space to challenge the interdicted social mixing of blacks and whites through a shared expression of black musical affect.[9] The enormous demand and exuberant response across racial lines to this first show in Cleveland presaged a string of riots and police crackdowns associated with Freed's rock and roll performance events. This earned Freed many enemies in the press and, indeed, within the F.B.I. Local authorities, too, would accuse him of inciting riots in major cities like New

Figure 1.5. The Moondog Coronation Ball's interracial crowd before thousands of overflow patrons broke in and sparked a clash with police. Photo archived at: www.bbc.co.uk.

York City and Boston, where formal charges were brought against him by the district attorney. A reactionary article in Woburn, Massachusetts' *Mass. Times* entitled "After the Brawl Was Over…" painted Freed as a satanic Pied Piper who needed to be stopped in order to save "the kids he bedeviled into gangsterism." The reporter's flabbergasted description of the earlier New York City controversy is particularly choice:

> About a year ago when Freed appeared at the Paramount Theatre in New York, several girls were injured in the crush and 135 policemen were called to keep order as teenagers danced on the seats, necked in the aisles and screamed and shouted, as wide-eyed Freed gazed in ecstatic joy and wondered why the kids were so inhibited and backward in expressing themselves. ("After")

Following Boston's 1958 rock riot, the officials in Troy, New Haven, Newark, Providence, and Boston all passed legislative amendments or *ad hoc* measures to ban rock and roll performances from appearing in their cities.[10] The "raucous, undulating rhythms that teenagers call 'cool'" were garnering a very bad reputation for their ability to activate powerful affects with subversive effects ("Cities Ban").

But these subversive and revolutionary musical affects were not restricted to live rock and roll performance venues in the Fifties, as filmic audition of black music also inspired similar outbursts of strong emotion. In the case of the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle*, a tale of a young inner-city high school teacher who reforms a class of rock music-loving juvenile delinquents, the opening soundtrack of "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and His Comets was reportedly impetus enough to send teen audience

members into destructive hysterics—an ironic effect, considering the conservative anti-rock ideology embedded within the script.[11]

Another aspect of this growing musical affect was its international nature, with various countries around the world experiencing similar youth flare-ups at rock and jazz music-related events. Several screenings of *Blackboard Jungle* the following year in Britain, for instance, led teens to slash seats, "jiv[e] in the aisles," and "vent[] their rage on tea-stalls" when expelled from the theatres (Hebdige 295). The first rock and roll movie had led to the U.K.'s first rock riots. Even in Japan, during Tokyo's first jazz festival, an overflow crowd shut out of the venue began to riot and "almost tore down the joint to hear a succession of Japanese big bands and combos and moan 'shinu, shinu, shinu'"—a hip euphemism which captures perfectly the overwhelming affective responses to black music beginning to erupt in various peoples all over the world: "I die, I die, I die" ("Shinu").

The revolutionary energies of the 1950s musical culture formed the affective touchstone for a moment of future-oriented, cross-racial exchange that Hughes, as I show below, began to remediate from the LP medium into print. By remediate, I refer specifically to Bolter and Grusin's work in *Remediation* (2000), which considers the ways that new media technologies tend to grow out of and incorporate the functions of older devices of the same stripe—as is the case, for example, with the visual media progression from photograph to cinema to digital video. Their thesis, in short, is that our contemporary technoculture evidences a contradictory double logic of both immediacy and hypermediacy, desiring "both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of

mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5). Their production-centered model of media genealogies traces the increasing desire of designers to bundle together a spectrum of previous media functionality while dreaming of the interface that disguises its own quiddity—as with, to borrow their example, the Nineties-era immersive virtual reality simulation (5). But since the scope of their study comprises "Digital visual media," which they claim "can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise" their predecessors, I should add a caveat about the ways in which Langston Hughes, as a practitioner of remediation, diverts significantly from Bolter and Grusin's conception of it (14). First of all, Hughes departs from their ocularcentric framework by incorporating aural media into his poem; second, he remediates the logics of a newer technology (the LP) into an older medium (print); and third, Hughes aims not to erase the visibility of the LP in the text, but to highlight its functionality in both rhetorical and metaphorical senses.

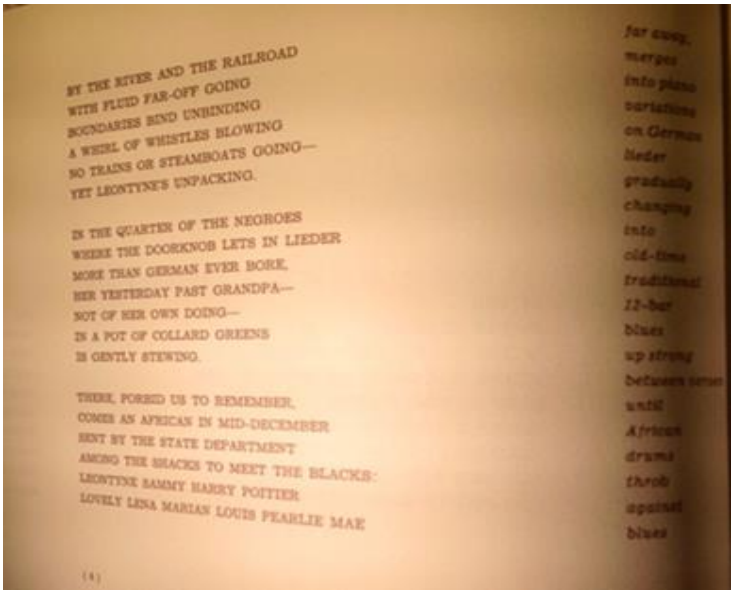
Instead of reading Hughes' work as merely an angry response to a black-versus-white disconnect inflected by authentic-versus-inauthentic responses to black music or by misguided commercialism, I'd like to suggest that Hughes' aesthetic response to the riot became much more complex as he wrote *Ask Your Mama*. His thinking about the nature of black music in relation to the larger cultural zeitgeist evolved to interrogate the more complex relationships emerging between music, performance, media, commodity, class, cultural memory, American-ness, freedom, and the global race question. These considerations led him to identify the riotous affective responses to black music in America—and the ever more accompanying disconnection from the global, social,

ideological, and material histories leading up to them—as a teachable moment.[12] Such an appraisal of Hughes' audio-didacticism, however, cannot flourish without first considering the most consistently-overlooked aspect of the poem: its rhetorical framing device of the LP record.[13]

LP Record as Formal Dialogue

Without a doubt, Hughes designed *Ask Your Mama* to formally signal the visual semiotics of late-Fifties jazz records. The subtitle *12 Moods for Jazz*, for one thing, offers a variation on a popular "mood" theme in major jazz LP titles directly preceding the book's release: Johnny Smith's *In a Sentimental Mood* (1954), James Moody's *Moody's Mood for Love* (1956), Billie Holiday's *Velvet Mood* (1956), Sarah Vaughan's *In a Romantic Mood* (1957), Charles Mingus' *Tijuana Moods* (1957), Yusef Lateef's *Jazz Mood* (1957), and Eddie Heywood's *In a Happy Mood* (1958), among many others. The cover art of the book also reflects the color palettes, typography, layout, and use of shapes characteristic of jazz LP releases on labels like Blue Note and Argo (see fig. 1.6). Though it is more difficult to discern from the recent reissues of *Ask Your Mama* because of their reduced size and aspect ratio, the original release more closely mimicked the physical experience of holding a jazz LP's cardboard outer sleeve. Its twelve "tracks" even have corresponding liner notes, whose explanatory content serves a didactic function while reflecting a formal strategy in the text to activate a dialogue between Hughes and his readers about the meaning of the tracks/chapters.

Figure 1.6. The book of poetry as LP record.


BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD
WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING
BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING
A WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING
NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING—
YET LEONTYNE'S UNPACKING.

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE THE DOORKNOB LETS IN LIEDER
MORE THAN GERMAN EVER BORE,
HER YESTERDAY PAST GRANDPA—
NOT OF HER OWN DOING—
IN A POT OF COLLARD GREENS
IS GENTLY STEWING.

THERE, FORBID US TO REMEMBER,
COMES AN AFRICAN IN MID-DECEMBER
SENT BY THE STATE DEPARTMENT
AMONG THE SHACKS TO MEET THE BLACKS:
LEONTYNE SAMMY HARRY POITIER
LOVELY LENA MARIAN LOUIS PEARLIE MAE

for cozy,
merges
into piano
variations
on German
lieder
gradually
changing
into
old-time
traditional
12-bar
blues
up strong
until
African
drums
throb
against
blues

Figure 1.7. *Ask Your Mama's* dialogic columns, with poem text on the left and performance cues on the right.

This dialogic strategy not only appears throughout the text in the form of "the dozens," as many scholars have noted, but also in the many formal experiments Hughes builds into the book's aesthetics. The number twelve structures the text in a complex and multilayered way that refracts many formal aspects of both the LP and music more generally. There are, for instance, twelve inches to a typical LP record diameter, twelve bars in a traditional blues and jazz arrangement, twelve notes in the chromatic scale, twelve key signatures, and twelve songs often possible on a typical 33 1/3 rpm record, depending on the total recording time of roughly 45 minutes.

The form of Hughes' twelve tracks/chapters/moods evokes these musical connections and many more, with the text arranged in two contrapuntal columns—one, the poem in progress, and the other, a set of musical performance cues (see fig. 1.7). The dialogue staged between text and "sound" echoes a larger formal strategy of reader-listener/author-performer interplay that often destabilizes such roles, placing the reader in a position to stage and perform the text by decoding its musical significations through a highly-individualized set of musical experiences. What Hughes enacts through such formal experiments, in other words, is cross-racial affective and experiential exchange—a call and response written into the poem's formal duality.

This strategy appears most clearly in the text's opening section, as twinned keynote phrases of musical and thematic leitmotifs. On one level, these function as a further riff on the musical performance theme, as jazz sheet music tends to offer the "head" and "solo" sections on musical staves before sketching the chordal arrangement of a piece. Hughes' main themes appear as "The Hesitation Blues" and "Shave and a

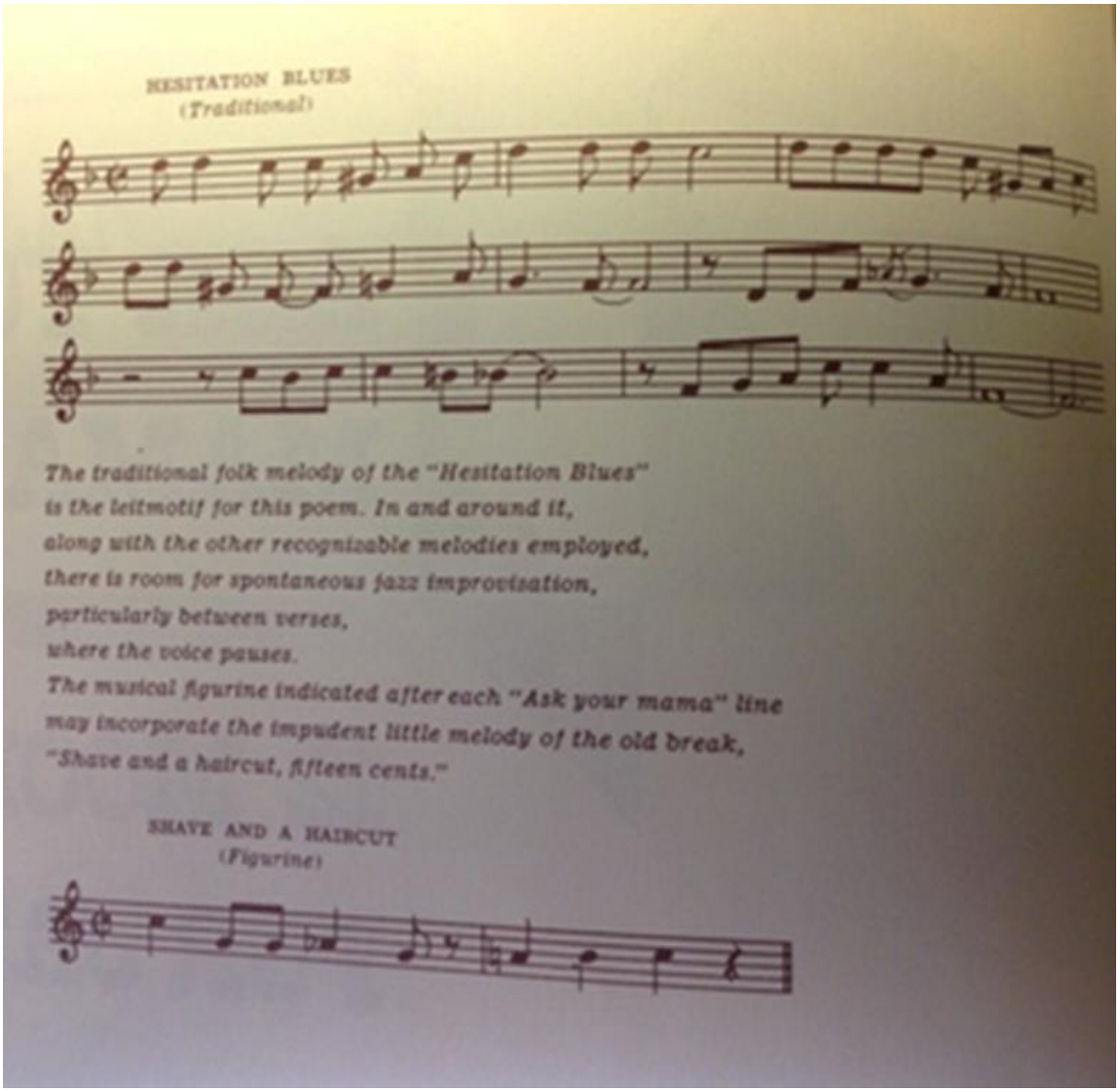


Figure 1.8. ***Ask Your Mama*****'s twin musical epigraphs. On top, the serious"Hesitation Blues" and below, the comical "Shave and a Haircut."**

Haircut"—both pre-existing tunes, with the former a blues-based lament and the latter a musical punch line, evoking again a dialogue between two antipodean perspectives, the serious and the comical (see fig. 1.8).

On another level, however, the leitmotifs allude to W.E.B. Du Bois' similar dialogic technique within *The Souls of Black Folk*, where each chapter begins with an epigrammatic juxtaposition of slave song text with European notation on a musical staff. While Du Bois' twinned musical figures illustrate his concept of double consciousness and the problem of representation across the color line, Hughes deploys the technique somewhat differently. Instead of emphasizing the disconnect between two cultures, Hughes suggests a more didactic intervention whose purpose is to enlarge a reader's understanding of the black American experience, with his two epigraphs representing both the tragedy and comedy inherent within black music—and the global, diasporic histories breathing life into it. In his appropriately titled first section, "Cultural Exchange," Hughes intends to puncture the Du Boisian veil with historical didacticism couched as musical call and response. It's a technique that both critiques and supplements an enthusiastic audition of black music, while ultimately extolling the virtues of informed multiplicity and hybridity, rather than a partitioned cultural duality.

LP Content and Audio-Didacticism

In *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes bundles 1950s-era musical affect with satire and poetically-rendered history lessons to teach the multiplicity of the global black experience, into which the LP record offers provisional entrée:

IN THE

IN THE QUARTER

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES

WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER

DUST OF DINGY ATOMS

BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.

AMORPHOUS JACK-O'-LANTERNS CAPER

AND THE WIND WON'T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT

FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN. (3)

On the one hand, "doors of paper" evokes the sleeve of the Jazz LP, which Hughes represents as a portal into "the quarter of the negroes," or black culture, as its "dust of dingy atoms" represents the LP as a physical object that "blows a scratchy sound." It's a masterful use of sibilant sound symbolism to evoke the hiss and crackle of an old LP record. But on the other hand, the passage signals a double-voiced critique of the sonic entertainment implied by the Jack-o'-Lanterns' desire to "blow doors down" in their pre-midnight caper. In jazz vernacular, musicians "blow," and an especially spirited session might "blow the doors" off a club, but The Big Bad Wolf also blows doors down, especially doors of paper. Hughes' opening suggests the poverty (dust, dingy) and vulnerability (paper doors blown down) and ever-looming threat of crime (amorphous caper) in this quarter of the negroes, a vision of black life not typically communicated by the joyful sounds of an LP record alone. Here and elsewhere throughout the poem,

Hughes bundles a historical wake-up call with the more sanitized or occluded sounds and symbols of LP audition.

Continuing his didactic "Cultural Exchange," Hughes goes on to instruct his readers about the unseen problems of black social mobility in the pre-Civil Rights era:

> BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD
>
> WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING
>
> BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING
>
> A WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING
>
> NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING—
>
> YET LEONTYNES UNPACKING. (4)

Though these city-dwellers live in proximity to major transportation hubs, with riverboats and trains leaving to far-away places, the "whirl of whistles" blow not for the black urban poor. The "unbinding" binds of poverty remain invisible, particularly to the white LP listener, who hears and imagines the exceptions, like Leontyne Price, one of the most talented opera sopranos who has ever lived. Leontyne, the globe-trotting entertainer, the one auditors hear on the record, cannot communicate the full range of the black experience. For that, Hughes implies, his supplementary corrective and affective redirection is necessary.

But Hughes' work in AYM is not so easily fixed into one meaning, and the figure of Leontyne reappears to make the case for a de-essentialized Harlem:

> IN THE POT BEHIND THE
>
> PAPER DOORS WHAT'S COOKING?

WHAT'S SMELLING LEONTYNE?

LIEDER, LOVELY LIEDER

AND A LEAF OF COLLARD GREEN,

LOVELY LIEDER LEONTYNE. (6)

While Hughes plays with assonant long E's ("Lovely Lieder Leontyne") to homonymically riff on the singer as a "leader," or member of a Du Boisian talented tenth, he also conjures the sounds of German lieder, perhaps the music of Franz Schubert, which Leontyne might have sung during her education at Julliard. These sounds, too, emanate from the apartments of the quarter and capture a more complex interaction between cultures. This complex relationship receives attention in Josh Kun's *Audiotopia*, in which he makes a case that the inclusion of the Spanish language in *Ask Your Mama* reflects Hughes' ability to pass as Mexican when traveling there to visit his father, an experience that led Hughes to begin representing a less essentialized space of Harlem through poetic moments of "inter-American singing, translation, and cartographic realignment" (145). I'd go even further, pointing attention to the poem's use of a whole host of languages—German, Spanish, Italian, Yiddish, and Haitian French Creole, among others—to represent the cultures of the world in a global "multi-logue."

This is all part of Hughes effort to widen the black experience for his audience to include a diasporic perspective reflecting the musical roots of the Global South. Indeed, the poem is filled to the brim with African American heroes and global statesmen, often appearing in a paratactic catalogue: Kwame Nkrumah (Ghanaian independence movement, prime minister 1957), Gamal Nasser (Egyptian independence movement,

1952), Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigerian Statehood movement, 1960), Fidel Castro (Cuban revolution, 1958), Ahmed Touré (Guinean decolonization movement, president 1958), and Jomo Kenyatta (president of a post-British Kenya, early 1960s). What's clear from this partial list is that Hughes seeks to bring his audience into an understanding of the revolutionary affect seizing the global proletariat. Without question, Hughes seeks to make his audience understand its desires and identifications with black music as part of a larger global movement, a larger revolutionary moment in the late-Fifties and early-Sixties.

Thus the LP motif functions, ultimately, as a symbol of global *revolution*. The individual grooves of the global struggle, in Hughes' conceit, revolve together and can be heard as one unified record of social, even socialist, change. The second chapter, "Ride, Red, Ride," for instance, moves from the leitmotif of the "Hesitation Blues"—"*TELL ME HOW LONG— / MUST I WAIT?"* (13)—to evocations of Fidel Castro and Patrice Lumumba, leaders of two political movements with opposite outcomes—with Castro bringing lasting revolution to Cuba and Lumumba being ousted (and executed) in the Belgian Congo. The juxtaposition of the two against the "Hesitation Blues" allows Hughes to question the status of civil rights in the United States in 1960, with the right-hand musical cue punctuating the section with a "flute that ends in a high discordant cry" followed by "TACIT," meaning silence. Hughes examines the gains and losses of the global struggle and seeks models for pushing a future-oriented American civil rights revolution, settling momentarily on a hopeful image of "red" rebellion:

SANTA CLAUS, FORGIVE ME,

BUT YOUR GIFT BOOKS ARE SUBVERSIVE,

YOUR DOLLS ARE INTERRACIAL.

YOU'LL BE CALLED BY EASTLAND.

WHEN THEY ASK YOU IF YOU KNEW ME,

DON'T TAKE THE FIFTH AMENDMENT.

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROS

RIDING IN A JAGUAR, SANTA CLAUS,

SEEMS LIKE ONCE I MET YOU

WITH ADAM POWELL FOR CHAUFFEUR

AND YOUR HAIR WAS BLOWING BACK

IN THE WIND. (14-15)

Though Hughes denied rumors he dined with Castro during the leader's post-revolution tour of Harlem in 1960,[14] he nonetheless figures Castro as a bearded "red" Santa Claus, riding in style through the streets of the city with his subversive texts and interracial dolls. Here, Hughes pokes fun at the anti-communist and anti-Civil Rights posturing of Senator James O. Eastland, whose Internal Security Subcommittee of the late-Fifties and early-Sixties inherited the mantle of McCarthyite red-baiting and formed the counter-weight to more progressive politicians, like Harlem's own Representative Adam Powell, imagined here as Castro's driver. What's clear from the short chapter is that Hughes sees political possibilities in socialist revolution that, in 1960, set a hair-blowing Jaguar's pace in comparison with the United States. Hughes' coded cheerleading

of the Cuban revolution runs counter to the often-Anthologized argument, stemming from Rampersad,[15] that Hughes' far-left politics waned sharply after his drubbing by Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn during his House Unamerican Activities Committee session in 1953. In *Ask Your Mama*, it seems that Hughes not only rekindles his leftist commitments in the face of a global revolutionary moment but also hopes to awaken his audience to those realities through the metaphorical device of the 1950s jazz LP.

That Hughes chooses jazz music as the metaphorical conduit of this global revolutionary history lesson is no surprise, given his fluid definition of the term in his 1956 address, "Jazz as Communication." In it he dissolves the white/black and rock/jazz divides by defining global black musics as all of a piece—as various permutations and hybrids of the same cultural waters:

> Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat. And Louis must be getting old if he thinks J. J. and Kai—and even Elvis—didn't come out of the same sea he came out of, too. ("Jazz")

As Lowney writes, this "figure of the sea was at once an identification of jazz with the beat of the human heart and the persistence of African rhythms as a life-affirming force, for black people throughout the diaspora and everyone else who is moved by black music" (568). In *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes attempts to show solidarity with global diasporic peoples and appeal to "everyone else" by historicizing the global decolonization in progress and using musical media as a trope to emblematize the shared global exchange made possible through black music and its many positive cultural

resonances. His book's formal hybridity, in effect, mirrors a sense of optimism that black musical affect could be activated and directed through an educative poetic discourse in order to put readers in sync with global socio-political developments. In this way, it seems Hughes favors the same path to revolution as Marxian thinkers Antonio Gramsci and György Lukács, both of whom believed—though they disagreed about the particulars—that some program of education would be necessary for the global proletariat to find common cause.

Hughes' poetically-rendered jazz record thus explores the possibilities and limits of cultural exchange made possible through LP audition, highlighting the multiplicity of not only a pan-African perspective but also a shared global revolution that embraced a de-essentialized notion of race, whose fluidity challenged the Eurocentric modern subject founded upon the rigidly exclusive notions of self and other. Hughes' experimental admixture of text and music, reading and performance, and entertainment and politics resonates with a complex dialogic—and multilogic—soundness that operates as a didactic corrective and a plea for a more progressive, future-oriented global consciousness. On the one hand, Hughes' work syncs with the transatlantic modern subject that Paul Gilroy describes in *The Black Atlantic* and Alex Weheliye reads through the lens of remix culture in *Phonographies*. I'd go further, however, and argue that Hughes gestures toward what W. Lawrence Hogue, in describing later black writers like Ishmael Reed, has labeled a "planetary postmodernity" (143)

LP Form and Postmodern Content

The generative nostalgia of Hughes' *Ask Your Mama* works to rejuvenate the revolutionary affects of past musical media through its remediation into print—a platform from which the poet's interventionist historiography builds a hopeful vision of an integrated global culture destabilizing the Liberal Humanist distinctions between center and periphery. The poem's continual refrain of "how long must I wait?" suggests an anticipation of the American social revolution yet to be, a future-oriented vision of a dawning Civil Rights era in step with the emancipatory potential of the global decolonization movement—all of which Hughes bundles into the LP metaphor, a reminder of the power of the musical past and a remediated emblem auguring a global antiphonic revolution to be. According to Hogue, "planetary postmodernist" writers help sketch what Jameson called the "cognitive mapping" necessary to image and navigate the emerging global world system, though I'll hasten to add Jameson's concerns remain more clearly rooted in matters of political economy. What Hughes accomplishes in *Ask Your Mama* is a speculative sonic cartography that furnishes a snapshot of the emerging global postmodern landscape.

I grant that Langston Hughes isn't necessarily the first artist we muster when forming the lineup of the postmodern usual suspects—and perhaps for good reason. Early in his career, Hughes quite deliberately distanced himself from his white Modernist contemporaries and what he saw as their more hermetic, academic poetics, embracing instead what he thought were more authentic cultural referents—vernacular speech, the Jazz Age, and city life after the first-wave Great Migration.[16] This does not mean,

however, that Hughes shunned experimental poetics. From the early-modernist period onward he served as a staunch supporter of the innovative black aesthetics of writers like Jean Toomer, whose multifaceted *Cane* he champions in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926).

The depths of Hughes' own immersion into various experimental poetic techniques have yet to be fully sounded in critical circles, though recent scholars like Tkweme, Marcoux, Jones, Lenz, and Scanlon have recently paid considerable attention to the poet's use of jazz rhythms to further a case for Hughes' innovative practices. Indeed, the degree to which even early poems like "Jazzonia" (1923) draw from traditional blues and jazz 1-4-5 chordal arrangements suggests a fruitful avenue through which to further investigate his jazz-inspired innovation.

What remains missing in this scholarly conversation is an appraisal of Hughes' innovative remediation of LP rhetorics in *Ask Your Mama*—a technique which showcases the poet at the very peak of his experimental form. Its framing device represents the most sophisticated conceit within the poet's oeuvre; its jazz-influenced form revels in the processual, the improvisatory, the in-between, the performative, the open, the non-hierarchical, the multiplicitous; its poetic content extolls the virtues of the recombinatory, the hybrid, the indeterminant, and the ironic. *Ask Your Mama*'s formal framework, its dialogic musical structure, its multivocal content, and its openness to interactive reader performance all point in the direction of the postmodern.

The weakest case we could make based on these considerations is that Hughes' later works, including *Ask Your Mama*, formed an aesthetic gateway into the postmodern

era—that the text exhibits the kind of experimental formalism we see in writers like Nabokov or Faulkner, whom postmodern critic Brian McHale has taxonomized as "limit modernists," writers who exhibit both the Modernist concern with questions of epistemology—how do I know what I know about the world?—and the postmodern concern with ontology—what world am I in?; In what ways is this world unstable?; In what ways does it threaten the stability of my construct of reality? This wouldn't be the first time that Modernist-era writers, of course, have been identified as postmoderns *avant la letter*, if you recall the many recent (and clearly warranted) reappraisals of Gertrude Stein's innovations.[17] But such efforts by postmodern scholars tend to trace the white modernist roots of contemporary literature—to use the case of Stein—or begin histories of black postmodernism in the mid-to-late 1960s, as does Madhu Dubey, in her groundbreaking work *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2003).[18] Because of the preconceived disciplinary lenses we scholars bring—or fail to bring—to the examination of writers like Hughes, I believe we run the risk of mischaracterizing, and thus limiting, the body of their work. The formal innovations of *Ask Your Mama* couple with an equally challenging poetic discourse that defies the neat boxes of academic periodicity and urges us to listen more closely to the breaks between well-worn tracks.

While Hughes' *Ask Your Mama* displays an optimistic, generative nostalgia for musical cultures and their media, the next chapter explores a more pessimistic, degenerative nostalgia for bygone music. Chapter Two traces a genealogy of skepticism about musical revolution from the Sixties- and Seventies-era New Wave science fiction writers into the next generation of cyberpunks, whose musical-cultural critiques in the

Eighties and Nineties take aim at the corporatism and video-mediated innovation accompanying the rise of the MTV network.

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Notes

[1] See Saul, *Freedom* 113.

[2] In the summer of 2013, I was awarded a Center for Ideas and Society grant in order to travel to Yale University's Beinecke Library, where I examined the thirteen hand-annotated drafts of *Ask Your Mama*, which reside in the Langston Hughes Papers in the James Wheldon Johnson Collection: JWJ MSS, Boxes 271 and 272.

[3] According to the *Time* magazine article "Newport Blues" from December 5th of that year, these forebodings turned out to be quite short-lived and unfounded. Neither party, in the end, wanted to lose what was already the crown jewel of East Coast jazz performance venues. Tighter restrictions on alcohol vending were happily agreed upon by all parties involved.

[4] Saul's historiography has been influential, with very recent scholarship about *Ask Your Mama* by both Lowney and Marcoux following his narrative quite closely.

[5] Notable examples of this analytical framework can be seen in Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* (1995), Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism* (1994), Nathan Huggins' *Harlem Renaissance* (1972), and, in reverse, Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

[6] The "jazz as vernacular" approach to *Ask Your Mama* has become a popular analysis, with several variations on the theme more often than not comprising what little scholarship does exist on the work. See, for example, Michael Borshuk's *Swinging the Vernacular*, Thomas Scanlon's "News From Heaven: Vernacular Time in Langston

Hughes' *Ask Your Mama,*" and Philip Marcoux's *Jazz Griots,* which analyzes jazz and blues as meta-languages in the poem.

[7] For more on the "Moondog Coronation Ball" see "Cleveland's rock'n'roll riot" from the BBC, as well as Jude Sheerin's "How the world's first rock concert ended in chaos."

[8] The standard radio practice of the time reflected the larger segregation of black and white audiences, with the assumption that "race records" were for blacks and therefore not appropriate for a white audience. The appearance of the "cover band" phenomena represented one ad-hock fix—having white performers do renditions of the music of black artists, a practice that soon after led to the rise of the first white rock and roll superstars, like Elvis Presley, in the mid-Fifties. For more about early rock race dynamics, see *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'N' Roll*.

[9] The event, of course, proved too hot to handle, as did his later rock and roll television program on ABC, when the handsome black pre-teen crooner Frankie Lymon danced with a white girl on stage—a performance that raised hackles among the corporate sponsors and garnered Freed, much to the chagrin of fans both black and white, an immediate pink slip. Though forgotten for a time after his career was largely destroyed by the post-Quiz Show era "payola" investigations conducted by the F.B.I., Freed was the major inspiration for building the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland (the city of the original Moondog show) and among the first wave of inductees.

[10] See, for example, the article "Cities Ban Rock 'n' Roll As Result of Boston Riot."

[11] The film was based on Evan Hunter's dime novel *The Blackboard Jungle*, released in 1954, in which bad-to-the-bone youngsters sass and pull knives on their teacher, no doubt channeling fears that white youth would turn rotten under the influence of black classmates—recently integrated with whites by the Supreme Court-mandated desegregation of schools that same year. The film features white hooligans in black leather snapping fingers to rock and roll, smoking cigarettes, and ending sentences with "Daddy-O."

[12] I believe Langston Hughes likely drew inspiration for this didactic approach from a film called *The Cry of Jazz* (1959), which was produced by the then-youthful composer, Edward Bland. In various interviews, Bland describes the New York salons his father would host for such literary stars as James Baldwin and Hughes himself. The film was excoriated by Baldwin and other black Marxists, and its notices ran in the *Chicago Defender*, the newspaper for which Hughes wrote his Jesse B. Semple columns. I have little doubt that Hughes saw the film before he began *Ask Your Mama*. In it, an interracial party listens to jazz records and have a dialogue about the cultural meanings of jazz music, from both a white and black perspective, with the majority of the film dedicated to a black history lesson aimed at readjusting and augmenting white understandings of the idiom.

[13] With the exception of James Tobias in *Sync*, no scholar has addressed the importance of the poem's formal rhetorics. Tobias' concern, however, falls primarily within the purview of film studies as it relates to haptics. His two-paragraph analysis-in-passing of *Ask Your Mama* focuses on the gestural aspects of reader interaction with the text, rather

than its content. What I add to this discussion is an enlarged catalogue of the poem's uses of the LP metaphor and a greater awareness of how such a dialogic mode of reading helps reveal both important contexts and content within the work.

[14] Though Rampersad's biography (II, 323) states that Hughes denied Castro's invitation for reasons of political timidity in the post-HUAC era, I suspect Hughes did indeed dine with the leader and simply disavow it to the press.

[15] Rampersad's appraisal of Hughes' leftist sentiment is fairly dismissive. See for example, Volume II, pgs. 207, 222.

[16] See, for example, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."

[17] For a sampling, see Jameson's *Postmodernism*, as well as "Rose is a Rose": Gertrude Stein and the Critique of Indeterminacy" by Jennifer Ashton in *Modernism/modernity* 9:4 (November 2002): 581-604.

[18] Consider, too, for example, Ishmael Reed' *Yellowback Radio Broke-down* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, the latter of which can be seen as a direct inheritor of Hughes' audio-didactic postmodern strategies, but with a larger historical scope and perspective on the power of black music to act as a viral dance agent—the Jes' Grew. Reed's presentation of historical suppression of black music and other affective cultural practices particularly comes alive within the context of 50s and 60s rock and jazz riots and the official efforts to both downplay their importance and suppress them. While Reed's work has garnered critical attention for its postmodern treatment of musico-historical themes, I'd argue that Langston Hughes laid the foundation in both formal and thematic senses nearly a decade earlier.

Chapter Two

SF's Degenerative Nostalgia in the MTV Era

Abstract: If Chapter One explores the burgeoning revolutionary affects of the Sixties and Seventies and the attempt by artists like Langston Hughes to remediate them through a generatively-nostalgic discourse of musical technologies and the use of experimental literary techniques, Chapter Two aims to survey a countervailing trend toward a more pessimistic, degenerative nostalgia for the optimism of the Sixties music culture within science fiction of the Eighties and Nineties. As with Hughes, authors like Pat Cadigan, Norman Spinrad, and John Shirley consider the revolutionary affects of the Sixties and the potential for new musical technologies to revise and rebroadcast their emancipatory spirit. Their messages, however, are much less hopeful. The SF authors of the Eighties and Nineties lament, among other things, the passing of a great musical culture and its co-optation by corporations bent on a commercial model of art. Instead of illuminating speculative sonic cartographies based on the past—as Hughes and Reed attempt to do—these writers focus on the unrealized promises of the Sixties and the inability within the context of video-mediated musical exhibition to return to the perceived greatness of the past. Like Adam and Eve expelled from the garden, the SF writers of the Eighties and Nineties look backward in resignation and howl for a paradise lost—a Sixties music culture whose charismatic performers not only set musical high-water marks but served as figureheads for an antiestablishment ethos and a welter of progressive political movements. In its place, cultural degeneration and political apathy run rampant in their work, with golden age musical nostalgia a bittersweet memory to lend some measure of comfort, however cold. For these writers, the source of such a fallen state, to follow the lapsarian conceit, is a latter-day serpent with the name of MTV.

As of late, music's role in SF has become a more visible subject in both popular and academic circles. Following the publication of Philip Hayward's *Off the Planet*: *Music, Sound, and Science Fiction Cinema* in 2004, there has been steady stream of academic titles dedicated to exploring the links between the two areas—William Whittington's *Sound Design and Science Fiction* (2007), Mathew Bartkowiak's *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film* (2010)—not to mention the most recent subspecialized offshoots, such as *Music in Science Fiction Television: Tuned to the Future* (2012), edited by K.J. Donnelly and, once again, Philip Hayward. A recent issue of *Science Fiction Film and Television* (5.2 2012) also took the topic of filmic

sound as its theme. SF scholar Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. perhaps best expressed this critical zeitgeist in his 2008 book *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* by suggesting that "the most orphaned of sf media is music. Little has appeared in print discussing the relationship between music and sf, a connection that is much richer than may at first appear" (11).

While scholars have clearly answered the call to address music's role in SF film and television, the question of its relationship to SF *literature* has thus far been met by radio silence. Recent publishers, on the other hand, seem to have discovered the niche. As I have argued elsewhere (Young "Defending"), the release of Paula Guran's edited collection of stories, *Rock On: The Greatest Hits of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2012), marks the first major effort to curate a selection of music-themed stories within SF literature. In what follows, I hope to carry Guran's pioneering spirit into the scholarly arena and address the paucity of research on SF literature and music. To do so, I'd like to first contextualize the pessimism of Eighties and Nineties-era writers by aligning them with the febrile skepticism of the SF New Wave, the Sixties and Seventies gadflies who shook up the whiz-bang aesthetics and space-opera thematics of Golden Age and pulp SF and also pushed, following the lead of J.G. Ballard's controversial manifestos, for an exploration of "inner space" frontiers and the "psycho-literary territories" of the human drama, as opposed to the empty vacuums of outer space (198). As I'll show, an analysis of the musical media themes of Eighties and Nineties SF serves to establish a stronger lineage of genealogical transmission from the New Wave into the so-called Cyberpunk era than critics have thus far allowed. Next, I'll historicize the social and political

contexts surrounding the rise of the MTV corporation, including its initial cultural impact and gradual changes in reception from the herald of a new cultural revolution to the standard-bearer for a conformist and anti-progressive musical corporatism. Finally, I'll curate an SF gallery tour of degeneratively- nostalgic critiques of MTV, featuring John Shirley's *Eclipse* (1985), Norman Spinrad's *Little Heroes* (1987), and Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991. In this concluding section, I'll qualify the appraisals of Eighties and Nineties cyberpunks by George Slusser, whose essay "Literary MTV" (1988) condemns SF stylists like Shirley and Spinrad for style-over-substance appropriations of the rapid-fire, jump-cut music video aesthetics of the MTV generation. By considering the nostalgic musical media themes of these writers, I show that Slusser ironically misses the point of their interventions, which in fact evince a comparable distaste for a "fallen" state of video-mediated MTV culture.

New Wave Precursors

Since little to no scholarship exists to help contextualize the degenerative nostalgia and music business critiques of the Eighties and Nineties SF writers, I'd like to briefly sketch a genealogy of such sentiment as it appears throughout the New Wave writers of the Sixties and Seventies and helps inform the politics of the next generation. I have argued elsewhere (Young "Which Way Out") that, contrary to the prevailing critical narrative aligning the New Wave with a pro-sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll ethos, many New Wave writers reserved skepticism for the trappings of the counterculture and the psychedelic revolution. This sentiment proves true for the New Wave's rendering of rock

and roll, even though, at first glance, one might think their views of rock music would be overwhelmingly favorable. After all, the principal tastemaker, impresario, and tub-thumper of the movement, Michael Moorcock, who used his editorship at *New Worlds* as a mouthpiece and venue for the promotion of the young J.G. Ballard and his inner-space paradigm, was (and remains) an avid rock music enthusiast, performer, and recording artist with Hawkwind, as well as a lyricist for famous acts like Blue Öyster Cult (Freeman). But both Moorcock's *New Worlds* and his rock star-themed Jerry Cornelius quartet of novels reflect an ambivalence about the music business and the rock musician as countercultural icon—a stance shared with many writers and artists in the New Wave. Though their treatments of Sixties-era music and musical technologies bear traces of hope and optimism, they often end with musical futures imagined as isolating, dystopian, conformist, and counter-revolutionary, a cultural landscape in which musicians and musical technologies serve to atomize and control the masses rather than unite and liberate them. Satires of rock, both light-hearted and grim, abound in the New Wave.

A mixed-media collage bearing the title "Dropout Mediocrity," for example, from the March 1968 issue of the Moorcock-edited *New Worlds*, took aim at rock music and the counterculture, showing that even rock heroes like Jimi Hendrix, for whom Moorcock has expressed great respect throughout his career,[1] were not above the New Wave's critique (see fig. 2.1). The collage shows an over-sized image of Hendrix in full hippie regalia, looming over his diminutive counter-cultural clones, who, we are told by the accompanying blurb, have "renounced consumerism" but unwittingly "retained its attitude that bigger-is-better" ("Dropout"). Among the "bigger" things on display in the

DROPOUT MEDIOCRITY: Hippies renounced materialism but despite themselves retained its attitude that bigger-is-better, new-outdates-old. Get a kick from Beardsley? Then copy him, even more grotesquely. Colours are mind-blowing, so make them brighter. If it doesn't work any more then try something stronger -- if 1000 watt guitar feedback doesn't make them freak out, add stroboscopes, colour slides, bright lights. The appeal of hippie music and art is inevitably transitory, being trapped in the same bigger-better, new-improved rut. Lacking true talent or imagination, they can't hope to produce anything lasting, even if they wanted to. A new trend will always outdate last month's rave. There's always a bigger freakout.

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Figure 2.1. "Dropout Mediocrity," *New Worlds* (1968).

collage is a satirical rendering of Hendrix's penis in the shape of a cartoon word-bubble, reading "Would you like to know the truth?" ("Dropout"). Skewering at once the consumerist conformity of the counterculture and at the same time the minstrel media tradition of black sexual supermen, the Moorcock-era *New Worlds* showed no mercy when it came to the "truth" about rock culture.

The most iconic and satirical musical figure to emerge from the New Wave imagination was undoubtedly Michael Moorcock's character Jerry Cornelius, here represented as a cannibal / rocker / hippie / angel of death / pied piper of the apocalypse on the June 1969 cover of the Moorcock-edited *New Worlds* (see fig. 2.2). The Cornelius of the first book, *The Final Programme* (1968), resembles something like a cross between Buckaroo Bonzai (a latter-day homage to Cornelius) and Austin Powers (it's hard not to read the books and hear "Yeah, baby!")—a protean fantasy of the swinging Sixties counter-cultural rocker-playboy, who just so happens to be a master spy, marksman, adventurer, assassin, and so on.[2]

At the conclusion of *The Final Programme*, Cornelius, the rocker hero, enacts the titular program his physicist father has created, stepping into a chamber which hybridizes his body with that of the "establishment" figure, Miss Brunner. Virile, androgynous, and polymorphically perverse—the hermaphroditic messiah that emerges from the experimental pod can be seen as the apotheosis of the Sixties countercultural rocker: "A tall naked, graceful being stepped out.…The scientists and technicians began to clap and whistle. Others cheered and stamped. 'Hi, Fans!' said Cornelius Brunner. The cavern reverberated with a massive shout of exultation" (139).

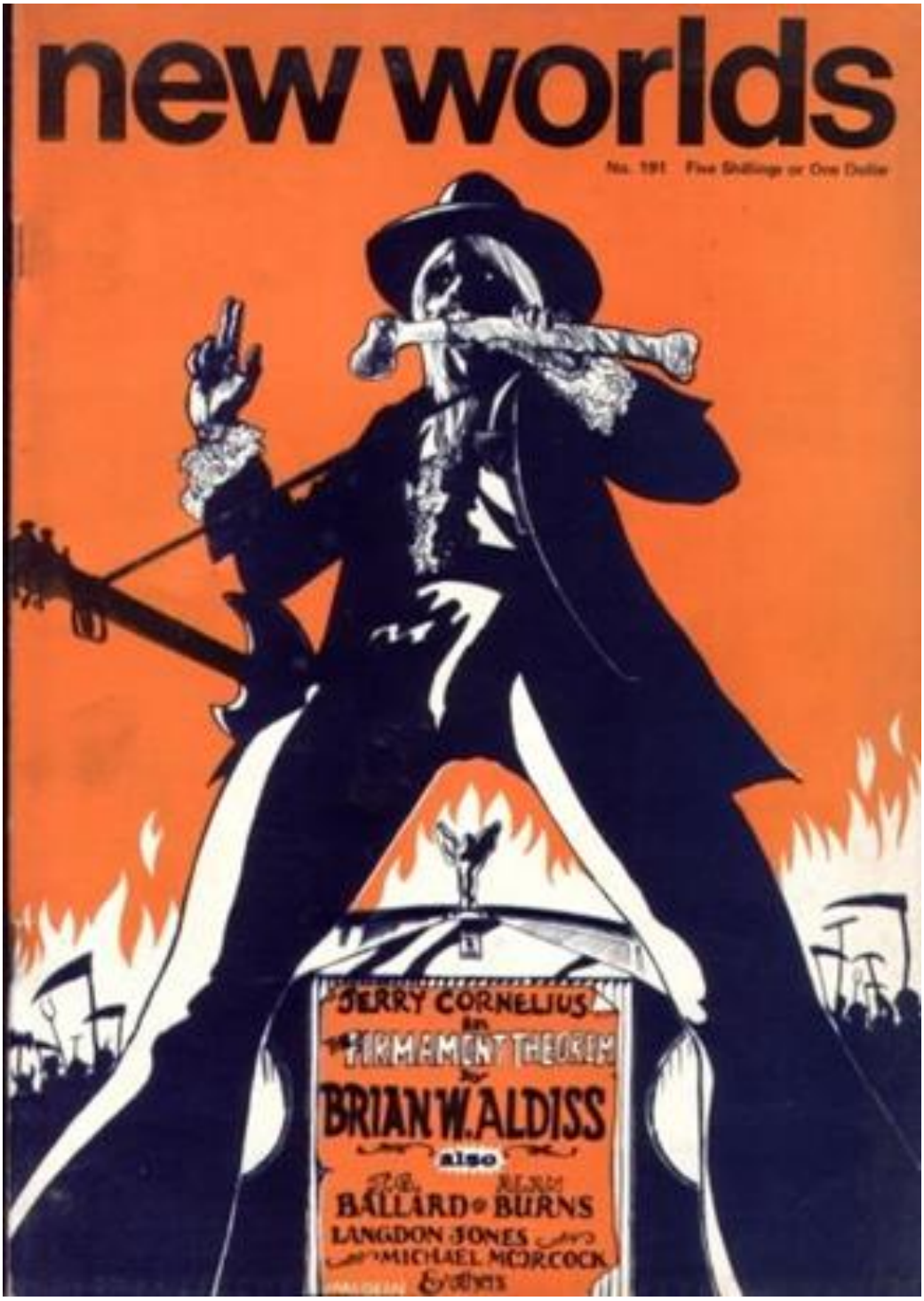

Figure 2.2. Jerry Cornelius on the cover of New Worlds (June 1969).

The scene of this cyborgic hybridity—engendered by a program that apparently fuses the two bodies and integrates them with the sum total of human knowledge—resembles nothing so much as the rock concert, with the scientists represented as gushing fans and Cornelius Brunner as the charismatic performer. Soon after, the masses of the entire globe flock to this "new messiah" and demigod, "dancing along…their voice…one melodious song," as they destroy the major cities of the world at its command and ultimately drown themselves—like lemmings—in the sea at their master's whim (139). Thus a slippery ambivalence appears in Moorcock's representation of rock and roll. On the one hand, the author invests in the symbolic power of the rock musician figure and the revolutionary potential of music itself. But on the other, he closes with a concurrent satire of the herd mentality and mob-like destructiveness of the Sixties concertgoer.

Indeed, the messianic fervor of rock fans—short, of course, for fanatics—and the amoral abuses of power associated with their leaders become a preoccupation within the New Wave, with various images of the rock concert as the site of propaganda and apocalyptic nuclear destruction, as in Norman Spinrad's "The Big Flash" (1969), or pixilated hallucinogenic rampage, as in Brian Aldiss' virtuosic homage to the Joycean portmanteau, *Barefoot in the Head* (1969). All three tales—Moorcock's, Spinrad's, and Aldiss's—share an affinity with British filmmaker Peter Watkins' dystopian *Privilege* (1967), in which a media-savvy church and state alliance of the near future shrewdly press into service a popular rock front man and teen heartthrob, played by Paul Jones, the actual front man/heartthrob of pop group Manfred Mann. The film's sadomasochistically-inflected musical performances of a persecuted Rock Jesus (see fig. 2.3) drum up untold

Figure 2.3. A promotional ad for *Privilege*, juxtaposing rock spectacle, Jesus worship, and police state.

support for a hoary establishment—a nefarious co-optation of musical potential resulting in a dystopian state of mass conformity. Watkins' work, as with his New Wave counterparts, sends up the rock opera's messianic themes—that is, before the first rock opera had even launched from the cultural platform later that year with *The Story of Simon Simopath* (Fleming).

Other SF-inflected films in the Sixties and Seventies echo the print-based New Wave's exploration of the dark potentials for conspiracy and demagoguery within the ranks of rock fandom. Barry Shear's satirical *Wild in the Streets* (1968), for instance, takes the "trust no one over 30" mantra of the counterculture and explores it to its most absurd end—with charismatic young rock star Max Frost, played by Christopher Jones, first using the rock-stage pulpit to lower the voting age to 15 years old and then emerging, due to his pro-youth platform and popularity with the teen set, as the new president of the United States. Under the direction of this "groovy" new regime, all citizens over 30 must report to the ersatz-Orwellian "Paradise Camps," psychedelic internment facilities for forced LSD therapy and re-education in countercultural values (see fig. 2.4). Scenes of an armed youth Gestapo rounding up the middle-aged directly precede the final punchline: a group of disaffected pre-teens who promise to lower the voting age even further and, presumably, hand the newly-"old" twenty-somethings the next wave of ageist comeuppance. Shear's send-up of the counterculture puts rock music squarely in the crosshairs, depicting its audience-performer power dynamic as a mutually-corrupting two-way channel with the power to launch dictators and spread a new brand of conformity.

Figure 2.4. Paradise Camps, where a forced-LSD regimen and armed guards serve to neutralize the "old," seen here in government-issue blue polyester capes. Still from *Wild in the Streets*.

In addition to the above themes, the co-optation of the rock concert to promote escapism and ideological containment can be seen in Robert Silverberg's *The World Inside* (1971), a novel which depicts a future society that has adapted the human habitat to meet the needs of explosive population growth—cramming hundreds of thousands of people into massive, high-rise buildings called urban monads, or urbmons, which few people are allowed to leave. In one such building, Dillon Chrimes, the urbmon's San Francisco-level "vibrastar player in a cosmos group," helps distract people from their woes and reconcile themselves to this bizarre, inner-space environment (72). In truth, Chrimes reads likes a clownish parody of a 1960s acid-rock arena musician who spouts the voguish bromides of counterculture positivity like "Love!" and "Loosen up!" (72). To complete the caricature, Silverberg tells us his hippie wife, an artist, paints "psychedelic" tapestries and spends her afternoons partaking of a marijuana-like drug called "fumes" (67). Though Chrimes fancies himself a modern-day Orpheus with the power to "burn [the] brains…and singe [the] souls" of his drug-addled audiences, the escapist nature of his function in the urbmon comes into crisp focus when he recalls what disobedience to the gods cost Ovid's mythological music-maker: "they would tear me apart…if I ever really reached them" (72). Luckily for him there seems to be no danger of that. His cosmos group performs atop "a toadstool of a stage" and the ensuing concert synchronizes with an awe-inspiring light array which simulates on the auditorium roof—like a planetarium show—the rich textures of the night sky, the net effect of which seems to be a synaesthetic blend of sight, sound, and sensation. At the highpoint of the act, as

the group "bombard[s] the flaccid data-stoned audience with mountains of overload," Chrimes congratulates himself for "empt[ying] everybody's skull" (83). And that seems to be the point of it all—a psychic decompression, an orgasmic release, and, ultimately, a "far-out" flight from the realities of everyday life under the urbmon's totalizing constraints. It's a vision of psychedelia at its most escapist and rock music at its most politically instrumentalized.

In an era of social upheaval and hard-won ideological change in the budding Civil Rights Movement, it's worth noting that many New Wave writers looked forward from the Sixties with great reservations about the potential for demagoguery and ideological interpolation latent within the subcultural power of music and its accompanying technological advances. As I intend to show below, the next generation of SF writers inherits this strain of music and technocultural critique, aiming their discontent—which concerns the degenerating vestiges of the Sixties' musical potential—at a video-mediated paradigm ruled by MTV. As a way to further set the context of those critiques, I'd like to first sketch changes in the larger cultural reception of MTV, from an initial hope for the network's revolutionary promise to a gradual alignment with corporate culture and musical degeneration.

The Rise of MTV

There are many precursors to music video that prepared the ground for the launch of MTV. Oskar Fischinger's work on Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) helped narrativize music

through filmic exhibition, and the forties-era 16mm vignettes became staple "filler" content for both TV and film, as well as the main attraction of the cinematic jukebox, with its relatively short-lived iterations in the Panoram Soundie of the 1940s and the later Scopitone format of the 1960s (Herzog 31). Rock and roll music scenes in film, as in *Blackboard Jungle* (see Chapter One), and the many Elvis Presley Hollywood offerings from 1956 onward, all contributed to the cultural familiarity with seeing and hearing musical artists—whether live or lip-synched—within the contexts and constraints of the era's visual media.

When a local Philadelphia TV station picked up Dick Clark for its *Bandstand* program four years into its initial airing, the young, charismatic host sparked enough interest from the networks to take the youth-centered music and dancing program into national broadcast distribution, debuting in 1957 as ABC's *American Bandstand*. The show spawned a host of imitators—like rival network NBC's *The Music Shop* (1959) and the BBC's *Juke Box Jury* (1959) and *Top of the Pops* (1964)—all trying to cash in on the newly-emerged postwar market demographic of teenagers (Goodwin 190). The onset of Beatlemania in the U.S. further electrified the pop music video market exploited by Elvis, with the group releasing not only full-length musical features like *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), among others, but also short video clips for individual songs (Goodwin 191). Following the release of clips for "We Can Work it Out" and "Paperback Writer" in 1966, a growing list of pop artists—such as The Who, The Kinks, and the Rolling Stone—began dabbling in the nascent art form (Goodwin 192). Music-related television content was clearly on the rise. The Monkees, the 1966 made-for-TV American

knockoff of The Beatles, initially enjoyed enormous success—with NBC banking off the doubled revenue stream of mainstream commercial TV sponsors, as well as record sales and radio residuals. Seeing as many dollar signs as untapped potentials in the marriage of music and television, *The Monkees*' producer Don Kirshner brought the studio-produced band idea to the TV cartoon *The Archies* (1968), spawning the number one hit "Sugar, Sugar" largely through its promotion via animated music video during the show (Goodwin 193). By the early 1970s, three more music programs appeared on American TV: ABC's *In Concert*, NBC's *Midnight Special*, and the nationally-syndicated Don Kirshner production, *Rock Concert*. Concert films by The Beatles, Pink Floyd, and David Bowie, as well as the theatrical film accompaniments to concept albums like The Who's *Tommy,* were becoming increasingly commonplace.

Save for isolated TV programming slots, however, no dedicated venue for music video existed to showcase the modest, but growing catalogue of clips. According to Dwight Garner, "scanning for new music [in the late-Seventies] on television was mostly a thankless task, even if you stayed up late, and stayed home, on weekends" (Garner). Despite a steady increase in the supply of musical content on TV, the networks hadn't yet apprehended the depths of audience demand for it. Enter MTV.

The first station of its kind, MTV launched in 1981 from the crossroads of a seemingly-perfect set of conditions—the decades-long build-up in desire for music video, the freshness of the 24-hour dedicated video concept, and the creeping national expansion of cable television hook-ups. Even more than these factors, the network's initial success undoubtedly grew from the foresight of MTV's brassy young execs, who, in perhaps the

greatest coup in the history of television, convinced the major record companies to provide videos royalty-free (Tannebaum). This essentially put the burden on artists and record labels to conceive of, produce, and pay for the making of all music videos. For MTV, this was crucial. With an operating budget of roughly zero, and the comically-inept production values of a community-access channel to show for it, any other financial arrangement would have probably crushed the project before it had the chance to grow wings, take flight, and achieve exit velocity from the prevailing models of music video production, mediation, and distribution. With agreements inked and open vistas ahead, the MTV revolution was *in medias res*.

For artists and fans alike, the early MTV programming was like manna from heaven—not just for its entertainment value but for its revolutionary potential. For many, the nascent music video network promised the rebirth of a bygone revolutionary ethos not possible since the Sixties, or even the heyday of rock 'n' roll radio. Young artists coming into their own during the early-MTV broadcasts remember the network's influence on them in the hyperbolic, awe-struck tones more often associated with the dawn of a spiritual experience, the brush with the numinous, or the glimpse of a celestial anomaly. TV host Conan O'Brien, who watched the channel for "six hours" at a clip, recalls "It was like a comet streaking across the sky" (qtd. in Tannenbaum 2).

Musician Dave Grohl, of Nirvana and Foo Fighters fame, remembers feeling it was "like a transmission from some magical place" (qtd. in Tannebaum 1). Stevie Nicks, of Fleetwood Mac, recalls binging on its audio-visual bonanza, sitting on the "end of [her] bed, watching vdeo after video, just stupefied" with delight (qtd. in Tannebaum 1).

The rapper B-Real, of Cypress Hill fame, remembers thinking "it was the greatest invention ever" (qtd. in Tannenbaum 4). Chuck D, rapper for the ground-breaking, influential, and politically-conscious group, Public Enemy, saw it as the cultural "main event" of the day (qtd. in Tannebaum 4). And singer Chris Isaak compares its initial impact to that of the Sixties music culture, musing that, despite its quite public broadcast to anyone with a cable TV hook-up, "it was almost underground or countercultur[al]" in its impact (qtd. in Tannenbaum 3).

Part of this revolutionary cultural work can be attributed to the fact that the early MTV broadcasts injected a distinctly European style into the American suburban mainstream, breaking up a more codified and conservative manner of dressing, acting, and thinking. According to John Taylor, the bass player for Duran Duran, the early MTV videos

> were dropping like bombs on the suburbs of Ohio and Texas, places that were so conservative. For people that were a little different — maybe they didn't yet know they were gay, or didn't know they were into art — the kinds of things that were on MTV were like life changers. All this stuff like Culture Club was the result of an underground, progressive, liberal, London art school sensibility. (qtd. in Tannenbaum and Marks 86)

Due to an initial paucity of new video production, most of bands with ready-made videos were European, and thus early MTV programming brought an artsy, un-macho, continental vibe into the media ecology of Reagan's America, with its larger-than-life, hyper-masculine heroes: Sylvester Stallone as John Rambo in *First Blood* (1982), Arnold

Schwarzenegger as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), and Chuck Norris in *Missing in Action* (1984). But decorative scarves and male eye make-up formed only aspect of this new cultural force—with forward-thinking and equally-bizarre American art-school misfits like Devo storming the reality studio of the American consciousness, offering a delightfully eccentric counter-narrative of normative male comportment and body image in the Reagan era.

Indeed, as MTV hit full stride and established itself as the media mouthpiece for a youth demographic, it extended its influence by not only reporting the news from a teen-friendly perspective but also more directly affecting political change. The 1990 "Choose or Lose" campaign, a recurring segment during MTV News that year, aimed to spread awareness of the upcoming presidential election and encourage greater participation amongst eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old voters, a demographic whose voter turnout had plummeted, by 1988, to less than thirty percent (Tannenbaum 498). Though MTV's newbie correspondents were mocked on the campaign trail by the mainstream news networks (Tannenbaum 501), it turns out they would have the last laugh—and the most decisive impact on the outcome of the election. Unlike the incumbent George H.W. Bush, who was "snarky and dismissive" to the network (Tannebaum 501) and the tone-deaf Ross Perot, who spent his MTV News interview lecturing kids on the dangers of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll (Tannenbaum 499), the younger and more media-savvy Bill Clinton embraced the opportunity to reach young voters on their own turf: the MTV network. Tannenbaum and Marks report that after Clinton's election, "he appeared at MTV's Inaugural Ball in Washington DC [an event put on by MTV News to cover

election night results] and certified the network's influence by anouncing, 'I think everyone here knows that MTV had a lot to do with the...victory'" (498-499). It wasn't just a pandering bromide; it was evidence that MTV had arrived as a major player—and perhaps, for a while, *the* media tastemaker—in modern American politics.

Further evidence that MTV had arrived as a major cultural force in the US came by way of government's attempts, by the mid-Eighties, to regulate its content. The network and its star artists began to experience a high-profile, official push-back from an *ad hoc* coalition of conservative "Washington Wives" called the Parents' Music Resource Center, or PMRC, which found likeminded support and affiliation within the religious right in their objection to a host of "indecent" artists in heavy MTV rotation (Chastagner 181). The origin of the PMRC's "Filthy Fifteen," in fact, a preliminary list of artists objectionable on the grounds of risqué lyrics or "satanic" content, allegedly derives from Tipper Gore's concern about her young daughter's consumption of "confusing" music video images on MTV. Though the group's pressure on the music industry succeeded in having the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) adopt a self-policing, parental warning label system for audio cassettes, LPs, and eventually CDs, such measures largely acted in favor of the artists, placing *de facto* badges of authenticity on albums, boosting sales (Murphy). In hindsight, the PMRC "victory" can only be counted in the nominal, or even pyrrhic, sense. The push for video self-censorship and restraint was an utter failure, as the amplification of late-Eighties heavy metal music video excesses make plain. One could even argue that the PMRC affair led to the Clinton/Gore strategy a few years later that would later harness the youth media channel they had

failed to bring to heel: If you can't beat them, pretend to join them. MTV's position at the rebel vanguard of American culture and politics was undeniable.

Shifts in the network's corporate structure and programming, however, soon eroded its reputation as a progressive force aligned with artists against official culture. By the early Nineties, the slide from what many remember as the network's revolutionary Golden Age had already begun. Tannenbaum and Marks make the case that 1992 was "the last time MTV could claim to be revolutionary," due to a complex confluence of factors:

> Video budgets rose steeply, leading to wasteful displays; digital editing arrived, making it a snap for directors to flit between shots and angles; all the good ideas had been done; record labels increasingly interfered in video decisions; many of the best directors moved on to film....[and] It's also the year MTV debuted *The Real World*, a franchise show that sped a move away from videos. (xl)

For early fans, the move away from music videos smacked of betrayal, an unwanted deviation from the network's founding mission and initial appeal. For artists and record execs, the network was becoming a new kind of corporate bully, all too eager to play cultural gatekeeper, choose winners and losers, and make life uncomfortable for them (Tannenbaum 378). The new surfeit of music videos assured there was no longer enough time in any given day to accommodate the ballooning rate of production, meaning artists and record companies alike were all too often put in the position of either courting MTVs favor or taking a loss on a high-cost music video, whose primary goal in the first place

was to advertise the album and generate enough sales to cover the overhead costs. More spectacular videos meant higher chances for heavy rotation, but the concomitantly higher budgets meant more artists and record companies were losing their shirts—and their integrity—under MTV's control.

In the aftermath of the Viacom corporation's 1985 acquisition of MTV for over a half-billion dollars, the network began shedding its early DIY image and adopting more traditional corporate trappings—such as anticompetitive business practices to keep its new form of monopoly on the music business (Banks 63). By the time PBS's Frontline would air its award-winning documentary, *The Merchants of Cool* (2000), chronicling MTV's role in predatory cool-hunting and stimulation of a reality-warping, consumerist echo chamber akin to Adorno and Horkheimer's "Culture Industry," it was hard to deny it: MTV had symbolically grown up, sold out, and become the very thing it once rebelled against.

80s and 90s SF Writers

These two contexts—MTV's darkening reputation amongst early adopters and the New Wave's lingering influence—serve as twin optics for the examination of SF's musical themes in the Eighties and Nineties. The New Wave mistrust of the corporate influence on rock continues into the next generation and merges with a degenerative nostalgia concerning the rise of video-mediated ubiquity and MTV's shift toward corporate monopolism.

My argument in this section adds new dimensions to two prominent academic characterizations of the cyberpunk movement. The first concerns its relationship with the ethos and aesthetics of the New Wave. Science fiction scholars like Fred Pfiel and Scott Bukatman, for example, tend to emphasize the ruptures and generational squabbles between the cyberpunk and New Wave writers (Latham). My focus on the shared skepticism of populist music cultures offers an opportunity to reconsider the continuities between the movements. The second concerns the commonplace alignment—stemming from Bruce Sterling's introduction to the groundbreaking cyberpunk anthology, *Mirrorshades*—of cyberpunks with an unqualified embrace of MTV. Though critics like George Slusser rightly consider cyberpunk stylings—including those in Spinrad's *Little Heroes* and Shirley's *Eclipse*—in the context of MTV's concurrent cultural prominence, he goes too far in suggesting that these artists wholeheartedly embrace the new aesthetic regime of corporate video's "total autonomy from reality, and from story" (288). "This," he adds, "is what MTV dreams of doing to the body of film, and cyberpunk to the corpus of SF" (288). To the contrary, Eighties and Nineties cyberpunk writers feel compelled to tell the story of post-Sixties musical-cultural decline, creating impassioned historiographies in praise of a pre-video media dominant and its revolutionary potentials. True, these writers revel in new stylistic techniques informed by jump-cut TV edits. But by mistaking style for substance—or the lack thereof—Slusser myopically misses the common ground he shares with the cyberpunks: a distaste for MTV's effects on culture. Curiously enough, both parties also harbor a degenerative nostalgia for Golden Age

artforms—for Slusser, the prose of Golden Age SF; for cyberpunks, the sounds of Sixties rock and roll music.

In works like Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, John Shirley's *Eclipse*, and Norman Spinrad's *Little Heroes*, among others, degenerative nostalgia for past rock cultures appears in the context of new forms of musical media consumption reflecting the real-life rise of MTV. More than rehearse a conservative response to the unfamiliar, their near-future speculative visions critique what they see as an ever-growing corporate impact on art, media, and culture—i.e, its evacuation of music's once-hopeful powers to affect progressive change.

Implicit within these dystopian visions, I argue, is an animating nostalgia for a possibility that should have been, a musical fruition gone rotten on the vines and irretrievably fallen. It's not that these writers feel the revolutionary potential of rock music never existed; rather, they offer the bitter lament that the time for rock—beloved though it may remain—has forever passed. The dark double of the more hopeful remembrances of Hughes and Reed, and the spawn of SF's New Wave skeptics, the musical representations of the Eighties and Nineties SF writers sing a dirge and jeremiad, whose orotund sounds I dub degenerative nostalgia.

Pat Cadigan

Stories like Pat Cadigan's "Pretty Boy Crossover" (1986) and "Rock On" (1984, later developed into the novel *Synners*, which I discuss in greater detail below) explore the unctuous commercialization and corporatization of rock culture through its MTV-era

video remediations. The latter story, for example, projects a near-future world in which rock and roll "sinners"—the hipster parlance for synthesizers—are in high demand due to their ability to bring the disparate, virtual imaginations of a group of people together to coalesce into a song product, which gets recorded through the use of implanted bioport electrodes. In Cadigan's world, virtual music has replaced the real thing and video is now its default accompaniment. There are no more bar bands and no more bars. The performance of music by "real" instrumentalists on "real" instruments—in a marker of degeneration from the Sixties ideal—no longer holds sway in the musical culture. Cadigan's "Rock On" thus offers a disturbing vision of a world where nobody plays organic instruments, yet anyone, with the help of a synthesizer/sinner as a medium can express themselves musically. The tone of the tale is unmistakable: Cadigan reserves no enthusiasm for the new technology's increased access to musical production. The sinners, like Gina, the female protagonist of the story, are often kidnapped and abused for the purpose of making these recordings, a grim reality Cadigan describes in terms of a corporate-sanctioned gang rape: "Five against one and I couldn't push them away. Only, can you call it rape when you know you're going to like it? Well, if I couldn't get away, then I'd give them the ride of their lives" (247).

The story's degenerative nostalgia appears within the context of Gina's primary talent, her embodied connection to the past rock music culture via memory:

> They were all there, little more than phantoms….I'm old enough to remember. Oingo Boingo and Bow-Wow-Wow. Forty, did I say? Oooh, just a little past . . . a little close to a lot. Old rockers never die, they just

> keep rocking on. I never saw The Who; Moon was dead before I was born. But I remember, barely old enough to stand, rocking in my mother's arms while thousands screamed and clapped and danced in their seats. *Start me up . . . if you start me up I'll never stop*. (247)

As Gina's captors "h[a]ng on the memories, pulling [them] from [her]" to produce their sonic amalgam, Cadigan manifests a nostalgic through-line from the classic rock of the Sixties (The Who and the Rolling Stones) into the early MTV-era Eighties (Oingo Boingo and Bow-Wow-Wow), and into a present where "all the [TV] tube babies…[could] play" her retro "rock 'n' roll visions straight from the brain" (248).

But the brutal methods of extraction and the raw commodification at work in this new paradigm of musical "sinning" turn Gina's musical memory into a curse. A monopolistic corporate video production entity and MTV stand-in called Man-O-War holds Gina "legally bound by [a] [recording] contract" nearer to indentured servitude (246). Though at the start of the tale, Gina has escaped her corporate captivity and is on the lam, renegade music gangs comb the streets to collect on Man-O-War's bounty—or kidnap her, as above, to make money through unauthorized sin-sessions. In the end, Man-O-War buys out her motley captors, takes repossession of Gina, and tells her that "Rock 'n' Roll never forgets," (251) a chilling reminder of her perpetual servitude to the new video regime of "Derivative, unoriginal-Featherweight" music (247).

Thus in "Rock On," Cadigan offers a loosely-veiled defamiliarization of the changing 80s music business and a disturbingly counter-revolutionary conception of music in MTV era, where monopolistic music video distribution not only suggests the

diminishment of artist control over musical production but also signals the degeneration of rock's musical force compared to a Sixties touchstone of traditional musical instrument virtuosity and freedom. Cadigan nostalgically represents the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll "sins" of the Sixties rock counterculture as the pale, synthetic vestiges of a bygone spirit now thoroughly subsumed into—even enslaved by—the corporate business models they once held the power to disrupt.

In *Synners* (1991), Cadigan broadcasts an even more hopeless message about the musical future. As with her previous work, it sounds alarm bells about corporate ownership of music and aural technologies, but its nostalgia registers the musical past as scorched Earth, collateral damage in an inevitable onward march toward the newly artificial means of musical synthesis and production accompanying music video culture. When read in the context of the early Nineties, the very pinnacle of MTV's cultural influence, *Synners* can be seen as a satire of the media giant and a cautionary tale about the dubious link between music and corporatism, a Faustian bargain without benefit of an 11th-hour redemption. It's a bleak vision of a musical future already damned to cultural dementia, weak art, and techno-corporate fealty.

Cadigan's main villain in this grim vision is Manny Rivera, a corporate stooge and executive for the MTV-like Diversifications, Inc., known colloquially as "The Dive." Manny serves as the figurehead for corporate music writ large—the quintessential embodiment (much like Man-O-War) of "The Man," who Cadigan reminds us is not only bloodless and unethical, but outright destructive to the soul of great art. Manny's

supervisory duties at The Dive, for instance, entail the "motivation" of the video-production staff by threatening them with productivity inspections:

> "Trying isn't good enough.…You're just going to have to *do* it, before the next quarterly figures go Upstairs. I can just about guarantee that when they graph your time spent against your number of completed assignments, they'll start talking personal audit. That's everything you've got in memory, on chip, in long-term storage. They'll want to see it all, and they'll question every requisition you've made in the last two years. You'll have to explain and justify everything, completed projects, fragments, the whole thing." (116-117).

Manny's threat to have his creative staff "monitored every moment"—something he already does surreptitiously—demonstrates The Dive's bullying power hierarchy and the odiousness of a corporate model of saleable art (117). Those who don't "adjust" and get "creative enough to…play the game their way" may find themselves under suspicion of "abusing corporate equipment," resulting in termination, lawsuits, or both (117).

Manny also plays a corporate Mephistopheles, and his devlish seductions include not only the music video pioneers Visual Mark and Gina, whose company EyeTraxx was bought by The Dive to obtain the patents for an innovative implant technology, but the older rock-n-roll guru who trained them, The Beater, whose formerly-glorious and over-the-top performance persona emerges in the context of The Dive's employ as tame and defeated:

> The guy in the drab suit had only a vestige of the gong-banging wild animal [Gina'd] known when she'd first gotten into video. The straight chin-length hair had been slicked back, and she could see there was more gray among the brown. For that confidence-inspiring corporate look, no doubt. Most of the people he'd been moving among now wouldn't remember him from his performance days—his real performance days, when there had still been plenty of concerts, and video had been the come-on for the studio releases and live events, not an end in itself. (110)

Gina's nostalgia for The Beater's rock-n-roll heyday, with its touring bands and audio dominant, references a time before "the corporations took over the world" (113) and independent producers and artists of merit hadn't yet become beholden to the audio-visual monopoly, "contractually bound to Diversifications" (111). Cadigan's portrait of The Dive's anticompetitive practices, stranglehold on new media distribution, and negative affect upon musical artists defamiliarizes the history of MTV's ascendancy and shift toward corporate monopolism. And though she clearly holds a candle for the fallen musical greatness of the past, she shows its fire smothering under the new corporate pressures, with little hope in sight for a revival.

In Gina's view, a revival of the musical past, though desirable, seems increasingly unlikely within the new video-mediated paradigm. On the one hand, she waxes nostalgic about the power of past music to spread revolutionary consciousness:

> "[In the Sixties] music started to stand for something," she went on suddenly, in a quieter voice. "There were all these ideas, the ideas were in

> the music, the music was in the ideas. These performers would cut these releases, and they'd say shit like, 'Well, my album's fighting against this' and 'My album's fighting against that.'… Nobody does that anymore." (198)

But the shift to corporate "reality" video spearheaded by The Dive—Cadigan's prescient anticipation of MTV's shift away from music video after *The Real World*—dilutes the potential of music by combining it with insipid video images in competition with a welter of similarly uninspired, but captivating, content: "I want the fucking music and the people to matter. I don't want fucking *rock 'n' roll* porn to go along with the med porn and the war porn and the weapons porn and the food porn—shit, it's *all* porn, goddamn fucking video porn" (199). In the new video regime, only a handful of artists like Gina remember music's once-powerful performance culture or its potential to spread big ideas. After another generation of music-video porn, Cadigan implies, nobody will remember or care about the visceral performance cultures of Gina's youth. The last vestiges of such archaic musical practices will have transformed according to the novel's resigned refrain of "change for the machines," the formation of new cultural practices to suit the affordances of advancing technology (228).

Cadigan, to be clear, does flirt with the revolutionary potential for a synthesis of human and machine through The Dive's newly-acquired cerebral bioport technology. The novel's theme of synthesis extends not only to the posthuman hybridity of machine and "meat" but also to intergenerational understanding and a musical-cultural acceptance of inevitable change. Though the corporate musical implant scheme of The Dive results in a

sentient virus disabling all online technologies in the LA area—the effect of which brings the city to the brink of apocalyptic conditions—the new implant technology also allows Visual Mark to transcend his meat body and join Artie Fish, a kind of artificial, singularity consciousness born from an accretion of smaller net-based viruses. Together, Art and Mark aid a group of hackers and synners to quarantine the destructive virus, allowing the slow reconstruction of net functions. In the end, though, the virtual duo simply enable the return of business as usual—including the production of a fresh batch of the media implants responsible for the problems in the first place. Rock ghosts may now inhabit the "machine" of the net, but their presence, invisible and incidental, seems a fading memory—or a flash of wishful thinking—in the context of corporate monopolies and technological progress.

What doesn't get so tidily sewn up in *Synners*, then, is the fate of music cultures within the expanded regime of video-focused brain implantation via proprietary technology and corporate-owned patents. After all, the implant technology simply remediates and augments the existing cultural practices favoring cookie-cutter music video over live performance and classic, instrument-based virtuosity. Though Manny dies due to infection by the new net virus, no meaningful change to the corporate ecology prevents The Dive—or a competitor—from resuming its nefarious reign of artistic subjugation. On the one hand, some semblance of Visual Mark lives on in the net, as does a bioinformatic snapshot of Gina, which suggests that some archival vestige of the rock 'n' roll past will live on to inform future music video production. On the other, it seems increasingly unlikely that the next generations will even notice, ensnared as they

are within the new media trend of "reality" video porn. The sight of the dying, meat body of Visual Mark—itself a fitting analogue for a moribund musical past—triggers an internal monologue in Gina that usefully sums up Cadigan's comment on the fate of video-mediated music: "*This ain't rock 'n' roll. It ain't been rock 'n' roll for a long fucking time. This is business, and money, and change for the machines, but it ain't rock 'n' roll*" (326).

As an estranged vision of the trajectory of the MTV era, the book displays a degenerative nostalgia for a Sixties music culture whose time has sadly passed and will not likely come again. Cadigan's song of the early-Nineties musical technoculture croons a bittersweet lament for the passing of a "real" rock-n-roll age when the "music had ideas" and passion and more artistic *raison d'etre* than easy fame, instant gratification, or the corporate profit motive. In Cadigan's post-MTV world, the Devil's bargain has been struck, Pandora's Box cannot be shut, and though we look back, there's no direction "home."

Norman Spinrad

A similar exploration of consciousness-blending musical technologies in the context of corporate video monopoly appears in Spinrad's novel *Little Heroes* (1987), in which a washed-up Sixties rock singer named Glorianna O'Toole gets hired by the MTV-esque Muzik, Inc. to re-inject new video production techniques with the zest of the musical past—all for the sake of profit, of course. Unlike his more simplistic New Wave-era work, like "The Big Flash" (1969)—which explores a paranoid vision of the

infiltration and manipulation of rock for the sake of apocalyptic militarism—or the pulpy media boosterism of *Bug Jack Barron* (1969)—which invests too patly in the power of progressive talk radio jocks to bring down corruption—Spinrad's *Little Heroes* balances the poles of his ambivalence long enough to create a nuanced and anamorphic exploration of the technocultural possibilities within the post-MTV musical mediascape. The author's most mature consideration of new musical media and its relationship with the greatness of the musical past, furthermore, positively rings with degenerative nostalgia.

His portrayal of Glorianna O'Toole, the "Crazy Old Lady of Rock and Roll," glories in Sixties-era rock and roll nostalgia (7). Spinrad takes every opportunity to align her with the icons of the musical past and their chaotic, hard-partying iconoclasm. In her youth, she spent time "dealing acid in the Haight" and battling "a two-year amphetamine jones" (7). She once "turned on a trio of New York graffiti artists to mescaline at her Laurel Canyon treehouse," the aftermath of which results in the psychedelic paintjob adorning her trademark Rolls Royce (8). She worked over "forty years as a rock and roll singer," doing "more back-up work on other people's albums that she cared to remember," while taking "an endless succession of tank-town tours of the universe" (7). Glorianna, in other words, is the Real McCoy—the last living example of a Sixties-rock spirit, thus far unadulterated by The Man.

But despite sharing stages over the years with "Pearl [Janis Joplin]…the [Jefferson] Airplane and [Bruce] Springsteen," (7), her retirement prospects at the start of the tale are "not exactly financially sound" (9). She herself never "c[a]me within a light

year of ever shipping gold" (7). Her "luscious jailbait" looks have "gone to gray hair and wrinkles" and "her pipes [have been] long since honorably retired" (9). She gets by mostly on raw "chutzpah" and residual "freebie list[s]" (9). Her hard-living lifestyle has left her rich in experience, memory, and spirit, but by all accounts cash poor. Enter the MTV surrogate, Muzik, Inc., and Spinrad's own riff on the video-mediated Faustian bargain between a great musical past and an emergent paradigm of insipid corporate art.

A "conglomerate monstrosity that [has] come to…utterly dominate the music business," Muzik, Inc. sets the current musical trends through monopolistic business practices:

> [They] pressed forty-five percent of the videodiscs sold in the United States, and moved the lion's share of them through their own nationally franchised chain of Muzic Stores. They had Muzik clubs in New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Chicago, and San Fransico. They had a string of twenty-four-hour music tv stations all across the country hyping their own product. They were to the music business what IBM was to the computer industry or McDonald's still was to greaseburgers, and somehow there was nothing that what was left of the antitrust division of the Justice Department cared to do about it. (10-11)

Muzik's video paradigm and corporate overreach clearly evokes the rise to dominance and monopolism of MTV, extrapolating a trajectory of even greater ownership over distribution outlets and cultural venues. As their ubiquitous corporate motto suggests, "MUZIK *is* Music!" (10). The company has "by far the biggest payroll in the music

business," employing "techs to program the production robots…[as well as] bartenders, bouncers, waitresses, and assorted flunkies," including the "hundred or so" satellite technicians and tv feed managers throughout the country to ensure continual broadcast hegemony (11). "But mostly," Spinrad adds, "they emplo[y] the people who turn out [the] shit"—i.e., the music video product (11)

The corporation's negative influence upon music culture comes into focus through both Spinrad's mordant editorial passages and Glorianna's snarky wit, with the two often intertwined and conflated throughout. Her first impression of the Muzik Factory, for example, the company's West Coast corporate office and studio space, is that of "some ancient Mafia jukebox" with "Rainbow glass pillars" forming a "false deco pagoda roof' that gets illuminated by laser beams—a garish appropriation of past rock and roll iconography, suggesting at once a brutal business model and at the same time a new covenant with a false, commercial god (11). Glorianna's appraisal of the "product" on Muzik's national satellite feed is even less forgiving: "some dead-ass plastic max metal thing with a ton of swagger and rubber underwear and a spec sheet for a soul" (11). As with Cadigan, Spinrad aligns his readers with the aesthetics of the old guard musicians, offering through their reactions a narrative of a contemporary music culture fallen from a Sixties ideal. Like Cadigan, too, Spinrad's narrative focuses blame on both the new corporate purveyors of pablum and the emergent technologies affording its creation.

Muzik's negative influence on music culture stems in part from its adoption of and overreliance upon new digital technologies and virtual software suites at the expense of

actual musicians and traditional performance techniques. In its mania for "cost-cutting" (13), the corporation chooses not to "employ drummers or keyboard players or any other kind of session musicians" (11), sending them into the "great army of the unemployed" (13). Even the pop-stars—hitherto preserved as brand representatives, if not great artists—have been replaced by so called digital "APs," Max Headroom-like artificial personalities "who [they] don't have to pay royalties to and who won't give [them] any prima-donna shit" (15). In place of real musicians, with all their messy human agency, Muzik pays computer techs called "VoxBox players" (15) to synthesize instruments and vocals from a "black box full of wizardware" while "platoons of shrinks...and former Pentagon psy-war spooks" think up "best-selling scenarios for their songhacks" (11). It's a gruesomely instrumentalized vision of "hit-making [as] a science," or music video art as just another assembly-line product (15). For Spinrad, it seems, the shift to corporate music video in the MTV era represents the top of a slippery slope, whose plummeting decline from a Sixties ideal ends only in a cultural abyss.

Or does it? Spinrad's plot thickens when we learn the shift to fully-synthetic and market-driven video APs brings a troubling dip in sales figures, spurring Muzik's top brass to make a bargain with Gloriannna to re-inject some classic rock "soul" (18) back into the lifeless corporate machine. The play on words, of course, highlights the Faustian nature of the bargain. But though Muzik hopes only for "an AP rock star that ships gold" (14)—that is, videodisc sales of half a million units or more—Glorianna has other plans, privately refusing to perform the "treason of the spirit" represented by their offer and vowing that "the assholes would get far more than they had ever bargained for" (20).

Using Musik's own wizardware against them, she hopes to respawn "the music of a braver and grander age….the great voice of that spirit which had now all but vanished from the world," (20) with the revolutionary goal of taking "a vengeance that the powers that be would not like at all" (21). Much like Cadigan, Spinrad celebrates a nostalgic desire to rejuvenate the Sixties music culture, while exploring the possibilities of using the master's own tools to thwart his plans.

But unlike Cadigan, who perhaps unrealistically represents the MTV-esque corporate overlord as an idea made assailable in the body of Manny Rivera, Spinrad's riff on the rock Mephistopheles adds nuance by suggesting that institutional power-dynamics limit and discipline the mobility of any one individual within the ambit of the corporate infrastructure. The position of president in Muzik, for example, is a "revolving door" (10) position, chewing up and spitting out even the hippest and most tasteful of the old guard (14). The current president, Billy Beldock, had been a "real rock and roller" of a drummer "back in the early Seventies," before synths had replaced him, but now, himself beholden to corporate contracts and quotas, he sits in his office under a "whole wall of [gold] minidiscs" to remind him "of the gold shipped by his predecessors," wearing "the frazzled look of a man who expect[s] to have [his lifestyle] yanked out from under him at any moment" (12). Billy, a friend and former lover of Glorianna, makes his devil's bargain with her as a mere functionary of an organization to which he himself has made a soul-crushing deal. Now inured to the high salary and concomitantly luxurious lifestyle that accompanies it, Billy has fallen into the trap of "all those poor old rockers who had become the people they had long ago warned themselves about" (14). When Billy gets

inevitably fired, due to poor initial sales of the AP concept, he steps down as the last ever Muzik president to have "played [in] a rock and roll band" and gets replaced by just another steward of sales (108). Spinrad implies, in other words, that despite the best intentions of individuals—including Billy, who recognizes the AP venture is just not authentically "Rock and Roll" enough—that the very power structures in which individuals work limit possibilities for push-back and self-expression.

At first, Glorianna's efforts to express a retro-musical spirit of revolution with the rigid corporate machinery seem to promise something special. Much like in Cadigan's work, Glorianna and her crew use a new "wire" technology (205) to blend consciousnesses and hatch an AP called Red Jack, whose lyrics evoke a revolutionary, anti-establishment message and create a pop sensation:

> Red ripe anarchy
>
> For all the world to see
>
> What will the Fat Men do?
>
> You make more of me
>
> I make more of you! (218)

The accompanying video images of Red Jack reinforce the revolutionary message, showing the "wimpy little faces" of "hacking drudges" and urging them to identify with the spirit of revolt:

> [they] poured out of buildings, like cockroaches fleeing in a tide from their tenements, like huddled wimpy masses yearning to breathe free, their faces transforming into the face of Red Jack as they hit the streets and

> joined the parade, then flickering back and forth between the nerd masks of the cybermasses and the rockin' face of Red Jack in time to the beat….(217)

With Muzik partially appeased by the video's popularity, an an anarchist-minded hacking collective called the Reality Liberation Front hoping to highjack the Red Jack persona during a major broadcast to push their own anti-establishment intervention, Spinrad sets the stage for an interesting commentary on the potential for retro music to effect change within a new corporate video media network.

In the end, however, Glorianna's creation falls victim to familiar constraints, with the corporate higher-ups spinning the "revolutionary" final broadcast to their own advantage. The RLF bungles its own power-play, for starters, and instead of igniting the revolutionary spirit of the masses, they face a mob of "brain-burned zombies out of their minds and howling for the ultimate [wire] flash that would never come" (701). As the very wire technology used to disseminate the Red Jack persona spreads to the black market, it creates a new kind of drug trip, intensifying audience projection into the roles of video AP celebrities. Thus the "flash" the audience craves—the street lingo for using the "crumpled spider web" apparatus of the wire—represents less of a progressive spirit and more of an escapist communion with a virtualized fame manufactured by Muzik itself (35). The effort to use the tools of the master turns out to be just another trap of sorts—a spider's web into which the main characters all haplessly tumble.

True, the broadcast succeeds in disseminating a few hacker tools and "Red Jack's voiceprint…algorithms" to the masses, opening Muzik up to lawsuits that for a moment

threaten the company's hegemony (710). The crowd, too, seems for a moment to awaken from their false reality, like "rubes at the carnival reluctantly…fac[ing[the fact that they have been royally had" (726). But Spinrad gives the corporation the final masterstroke. They instantly adjust to the new revelations and play the broadcast off as a promotional roll-out marketing AP rock stars "as software" that "sell[s] the customers their very own selves as rock stars through the magic of Muzik! The biggest thing since Hula-Hoops! And at a much higher unit profit margin!" (727). Muzik even plans to tap the leader of the RLF to help with the campaign, repackaging an existential threat to its power as a future revenue stream.

Spinrad shows that in the struggle between art and corporate power, the media monopolists ultimately control the message. Like a hydra, the assailable figureheads of corporate power regenerate and absorb even the most revolutionary challenges as new commodities to be bought and sold. The fate of retro-music in such a post-MTV-like milieu, Spinrad wanly surmises, seems doomed to a mere caricature, robbed of all "soul" and revolutionary thrust. A degeneratively-nostalgic commentary about the Sixties music culture and its inability to work its mojo within the confines of video-media corporatism and its cult of celebrity-worship, *Little Heroes* sings a complex jeremiad about a modern-day devil's bargain damning the soul of the nation.

John Shirley

In *Eclipse* (1985), the first installment of his *Song Called Youth* trilogy of dystopian geopolitical thrillers, John Shirley juxtaposes the musical past with the

present—and future—of guerrilla resistance to global superpowers. Like many of his contemporaries discussed in this chapter, he limns the musical past without a rose-colored palette, showing its exhaustion of revolutionary force within a new context of club cultures born, in part, from new media paradigms for distribution. In this section, I'll argue that Shirley, too, demonstrates a degenerative nostalgia for a lost musical power, now diminished through its invisibility within an MTV-esque musical monopoly. Through the narrative arc of the aging musician Rick Rickenharp, he both mourns and symbolically buries hope for a musical intervention into Cold War realities.

The book takes place around the year 2029, wherein a defamiliarized Cold War NATO struggles against the forces of Greater Russia, whose attempts to annex surrounding states, including Amsterdam, spur military clashes between the two superpowers, as well as a homegrown citizen resistance movement flouting both claims to authority over the region. The so-called New Resistance, according to a memo from the Second Alliance International Security Corporation, the private security firm working alongside NATO, is a "terrorist gang" that "commonly steals supplies from NATO forces and disseminates antimilitary tracts which...lump NATO and the Russian forces together as if both were the aggressors in the area" (2). Shirley, however, focalizes his readers through the perspective of the New Resistance, a group whose goal is to thwart a clandestine, quasi-fascist conspiracy for world domination spearheaded by the Second Alliance. A major question Shirley raises in *Eclipse* is: What power does the music of the past have in such a dark, multidimensional milieu of politics?

His character Rick Rickenharp, the allegorical figurehead for the music cultures of the past, offers the degeneratively nostalgic answer. Self-identified with a "retro" (67) aesthetic approximating "pre-punk" 1960s greats like The Velvet Underground (84), Rick Rickenharp emerges as the last "anachroni[stic]" (70) figurehead for a moribund rock and roll performance culture all but gone the way of the dodo. Self-consciously "unfashionable" (68) in his "classic retro-rock black leather" and boots, Rick is at the tail end of a career that barely began in the first place (86). His finances have dried up, with royalties from two minor hits long since exhausted and the club circuit no longer favoring his brand of retro rock performance. Though he hopes in vain that "real rock is coming back" (72), his band's only gig is an opening slot at an underground dive on the adult playground of Freezone, a man-made island city in international waters, whose reputation for illicit drug trade and escapism just so happens to coincide with a rich clientele of "nostalgia freaks" who might actually tolerate Rickenharp's music (69). To make things worse, his band decides to fire him after the show, hoping to repackage themselves as a more fashionable synth-based, instrumental "wire act" and hopefully earn a living once again (96). His band knows as well as he does that "The Grid"—a kind of top-down, corporate-controlled audiovisual content distribution network—"just didn't want him" anymore (129). Rickenharp's misfortunes, as I show below, evoke a revolutionary Sixties music culture all but doomed to vanish within a new regimes of corporate video and musical media.

Shirley describes the new music culture supplanting retro rock—the wire act, or "minimono"—as a soulless and artificial outgrowth of the now decades-old paradigm of

televisual media and monopolistic music video distribution structures (68). The "stultifying" performance genre relies upon canned, or machine-generated beats and pre-progammed sounds, which accompany the "wire dancer" controlling the sound and light show via jacked-in brain implant (70). Shirley plays up the visual aspects of minimono, suggesting its emergence from the preceding era of music video ruled by the MTV-esque VidCo (68), a monopolistic megacorporation that has lead to a generation of "viddie addicts," who roam the streets with vid-projection visors (something akin to Google Glasses), perpetually entranced by torrents of content (84). Both the media ecology and the music growing out of it appear, by turns, illusory, addictive, antidemocratic, and counter-revolutionary. Shirley describes the Adornoesque top-down video paradigm as a sham reality, "none of it real," making the world over in its image: "Man[kind] reduced to... A pixel in a TV transmission" (177). The new minimono crowd also embraces "law and order," turning away from the rebellious free-thinking associated with rock and roll (68). In this conformist, video-mediated desert of the real, Shirley's protagonists struggle to make an authentic contribution to a world torn apart by global military conflicts and oligarchical cadres, but the genre of retro rock music, glorious and revolutionary as it may have been, no longer resonates in the new media ecology.

Shirley instead emphasizes the vanishing and now-effete cultural power of retro music by contrasting it with boots-on-the-ground insurgent action. Throughout the novel, for example, a consistent character foil for Rickenharp is Brendan Jack Smoke, a 35 year-old American author, journalist, and philosopher caught in a war-torn Amsterdam, where the Second Alliance and Greater Russia battle for dominance on the European theater,

and agents of the New Resistence recruit him into their ranks as a soldier and tactician. Like Rickenharp, Smoke defines himself in relation to bygone music, frequenting, as a student, a London club called the "Retro," where people "were into cultural retrogressing" to the sounds of the past, including the "Sixties, back to rockabilly and bebop and blues" (16). But once the forces of Greater Russia—which had recently reabsorbed Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakstan—drive tanks across the "frontier into Poland," Smoke gains perspective on the escapist, "unreal" nature of his club days, reflecting that "lives before the war were just long, detailed movie lives or TV lives or holo lives" (18). Smoke's indictment of the MTV-esque video reality echoes that of Rickenharp, and both men turn away from the path of retro music to join the New Resistance as rebels.

In this new and dangerous political milieu, however, the two men are clearly not equally-situated to contribute to the revolution. Smoke is a political dissident and scholar of political science, structuralism, and diplomacy (16) and has authored both the United Nations Literary Committee prize-winning *Search for a Contemporary Reality*, which speaks "for all the people who felt lost in the accelerated" new media environment(106), as well as a series of essays critiquing corporate manipulation of the internet-like "Grid" for political ends—an expose that leads to his abduction, torture, and escape by sheer luck as shells from invading Russians fall upon his captors (107). A serious intellectual and a crusader for justice, Smoke makes for a stalwart ally for the rebel forces.

Rickenharp, on the other hand, is a washed-up guitar player and former drug addict who slips off the wagon after being fired by his band. He spends much of the novel

under the influence of "blue mesc," a mescalin derivative that induces powerful hallucinations and a dream-like unreality (72). When he tags along with Carmen and her fellow New Resistance agents--who he helps escape Freezone after his final gig--they openly mock his efforts to join them: "You're not the type. You're a fucking artist....What do you think this is? You've seen too many movies" (138). Rickenharp is "living a fantasy" of cloak and dagger romance, and though the rebels grudgingly accept him on their journey back to the European front, they all but instantly regret it (139). Rickenharp proves to be not only "dead weight" (206) but also a danger to the group, accidentally shooting Carmen while on night watch (218). When the group rendezvous with Hard Eyes, the regional commander in the Paris underground, the man remarks that unlike the rest of them, who are "looking sullen...[or] trying to keep from looking scared" under the shelling, starvation, and death, "goddamn Rickenharp, [that] brain-damaged asshole, [has an] expression on his face like a kid watching fireworks" (275). Clearly, the musician fits poorly into the new reality, and indeed, in the penultimate scene, Rickenharp distracts the group by showing them a subterranean cache of retro musical instruments and playing a "dirge"—which ironically attracts enemy soldiers and leads to a costly ambush, with several wounded, including Rickenharp, who emerges from the firefight blind and lame (306). Shirley symbolically emphasizes retro music as a sepulchral art, best left buried in the rubbles of war.

And buried it gets—both figuratively and literally—in the novel's final scene. Lacking sight and mobility, Rickenharp volunteers to take position high above the Étoile, the star-shaped intersection of Paris boulevards radiating from The Arc de Triomphe, on

which he forms a musical crow's nest to stage his "last gig": a distraction to draw the enemy Jaegernauts, enormous five-story war engines designed level entire cities (311). Without question, Shirley revels in the last echoes of Rickenharp's art, with amplified guitar notes ringing like a "church bell...declaring a new and electric morning," suggesting renewal (315). Rickenharp plays a medley of retro rock classics from Blue Oyster Cult, The Clash, Lou Reed, and The Rolling Stones, while shouting out what sounds like "an anthem...about being young"—the series' titular Song Called Youth (318). "[F]urious and defiant" though the music sounds, and successful though the gambit proves to be, allowing the rebels' escape, the Jaegernauts grind "the remains of the monument into powder," burying Rickenharp under a mountain of rubble and a "monolithic silence" (319). Shirley thus gives the former "star" a martry's burial, but the power of retro music, in his final consideration, makes precious little impact on the world-shaking realities of war and the insurgent measures needed to address them. His threnody to the rock and roll past, in other words, allows it to burn out rather than fade away.

Much like Cadigan's own degeneratively nostalgic vision of a near-future post-MTV musical landscape, Shirley plays a dirge for the rock and roll past, lamenting the passing of a Sixties musical greatness and its revolutionary power. In its place he shows an obsolete shell of its former glory, failing to thrive in the new realities of video-mediated corporate distribution, war-poisoned soils, and inclement political climates. In truth, he signals a changing of the guard, with the once-brilliant art culture Rickenharp represents forever eclipsed, while Smoke and Hard Eyes come to the fore, the much-

needed brains and brawn of a new revolutionary moment. Nostalgic pangs of loss echo through *Eclipse*, but instead of staging rock's rejuvenation, Shirley wistfully buries the past and explores more viable strategies for future revolution.

Conclusion

In the Amazon.com description blurb for the 2013 ReAnimus reprint of *Little Heroes*, Michael Moorcock praises it as "A novel which mourns the death of rock n roll—and celebrates its rebirth" ("Little Heroes"). As I have shown, the authors discussed in this chapter all have strong connections to the musical past and indulge nostalgia for its possible renaissance. Moorcock, Shirley, and Spinrad not only write about music, but also perform it; as a child, Cadigan, too, fantasized about performing with The Beatles and contributing to their genius ("In Secret World"). These facts highlight, if nothing else, the sincerity of their cultural commentary and concern for the collective musical future. The obvious question, though, must be addressed: How much of their trepidation about the musical present can be ascribed to an inevitable changing of the cultural guard, with the once-familiar rock and roll scenes of their childhood superseded by the Eighties-era ubiquity of synth instruments, New Wave dance clubs, heavy metal, and hip-hop? Any attempt to weigh these authors' investments in the traditional power of rock should be counterbalanced with both their registration, twenty years later, of their own mortality and their desire, looking backward and historicizing their youthful enthusiasms, to have participated in a revolutionary moment. Judging by the rock magazine covers, the tribute

concerts, and the stylistic revivals, these authors seem to reflect a larger nostalgic trend in Eighties and Nineties American culture (Reynolds).

But more is at work in the degenerative nostalgia of these Eighties and Nineties SF novels, an idea I'd like to illuminate by closing with a brief consideration of Jonathan Lethem's slipstream-y *Gun, With Occasional Music* (1994), a novel which offers its own unique indictment of new musical media technologies in the MTV era. In the traditional sense, "occasional music" can be understood as music defined by and/or governing social functions. In Lethem's quirky dystopian future, aspects of culture get expressed as ever-more nebulous and abstruse sound bites of occasional music, as with the impressionistic musical news, which communicates important developments as a hazy series of cheery, hopeful, or ominous melodies (3). Print culture has been outmoded and legalized "makeries" (103) cut personalized narcotic blends of memory-disabling drugs including "Forgettol" (5) and "Blanketrol" (107) that take the edge off the constraints of a Kafkaesque police state. As memories get worse, the culture turns to the widespread use of extra-somatic aural media storage devices as a replacement for human memory, a development that leaves individuals both forgetful and susceptible to memory edits by themselves or others. Lethem's bizarre world suggests important connections among the decline of amateur music cultures, the rise of aural media storage technologies, and a steady erosion of a robust public sphere, with its myriad democratic mechanisms for keeping tyranny at bay. "Art mirrors the culture," one of his characters tellingly soliloquizes (69). Cultural forgetting of all kinds, implies Lethem, sets the stage for dystopia.

Little hope for the future memory of the musical past can be found in the worlds of Cadigan, Spinrad, or Shirley, and they similarly tie the ill health of their imaginaries with a perceived degeneration in the cultures of aural media and musical performance. Cadigan's Los Angeles is a ruin of unemployment, cheap consumer tech, and video-mediated escapism; Shirley's geopolitical power-plays are full of "tactical" nuke-strikes, religious fundamentalism, and fascist resurgence; and Spinrad's New York is an armed police state protecting the rich from the rest, with the middle class a fading anomaly. Ruined cities, hardscrabble poverty, and mesmeric false consciousness are concomitants in these works to the video-mediated musical paradigm popularized by MTV. For the SF writers of the Eighties and Nineties, music video monopolism poisoned the body politic and sowed a grim wilderness of mind, body, spirit, and country.

Like the Jazz Age fretting of T.S. Eliot, perhaps, whose female phonograph auditor in "The Wasteland" moves like a robot under the spell of her newfangled contraption, these Eighties and Nineties cyberpunk writers register anxiety and distrust of changing aural media practices during their very apogee. In the wake of Reagan's America, with its trickle-down impoverishment, Cold War posturing, and proscriptive social conservatism, these writers lament the passing of a musical paradigm whose animating spirits once fought the power and rocked a revolution. They desire a comparably influential, political-minded counterweight to the official cultures of their time. But the concurrent musical milieus they survey not only fall short but also augur the foreclosure of a Golden Age for the foreseeable future.

For all their cynicism and New Wave-inheritance of pop-cultural distrust, I detect in these writers a kind of satire of self-defense. Their collective vitriol for the video media paradigm burns at the temperature of a jilted lover, that special hatred born of intimacy, betrayal, and disillusionment. Their portraits of MTV, in other words, reflect a desire unmet, a nostalgic investment in a musical media past that for a brief cultural moment seemed perhaps to bloom anew in the early-Eighties' video media dawn—until it withered once again before their eyes, eclipsed in the darkness of business as usual. These artists cry out in earnest that the sky is falling and the world has forever changed. But in retrospect, as I argue in the concluding "Coda," only one of those things turns out to be true.

In the next chapter, I consider the more optimistic, generative nostalgia of three twenty-first century novels: Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2013), and Nathaniel Mackey's *Bass Cathedral* (2009). Each author focuses on reimagining past music cultures in the context of new media technologies, using the traditional Western myth of Orpheus, the quintessential musician, as a symbol of productive retrieval.

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[1] A 2010 post by Moorcock to the *New York Times* art blog listed the top ten albums he listens to while writing, and Hendrix's *Are You Experienced* not only comes in at number three but also earns the designation of "the greatest debut rock album ever" (qtd. in Cowles). Hendrix figures also appear in several Moorcock stories and novellas, such as *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (later revised into *Gold Diggers of 1977*) and "A Dead Singer," among others.

[2] The Cornelius mythos runs very deep—with four novels, four novellas, at least twenty stories, two comic books and other transmedia adaptations, including stage musicals and a film. Moorcock and Langdon Jones even edited a collection of other authors who contributed Jerry Cornelius-themed stories to *New Worlds* and other venues. In effect the figure, who appears under various pseudonyms and historical avatars throughout nearly all of Moorcock's oeuvre, acts as the common denominator within a much larger, multiversal "megawork." A much larger piece would be required to chart the transformations of Moorcock's character over time in dialogue with the larger superstructural shifts taking place within British and global culture.

Chapter Three

Faces of Orpheus in Twenty-first Century American Literature

Abstract: In the literature of the twenty-first century, the pendulum swings toward a generative nostalgia focused on reimagining past music cultures through new media technologies. In this chapter, I survey three contemporary novels—Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2013), and Nathaniel Mackey's *Bass Cathedral* (2009)— and provide an analysis of how each writer uses the Greek myth of Orpheus to fashion what Svetlana Boym has called a revolutionary "past perfect" out of golden age nostalgia—with the musical past reimagined through either the affordances of contemporary technoculture or through syncretic, cross-cultural exchange.

Throughout the winter of 1922, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke found himself in the midst of a spartan seclusion in the medieval Château de Muzot, rising up from the foothills of the snowy French Alps, where day in and day out he watched and waited, but mostly strained to listen. Without running water or electricity, but possessed of a majestic view and a few old mementos—a postcard replica of a bust of Orpheus, a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—Rilke harkened for the whispers of inspiration that would, at long last, help him finish the great *Duino Elegies*. "Consciously empty yet anticipating something," Ann Wroe recounts, "he took up his station at the standing desk….And suddenly, Orpheus was there" (3).

From the times of the ancients to the present day, the songs and stories of Orpheus—the Greek music-maker and bard—have long spoken to artists. By turns, his adventures have placed him in various roles: the charmer of men and beasts, the placater of gods, the shipmate of the Argonauts, the traveler into the underworld, the retriever of lost love, and the decapitated head that prophesies long after the death of its body. Equal parts Prometheus (the thief of divine fire) and Apollo (the sun god and musical patron),

Orpheus has represented various things throughout the ages—the civilizing role of clergymen, the furtive nature of inspiration, the earthly sacrifice of romantic love, the universal harmony of the cosmos, the stubborn persistence of memory, and the echo of art from beyond the grave.

As the productive and/or problematic remembrances of sound media and listening practices since the sixties have been the focus of previous chapters, what follows extends the theme of Sonic Retro-futures by examining the reappearance of Orpheus figures—both traditional and innovative—within a twenty-first century American literature singing with aural media. The Orphic call of poetic inspiration, as Rilke heard it, isn't necessarily the only sound conjured by the myth nowadays. Through an analysis of three recent novels—Jennifer Egan's *Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2013), and Nathaniel Mackey's *Bass Cathedral* (2008)—I'll argue that Orpheus now speaks to us through the oracular heads of LP records and eight-track tapes, sending cryptic sureties that a dialogue with the musical past forms the pathway to a revolutionary future.

For the benefit of the uninitiated, I'd like to begin with a brief sketch of the Orpheus myth and its narrative arc, followed by an all-too-abridged review of the various interpretations of the tales by historical epoch. These will serve, through productive comparisons with their more recent avatars, to clarify the interventions of Egan, Chabon, and Mackey.

Born from the coupling of a mortal man and Calliope, the eldest Muse and inspirer of art, Orpheus grew to hold a special, intermediary place between worlds.

Mortal, but possessed of supernatural powers of poetry and music, he could move the hearts of men and gods alike—even draw birds and beasts, rivers and trees with the harmony of his voice and lyre. More than a man, he was nonetheless a man of adventure, sailing on the Argo and hastening the labor of oarsmen and buoying spirits through his rousing performance. He also drowned out the call of Sirens who hoped to smash them between the dreaded pass of Scylla and Charybdis, saving the crew from certain death. But the traditional Orpheus was no common sea-dog; he refused all meat out of respect for living creatures and abstained from intoxicating drink. In many versions, he serves as a priest in the temple of Apollo, the sun-god, musician, and patron of science and order, the natural foil—according to Nietzsche's analysis in *The Birth of Tragedy*—of Dionysus, the lover of strong wines and chaotic revelries. His most famous adventure takes place in the underworld, after an ill-fated wedding day that sees his wife, Eurydice, bitten by a serpent and claimed by the agents of death. Unwilling to let go of his love, Orpheus descends into the labyrinths of Hades, where—depending on the version—he lulls a three-headed dog to sleep, charms the recalcitrant boatman of Styx, and so moves the lord and lady of the underworld with tuneful lamentation, that they make him a devilish deal: If he can lead Eurydice up the way he came without once glancing back, she will be restored to full life. In some early Greek versions, he actually succeeds (Bernstock xviii). But the tale that endures sees him seized with a madness to assure her presence, and back she slips into the arms of eternity. Afterwards, the inconsolable Orpheus spurns the love of women and succumbs to the Maenads, the frenzied wild women of the drunken cult of Dionysus, who tear him to pieces and scatter his body. Yet

his severed head sings on as an oracle to mankind, until his patron god, Apollo, grew too weary of the sound.

A veritably nomadic force, the figure of Orpheus haunts the pages of myth, *belle-lettres*, fine art, and chamber music, spreading new sounds and messages depending on the age and cultural context. According to Ann Wroe, "Orpheus roams Western civilization much as balladeers, hurdy-gurdy men, pipers and storytellers used to travel the back roads of America and Europe" (6). Though "Each age revisits him" in a new way, the heart of his identity beats with "the pulse of creation, the song of life" (Wroe 5).

The Orpheus myth comprises the full life cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, leading comparative mythographers like Sir James Frazer to align its ancient reception with fertility rites and the narrative impulse to account for nature's order (379). But as civilization took hold, the interpretations diversified. To ancient Thracians, "he was a king, a shaman, and a traveller through the realms of the dead" (Wroe 3-4). To ancient Greeks, "he was the first singer of holy songs," a powerful magus, and "a teacher of beauty and order" (Wroe 4). By the fifth-century B.C. the Greeks had given him a wife, though they "never cared for that part of the story" (Wroe 4). It was the first-century Romans, namely Ovid and Virgil, who injected more humanity into the tale by making "him a lover so ardent that he challenged death," a role that inspired the later Elizabethans to make him "the quintessential love poet" (Wroe 109-110). Though this romantic interpretation endures into the present with perhaps the greatest tenacity, important vestiges of diverse traditions help color more contemporary accounts.

Important religious overlays abound, and for as many as sixteen centuries, "Christians easily imagined [Orpheus], with his miracles and parables, his redeeming power and his bloody, sacrificial death, as a forerunner of Jesus" (Wroe 4). In the Dark Ages, Boethius allegorized Orpheus' the descent into hell as a Christian "journey of the soul" (Wroe 4). In the fourteenth century, Boccaccio linked Orpheus to the origins of temple-building and religion, institutions through which he functioned as a theologian (Kosinski 3). By the fifteenth century, the anonymous writer of the medieval chronicles of Sir Orfeo merged the myth with troubadoric romance and Judeo-Christian moral dualism, much like the grail legends of Sir Thomas Mallory (Kosinski 16).

By the mid-to-late Renaissance, an order-keeping interpretation reigned, with seventeenth-century mythographers like Natalis Comes and George Sandys describing the Orphic role as Apollonian in nature: didactic and civilizing (Kosinski 3). According to Vanessa Agnew, this role expanded to become a guiding ideology in the eighteenth-century European voyages to the Pacific. The Argonaut Orpheus became the imperial harmonizer of savage lands, and a musical version of the era's scientific racism broadcast an "Orphic discourse [that] constituted a kind of ethnographic yardstick" to "categoriz[e] and hierarchically orde[r] people according to their musical practices" (Agnew 7).

If Agnew stresses the more collective, Eurocentric jingoism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment Orpheus—the musician as synecdoche for the West's civilizing power—R.A. Yoder and Dorothy M. Kosinski examine the markedly individual nature of Orphic conceptions in their analyses of nineteenth-century artists. The Symbolist Orpheus revisited his power as a magus or alchemist, a purveyor of secret paths of

knowing, rather than his more official role as an Apollonian priest or culture-bearer (Kosinski 20):

> Mallarme's concept of the poet's role as summoning forth the orphic voice in the world succinctly articulates the Symbolists' preoccupation with the notion of the artist as priest, art as religion, art object as revelation. Their emphasis on Orpheus' magical powers differentiates their interpretations of the traditional motif of Orpheus amidst the animals…which often explored the variety and beauty of...the pastoral landscape. (Kosinski xiii)

Symbolist images of the natural were idiosyncratic and anti-naturalist, imbued with an obscure and magical quality through "concepts of synaesthesia and correspondences" to "express an interior reality" (Kosinski xiv). The severed head of Orpheus—the most compelling trope for the Symbolists, appearing in works by Gustave Moreau (*The Apparition*, 1876), Jean Delville (*The Head of Orpheus*, 1893), and Odilon Redon (*Orpheus*, c. 1902-1910), among others—served to celebrate the ersatz-supernatural "apotheosis of the work of art in death" (Kosinski xiv).

Clear overlap with this individual poetic mythos can be seen in the American Romantics, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson. "What proved to be the most important feature of the Orphic myth for Emerson," argues R. A. Yoder, "was not the descent into the underworld or even the NeoPlatonic stress on the continuity of truth, but the mythical fact of Orpheus taming nature or the wilderness" to emerge as a "central man," or intermediary between earthly systems of natural science and the individual experience of an eternal numinous (xiii-xiv).

Twentieth-century Europeans tend to see Orpheus in a similar light—as an emblem of the individual poet's elevation over normal men through the poetic act of channeling timeless, divine energies. But an important issue about the nature history and remembrance in the turn-of-the-century European modernist conceptions of Orpheus can also be detected. Artists like Raoul Dufy, following Eugene Delacroix a generation before him, celebrated Orpheus as the bringer of civilization through the ages (Bernstock 134). Such work functions perhaps as an activist reminder of the role of tradition in the context of Guillaume Apollinaire's call to burn down the Louvre (Garner) and F.T. Marinetti's manic futurist manifesto calling to raze all memory of Western civilization and begin afresh. Like the Rilke of this essay's opening vignette, though, Apollinaire sought (as did Paul Klee and Marcel Proust), the productive collapse of temporal boundaries that would downplay "externalized images of a dead past" and liberate them "from the menace of time by transforming past into present consciousness through…song" (Bernstock 134). This desire for an Orphic "unity of being" through the individual poetic act endures in the mid-century Orpheus of Jean Cocteau and the Americans who took inspiration from him.

Orpheus Emerged (1945), Jack Kerouac's first, unpublished attempt at a *roman à clef*, can be seen as an effort to release his own Orphic voice, still stifled between the desire to live life and the compulsion to dedicate himself to a disciplined artistic path. The novella represents the crucible in which he began to alchemize an artistic voice and a fully sensual life as two complementary elements of a personal mythology that could, ultimately, combine into a modern myth of his own to live by (Pontiac). Tennessee

Williams' *Orpheus Descending* (1956) shows the power of an itinerant musician to discharge the secrets and emotional discord of small, Southern town, releasing the toxic steam of stifling personal histories. The underworld adventure of the twentieth century American Orpheus, like that of Freud's unconscious, entails a personalized retrieval or leaving-behind within a labyrinth of self-imposed demons. Much as in Herbert Marcuse's conception of the myth in *Eros and Civilization*,[1] the twentieth-century American version of Orphic "loss" implies the abandonment of dead aspects of the self (or society) so a new, authentic, or actualized self can emerge.

Though contemporary writers present no less individualized figures of Orpheus, their commentaries frame the act of remembrance in an appreciably new way. In his 90s, the wizened Polish poet Czesław Miłosz imagined himself, upon the death of his second wife, in the role of Orpheus, perhaps prepping for the time when he himself would throw off his mortal coil and tour the waiting underworld, which would claim him, in truth, just two short years from then. In the underworld of his imagination, this Orpheus does not find the sought-for Eurydice, only an ashen shade of all that once was: "Her face no longer hers, utterly gray" (101). Not that this stops his desire "To call her name, to wake her from that sleep" (101) or his willingness to go through with the heroic trials of her resurrection. What shakes the Orpheus of Miłosz from his pre-doomed labor is not the earthy impulse ascribed by the Ancients or some Freudian tension between possession and purity, but a crisis of faith in what he was doing, in the powers of ritual itself:

> Under his faith a doubt sprang up
> And entwined him like cold bindweed.

Unable to weep, he wept at the loss

Of the human hope for the resurrection of the dead. (101)

His sustaining illusions riven in twain, he turns to look, "And behind him on the path was no one" (102). But once out of the darkness of the underground caverns, the living world reappears, "Only now everything cried to him: Eurydice!" (102). The sparkle of love he sought in the shadows now reflects in the sun-glint of all creation: "there was a fragrant scent of herbs, the low humming of bees, / And he fell asleep with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth" (102). Though he leaves behind the empty dream of reanimation, fecundity is everywhere on display: the arms of the world, now infused with new spring, accept him in a tender embrace.

For Miłosz, the point of the journey is not to *recreate* the past (tempting though it may be), but carry motes of its memory from the halls of the fallen—the dark, rich compost of creation. The archives of art, history and ideas, in such a view, form a great seed bank of culture awaiting retrieval, grafting, and new germination.

The twenty-first century American fiction of Egan, Chabon, and Mackey builds gardens of the future from the mediated stuff of the Orphic grave—LP records, Eight-track tapes, and digital rips of radio broadcasts. In what follows, I argue that the Orphic spirits of contemporary literature traverse a cultural underworld in which they cannot help but "look back" by listening to the musical past. With LPs apotropaics and radio-waves lyres to guide their journeys, the Orphic figures of contemporary America exhibit a memorial function distinct from previous eras, moving beyond the personal or poetic aggrandizement of the nineteenth and twentieth-century artists to consider the cultural

look backward as a greater social good. The tone and sweep of these artists' remembrances will be just as important to attend to as their rewriting of the Orphic quest. What seeds emerge from their boom-box broadcasts of the pop-cultural past? What "lyres" get restrung, what songs get resung, and what ideologies of rejuvenation echo from this cross-section of literary deep cuts?

Aural Media and Regenerative Nostalgia in Egan's *A Visit from Goon Squad*

A Pulitzer Prize-winning "fix-up" novel[2] whose narrative fragments form a musical timeline spanning the youthful, late-seventies San Francisco punk scene of the Mabuhay Gardens to a Central Park concert in a New York City of the near future, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* comments on the interrelationships between adolescence, music, media, memory, aging, and the possibility of renewal. Portraying a life-cycle much like the Orpheus myth itself, Egan follows the youthful triumphs, missteps, and renaissances of a group of characters connected, by various degrees of separation, to the heyday of the Flaming Dildos, a motley seventies SF punk band made up of disaffected high school seniors on the cusp of maturation.

Organized like an LP record, with an A-side and a B-side, the novel's thirteen chapters are each focalized through a different character and illuminate a diverse, asynchronous snapshot of the narrative, a clever structural device that further highlights the theme of flashbacks and re-search to make sense of the past. In her own words, the novel represents an attempt to render a "polyphonic fictional world" (qtd. in Reilly 440)

that plays with chronology, much as the Joyce of *Ulysses* achieved a "multiexperiential quality in linear form" (qtd. in Reilly 453).

Even before beginning the overlapping, multi-perspectival, out-of-sequence stories, Egan sounds a thematic keynote of Orphic nostalgia in new media contexts. Invoking at once the dynamics of the look backward and the forward march of progress, she frames the novel within a pair of epigraphs from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*:

> Poets claim that we recapture for a moment the self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth. But these are most hazardous pilgrimages, which end as often in disappointment as in success. It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years.
>
> The unknown element in the lives of other people is like that of nature, which each fresh scientific discovery merely reduces but does not abolish. (qtd. in Egan 1)

Juxtaposing a call for an interior model of Orphic memory-search with the incremental, but incomplete journey toward human understanding through technology, Egan implies the questions at the heart of her novel: What solace can be found in nostalgia?; What forms of it can be productive?; What role does media play in remembrance?; and What are the limits of both?

Due to its recent publication, Egan's novel has not yet been adequately discussed in the critical literature, though one current article does help launch the topic. In her

analysis, Danica van de Velde makes the case for a gendered split between the male and female characters' experiences of nostalgia. On the one hand, she argues, Egan's men exhibit a "hollow idealism" in their "desire to return to a past...they can never recapture," which leads to a loss of their "hardcore [punk rock] authenticity" by the novel's end (124). On the other, the women "do not wallow in the false promises of nostalgia," which allows them to more productively move on from the past by putting it behind (131).

Here and throughout, Velde draws from a reading of Svetlana Boym that assumes nostalgia always names an unproductive response to loss. Nostalgia, in this reading of Boym, inhibits further growth by failing to come to grips with "the impossibility of mythic return" (qtd. in Velde 132). Sidetracked in the exploration of the "sideshadows and back alleys" of history, the "straight road of progress" into the future gets unnecessarily delayed by the errant glance backward (qtd. in Velde 131). Through such a lens, Velde argues that Egan "highlights the failure of nostalgic desire," a theme reinforced by the novel's lack of closure, which "leav[es] a number of narrative threads untied" and forces the reader "to dwell in the ellipses of the text" (132-133).

There are two major problems with this reading. The first is that Velde's presentation of Boym is inadequate, if not outright disingenuous, as it elides the breadth and nuance of the theorist's argument. What appears in Velde as a one-dimensional broadside against the universal ills of nostalgia is actually as much a defense of the progressive uses of nostalgia as a cautionary reminder against giving oneself over to foolish projections of imagined homelands or the false promises of Disneyfied media.

A more complete dialogue with Boym must include her view that the modern world requires *more* (and more *creative*) outlets for productive nostalgia:

> With the waning of the role of the art [sic] and humanities, there are fewer and fewer venues for exploring nostalgia, which is compensated for with an abundance of nostalgic readymades. The problem with prefabricated nostalgia is that it does not help us to deal with the future. Creative nostalgia reveals the fantasies of the age, and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born. One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is in this past perfect that one strives to realize the future. (Boym 351).

An analysis of how contemporary novelists fashion a kind of "past perfect" out of a creative reimagining of bygone music and its technoculture is precisely the focus of this chapter.

As such, the second issue with Velde's reading is that it cannot satisfactorily explain the productively nostalgic symbolism of the novel's ending. While her reading nicely affords attention to the themes of music, youth, nostalgia and aging, its negative thrust cannot account for what she herself describes as the "hope and redemption" of the final scene, in which a future concert in New York City sees a seventies-era musician bring together a city still reeling from the loss of the twin towers (133). This final scene stumps Velde, as she must admit its bald optimism while nonetheless reasserting the novel's anti-nostalgic bent (133). To be fair, the irreconcilability of those two readings—

the failure of nostalgia and its final triumph—speaks as much to Egan's craft and subtlety as it does to the incompleteness of Velde's analysis.

But a clearer focus on the novel's overlooked allusions to Orpheus serves to harmonize what Velde presents as a thematic cacophony and a lack of closure. Egan's narrative of musical changes since the seventies evokes an Orphic narrative of loss and dark trials as a way to dramatize the productive retrieval and recontextualization of lost cultural touchstones. In Egan's revelation of the "fantasies of the age," the music of a bygone Orpheus, once hybridized via new media exhibition, holds the power to rejuvenate the city.

Scotty, the "magnetic" guitar player for the Dildos, serves as the central Orpheus figure in the novel (42). When he plays onstage in the punk clubs as a teen, the audience becomes entranced by his performance and "bare muscles shining with sweat and beer" (52). But Scotty's off-stage connection to music runs just as deep, as he plays "a lap steel guitar" that he "actually built" himself—"bent the wood, glued it, and painted on the shellac" (41). When he plays this one-of-a-kind instrument, the sound draws people in the same way Orpheus drew wild birds and beasts: "Everyone gathers around, there's no way not to when Scotty plays. One time the entire J.V. soccer team climbed up from the athletic field to listen, looking around in their jerseys and long red socks like they didn't know how they got there" (41). Like the Orpheus of the Apollonian temple, too, Scotty has a connection with the sun. He has "bleached hair and a studly chest that he likes to uncover when it's sunny out" (42). He likes to play outside in the sun on "warm days" (41). He lives in the suburban "Sunset" district of San Francisco, where on Saturdays the

band "glares out at the bright day" from inside the garage (44). But most of all the sun image speaks of loss and damage, as Scotty's mother "died three years ago from sleeping pills," the last of a string of suicide attempts that began in the fifth grade and so deranged him that "he sat all day on the patch of grass outside his house and stared at the sun" (45).

Nearly all of Egan's characters are in the midst of a personal crisis and must undergo some form of Orphic underworld quest to surmount their trials of nostalgic loss. Scotty's once-magnetic aura seems to have diminished over the years, and mid-novel we find his talent still unrecognized, as he toils away as not only an artistic unknown but a beat-down garbage man. Bennie Salazar, the bass player and de facto manager of the Dildos (turned music industry A&R suit), loses his wife to divorce after an unfortunate tryst during his ill-fated attempt at a brown-skinned integration into the WASPy, blue-blooded suburban Hades of the fictional Crandale, New York. Sasha, Bennie's former assistant, struggles to put her life back together after getting fired for stealing, as she resorts to kleptomania as a way to fill the dark void left by her absent father, after whose memory she chased, as a runaway teen, into the dingy undergrounds of Naples—where indeed, her uncle pursues her in a chapter couched explicitly in terms of Orpheus and Eurydice (209). Dolly, or La Doll, a PR shill who for years reigned as queen of the New York City entertainment biz, finds herself in disgrace and financial ruin after a disastrously conceived oil-and-light-show apparatus dazzled a who's who of A-list attendees—just before raining down a scalding torrent, scarring many of them for life and banishing La Doll to a lousy studio apartment in the Bronx, a sorry state of fortune that compels her to travel into a third world hell to rehabilitate her only available client: a

genocidal dictator. Jules, the brother-in-law of Bennie and a former up-and-coming journalist, aims to reintegrate with society after serving time in prison as a consequence of a meltdown-turned-assault during a puff-piece interview assignment with a ditzy starlet. Kitty Jackson, that very former starlet, after succumbing to the trauma of the incident, falls out of favor with the Hollywood elite, but gambles on going along with La Doll's desperate scheme to have Kitty accompany her into the general's compound, where a staged photo shoot with the dictator could raise the social stock of all involved. And Bosco, the formerly rail-thin ska/punk guitarist for the eighties group the Conduits, once known to perform like "a hive of redheaded mania…[that] made Iggy Pop look indolent," wallows in career hell as a cancer survivor with an "unsuccessful hip replacement" (125)—a self-described "fat fuck no one cares about" (127).

Each of these characters undergoes an Orphic quest of sorts because they are haunted by ghosts of the past, the missteps and memories that torment them to the point of anguish. Often, Egan describes their bouts of remembrance in terms of emotional pain or even bodily harm. Bennie, for example, gets uncontrollable bouts of "shame memories" (19), thoughts of the past that "hurt him physically, as if…raking over him and leaving gashes" (31). When La Doll makes her "usual," late-night trips down the "memory chute" she replays the "moment when the plastic trays first buckled" at her party (154), a recollection so painful it "plow[s] through her like a hot poker, causing her to writhe in her sofa bed and swill brandy from the bottle" (141). After Sasha steals a purse while on a first date, she later reflects on "an emptiness that felt violent, as if she'd been gouged" (16). Even Scotty, as a result of his childhood sun-gazing, suffers from

"permanent gray smudges" in his vision—a metaphor, among so many in the text, for the pangs of longing and the persistence of memory (45).

The pain of these characters serves to dramatize their desire for renewal, which Egan shows both explicitly and implicitly. After the middle-aged Scotty visits Bennie, for instance, he makes a point to dry clean his coat to "make it new again," a symbolic act given his low-fallen state compared to the successful Bennie (108). When Bosco pitches his desperate plan to hype a farewell "suicide tour"—a string of performances with the goal of actually dying on stage by performing as feverishly as he did in his teens—he appears "ablaze with hope" (129). Once Jules embraces the tour idea as "genius" (129) and establishes himself as the sole official chronicler of the proposed string of ironic spectacles, his whole demeanor shifts toward the positive, with his sister remarking that she "could practically hear the hope sluicing through" him (132). When Sasha begins therapy to deal with her kleptomania, she thinks "Redemption, transformation—God how she wanted these things. Every day, every minute" (18).

The theme of transformation—both into hard times and then out of them—forms the dominant motif of the novel, often recurring through variants of "A to B." The very form of the novel highlights this dynamic, positing the A- and B-sides in terms of musical media and suggesting that both are all of a piece, or two dialogic facets of life. The phrase appears when Scotty visits the hot-shot Bennie, when he asks "I want to know what happened between A and B….A is when we were both in the band, chasing the same girl. B is now" (101). Later, we learn that *A to B* is the title of Bosco's forthcoming CD, so named for the artist's rhetorical question: "how did I go from being a rock star to

being a fat fuck no one cares about?" (127). Finally, "A to B" is also the title of the seventh chapter, the first in the "B" section of the book and thus suggesting an arc toward transformation. Indeed, in this chapter the fortunes of several characters begin to shift—Bennie's wife Stephanie learns of his infidelity, Bosco begins planning his tour, and Jules hops aboard the Bosco media train to jumpstart his career. But Egan uses the "A to B" motif to achieve a larger cultural commentary beyond the individual character arcs toward personal growth. Before staging the meeting that jumpstarts Jules' road to redemption, she makes a telling juxtaposition between his post-prison depression and a post-9/11 Manhattan he no longer recognizes:

> "I go away for a few years and the whole fucking world is upside down," Jules said angrily. "Buildings are missing. You get strip-searched every time you go to someone's office. Everybody sounds stoned, because they're e-mailing people the whole time they're talking to you. Tom and Nicole are with different people.…And now my rock-and-roll sister and her husband are hanging around with Republicans. What the fuck!"...."I don't get it, Jules," Stephanie said. "I don't get what happened to you." Jules stared at the glittering skyline of Lower Manhattan without recognition. "I'm like America," he said." (123)

Jules' personal crisis of "A to B," which appears here in the chapter of the same name, extends outward to the whole country, where cultural transformations visible through media consumption, communication, surveillance, and the missing twin towers form the dark "B" side to an American narrative of hope for the future.

The power of bygone music to redeem and bridge gaps between the various A- and B- sides in the text—ones between parents and children, as well as past and future—can be seen throughout Egan's *Goon Squad*. In the book's penultimate chapter, "Great Rock And Roll Pauses by Allison Blake," we get a glimpse into the life of Sasha after marrying, moving away from New York, and having two children. Told through a series of PowerPoint slides written by Sasha's daughter, the chapter chronicles the family dynamics through the obsession of Allison's autistic brother, Lincoln, or Linc, who meticulously collects data about pauses in classic rock songs. Linc, in fact, communicates only through his chosen topic, a behavior that particularly frustrates his father, Drew, who clearly feels disconnected from the boy. After a particularly fraught attempt to get Linc to explain his arcane system, Drew raises his voice and brings the kids to tears, which prompts Sasha's livid, whispered response: "The Pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn't really over, so you're relieved. But then the song *does* actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and *THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL"* (281). In one sense, Egan implies a model of musical media sharing pegged to the hope of transcending even linguistic barriers between parent and child. In another way, Egan's meditation on the power of musical pauses also metaphorically describes the dynamics of hope, loss, and redemption at the heart of much of the narrative. Like a wish that our current music culture represents a necessary dead zone between the excellence of the American past and its triumphal resurgence, the theme Great Rock and Roll Pauses sets up the final chapter with a clever mock ending: a slide entitled, simply, "The End" (309). Positioned rhetorically to imply a pause before the final chapter, the last slide in

chapter 12 cues the reader to anticipate what comes after it as an encore—the joyful noise on the other side of the novel's own Great Rock and Roll Pause—the concluding action of Scotty's future concert in New York.

Egan shows Scotty's final concert as an event of the same cultural significance of Woodstock, an Orphic cultural moment where young and old converge to share some musical vision of the past and future. One character scans the crowd to see how Scotty's music unites young and old, black and white with a cathartic and characteristically Orphic harmony:

> [He saw] the rapt, sometimes tearstained faces of adults, the elated, scant-toothed grins of toddlers, and young people like [Dolly's daughter] Lulu, who was now holding hands with a statuesque black man, both of them gazing at Scotty Hausmann with the rhapsodic joy of a generation finally descrying someone worthy of its veneration. (336)

The lyrical description of the event's cultural impact evokes the power of Orpheus and concretizes Scotty's role as his narrative avatar, for the influence of his performance assures he "has entered the realm of myth" in the eyes of not only the massive crowd in attendance but also the many "more people [who] claim it than could possibly have fit into the space" (336).

It is not only the crowd and city that undergo a transformation, as Scotty, too, channels a power long forgotten:

> a swell of approval palpable as rain lifted from the center of the crowd and rolled out toward its edges, where it crashed against buildings and water

> wall and rolled back at Scotty with redoubled force, lifting him off his stool, onto his feet…exploding the quavering husk Scotty had appeared to be just moments before and unleashing something strong, charismatic, and fierce. (335)

Like the washing waters of redemption, Scotty's music implies the power of the musical past to create change. The nature of that change receives further elaboration, as Egan clarifies her cultural critique by describing the political significance of the crowd's affective investment in this spectacle of bygone music:

> it may be that a crowd at a particular moment of history creates the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock. Or it may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar. (335)

Scotty's power to galvanize the masses relates as much to his musical prowess as to the new cultural context of ubiquitous media and seemingly-endless militarism, in which his "ballads of paranoia and disconnection" seem "ripped from the chest of a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset," a man "who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure. Untouched" (336). Scotty, who does not own a computer or cell phone and spends free days reading old-fashioned print media in physical book stores for "for four-and five-hour stretches," experiences his apotheosis at the precise cultural moment there is, seemingly, nobody else left like him (96).

But social media, ironically, helps produce the spectacular success of Scotty's concert. In truth, the final scene represents the hybrid vision of two generations working together, as well as the power of new media to help reconnect us with the past by recontextualizing it. Earlier in the book, La Doll provides some foreshadowing of the intergenerational nature of the final concert by musing about just such a generation-defining event, while lamenting her own inability to predict it:

> Now and then, Dolly found herself wondering what sort of event or convergence would define the new world in which she found herself, as Capote's party had, or Woodstock, or Malcolm Forbes's seventieth birthday, or the party for Talk magazine. She had no idea. She had lost her power to judge; it would be up to Lulu and her generation to decide. (143)

As it turns out, her daughter Lulu has a more direct hand in its production, working alongside a Bennie now "pushing sixty," as his protégé and social media agent. Lulu, who Egan presents in earlier scenes as a tech-savvy private-school wunderkind with a "regal bearing," truly emerges as both her mother's daughter and the queen of a new era of media PR: La Doll 2.0 (140). She spearheads the campaign to pre-mediate the utterly unknown and unglamorous Scotty by leveraging thousands of personal social media contacts, street-team "parrots," and other networked shills.

At this point, it should be noted, Egan ramps up the satirical aspects of the book, and her portrait of the near-future mediascape appears within a comically dystopian frame. Not only do Lulu's tactics seem cynical and instrumentalist, they evoke a larger media ecology in which the influence of corporations and other business interests has

become disturbingly invasive. The focalizing character for the final chapter is Alex, who Bennie hires as part of Lulu's team, and who remains disturbed by the quasi-legality and shaky ethics of their promotional campaign, but also by what he sees as a cultural shift toward a bioinformatic captivity in the datasphere:

> he never could quite forget that every byte of information he'd posted online (favorite color, vegetable, sexual position) was stored in the databases of multinationals who swore they would never, ever use it—that he was owned, in other words, having sold himself unthinkingly at the very point in his life when he'd felt most subversive[.] (316)

From Alex's perspective he has sold out, and his job requires him to find "more people like him, who had stopped being themselves without realizing it" (317). Such people would presumably include the parents the hottest new consumer demographic of "pointers," so named for the users of the Starfish handset for toddlers, as "any child who could point was able to download music" (313). As a result of the Starfish fad, "bands had no choice but to reinvent themselves for the preverbal," a commodification of music resulting in abominations like rap song remixes of Biggie's "'Fuck You, Bitch'…[made to] sound like 'You're Big, Chief!'," complete with Photoshopped pictures of "Biggie dangling a toddler in Native American headdress" (313).

On top of all of this, Lulu communicates through a mix of textbook marketing jargon alternating with text message abbreviations, further implying a commodification of language and the pernicious influence of media writ large: "*U hav sum nAms 4 me?*" (321). Indeed, Alex's wife Rebecca, a "rising academic star," has written a book on the

phenomenon of "word casings, a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks" (323). Among the English words "shucked of their meaning and reduced to husks" in the mediated near-future, she includes friend, real, story, change, search, cloud, and American (324).

Certainly, through the eyes of this "purist" (310), Egan dangles the bait of an ironic reading of the final scene, one in which the entire world has been so brainwashed and enslaved by media influence that they are simply walking dupes—living "word casings" evacuated of meaning and awaiting a fill-up by predatory business agents. In such a reading, Scotty would represent nothing more than the triumph of style over substance, image over talent, and mass gullibility over aesthetic authenticity. In such a reading, Bennie would indeed end up a sad sell-out, his final hurrah a nostalgic über-disaster and cautionary tale against the foolishness of holding too tightly onto the past. It would also make Egan a nostalgic futurist of the degenerative variety, an atavist of those artists glossed in earlier discussions—like Pat Cadigan and Jonathan Lethem—a writer whose sense of cultural loss is so great she laments the past as a Rubicon crossed, a past that should have been but was not seized when the time was right. In such a view, Egan, too, would be ringing the alarm bells of loss to show us as Eurydice dancing on a nest of vipers, poised to descend all too willingly into hell.

Judging by her tone, Egan enjoys flirting with these more strident anti-media diatribes, but the character of Alex serves as a narrative distancing mechanism to buffer the heavy-handed messages that may complicate a reading of the final chapter and the text as a whole. His nostalgic disposition filters his glimpse of the future to fit a more

Adornoesque model of reification through media devices rather than the more expressive potentials Bennie uses to his advantage. Bennie, the older and wiser entertainment worker, has let go of the calcified notion of authenticity that used to plague him, arguing that the music business is no longer solely "about *music*. It's about reach" (312). He has wedded his belief in the power of music to include the media networks through which those exhibitions can be more effectively realized.

The hybridization of past music and new media, for Egan, serves as the productive combination that brings redemption—an Orphic retrieval and recontextualization uniting the best aspects of old and new. It is not only Scotty and his audience who emerge as renewed versions of themselves through remediation. Bennie's promotion of the concert re-establishes his career as a taste-maker after a period of decline in which the industry saw him as "irrelevant" (312). Sasha adapts her tendencies toward kleptomania and hoarding into more productive practice—collaging odd family items into a commemorative art of "found objects" (265). Sasha's daughter Allison, as you recall, uses PowerPoint to remediate the classic rock pauses as a way to help "Linc" the family members, young and old, closer together. And Jules remediates Bosco's suicide tour through print, leading both men to eventual success, with Jules publishing a book about the experience, *Conduits: A Rock-and-Roll Suicide*, and Bosco surviving the tour and retiring in peace after buying "a dairy farm" (257). Both music and media are "conduits" to the past that become more productive when combined and redirected. The character of Scotty, who acts as a direct musical channel redirected through media, most clearly embodies the promise of redemption. But to clarify the role of her Orpheus, she

aligns Scotty with both the Judeo-Christian overlay of Jesus—through a vision of the Sacred Heart (105)—and Perceval's purity in the Grail and Fisher King tales—symbolized in his gift of a fish to the then-impotent Bennie (100)—two allusions that further indicate his narrative function of restoration, healing, and rejuvenation.

Nearly all Egan's main characters, both male and female, experience the rejuvenating benefits of what I've dubbed "generative nostalgia" related to reworkings of the musical past: the cupped ear harkening backwards in the present, eyes set on the future. What Egan stages is not a one-dimensional replay of the music past, but an iteratively transformed and repositioned dialogue pitched in the key of hope—an imaginary moment of Boym's "past perfect" whose performance reminds us of not only the losses of past cultural value but also the ongoing possibility of their retrieval and recontextualization for the future. The satirically-rendered dystopian city of the future New York, Egan suggests, will not come to pass as long as memory and its affects persist. Even in a world atomized by media ubiquity, a reinjection of Orphic musicality into the network provides the necessary pathos to unite the social body and keep the worst aspects of the corporate world in check. Her remediated Orpheus thus provides the emblem for a future founded upon greater harmony of the past and present, as well as a concert-going live presence balanced with virtual experience. In other words, redemption from the present world awaits, and if we look to the past and heed the words of Bennie, "we have some history together that hasn't happened yet" (311).

Orphic Desire and Megatextual Composition in Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue*

Towards the end of Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2012), the dysfunctional heroes and soon-to-be-erstwhile used record store owners, Archy Stallings and Nat Jaffe, find themselves in the dark, musty Oakland basement of their recently-deceased bandmate, friend, and customer, Cochise Jones. Stacked like crates of forgotten treasure and preserved in cardboard to stave off the ambient dust of the underworld, Cochise's stash of classic LPs offers a glimpse of hope for the two men in a time of desperation—the potential to rejuvenate their business through an act of Orphic retrieval:

> [They] had descended like Orpheus to this basement full of forgotten music, dressed in…funeral suit[s], hoping to bring Brokeland Records back to the upper world, the land of the living, with a vibrant infusion of collectible stock, stock that they would catch the scent of as far away as Japan. (346)

The collection poses the central and long-avoided question to the proprietors: Should they seize this opportunity with the hope of changing their fortunes?; Or should they cut their losses, move on, and leave the value of the great sonic archive behind?

Either road into the future seems equally perilous for these men. The cultural and consumer treasure chest of the Cochise collection, for one thing, cannot be simply raided carte blanche. There is the matter of the man's executor and the scheduled sale of all property for the benefit of the next of kin, and buying the records would thus add to their already substantial debts. Their aptly-named Brokeland Records, situated on Telegraph Avenue between Oakland and Berkley, has fallen on hard times, with declining foot

traffic and rising costs of rent—even with friend-price discounts from their landlord. Choosing to double down on a failed business model seems an act of foolish desperation. But the alternative seems just as frightening—two married men and fathers in their mid-forties finding new careers to support their families.

Like Jennifer Egan, Chabon uses musical culture and the myth of Orpheus to dramatize the changing social and economic climate of global capitalism in the neoliberal era and the struggles of ordinary people to adapt to its realities. In the process, Chabon poses similar questions to those in Egan's *Goon Squad*: What is the value of the musical past? To what degree is nostalgia a positive force for individuals and society? What role does musical media play in memory and identity? And what social and economic changes accompany the evolution of media dominants?

Chabon suggests the answers to such questions through a narrative that interweaves the Orphic myth with the pop cultural megatext—fashioning, in a formal sense, a book from the junkyard of Americana, with a sprawling swap meet of allusions to not only funk and soul records but also film, television, playing cards and sundry ephemera. If Egan signals a nostalgic musical theme through Proustian epigraphs, a punk rock imaginary, and a formal framework that suggests the shuffled nature of memory, Chabon stiches the theme line by line into the novel's warp and woof, threading the colorful stuff of nostalgia into the crewelwork of his prose. Take, for example, the following commentary, which juxtaposes thoughts on classic Star Trek lore with the hormonal vagaries of pregnancy:

> Steeled by a lifetime of training in the arts of repression, like Spock battling the septenary mating madness of the *pon farr*, Gwen had resisted the urges and surges of estrogen and progesterone for each of the first thirty-four weeks of her pregnancy, denying all cravings, battened down tight against hormonal gusts. (44)

Such allusive Easter eggs abound in the narrative, with nary a page unworked with Chabon's megatextual embroidery. Though such stylistic ornamentation can be seen in much of the writer's oeuvre, I'd like to suggest its role in *Telegraph Avenue* transcends the merely stylistic and contributes another level to the novel's commentary on the uses of nostalgia.

A meta-commentary on the possibilities of retro culture and media, for example, appears during the scene where Nat's son Jules meets Archy's estranged son Titus while participating in a summer community enrichment series at the Berkeley Southside Senior Center entitled "Sampling as Revenge: Source and Allusion in *Kill Bill*" (93). The set-up offers a number of fruitful juxtapositions that plug into the larger consideration of cultural nostalgia: the generational interface of young and old; the dialogue of white (Jules) and black (Titus); the appreciation of art to create new knowledge; and the technique of allusion to create new art from the past. Much like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* fashions a new narrative from the genre materials of the past—with many scenes "quoting" or recreating iconic shots from, say, classic Shaw Brothers kung-fu cinema—Chabon's narrative gets told through a loving amalgamation of musical media riffs and pop cultural quips.

The recycling of cultural capital on display in the book's style—and indeed, in the book's content, given Brokeland's role as a cultural resaler— must be seen within the context of an economic paradigm no longer favoring mom-and-pop shops. Chabon represents the changing capitalist marketplace and its effects on American small business owners like Archy and Nat through the character of Gibson "G Bad" Goode, a "former All-Pro quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, president and chairman of Dogpile Recordings, Dogpile Films, head of the Goode Foundation, and the fifth richest black man in America" (11). The former champ's wildly successful post-sports business ventures have grown into a considerable multimedia empire of his own, and his next project—the Dogpile "Thang," a multilevel megastore with bargain prices to be built in the vicinity of Brokeland—threatens to put Nat and Archy out of business for good.

Though Chabon flirts with the easy narrative dichotomy between "good" small businesses and "bad" big corporations, he works more nuance into the character of G Bad than the character's moniker might suggest. In fact, Chabon makes it a point to show the mogul has more noble ambitions for the Dogpile Thang beyond the profit motive:

> Goode's pockets were deep, and his imperial longings were married to a sense of social purpose; the main idea of a Thang was not to make money but to restore, at a stroke, the commercial heart of a black neighborhood cut out during the glory days of freeway construction in California. Unstated during the press conference, though inferable from the way things worked at the L.A. Thang, were the intentions of the media store not only to sell CDs at a deep discount but also to carry a full selection of

> used and rare merchandise, such as vintage vinyl recordings of jazz, funk, blues, and soul. (11)

Though Chabon historicizes pervasive urban blight and the creeping death of small businesses as inevitable concomitants to e-commerce and megacorporate monopolies, he also takes care to represent G Bad as a figurehead for market-based philanthropy and urban renewal—a logic akin to the Derridean *pharmakon*, where the poison can also be the cure.

Chabon also stages a humanizing exchange between Archy and G Bad, with the latter inviting the former to lunch aboard the Dogpile blimp, a chat that reveals the two men—born in the same hospital and sharing many of the same cultural touchstones—have a great deal in common (224). The scene—written with jackdaw panache and bursting with Chabon's own brand of nostalgia—culminates with G Bad offering Archy a salaried position as the Thang's lead archivist and community educator:

> "I am building a monastery, if you like," Goode said, warming up, "for the practice of vinyl kung fu. And I am asking you to come be my abbot. And, yeah," with the enigmatic half-smile, "that does make me the Buddha, but don't go too far down that analogy, 'cause, check it out, now I'm a bend it a little. What I am asking you to do, to be— Look here, did you ever read this book, Taku over there turned me on to it, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*?" (229)

From the mouth of Nat and Archy's supposed corporate enemy comes the most succinct argument in the novel about the perils and obligations of retro musical preservation—all

couched by way of juxtaposition to Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s 1960 post-nuclear holocaust tale of a precarious monastery of intellectual archivists. I quote at length:

> The world of black music has undergone in many ways a kind of apocalypse, you follow me? You look at the landscape of the black idiom in music now, it is *post-apocalyptic*. Jumbled-up mess of broken pieces. Shards and samples. Gangsters running in tribes. That is no disrespect to the music of the past two decades. Taken on its own terms. I love it. I *love* it. Life without Nas, without the first Slum Village album, without, shit, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*? Can't imagine it. Can't even imagine. And I'm not saying, just because we got sampling, we got no innovation happening. Black music is innovation. At the same time, we got a continuity to the traditions, even in the latest hip-hop joint. Signifying, playing the dozens. Church music, the blues, if you wanna look hard. But face it, I mean, a lot has been lost. A whole lot. Ellington, Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder, Curtis Mayfield, we got nobody of that caliber even hinted at in black music nowadays, I'm talking about genius, *composers*, know what I'm saying? Quincy Jones. Charles Stepney. Weldon *Irvine*. Shit, knowing how to play the fuck out of your *instrument*. Guitar, saxophone, bass, drums, we used to *own* those motherfuckers. Trumpet! We were the landlords, white players had to *rent* that shit from us. Now, black kid halfway to a genius comes along? Like RZA? Can't even play a motherfucking kazoo. Can't do nothing but 'quote.' (230)

G Bad, as much as Nat and Archy, feels a sense of loss for the great black musical past and hopes to use his store as an archival time capsule and re-education center to thwart the effects of what he sees as a Milleresque "Deluge of Flame"—a contemporary ignorance that imperils the future of a once-great culture now beset by "Record Companies.…MTV.…Corporate radio.…Crack cocaine.…Budget cuts to music programs, [and] high school bands" (230). His offer thus represents a chance for Archy to not only gain financial security but also revivify the spirit of his own flagging venture to build a "church of vinyl" (211), a chance to use his knowledge of the past as a meaningful building block for the future:

> All's we got is a lot of broken pieces. And you been picking those pieces up, and dusting them off, and keeping them all nice and clean, and that's commendable. Truly. What I'm offering you is a chance not just to hang them up on the wall of your museum, there, maybe sell one every now and then for some white dentist or tax attorney to take home and hang on his wall. I'm offering you, I'm saying, come on, let's really put them out there where the *kids* are, where the future's spending its money. Teach them. Explain what all those broken-up old pieces mean, why it's all *important*. Then maybe one of those kids, maybe he's going to come along, learn what you have to teach, and start to put things back together. (231)

Much like the elder Bennie Salazar in Egan's *Goon Squad*, G Bad's cultural nostalgia weds an impulse to retro musical aesthetics to contemporary market realities—addressing

the "reach" factor (Egan 312) by circulating old culture through new media and consumer channels to go "where the *kids* are, where the future's spending its money" (231).

The dialogue between rich white connoisseurship and black cultural disengagement explicit in G Bad's monologue appears in many places within *Telegraph Avenue* and complicates the issue of cultural preservation on the behalf of "the kids." One of Brokeland's most consistent customers, for example, is Mike "Moby" Oberstein, a stereotypically unstylish Jewish lawyer with a "a three-hundred-dollar-a-month" vinyl habit, and whose consistently awkward affectation of an ersatz-jive vernacular—including gems like "straight-up bangin"—suggests his investment in the black musical past buys him street-cred talismans of a black imaginary as much as the usual aesthetic pleasures (31). Another example appears in the subplot concerning Archy's wife, Gwen, who works as a home-birth midwife, but struggles to reconcile her desire to bring back those traditional practices within the black community and the reality that rich new-age whites comprise the sole clientele. After a tense scene of a home-birth turned hospital emergency, she encounters a young, Kool-smoking pregnant black woman who responds to Gwen's identification as a midwife with a dismissal hard for her to ignore any longer: "'See, now,' she told her companion, "don't want to be messing with that country shit'" (68).

Both Archy and Gwen must face the realities of their careers unalloyed, stripped of the cushioning, but untenable, illusions of personal nostalgia. For Archy, the failed dream of Brokeland is only part of the obstacle he must overcome. For one, he must contend with his own sense of loyalty and the guilty feeling he is "stepping out" on his

partner by flirting with G Bad (226). His reluctance to accept G Bad's offer also takes the form of a complicated mix of class-based distrust and the more personal sense of nostalgic loss-in-progress for the good-time feelings he once associated with Nat, Brokeland, and the old neighborhood:

> stoned and cross-legged, they fell through the circular portals of Nat's record collection, one after another, flat-out tumbled awestruck arm in arm like that team of chrononaut dwarfs in *Time Bandits*, through those magic wormholes in the fabric of reality. Archy was so impressed by the scope and detail but most of all by the passion—relentless, nettlesome, ecstatic, inspiring—of Nat's knowledge when it came to music, "in all its many riches," from Storyville whorehouse rags to South Bronx block-party sound-system battles. It had been a long time since Archy had seen a man so willing to betray himself by exuberance, by enthusiasm for things that could not be killed, fucked, or fed upon. (228-229)

Ironically, though Nat and Archy stubbornly rebel against G Bad's more successful entrepreneurship, they themselves wish more than anything to hold on to their own dreams of it. Their reluctance to sell the business in the face of certain financial ruin—even if the Dogpile venture doesn't receive it required permits—can be seen as a stubborn strain of American individualism and underdog spirit.

In the end, the main characters must make peace with the past to move forward. Gwen chooses medical school with the eventual goal of "reach[ing] out to a black woman while she's having a baby," a decision that preserves her community-oriented midwife

sensibilities while embracing the larger customer demand for Western medicine (404-405). Archy, having lost his sense that Brokeland constitutes serving as "guardians of some ancient greatness that must never be tainted or altered" (34), lets go of Brokeland and preserves a semblance of entrepreneurship as a real estate agent (459).

But another iteration of Brokeland survives through a hybrid fix, wedding the passion of Nat to new media solutions, embracing entrepreneurial tools and e-commerce strategies to target a world wide web of connoisseurs willing to pay high-ticket prices for a prime stock of collectibles: "'You [will] have customers,' Archy said. 'All over the world. Every time zone, some Samoan, Madagascar motherfucker, hitting you up for a five-thousand-dollar original pressing of Blue Note 1568, deep groove, mono'" (459). Much like Egan revalorizes the live concert performance through its interplay with social media, Chabon stages the rejuvenation of the independent record shop through its hybridization with the digital platforms of e-commerce.

Through the *deus ex machina* of permit problems, the Dogpile Thang does not get built in Oakland, leaving the neighborhood even more blighted than at the novel's opening. The racial tensions of G Bad's monologue, in a sense, only deepen—as the notable black/white duos all split by the novel's end. Archy and Nat dissolve their business partnership; Gwen leaves Aviva's midwife service; and Jules and Titus, who share a brief, but physical, homoerotic friendship, end the novel in separate circles, meeting only in the virtual world of online videogames with the handles "Dezire and Black Answer" (464). These latter pseudonyms are nothing if not allegorical. I sense that for Chabon, the musical and pop-cultural past provides a virtual language network,

through which black and white affects and histories can circulate and hybridize—an antiphonic call and response through bygone media. The younger generation represented by Jules and Titus, share both an enthusiasm for the pop-cultural past and the new media technologies that allow a shared expression or performance of it. The problems of black and white cannot be solved through these media alone, Chabon implies, but the exchange itself—and the media structures that make affordances for it—allow fleeting, shared moments of cultural understanding. Brokeland, as an emblem of the remediated musical-cultural past, represents the next important iteration of that dialogue, with its web-based LP shop curator as a cultural Orpheus poised to retrieve and respin the interracial, intergenerational records of sharing.

"Orphic B[l]end": Sankofic Retrieval and Hybridity in Mackey's *Bass Cathedral*

Nathaniel Mackey's 2008 epistolary novel *Bass Cathedral* is the fourth in an ongoing series of jazz-themed meditations on the nature of black performance, history, and epistemology entitled *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Taking the form of a dialogue in letters between the professional jazz trumpet and sax player of the Molima m'Atet who goes by "N," and the "Angel of Dust," who writes the group's liner notes, *Bass Cathedral* limits the reader's access to N's side of the exchange, expressing in formal terms both a theme of absence and an exploration of how the interplay between writing and music can fill myriad cultural gaps. As Mackey blurs the lines between poetry and prose, realism and fantasy, history and myth, European and African, music and writing, the novel revels in a formal hybridity—one whose method,

even more so than in Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue*, signals a retrieval and intervention into the past.

Much as with Egan and Chabon's work, little scholarship as yet forms the scholarly discussion about Mackey's novel; as with Chabon, the MLA database turns up no peer-reviewed articles about his work. Perceptive book reviews of *Bass Cathedral* do exist, however, as do a handful of articles about previous titles in the *Broken Bottles* series. David Hadju's review of the novel for *The New York Times* usefully contextualizes the book within a history of "jazz literature," in whose artistic ranks he includes Harlem Renaissance giants like Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer; modernist masters like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin; as well as later Beat luminaries like Amiri Baraka and Jack Kerouac (Hadju). But his establishment of such a legacy also clouds Hadju's assessment of the work as "performance done for the glory of performing," a "writing as jazz" whose extemporaneous improvisations offer a "satisfaction…of the moment" (Hadju). Though such an assessment justly luxuriates in the textures of Mackey's language, its over-emphasis on form over content tacitly reduces the book to a presentist exercise in aesthetic virtuosity. Scholarly commentaries on Mackey tend to do more justice to the series, with perceptive articles considering the use of a musical aesthetic to suggest "words and music [can] become interchangeable" (Mullen 39), thereby liberating "the established forms of expression" (Allen 218) to the point of destabilizing "the very notion of an authoritative version of culture and of narrative" (Allen 207). Indeed, much has been made of the mystical role of music in Mackey's work, with either Sufism (Burge) or a gnostic shamanism (Finkelstein)

combining with Judeo-Christian traditions to revalorize forgotten histories of sound, whose performative remembrance addresses "The fact that in the present we can envision neither a Utopian future nor an Unfallen past" (Finkelstein 44).

Building from these insights, I'd like to argue in this section that Mackey's virtuosic play with language aims for a novel hybridity of mediated expression-in-progress that affords at once the immersive moment of "musical" improv while at the same time evoking a theme of heterogeneous convergences—both temporal, with trialogues of past, present, and "future" cultures; and epistemological, with western cultural histories enmeshed in alternate worldviews. To realize this project, Mackey focuses on the concepts of hybridity and recontextualization, using the Molima m"Atet's new album "Orphic Bend" as the focal point of a multi-temporal, multicultural mash up, with the western myth of Orpheus in dialogue with the traditional Ghanaian concept of the Sankofa (see fig. 3.1)—two icons of retrieval whose combination suggests the benefits of a cultural/historical blend.

Figure 3.1. The Sankofa bird. Image archived at berea.edu.

The Sankofa concept, put simply, originates within the folklore of Ghana, with the Asante Adinkra peoples representing the Sankofa as a mythical bird that flies forward with its head turned backward, holding in its beak the seed of the past to grow the future. Sparked in large measure by *Sankofa* (1993), a film by the Ethiopian-born and UCLA-

trained Haile Gerima, African American film scholarship has since incorporated the Sankofa concept into its analytical toolkit for global black cinema, offering a handful of academic titles in the film's wake to interrogate the role of cinema in diasporic historiography.[3] Since its debut, the influence of Gerima's film on African American intellectual culture has been profound, as is evidenced by the many dance/theatre troupes, shows and festivals now inspired by the Sankofa concept;[4] the explosion of university-based black student unions taking inspiration from it,[5] and even pedagogical methodologies drawing from the concept (McAdoo). It is therefore curious, to judge by the MLA database, that so little discussion of the term extends into American literary studies, past or present.

It is the work of this section on Mackey's novel to address this oversight and explore his cross-cultural extrapolations of an Orphic/Sankofic model of American literature. Merging African and Greek myths, voodoo spiritualism, black musical performance and western print culture, Mackey's novel provides a perfect opportunity to explore a hybrid cultural blend—one that in the context of this dissertation's larger consideration of post-1960s American musical nostalgia raises the interesting question of a post-diasporic, post-pan-African cultural diffusion of non-western discourses into the American consciousness writ large.

The Sankofa concept as presented by Mackey, it should be noted, differs markedly from that of Gerima. Opening with the juxtaposition of a black American high-fashion cover model—in blonde wig and posing for a white cameraman upon the beaches of the Gold Coast—with an elder African figure in kente cloth holding a Sankofa-tipped

walking staff—Gerima's *Sankofa* presents itself as a historical corrective to a black consciousness tainted by integration with Western thought. Its project concerns a retrieval of black Atlantic slave trade histories as well as a call to diasporic black peoples re-establish a connection to African origins. Mackey's evocation of the Sankofa concept is both more subtle and more focused on the hybrid possibilities of cultural exchange—braiding through his art multiple cultural references and histories into a new, syncretic form that draws from the past but defies neat allegories of it.

In his "Preface" to *Splay Anthem*, which won the National Book Award for Poetry, Mackey outlines an "echoic" and musical model of history that offers insight into his Orphic/Sankofic project in *Bass Cathedral*:

> Earlier moments can be said to die and live on as echo and rearticulation, riff and recontextualization, alteration and reconception. The song of the Andoumboulou is one of burial and rebirth, *mu* momentary utterance extended into on-going myth, an impulse toward signature, self-elaboration, finding and losing itself....Revisitation suggests that what was and, by extension, what is might be otherwise. (xiii)

Much as in the projects of Egan and Chabon, Mackey delves into a sonic cultural underground not necessarily to rebuild the past, but to draw from, understand, and transform it. Seeking a self-utterance and a hybrid model of art to suggest "what might be otherwise" through a Boymian "past perfect," Mackey spelunks the caves of culture, mythology, and abstruse rites—evoking as often the dream state as the anthropologist's log.

Part of his poetic project is recuperative on behalf of "the dead who have not yet been properly laid to rest by their surviving kin, those for whom the required rites have not yet been performed, the required altars not yet built, the attendant libations not yet poured" (Mackey *Splay Anthem* xiv). He addresses "not only debts to history or the dead or the past, a neglect of history or the dead or the past, but other non-observances only an alteration of mind might set right," suggesting an art that equally appeals "to the living dead wanting to awake" (*Splay Anthem* xiv). Thus Mackey's work aims for a radical refashioning of the past and the self, an interventionist "poetics [that] posits poetry and music as quintessentially elegiac but also restorative," enabling a backward-looking crab-walk into the future, an "advance no matter how pained or ungainly" (Mackey *Splay Anthem* xvi).

As the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris argues in his "Preface" to *Bass Cathedral*, Mackey's novel attempts to stabilize the one-sided cultural histories that tend to disproportionately valorize the West:

> [He] gives us a vision to retrieve essentials in music and art that have been so suppressed in their variety—by an undeviating order or value—they are virtually lost or sent into exile.
>
> In retrieving, or bringing them back, we face a complicated focus on the nature of originality which is open to vulnerabilities across the spectrum of humanity, to incompletion where least seen, and to a potential wholeness to be derived from the creativity of all cultures—unlike classic

> fixtures—in breaking themselves from the one-sided triumphs of a hierarchy of history looming large still. (xi).

Harris's keen ear distinguishes the political dimensions of "listening" backward—a sonic retrieval whose goal is the destabilization of cultural hierarchies for the benefit of all peoples and for the sake of moving inward and onward through the global archives of the long-forgotten and the actively-suppressed.

Throughout *Bass Cathedral*, Mackey fashions this powerful message through what I'm calling an Orphic Blend—a globally-inflected synthesis of Orphic and Sankofic retrievals. Though the epistolary novel destabilizes a traditional plot arc, it loosely concerns the release and live performance of the Molima m'Atet's new album, *Orphic Bend*. In his missives to Angel of Dust, N. recounts how playing the test-pressing of the LP instantiates a series of surreal space-time disturbances, with messages from the past appearing in the form of visible word "B'loons" out of the record player during the track "Dream Thief" (3). These spontaneous Orphic irruptions at first connect with the past of Aunt Nancy, the bass player, as she senses the "ghost of [her] father," whose messages "see deep into the past and present" (6) to create a kind of "time-lapse revision" (6). Mackey then blends this more Orphic allusion with the desire for Sankofic flight, riffing on how "Leverage and levity share roots in the sky" (7). From there, Mackey's Aunt Nancy then muses on "a pedigree among the stars," a state of mind that leads the N. to recall an anecdote about Sun Ra's "space lift" and the musician's "angled flight from flat abidance" (7). Through the Orphic caves of subterranean memory, then upward into

Sankofic flight, Mackey's allusive blend of musical retrieval charts a course into a future in "interstellar space" (7).

The hybridization of Orphic and Sankofic allusions also appear during the band's live performance of "Dream Thief." As Aunt Nancy makes "a cave of herself" during her bass solo, she becomes at once an underworld traveler into the past and a "unitarian house of sound" (10), through which the other band members can enter as "antiphonal kin," metaphorically tapping upon "a séance table" to raise "a ghost or…poltergeist" through their Orphic performance (11). As the channeled spirit takes hold of the group, the sax player, Lambert, begins a dance in a "stereotypic sleepwalker's pose though his eyes remained open" (13) while turning in a backwardswalking circle" (13). When N. joins the dance, he recalls his "raised elbows felt like wings" poised for "lift off" and set to "fly backwards" (15). Mackey thus morphs the Orphic allusion of the cave-based communion with the dead into the Sankofic spirit to bring elements of the past into the future. Indeed, as the band leaves the venue, the memory of their performance lives on in the crowd, as an audience member stops them to exclaim "Yeah! 'Dream Thief'!" while mimicking the backward dance (16).

Written with a jazz aesthetic—with an avant-garde spirit of difficulty commensurate with rewards, with odd time signatures that thwart a steady pulse, with a recognizable "head" refrain and recurrent motifs, with solo virtuosity taking lines of flight and discovering new connections, with inevitable returns and reiteration—the book doesn't so much "arrive" as suggest an ongoing performance. It stirs up the dust of jazz LPs and even chokes on it, with Mackey comparing the haunts of the past to the curse of

the "*ihamba* tooth"—a kind of *pharmakon* used by Ndembu shaman's to fight fire with fire and brook truces with the souls of the dead. Mackey's jazz aesthetic relies upon multiple cultural pasts to create a new expression, with long scenes about the customization of saxophone mouthpieces allegorizing the desire to rework classic instruments and redirect the archives of jazz.

I can't help but feel, as I read through Mackey's pages upon pages of lyrical rendering of live jazz, that he, too, performs a sepulchral rite of renewal for a moribund art form. Conjuring the mythic, cosmic, and historical overtones of its extemporaneous creation, he at once affirms the future-directed self-fashioning at the heart of the American mythos and at the same time the transcultural passages of the black Atlantic, the sparking frayed connections with the past. *Bass Cathedral* echoes a lament for a past that should have been and sings a paean to a hybrid future that still could be.

Conclusion

All three of these authors—Egan, Chabon, and Mackey—draw from musical cultures of the past by invoking the spirit of Orpheus. Their projects, broadly speaking, concern the synthesis of old and new in order to intervene into problematic cultural milieux, with the thrust of their interventions suggesting a necessary embrace of change, growth, and hybridity rather than a static reversal of time or indulgence in untenable nostalgias. Through the politics and affects of sound, these contemporary authors perform what I've dubbed a generative nostlagia, with Egan and Chabon suggesting the potential afforded by new media technologies and Mackey, much like Hughes and Reed, dredging

the world's analog archives to honor and remediate the jazz idiom in print. Through their narratives, each builds a kind of secular ritual of sonic retrieval, with Mackey digging the foundations of the "first antiphonal church of thump-inflected strum" (10), Egan implying a rite of sacrament through Scotty's music, and Chabon rendering the LP shop as a modern-day Church of Vinyl.

If Hughes could be said to pioneer a postmodern aesthetic aiming for a musical—rather than purely visual—synthesis that could work towards what I dubbed in Chapter One "a speculative sonic cartography" of an alternative postmodern global order, it seems appropriate to conclude that this new crop of authors—Egan, Chabon, and Mackey—continues that map-making project through the liminal border crossings of sound, myth, media, and history. Each writer in his or her own way plucks the mind-strings of musical nostalgia to suggest hybrid pathways to a revolutionary future. Through Orphic memory search, and in part their own nostalgic energies, they retrieve and remediate both personal and cultural affects for music and its technoculture—bringing echoes of a forgotten future back up from the underworld.

In the next chapter, I analyze the first decade of the 2000s, turning to Shane Carruth's postmodern time-travel film, *Primer* (2004), as a case study for how nostalgic desire for a post-war middle-class ideal manifests within the uses of MP3-based musical media. The film's thematization of aural digital media, I argue, performs the conditions of neoliberalism at the levels of production, mediation, and reception—raising questions about the mediated constraints of both desire and resistance.

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Notes

[1] Marcuse purposely conflates Narcissus and Orpheus to make a point about non-normative pathways, or what he calls the embrace of "The Great Refusal," a negation of the existing order through art that "transforms being" via song and contemplation (171).

[2] See Julavitz for Egan's interview describing her method of writing the individual tales and amalgamating them into one coherent and interlocking narrative world, a technique inspired in part by the square-gridded micro/macro paintings of Chuck Close.

[3] See, for example, Sandra M. Grayson's *Symbolizing the Past: reading Sankofa, Daughters of the dust, & Eve's bayou as histories* (2000); Mark Reed's *Black Lenses, Black Voices*: *African American film now* (2005); Wheeler Winston Dixon's "The Practice of Theory, the Theory of Practice: The Post-Colonial Cinema of Maureen Blackwood and the Sankofa Collective" (1995); Sylvie Kandé's "Look Homeward, Angel: Maroons and Mulattos in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*" (1998); I. P. Ukpokodu's "African Heritage from the Lenses of African-American Theatre and Film" (2002); and Danette DiMarco's "Rehistoricizing the Past through Film: Considering the Possibilities of Haile Gerima's Sankofa" (2004).

[4] For a small sampling, consider the following theatre and dance troupes, festivals, and shows: Sankofa Theatre Company (Modesto, CA); SanKofa Theatre Company (Chicago, IL); Sankofa Dance Theatre (Baltimore, MD); the Annual Sankofa Theatre Festival (Rochester, NY); Sankofa Theatre: A Maafa Experience (Seattle, WA); Sankofa: "Evolution" (Williams College / Williamstown, MA); Sankofa Dance Theatre (Petersburg, VA); The Sankofa Trilogy (Toronto, CN); Sankofa Drum and Dance

Ensemble (SUNY / Brockport, NY); Sankofa Kuumba Cultural Arts Consortium (Hartford, CT); Sankofa Film Series (Detroit, MI); Sankofa Achievement Center (Nashville, TN); Sankofa Theatre (Dallas, TX); Annual Sankofa Awards (San Diego, CA); and the Pan-Afrikan Sankofa theatre (Oregon State University / Corvallis, OR).

[5] For a very brief sampling, the Sankofa concept can be found in the names, facilities, mission statements, or event titles of the following black student unions: UC Riverside ("Sankofa Alumni"); UC Berkley; Harvard University Business School; Yale University ("Sankofa54"); Cornell Univeristy ("Sankofa Welcome Event"); University of San Diego ("Sankofa: Change from Within"); University of Illinois, Springfield ("Sankofa"); DePaul University ("Sankofa Student Formation Program"); Monroe Community College ("Engaging Sankofa Speaker Series"); SUNY Oswego ("Sankofa Harambee"); Hobart and William Smith Colleges ("Sankofa"); Michigan State University ("Sankofa Graduate Association"); Gettysburg College; University of New Haven; Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis ("Sankofa Room"); Lawrence University ("Sankofa House")—and the list goes on.

Chapter Four

Xenochrony: Aural Media and Neoliberal Time in Shane Carruth's *Primer*

Abstract: Shane Carruth's time-tripping, paradox-filled debut film, *Primer*, evokes the affective conditions of neoliberal time not only through its characters' precarious work life and dreams of get-rich-quick tech entrepreneurship but also through their invention of a time machine that they hope will change their fortunes and enable them to live the equivalent of a nostalgic postwar middle-class American dream. Throughout, Abe and Aaron's use of the machine gets juxtaposed to the use of aural media storage and playback technologies, which suggests a curious, "xenochronic" timeclash at the junctures of sonic posthumanism, neoliberal subjectivity, and vestigial postwar ideology.

"How many times would it take for him to get it right—three, four, twenty?" Toward the end of Shane Carruth's time-tripping, paradox-filled debut film, *Primer*, the main characters Abe and Aaron skulk through yet another iteration of party they have lived through before and whose events and outcomes—for reasons opaque to the audience—they hope to synchronize. Each with a lone earbud draping down, the right side (Abe) and left side (Aaron) split like a stereo signal from the digital audio device in each of their pockets, they replay a guide track they've recorded from a previous "take." Pantomiming responses and re-mouthing trivia as if trapped in a surreal nightmare, each man stays alert within the frame while the words of Aaron, in an extra-diegetic voice-over, inform us that he's "decided to believe that only one more [take] would've done it." What the audience sees and hears, in other words, does not represent the desired synchronicity.

Critical frameworks for understanding postmodern SF in the neoliberal era should not rely solely upon the ocularcentric epistemologies of Jameson, Hutcheon, McHale, and Harvey for analytical heuristics, as their visual-cultural biases cause them to overlook the importance of aural technoculture as a means for sounding the depths of late capitalist

culture. Current critical narratives of postmodern time travel—most recently in books by Elana Gomel and David Wittenberg—grow out of and thus inherit similarly visualist frameworks for the theorization of time and its representation in literature and film. For postmodern SF critics, in other words, culture should be seen and not heard. But what happens when we de-emphasize the visual and place sound at the center of a model of contemporary SF? It is high time to expand the critical sensorium, tune into alternative wavelengths of postmodern SF production, and record its heretofore hidden dimensions through the framework of sound studies.

By sound studies, I mean the scholarship of aural media and sound culture, like that of Jonathan Sterne, who has both championed the need to historicize sonic technoculture and called for a reassessment of post-Enlightenment reason as an "Ensoniment"—a social and philosophical history of thought from an aural, rather than a visual, perspective (*Audible* 2). Sterne's work centers on the various cultural assemblages whose coalescence served to underwrite the production and reception of modern aural technologies. Through these developments, he traces the dissemination of an "audile technique" from its theorization and practice within medical stethoscope auscultation to its adoption by professional telegraphers and ultimate public adaptations through the telephone, phonograph, and radio (Sterne *Audible* 174). Rather than exalting the impact narratives of these devices and their concomitants, Sterne stresses the shared cultural origins of sound practice, arguing that, "Rather than 'revolutionizing' hearing, sound-reproduction technologies would expand on and further disseminate constructs of listening based on audile technique" (*Audible* 174). According to Sterne, the legacies of

this sea-change in sound practice are still with us, as "Even today, when listeners in a music library treat the surface noise of an LP record or the hiss of a tape as "exterior" to the music on the recording, they use some of the same techniques of listening that physicians and telegraphers developed over 150 years ago" (*Audible* 24).

Though Sterne's project centers on the modern-era developments and legacies of audile technique, he concludes—albeit cautiously—by leaving open the possibility of a "postmodern" evolution of audile technique in response to new regimes of digitality (*Audible* 338). My project extrapolates from and augments these insights by bringing a sound studies apparatus to bear upon Carruth's mind-bending postmodern[1] time-travel film, wherein a portable aural media recording and playback device both allegorizes and critiques the lived temporal experience of the neoliberal era. More specifically, *Primer* suggests a postmodern form of audile technique—one animated by a desire to unify postwar middle class expectations with the disappointing realities of neoliberal outcomes. This more interactive technique of audition and/or sound manipulation serves as a means for navigating, and offering some semblance of control over, the contingent realities of neoliberal subjecthood. This essay's opening figure of the sound-mediated replay of scenes to "get them right" emerges as a microcosm of desire for sonic synchronicity that can be seen in the diegetic character action, the audience reception, and even the film's production. The desire for "xenochrony"—the synchronicity of alien or strange temporal dominants—not only drives postmodern audile technique but also evokes the fundamental time-clash at the junctures of sonic posthumanism, neoliberal subjectivity, and vestigial postwar ideology.

Primer follows the story of Abe and Aaron, two thirty-something middle-class engineers as they struggle against the force of a time narrative threatening to overpower them. It is made quite clear in the scenes centered on their primary place of employment that these two—though perhaps young by postwar temporal standards—are rapidly approaching the tail end of a career in tech design that now considers forty years of age as the threshold of worker obsolescence. The oft-repeated refrain heard at their workplace is "You know what happens to engineers after forty? They take them out and shoot them," a constant and anxiety-inducing reminder of Abe and Aaron's economic vulnerability in a new regime of temporal expectations. To cope with their looming desuetude, Abe and Aaron come home from work only to continue working in their garage (and kitchens) nights and weekends with two other men in an effort to launch a successful venture of their own. The film opens with a scene of the four men sitting around a table, stuffing JTAG cards into envelopes to fulfill orders from their most recent mail order scheme, and bickering about their 80-hour work weeks (which consist of 50 hours at the office, 30 in the garage). Though they've tried to produce and market various specialty consumer electronic products, one thing is clear: none of their ideas has yielded a return to justify the effort and time. As the film opens, in other words, the plight of these characters—and the impetus for creating the time machine itself—should first and foremost be understood within the context of the amplified time demands and economic pressures on the neoliberal worker.

Replacing the earlier designations of "Late Capitalism," and the "Regime of Flexible Accumulation" popularized, respectively, by Jameson and Harvey, the term

"neoliberalism" has come to signify a range of social, political, and economic shifts in global culture and labor relations since the 1970s. At its core, it represents a turn away from the Keynesian "fiscal" policies often associated in the US with New Deal-era "big government," social programs, welfare safety nets, and high tax rates for the wealthy. Neoliberalism conversely privileges a "monetary" economics focused on controlling inflation, keeping taxes low, and keeping government—especially its social programs—as "small" as possible. As an economic philosophy, neoliberalism privileges the "free," or unregulated, global exchange of goods and services, which in practice has led to more fluid international trade and tariff agreements, a tax structure more favorable to large multinationals, a 30-year increase in worker productivity, and unprecedented corporate profits. According to economists Robert Reich and Richard D. Wolff, however, the story for the lower and middle classes during this shift has been markedly different, as the concomitant effect of neoliberal policy has not, by and large, included a surge in prosperity and security, but rather a greater and greater sense of precarity stemming from the realities of outsourced labor, eroding unions, increased competition and stagnant wage structures (*Capitalism*).

But "It is not *just* that wages are stagnating," Reich emphasizes. The holistic economic consequences of Neoliberal policies on the average American have been far more destabilizing:

> when you take into consideration…the rising cost of rents or homes; [the] dramatically increasing costs of health care; the rising costs of child care; and also the rising costs of higher education, [all] rising much faster than

> inflation…you find that …. middle-class families, often with two wage earners, [are] working harder and harder and harder—and getting nowhere. (*Inequality*)

Carruth's *Primer* registers the dilating neoliberal precarity of a formerly-"protected" professional class—a shifting up of economic susceptibility into what Giorgio Agamben calls the "new planetary petty bourgeoisie" (qtd. in Berlant 192). The film also evokes the temporal shift toward what David Harvey has famously dubbed a "Time-space compression"—a condition under which accelerated data streams and global capital flows result in intensified demands on worker productivity, setting up greater competition amongst U.S. postwar and neoliberal narratives of normative time: family time, work time, leisure time, quality time, time for retirement, and the time horizon of the American Dream, among others. This gulf between postwar middle class narratives of the good life and their growing untenability has led to what Laruen Berlant describes in *Cruel Optimism* as a cultural impasse, from which subjects caught within "a present in extended crisis" struggle to reconcile narratives and adjust to new material conditions (7). Living in what Berlant calls the breach between post-War fantasies and neoliberal realities, the middle class has resorted to coping mechanisms that can be mapped—as Hardt and Negri suggest in *Empire*—through displaced, as-yet-inchoate strategies of affective investment (294).

Primer, as you will see, offers a surreal and estranging glimpse into the affective conditions of a neoliberal time crisis, as Abe and Aaron struggle to weave the fraying strands of multiple timelines into some familiarly-patterned narrative of a "normal life."

Even more interestingly, *Primer* presents the characters' attempted process of temporal reconciliation not through techniques legible in terms of postmodern visuality, but through strategies of aurality—practices of listening to, recording, and arranging sound. Throughout the film, Abe and Aaron resort to a sonic navigational strategy in an attempt to both master and perfect time, as well as synchronize its unwieldy variations.

Partially an effect of analeptic editing and an out-of-sequence unveiling of plot, the film itself produces the estranging effects of temporal anomalies, both sonic and visual, rendering any plot description or character analysis provisional and ambiguous. Though *Primer* militates against any fixed record of events and fundamentally destabilizes our understanding of character (i.e. is this Aaron 1, 2, or 3?)—an effect which, in itself, evokes the uncertainty of neoliberal subjectivity—a rough sketch of the main action allows this analysis to move forward. At first, Abe and Aaron's use of the time machine[2] seems a novel and relatively manageable solution to their financial problems—a simple matter of arranging to spend the hours of coexistence with their doubles far enough away to physically avoid temporal entanglements and who-knows-what kind of time loops and paradoxes. By paying attention to fluctuations in stock prices they use time travel to game the neoliberal system--"taking something from their surroundings," according to the voice-over refrain, "and making it into something more" (*Primer*). This theme of gaming and gambling appears throughout and underscores the precariousness and chance-taking of neoliberal existence, as well as the frightening costs of meddling with time—a motif evidenced by Abe's last name of Terger, a backwards spelling of regret. The causes for regret become more apparent as implementation of Abe

and Aaron's use of the time machine result in unintended consequences in the timeline as they "break symmetry", beginning to disturb the original timeline—at first in small ways with seemingly minor temporal disturbances, as with things like answering a cell phone call that should have, ostensibly, been answered by their double. Their use of the time machine, however, begins a process that only accelerates over the course of the film, whereby changes in an original timeline create so-called "recursive variations"—a temporal chaos that Abe and Aaron can no longer control or anticipate. The two seem to have a falling out over the proper uses of the machine around the time a double of Thomas Granger, one of their potential investors appears seemingly out of nowhere, confronts them, and then falls into a comatose state. This disturbing encounter prompts both Abe and Aaron to use a secreted failsafe machine (there's two of them we find out) to allow them to travel backward far enough to "reset" the timeline and obviate the damage they have caused. This process requires Abe and Aaron, however, to drug and subdue previous versions of themselves whose goals no longer align—a surreal evocation of neoliberal time-clash and the process of what many theorists have called the privatized blame of neoliberal subjecthood. By the films end, the audience seems to see Abe and Aaron supplanted by doppelgängers—even dreimalgängers—of their own creation, their temporal doubles now living the lives they would have lived—the lives of family members, the lives of a middle-class suburban existence. Radically estranged and alienated from their former lives—with their friendship in tatters—without access to passports for travel, without the ability to explain to family members what has happened, these characters emerge as shadows of their former selves, on the outside of a postwar

narrative of possibility that has left them behind. The explosion and duplication of neoliberal timelines in this sense becomes quite literally rendered, as towards the final scenes we see what appears to be a second Abe haunting the periphery of a former life and a second of three coexisting Aarons, each seemingly pursuing different goals. In other words, *Primer* offers a powerfully surreal affective portrait of neoliberal subjects in extended crisis and temporal dislocation.

Digital aural media recording and playback technology constitutes both the vessel of Abe and Aaron's affective desire for temporal synchronization and the means by which they attempt to realize it through their postmodern audile technique. To return to the opening scene, when Abe and Aaron embroil themselves in the meticulous business of stopping an incident at the party involving a gunman, we learn that they have employed portable sound recording and playback devices—MP3 players and a laptop computer interface—in order to re-create the scene as many as twenty times. Here and throughout, *Primer*'s time travelers emerge as nothing less than multitrack recording performers and sound engineers: they listen to the 3-second pre-roll of previous takes, punch in with an alternate performance, and fix the mix of their time-stream composition. In short, they act as temporal "producers," employing a technique of xenochrony—a neologism first coined by composer, recording engineer, and musician Frank Zappa to describe one of his pioneering techniques of studio recording.

Xenochrony in Zappa's parlance encompasses the process of blending foreign or "alien" sound streams, often ones in alternate time signatures and/or different keys, some recorded live, others within the studio. Zappa's album *Joe's Garage*, for example,

features guitar solo tracks recorded live in one context and then spliced into another track as the solo for a completely different song. The best example of this, in my humble opinion, can be heard on the guitar solo for "On the Bus," which was initially recorded as a live improvisation for the markedly different song "Inca Roads" (Watson). Though it remains unclear if Zappa deliberately imported the technique from literary sources, much crossover can be seen between William Burroughs' techniques of folding in and cutting up, through which a randomization of phrases might yield fortuitous and often bizarre sentences—a novel method of experimental writing that reflects, according to N. Katherine Hayles, the rise of audio tape technologies in the Fifties:

> Books and bodies have a long tradition of being imaged in terms of each other. For certain texts after 1950, the body became a tape recorder. When voice, historically linked with presence and therefore with the immanence of the body, was displaced onto tape, the body metonymically participated in the transformations voice underwent in this medium. If voice could be transported through time and spliced in with different sounds, the body-as-tape-recorder could also undergo time delay and mutation. (79)

If Burroughs' use of analog audio-tape epistemologies served to usefully expand the possibilities of queer postwar subjectivity and provide new strategies for becoming expressive within his socio-temporal constraints, the mediated time travels of *Primer*'s protagonists more clearly evoke a traumatic mutation of their lives and bodies as they batter against the boundaries of neoliberal time. As Jacques Attali suggests in *Noise,* "Every code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the

same time produces them" (19). The further Abe and Aaron's digital aural media praxis positions them as coded, bioinformatic sound, the more they succumb to the logics and limits of neoliberal time.

For my purposes, then, postmodern audile technique is xenochronic, as it describes the desire to align and synchronize "strange" or "alien" temporalities—the fussy, unsynchronized takes within the multitrack temporal composition Abe and Aaron work to produce. Their project, moreover, allegorizes a larger cultural desire for xenochronicity between postwar narratives and neoliberal milieus. The productive xenochronic randomness of Burroughs and Zappa emerges in the context of *Primer*, however, as an overwhelming stressor, as Abe and Aaron find themselves further and further behind the ball of their Sisyphusean effort to flatten out asynchronous temporal variations and manage the narrative expectations of everyday existence.

With its use of montage and pacing, the film swiftly drags the audience into a state of confusion akin to those of the characters, who seem increasingly tangled in a skein of audible time whose strands they can no longer manage. The film's temporal chaos and narrative confusion emerges from a deliberate technique in *Primer*, with Carruth explaining in an early interview that "Abe and Aaron's experience [is] inherently complicated so it needed to be that way in order for the audience to be where Abe and Aaron are, which was always my hope" (Murray 2). Postmodern theorists most readily explain such filmic effects in visual terms, as does David Harvey in his analysis of *Blade Runner*'s reflection of its time: "Within limits...the mimetic qualities of cinema of this sort are extraordinarily revealing....[These films] hold up to us, as in a mirror, many of

the essential features of the condition of postmodernity" (323). Though I agree wholeheartedly with the thrust of this analysis—and presume that such a cultural studies view of the revelatory social-political function of contemporary cinema has become more or less naturalized and uncontroversial—I don't believe the critical metaphor of the mirror functions adequately enough to make audible the nuances of sonic reception and neoliberal time in *Primer*. To achieve that, we'll need to de-emphasize the visual and further emphasize the film's evocation of xenochronic aural media streams.

Recent sound studies work by Veit Erlmann helps contextualize the theoretical shift away from the visual and suggest the benefits of contemporary aural analysis. In "The String and the Mirror," the introductory section of *Reason and Resonance*, Erlmann takes up the gauntlet thrown down by Sterne, who suggests in *The Audible Past* that a revision of our philosophical histories is in order—one that rethinks the foundational visuality perceived to be inherent to the Enlightenment project in terms of a neglected epistemology of sound. Erlmann's version of the Sternean "Ensoniment" begins with an anecdote about Denis Diderot, whose musings in the 1769 *Entretien entre d'Alembert et Diderot* compares the sympathetic resonance of musical instrument strings to the work of the engaged philosopher who "listens to himself in silence and darkness" (qtd. in Erlmann 9). For Erlmann, this assertion instantiates a "scandalous" otological alternative to the visual paradigms of René Descartes and John Locke, both of whom envision the "philosopher as someone who deliberates and ponders in cool detachment, who searches for the truth by completely withdrawing from the world…whose intellect seems to be akin to a mirror," and whose thoughts are understood "as reflection" (9). Reason, in such

a view, opposes resonance, as the latter suggests the conjunction of subject and object and "entails adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the boundary between perceiver and perceived" (10).

Though Erlmann's project traces the modern-era convergence of reason and resonance within the discourses of philosophy and otology, his work nonetheless provides a framework for extrapolation into the neoliberal aurality of *Primer* along the vector of posthuman subjectivity. If resonance models the collapse of Cartesian binaries, sound may rightly serve as the lingua franca of posthuman expression. Thus, Abe and Aaron's use of the time machine could be seen as an aural media strategy to transcend the limits of a neoliberal time stream, a way to re-establish the adjacency and resonance of earlier postwar American realities within the contemporary moment.

Listen, for instance, as Abe recalls his first experiences and sensations inside the time machine:

> I was breathing a lot differently than I was when I was testing it on the outside. Eventually, I settled down, and...I don't know, maybe, maybe it was the Dramamine kicking in, but I remember this moment in there, in the dark with the reverberation of the machine. It was maybe the most content I've ever been. (Primer)

After an initial "static shock" upon entrance, Abe recalls his feelings of resonance in the machine—and perhaps *with* the machine—with a cast of lyricism that suggests a proximity to some kind of personal transcendence. By entering into the machinic space that Carruth juxtaposes with aural media recording and playback technology, Aaron and

Abe transform themselves into coded sound streams manipulable enough to allow more expressivity within their temporal composition. For critics like Kodwo Eshun, Abe and Aaron's aural media praxis might evoke the trajectory of contemporary sonic desire, with an embrace of musical media accompanying the emergence of a networked ontology plugged into and thus defined in terms of the world's sound streams:

> You are willingly mutated by intimate machines, abducted by audio into the populations of your bodies. Sound machines throw you onto the shores of the skin you're in. The hypersensual cyborg experiences herself as a galaxy of audiotactile sensations….You are the newest mutants incubated in womb-speakers. (00-001)

Eshun's ecstatic model of subjectivity holds that "Sonically speaking, the posthuman era is not one of disembodiment but the exact reverse: it's a *hyperembodiment*" via aural media technologies (00-002). At first glance, Abe's experience within the time machine seems to correspond to Eshun's paradigm, as his relaxation into the machine's reverberation could be seen as an embrace of a newly productive posthuman role as a sonic producer, born from an aural media womb and connected with a reworkable fabric of phonologic reality. But rather than achieving this theorized "hyperembodiment," Abe and Aaron undergo an estranging, multi-disembodied fragmentation and decay, as evidenced by both their unplanned duplication and the negative physical effects of their multi-tracked existence.

The production of digital multitrack compositions, like the ones Abe and Aaron attempt, creates enormous data files that only became portable (especially in the early

2000s, when *Primer* was filmed) through compression like that of the MP3 format, a data-encoding platform of so-called "lossy compression" that sacrifices fidelity (Sterne *MP3)*. As Abe and Aaron make dozens of trips in the time machine, they too become subject to a "lossy compression" of a kind, losing physical faculties like their ability to write with their dominant hands or experiencing unexplainable bleeding from an ear. In other words, as I've suggested throughout, *Primer*'s characters emerge—despite their affective investment in aural media strategies—as diminished copies of their former selves,[3] workers whose own labor threatens them with surreal version of neoliberal "redundancy." Their use of aural media to regain mastery over an overwhelming neoliberal time could be seen as a tragically paradoxical effort to reintegrate with a lost postwar American dream cloaked as Benjaminian aura—an "originary" plateau of middle-class expectancy. Their bioinformatic "tempaurality" warps and fractures their subjectivities and bodies, whose entelechies approach disintegration with each duplication of the sound/time stream.

Rather than achieving the pristine originary recording of their lives for which they struggle—a sonic primer, if you will—Abe and Aaron enact the digital equivalent of Alvin Lucier's "I am sitting in a room,"[4] an *avant garde* aural media demonstration of a physical space's structural acoustics and formant resonance. In the piece, Lucier reads a short script into a room microphone, which records his voice and then simultaneously plays it back into the room via speaker, where it rerecords, loops, and continually rerecords until the original script undergoes various transformations of fidelity and legibility—morphing as a sonic signifier from human speech in a room to human speech

under water; from aquatic steel drums to low-fi whale song; from the softened squeal of desk chairs to an Aeolian harp; and from a pulsing ambient feedback to an utterly alien drone (Lucier). The accretion of loops over time degrades and decays any trace of the instantiating voice and leaves only the mediated acoustical properties of the room itself.

A similar sonic logic sounds out within *Primer,* with Abe and Aaron's decaying time-loop composition slowly revealing, iteration by iteration, the figurative containing frequencies and structure into which they fragment and disappear: the "room" of neoliberal time. Beyond the curiously estranged aural-metaphorical representation of Harvey's "time-space compression," then, *Primer* stages a recursive technological determinism aligned with a desire for ideological reparation—a strategic aural media fix that both highlights the impossible demands of neoliberalism and the failed material cultures of listening sought to ameliorate them. The sound of neoliberalism, according to *Primer*, might amount to this: lying supine, alone in a "coffin,"[5] a mechanical drone the only solace for the death of the American dream.

Though the film's inherent indeterminacy deflects any unified reading of the characters, one possible way to interpret their actions is as competitive and solitary, aspects that might best be seen as outgrowths of the kind of problematic posthuman expression Sherryl Vint cautions against in *Bodies of Tomorrow:*

> The concept of the [liberal] subject as owning himself and owing nothing to society for this self or its capacities is evidence of a profound individualism that marks many versions of the posthuman. This emphasis

> on individualism and isolation evacuates our model of a society from any ethical sense of intersubjectivity and collectivity (13).

Though resonance implies the *possibility* of social adjacency and communal resonance, *Primer*'s characters prove that such a model of subjectivity need not be progressive. As I argue below, one reading of their postmodern audile technique could be its reproduction of the neoliberal logics they hope to elude.

The experimental novelist and digital media maven Steve Tomasula once wrote that "Criticism always asks, 'Why does representation take this form?' and the answer is always a palindrome that can be read from art to artist and back" (337). But I'm always most interested in a cultural studies criticism that pushes beyond the epiphenomenal reading—the identification of work of art as a mere outgrowth of prevailing social relations and material conditions, rather than some more dynamic force within them. I think *Primer*, in its final scene, affords a reading much more closely identified with the latter. There the dialectical play of critique and interpellation, art and entertainment, resonate with the sympathetic fervor of Erlmann's strings.

Primer concludes with a scene in an undisclosed francophone location with one of the possibly three co-existing Aarons giving instruction to a work crew via interpreter inside a large, empty warehouse building. True to the film's larger aesthetic, the ending remains ambiguous, giving little information to go on beyond the assumption that Aaron seems on the verge of experimenting with a larger time machine. Has he "sold out"—either to a revolutionary force, Thomas Granger, another venture capitalist, or even himself? Quite possibly what we are left with is a person no longer fighting neoliberal

temporality, but embracing and enacting it as a fully entrepreneurial subject, the neoliberal *par excellence*. After passing through the fire of his neoliberal trials, perhaps this copy of Aaron has persevered long enough and fought hard enough to finally fund a successful technological entrepreneurship of his own, emerging as not only a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps American Dreamer but also the neoliberal boss—scaling up production with an industrial-sized time machine venture, complete with a contingent, outsourced labor force of his own.

Whatever air of finality does emerge from its arrangement within the film's sjuzhet, such an ending should not be trusted as sequentially final or evidence of a "solvable" narrative. Fittingly, it is through the soundtrack, specifically the film's use of voice-over narration, that the audience experiences some semblance of coherence and resolution. From the film's beginning, Carruth employs voice-over narration, which sets the tone of the film's theme of aural media and presents it as a sound recording among so many others within the film. The sound of the voice-over throughout corresponds to a telephonic monologue whose message in the final scene echoes the materiality of digital sound storage:

> Now I have repaid any debt I may have owed you. You know all that I know. My voice is the only proof that you will have of the truth of any of this. I might have written a letter with my signature, but my handwriting is not what it used to be. Maybe you've had the presence of mind to record this. That's your prerogative. You will not be contacted by me again. And if you look...you will not find me. (*Primer*)

By juxtaposing the Aaron of the final scene and the recorded telephone message, the voice-over baits the audience into the gamesmanship Abe and Aaron have engaged in throughout, using sound to bring temporal unity to a neoliberal time out of joint. As the ambiguously-situated and indeterminate voice track teases, "If you *look*, you will not find me," because in the end, the characters emerge as mere variations of sound, forcing the audience to rely on sonic traces for the task of xenochronic sense-making (Emphasis mine).

The use of voiceover narration in cinema, according to Sarah Kozloff, receives criticism for the indelicate "telling," rather than showing of narrative, with the technique garnering the industry reputation as "the last resort of the incompetent" (12, 21). But film sound theorists like Michael Chion argue the many ways the technique might produce a powerful dramatic effect that proactively plays with what he calls the inherent "vococentrism" of filmic reception (5). The audiovisual aesthetics of cinematic narrative, in his view, privilege the voice above all other auditory input, such as foley effects or film score. What this means is that "*the human voice structures the sonic space that contains it,*" especially in cases of voiceover narration, where the inherent disjuncture between the voice and the implied-but-absent-body might serve to impose or heighten various emotional effects (5). Chion dubs the unseen source of the bodiless voice the *acousmêtre*, which may exert dramatic powers upon the audience, such as feelings of authority, omnipresence, omniscience, among other borderline supernatural attributions (24). This "special being" equates to "a kind of talking and acting shadow" that unsettles the audience, who craves the moment of unmasking or unveiling to diffuse narrative

anxieties through the audiovisual reunification of the voice and body (Chion 21). This process of defragmentation forms part of a de-acousmatization process, through which "the acousmêtre has only to show itself—for the person speaking to inscribe his or her body inside the frame, in the visual field—for it to lose its power, omniscience, and (obviously) ubiquity" (27). The "unmasked" acousmêtre, forced into the light of the mortal realm, thus receives a downgrade in prestige and mystery as their image/body enters the scopic realm. Chion cites an example of this dynamic from *The Wizard of Oz*, where the previously terrifying and larger-than-life OZ communicates through an amplified vocal rig, screening his true appearance from view with an elaborate smoke-and-mirrors show. Once Dorothy peeks behind the curtain, according to his logic, she shatters the illusory facade of power by grounding the "bodiless" voice and thus rendering it impotent (28).

Primer's voiceover narration participates in a curious postmodern variation of the de-acousmatization process, though one perhaps afforded within Chion's theory, since "The cinema of each period gets the acousmêtre it deserves" (57). What makes *Primer* a postmodern variation of the audience desire to reclaim power over the bodiless voice is that no definitive, fixed body—despite Carruth's *mise-en-scène* juxtaposition of Aaron's image—can harmonize and reintegrate with the aural media sound stream of the voiceover narration. Its presence forms an unsettling sonic aporia that haunts the frame of the film, one that drives the audience mad in their attempts to fix, reintegrate, and ultimately exorcise the fragmented bodies of the audiovisual narrative.

It is precisely in the audience attempts to "master" *Primer*'s unsettling echo of bodies out of time that we can further capture some essence of the affective conditions of the neoliberal era. As Rick Altman has astutely argued:

> A proper theory of sound….will pay special attention to those very points where confusion is possible, recognizing in such moments of imprecision, indecision, or incoherence the very place where sound seizes the opportunity to take an active role in the definition and exploitation of culture (30).

The incoherent, indeterminate nature of the film's voiceover has led to legions of cult followers to puzzle out the plot in an effort to braid its "tempaural" loose ends. Indeed, a veritable cottage industry of fan-generated diagrams of the action can be found on the web, ranging from the confidently meticulous (see fig.4.1) to the comically resigned (see fig. 4.2). The *New York Times* film reviewer A.O. Scott sympathized with the latter camp when he assessed *Primer* as a clever film whose "attraction is the tantalizing belief that if you see it enough, you will finally figure it all out. I'm not sure of that. Having seen it twice from start to finish and gone back over the videotape in search of clues to its meaning, I wouldn't say that it entirely makes sense" (Scott). The audience investment[6] in fixing the narrative via the generative interactive practices of fandom participates quite directly in the very neoliberal desire for isometric reparation the film rehearses. The viewer/auditor's own desire for fabular coherence through the recorded soundtrack echoes Abe and Aaron's xenochronic aural strategies to synchronize an irreparable and cacophonous neoliberal time stream.

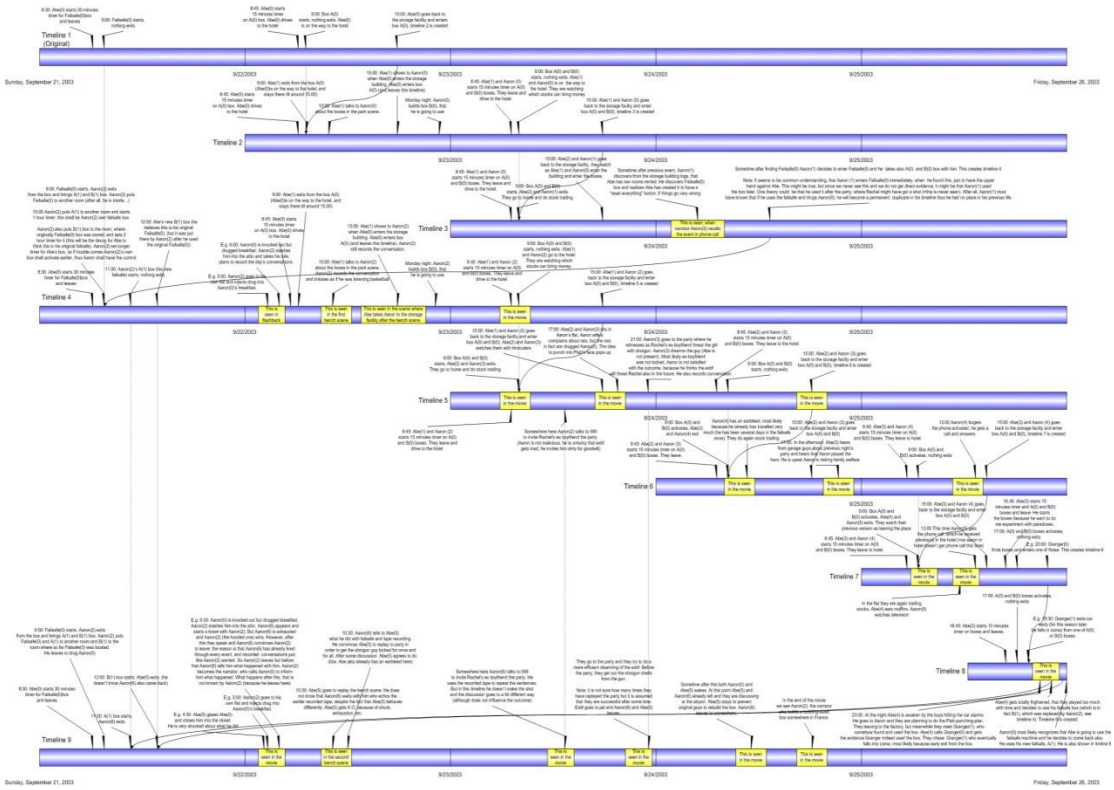

Figure 4.1. "Primer-Chart." A neurotically-detailed fan infographic of *Primer*'s plot. Image archived at www.unrealitymag.com.

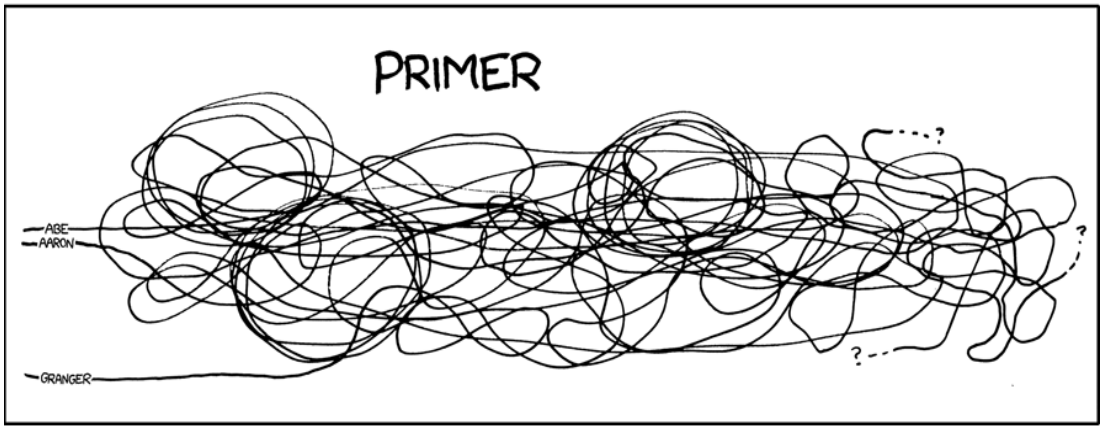

Figure 4.2. "Movie Narrative Charts. Graphic archived at: www.xkcd.com.

On the levels of diegesis and reception, in other words, the film's theme of aural media allegorizes a promise for temporal unity unfulfilled, though this logic also applies to Carruth's own DIY strategies of producing and editing the film on a total budget of $7000.

Carruth's Audiobiography

There remains a curious doubleness to the film's message that requires further analysis. On the one hand, the triumph of the film could be described as the disturbance the audience may experience at Aaron's endeavor in the final scene to reproduce the time machine on a much larger scale and with unknown outcomes—potentially jeopardizing all aspects of the story preceding it. If the audience reads the character of Aaron as the epitome of the neoliberal values of individual entrepreneurship, cut-throat competition, and success at all costs—what Carruth himself describes as a growing "proprietary" nature of the characters—the film dialectically positions us outside, looking in on the governing narratives of our time and estranging us from them (Carruth). In other words, the narrative of "success" and "mastering time" the audience may piece together through the soundtrack as a knee-jerk attempt to impose a comforting continuity may also offer—if only for a moment—a disturbing glimpse of the radical self-absorption, self-alienation, and anti-cooperative subjectivity necessary for the navigation of neoliberal temporality.

On the other hand, the final scene drips with the blood, sweat, and tears of a fantasy in which the ambitions and optimistic tenacity of Carruth himself, the then thirty-something first-time indie director, can be mapped onto the future version of Aaron,

whose time machine project 2.0 might resembles nothing so much as the sound studio of a bigger budget film to be. Beyond plot and audience dynamics, then, the film's employment of aural media to evoke the struggles and desires of the neoliberal era resonates one level deeper—or rather, one level above. *Primer*'s thematic desire for neoliberal temporal and sonic unity affords a meta-analysis through the trajectory of the film's director and production history. By comparing details of Carruth's biography and filmic method with scenes from the film, I'll argue in this section that *Primer* can be seen as a film about film—more specifically, a film about its own quiddity and process of creation—a meta-analysis of which leads to a further understanding of how *Primer* exemplifies the neoliberal-era desire for xenochrony.

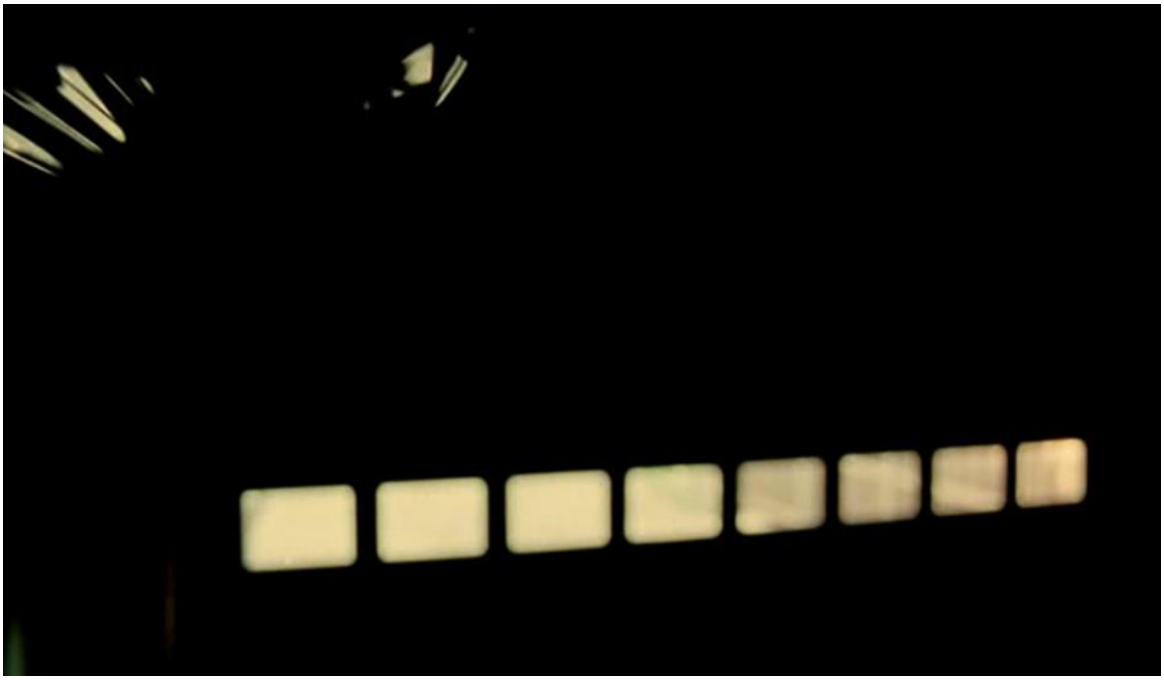

Figure 4.3. The opening shot of *Primer*, from inside the garage.

Carruth's film is clearly a film about film: a metafilm. The opening *mis-en-scène* of Aaron and the other three engineers entering the garage suggests that they—and we the audience—figuratively enter into the space of film itself, as the back-lit windows evoke a strip of illuminated film stock (see fig. 4.3). As the narrative progresses, the garage windows serve as a recurring leitmotif to not only remind the audience of the film's materiality on Super 16 film stock but also juxtapose various scenes with the creation of the time machine itself ("The Film"). Indeed, as Brooks Landon has noted about filmic narrative, "cinema itself is a kind of time machine" whose "primary special effect…is always one of time travel or time manipulation" (74, 76). The cinematic narrative, in other words, presents the passage of time sequentially or through alternate, non-chronological arrangements of temporality. A film that takes the theme of time travel thus functions in a doubled, metafictional way, serving as, to borrow Wittenberg's term, a "narrative laboratory" in which the "most basic theoretical questions about storytelling" present themselves for scrutiny (2). Of course, like Tim Burton in *Edward Scissorhands*, Carruth's visual leitmotif contributes and pays homage to a shared filmic culture of one-upmanship in terms of content-as-film metaphors.[7] In addition to this clever wink-and-a-nod film-school allusiveness, though, Carruth's technique amounts to a metafictionality inviting greater attention to the real-world correspondences between his artistic process and the finalized film.

Like his characters, Carruth launched his DIY project from his home on a shoestring budget ($7000) after failing to attract more robust funding sources (Mitchell). Like his characters, he worked a job as an engineer, but dreamt of a more entrepreneurial

existence away from the pressures of that life (Murray). Like his characters, he builds a fictional time machine through his own efforts. Like his characters, he begins scripting, directing, and micromanaging a fictive reality, performing multiple takes of the same scenes over and over with diminishing returns (Murray). Like his characters, he acts as editor, producer, sound designer, and lead actor in a perilous venture with the hopes of a brighter economic future ("The Movie"). And like his characters, he experiences a feeling of losing control of time, with the post-production and film editing extending for years (Mitchell).

The meticulous and time-consuming process of matching sounds in post-production was Carruth's "puzzle to fix" and a "nightmare" that lasted a full two years (Murray). Part of the complication stemmed from budgetary constraints on the film stock, which necessitated a precarious "first-take" approach to shooting that meant any mistakes would require a clever editing solution or sound-dubbing strategy to retain continuity or synchronization. Carruth explained in an early interview that:

> We only shot one take and not only that, we only shot the lines from any given shot that I knew I would need, with very little overlap. So, you know, there's nothing left. For the most part it works well. It's kind of pre-edited and you just edited it together the way I had planned. But when there's some kind of problem, like if I lose a shot because a mag is accidentally opened and exposed to light. Or if there's some kind of continuity error if a water bottle is on the table in one shot but not in the next it's this problem that takes days if not weeks to figure out and I'm

> scrambling around for, Was the camera accidentally on for a second? Is there extra footage somewhere? This actor's back is turned, maybe I can get him to dub the line a little bit faster. It becomes this weird puzzle and it takes forever to fix. (qtd. in Murray)

Poor on-location acoustics, guerrilla-style shooting for unauthorized venues, and cheap wireless microphones compounded such editing tasks exponentially (Carruth). The director employed sound design, sound editing, and musical composition techniques throughout, all of which helped to piece together the patchwork frames, seams be damned. But the task of dubbing vocal audio posed perhaps the prime challenge:

> probably 50% of the audio in the film had to be dubbed. We were all first-timers on this, and one of the things that I didn't pay enough attention to was getting good sound recording equipment and making sure that we were thinking about that in every scene, and so we ending up dubbing a lot of it. And so this, this basically, all you're seeing here is dubbed; you're hearing the acoustics of my apartment, basically. (Carruth)

The directors Herculean labors to synchronize the film takes with foley effects, simulated location acoustics, and overdubbed dialogue proved overwhelming. "I gave up at least three times during the two years," Carruth confided, suggesting both the insolubility of his post-production puzzle and the precarity of his social and financial situation as time wore on.[8] Most of the DVD commentary by the director, in fact, is dedicated to pointing out—painstakingly, scene by scene—the gaffs, the goofs, the inconsistencies, and the labors of figuring out how to fix the principle shooting.

As I've suggested above, a curious thematic echo of Carruth's personal and technical struggles to achieve a desired xenochrony resonates throughout *Primer's* narrative. We can read the scene this essay opened with—Abe and Aaron's twentieth iteration through the party scene, with their earbuds playing guide tracks and their meticulous work to get the scene perfect through a process of sonic editing—as a kind of microcosmic representation of Carruth's desire to impose some semblance of a professional, synchronous finality to a temporal project out of control. Aural, digital, consumer media technologies and techniques were Carruth's only way to unify the project and achieve the technical xenochrony necessary to enact his own narrative of accomplishment. The correspondences between production, reception, and diegetic action triply highlights the growing difficulties of the neoliberal-era worker/artist to conform to postwar narratives of traditional success, as well as the desire to ameliorate those circumstances through a xenochronic audile technique.

Though Carruth and his characters work to elude the confining temporality of neoliberalism, their mutually-resonant experiences nonetheless conform to a newly "flexible" model of work that, according to Richard Sennet, functions like an MP3 player:

> In the old-style corporation…production occurs via a fixed set of acts; the links in the chain are set. Again, in an MP3 player, what you hear can be programmed in any sequence. In a flexible organization, the sequence of production can be varied at will.…This is task-oriented rather than fixed-

> function labor. Linear development is replaced by a mind-set willing to jump around. (48)

In such a paradigm, the quintessential neoliberal worker emerges as an ambitious and multi-skilled jack of all trades—much like Carruth himself—who retrains and reorients to display an assortment of future potentials, rather than enhance a circumscribed mastery in the here and now (Sennet 121). Though Sennet's comparison of neoliberal shifts in the workplace to digital aural media functionality occasionally misrepresents the technical aspects of the MP3 player,[9] his analysis raises interesting questions about Carruth's film-making process and its echo within the diegesis. The correspondence implies, at the least, that the successful production of a film exposing neoliberal rationality requires the adoption of neoliberal values, workflow, and gamesmanship in order to bring it to fruition. It requires, in short, a feat of ideological xenochronicity.

Primer's genius resides not in its shiny surfaces, structural perfection, or illusion of false totality, but in its ability to make audible the socioeconomic and affective conditions of neoliberalism, as well as the growing cultural shift toward aural media epistemologies as the bulwark against them. It suggests that any "time machine" we build will both remediate, in Bolter and Grusin's use of the term, pre-existing media practices and conform to the prevailing political economy of the time before potentially altering (or estranging) them. It also evokes MP3 audition as curious means of posthuman time travel in its own right, suggesting that greater attention to the sonic within scholarship of the fantastic arts will only yield more and better theories of postmodern and posthuman SF in

contemporary culture. My hope is that this model of xenochronic listening practices—what I've dubbed postmodern audile technique—will serve as a tool to that end.

In the final "Coda" section up ahead, I consider an alternative, more generative model to that of Carruth, arguing that aural technoculture and science fictional aesthetics have been merging to set the stage for a science fictional model of the public sphere. By articulating this connection, I hope to participate in the futurological dynamics I've sketched throughout this dissertation by considering how contemporary practices of looking back to musical cultures can suggest viable alternative futures.

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Notes

[1] "Primer, as I will show, can be seen as postmodern in its adherence to Brian McHale's heuristic in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) of an "ontological" dominant—one concerned with being, world-creation and multiplicity—rather than an epistemological one—that is, one concerned with exploring a fixed, knowable world (10). Postmodern artistic techniques (like Carruth's creation of an unstable, unsolvable narrative) do not cease to exist in the neoliberal era. In fact, the term "postmodernism" as Harvey, Jameson, and Lyotard use it represents an early attempt to label the social conditions and new artistic production accompanying the post-Regan/Thatcher-era economic paradigm that would later be reconceived (or rebranded) as "neoliberalism." A Venn diagram of these terms would necessarily show more overlap than exclusion. The definition of the precise in/out boundaries of those terms has never—to my knowledge—been attempted, and addressing that larger terminological slippage or imprecision certainly falls outside the scope of my project.

[2] Time travel via Abe and Aaron's invention seems to work as follows. In the morning, the original, Abe 1, goes to the storage facility where they've set up their operation and starts the machine on a 15-minute delay, setting the time his double, Abe 2, will exit the box and allowing leeway for Abe 1 to leave the area in time to avoid any *unheimlich* encounters that could potentially disturb the original timeline. Abe 1 then goes to work as normal, checks stock fluctuations at the end of the day, and then returns in the evening to enter the machine, through which he travels travels back to the time he initially set the device and "relives" the same day—with the important distinction that once inside the

machine, Abe 1 becomes Abe 2. Upon exit from the machine, therefore, he enters into a temporal danger zone in which both the original and the double coexist on the same timeline for the period between the morning and the evening. Abe 2 thus endeavors to "take himself out of the equation" by spending time in hotel rooms and at the public library across town, where he may use the day's stock trading information to his financial advantage. After Abe 1 enters the box in the evening, he exists solely within the ambiguous time-loop of the machine, meaning only his double, Abe 2, remains within forward-moving time.

[3] Carruth's commentary track on the DVD release bears out this reading of Abe and Aaron as diminished copies: "I knew that this machine, as alluring as it was going to be and intoxicating, that is was going to have these detrimental effects, and not just the causality or paradoxical things. You know, essentially, by the end of this, these guys are just copies of copies and that, you know, that on top of...how dangerous this device might actually just be in general was going to have some wear and tear on them. And, um, the ear bleeding is, you know, of course, something that's messing with them physically, but it was almost a plot device because we see Aaron's ear bleed first. And there's really no reason to know why at that point, but by the end of it we know that...he's had more exposure to the machine than Abe has, and at the end we see Abe's ear bleeding. But the inability to write....it's that weird place between knowing something and being able to physically manifest it—that's what I wanted them to be messed [up] with" (Carruth).

[4] A big tip of the hat to Istvan Csicsery-ronay, Jr. for bringing this to my attention.

[5] Abe and Aaron refer to the boxes comprising the makeshift time machines as "coffins."

[6] See, for example, Scott Tobias' piece on why *Primer* has achieved a "cult" following of repeat viewers: "I consider myself a reasonably intelligent, attentive guy, but I've seen the film three times now, and I've barely scratched the surface in terms of piecing the story together. But I don't find that intimidating, off-putting, or unsatisfying; on the contrary, the film is more mysterious and compelling for being so resistant to easy solutions." This desire for a *solution*—a way to piece together or synchronize the film's fragmented temporalities—is at the heart of my argument that postmodern audile technique is xenochronic.

[7] Edward, in this sense, scarred by a series of cuts and alternately loved, misunderstood, and reviled, embodies Burton's view of the film as subject to violence both in the form of studio editing and audience rejection. A monster movie amalgam of both Frankenstein's monster and Freddy Krueger, Edward also serves as a loving homage to the horror cinema past.

[8] According to Carruth, "It took two years to edit and compose and loop and foley and all that. There's at least three times it really got to me when someone asks what I did for a living and I realized I didn't have a good answer. And it was just, I don't know, it was like I'm in my apartment alone all day editing this thing that I'm calling a film but it wasn't actually a film yet. So yeah, there's a couple of times where I just gave up and decided I was going to go back and get a job….That was going to be that" (Murray).

[9] Sennet, for example, conflates the optical laser functionality of a CD-ROM unit with the non-mechanical, solid-state flash storage and access of the MP3 player (51).

Coda

Digital Aurality and the Science Fictional Public Sphere

Abstract: This final section explores the sonic "science fictionalization" of the twenty-first century public and the fundamental questions concerning its emergence: How might science fictional practices of aurality challenge existing definitions of science fiction?; What role does digitality play in the new regimes of production, distribution, and consumption of science fictional aurality and its attendant technocultures?; What aspects of the public sphere are shifting in response to these desires?; and What potential for sonic resistance might emerge from portable, digital modes of science fictional listening? In answering these questions, I sketch a generatively nostalgic theory of an emerging public sphere based upon the future sounds of the past and present.

July 4th, 2014: Emergence of the 'Pod People

We are climbing Cowles Mountain, the highest peak in San Diego, to glimpse the multicolored spectacle of every fireworks display in a 50-mile radius exploding into panoramic view simultaneously, timed to the second, regular as the state. Glorious as the red, white, and blue rockets of freedom may look from this vantage, the sights and sounds of the trail-hikers from below suggest a more interesting display of public independence.

Against the ghostly haze of sulfur and ash, the Westward post-sunset glow at trailhead gives way to a fresh illumination: a city of tiny lights, hundreds of iPod and Android LEDs, like makeshift flashlights dancing in the dark—the mountain aglow with an aggregate of human, machine, network, and insect, a biomimetic luminescence of cyborg fireflies, tethered antennae and speaker-box broadcasts, descending like army ants to the cacophonous buzz of individual sound streams, *Alive!* with ambient substrates and electrified nodes, the emergence of a twenty-first century Frankenstein monster.

At the junction points of aural media technologies and everyday listening practices we can see and hear the emergence of a science fictional public sphere. The

ersatz-Deleuzian becoming-insect of the light-and-sound trail above comprises one convergence of a changing media landscape whose grid lines more and more intersect with science fictional theories of posthuman subjectivity; a growing cultural desire for science fictional sound signifiers; a defamiliarizing "Walkmanized" *flâneurie* in the era of networked soundscapes; the remediated vestiges of a global *magnitizdat* economy of exchange; and the potentials of a newly-mobile and affordable digital sound design production.

What follows should be considered prolegomena to a wider discussion about the mutating definition of science fiction in such a digital ecology—one whose affordances suggest a dilation of the term outward into the larger public consciousness but whose associations augur, too, a non-narrative and perhaps anti-generic energy. Along the way, I'll attend to the medium specificities of aural technologies within this emerging cultural matrix, as well as gloss the fraught media and cultural studies debates that animate an understanding of both the emancipatory possibilities and pitfalls of a sonic paradigm of science fiction. Lyrical rhetoric aside, the opening figures above require answers to the following question: are these Pod People or Frankensteinian creations—drones of a sonic neoliberalism,[1] avenging monsters of a market amok, or a fruitful hybrid of the two? These twinned avatars vibrate at the center of a sound-based polemic whose virtual and actual dynamism holds the power to transform the way scholars conceive of "science fiction" studies.

Jonathan Sterne, following Douglas Kahn, reminds us that there "is no *a priori* privileged group of methodologies for sound studies. Instead, sonic imaginations are

guided by an orienting curiosity, a figural practice that reaches into fields of sonic knowledge and practice and blends them with other questions, problems, fields, spaces and histories" ("Sonic Imaginations" 6). In the spirit of these thinkers, I examine the febrile but as yet under-theorized connections between the fields of sound studies and science fiction, putting the mash-up in the service of extrapolating a theory of a "science fictional" public sphere.

Sonic Science Fiction as Public Desire

In his intro to *Off the Planet*, Philip Hayward sketches a model of how audiences index novel sound signifiers as "alien" or otherworldly through the process of filmic audition (9). The science fictional aesthetic of the 1950s and 1960s partly took shape, he implies, within a matrix of Cold War invasion paranoia and sonic technocultural innovation —with new instruments like the theremin and synthesizer providing SF film scores and effects, while codifying the genre's aural semiotics (8). Building from this discussion, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. recently extrapolated from his criteria in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* to consider this dynamic of aural production and reception in terms of "sonic novums," the production of novel sounds or soundscapes in order to produce immersive filmic effects or inspire cognitive estrangement in the viewer/listener (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.). This growing industry of filmic "sound design" and its imbrication with science fictional aesthetics forms the subject of William Whittington's *Sound Design and Science Fiction*, in which he argues that George Lucas' creation of Sprocket

Systems (later renamed Skywalker Sound) in the 1970s marks a permanent amplification of these dynamics within Hollywood and the culture at large.

Lucas built from the defamiliarizing scoring and instrumentation of early genre cinema but most notably the sound montage of Jean-Luc Godard and the French New Wave, whose contributions to an SF aesthetic included deliberately non-synchronized scoring (Whittington 65) as a way to challenge, in Goddard's words, a "bourgeois aesthetic of representation" by destabilizing normative image/sound relations (qdt. in Whittington 60). Inspired by such possibilities[2], Lucas hired Ben Burtt, the sound designer for *Star Wars*, to experiment with newly-available portable recorders like the Nagra IV as well as smaller mixing boards and processors that allowed, in Burtt's words, "the creative potential of film sound to be 'rediscovered' and reinvented" (qtd. in Whittington 32). In effect, Lucas' mobile approach to sound design transformed the world of everyday sounds into a potential cabinet of curiosities, a sonic catalogue ripe for manipulation and hybrid experimentation. Pioneering analog tape techniques, for example, like slowing, speeding, blending and distorting enabled the production of "alien" or "defamiliarized" sounds unrecognizable as Earthly in origin. This novel studio-based SF sound design contributed to a growing postwar consumer hi-fi and transistor market enabling new listening experiences, which in turn drove demand for technological development and produced an iterative "ripple effect on culture and society" (Whittington 6).

The increasing public desire for alien and futuristic sonic novae has been a primary ripple effect, driven in part by the very logics of novelty, estrangement, and

exhaustion. Rebecca Leydon suggests, for instance, that "music's defamiliarizing function" in filmic reception functions commensurately with its sonic freshness ("Hooked" 31). Though "The earliest couplings of electronic sounds and cinematic images consistently involved the uncanny and the alien" due to their unknown, acousmatic, and essentially non-referential nature ("Forbidden" 64), such sounds could quickly grow "stale" or more readily fixed in their associations—as was the case with the atonal scoring practices of Arnold Schoenberg and the novelty of the theremin, both of whose estranging powers depleted with overuse and became token sonic signifiers of, respectively, mental calamity and a whiz-bang retrofuturism ("Forbidden" 64). Thus, the desired genre-based aesthetic effects of wonder and estrangement associated with SF media like cinema rely in large part on the production and exhibition of novel sounds. Leydon's suggested logic of sonic exhaustion and innovation, however, could use a qualification. I'd like to that the designation of "new" sounds must include the postmodern reworking or recontextualizing of previously "exhausted" sounds, in effect positioning the sonic megatext for perpetual recycling, recombination, and rejuvenation.

As Hollywood has continued to follow Lucas' lead in activating a science fictional listenership, a public desire for sonic novae has both destabilized the primacy of the image in cinema (Whittington 195) and spilled outward into more and more diverse aspects of everyday experience. An undeniable cultural affect for all things science fictional now spans the increasingly transmedia forms of non- or quasi-literary genre production, like cinema, videogames, albums and mobile applications, but perhaps less widely understood or acknowledged is that alien sound signifiers and future sounds form

a core column of that larger media architecture now restructuring and defamiliarizing the experiences of everyday publicity.

A Republic of Science Fictional Sound Designers

Though "Portability and mobility were essential to developing a new lexicon of film sound" in the seventies (Whittington 32), the vistas of that creative technological revolution were limited to sound professionals due to the cost.[3] In his final chapter, however, Whittington considers the more recent technological trajectory in which sound design experiences supposedly transcend their insular industry contexts and move into the home:

> sound design has found a way into our daily lives through home theater systems, new consumer formats such as DVD, as well as new media forms designed for PCs, Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo, among others. In these new contexts, sound design is once again undergoing a retrofit in terms of its application and meaning.…[with] audiences …encouraged to take on greater agency in terms of sound reproduction, deployment, and even sound literacy in the installation and use of these technologies. (223)

Though attempting to account for the interactivity afforded by such new digital technology, Whittington still largely conceives of these innovations in terms of consumption and appreciation, tacitly attributing the creative work of sound design production to those under the aegis of corporate branding. His musing about the potential of videogames to exploit user mp3 files or microphone input to personalize in-game

experiences (239) similarly overlooks the mode of player-as-producer in favor of a corporatized weak interactivity that, at its most extreme, celebrates the digital surveillance trajectories of home entertainment.

To be fair, of course, hindsight is 20/20, and what changed since the publication of Whittington's book in 2007 has been the same-year release of the iPhone and its application market, which placed digital sound design capabilities in the pockets of millions, helping to defamiliarize the public sphere in ways a studio-centered production never could. In terms of recording, the device's technical affordances, coupled with its consumer ubiquity, affordability, and booming third-party application development market, augur a more robust, interactive aural public in which listeners become capable of not only a discerning, individual reception but also a more active and creative production of science fictional sound streams.

Sound design and manipulation apps like Propellerhead's Figure and Thor, based on the more powerful studio suite Reason, serve as engines for the creation of alien soundscapes, synthetic sound generators whose products have no earthly, organic referent and whose reception evokes a "far out" sense of novelty and wonder. Working largely by combinable algorithms, Figure's deceptively simple interface yields on its own a welter of potential sonic novae, but when combined via Audiobus with the Thor synthesizer, a user-recorded input signal, and/or the host of inexpensive DJ apps, samplers, and sound effects, an amazing variety of new timbres and combinations is possible. While limited by the constraints of operating systems, mobile storage, and software algorithms,

powerful mobile sound design capabilities are injecting more dynamism into the previously top-down production and distribution models of future-sounds.

This is a revolutionary development. In many ways, the technology available within the iPhone equipped with Garageband software, an input adapter, and a third-party microphone—let alone the apps above—surpasses the sound recording and editing possibilities of most complete professional studios from decades past, all while obviating the "fetishized" aura (Meintjes), elite privilege, cost-prohibitiveness, insularity and professional connotations of the studio space. Though it should be noted that professional studios are still vastly more powerful in processing power, storage capacity, sound isolation, and overall functionality, never before has such power to capture, shape, and share sounds—especially novel, alien or futuristic sounds—been in the hands of the everyday consumer.

As our sound discourse further aligns with a model of "music as special effect…[and] as bodily and mental sensation of musical textures" associated with "post-rock electronic dance and DJ culture at the expense of…verbal meaning," it seems appropriate to address the non-narrative character of sonic novae (Zuberi 92). As Pawel Frelik has recently argued in relation to genre-based videogames, "science-fictionality does not need to reside in the strength of a plot-driven narrative" (229). Indeed, an overweening adherence to narrative models fails to account for the strengths and medium specificities of aural media, namely their interactivity, portability, non-visuality, and performativity.

A non-narrative aesthetic of sonic science fiction may also open a new vector of tactical media resistance, though one in which "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real" (Raley 27). With an aural public driven by science fictional affects and aesthetics, it seems possible to potentially achieve both: a future-sound utopian imaginary brought into being and enacted through embodied performance by the everyday citizen. Though early sonic futurists like Edward Bellamy are probably rolling in their graves[4] over the amateur sound design revolution, I'd like to leave open the possibility they may also be rocking.

What distinguishes science-fictional publicity from other modes of megatextual engagement—whether literary, gamic, filmic (or perhaps even filk-ic)—is its more direct importation of anamorphic effects out of the exhibition spaces of the printed page, the computer screen, the theater, or the genre convention, and into the world of everyday experiences. While the mobile digital revolution has certainly carried most genre forms and aesthetics quite literally into new territory, only science fictional listening practices directly engage the actual world and estrange the experience of the public sphere itself.

Defamiliarizing Flânerie in the Era of Networked Audition

The city is built to music, therefore never built at all, and therefore built forever.
– Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*

The growing public desire for sonic novae in cinematic forms and their production through portable digital sound design and listening technologies coincides with a host of streaming music services that also serve as viral carriers of a science

fictional aesthetic—sonically defamiliarizing the look, feel, and sound of the public sphere. As Brandon LaBelle, Michael Bull, and Shuhei Hosokawa have argued, a new kind of hermetic interiority marks the headphone-based public listening practices associated with a post-Walkman public, with mp3 players, iPods, laptops, tablets, wearables, and all-in-one devices like the iPhone affording a new aesthetic strategy to "create an all-enveloping wall of sound through which the user looks" (Bull 198-199)—an aesthetic that, since its debut in the eighties, has prompted both posthuman and anti-democratic anxieties (Hosokawa 104).[5]

This curious new digital aurality can be seen as a latter-day remediation of the Habermasian public sphere of the seventeenth century, whose print-based exchange of ideas gave rise to new reading practices and social relationships which later led to the Modern-era aesthetic practices of the flâneur and flâneuse, the bourgeois strollers of the urban arcade whose tactics of scanning and collecting served "as compensatory strategies to ward off the shock of urban anomie" (Berlant 8). In many ways, such tactics responded to and mimicked the distinctly visual technologies of the camera, the nickelodeon, and the "silent" cinema, with their construction of the fragmented subjectivity scholars often associate with Modern art practices and aesthetics. "All new media," according to Lisa Gitelman's analysis of the cultural impact of Edison's phonograph, "emerge into and help to reconstruct publics and public life, and…this in turn has broad implications for the operation of public memory, its mode and substance" ("The Phonograph's" 264).

Thus it makes sense that a new model of flânerie should accompany the influx of contemporary aural technoculture and its newly-emergent modes of listening within the

public sphere, especially as Lauren Berlant, following Nigel Thrift, believes the Modern-era tactics no longer serve to ameliorate the condition of contemporary public life, as the collective sensorium has simply adapted and evolved (8).

Critical attempts to navigate a new technocultural dynamics of digital listening tend to founder on the rocks of either romantic projection (LaBelle) or disingenuous departure from the legacy of the flâneur (Michael Bull). Bull's attempt to make a clean break from the Modernist-era visual epistemology, for example, seems to exhibit a willful blindness to the actual data samples he presents as proof. He polls iPod users and presents their testimonies of sound-mediated public experience, offering them as evidence that a fragmented camera snapshot subjectivity has given way to a post-Modern kind of iPod flow:

> Visual descriptions of the city often resemble the snapshot—the fragmentary distillation of urban life as if through the aperture of a camera (Benjamin 1973). IPod culture by contrast, concerns the seamless joining together of experience in a flow, unifying the complex, contradictory and contingent nature of the world beyond the user. (198)

For these reasons, Bull argues that flânerie serves as "an inappropriate concept for understanding the audio-visual world of the contemporary iPod user" (198). But such a negation of contemporary remediation ignores Bull's own evidence from iPod users, which overwhelmingly stresses the *cinematic* aspects of their audio-visual adventures—suggesting both a Modernist cinematic aesthetic with the important additions of greater control and customizability of the soundscape. Instead of jettisoning the concept of

flânerie altogether, therefore, it seems more appropriate to frame mobile headphone-based aurality—the flânerie of the 'Pod People—as a newly-remediated urban experience, an extension of earlier practices of publicity.

But this formulation alone cannot entirely dodge or negate the Frankfurt School critiques of cinematic subjectivity. Given that the bourgeois nature of flânerie corresponds at least in part to a cinematic subject whose gaze upon the other allows vicarious experiences of exotic fantasy projection while serving to master and distance the scopic object, a problem arises for the democratic and multi-embodied potentials of new listening technology. Bull's user testimonials of iPod Flânerie seem only to intensify the distancing impulses between the subjects, places, and others, giving the iPod user, in Bull's words, "an illusion of omnipotence" as they "re-spatialize urban experience through a process of solipsistic aestheticisation" whereby they become "preoccupied with their own mood and orientation rather than the spaces they pass through"(199). In addition, the iPod flâneur's experience of floating observation and cinematic identification attests to an intensification of the contemporary identification with and desire to inhabit the hegemonic imaginary spaces of the cinematic culture industry. We might ask whether the iPod experience for many amounts to much more than a mobile daydream of stardom and pop narrative fulfillment—the very nightmare of reification presaged by Adorno and Kracauer.

If nothing else, the mania for over-sized retro headphones like Beats By Dre seems to provide a ready example of consumers falling prey to capitalist co-optation and corporate cool-hunting. Beats headphones rate abysmally[6] among audiophiles—though

this hasn't affected sales of the product or Apple's recent acquisition of the company for three billion dollars ("Apple")—which suggests the cynical marketing to exploit desires for a postmodern "audile technique" (Sterne *The Audible* 23, 335).

But the conspicuous publicity of an audio-identified self also dovetails with the subcultural group dynamics and parasitically-imminent "micro-politics of domination" parsed by Sarah Thornton in *Club Cultures* (168),as well as a longer genealogy of sonic technocultural identifications similarly oriented to the future. As Lisa Gitelman recounts of the first public phonograph exhibitions in the nineteenth century, a sense of sonic futurism can be composed of private desires linked in publicity:

> phonograph exhibitions pointed outward, toward an impersonal public sphere comprised of similarly private subjects....In their very recordability, people were connected. Audience members might imagine themselves as part of an up-to-date, recordable community, an 'us' (as opposed to some imagined and impoverished 'them'), formed with similarly up-to-date recordable people they didn't know. ("The Phonograph's" 290)

A futurist spirit similarly marks the sameness-in-difference of the iPod flâneur or flâneuse, whose affects and desires identify not only with a sense of futurity in technocultural consumption but also with a mode of direct mediation, through future-sounds, of the public sphere itself.

This direct mediation offers possibilities for the transformation of society by engendering everyday gestures of aesthetic refusal. As Bull himself suggests, new listening configurations foster a productive sense of reality management:

> [iPod listening arouses a] utopian impulse to transform the world [, but one that] occurs only in the imaginary: in its technologised instrumentality the world remains untouched. Users prefer to live in this technological space whereby experience is brought under control—aesthetically managed and embodied—whilst the contingent nature of urban space and the 'other' is denied. (207)

Vestigial within this assessment is the Frankfurt school fretting over the increasingly backgrounded nature of sonic diversions and their anxiety about how this would lead to wholesale disengagement from History and anticapitalist solidarity. But as Brian Massumi and Erin Manning contend, "life everywhere can be considered germinally aesthetic, and the aesthetic anywhere already political" (qtd. in Goodman vii-viii). This politics-in-aesthetics model seems apparent, furthermore, in Hosokawa's assessment of an earlier "Walkmanized" flânerie, through which an interiorized practice of listening "decontextualizes the given coherence of the city-text" (109), fosters "de-territorialised listening," and

> induces an autonomous 'head space' between [the] Self and [its] surroundings in order to distance itself from—not familiarize itself with—both of them.…This enables...an autonomous pluralistically structured awareness of reality, but not...a self-enclosed refuge or...narcissistic regression" (112).

The auditor's headphone bubble becomes at once a protective barrier—a technosonic prophylactic—and at the same time an ersatz-private act of defiance, a refusal to accept

the ambient soundscapes of the neoliberal public unmediated. iPod flânerie thus constitutes a politicized mode of everyday estrangement for evolved sensoriums, drawing from the megatext of SF cinema sound design and the larger cultural desire for sonic novums. Public science fictional listening also (re)activates the science fictional mindstates developed by other genre-based transmedia assemblages, urging a subcultural identification with the alien, the estranged, the otherworldly—and all of their attendant critical possibilities.

If the alien-ated iPod flâneur or flâneuse finds the flow to navigate the byways of contemporary capitalist publics, they often do so as the rider of wobble-bass waves and the myriad future-sounds of popular music. The alien/SF aesthetic has circulated in popular music since the fifties—with its relatively clownish beginnings in albums like Forrest J. Ackerman's "Music for Robots" and increasingly into the aesthetics of Sun Ra's Arkestra; and Hendrix's "Radio EXP" and "Third Stone from the Sun;" and Frank Zappa's "Inca Roads"; and further hybridized by Zappa stunt-guitarist Steve Vai on *Flex-able* to really set the tone and theme for 80s and 90s guitar virtuosity, with seminal artists like Joe Satriani and Eric Johnson both drawing from the "interstellar" discourses and sound semiotics of their predecessors and taking advantage of new breakthroughs in commercial studio Digital Signal Processing units (DSPs) and novel stomp-box effects like Digitech's Whammy pedal, which enabled Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello to further innovate an aggressive, one-of-a-kind sound, evoking at once the blast of alien death rays and the scratching of hip-hop turntables. Further innovations in both sound design and consumer recording technology continue the aural mutations and viralogics of

alien pop, whose surrealizing affects erupt in electronic festivals like the Electric Daisy Carnival, which alone draws hundreds of thousands[7] of revelers to celebrate the wobble and warp of inner-space frontiers, as artists like Destroid, Novaspace, and Planet Rock continue the collective estrangement of the "real" (Mac).

In many ways, the inner echoes of this alien soundscape replay and remix an earlier and all-too-familiar SF polemic. When a rascally young turk named J.G. Ballard came along in the sixties, his "Which Way to Inner Space?" manifesto dropped like a hydrogen bomb and heralded the coming of a New Wave of science fiction whose writers showed less interest in the Golden Age semiotics of rocketry and space opera so much as mapping the "psycho-literary" territories of a coming age of psychedelic experimentation, pharmaceutical dependence, Cold War paranoia and post-Empire ennui (118). In such a vision, "The only truly alien planet is Earth," a statement that sounds prescient within the present discussion of aural media, alien identification, and the new subjectivities emerging from them (117). It's apt to reconsider the seed of Ballard's inner space, in other words, as having sprouted too soon, only to endure a long cultural gestation as the conditions for its eutrophication have slowly aligned, until now, as the everyday interiority of a "Walkmanized" or 'Pod-based science fictional experience has spread its alien roots the world over.

What about the persistence of in/out and self/other dynamics within the decidedly capitalist quasi-public spaces of the concert festival? The audience member's fantasy projections of themselves into the role of producer—mediated through handset video and audio recordings—does not *necessarily* change his or her function as a consumer of mass

culture or inch much closer to realizing the biopolitical potentials through collective awareness of shared utopian longings. On one level, capitalist ideology predictably circumscribes and deflects the mutuality and unity of masses brought together physically through the affective networks of aesthetic appreciation, blunting the audience's shared presence into a thousand—ten thousand, one hundred thousand—entrepreneurial dreamers bouncing solo to the rhythms in their cubicle minds, sharing only rented space and affective spectacle with the ambient collective. Or perhaps, as Jacques Attali suggests in *Noise*, these new collectivities organized around sonic mash-ups do indeed augur some new form of anticapitalist social relations as yet clearly articulated (10).

In a world in which the politics of difference consistently intersect with the semiotics of alienness—visual, narrative, or sonic—a shared feeling of everyday defamiliarization from the sights, sounds, and temporal flows of global neoliberal capital holds the potential to connect an alternative culture with the aggregated power to further mutate the collective sensorium and its registration of publicity. As Gitelman argues,

> New inscriptions…have regulated modern experience, making life more legible in complicated, public ways, signaling changes to the context and thereby the complexion of writing and reading. And changes to writing and reading matter in large measure because they equal changes to writers and readers. *New inscriptions signal new subjectivities***.** (*Scripts* 11, emphasis mine)

What this suggests is that the electromagnetic inscriptions inherent to digital aurality—the binary forms of reading and writing—serve to instantiate a comparable process of

transformation within both listening subjects and their concomitant publics. With new affects driving sound cultures, new machines for making sounds, new devices and networks for listening, and new modes of embodied listening—what new subjectivities emerge from such a matrix?

Science Fictional Listening and the Sonic Posthuman

The turn inward into alien digitality, argues Kodwo Eshun, has led to a revolution in not only listening practices, but human embodiment—fostering a "hyperembodied" posthuman subject jacked in to a sonic thought-matrix via turntables and headphones (-002). Eshun's sonic amplification of Black Atlantic cultural legacies touts the coming—nay, the culminant—extraterrestrial invasion of a Western subject whose mind/body distinction has been subject to an "AutoDestruction" via musical technologies and stylistic hybridizations, an "interference which breaks up the transmission, becomes an alien signal which inhabits the spirit of broadcasting, manifests communication breakdown and makes technical difficulties audible" (021). Like the "jes' grew" virus of Ishmael Reed's SF-tinged *Mumbo Jumbo*, Eshun touts a viralogically infectious groove spreading throughout the globe by rhizomatic channels to mutate its Western hosts and cure them "of the rhythmically retarded influence of Eurometric musical civilization" (Goodman 158). The Rhetoric of this colonization and de-Enlightenment borrows extensively from the science fiction megatext to evoke both future-directed modes of being in the world and the racial ghosts of the past—putting them into, in this instance, an

Afrofuturist dialogue which both destabilizes any capitalistic time-narratives of past, present, and future and embraces genre-based possibilities of alternative embodiments.

Such a subjectivity of non-normative machine-human or machine-animal formulations has long been a staple of posthuman theory, with Haraway celebrating "monstrous and illegitimate" cyborg images as "potent myths for resistance and recoupling" (295); with N. Katherine Hayles arguing that "If voice could be transported through time and spliced in with different sounds, the body-as-tape-recorder could also undergo time delay and mutation" (79); and with Rosi Braidotti fêting machine-based algorithms and information networks for "making us aware that the human is not the ruling principle in the harmony of the spheres" (157)—all gesturing toward the rethinking of Western culture in terms of sound and vibration.[8]

On the one hand, Sterne cautions that "we cannot assume that, by their existence alone, digital transmission and storage herald a new age, a fundamental transformation in modern sound culture" (*The Audible* 338-39). But on the other, the fruitful conjunctions of aural media and global decolonization histories, posthuman subjectivities, and the aesthetic politics of the science fiction megatext affords a theory of its own. Such a theory, though—even in preliminary form—would be incomplete without considering the vectors of networked exchange enabled by the mobile publics.

Remediated Vestiges of a Now-global *Magnitizdat* Economy of Exchange: Or, piratical trade-routes of emancipatory informatics

Those of us in the West tend to assume that our listening and sound-making practices are largely unrestricted, especially in the era of fecund mash-up culture. But the

practices of internet-based mp3 pirating, as well as the rise of so-called "illegal art" by mix-master Girl Talk call into question the open boundaries of contemporary sound culture (*Rip*). We might also consider the crossovers between contemporary digital pirating and the Soviet-era Eastern Bloc strategies of surreptitious magnitizdat reproduction and exchange through clandestine channels.

Magnitizdat refers to a magnetic-tape-based subset of samizdat practices ("publishing on one's own"), the act of reproducing, smuggling, and/or disseminating banned or redactable documents within the zone of informational quarantine or, as in the practice of tamizdat ("publishing abroad"), attempting to send such materials outside of restricted space—say, to the West—where sympathetic publishers could preserve manuscripts and archive the revolution, as well as release special editions to clusters of dissident émigrés, who in turn, could smuggle or transmit them back into forbidden mind-space as both ideological triumph and emboldening *pièce de résistance* (Kind-Kovács).

To be clear, not all practices of quasi- or il-legal exchange make sense under the rubric of samizdat. Earlier cassette tape- and CD-sharing cultures in the West were a mostly small-scale and tolerated function of normative capitalist practices, while Soviet-era Eastern-Bloc practices contributed to a distinctly collective oppositional aesthetic and politics. But now that more anticapitalist global exchange of illegally-pirated content is something close to a mainstream practice—and one increasingly opposed by corporate lawsuits and state-based legal action—the magnitizdat concept deserves reconsideration within the toolkit of a viralogical sonic resistance.

As Rita Raley suggests in *Tactical Media*, most officially-sanctioned or default technological interaction serves to reproduce the economic logics governing a device's production, yet latent technical affordances can lead to a range of anticapitalist practices—like repurposing, culture jamming, spamming, glitching, hacking, and pirating—all of which harbor potential for immanent critique (11). Though technology is by no means inherently ontological, as boosters and determinists would have it, devices can certainly mediate and potentiate culturally-ambient affects and technical affordances through unsanctioned interactivity and exchange. The freak flag of the global 21st century may very well be the Jolly Roger, but it could use an update with a cyborg captain.

A *Fantasy* of an SF-inflected Affective Revolution via Magnitizdat

Sonic interactivity could very well give rise to the curious case of capitalist autophagy, wherein the consumptive desires for science fictional sounds outstrip the ability of a typical consumer to afford purchasing them, and, fatefully intersecting with the peer-to-peer software facilitating "piratical" sharing on a scale sufficient to overrun the channels of discipline that enforce an orderly marketplace, hasten the market-based processes of erosion and consolidation—sending retailers into a death-spiral (Borders, Blockbuster, *adieu*), Hollywood into a defensive cocoon of insipidity (*Fast and Furious 7*) and mainstream media into a comparably heightened state of conservative Disneyfication—further highlighting the problem of megacorporate media trusts and provoking new privateers to helm desktop ships and smuggle new mind-cargo to the global masses. The process resembles an ironically systemic autophagy in that the

entrepreneurial character of the everyday subjectivity of neoliberalism may be the very seed of madness to undo capitalism as we know it, as an entrepreneurship of pirates competing for up-clicks and street-cred (not to mention amoral ad revenues) plugs into the very logic of web-based traffic flows that makes global capitalism in the 21st century function in the first place. Marx could not have foreseen such a possibility in concrete terms, but his dialectic presages the general historical arc: capitalism's own steam will begin to burn out the gears and explode the makeshift machine—necessitating new social relationships, collective subjectivities, and economic systems: a "revolution," though in this case a performative and affective (rather than explicitly ideological) one. Or, to return to this essay's opening figure, the monstrous birth of a patchworked affectsphere wreaking unforeseen calamity on its capitalist creator at 80db.

What differs in this scenario from more traditional samizdat praxis, however, is also what constitutes its limitations and provides a reality check. If earlier samizdat exchange often relied upon outmoded and hard-to-trace technologies like hand-cranked printing presses and manual typewriters, contemporary net-based strategies, by contrast, rely much more heavily on corporate-branded proprietary operating systems and hardware, both of which imperil anonymity. As increased corporate consolidation of network access routes converges with greater international pressure to prosecute pirates, one may also reasonably wonder whether today's successful tactics will be tomorrow's ticket to Davy Jones' locker.[9] In the meantime, the eye-patched insurgents of sonic science fiction plunder on, relying as much on luck as on the development of more

sophisticated IP-cloaking VPNs, torrent-streaming platforms, and invite-only peer-to-peer forums.

In a world increasingly defined by informatic paradigms of saleable data, the utopian call from the crow's nest of the "copyLEFT"—director Brett Gayler's neologism for anti-copyright activists—is, against all odds, that all information should be free for exchange and remix (*Rip*). The paradox here, as the work of Lev Manovich reveals, is that the rhetorics of sonic "remix culture" are appropriated as readily by corporate designers as their pirate nemeses (196-198).

Changing Definitions of Science Fiction

Samizdat digital distribution isn't the only thing dancing with an unlikely double. The entire *dispositif* of aural technoculture is now caught in the orbit of science fiction—like binary stars sharing one center of mass. It no longer matters what you listen to, or where, with whom or how—through which device, application, event or networked service. If you are listening to (or within) the mediatized public, or even tuning it out, you are participating in a science-fictional aesthetic.

Several critics have recently suggested that affective practices like sound audition reverberate with the latent or explicit power to move and mobilize bodies, as well as shape new, potentially-oppositional subjectivities. These biopolitical and affective dimensions of new sound cultures have been preliminarily glossed by Haraway (312), Hayles (79), Hardt and Negri (96-97), Goodman (191-194), Eshun (021), and Berlant (232-263), all of whom gesture toward creative potentials without adding much

specificity beyond Attali's seventies-era formulation of a signal/noise binary rooted in the histories of telephony, cybernetics, and information theory (Sterne *MP3* 124). A science fictional model of sonic publicity has the ability to push beyond that critical impasse and open further space to imagine a global revolution rooted not only in noise-based sound-clash, street skirmishes, or reactionary slogans, but in everyday aural desires, creativity, listening, and exchange.

A science fictional aesthetic constitutes the vanguard of these tactics, driving an always-already politicized desire for not only the reception of future sounds but also the tools of production to create them and the networked connectivity to openly transmit them. Though the Adornoesque holocaust of a dystopian Pod People—with their mass distraction and Kracauer-derided mass ornament—or the "solitary, and sedentary, aesthetic" of Raley's upstart tacticians (26) looms in the virtual gloaming over Cowles Mountain, so too does the potential for a nonviolent, affective vibrational (micro)politics of a Frankensteinian subjectivity. As Haraway reminds us of her cyborg interventionism, an embrace of dialectical paradoxes and "the tension of holding incompatible things together" keeps progressivism humming (291), or, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it: "ventur[ing] from home on the thread of a tune" (311). Along with such signals of change, we need to reassess our definitions of "science fiction" to include a non-narrative, non-generic shift toward an evolved sensorium of publicity and an emergent, cyborgic ontology of anticapitalist sound practice. Or, put more simply, we need to embrace the revolutionary potential in the popular desire for the past and present archive of future-sounds.

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Notes

[1] Rather than the canonical reading of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) as a Cold War allegory of Communist virology, I'm borrowing from John Rieder's analysis at the 2014 ICFA conference of the film as an unwitting satire of a Walmart-esque capitalist monopolism.

[2] As Whittington notes (79), an anti-consumerist politics animates Lucas' early use of these techniques in *THX 1138*, which prompts the question: Why did that activist spirit flag so completely just as he began to develop the sound techniques to communicate it more effectively?

[3] The Nagra IV alone cost in the neighborhood of $10,000 dollars (Whittington 31).

[4] In *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, Bellamy's utopian society seems to agree that music production is best left trained professionals (65).

[5] Says Hosokawa: "An interviewer for the *Nouvel Observateur* ask[ed] the following questions: "whether men with the walkman are human or not; whether they are losing contact with reality; whether the relations between eyes and ears are changing radically; whether they are psychotic or schizophrenic; whether they are worried about the fate of humanity.…The walkman, for such an interviewer, [was] taken as encouraging self-enclosure and political apathy among the young, under a structure of mass control" (104).

[6] See Alexis Kleinman's article in *The Huffington Post*: "Face the Music: Beats By Dre Headphones are 'Extraordinarily Bad'."

[7] Roughly 134,000 people were in attendance at each of the 2014 event's three nights.

[8] A project which sits on the tech-tonic fault lines of this essay, but mostly out of its bounds. For more on this, see both Veit Erlmann's *Reason and Resonance* and Steve Goodman's *Sonic Warfare* for starters.

[9] As of 2014, all founding members of The Pirate Bay have been prosecuted, fined, and/or jailed ("Pirate Bay"); torrent uploaders like Secludedly have been tracked and sued for tens of millions in US Dollars (Andy "Pirate"); the RIAA has joined the MPAA in pressuring governments to target sharing forums and content lockers (Mazumdar); and new police units tasked with the protection of intellectual property are making raids on servers in the West (Andy "Big," "Police").