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**Who Could Ask For Anything More?:
Cultural Theory, Contemporary Music,
and the Question of Canons**

by

Alan Stanbridge, B.Sc., M.A.

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
Sociology

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Chair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Thesis Supervisor

External Examiner

Carleton University
October 6, 2000

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by Alan Stanbridge

Abstract

This dissertation was motivated by a sense of frustration with many of the existing theoretical and methodological protocols for the study of art and culture. A review and critique of a wide range of work in cultural and postmodern theory, and in the ‘new musicology’ and popular music studies, suggests that, in response to the formalist reductionism of traditionalist approaches, much revisionist work simply substitutes its own form of ideological reductionism. Such approaches often ignore, relativize, or invert established systems of cultural hierarchy and canonicity, sometimes offering an alternative canon but ultimately failing to challenge existing patterns of institutional authority, privilege and canonicity. The significant corollary to these revisionist forms of reductionism and canonic inversion is an equally problematic understanding of cultural value.

In this dissertation, I develop a conceptualization of postmodernism that attends to the specificities of postmodern cultural practice, acknowledging the prevalence of irony, parody and intertextuality in contemporary cultural forms. Suggesting that the ‘double-coding’ of much postmodern practice raises significant questions in terms of both cultural value and academic ‘positionality’, I note the limitations of any ‘happy’ interdisciplinarity. In sharp contrast to the partiality and reductionism of much work in contemporary cultural theory and ‘music studies’, I propose a critically self-reflexive ‘eclecticism of theory’, based on a judicious appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of particular theoretical approaches and methodologies, and the recognition that issues of text and context must be understood as thoroughly interdependent, symbiotic, and dialogical. This involves a critical engagement with art and culture – in all its ‘high’ and ‘popular’ manifestations – analytically situated in its socio-historical, institutional and political contexts. This analytical model allows a broadly eclectic theoretical approach to the complexities of contemporary music and its canons, denying narrow interpretations of musical meaning and cultural value, and offering instead a richly intertextual reading of musical forms and practices. With the aid of several case studies in the field of contemporary jazz, I illustrate the proposed model, suggesting that the model can be understood to be more broadly applicable to questions of meaning and value across the entire musical field.

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For reasons I can't quite understand, most acknowledgement pages relegate the thank you to the long-suffering partner/spouse/wife/husband to the end. Not this one. And far from being long-suffering, the charming and talented Gina Brown has been a literally endless source of support, encouragement, discussion, chiding, cheer-leading, cajoling, and yes, subsistence. This project would never have happened without her. Her love and inspiration have been vital, from planning my return to university in Birmingham in 1992, to the move to Ottawa in 1994, to the final stages of writing in Toronto in the summer of 2000. As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love her madly.

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Alan Stanbridge
Toronto, September 2000

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Introduction

Who Could Ask For Anything More?: Of Rhythm and Revisionism

“I got rhythm, I got music, I got my man;
Who could ask for anything more?”
From: ‘I Got Rhythm’, George and Ira Gershwin,
(quoted in Furia, 1996: 79)

The protagonist of George and Ira Gershwin’s ‘I Got Rhythm’ was fairly easily satisfied, it would seem: a little rhythm, some music, and a man, and there was nothing more to ask for; a few daisies, some green pastures (and a man) and the world was fine; a little starlight, some sweet dreams (and a man) and everything was okay. One wonders what Abraham Maslow (1954) would have made of the tripartite hierarchy of needs outlined in each of these verses. But given the richness of American musical culture in the 1930s, and notwithstanding the modest simplicity of the creature comforts indicated in the lyric, perhaps it could be argued that the 21-year old Ethel Merman,¹ making her Broadway debut in the role of Kate in the Gershwin’s *Girl Crazy* of 1930, did, indeed, have little more to ask for. Co-starring with Ginger Rogers, Merman’s show-stopping version of ‘I Got Rhythm’ was the talk of the town:

[In] ‘I Got Rhythm’... I held the C note for sixteen bars, an entire chorus, while the orchestra played the melody, and the audience went crazy. I don’t think they were responding to the beauty of it. I think it was the newness. Nobody had ever done it in a Broadway show before. Thank God I was blessed with a strong diaphragm and lungs.

(Merman, 1978: 39)

¹ An 18-year old Ethel Merman, if one believes Ms. Merman’s own chronology: “I was born in my parents’ bedroom on January 16. *The World Almanac* says it was 1909. I say it was 1912. But what difference does it make as long as I feel thirty-three?” (Merman, 1978: 17).

Supported by an opening night orchestra that included Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Jimmy Dorsey, Red Nichols, and Gene Krupa, Merman's 'I Got Rhythm' was only one of many highlights in a show which featured several other classics by the Gershwin brothers, including 'I'm Bidin' My Time', 'But Not For Me', and 'Embraceable You'. And all this at the start of a 25-year period² which saw the premieres of countless Broadway shows and Hollywood films featuring the music and lyrics not only of the Gershwins, but also of Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, and Rodgers and Hammerstein – it was, without a doubt, a “Golden Age of American popular music” (Hyland, 1995: 292).

In analogous fashion, over the last 25 years, it could be argued that the field of contemporary cultural theory has experienced its own Golden Age, featuring a roster of star names and an endless series of books and publications which, in their own way, easily rival the prolific invention and output of the heroes of the Golden Age of American popular song. Moreover, the sheer volume and extent of this literature – and its often uncompromising ‘newness’ – tends to indicate that many of its academic practitioners were blessed with the intellectual equivalent of Merman's strong diaphragm and lungs. Despite this apparent embarrassment of theoretical riches, however, one of the key points which I will argue in this thesis is that much of this work is ultimately as modest – nay, narrow – as the needs of Kate, our 'I Got Rhythm' protagonist. But in this case, if we can

² Although the time period quoted here is relatively arbitrary – many successful Broadway musicals continuing to be produced into the late-1950s and beyond – it is not without significance, especially in terms of the advent of rock music in the mid-50s. See Peterson (1990) for a useful summary of the contextual factors that influenced this cultural paradigm shift.

allow ourselves the thought experiment of imagining Ethel Merman born again as a contemporary cultural theorist, I suspect that – like myself – she *would* be asking for something more.

In the course of this Golden Age of cultural theory, the theorizing of art and culture has undergone a distinctly sociological and contextualist turn. In contrast to the ideology of autonomous art which informed traditional, formalist approaches, contemporary theoretical interventions have emphasized context, contingency, and the fundamentally social nature of all artistic and cultural production. Consequently, such revisionist approaches have offered a significant challenge to the received orthodoxies of established disciplines, opening up often controversial and long-overdue debates on questions of academic authority, canonic hierarchies, and cultural value. The revisionist work I have in mind encompasses a remarkably wide range of academic disciplines and theoretical approaches, in which an analytical focus on the socio-historical contexts of cultural production, regulation, and consumption has become widely accepted. This turn towards more socially and historically-grounded modes of analysis is clearly evident not only in newer fields of inquiry such as cultural studies, but also within a number of well-established disciplines, including art history, philosophical aesthetics, literary criticism, musicology, sociology, and anthropology. In these fields, the influences of Marxist, structuralist, feminist, and postmodernist perspectives have been – and continue to be – keenly felt, occasioning significant re-evaluations of the accepted theoretical protocols and methodologies of these traditional disciplines. Central to these contemporary

developments has been the critical interrogation of universalizing modes of thought,³ whether such universalism has been expressed, for example, in the aesthetic autonomy of an idealist philosophy of art, in the taxonomic value systems of art history, or in the positivistic empiricism of traditional musicology.

Notwithstanding their manifest strengths, however, I want to suggest that many of these revisionist approaches have been far from unproblematic; and given my already noted desire to ask for something more, it should come as no surprise to the reader that my thesis project finds its motivating impulse in a degree of frustration and dissatisfaction with many of the existing theoretical protocols for the study of art and culture. And I want to stress that this frustration and dissatisfaction is far from confined to the shortcomings of traditionalist approaches: approaches which, as noted above, have been the subject of vigorous critique. Indeed, given the incisive and convincing nature of many of these critiques, it is relatively easy and uncontroversial to agree with Janet Wolff when she suggests that “by now... it is no longer necessary to document the claim that there is nothing ‘pure’ about art” (Wolff, 1993a: 112). More significantly, however, my unease has been focused primarily on those revisionist approaches which claim to offer an alternative to traditionalist dogma and orthodoxy: often, it seems, the result is nothing other than a variation on an orthodox theme; or, to paraphrase Pete Townshend, ‘meet the new dogma, same as the old dogma’. And, more specifically, given my own interest in a wide range of contemporary music, I have found myself increasingly frustrated with the

³ For a useful summary of these developments, see Milner (1994a). See also Storey (1998).

protocols and methodologies of much work in ‘music studies’: work which, although sometimes insightful and compelling, is more often alarmingly narrow in its analytical methods and evaluative conclusions.⁴

This unease with the claims of much contemporary cultural scholarship can be traced back to my previous professional career in arts management and music promotion,⁵ and my continuing feeling that many of the decision-making mechanisms of cultural policy remain in a constant state of tension between the economistic perspectives which emerged in the 1980s – i.e. stressing the ‘economic importance of the arts’ (Myerscough, 1988) – and the explicit reassertion, in the 1990s, of an equally problematic understanding of the ‘artistic importance of the arts’ (Hutchison, 1990). In the latter case, more often than not, the defence of the arts against economic rationalism was expressed in the paternalistic language of the “lofty approach” towards government funding of the arts (Dworkin, 1985: 221). Hence, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere:

In response to the economic perspective... the familiar discourse of lofty paternalism is substituted for that of crude economism – ‘giving the people what they need’ replaces ‘giving the people what they want’; and the idealist universalism of eighteenth century aesthetics supersedes the economic rationalism of 1980s monetarism – ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ displace ‘economic impact’ and ‘regeneration’ as the buzz-words of choice.

(Stanbridge, 1998b: 7)⁶

⁴ The term ‘music studies’ is of relatively recent coinage – see, for example, Kassabian (1997: 9) – but one which is useful in that it can be understood to encompass a wide variety of contemporary developments in the ‘new musicology’ (including postmodernist and feminist approaches), as well as recent work in ethnomusicology, popular music studies, and cultural studies.

⁵ My 15-year career in arts management in Britain included periods as Director of the Glasgow International Jazz Festival and of Jazz Services in London, the national organization for jazz touring and promotion. I also held senior management positions with several arts centre projects, including the Almeida Theatre and Midlands Arts Centre.

⁶ See also Stanbridge (1995) for a review of what I characterize as the ‘mercantile turn’ in arts funding in the 1980s.

In the early stages of my doctoral work, the continually expanding literature in cultural theory and the relatively new field of cultural studies appeared to hold the prospect of an examination of these issues which avoided the twin poles of economic reductionism and paternalist elitism. However, aside from a brief intellectual honeymoon, my subsequent engagement with much revisionist work in cultural theory and cultural studies over the last few years has served to identify a number of recurring problems in this literature: problems which it often shares – somewhat paradoxically – with the traditional perspectives to which it claims to stand opposed. Thus, for example, if many traditionalist approaches are characterized by a formalist aestheticism and a textualist reductionism, in response to such approaches much revisionist work simply substitutes its own form of ideological reductionism, whether that of economics, class, gender, race, populism, ‘governmentality’, contextualism, or – a doubly paradoxical revisionist move – textualism. Moreover, rather than offering an effective critique of the traditional canon, many revisionist approaches simply ignore, relativize, or invert established systems of cultural hierarchy and canonicity, sometimes offering an alternative canon but ultimately failing to challenge existing patterns of institutional authority and privilege. And the significant corollary to these revisionist forms of reductionism and canonic inversion is an equally problematic understanding of cultural value, many evaluative judgements – whether explicitly or implicitly – proving to be as narrow and restricted as the analytical methods employed in reaching such evaluative conclusions.⁷

⁷ I will return to all of the issues identified in this paragraph in the chapters that follow.

The early result of my intellectual frustration with the protocols of contemporary cultural theory was a shift in emphasis in my doctoral work, from an initial focus on cultural policy (with the prospect of cultural theory as a potential tool), to a subsequent focus on cultural theory itself, particularly in terms of an examination and appraisal of revisionist approaches to the study of music. A fundamental point which informs my thesis work, however, is that any such analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of recent theoretical work in music studies can only be conducted against the background of a broader understanding of a wide range of related developments in contemporary theories of art, culture, and postmodernism. The point at issue here is that many of the revisionist theoretical interventions in the study of music have been explicitly informed and motivated by prior developments in cultural and postmodern theory, and critical assessments of these latter bodies of work are therefore highly relevant – indeed, essential – in any consideration of related work in music studies.

My thesis is therefore focused primarily on questions of theory and methodology, challenging the primarily modernist discourses that inform much contemporary theoretical work, and suggesting an understanding of postmodernism which is grounded in cultural practice. The ultimate objective of my thesis project is to propose and illustrate a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of contemporary music which is both eclectic and critically self-reflexive, building on the strengths but avoiding the weaknesses of recent revisionist approaches. In the paragraphs which follow, I will proceed to outline briefly the overall structure of my dissertation.

Chapter One offers a wide-ranging review of contemporary theories of art and culture, situating and mapping contrasting approaches in terms of their theoretical and ideological characteristics, and highlighting the evaluative antinomies which underlie much contemporary scholarship. Developing some of the issues noted in the first chapter, Chapter Two focuses on theories of postmodernism, arguing that the field is dominated by an academic and intellectual orthodoxy which I characterize as a ‘modernist postmodernism’. At the conclusion of this chapter, I cite briefly the work of Umberto Eco (1985a), suggesting that this work holds the prospect of a more pragmatic and useful conceptualization of postmodernism – issues which I pursue further in Chapter Six.

Against the background of the critiques developed in the two opening chapters, in Chapters Three, Four and Five, I turn to a range of theoretical work in music studies. Chapter Three begins by addressing the notion of the canon, highlighting the discursively narrow construction of ‘music’ which follows from the ‘false universality’ of the canon of Western art music. I go on to review a variety of work in the ‘new musicology’, considering the problematic notion of the structural homology, issues of text and context, and the reductionism inherent in some feminist approaches to musicology. The chapter concludes with a review of recent work on Charles Ives, suggesting the dialogical mutuality of text and context, and pointing towards the possibility of an eclectic, critically self-reflexive approach to the study of music. In Chapter Four, I address the problem of cultural relativism and the notion of multiple canons, noting the disciplinary ‘imperialism’ of some approaches within ethnomusicology and sociology. A review of work in popular music studies highlights the populist tendency to simply invert canonic hierarchies, and

I conclude this chapter by suggesting the need to understand music as a single field that has, nonetheless, been discursively shaped. Chapter Five addresses the unhappy relationship between music and postmodern theory, noting the tendency within music studies to replicate the pessimist and populist positions which characterize the broader postmodern debate.

In Chapter Six, drawing on the work of Eco, I develop a conceptualization of postmodernism which attends to the specificities of postmodern cultural practice, acknowledging the prevalence of irony, parody and intertextuality in contemporary cultural forms. Suggesting that the ‘double-coding’ of much postmodern practice raises significant questions in terms of both cultural value and academic ‘positionality’, I note the limitations of any ‘happy’ interdisciplinarity and develop further the notion of an ‘eclecticism of theory’.

In Chapter Seven, with the aid of several case studies in the field of contemporary jazz, I illustrate the theoretical and analytical method that I have proposed. This field proves to be useful for illustrative purposes on two counts: firstly, in terms of critical and academic scholarship, it encompasses both ‘traditional’ and ‘revisionist’ approaches; and secondly, in terms of creative practice, it embodies many of the postmodern techniques which I hold to be characteristic of much contemporary cultural production. In my concluding chapter I summarize briefly the main claims of my thesis, noting the broad applicability of the proposed method across the entire musical field, and suggesting several interesting directions for future research.

Chapter One

From the Sublime to the Reductionist: Contemporary Theories of Art and Culture

“What one perceives, while it may not be theory determined,
is much affected by what one believes and by theories to
which one subscribes about the way the world is.”
From: *Definitions of Art*, Stephen Davies (1991: 14)

As noted in the Introduction, and as even the most cursory survey of the international publishing industry will indicate, the last few decades have seen a phenomenal growth in academic studies of art and culture. Indeed, some observers have characterized this period in terms of a ‘cultural turn’ in academic scholarship (e.g. Chaney, 1994; Jameson, 1998). This burgeoning literature encompasses many disciplines and fields of study, including sociology, cultural studies, philosophy, art history, literary criticism, musicology, and film studies. This list can be readily extended, acknowledging a range of related work in the fields of anthropology, communications, political economy, and psychology. My objective in this chapter is to map this daunting intellectual terrain, reviewing and situating a wide variety of contemporary theories of art and culture, and offering a brief assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of particular approaches. And it is worthwhile at this early stage reiterating a point made in the Introduction: that this mapping of theories of art and culture is a necessary prerequisite to a closer examination of a range of revisionist approaches to the study of music, given that these latter approaches primarily draw on theoretical protocols developed in the broader cultural field. In the following chapter, I will focus more closely on issues in postmodern theory that are similarly relevant to

debates in music studies. Having conducted the wide-ranging reviews in this chapter and the one which follows, in Chapters Three and Four I focus more closely on a range of related work in music studies, turning in Chapter Five to the relationship between music and postmodern theory.

Given the disciplinary and intellectual heterogeneity indicated in my opening paragraph, it is clear that my mapping exercise will necessarily traverse a number of distinct disciplines and fields of study. Furthermore, although I will address many differing theoretical and methodological approaches, I make no claim that my review is comprehensive; nor do I claim to offer detailed histories and analyses of the development of particular perspectives. Rather, my interest is in categorizing and mapping a range of salient, contrasting approaches, attempting to bring some order to this disparate, and often highly contested literature. For my purposes here, then, I want to propose an analytical framework for the analysis of contemporary theories of art and culture. This analytical framework is based upon what I regard to be the key tendencies and tensions which characterize much contemporary work in the field, and although it is one which logically emerges only *after* an extensive review of contrasting approaches, it is one that I want to employ at this early stage as a means of structuring the discussion which follows. And it must be stressed that the proposed framework simply represents a heuristic device, and should not be interpreted, in itself, as a totalizing theoretical gesture: rather, it simply provides a useful means of situating and analysing existing theoretical approaches.

*Figure 1: Analytical framework for the analysis
of contemporary theories of art and culture*

In terms of theories of art, the horizontal axis of the framework indicates a spectrum of approaches from ‘autonomous art’, most often associated with a traditionalist, conservative aesthetics, to ‘art as ideology’, most commonly identified with a revisionist Marxist position. Similarly, in the case of theories of culture, the vertical axis indicates a range from the primarily traditionalist ‘critique of mass culture’, to the ‘cultural populism’ most often identified with a revisionist cultural studies.¹ Given these tendencies, it is worthwhile noting that the location of these categories on the framework in the positions of ‘right’ and ‘left’, and ‘high’ and ‘low’ is far from accidental. But it is also worthwhile

¹ Although the terms I employ are now in relatively common usage, it should be noted that ‘autonomous art’ and ‘art as ideology’ are borrowed primarily from the work of Janet Wolff (1987, 1993b), and the ‘critique of mass culture’ and ‘cultural populism’ from that of Patrick Brantlinger (1983) and Jim McGuigan (1992).

entering the caveat that these categories do, indeed, only indicate theoretical tendencies. Hence, for example, although the concept of ‘autonomous art’ does tend to be most readily associated with traditionalist aesthetics (notwithstanding the arguably ‘radical’ nature of Adorno’s aesthetic project, and of similarly-inspired Marxist aesthetics),² the ‘critique of mass culture’ has attracted supporters from both sides of the political spectrum (a point I will return to in the relevant section below). Furthermore, in terms of current theoretical approaches, although the political orthodoxy of the approaches characterized as ‘art as ideology’ and ‘cultural populism’ is primarily left-wing, it is clear that both are equally open to conservative interpretation: in the case of ‘art as ideology’, right-wing attacks on explicitly political or ‘troublesome’ art have a long history, from Hitler’s condemnation of ‘degenerate’ art in the 1930s to the NEA’s battles over Congressional censorship in the late 1980s and 1990s;³ in the case of ‘cultural populism’, the hegemonic nature of the Thatcherite political project in Britain in the 1980s succeeded in making it only too clear that the Left has no monopoly on such ‘populism’.⁴ The important point here, however – and in sharp contrast to the ‘critique of mass culture’ – is that these competing political and cultural philosophies remain distinct and mutually exclusive, and it is the leftist versions of ‘art as ideology’ and ‘cultural populism’ which have continued to dominate much academic scholarship.

² See, for example, Adorno (1984); see also Johnson (1984) and Laing (1978). For a critique of such Marxist approaches, see Bennett (1990).

³ On ‘degenerate art’, see Barron (1991); on the NEA, see Wyszomirski (1995) and Dubin (1992).

⁴ See Hall and Jacques (1989).

The theoretical review which follows will involve the identification of the weaknesses and shortcomings of those theoretical positions which represent the binary oppositions delineated by the framework's two intersecting axes, interrogating the often problematic notions of cultural value – both positive and negative – which are encoded in such positions. My review will not ignore the strengths of particular approaches, however, acknowledging that the holding of an extreme position often represents a necessary reaction to firmly entrenched cultural orthodoxies (although, in turn, it must be acknowledged that initially heterodoxical positions often become as dogmatically entrenched as those they set out to oppose). I will suggest that any approach to the complexities of contemporary art and culture must steer a course between the spurious universalism of idealist aesthetics and the ideological reductionism of much revisionist theory. Similarly, it must negotiate a path between the conservative elitism (whether from Right or Left) of the mass culture critique and the “disarming anti-intellectualism” (Storey, 1998: 228) of an uncritical cultural populism.

In common with Janet Wolff, then, I am of the view that the study of art and culture “must be *both* at the level of texts *and* at the level of institutions and social process” (1990c: 110; emphasis in original) – a proposition which serves to indicate the limitations of both traditionalist and revisionist scholarship. In the case of the former, the focus has been overly textual, value being understood as an inherent quality of cultural objects; in the case of the latter, the notion of inherent value has been challenged, and questions of consumption and context have become overdetermining. However, notwithstanding the fact that my analytical framework is constructed around two pairs of binary oppositions –

and a crucial point in terms of the analytical approach which I propose in this thesis – the proposal for the study of *both* texts *and* contexts does not imply that the ‘solution’ to the various problems which I identify in contemporary cultural scholarship is to be found in some form of magical dialectical synthesis of competing approaches. On the contrary, as I will illustrate in the chapters that follow, and as I will argue in more detail in Chapter Six, these binary oppositions simply serve to illustrate the ‘all-or-nothing’ logic which continues to dominate academic scholarship, highlighting the problems involved in any ‘happy’ interdisciplinarity.

The proposal which I develop in this thesis is for a critically self-reflexive ‘eclecticism of theory’, based on a judicious appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of particular theoretical approaches and methodologies, and the recognition that issues of text and context must be understood as thoroughly interdependent, symbiotic, and dialogical. This involves a critical engagement with art and culture – in all its ‘high’ and ‘popular’ manifestations – analytically situated in its socio-historical, institutional and political contexts. I will now proceed to outline and clarify the pairs of conceptual headings suggested by the oppositional axes in the proposed analytical framework, each of which represents a polar extremity on a spectrum of theoretical approaches. In the review which follows, I will rely heavily on citations from others, allowing theorists – and their critics – to make their arguments primarily in their own words. I trust that it is clear, however, that the ‘mapping’ of this literature, and the overall structure of the argument, remains my own.

Autonomous Art

The idealist notion of the autonomy of art – of “art’s independence from society” (Bürger, 1984: 35) – has its roots in the development of eighteenth century aesthetics. Constituted as a new sub-discipline of philosophy, this field of inquiry finds its generally agreed inaugural moment in the publication of the two volumes of Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* in 1750 and 1758, and its subsequent elaboration in the work of Burke, Schiller, and Kant. From these early writers, and more specifically from Kant, have come some of the basic principles which, to a large extent, continue to inform philosophical aesthetics, namely notions of beauty and the sublime, of the ‘disinterested’ nature of aesthetic appreciation, and of art’s universal, autonomous, transcendent qualities.⁵ The ‘discovery’ of these apparently natural qualities – and their endless debate – has continued to exert a considerable hold over the theory and philosophy of art, as well as establishing a whole new category of academic labourers, the aestheticians.⁶ The influence of aesthetic idealism can be perceived beyond the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy, however, playing a major role in the development of a traditionalist, formalist art history,⁷ and motivating the development of the New Criticism in the 1930s and 40s, in both Britain and the United States. As Terence Hawkes has observed, New Criticism proposed that:

⁵ For a useful summary, see Kant (1994).

⁶ It is not my intention here to offer a history of the development of philosophical aesthetics, but rather to give only the briefest of indications of its grounding concepts. This is a history which is well documented elsewhere, e.g. Dickie (1971), Osborne (1972). See also Eagleton (1990) for a somewhat more politically motivated account. See also Ross (1994), Harrison and Wood (1993), Harrison *et al.* (1998), and Thompson (1990).

⁷ See Wölfflin (1932) for a classic example of the genre. See also Edwards (1998) and Fernie (1995) for reviews of the history and methodologies of art history.

the work of art... should be regarded as autonomous, and so should not be judged by reference to criteria or considerations beyond itself... It yields itself to close analytic reading without overt reference to any acknowledged 'method' or 'system' and without drawing on any corpus of information, biographical, social, psychological or historical, *outside* the work. 'There is no method' said TS Eliot (a poet and critic much favoured by the New Criticism), 'except to be very intelligent'.

(Hawkes, 1977: 152; emphasis in original)

The elitism inherent in Eliot's admonition is also revealingly evident in his conceptualization of culture, as outlined in his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (1948):

It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the Twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century gothic churches and the music of Elgar.

(Eliot, 1948: 31)

Jim McGuigan has characterized this notion of culture as "patronisingly hierarchical" (1992: 21), and while it might be tempting to dismiss Eliot's definition as merely a product of its time, it is instructive to turn to a much more recent passage by the cultural theorist Fred Inglis, which is curiously reminiscent of Eliot's. Here, the idealist conception of the cultural artifact as somehow independent of broader social and historical forces is clearly foregrounded, representing a contemporary paean to the joys of art and cultivated civilization, and to the virtues of art's autonomy and transcendence:

It is humanly necessary to value value. This is not a pleonasm. It is a reminder of what creativity creates. And it restores the force of our intuition that works of art are more than the shadows cast by social structure and the hard fact of its power. For our *natural* response when we recognize great accomplishment is wondering admiration. When we know how to look and see the splendour of Turner's great paintings, of Vivien Richards's greatest innings, or to hear Glenn Gould's playing of the Bach preludes, or to taste the most beautiful of the Burgundian red wines of 1976, we remove these experiences to a special zone reserved either for eloquent and entranced reminiscence or for worshipful silence.

(Inglis, 1993: 190, my italics)

Written fully 45 years after Eliot's *Notes*, the very absence of cultural hierarchy in Inglis' account, and his extravagantly elitist claims for our 'natural' responses to 'great accomplishment' – nineteenth century painting, eighteenth century music, cricket and fine French wine – perhaps reveal him to be even more of a conservative traditionalist than the "arch-conservative" Eliot (McGuigan, 1992: 21). The manifestly ahistorical and asocial character of such claims for the autonomous and transcendent qualities of art has come to be increasingly challenged in contemporary theories of art and culture. As the philosopher Paul Mattick has observed: "the past twenty-odd years have seen increasing appreciation, among academics and other intellectuals, of the historical character of cultural objects and of the necessity, if they are to be understood, of viewing them within their complex social contexts" (1993b: 2). Thus, Mattick suggests:

If we think of the eighteenth-century reclassification of the activities and objects that now form the fine arts not as the revelation of a character previously obscured but as the development of new social functions for them, the idea of art's autonomy... can be understood to mark that reclassification itself... the very concept of 'autonomy'... suggests the idea of the disengagement of a previous existent from its earlier subordination to other social institutions... The implication is that the practices of present-day society represent fundamental features of human life, found in all other social systems although only among us freed from obscuring 'extrinsic' institutions.
(Mattick, 1993b: 6-8)

In light of Mattick's observations, Peter Bürger's contention that "the *autonomy of art* is a category of bourgeois society" is persuasive and convincing (1984: 46; emphasis in original), the point being further elaborated by Terry Eagleton: "The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is... inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order" (Eagleton, 1990: 3).

Although theoretical approaches such as these have their own limitations – especially when extrapolated to the point where art is regarded simply *as* ideology (a point which I will return to in the following section) – the American sociologist Vera Zolberg has insightfully observed that:

a purely aesthetic analysis by itself is no less potentially reductionist than the reductionism imputed to many sociologists. When aestheticians treat art as a specialized activity of little import to anyone but restricted groups with specialized interests and knowledge, thereby confining art to a coterie, they make a shambles of their claim to universalism.

(Zolberg, 1990: 14)

Yet, despite such claims, the extent to which much contemporary cultural theory continues to neglect socio-historical analysis is perhaps somewhat surprising. For example, in Peter Fuller's work (e.g. 1980b, 1980c, 1983), although his conceptualization of the aesthetic as "a historically specific structuring of relatively constant, or long-lasting, elements of affective experience" (1980a: 29) apparently acknowledges such analysis, his essentialist, psychoanalytically-inspired concept of "aesthetic potentialities" (Eagleton and Fuller, 1983: 79) remains ungrounded, effectively divorced from any detailed social or historical contextualization. Thus, for Fuller, "the vocabulary of art, artists and aesthetics only appears obsolete today because a great dimension of human life and experience is presently catastrophically threatened" (1983: 36). Such "rampant traditionalism" (Osborne, 1989: 46) is – almost inevitably – accompanied by a critique of mass culture, and, in Fuller's terms, our "aesthetically sick" society succumbs to "the debased symbolic orders of advertising and spectacle" (1983: 37), which are held to constitute "the prostitute practices of the mega-visual world" (1983: 34). In response to the "crisis of the 'aesthetic dimension' in our time", and in a move which highlights the idealist formalism

inherent in his work, Fuller suggests the need “to re-root aesthetics in the study of nature and natural form” (1983: 40). Although such essentialist “utopianism” (Hebdige, 1987: 52) can perhaps be readily dismissed, there is, however, much to be said for Fuller’s defence of the “specificities” of artistic practice (Fuller, 1980a: 8), especially in the face of ideological reductionism. Fuller makes this point in the context of his ‘revaluation’ of John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972), arguing that “a way of seeing is not, in itself, a way of painting”, and suggesting that Berger has little to say about “painting as a *material process*” (Fuller, 1980a: 8; emphasis in original).⁸ Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, Dick Hebdige has argued of Fuller that:

the patent absurdity of some of his arguments should not be allowed to obscure the force, consistency and strategic value of his overall position at a time when the New Right is intent on giving such ideas an explicitly authoritarian inflection; at a time, too, when attacks on the arts in general and art education in particular are being justified in terms of the narrowest and crudest kinds of market-oriented logic.

(Hebdige, 1987: 52)

The collocation of the fundamentally conservative notion of an autonomous aesthetic and the critique of mass culture is similarly evident in the work of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, although this time with a distinctly ‘postmodern’ twist. Thus, while Fuller bemoans the “pornography of despair” (1983: 34) which is held to inspire much contemporary art, Lyotard’s faith in the ‘sublimity’ of the postmodern avant-garde is unshakeable, although the dangers of ‘eclecticism’ are never far:

⁸ This is a point that I will return to in the following section, in my discussion of Berger’s own critique of the work of Nicos Hadjinicolaou, which is intriguingly reminiscent of Fuller’s critique of Berger.

[the] eclecticism... of 'culture' ... strips artists of their responsibility to the question of the nondemonstrable. That question is, to me, the only one worthy of life's high stakes, and of the world of thought in the coming century. Any denial of that question is a menace... This menace implies the corruption of painting's honor – which thus far has remained intact in spite of the worst temptation of the state and of the market... The spirit of the times is surely not that of the merely pleasant: its mission remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to the nondemonstrable.

(Lyotard, 1982: 69)

Although I will resist commenting on Lyotard's problematic recourse to 'feminine'/'virginal' metaphors regarding painting's 'honor' remaining 'intact' in the face of a presumably therefore 'masculine'/'phallic' state and market, it is important to note that his return to this arcane form of neo-Kantianism, and his curiously anachronistic notion of the artist's pursuit of the 'immanent sublime', is achieved at the expense of any socially or historically-grounded analysis of art and culture. Indeed, specifically renouncing any such analysis, Lyotard goes so far as to completely divorce "the fields of cultural activities and artistic work", suggesting that these fields "must be posited separately and kept apart from each other", arguing that although artists may be "confronted with demands coming from a real or virtual audience, with the cultural market or industry. ... these demands are exterior to their writing or painting" (1990: 298). The obvious result of such rhetoric is not only the reinstatement of "the concept of the artist/author as some kind of asocial being, blessed with genius, waiting for divine inspiration and exempt from all normal rules of social intercourse" (Wolff, 1993b: 12), but also the obscuring of the contextual factors which are fundamentally implicated in all artistic and cultural

production.⁹ Thus, despite Lyotard's otherwise compelling analysis of the 'postmodern condition',¹⁰ Daniel Herwitz is convincing when he suggests that Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime clearly "fails... to do justice to the complexities of postmodern art" (Herwitz, 1993: 280).

In contrast to the almost stereotypically extreme characterization of autonomous art which Lyotard's sublime idealism represents – wherein the socio-historical context in which the artist works is regarded, at best, as immaterial, at worst, as a mere distraction – it is interesting to turn now to a consideration of examples of theoretical work which, although firmly within the field of philosophical aesthetics, do much to belie this idealist stereotype. Perhaps understandably, given the arcane complexity of much aesthetic discourse, the stereotype which I describe is relatively common currency, as exemplified in the following statement by Vera Zolberg from her book, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* (1990): "Whereas humanist scholars try to avoid the Scylla of reducing art to its social function, social scientists dread the Charybdis of a purified, defunctionalized, formalistic conception of art" (Zolberg, 1990: 12). Interestingly, in a review of Zolberg's book, and in response to her dramatic vision of mythically opposed humanists and social

⁹ It is a similar vision of the artist, and a similar lack of contextualization, which inspired the development of the various *auteur* theories in film studies, in which the privileging of the role of the director serves to obscure the fundamentally collaborative nature of film making. As John Caughie has suggested of *auteurism*, "by adopting a fairly consistent romantic position in relation to creativity, it exposed film aesthetics to the contradictions of those romantic principles of individual creativity which formed the basis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism, when applied to an expressive form which was collective, commercial, industrial and popular" (Caughie, 1981: 13).

¹⁰ It should be noted at this stage that my comments are directed specifically at Lyotard's writings on art and culture (1982, 1984b, 1984c, 1989, 1990), and not at his broader thesis on postmodernism (1984a).

scientists, Mark Cyzyk has argued that “a cursory glance at the literature of aesthetics”, and, more specifically, a consideration of Arthur Danto’s “seminal article, ‘The Artworld’” – originally published in 1964 – “would suggest that aestheticians have been concerned with the social nature of art for at least twenty-five years” (Cyzyk, 1991: 192). Prompted initially by the work of Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, and, most significantly, Warhol – in the shape of his infamous *Brillo Box* (1964) – Danto suggested that, in the realm of contemporary art, “To mistake an artwork for a real object is no great feat when an artwork is the real object one mistakes it for” (1964: 136). Thus, for Danto: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (1964: 140). He goes on:

What in the end makes a difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is... It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible.
(Danto, 1964: 141-142)

Danto’s use of the phrase ‘these days as always’ is especially suggestive here, and the work of Paul Mattick elaborates this point, arguing that the contemporary challenge of ‘reading’ conceptual, anti-aesthetic, or postmodern art has served to illuminate only more clearly a particular feature of *all* art: namely, that “its readability depends on mastery of the cultural code utilized in its production” (1993d: 256). Thus, Mattick suggests, “The rise of art-world anti-aesthetics sets a valuable example for philosophers of art, suggesting the need for a critical engagement with the assumptions, and so with the history, of aesthetics itself” (1993d: 258). Although Danto’s ‘artworld’ proves to be a somewhat

slippery concept,¹¹ the contextualist character of Danto's approach is plain when he states: "Fashion... favors certain rows of the style matrix: museums, connoisseurs, and others are makeweights in the Artworld" (1964: 144). In subsequent elaborations of his theoretical approach,¹² Danto continued to interrogate the distinction between 'works of art and mere real things', addressing Marcel Duchamp's 'readymades' – objects which continue to hold a perennial fascination for philosophers of art, Steven Goldsmith suggesting that the readymades "have become the central hurdle over which any attempt to define art must leap" (1983: 197).¹³

Beyond questions of philosophical definition, however, Duchamp's readymades have also prompted a more socio-historically grounded debate, regarding the institutional emasculation of the aesthetico-political potential of these artifacts by the very 'artworld' which, Danto suggests, makes the readymades possible in the first place. As Paul Mattick observes, it was ultimately the case that Duchamp's readymades "had to be manufactured in series to meet the demand of museum collections" (1993e: 10), a process in which Duchamp himself was a willing, if perhaps (one might like to think) ironic participant. Thus, Mattick argues, "the museum by folding the readymade within its embrace removed the sting of its challenge to earlier conceptions of art" (1993e: 10). Andreas Huyssen clearly shares Mattick's view, suggesting that "Dada's frontal attack was unsuccessful... because even then bourgeois culture was able to co-opt any kind of attack made on it"

¹¹ See Herwitz (1993: 209-211).

¹² See Danto (1981, 1992). See also the relevant essays in Rollins (1993) for a selection of interesting commentaries on Danto's work.

¹³ On Duchamp's infamous *Fountain*, see Camfield (1991). See also the collection of essays in De Duve (1991).

(Huyssen, 1986: 147). It is interesting to note that some observers adopt a rather different attitude toward such notions of ‘co-option’. For example, citing Huyssen’s notion that “*co-option* by society implies neutralization”, Nicholas Zurbrugg suggests, considerably more optimistically, that: “On the contrary, it could be argued that the assimilation of dadaist or surrealist concepts signals the conceptual *invasion* of the public sensibility and the triumphant institutionalization of innovative ideas” (Zurbrugg, 1993: 138; emphasis in original). In rather more measured tones, resisting Serge Guilbaut’s (1983) thesis that, ultimately, abstract expressionism became simply a tool of American Cold War propaganda, Casey Blake has argued that: “A single minded focus on capitalism’s ability to co-opt a once-pure avant-garde... obscures the extent to which modern art itself enjoys a significant degree of power as a result of its institutionalization over many decades” (Blake, 1993: 249). This debate suggests, then, that ‘the artworld’ functions as more than simply a site of theoretical legitimation, but also as a site of significant social, political, and economic power.

It can therefore be argued that Danto’s theory of the artworld represents an early and significant contextualist intervention in the philosophy of art. However, notwithstanding Richard Shusterman’s contention that “it was probably Arthur Danto who first made analytical aesthetics pay attention to the ineliminable socio-historical dimension of our appreciation of art” (1992a: 21-22), I would suggest that Danto’s conceptualization of the artworld, despite its apparently materialist grounding, ultimately fails to evade the ideology of aesthetic autonomy characteristic of much work in philosophical aesthetics. Thus, the aspects of ‘social organization’ which George Dickie would later tease from

Danto's initial formulation are elided by Danto himself, in favour of an understanding of the 'artworld' as "the conceptual or philosophical basis of art that transcends its physical dimension" (Goldsmith, 1983: 203), and the fact that it is ultimately theory alone which is held to allow us to differentiate between 'works of art and mere real things' renders this understanding acutely problematic. As Stephen Davies has suggested, "just as no artist can succeed in casting aside what Danto has called 'the atmosphere of theory' which surrounds art... so no artist can succeed in casting aside an *atmosphere of practice*" (Davies, 1991: 141; emphasis in original).¹⁴ And, as Daniel Herwitz has argued, "A variety of contextual factors such as history, society, the art market, taste, and the artist's education, all of which reside, in some sense, outside the artwork (as well as 'in it'), might also serve to define the artwork" (Herwitz, 1993: 28). Thus, Herwitz suggests,

In its extreme form, the subordination of the visual aspects of an artwork to a theory becomes a living illustration of Danto's picture of what an artwork is but with results which are far different from anything Danto would have expected. For what is evidenced is the attenuation of the artwork, its loss of interest, and its subsumption under a hyperbolic set of references to the written word (then why not simply dispense with the artwork and read the books?).

(Herwitz, 1993: 18)

As noted above, Danto's theory of the 'artworld' was subsequently further developed by George Dickie, in his 'institutional theory of art' (1971, 1974, 1984), for which he proposed the following "formal definition... A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artifact 2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation" (Dickie,

¹⁴ It is interesting to compare Davies' proposition with Peter Fuller's observations regarding painting as a "material process" (Fuller, 1980a: 8), as noted above.

1971: 101). Not surprisingly, this curiously unhelpful, ineluctably circular definition – which, again, took as its primary focus the readymades of Duchamp – has found few supporters, and a not inconsiderable number of critics, from both traditionalist and more ‘progressive’ perspectives.¹⁵ In Steven Goldsmith’s view, for example, any such ‘institutional theory’ is “endlessly problematic” (1983: 205), representing “a conservative effort to organize the aesthetic experience that is at least confusingly diverse and perhaps outright chaotic” (1983: 207). Similarly, for Mark Wartofsky, Dickie’s theory “is ideological... it acquiesces in, nay, institutionalizes the *status quo*, as *whatever* the artworld declares it to be” (1980: 241; emphasis in original). Thus, as Richard Shusterman suggests, “such analytic attempts at a social and historical understanding of art are very narrow, internalistic, and rarefied” (1992a: 22). It must be acknowledged, however, that Dickie has made it clear that “the institutional theory of art is supposed to be a *classificatory* theory of art – a theory that explains why a work of art is a work of art” (Dickie, 1988: ix; emphasis in original), and one in which the ‘artworld’ functions as “the *background context* within which art is created by artists” (Dickie, 1993: 70; emphasis in original). Thus, for Dickie, “why a work of art is valuable or disvaluable is an additional question” (1988: ix): a question which he went on to address in his subsequent work, although one which, for Dickie, remained firmly rooted within the ambit of philosophical aesthetics.¹⁶

¹⁵ See, for example, McGregor (1977), Wartofsky (1980), Goldsmith (1983), Wollheim (1987), Brough (1991), and Davies (1991).

¹⁶ See Dickie (1988). See also Davies (1991) for a thorough-going critique of Dickie’s institutional theory.

Given the arguably minor contribution to a ‘social and historical understanding of art’ which Dickie’s institutional theory represents – one which post-dates Arnold Hauser’s *Social History of Art* (1962) by fully twenty years – a more cynical observer might think that the intellectual heat which Dickie’s intervention generated was simply a reflection of the paucity of critical socio-historical thought within the field of philosophical aesthetics. Such a view may, indeed, be warranted, although the degree of conservative reaction to Dickie’s proposal also serves to highlight the extent to which the introduction of fundamentally social issues to the realm of aesthetics was perhaps regarded by many of his colleagues as something of a disciplinary *faux pas*. From this perspective, then, Dickie’s institutional theory can perhaps be seen – in a manner analogous to the Duchamp readymade – as a timely provocation within its own institutional context.

Thus, despite their weaknesses, the theoretical interventions of Danto and Dickie can be regarded as having had a significant and lasting impact on the field of philosophical aesthetics, representing – if perhaps in only a relatively modest fashion – the rejection of aesthetic idealism and the introduction of socially and historically-grounded modes of analysis into this otherwise somewhat esoteric field of study. In light of the early influence of Danto and Dickie, perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of recent work in this field is what might be characterized as a socio-historical turn in the philosophy of art, resulting in a considerably more sceptical and holistic approach to its object of study.¹⁷ Daniel Herwitz, for example, is typical of this trend, suggesting that:

¹⁷ A similar, and broadly contemporaneous, contextualist turn is evident within the discipline of art history, although often with a more specifically Marxist orientation. I will return to this point in more detail in the following section.

the idea that paintings have meaning purely on some retinal basis, that their visual character is not partly structured by a culture whose conceptual schemes, social attitudes, and specific requirements impose norms of production and visual reception, is at best a fabrication – currently under correction – of the eighteenth century.

(Herwitz, 1993: 2)

Herwitz goes on to cite briefly the work of Michael Baxandall on fifteenth century

Italian painting, which suggests that:

some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his experience. Among these variables are categories with which he classified his visual stimuli, the knowledge he will use to supplement what his immediate vision gives him, and the attitude he will adopt to the kind of artificial object seen.

(Baxandall, 1988: 40)

Although we may wish to be cautious with regard to Baxandall's notion of determination, his 'primer in the social history of pictorial style' offers a detailed and convincing account of the "period eye" of the Quattrocento (1988: 29). Baxandall's historically-specific thesis also proves to be highly suggestive in terms of contemporary cultural analysis,¹⁸ and – in the work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz – has been productively generalized to address a broad range of artistic and cultural practices.¹⁹

As noted earlier, the work of Paul Mattick is also typical of the recent socio-historical turn within philosophical aesthetics. Mattick argues for an understanding of aesthetics "based not on the use of such ahistorical concepts as 'aesthetic experience' but on the analysis of art as a cultural phenomenon", advocating "a more serious engagement with the historical specifics of art" (1993d: 258), and suggesting that "aesthetic ideas, of the

¹⁸ I pursue the suggestive nature of Baxandall's work in more detail in Chapter Six.

¹⁹ I will return briefly to Geertz, and related work in cultural anthropology, in the following section.

present as well as the past, can be fully understood when seen not only in relation to intellectual and other social contexts but as themselves constructed in history” (Mattick, 1993b: 3).²⁰ The work of Richard Shusterman (1992a, 1993a, 1993b) is also relevant here, emphasizing the “social and class-hierarchical foundation of aesthetic judgment” (1993b: 96), while also recognizing “the complexities of art and its relations to society” (1993b: 119). Similarly, Preben Mortensen argues that “to understand the nature of art we need to recognize the historical contingencies which shaped our ideas of art” (1997: 5), while Paul Crowther’s notion of a “critical aesthetics... focuses on the way art and aesthetic experience involve an interplay between what is constant and what is historically determined in our engagement with the world” (1993: 206), suggesting that the aesthetic might be better thought of as “historically mediated” (1994: 165). Thus, the work of these theorists serves to indicate a revitalized contemporary research agenda for philosophical aesthetics: one which recognizes the need to move beyond the notion of autonomous art to an understanding of art that acknowledges its social and historical contextualization.

Art as Ideology

Contrary to the aesthetic idealism of ‘autonomous art’, the approach that I have identified as ‘art as ideology’ is one in which, in its more extreme versions, art itself is seen as ideological, simply expressing the socio-historical values and beliefs of a particular culture. This approach involves a critique – and often a rejection – of traditional notions of the aesthetic, and an emphasis on the contextual aspects of cultural practice. In its

²⁰ See also Mattick (1993a, 1993c, 1993e, 1991).

‘weaker’ form, this approach is evident in the American sociological tradition, and in the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; in this case, the emphasis is on the fundamentally social – if not necessarily ideological – nature of all artistic and cultural activity. In its ‘stronger’ form the understanding of art as ideology is associated primarily with Marxist theories of art and culture; here, the tendency is towards the analytic ‘uncovering’ of the ideologically encoded aspects of cultural forms and practices.²¹

Within American sociology, the symbolic-interactionist ‘artworlds’ theory of Howard Becker (1974, 1976, 1982; see also Gilmore, 1990) is broadly contemporaneous with Arthur Danto’s conceptualization of the ‘artworld’ (1964), although there the similarity ends. Unlike Danto’s philosophically-motivated approach, the symbolic-interactionist account of ‘artworlds’ disregards the textual reading of art forms, focusing instead on an analysis of social and institutional conventions. Thus, as Judith Blau suggests, its guiding principle is “to boldly deny any validity to the aesthetic premise altogether and to state that art is nothing but a social definition” (Blau, 1988: 272). But Blau is surely wrong to suggest that Danto’s theoretical approach represents a “similar perspective, arguing that art is no more than that which institutions label as art” (1988: 272). Although her contention is arguably more accurate in relation to Dickie’s classificatory ‘institutional

²¹ It is not my intention here to offer either a history of these theoretical trajectories – all now daunting intellectual fields – or to dwell on the semantic possibilities of the term ‘ideology’ – an equally disheartening task: David McLellan, for example, suggesting that ideology is “the most elusive concept in the whole of social science” (1986: 1). For typical collections of work in the American sociological tradition, see the following footnote; on Bourdieu, see Jenkins (1992) and Robbins (1991); on Marxist aesthetics, see Johnson (1984) and Laing (1978); on ideology, see McLellan (1986), Eagleton (1991), and Thompson (1984). See also Wolff (1993b) for a particularly useful survey of many of these issues.

theory', both Danto and Dickie, as indicated in the previous section, retain a fundamental interest in the conceptual and philosophical basis of 'art'. In this sense, the links between Becker's work and that of Pierre Bourdieu are perhaps more readily apparent.

In recent years, the American sociological tradition has been the source of an interesting range of work in the arts, although Janet Wolff has noted its disabling tendency towards "empiricism", and its "lack of a critical sociological perspective" (1993b: 31). Somewhat less charitably, John Robinson has likened the "chi-squared sociologists" of this tradition to "squinty-eyed bean counters" (1984: 101). But, as Ben Agger argues, "it would be a serious mistake to ignore this mainstream cultural empiricism" (1992: 133), and much of the work remains of considerable value, perhaps offering, as Wolff suggests, a useful corrective to the "over-theoreticism" of much European cultural theory (1993b: 32).²² More recent work in this tradition, such as that of Vera Zolberg (1990) and Anne Bowler (1994), has served to allay the critique of positivist empiricism, engaging more directly with questions of value and aesthetics.

In a manner similar to much of the work in the American tradition, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1984, 1993) has argued persuasively, and at not inconsiderable length, for the contingently socio-historical nature of the categories and values of high culture, suggesting clear links between social class and cultural taste, which

²² See, for example, DiMaggio (1982a, 1982b, 1986, 1987, 1991); Peterson (1976); Crane (1987, 1992, 1994); Foster and Blau (1989); Balfe and Wyszomirski (1985); Balfe (1993); Levine (1988, 1993); and Blake (1993). The two latter writers are technically historians, although Levine's account of the 'emergence of cultural hierarchy in America' (1988) and Blake's analysis of the controversy surrounding the siting of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York's Federal Plaza (1993) are models of sociologically-grounded – and historically-detailed – cultural research.

the mystificatory notion of the autonomous aesthetic only serves to obscure. Thus, for example, Bourdieu suggests that:

the question of the meaning and the value of the work of art, like the question of the specificity of aesthetic judgement... can be resolved only within a social history of the field, a history which is linked to a sociology of the conditions of the establishment of the specific aesthetic disposition (or attitude) that the field calls for in each one of its states.

(Bourdieu, 1993: 258)

Notwithstanding the persuasive nature of Bourdieu's thesis, however, and while acknowledging Raymond Williams' cautionary remarks regarding idealist analyses of "the works of art themselves" (1981: 119), I would argue that there is clearly a need to differentiate between Bourdieu's compelling 'social critique of the judgement of taste' (1984) and the textual analysis of art forms, the latter representing a particular mode of cultural investigation which Bourdieu's substantial body of work chooses to ignore. Thus, Richard Jenkins is surely correct to observe that Bourdieu offers only "a sociology of cultural consumption", suggesting that we will "look in vain in Bourdieu for a sociology of practices of cultural *production*" (1992: 130; emphasis in original).²³ For some critics, however, it is Bourdieu's location within the discipline of sociology which is problematic: for example, at its most dramatic, Ian Heywood claims that social theories of art represent a form of sociological "violence" towards art and artists (1997: 46). Interestingly, however, Heywood fails to engage with Bourdieu's work, perhaps the most sustained and

²³ At this stage, it should be noted that Bourdieu's empirically-substantiated analysis of cultural consumption is of a considerably different variety to the consumptionist perspective prevalent in cultural studies, which is discussed below in my consideration of 'cultural populism'. Bourdieu's thesis finds interesting parallels, however, in Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory* (1979), which, with its analytical categories of 'Transient', 'Rubbish', and 'Durable', offers a fascinating social anthropology of the 'creation and destruction of value'.

thorough-going sociological critique of traditional aesthetic principles. Rather, in his review of the work of Howard Becker, Janet Wolff, and Peter Bürger, Heywood tends to employ caricatures of both the heroic, misunderstood artist – “Dedication and sacrifice require faith that the activity is important, even if it goes largely unrecognised” (1997: 40) – and the practitioners of the “bogus science” (1997: 31) of sociology – “Wolff’s Marxist sociologist sees things as pretty straightforward” (1997: 41). Such caricatures do justice neither to the social complexities of contemporary artistic practice nor to the finely balanced ‘sociological aesthetics’ of Wolff’s theoretical project (Wolff, 1993a).²⁴

In a similarly sceptical, if considerably more cogent, critique, Paul Crowther has opposed the “sociological imperialism” of Bourdieu’s intellectual project, arguing that Bourdieu “offers no justification whatsoever as to why sociology in the grand style should have a privileged *modus operandi* which enables it to at least aspire to universality” (1994: 161). And in a critique of Bourdieu’s conceptualization of “dominant norms”, John Frow has queried the analyst’s “own critical exteriority to... [these] dominant norms” (1987: 72). Thus, notwithstanding Bourdieu’s critique of the ‘distinction’ which typifies the ambitions of the ‘dominant classes’, it is undeniable that his own prodigious academic project – with its “elevated style” (Jenkins, 1992: 171) – successfully achieves its own distinctive ‘distinction’. Despite criticisms such as these, however, Bourdieu’s work represents an enormously valuable, if undeniably problematic, contribution to an understanding of the complexities of contemporary culture.

²⁴ Although published in 1997, it is also revealing that Heywood’s book fails to address the revised second editions of Wolff’s texts, both of which were published in 1993 (Wolff, 1993a, 1993b).

The contemporary field of cultural anthropology offers a critique of traditional aesthetics which has interesting parallels with Bourdieu's thesis. Traditionally, anthropologists have viewed the cultural artifacts of 'primitive' societies as exotic curiosities, with the emphasis on cataloguing and categorization, and any evaluation of these works has tended to be undertaken within the framework of Western aesthetic norms. In more recent years, however, this traditional view has been radically challenged and rigorously interrogated. Grounded in an understanding of art as an inherently social practice, the cross-cultural analysis and evaluation of cultural forms and practices serves to highlight the fundamentally Eurocentric nature of aesthetic discourse. Implicitly invoking Raymond Williams' 'social' definition of culture (1961: 41), and citing the previously noted work of Michael Baxandall (1988), Clifford Geertz has suggested that "the chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force, in whatever form and in result of whatever skill it may come, is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life" (Geertz, 1976: 1475). Geertz goes on to argue that:

The capacity, variable among peoples as it is among individuals, to perceive meaning in pictures (or poems, melodies, buildings, pots, dramas, statues) is... a product of collective experience... It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art, which is in fact but a sector of it, is possible.

(Geertz, 1976: 1488)

Raising interesting questions with regard to 'authenticity' and cultural value, James Clifford has developed Geertz' argument, suggesting that "the dominant, interlocking contexts of art and anthropology are no longer self-evident and uncontested. There are

other contexts, histories, and futures in which non-Western objects and cultural records may ‘belong’” (Clifford, 1988: 248).²⁵

From a Marxist perspective, the notion of art as ideology finds its earliest examples in the work of John Berger (1972) and T.J. Clark (1973, 1974), involving the analysis of what Clark has described as ‘the conditions of artistic creation’. This work was enormously influential in the later development of the New Art History, the basic premises of which have been usefully summarised by Rees and Borzello:

Its central interests lie in an investigation of how the social order is represented and endorsed by art and in analysis of the institutions of art, including art history itself... its aim is to ‘deconstruct’ the most familiar and unquestioned ideas, in particular the notion that the work of art is a direct expression of the artist’s personality, the belief that art contains eternal truths free of class and time, and the conviction that art is somehow ‘above’ society or out of its reach.

(Rees and Borzello, 1986: 8)²⁶

John Berger’s seminal television series and collection of essays, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), represented a radical and polemical response to the innate conservatism of Kenneth Clark’s *Civilization*, an earlier television series in which, as Peter Fuller has suggested, the history of Western art was portrayed as “a succession of isolated men of genius” (Fuller, 1980a: 3). In sharp contrast to Clark’s inherent idealism, Berger’s insightful analyses of the nude and the landscape tradition in oil painting convincingly demonstrated that these were far from ‘neutral’ cultural objects. Berger’s study was among the first of its kind, and it still remains highly influential today. But it is interesting

²⁵ See also Clifford and Marcus (1986), Marcus and Myers (1995) and Marcus (1990).

²⁶ See also Tagg (1992a) and Alpers (1993).

to observe the degree of ambivalence which pervades Berger's ideological analyses of cultural artifacts, evident in his identification of the paradoxical nature of the history and development of oil painting:

[its] essential character... has been obscured by an almost universal misreading of the relationship between its 'tradition' and its 'masters'. Certain exceptional artists in exceptional circumstances broke free of the norms of the tradition and produced work that was diametrically opposed to its values; yet these artists are acclaimed as the tradition's supreme representatives.

(Berger, 1972: 109)

Although there are interesting parallels here with the debate on the 'co-option' of radical art discussed in the previous section, this should not be allowed to obscure the extent to which this statement reveals a degree of 'residual idealism' in Berger's argument: an idealism which coexists somewhat uncomfortably with the sustained force of his ideological critique of Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, in which he observes "the special relation between oil painting and property" (1972: 106). Berger himself has subsequently acknowledged that "the immense theoretical weakness... [of *Ways of Seeing*] is that I do not make clear what relation exists between what I call 'the exception' (the genius) and the normative tradition" (Berger, 1978: 702). Yet despite this self-acknowledged 'theoretical weakness', it is clear that *Ways of Seeing* represents an accurate statement of Berger's theoretical approach, and it is no coincidence that his highly negative critique of the Marxist art historian Nicos Hadjinicolaou's *Art History and Class Struggle* (1978) was entitled 'In Defence of Art' (Berger, 1978).

Hadjinicolaou rejects any notion of the aesthetic, arguing that "Art does not exist. To speak of Art is... a feature of bourgeois aesthetic ideology" (1978: 179), and suggesting that "the pleasure felt by the spectator on viewing a picture, and the correspondence of his

aesthetic ideology to the picture's visual ideology, are one and the same thing" (1978: 180). Thus, in Hadjinicolaou's view, "from now on the idealist question 'What is beauty?' or 'Why is this work beautiful?' must be replaced by the materialist question, 'By whom, when and for what reasons was this work thought beautiful?'" (1978: 183). Although such a question might not seem particularly amiss in the context of Berger's own theoretical approach, in its extreme form as proposed by Hadjinicolaou in his concept of 'visual ideology', this question represents, for Berger, an unacceptable reductionism. In response to Hadjinicolaou's 'hard-line' stance, Berger argues that: "The culture of capitalism has reduced paintings, as it reduces everything which is alive, to market commodities, and to an advertisement for other commodities. The new reductionism of revolutionary theory... is in danger of doing something similar" (Berger, 1978: 103).²⁷

Given Peter Fuller's critique of Berger's earlier work – on the basis that "it places insufficient emphases on the specificities of painting" (Fuller, 1980a: 8) – it is fascinating to observe that Berger, in comparable fashion, accuses Hadjinicolaou of having "no theory about *the act* of painting or *the act* of looking at pictures" (Berger, 1978: 703; emphasis in original). Thus, despite the marked differences between the two men – reflected in Fuller's "rampant traditionalism" (Osborne, 1989: 46) and Berger's 'left idealism' – it is apparent that, although approached from different poles of the ideological spectrum, their respective positions can be seen to be intriguingly similar, at least in this one important respect. Hence, notwithstanding the sometimes ambivalent and contradictory nature of

²⁷ More recently, Elizabeth Chaplin has been similarly critical of Hadjinicolaou's "theoretical straitjacket" (1994: 65), contrasting it negatively with T.J. Clark's more empirically-based methodology.

John Berger's work – and despite Janet Wolff's contention that Berger's critique of Hadjinicolaou is unacceptable in that it "reintroduces a metaphysical notion of the transcendental subject" (Wolff, 1993b: 131) – his approach offers a clear understanding of the inherently social nature of artistic practice, while avoiding the ideological reductionism of Hadjinicolaou's position. In Berger's work, then, the acknowledgement that some 'great' art is profoundly ideological is accompanied by a deep commitment to the notion that art – 'great' or otherwise – might not be *only* ideological.

Hadjinicolaou's extreme ideological reductionism finds its more recent counterpart in a 'post-Marxist' polemic by Tony Bennett, in which he rails against traditionalist aesthetics in all its forms – Marxist or otherwise – arguing that "aesthetic discourse... constitutes a really useless form of knowledge" (Bennett, 1990: 149). Hence, Bennett suggests, "Susceptible to neither logical nor empirical demonstration, the existence of a distinctive aesthetic faculty is always ultimately sustained, but entirely intra-discursively, by the projection of a set of conditions in which the subject of value can be represented as universal" (1990: 151).²⁸ Although Bennett's arguments are often powerful and convincing – I will address, for example, the 'false universality' of Western art music in Chapter Three – his frontal assault on 'aesthetic discourse' perhaps does little to advance contemporary debate in the field. Citing none of the recent contextualist work in the field

²⁸ Anticipating Bennett's attack on the shortcomings of Marxist aesthetics by over a decade, and echoing Hadjinicolaou's reductionist thesis, in his book *Art, An Enemy of the People* (1978) the English philosopher Roger Taylor argues that "the very concept of *art* is a bourgeois classificatory practice" (1978: 26; emphasis in original), going on to identify "the fraudulent status of art in Marxism" (1978: 59). For a range of similar arguments – and another catchy title – see also Taylor (1981).

– which, as noted above, adopts a considerably more sceptical attitude towards traditional aesthetic issues – Bennett’s target of a prototypical, idealist aesthetics turns out to be, at least in contemporary theoretical terms, something of a straw man, which he then proceeds to demolish with relative ease.²⁹ Furthermore, in response to the spurious universalism of traditionalist aesthetics, Bennett’s neo-Brechtian conceptualization of the aesthetic solely in terms of “political use-value” (1990: 166) seems unnecessarily reductive. It is interesting to note that Peter Fuller, one of Bennett’s ‘prime suspects’ in his assault on traditionalist aesthetics, had already offered his own convincing ‘pre-emptive strike’ against Bennett’s critique fully ten years earlier, arguing that the “occlusion of aesthetic sensitivity is itself ideologically determined: it involves capitulation to a reductionist way of seeing peculiar to the culture of the prevailing economic order” (Fuller, 1980a: 13).

Although Bennett’s recent, empirically-based work on museums has been a source of rich and suggestive insights (1995a, 1995b), his more theoretically-oriented interventions in the field of ‘cultural policy studies’ reveal an equally reductionist bent. Several widely-cited essays by Bennett served to set the agenda for this new field,³⁰ rejecting cultural studies commitment to “cultural critique” (1993: 83), and proposing an alternative course for cultural scholarship, namely that of “producing positive knowledges that can be effectively used within actually existing spheres of cultural policy formation” (1989: 7). Drawing on Ian Hunter’s genealogy of the institutional development of literary education

²⁹ On the re-publication of this article in book form – the article having been originally published in 1985 – Bennett himself noted the “regrettably iconoclastic” tone of the piece (Bennett, 1990: ix).

³⁰ See, for example, Bennett (1993, 1992, 1989). See also Cunningham (1993, 1992, 1989).

(1988a, 1988b), and on a specifically structuralist reading of Foucault's notion of 'governmentality',³¹ Bennett argues that "the field of culture needs to be thought of as constitutively governmental" (1992: 32), proposing a narrowly reductionist definition of culture as "a set of institutionally inscribed processes for shaping the attributes of populations, and particularly those of modern citizenries, which, if not directly governmental, are in some way governmentally constituted and superintended" (Bennett, 1989: 6). Bennett's proposals here not only overlook the extent to which much cultural and social theory – including cultural studies itself – has previously addressed questions of cultural policy,³² but also offer a view of culture which is necessarily partial and incomplete: hence, although Bennett's studies of the development of the public art museum are 'thick' in terms of a historical description of the governmental forces which have served to regulate culture, they are rather thin on an understanding of the full range of social, artistic and creative processes which, in the first place, serve to bring into being the artifacts, ideas and knowledges which constitute the objects of regulation.³³

³¹ See Foucault (1978). See also Burchell *et al.* (1991) and Dean (1994: 174-193).

³² For example, in the fields of sociology, media studies, and political economy in Britain (e.g. Lewis, 1990; Mulgan and Worpole, 1986; Garnham, 1987), and in cultural sociology and communications in the United States (e.g. Mulcahy and Swain, 1982; Pankratz and Morris, 1990; Balfe, 1993; Carey, 1989). In the case of cultural studies, the work of Williams and Hoggart revealed considerable direct involvement in cultural politics (e.g. Williams, 1989a, 1989b; Hoggart, 1970b, 1970c). It is interesting to note that very little of this literature – much of it highly sensitive to institutional and policy issues – has been cited by those within cultural policy studies. This urge to re-invent the policy wheel, and the accompanying absence of critical self-reflexivity, may be as much a comment on the institutional – and rhetorical – demands of creating and sustaining a new intellectual and academic 'space' as it is on the relevance and usefulness of these earlier sources – I will return to the questions of 'positionality' and disciplinarity in Chapter Six.

³³ For convincing critiques of Bennett's approach, see O'Regan (1992a, 1992b) and Miller (1994). See also McGuigan (1996), and my own critique of the field of cultural policy studies (Stanbridge, 1995).

Writing of the ‘anti-aesthetic’ positions of both Tony Bennett and Terry Eagleton,³⁴

Llewellyn Negrin has summarised the problem succinctly:

aesthetic judgements cannot simply be reduced to political ones. Just as it is important to criticize the pretence of aesthetics to be ‘apolitical’ and ‘amoral’, one should not reduce aesthetics to ethics either... the inadequacy of Bennett’s and Eagleton’s attempts to reduce the value of artworks to the political impacts that they make in their own time... [is that a] crudely reductionist position cannot account for the discrepancy between the immediate moral/political impact of a work and its long-term aesthetic significance.

(Negrin, 1989: 266-267)

Negrin’s comments bring to mind the issue which Janet Wolff has characterized as “the notorious problem of ‘the Greeks’” (Wolff, 1993b: 73): namely, the fact that any encounter with Marx’s own cultural writings must contend with the perhaps surprising degree of idealism inherent in his attitude towards Greek art. In the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx offers the following reflections:

the difficulty does not lie in understanding that the Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It rather lies in understanding why they still afford us aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment.

(quoted in Baxandall and Morawski, 1974: 137)

Wolff notes that “almost every book on Marxist aesthetics tries to solve for Marx the problem he found in explaining why it is that the art of the Greeks still gives us pleasure today, even though our conditions of existence are so entirely different from theirs” (Wolff, 1993b: 73). Generations of Marxist scholars have subsequently attempted to resolve what Hans Robert Jauss has described as this “idealist embarrassment” of Marxist

³⁴ Eagleton’s position on these issues is broadly similar to Bennett’s: see, for example, Eagleton (1976, 1990). I will return to Eagleton’s work on postmodernism in the following chapter.

aesthetics (Jauss, 1975): Dave Laing, for example suggests that “Marx failed to see that the modern admiration for Greek art owed less to some trans-historical essence in the works themselves than to the aesthetic ideologies or philosophies prevailing in modern societies and their corresponding cultural institutions” (Laing, 1978: 11). But however the ‘solution’ to this ‘notorious problem’ is framed, it serves to highlight the potential dangers of ideological and political reductionism: as Wolff suggests, “the persistence or rediscovery of artistic value poses a problem for a sociological or Marxist account which merely relates cultural production to its contemporary socio-economic base” (1993b: 74).

Given these comments, and notwithstanding Wolff’s claim that Berger’s critique of ideological reductionism represented the reintroduction of “a metaphysical notion of the transcendental subject” (Wolff, 1993b: 131), it is interesting to observe that it is the attempt to balance aesthetic and sociological issues which has characterized her own later work. Significantly, therefore, in the second edition of her *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (1993a), the original concluding sentence – “if the debate is between sociology and aesthetics, sociology has the last word” (1993a: 109) – was subsequently revised to read “aesthetics cannot be unaffected by sociology – nor sociology dismissive of the aesthetic” (1993a: 115). Wolff’s revised position – in which aesthetic factors are conceded a degree of analytical primacy alongside a clear recognition of the contingent socio-historical nature of art and culture – serves to delineate her proposed project of a ‘sociological aesthetics’ (1993a: 105-115): a project which, if perhaps remaining methodologically underdeveloped

in Wolff's own work, represents a suggestive and valuable contribution to an understanding of the complexities of contemporary cultural forms and practices.³⁵

In considering the 'autonomous art'- 'art as ideology' axis of the analytical framework proposed in Figure 1, it is apparent that in both traditionalist and revisionist approaches the focus on the aesthetic – whether in terms of its validation or rejection – generally involves the textual analysis of cultural forms. Although this is less evident in the case of many sociologically-based approaches, in the fields of philosophical aesthetics and art history the orientation remains highly textualist. Significantly, however, the importance which contrasting approaches assigns to *contextual* issues is markedly different, such issues being regarded, to varying degrees, as either immaterial (in the case of 'autonomous art') or determining (in the case of 'art as ideology'). Although there may be an element of caricature in this characterization of these oppositional poles, in the foregoing review it may have become clear that – in their more extreme manifestations – such caricature is more than warranted. As the title of my chapter suggests, this is a spectrum of work which runs the gamut from the 'sublime' autonomy of idealist aesthetics to the reductionist determinism of 'anti-aesthetic' theory.

In the discussion which follows of the theoretical approaches which I have identified as occupying the 'critique of mass culture'- 'cultural populism' axis it will become

³⁵ In addition to Wolff's work (e.g. 1995, 1993a, 1993b, 1992, 1990), and to the previously cited texts in philosophical aesthetics, sociology, and cultural anthropology, an eclectic range of contemporary work exhibits a similar concern with both aesthetic and contextual issues. See, for example, Witkin (1995), Barrett (1988), Tagg (1992a), Regan (1992), and Connor (1992).

apparent that such approaches tend to eschew textual readings of cultural artifacts, displaying, respectively, broadly 'productionist' and 'consumptionist' biases. Thus, from the former perspective, the 'commodified' products of mass culture are regarded as beneath interpretation, or unworthy of textual analysis, the commercial conditions of their production being considered as sufficient evidence on which to condemn them, while from the latter perspective the focus is generally on questions of consumption, and the 'uses' to which popular cultural products are put in the context of 'everyday life'. Here, then, in contrast to the artistic and aesthetic textualism of the 'autonomous art'- 'art as ideology' axis, the focus is on competing contextualist conceptualizations of 'culture'.

The Critique of Mass Culture

Raymond Williams has characterized the term 'culture' as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (1983: 90): a complexity which is highlighted in the discursive construction of the notions of 'high' and 'popular' culture which continue to inform much cultural debate. In one of its earliest incarnations, the conceptualization of 'culture', and of the 'cultured' individual, was intimately linked with a generally conservative understanding of art and aesthetics. This understanding, which still tends to inform the common, everyday usage of the term 'culture', first came to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, although it has its roots in eighteenth century aesthetic theory, with its accompanying discourse of ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual self-improvement. From this perspective, 'culture' refers to "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity"; thus, 'culture' is "music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film" (Williams, 1983: 90), and the terms 'art' and 'culture' are

therefore read as virtually synonymous. In contrast to ‘folk culture’, which has tended to be conceptualized as the indigenous and spontaneous cultural forms and practices of ‘the people’ (most often understood as either non-Western, pre-industrial, or anti-industrial), the concept of ‘mass culture’ – or, more generally, ‘popular culture’ – has come to denote the commodified cultural products of industrialised Western societies: from pulp fiction and Tin Pan Alley songs to television and rock music. In all cases, however – whether characterized as folk, mass, or popular – these cultural forms and practices are generally conceived as standing in contrast and opposition to the forms and practices of ‘high culture’ (or, in conservative terms, simply ‘culture’).³⁶

The art historian John Tagg has observed that the “unqualified antipathy to mass culture... and the determination to open up a rift between it and authentic art has a history going back... to nineteenth-century conservative cultural theory and evaluative aesthetics” (1992b: 160). Tagg’s contention is readily apparent in Matthew Arnold’s views on ‘culture’ in late nineteenth century England, which are neatly encapsulated in his famous ambition to make “the best that has been thought or known in the world current everywhere” (1960: 6). Accompanying this lofty ambition, Arnold’s views on the “raw and uncultivated” working classes (1960: 76) – those “vast, miserable unmanageable

³⁶ The definitional niceties of ‘folk’ versus ‘mass’ versus ‘popular’ culture need not concern us further at this stage, especially since most of those who subscribe to the mass culture critique similarly ignore such niceties, generally regarding ‘mass’ and ‘popular’ as interchangeable, while retaining a certain wistful nostalgia for a notion of ‘folk’ culture which no doubt never existed. For my purposes here, I will tend to use ‘mass’ and ‘popular’ similarly loosely and interchangeably, while attempting to avoid wistfulness. For discussions of the conceptual instability of the term ‘popular culture’, see Bennett (1980) and Frow (1992). For a more extended analysis of these issues, see Shiach (1989). I will return in more detail to the question of ‘folk’, ‘mass’, and ‘popular’ culture in Chapter Four.

masses of sunken people” (1960: 193) – are vividly clear, and the very title of Arnold’s key text, *Culture and Anarchy*, offers a stark reminder of the choices facing ‘cultivated’ humanity. As John Storey has observed, for Arnold, the term ‘anarchy’ appeared to operate virtually as “a synonym for popular culture” (1998: 23). Arnold’s work inaugurated the ‘culture and civilization’ tradition, which was later vigorously championed by F.R. Leavis in his *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930) – again, the choice of title leaves little doubt about what Leavis considered to be the cultural stakes in this particular game. Despite the innate conservatism of Leavis’ work, it is interesting to note that Stuart Hall expresses his “admiration for the seriousness with which [Leavis] understood that questions of culture and cultural change lay at the very heart of social life”, arguing that, other than in the Leavisite project, “no other place could be found within the humanities that took these questions seriously” (Hall, 1990: 14-15).

A more contemporary echo of the Leavisite approach is evident in Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), in which a damning critique of ‘mass entertainment’ – especially of the American variety – co-exists rather uneasily, and perhaps a little paradoxically, with a somewhat romanticized, and distinctly non-Leavisite, valorization of British working class culture, understood as an indigenous ‘folk’ culture. Hoggart’s work therefore represents an important – if at times rather contradictory – transitional ‘moment’ in the study of culture, particularly in terms of an analysis of the ‘lived experience’ of popular culture. Alongside contemporaneous works by Raymond Williams (1958, 1961) and E.P. Thompson (1963), the canonization of *The Uses of Literacy* as one of the founding texts of British cultural studies is now complete. Yet Hoggart’s work remains

distinctly problematic, in that the conservatism of the mass culture critique which it inherits from the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition is accompanied by an equally disabling cultural populism. This deeply equivocal approach, which Jim McGuigan has characterized as a “populism against mass-culture trajectory” in cultural analysis (1992: 56), finds its contemporary manifestations in the work of Jeremy Seabrook (1988) and in the ‘cultural democracy’ movement that championed community arts and political theatre in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, the evaluative nature of much contemporary theory is clearly evident, in which a mythical vision of ‘folk’ culture – i.e. ‘good’ popular culture – is counterpoised with a negative view of ‘mass’ culture – i.e. ‘bad’ popular culture.

For some artists, this ‘populism against mass culture’ perspective has led them to the idiosyncratic task of attempting to develop what they regard to be an ‘authentically’ popular cultural practice; i.e. a ‘people’s art’, untainted by either ‘bourgeois’ conceptions of ‘art’ or the commercialism of ‘mass culture’. Perhaps the most striking example here is that of the British composer Cornelius Cardew, whose embracing of Maoism led him to publish his ‘Self-Criticism: Repudiation of Earlier Works’ (1974): works which he held to be the products of a “politically backward composer wrapped up in the abstractions of the avantgarde” (1974: 97). By adopting a more ‘populist’ approach, Cardew hoped to:

promote amongst progressive people a conscious and critical attitude – and finally an attitude of rejection – towards bourgeois music and encourage them to turn their attention to, and integrate themselves with, the progressive forces in present-day society, namely the politics and culture of the working class in its upsurge to wrest political power from the hands of the monopoly capitalist class.

(Cardew, 1974: 101-102)

But the fundamental problem with this “eccentric brand of socialist realism” (Gillmor, 1983: 1003) becomes all too clear when one encounters the banality and triteness – both

musical and lyrical – of Cardew’s subsequent People’s Liberation Music, which Georgina Born has characterized as “crudely determinist” (1987: 74). Notwithstanding Cardew’s virulent anti-bourgeois rhetoric, Tony Bennett’s observations on the problems of attempts to appropriate the discourse of bourgeois aesthetics for socialism appear especially apposite: “such discourse produces its ignorants and, however benign, an accompanying condescension which serves as a blockage to both political analysis and cultural policy formation” (Bennett, 1990: 165). Thus, it becomes apparent that inherent in any such attempt to create a ‘people’s art’ – Marxist or otherwise – is an implicit rejection not only of high art, but also of existing forms of popular culture, in favour of an ‘ideologically correct’ paternalism, which simply echoes the conservative paternalism of traditional autonomous aesthetics. As David Chaney has argued:

Even within Marxism, despite beginning with a self-avowed philosophical attack on established beliefs, there had in practice been a successful evasion of discovering or articulating an indigenous aesthetic in popular culture. Instead of confronting real issues, cultural theorists had too often been hijacked by the intellectual hubris of formulating an ‘appropriate’ culture for the masses.

(Chaney, 1994: 13)

The recent work of the Russian émigré artists Komar and Melamid, although less ideologically motivated and arguably less patronising than the later work of Cardew, confronts similar problems. In their “search for a people’s art”, (Melamid, 1994: 334), Komar and Melamid conducted a telephone survey, sponsored by *The Nation*, in which 1,001 adult Americans were asked a series of wide-ranging questions on their tastes in art and painting, including their favourite colours, styles, and content. On the basis of these responses, Komar and Melamid produced *America’s Most Wanted* painting, reflecting the tastes of the American public as expressed in the survey: a natural landscape, with wild

animals, people in a group, soft curves, and lots of blue. The pair also produced *America's Least Wanted* painting – an angular abstract in reds, golds and greys – and went on to conduct similar surveys in a wide range of countries.³⁷

Given the vigorously 'postmodern' character of much of their earlier work – which includes the paintings *Arles*, *Portraits of World Leaders with Right Ear Cut Off*, *Ronald Reagan as a Centaur*, and the *Nostalgic Social Realism* series, as well as the erection of *The Temple of Komar and Melamid* in Jerusalem (see Ratcliff, 1989) – one could be forgiven for thinking that *America's Most Wanted* painting might be just another of Komar and Melamid's amusingly ironic creations. However, in a lengthy interview with *The Nation*, Alexander Melamid's guileless sincerity is strikingly obvious: "I feel myself, as an artist and as a citizen, just totally obsolete. I don't know why I am here, what I am doing... That's why we wanted to ask the people. For us... it's a sincere thing to understand something, to change the course" (Melamid, 1994: 335). Notwithstanding this admirable ingenuousness, however, the fact surely remains that Komar and Melamid find themselves in the same artistic *cul de sac* which Cardew explored so fruitlessly in his later work, and are therefore confronted with a similar problem: namely, how to pursue an artistic practice which, on the one hand, evades the specious universalism of 'bourgeois' conceptions of 'art', yet, on the other, avoids the patronising banality which almost inevitably awaits attempts at a 'people's art'. But perhaps, more fundamentally, the problem lies in the very framing of the question, highlighting the fact that, paradoxically,

³⁷ See Komar and Melamid (2000: 16-17) for reproductions of 'Canada's Most Wanted' and 'Canada's Most Unwanted' paintings.

the notion of a ‘people’s art’ – conceived of specifically as a rejection of ‘bourgeois’ values – remains an inherently ‘bourgeois’ concept: one in which the rejection of existing forms of mass or popular culture is also all too evident.

The critique of mass culture is similarly apparent in much work in the fields of philosophical aesthetics and art criticism, in that the products of mass or popular culture are generally considered to be unworthy of aesthetic appraisal, any such analysis being confined to the objects of ‘high’ art. As Janet Wolff has observed (1993a: 14), this tendency is readily apparent in the work of critics and philosophers of art such as Wollheim (1980) and Gombrich (1960), in whose company I would also include Clement Greenberg (1939), with his clearly evaluative distinctions between the merely ‘kitsch’ and the more profound ‘avant-garde’. Yet Wolff is surely correct to highlight the fact that theorists such as these are also “well aware of the contingent and social nature of artistic practice” (1993a: 14), a point which is amplified by the previously noted socio-historical turn in philosophical aesthetics.

This is not to imply, however, that all current work in the fields of art criticism or philosophy either displays this sociological grounding or avoids the now well-worn critique of mass culture, which perhaps finds its most extreme statement in the work of Jean Baudrillard. Although Baudrillard himself has observed that very little of his work “deals explicitly with art” (1986: 54), his dense, hyperbolic texts have been widely read and are highly influential in the field (e.g. 1983a, 1983b, 1988). Yet beyond his gleefully nihilistic pessimism, Baudrillard has little to offer by way of empirical substantiation of his

arguments, adopting a McLuhanite technological determinism shorn of McLuhan's cautiously optimistic anticipation of a 'global village' (1964), which Arthur Kroker has characterized as McLuhan's "technological humanism" (1984: 52). Instead, for Baudrillard, the television image epitomises the "hyperrealism of simulation" (1983a: 128), wherein the "whole pornography of information and communication" results in a world in which "all becomes transparence and immediate visibility" (1983a: 130). Thus, "we" experience the "obscenity" of the "ecstasy of communication" (1983a: 130), in which the now typically "schizo" individual "is himself obscene, the obscene prey of the world's obscenity" (1983a: 133). In a spirited response to such "splendidly exaggerated speculations" (1993: 145) by the "Nostradamus of postmodernism" (1993: 21), Nicholas Zurbrugg suggests that "cartographers of contemporary culture" might do well to "distinguish the facts of innovative cultural practice from the fictions of apocalyptic cultural theory" (1993: 166), arguing that "postmodern culture does not simply culminate in the depthless, valueless, centerless trivia that so many of its chroniclers impute to the last thirty or forty years" (1993: 164). Yet despite such sentiments, and in an otherwise stimulating, and unfashionably optimistic, study (in which the inspirational figure of John Cage looms large), the critique of mass culture is again clearly evident in Zurbrugg's work. Thus, revealing his true colours, Zurbrugg writes of the "overwhelming vulgarity and frivolity of popular, mass-market media culture" (1993: 97), and of the contrast between the "stupidities and superficialities of mass culture" and the "subtleties and substance of much of the postmodern avant-garde" (1993: 131).

The critique of mass culture is similarly evident in the context of Jean-François Lyotard's aesthetic of the "sublime" (e.g. 1982, 1984b, 1984c), as noted in the first section. Here, postmodern "eclecticism" (1984b: 76) – which is again contrasted with the "real sublime sentiment" (1984b: 81) of the postmodern avant-garde – is held to represent "the degree zero of contemporary general culture" (1984b: 76). In Lyotard's discourse, it is fascinating to observe the way in which, in a manner remarkably similar to Matthew Arnold's use of 'anarchy' over a century ago, the somewhat less dramatic term 'eclecticism' functions virtually as a code word for popular culture. Thus, for Lyotard, the "eclecticism of consumerism... panders to the habits of magazine readers, to the needs of consumers of standard industrial imagery, to the sensibility of the supermarket shopper" (1982: 68-69). Leaving aside for the moment the question of where Lyotard does his own shopping, it should be clear from these examples that the critique of mass culture is still alive and well.

As noted in the introductory section of this chapter, one of the most fascinating aspects of the mass culture critique is the manner in which it has inspired adherents from both sides of the political spectrum: as Richard Shusterman has observed, "the denigration of popular art or mass culture... provides a rare instance where right-wing reactionaries and Marxian radicals join hands and make common cause" (1992a: 169). Thus, alongside the Arnoldian and Leavisite positions outlined above, the critique of mass culture is also clearly discernible in much cultural theory of a Marxist orientation, which often displays a surprisingly similar conservatism. Perhaps the most obvious, and most often cited,

example here is that of the members of the Frankfurt School, with their pessimistic appraisals of the enervating effects of the predictable, ephemeral products of the ‘culture industry’, which are negatively contrasted with the challenging demands and lasting gratifications of the artifacts of ‘authentic’ culture. In Adorno and Horkheimer’s account, the “culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises... the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory; all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu” (1986: 139). Similarly, for Marcuse, the products of the culture industry “indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood... it becomes a way of life... Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour” (1968: 26-27).

This fear of the apparently debilitating effects of contemporary mass culture is similarly foregrounded in much of the post-war American literature on cultural theory. The Frankfurt School-inspired work of Dwight MacDonald is typical here, exemplifying what Andrew Ross has identified as a rhetoric about the “containment” of mass culture, with its Cold War metaphors of contamination, quarantine, and hygiene (Ross, 1989: 45). Thus, MacDonald – who apparently claims to have coined the phrase ‘mass culture’ (Ross, 1989: 43) – concludes one of his essays in typical fashion: “staying power is the essential virtue of one who would hold his own against the spreading ooze of Mass Culture” (MacDonald, 1957: 73). In a somewhat later period, even Herbert Gans – an ostensibly liberal champion of popular culture, less influenced by the Frankfurt School than by a Parsonian structural-functionalism – still implicitly invokes the mass culture

critique, deferring to the “greater and perhaps more lasting aesthetic gratification” provided by ‘high art’ (1974: 76). Highlighting the range of political adherents which the mass culture critique inspires, it is interesting to note that this perspective is clearly shared by Gans’ fellow-American Allan Bloom (1987), whose conservative analyses are accompanied by warnings of our increasing cultural degeneracy.

Although the critique of the Frankfurt School’s gloomy cultural predictions is now well-documented – John Thompson, for example, suggesting that Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of the culture industry is “ultimately and irredeemably flawed” (1990: 102) – it is interesting to observe the extent to which a certain antipathy towards mass culture has continued to inform much Marxist cultural theory. As noted earlier, John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) represented a radical critique of traditionalist approaches to art history. However, notwithstanding its Marxist radicalism, and having previously observed a considerable degree of ‘residual idealism’ and ambivalence in Berger’s ideological analyses, it is intriguing to note a similarly ambivalent attitude towards mass culture in Berger’s work. Thus, despite the opening essay’s acknowledged debt to Walter Benjamin, often regarded by cultural studies theorists as one of the earliest enthusiastic advocates of mass or popular culture,³⁸ Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* – especially in its final essay on the codes and ideologies of contemporary advertising – tends to succumb to the “puritanic rationalism” which Jan Bruck and John Docker (1991: 84) suggest is

³⁸ The ‘Benjamin phenomenon’ in contemporary cultural studies is a fascinating one, which I will return to below in my discussion of ‘cultural populism’. As I hope will become clear from this discussion, the cultural ambivalence of Berger’s text can then be read simply as a somewhat more accurate reflection of Benjamin’s own contradictory thesis.

characteristic of Frankfurt School orthodoxies, in which the culturally privileged critic addresses the “idolatrous gullible masses” (1991: 89).

A further, more recent, and perhaps less obvious example of the mass culture critique is offered by Fredric Jameson’s hugely influential, and explicitly Marxist, study of postmodernism (1991) – in which he proposes that “one fundamental feature” of the postmodern is the “effacement... of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” (1991: 2). This effacement, Jameson argues, has seen “the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern, from Leavis and the American New Criticism all the way to Adorno and the Frankfurt School” (1991: 2). Yet despite this apparent critique of these modernist ‘ideologues’, Jameson’s own perspective on the postmodern remains profoundly ambivalent, and postmodernism’s ‘mass culture’ influences and borrowings, which Jameson himself identifies, are characteristics which he ultimately decries. Hence, the “constitutive features of the postmodern” (1991: 6) are enumerated by Jameson as a succession of cultural negativities: a “new depthlessness” (1991: 6), the “waning of affect” (1991: 10); a turn to “pastiche”, “historicism”, and the “nostalgia mode” (1991: 20); and the abolition of “critical distance” (1991: 48). Given this sad list, it is therefore relatively easy to perceive Jameson as standing shoulder to shoulder with the modernist ‘ideologues’ he has previously reproached for their insensitivities to the “forms, categories, and contents of... [the] culture industry” (1991: 2). Thus, in Jameson’s study, it is interesting

to observe the manner in which the critique of mass culture, having been ushered so brusquely out the front door, is allowed to slip in, almost unnoticed, through the back.

Other Marxist analyses of the postmodern, such as those of David Harvey (1989) and Terry Eagleton (1985), although considerably less ambivalent – and consequently somewhat more consistent – than Jameson’s, are similarly problematic. These negative critiques, if often passionate and intellectually elegant, are equally reductionist and deterministic in their evaluation of contemporary cultural practice. In this sense, Eagleton’s sweeping condemnation of the “commodified artifacts of postmodernism” (1985: 61), and Harvey’s call for a “renewal... of the Enlightenment project” (1989: 359), represent a not-too-distant echo of the Frankfurt School’s dismissal of the products of the ‘culture industry’, and its faith in the ‘authentic’ culture of modernism.³⁹

Cultural Populism

As indicated above in my discussion of Richard Hoggart’s work, the re-evaluation of the concept of ‘culture’ to include an analysis of the ‘lived experience’ of popular culture has its roots in the founding texts of British cultural studies, in the paradigm which Stuart Hall (1981) has dubbed ‘culturalism’.⁴⁰ Central to this movement is the figure of Raymond Williams, for whom culture, in its “‘social’ definition”, represented “a description of a

³⁹ I will return to the work of Jameson and Harvey in more detail in Chapter Two.

⁴⁰ It is not my intention here to embark on a historical review of the development of British cultural studies, and its encounter with structuralism, its ethnographic and Gramscian turns, its engagement with ‘new times’ and postmodernism, its increasing institutionalization, and its export to Canada, Australia and the United States: an academic story of now folkloric proportions, which has been well told elsewhere, e.g. Hall (1981, 1990); Turner (1990); Brantlinger (1990); David Harris (1992); Grossberg (1993); Davies (1995).

particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (1961: 41). Hence, for Williams, the analysis of culture involved “the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture” (1961: 41). The broad, contextualizing emphasis of Williams’ ‘social’ definition of culture thus serves to ameliorate somewhat the negatively evaluative, neo-Leavisite approach that tends to mar Hoggart’s account of contemporary ‘mass entertainment’.

In this sense, Williams’ claim that ‘culture is ordinary’ represented, as Jim McGuigan has observed, “a clear and concise rebuttal of what, for the purposes of brevity, can be labelled ‘elitist’ conceptions of culture” (1992: 21). Yet this rebuttal of cultural ‘elitism’, and Williams’ faith in “common culture” (1958: 332), did not, necessarily, involve a turning away from the objects and institutions of ‘high culture’, and the extent to which Williams remained deeply concerned with an historical and socio-political analysis of the category of ‘art’ should not be underestimated. As Williams observed, “the art is there, as an activity, with the production, the trading, the politics, the raising of families” (1961: 45), and, as Andrew Milner suggests, the “cultural materialism” of Williams’ later work (e.g. Williams, 1977; 1981) represents “an extended theorization of the social processes of art and literature”, in which these phenomena are regarded as “distinctive subset[s] of socially specific, materially determinate, forms and practices” (Milner, 1994b: 58).⁴¹

⁴¹ See Hunter (1988a) for a critique of the ‘residual Romanticism’ in Williams’s ‘social definition’ of culture. See also Bennett (1992, 1993).

In Michael Bérubé's view, ever since Williams' early definitional intervention, "cultural studies has driven itself largely by exploiting the tension between... [the] narrow and broad senses of 'culture', the Leavisite, humanistic sense and the anthropological, sociological sense" (1992b: 10). Contrary to Bérubé, however, I would argue that this tension has been far from evident in the continuing development of cultural studies, particularly in terms of the broader analysis of art and culture, in which a profound – and understandably warranted – scepticism towards traditionalist values has resulted in an almost exclusively anthropological or sociological emphasis on the products and meanings of popular culture. Thus, as Stanley Aronowitz has observed, cultural studies has "disdained the strategy of textual analysis of art forms" (1993: 126) – whether those of high or popular culture – focusing instead on ethnographic, subjectivist readings of popular cultural texts. Hence, alongside, and informed by, significant early work in subculturalism and ethnography (e.g. Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1977, 1978; Hebdige, 1979), gender and identity (e.g. McRobbie, 1981), and race and ethnicity, (e.g. Hall *et al.*, 1978; Gilroy *et al.*, 1982), the cultural studies tradition has been the source of numerous investigations of popular television and film (e.g. Hobson, 1982; Morley, 1986; Ang, 1985; Bennett *et al.*, 1981b; Fiske, 1987, 1992), popular literature (Radway, 1984; Bennett and Woollacott, 1988), popular music (e.g. Chambers, 1985; Grossberg, 1983, 1984; Frith, 1983), and – most importantly – their respective audiences.

The emphasis on popular culture, consumption, and 'everyday life' in much of this work has been of enormous importance in a fuller understanding of the complexities of the 'micro-politics' of contemporary culture, representing an optimistic analytical move which

certainly offers a necessary corrective to the mass culture critique – and to the cultural despondency which it engenders in conservatives and radicals alike.⁴² But the predominantly consumptionist focus on popular culture proves to be equally problematic, resulting not only in what Jim McGuigan has identified as “the drift into an uncritical populism” (1992: 70), but also, as Aronowitz’s observation tends to suggest, in the neglect of the forms and practices of ‘high art’, and the failure to interrogate the complex interrelationship of ‘high’ and ‘popular’.

Before going on to consider this uncritically populist orientation within cultural studies, it is worthwhile digressing briefly to examine the influence of the work of Walter Benjamin on this contemporary field. As noted in the previous section, Benjamin is often considered by devotees of this approach to be one of the first cultural theorists to adopt an optimistic view of popular culture. Thus, for Angela McRobbie, Benjamin’s work “can be seen as an important precursor of Cultural Studies” (1992: 152), while in Susan Willis’ view, Benjamin’s “landmark essay”, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1968), “may well be the single most important essay in the development of Marxist popular culture criticism” (Willis, 1991: 10). Similarly positive readings of Benjamin can be found in Simon Frith (1983), Iain Chambers (1985), and John Storey (1998). Willis (1991: 11) also suggests that Benjamin’s work has had a considerable

⁴² It is interesting to observe, however, noting the tendency within cultural studies to “either disregard or caricature in a hostile manner the critique of mass culture developed by the Frankfurt School”, Douglas Kellner has recently suggested that the relationship between critical theory and cultural studies represents a “missed articulation” (1997: 12).

influence on that of John Fiske (e.g. 1989a, 1989b). Given the deeply ambivalent nature of Benjamin's 'mechanical reproduction' essay – expressed, for example, in passages such as “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (1968: 221), and in the fact that “the crisis of painting” is attributed to “the appeal of art works to the masses” (1968: 234) – these unashamedly populist readings are curious, to say the least. For Bill Nichols, the ambivalence which permeates Benjamin's essay is “at best, dialectical, at worst, simply contradictory” (1988: 22), while even Adorno, one of Benjamin's fiercest opponents and hardly the most objective of critics, correctly identifies this contradictory aspect of Benjamin's essay, suggesting that Benjamin “gave a description of the phenomenon of aesthetic aura that is at once nostalgic and critical” (1984: 66). Further critiques of Benjamin's essay (e.g. Mattick, 1993e; Baas, 1987; Knizek, 1993) identify fundamental problems in his basic thesis, suggesting that, given the long history of the printing press, and the reproducibility of both printed text *and* printed images, the notion of 'mechanical reproduction' is hardly a new one. In a fascinating reversal of Benjamin's thesis, Paul Mattick suggests that “the mechanical reproduction of artworks played a considerable role in the creation of the prerequisites for the experience of aesthetic ‘aura’” (1993e: 136). Similarly, Jacquelyn Baas has argued that:

Benjamin's perception of the destruction of our experience of authenticity in works of art, and of their loss of 'aura' through mechanical reproduction, was hardly self-evident then and is even less so now. On the contrary, modern techniques of reproducing works of art confer a mystical aura upon the 'original' that is quantifiably verified in the marketplace.

(Baas, 1987: 339-340)

But critiques such as these have had little impact on the enthusiastic appropriation of Benjamin's work by theorists within the field of cultural studies, expressed, for example,

by Simon Frith when he contends that Benjamin's essay represented a "celebration of the positive possibilities of... the technology of mass reproduction" (1983: 47), and that, for Benjamin, "the ideological meaning of mass culture was decided in the process of consumption" (1983: 57). Similarly, although Susan Willis (1991) acknowledges alternative readings of Benjamin's essay, she ultimately rejects them in favour of her initial, optimistic interpretation. Interestingly, Janet Wolff has suggested that "*mis-*interpretations, as much as interpretations, can tell us something about the political and intellectual projects in play in such appropriations" (1993c: 113; emphasis in original), and commenting on the curious status which contemporary observers have afforded to the autobiographical and the 'micrological' in Benjamin's work, Wolff suggests that "there are real problems, and certain risks, involved in the wholehearted enthusiasm for Benjamin... which we are witnessing in contemporary cultural criticism" (1993c: 113).

In light of Wolff's critique, it is interesting to observe the manner in which Simon Frith's position on this topic has shifted over the years, to the point where he is now explicitly critical of "the relentless politicizing of consumption, the deployment of vacuous sociological terms (resistance, empowerment) at the expense of aesthetic categories, the constant misreading of the mainstream as the margins" (Frith, 1992a: 180; see also Frith, 1991). Thus, by way of a brief digression, it is interesting to observe the manner in which Walter Benjamin has been conscripted, perhaps a little unwillingly, into the service of a specifically consumptionist cultural studies, indicating that the intellectual foundations on which such a populist approach is built are shaky indeed.

In identifying the contemporary drift into an “uncritical populism”, Jim McGuigan cites the work of John Fiske (e.g. 1987, 1989a, 1989b) and Paul Willis (e.g. 1990) as symptomatic of this trend, arguing that:

Fiske merely produces a simple inversion of the mass culture critique at its worst... focused more or less exclusively on ‘popular readings’, which are applauded with no evident reservations at all, never countenancing the possibility that a popular reading could be anything other than ‘progressive’.

(McGuigan, 1992: 72)⁴³

Thus, in Fiske’s conceptual kaleidoscope of ethnography, semiotics, Barthesian pleasure, postmodern subjectivity, and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, any critical readings of popular texts, or, indeed, any political economy analyses of their conditions of production, are eschewed in favour of a consumptionist utopia, in which people ‘make their own meanings’, thereby ‘subverting’ and ‘resisting’ dominant ideologies. The “new revisionism” (1992: 5) that McGuigan identifies is further evident in the later work of Paul Willis (e.g. 1990, 1991), which proposes that “common culture” should be based on “grounded aesthetics”, placing “social practice over the veneration of things” (1991: 8). Apparently recalling Raymond Williams’ earlier formulation, Willis argues that “art should not... be the preserve of institutions, but recognised as part of everyday and ordinary cultural experience” (1991: 2). Yet, as McGuigan points out, Willis fails to acknowledge Williams’ broad concern with the *production* of culture, suggesting that “Willis’s assertion

⁴³ McGuigan does not mean to suggest – nor, indeed, do I – that *all* current work in cultural studies displays this ‘uncritical populism’: rather, the intention is to indicate some examples of what has become a significantly influential academic trend, and to highlight the manifest weaknesses of this approach. It is worthwhile noting that John Fiske’s works on popular culture (1989a, 1989b) are now virtually standard textbooks in many undergraduate courses in cultural and media studies, indicating a second, institutional level of ‘uncritical populism’ which is, in itself, worthy of further investigation.

that ‘common culture’ already exists fully formed in the everyday *consuming* practices of young people would make the old man spin in his grave” (McGuigan, 1992: 115; emphasis in original). Thus, the uncritically populist focus of Willis’ project is clear when he states that: “new popular cultural forms do not mechanically imprint themselves on the passive sensibilities of consumers but rather, the informal symbolic activity of users takes in these new inputs as resources for their own cultural productivity in the contexts of their everyday lives” (Willis, 1991: 5). The work of Fiske and Willis cited above therefore serves to confirm Janet Wolff’s observation that, in recent years, analysts of culture have claimed:

to discover examples of readings which are not only controlled, but also subversive. Even the most conventional genres and texts turn out to have this radical potential, as ethnographers of popular culture produce case after case of readers and television viewers who use texts in unexpected ways to resist everyday life and confirm alternative views.

(Wolff, 1993b: 152)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the “affirmative character” (Budd *et al.*, 1990; see also O’Connor, 1989) – or, somewhat less charitably (if perhaps more accurately), the “banality” (Morris, 1988a) – of this approach has been the subject of considerable critique, and the rhetoric of ‘resistance’ within cultural studies, based on a curiously ‘thin’ understanding of cultural ethnography, has long outlived whatever limited usefulness it may have had. As the ethnomusicologist Steven Feld has argued, there is now a pressing need to attend to the “grounded realities” of social life, suggesting that much “cultural studies and pop culture theory... reads like the idea police sniping from blinds and lookouts on the outskirts of town, far from real life in action, just declaring ‘meanings’ rather than fully investigating their genesis and lived lives” (Keil and Feld, 1994: 20).

Similarly, Simon Frith observes the “twitchy tendency to like everything, just in case” (1990a: 232), while Georgina Born has contested the notion that there is “a subversive politics simply in the experience of consumption of popular culture”, suggesting that “the postmodern optimism for consumption as subversion is as yet unargued” (1987: 61-62). Citing the work of Janice Radway (1984) and John Fiske (1989a), Wolff concludes that:

Such accounts are often less than convincing, exhibiting a populist commitment to certain cultural forms and an over-optimistic desire to find political resistance rather than a more measured understanding of what is involved in the more modest activity of the negotiation of meanings in a cultural text.

(Wolff, 1993b: 152)

In a critique of the “mainstream cultural empiricism” of much American sociology, which he contrasts with other “more politicized cultural studies traditions”, Ben Agger has suggested that, in the case of the former, “the point is to understand the world, not to change it” (1992: 133). Given the political imperatives which fuelled cultural studies in its earlier incarnations, it is perhaps somewhat ironic that the cultural populist approach of Fiske and others not only fails either to understand *or* to change the world, but ultimately, and perhaps unwittingly, conspires with conservative thought in the maintenance of the status quo. Thus, as Tania Modleski has observed:

If the problem with some of the work of the Frankfurt School was that its members were too far outside the culture they examined, critics today seem to have the opposite problem: immersed in their culture, half in love with their subject, they sometimes seem unable to achieve the proper critical distance from it. As a result, they may unwittingly wind up writing apologias for mass culture and embracing its ideology.

(Modleski, 1986: xi)

As noted above, the inevitable corollary to this “populist commitment to certain cultural forms” (Wolff, 1993b: 152) is a neglect of the category of ‘high art’, and the failure to attend to the discursive relationship between the categories of ‘high’ and ‘popular’. Stanley Aronowitz has suggested a “polemical motive” for the theoretical strategy informing this perspective, arguing that, for “a new generation of left-intellectuals”, the focus on working class and popular culture represented a reaction against the literary critical tradition, with all its Leavisite implications, which cultural studies initially inherited from Hoggart and Williams (Aronowitz, 1993: 129; see also Aronowitz, 1994).

Furthermore, Aronowitz identifies “a strong *will to scientificity*” in the development of British cultural studies, which has seen “an effort to purge social and cultural theory of its lingering humanistic, essentialist, and literary as opposed to theoretical” aspects (1993: 130; emphasis in original).⁴⁴ Although Aronowitz perhaps tends to overstate somewhat the ‘scientificity’ of the British cultural studies project, focusing too much on its early encounter with structuralist-Marxism, he is certainly correct to note its aversion to established forms of liberal humanism, and he does identify one crucial deficiency which arises as a result of the populist focus of much work in this field, namely that:

⁴⁴ It is important to note here that Aronowitz’ comments are directed specifically at *British* cultural studies. As Goodwin and Wolff have noted, the development of cultural studies in the United States has most often been under the auspices of literary studies, with a concomitant “textual bias” (1997: 123). Given this textualist emphasis, Goodwin and Wolff argue the need for cultural studies “to be grounded in sociology. The study of culture cannot just be the study of texts, however critically these texts are read. Nor can it be the analysis of texts in relation to social and historical contexts which are themselves entirely ‘textualized’” (1997: 142).

British cultural studies did not succeed in sundering the *distinction* between high and popular culture... in practice, it *obliterated* high culture as a legitimate object of theoretical and critical inquiry... Of course, if the movement were consistent with its own theoretical perspective, it would recognise that the category of 'high' art does not inhere in the object, but in its historical and social constitution. In which case, since high art is conventionally constituted, canonical novels, poems, paintings, and so on are appropriate subjects for both textual and ethnographic inquiry... If the point of media studies is to delineate the elements of ideological *struggle* rather than univocal domination... Art would still be a fitting subject for investigation.

(Aronowitz, 1993: 129; emphasis in original)

In response to Aronowitz, it might be argued that this 'new generation of left-intellectuals' has been understandably uninterested in the conservative notion of 'high' art, focusing instead on the more socially and politically pressing issues delineated by the "left triptych of concerns with class, race and gender" (Eagleton, 1990: 5). Although such an argument might have somewhat more credence in the context of the hectic formative years of British cultural studies, in which much of the early, politically-motivated work in subcultural analysis was effectively staking out a new theoretical and methodological field, it is rather less convincing in any consideration of cultural studies' subsequent trajectory, in which, as I have argued above, an uncritical populism – or, in Eagleton's droll formulation, "a commitment to more 'topical' modes of political struggle" (1990: 5) – has often displaced this triptych of concerns. Furthermore, if, as Nelson *et al.* have suggested, "cultural studies is... committed to the study of the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communication practices" (1992: 4), then the extent to which the socio-historical category of 'art', and issues of class, race and gender continue to be regarded as mutually exclusive remains somewhat puzzling, and the analytical omission which Aronowitz rightly identifies becomes a curious one indeed.

In this sense, and despite claims to the contrary, it is clear that contemporary cultural studies has failed to take seriously Raymond Williams' earlier proposition, noted above, that "the art is there, as an activity" (1961: 45), alongside other cultural and social practices. In a paper which is highly critical of the populist focus of much cultural studies, Jostein Gripsrud has suggested that the "total dismissal of the distinction between high and low culture may serve as an ideological veiling of the social positions of researchers and other academic intellectuals, hindering a recognition of the political limitations, obligations, and possibilities inherent in these positions" (1989: 195). Given that the university is clearly situated within the "high-culture institutional realm", Gripsrud argues that academic "attacks on the notion of high culture... appear ludicrous in their ideological blindness. They represent an implicit denial of the social determination of discourses, not least their own very obvious belonging to a high-culture discourse on culture" (1989: 197-198). Thus, Gripsrud suggests:

students and researchers of culture clearly have their base in the high-culture realm, and should reflect on this as a basic premise for critical work in their various fields. Our ability to take part in both high and low culture's codes and practices is a class privilege: it does not mean that the socially operative distinction between the two spheres has ceased to exist.

Gripsrud (1989: 204)

In arguing the case which I have made above – namely, the need for cultural studies to "have a closer look at the institutions and practices embraced by high culture" (Gripsrud, 1989: 195) – I trust it is clear that I am not arguing for a return to some form of apolitical, idealist aesthetics, in which immanent readings of the objects of high art are divorced from all other practical considerations. On the contrary, my intention is to address the categories of both 'high' and 'popular', critically interrogating not only the

notions of value and canonicity which inhere in these categories, but also the complex discursive relationship *between* these categories: as Aronowitz suggests, “the point is to reject hierarchies that are part of systems of social privilege” (1993: 248) – and it must be stressed that Aronowitz has in mind not only the ‘privilege’ which is customarily afforded ‘high culture’, but also the tendency in much recent cultural theory “to *reverse* the relation of privilege in favor of folk and other popular traditions”, against which he argues that the “discovery that art forms... are rooted in craft and other sites of the popular does not imply their superiority” (1993: 248; emphasis in original).

Jim McGuigan has suggested that “‘High or bourgeois art’ has arguably become too easy a target, and perhaps something of a straw man, for a new generation of intellectual populists to attack” (1992: 75). On the contrary, I would argue that if the intention is to engage critically, rather than simply ‘attack’, then (to persist with McGuigan’s metaphors) the ‘straw man’ of ‘high art’ soon reveals himself to be made of significantly sterner stuff, and this ‘easy target’ assumes radically different proportions. A critical analysis of the objects and institutions of ‘high art’ – and, perhaps most importantly, the power relations therein – is an important socio-political project which Raymond Williams’ early interventions clearly pointed towards. However, rather than embarking on the considerably more difficult and complex task of confronting the idealist assumptions and presuppositions of ‘high art’, it is apparent that much work in cultural studies, in its focus on subjectivist readings of popular texts, has simply vacated this particular field of struggle, thereby leaving the still dominant discourse of ‘high culture’ relatively undisturbed. As Perry Anderson has suggested, in an observation that has relevance far

beyond the field of literary criticism: “Railing at canons is not the same as replacing them, which they have resisted. Evacuation of the terrain of literary evaluation in the traditional sense necessarily leaves its conventional practitioners in place” (1992: 243).

In this chapter, I have undertaken an initial review and critique of contemporary theories of art and culture, based on an analytical framework that allows the mapping of a diverse range of approaches. I have indicated the tension in contemporary theories of art between the idealist view which regards art as autonomous from all other social factors, and the radical critique of this view, which, in identifying art as inherently ideological, runs the risk of an equally problematic reductionism. As Raymond Williams suggested almost forty years ago:

It was certainly an error to suppose that values or art-works could be adequately studied without reference to the particular society within which they were expressed, but it is equally an error to suppose that the social explanation is determining, or that the values and works are mere by-products.

(Williams, 1961: 45)

Similarly, I have noted the manner in which much contemporary cultural theory vacillates between, on the one hand, an uncritically populist celebration and, on the other, an often unthinking critique of popular or mass culture, exhibiting respectively consumptionist and productionist biases: as Meaghan Morris has observed, it often seems that the field of study is “occupied only by cheerleaders and prophets of doom” (1988: 23). In response to these perspectives, I have suggested the need to attend to the complex interrelationship not only of texts and contexts, but also of the discursive categories of ‘high’ and ‘popular’.

Chapter Two

Modernist Postmodernism: A Case Study in Theory and Value

“A garden gnome is no longer a garden gnome.
This is the dilemma facing contemporary art that is
circumscribed by the unhappy concept of postmodernity.”
From: ‘Aporias of Modern Aesthetics’, Peter Bürger (1990: 47)

In the previous chapter, I reviewed a wide range of contemporary theories of art and culture, with the aim of ‘mapping’ this literature in terms of contrasting conceptualizations of ‘art’ and ‘culture’, and the concomitant evaluative claims that such theories make in the analysis of cultural forms and practices. In this chapter, with the aid of a somewhat more extended case study in contemporary theory – which I have characterized as a ‘modernist postmodernism’ – my objective is two-fold: firstly, I will examine in more detail the theoretical and methodological assumptions and mechanisms which underlie this perspective; and secondly, I will explore the nature of the evaluations of contemporary artistic and cultural practice which follow from such an approach.

An immediate objection at this stage might be simply to ask ‘Why postmodernism?’ This most confusing of academic concepts appears to have had its heyday, and it could be argued that it no longer represents the most visible of current intellectual debates: scholarly journals no longer feel the need to devote whole issues to the topic; the spate of books on the subject has dwindled to a trickle; and this once high-profile concept is now seldom encountered in the popular press. Somewhat paradoxically, however, it is the concept’s very lack of visibility which concerns me here, in the sense that postmodernism is no longer controversial. Indeed, as I will argue below, the concept has succumbed to an

increasingly entrenched academic orthodoxy: an orthodoxy which is dominated, to a very large extent, by a ‘modernist postmodernism’ – namely, an understanding of postmodern cultural forms and practices which is shaped by a predominantly modernist, or neo-modernist, perspective. My ultimate aim in this chapter, however, is not simply to ‘reveal’ that theory is ‘ideological’: a rather banal proposition which, given the range of intellectual trajectories and evaluative positions surveyed in the previous chapter, must now be regarded as something of an academic truism. Rather, my intention is to begin to problematize the notion of cultural value inherent in a ‘modernist postmodernism’, challenging the orthodoxy which stubbornly circumscribes a delimited range of evaluative regimes, and suggesting the need for a considerably more sophisticated and multifaceted approach to the complex questions of cultural analysis and evaluation.

Furthermore – and especially significant in terms of the overall aims of my own intellectual project – I want to suggest that neither the continuing confusion nor the narrow orthodoxy which plagues the category of postmodernism should detract from its essential usefulness as an explanatory paradigm. As the now vast literature on postmodernism suggests, there is little doubt that the last three or four decades have witnessed enormous changes in cultural and artistic practices, and in common with observers such as Dick Hebdige (1988) and Andrew Goodwin (1991) I am of the view that the very presence and prevalence of the term means that “it must be describing something” (Goodwin, 1991: 175). Hence, given the cultural ubiquity of postmodern forms, techniques and practices – a point which I will return to in Chapter Six – and

contrary to those for whom the lack of clarity in the postmodern debate simply serves to confirm the shortcomings of postmodern theory as an analytical tool (e.g. Eagleton, 1985; Goodwin, 1991),¹ I will argue that there is, indeed, an urgent need to clarify the terms of the debate.

In this chapter, then, following a review of the key characteristics and features of postmodernism, I will examine the notion of a 'modernist postmodernism' in more detail, suggesting that it results in a primarily negative assessment of postmodern culture, or, in the case of avant-garde cultural practices, in a more positive evaluation which appears to be predicated on a fundamental category mistake. In the brief concluding section of this chapter, I turn to the work of Umberto Eco (1985a), suggesting that his pragmatic sketch of the limits of avant-garde modernism holds the prospect of a considerably clearer and more useful conceptualization of postmodernism. In the two chapters that follow, I assess the strengths and weaknesses of a wide range of revisionist work in music studies, returning to the question of postmodernism in Chapter Five, reviewing the encounter between music and postmodern theory. In Chapter Six, I develop the implications of Eco's work in more detail, arguing for a critically self-reflexive 'eclecticism of theory' in the analysis and evaluation of contemporary cultural forms and practices.

¹ The fact that, in the space of a 17-page article, Goodwin can argue both that "there is an urgent need to clarify the terms of the debate" (1991: 177) and that "there is no need to construct rational order from these confusions" (1991: 186) tends to typify the analytical discomfiture occasioned by the concept of postmodernism.

Postmodernism: Definitions and Delimitations

Postmodernism first came to prominence in the fields of literary criticism and architectural theory,² although its influence has subsequently been strongly felt throughout the humanities and social sciences.³ However, despite the fact that the word ‘postmodernism’ has been in relatively common usage since the 1970s, the concept continues to be one of the most contested and confusing in the history of cultural theory. The term itself remains in a state of constant linguistic flux, being called upon to categorize, define and interpret a bewildering multiplicity of cultural and social phenomena.⁴ In more recent years, a welcome clarification has entered the literature, distinguishing *postmodernism*, as a primarily cultural and artistic concept, from *postmodernity*, which addresses new modes of social, political and economic organization.⁵ Despite this clarification, however, it must be noted that confusion still abounds.

Notwithstanding their theoretical variance, one common factor has united all conceptualizations of postmodernism: namely, their fundamental relationship to theories of modernism, whether such a relationship is conceived of in terms of a radical break with the modernist tradition (e.g. Jameson, 1991) or in the light of what are regarded as significant

² See, for example, Hassan (1971, 1987) and Jencks (1991). See also Venturi *et al.* (1977).

³ See Bertens (1995) and Connor (1989) for useful and comprehensive reviews of this extensive literature. See also Woods (1999), Wheale (1995), and Stanbridge (forthcoming).

⁴ See Hebdige (1988) for his widely cited and marvellously parodic ‘shopping list’ of the various usages of ‘postmodern’, from “the décor of a room” to “a generalised substitution of spatial for temporal coordinates” (1988: 181-182).

⁵ See, for example, Featherstone (1988) and Best and Kellner (1991: 1-33).

continuities with the modernist impulse (e.g. Harvey, 1989). Modernism is generally understood as an artistic movement prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among its defining characteristics were: a rejection of Classical and Romantic aesthetic conventions, typified, in the visual arts, by the transition from figurative realism to formal abstraction, and, in music, by the passage from tonality to atonality; an avant-garde experimentalism and theoreticism, with a concomitant antipathy toward popular or mass culture; a didactic rhetorical vanguardism, linked to a fascination with science and technology, and encompassing an emancipatory discourse of progress and social change; and an understanding of art – and the artist – as autonomous and independent of social forces.⁶

It is the rejection of these defining characteristics of modernism which tends to distinguish postmodernism from its modernist precursors. Hence, postmodern artistic practice repudiates the modernist negation of prior forms, drawing freely and eclectically on a diverse range of stylistic, cultural, and historical influences, of which modernism itself may be only one example among many. Furthermore, in contrast to the aesthetic and rhetorical vanguardism of modernism, postmodernism openly embraces the forms and practices of popular culture, exhibiting a theoretical sensibility which is both self-reflexive and ironic. Postmodernism therefore incorporates a degree of cultural vernacularism

⁶ For a useful summary of the defining characteristics of modernism, see Born (1995: 40–45), on which my own brief typology is based. For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Smith (1998).

alongside a range of artistic techniques previously associated with modernism (e.g. collage, fragmentation and juxtaposition): techniques that, in the context of a postmodern artistic discourse, are reinterpreted, transformed and intensified. The postmodern reconciliation with popular culture also suggests a reinstatement of an understanding of the fundamentally social nature of artistic production, which the modernist ideology of aesthetic autonomy had served to obscure. Consequently, if modernism emphasized the formalist autonomy of the avant-garde artwork, postmodernism stresses social contingency and artistic hybridity, plurality, and intertextuality.

The radical eclecticism of postmodernism has led some theorists to propose the collapse of the distinction between ‘high art’ and popular culture as one of the key defining characteristics of the postmodern. Fredric Jameson, for example, suggests that “one fundamental feature” of the postmodern is “the effacement... of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” (1991: 2); and David Harvey writes of the “*rapprochement*... between popular culture and what once remained isolated as ‘high culture’” (1989: 59). Similarly – if from antithetical evaluative positions – John Docker suggests that the 1980s ‘moment’ in cultural studies disturbed the “clear binary oppositions” between ‘high’ and ‘low’, pointing to “cultural life... as historically ever hybrid and ambiguous” (1994: xx); and E. Ann Kaplan argues that one can see “the effacing in MTV of old boundaries between low and high culture, between past, present, and future, and between previously distinct art forms and genres” (1987: 147-148). Although these claims may have considerable credibility at the level of

artistic techniques and practices – which reveal a great deal of cross-fertilization between ‘high’ and ‘low’ – it is one which is perhaps difficult to sustain at the level of political economy, much postmodern art remaining resolutely distinct from popular culture in commercial, economic and social terms, thereby confirming the persistence of these categories. A crucial point here is the acknowledgment that the terms ‘high’ and ‘low’ are, themselves, cultural constructs, their emergence – not coincidentally – being broadly contemporaneous with the birth of modernism, a movement that was concerned to assert its aesthetic and social difference from popular or mass culture.

A further defining characteristic of postmodernism is the employment of parody and pastiche, which, for some theorists, ultimately points toward the essential bankruptcy of postmodern cultural practices (e.g. Jameson, 1991). For others, however, postmodern parody and intertextuality are viewed in a considerably more positive light, suggesting a reconsideration and reevaluation of previous cultural forms and codes (e.g. Hutcheon, 1988, 1989; Collins, 1989, 1995). Resisting a periodizing definition, Umberto Eco characterizes postmodernism as “a way of operating” (1985a: 66), suggesting that postmodernism’s ironic engagement with the past is virtually a necessary response to the conceptual and aesthetic limits of high modernism. Thus, postmodernism “demands, in order to be understood, not the negation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking” (Eco, 1985a: 68).

Contrary to the cultural authority and aesthetic vanguardism of modernism, the self-reflexive irony, parodic eclecticism and populist intertextuality of postmodern artistic

practice indicates a revisionist approach to traditional cultural hierarchies and value systems. Postmodernism therefore brings about a theoretical crisis in the assessment of cultural value, the relativism inherent in its defining characteristics and techniques casting doubt on modernist modes of evaluation and judgement. Indeed, if postmodern theory can be said to have achieved any degree of academic orthodoxy, it is on the question of the evaluation of postmodern practices that such orthodoxies have tended to bifurcate.

On the one hand, particularly among Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and Terry Eagleton, as well as in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, postmodern eclecticism and relativism are viewed with suspicion, and regarded as a denial and subversion of the aesthetic and sociopolitical sureties of the modernist project; from this pessimistic, essentially neo-modern perspective postmodern culture is routinely characterized as depthless, ephemeral and valueless.⁷ On the other hand, especially for a later generation of cultural studies theorists, such as John Docker, Angela McRobbie, and John Fiske, the populist challenge that postmodern relativism presents to traditional values heralds a new-found cultural pluralism; here, the diversity and heterogeneity of postmodern culture are regarded as liberating and empowering, with the analytical focus on a 'micro-politics' of resistance and subversion.⁸ Although populist approaches such as

⁷ See, for example, Jameson (1991; 1994; 1998), Harvey (1989), Eagleton (1985, 1996), and Lyotard (1982, 1984a, 1984b). It is to the work of these 'modernist postmodernists' – and especially that of Jameson and Harvey – that the remainder of this chapter will be devoted.

⁸ See, for example, Docker (1994), McRobbie (1994), Fiske (1986, 1994), and Kaplan (1987). See also Chapter One (pp. 57-70) for a critique of the 'cultural populism' which tends to characterize these approaches.

these have had a considerable profile within the field of cultural studies, I would suggest that they have not enjoyed the same degree of general circulation, citation, and critical reflection which the texts of theorists such as Jameson, Harvey and Lyotard have achieved.⁹ Somewhat more dispassionate accounts of postmodernism can be found in the work of those theorists who make no such claims for either the cultural certainties of modernism or the populist pluralism of postmodernism.¹⁰

At this stage, if my pitting of postmodern pessimists against postmodern populists appears overly caricatured in its dialecticism, it should be stressed that even this binary opposition does not do justice to the full spectrum of approaches to the concept of postmodernism. For arch-traditionalists such as Hugh Curtler, postmodernism is regarded as nothing other than a “specter” haunting the contemporary academy, and is typically accused of “relativism, exclusivity, reductionism, hyperbole, and half-truth” (1997: 7-8); thus, Curtler argues, cut off from “greatness” and the “canon of high culture” by “postmodern zealots... we are diminished and wallow in a quagmire of mediocrity” (1997: 158-159). In common with Fred Inglis (1993: 190),¹¹ it is intriguing to note that Curtler’s understanding of cultural value makes similar recourse to the metaphor of fine wine. Citing a parable from Cervantes, Curtler argues that “in order to make sensible judgments about wine, we must acquire a discerning taste. Not all wines are the same. Similarly,

⁹ I will return to the populist conceptualization of postmodernism in Chapter Five, in my review of the relationship between music and postmodern theory.

¹⁰ See, for example, Huyssen (1986); Connor (1989); Rose (1991a); Best and Kellner (1991, 1997); Bertens (1995).

¹¹ See Chapter One (pp. 17-18).

judgments of value require discriminating taste and should not be dismissed summarily by those who consider them silly or unfounded” (1997: 10). As John Frow has asked of such academic judgements of value: “who speaks? who speaks for whom? whose voice is listened to, whose voice is spoken over, who has no voice?... under what circumstances is it right or wrong, effective or ineffective, to speak for others?” (1995: 161).¹²

And in a highly revealing rhetorical move, Curtler warns against the postmodern tendency “to confuse values with evaluation” (1997: 166), which suggests that – at least in Curtler’s philosophy – the activity of ‘evaluation’ is contingent and subjective, while the concept of ‘values’ remains fixed and objective, beyond revisionist critique: ‘evaluation’, therefore, is the relativistic stuff of postmodern theory, while ‘values’ reside safely in the canon, which “bears the mark of genius” (1997: 159). Hence, it becomes clear that the ‘reductionism’ which Curtler imputes to postmodernism is central to his own intellectual project. In sharp contrast to Curtler’s traditionalism, at the other end of the ideological spectrum are those writers for whom the theoretical engagement with postmodernism demands that the text itself be ‘postmodern’: here, then, the very ideas, techniques, and characteristics of postmodern theory are incorporated in the text, often exhibiting the complexity – and wilful obscurity – which such a project implies.¹³

¹² I will return to these issues in Chapter Six.

¹³ See, for example, Phillipson (1989) and several of the essays collected in Hassan (1987). See also Derrida (1986).

Modernist Postmodernism: Jameson, Harvey, and Lyotard

In the sections that follow, my case study will focus primarily on the work of Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, two of the most highly influential theorists of the postmodern. Jameson's seminal essay *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* stands as a significant early statement in the postmodern debate. The essay first appeared in *New Left Review* (1984a), although an earlier version (Jameson, 1983) can be found in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, a collection of articles edited by Hal Foster (1983). The essay was subsequently reprinted in book form, along with several other related articles, by Duke University Press (Jameson, 1991; hereafter PM). Although Jameson has continued to publish on postmodernism (e.g. 1994, 1998), my comments will be focused primarily on this original essay, since it remains – by far – the most influential and most often-cited example of his work: Perry Anderson has characterized this early piece by Jameson as “a prodigious inaugural gesture that has commanded the field ever since” (1998: 54). Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989: hereafter CP) represents a valuable synthesis of theories of postmodernity and postmodernism, and remains his single, most extended contribution to postmodern theory.

Both authors are widely quoted, and these canonical works are now fixtures in university courses and academic texts which offer a synoptic overview of postmodern theory. Jameson's work has been the subject of several book-length studies (e.g. Kellner, 1989; Burnham, 1995; Homer, 1998; see also Anderson, 1998), while the work of both Jameson and Harvey has been the subject of numerous articles and essays, several of

which are cited below. Although Harvey's work has perhaps not been as heavily cited as that of Jameson, it has been enormously influential in those social science disciplines – geography, sociology, political science – which, in contrast to those in the humanities, came somewhat late to the postmodern debate (Bertens, 1995: 209). As similarly representative of a 'modernist postmodernism', I will also make reference to the work of Terry Eagleton and Jean-François Lyotard: work which has been similarly influential and widely cited – John Storey, for example, suggesting that Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984a) was the "book which introduced the term postmodernism into 'general' circulation" (1998: 174; see also Sim, 1995; and Benjamin, 1992).

Despite this high degree of academic attention and citation, however, in what follows I will argue that the neo-modernist perspective adopted by Jameson, Harvey, Lyotard and others is inadequate for the contemporary analysis and evaluation of postmodern creative practice. I will suggest that a closer examination of Jameson's contention that postmodernism represents the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' not only reveals basic empirical lacunae in his central thesis, but also highlights problematic aesthetic and evaluative paradoxes in his nevertheless seminal essay; that Harvey's overall argument, although convincing in its interpretation of the socio-economic impact of postmodernity, is unacceptably reductionist in its evaluation of postmodern cultural forms and practices; and that, notwithstanding his suggestive reading of the 'postmodern condition', Lyotard's notion of the 'postmodern' sublime represents a highly problematic and anachronistically modernist form of cultural theory.

Periodizing the Postmodern

Jameson claims to offer a “periodizing hypothesis”, in which postmodernism is conceived as a “cultural dominant” (PM: 3), corresponding to Ernest Mandel’s conceptualization of ‘late capitalism’ as the third stage of capitalist development.¹⁴

In Jameson’s work, however, there is considerable ambiguity over the question of the historical moment at which postmodernism emerged. Whereas Mandel’s scheme identifies ‘late capitalism’ as a specifically *post-war* phenomenon – regarding “the real break, the definite ending of the long wave, to be the ‘second slump’ of 1974-75” (Davis, 1985: 107) – Jameson traces postmodernism, conceived as a “radical break or *coupure*”, to “the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s” (PM: 1).

This contradiction between the two schemes, as Mike Davis observes, is “crucial” (1985: 107), given that Jameson’s thesis is predicated on their chronological homology – Davis asks: “was Late Capitalism born 1945 or 1960? Are the Sixties the opening of a new epoch, or merely the superheated summit of the postwar boom? Where does the Slump fit into an accounting of contemporary cultural trends?” (1985: 107). Thus, as Alex Callinicos has argued, “the slippages in [Jameson’s] analysis... suggest that his belief in ‘a cultural transformation of signal proportions, a historical break of an unexpectedly absolute kind’ is more an intuition informing his criticism than an inference from the empirical investigation of the contemporary world economy” (Callinicos, 1989: 133).

¹⁴ In Mandel’s (1980) scheme, market capitalism gives way to monopoly capitalism, which, in turn, is superseded by late or multinational capitalism.

In sharp contrast to Jameson's analysis – both in terms of chronological exactitude and the extent of socio-economic empirical investigation – Harvey's periodization of postmodernity offers a considerably more convincing – and convincingly theorized – account of the “sea-change in cultural as well as in political-economic practices” (CP: vii) which have been experienced over the last three decades. Following Charles Jencks' (1987) droll chronology, Harvey dates “the symbolic end of modernism and the passage to the postmodern as 3.32 p.m. on 15 July 1972, when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St Louis (a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier's ‘machine for modern living’) was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed” (CP: 39).

It should be noted at this stage that not all theorists subscribe to such periodizing accuracy or, indeed, contemporaneity. In typically apocalyptic fashion – employing the *de rigueur* pseudo-Baudrillardian hyperbole, in a proposition which appears to have somewhat limited analytical or explicatory value – Arthur Kroker and David Cook solemnly opine: “It is our general thesis that the postmodern scene in fact, begins in the fourth century with the Augustinian subversion of embodied power, and that everything since the Augustinian refusal has been nothing but a fantastic and grisly implosion of experience as Western culture itself runs under the signs of passive and suicidal nihilism” (1986: 8). Umberto Eco has noted this “increasingly retroactive” usage of the term ‘postmodern’: “first it was apparently applied to certain writers or artists active in the last twenty years, then gradually it reached the beginning of the century, then still further back.

And this reverse procedure continues; soon the postmodern category will include Homer” (1985a: 65-66).

Contrary to this retroactive tendency, Harvey’s more circumscribed periodization suggests that the break up of ‘Fordist-Keynesianism’ since 1973 has “inaugurated a period of rapid change, flux and uncertainty” (CP: 124), and he argues that “there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organisation of capitalism” (CP: vii). Contrary to Jameson’s hypothesis of a ‘radical break’ between the modern and postmodern eras, however, Harvey is at pains to stress the continuities between “Fordist modernity” and “flexible postmodernism” (CP: 338), suggesting that the changes which he identifies “appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society” (CP: vii).

Analysing the Postmodern

Despite Jameson’s insistence that postmodernism represents the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’, his examination of the phenomenon remains a primarily aesthetic affair, eschewing any detailed political economy analysis in favour of a series of diagnostically suggestive assertions. For example, Jameson neglects to elaborate on his dramatic contention that “the underside of [postmodern] culture is blood, torture, death and horror”

(PM: 5), and similarly fails to offer any convincing support – either theoretical or empirical – for his pivotal assertion that:

even if all the constitutive features of postmodernism were identical and continuous with those of an older modernism... the two phenomena would still remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function, owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capital, and beyond that, to the transformation of the very sphere of culture in contemporary society.

(PM: 5)

Hence, notwithstanding the fundamentally socio-economic implications of Jameson's insistence on understanding postmodernism as a "cultural dominant" (PM: 3) thoroughly linked to 'late capitalism', it is primarily Jameson's skills as a literary and cultural critic which are highlighted in his analysis of the postmodern, and his elegant, loquacious argument encompasses a wide range of cultural forms, including painting, cinema, literature, poetry, and architecture.

Although the defining characteristics and overall implications of Jameson's conceptualization of the postmodern are broadly similar to those inherent in Harvey's understanding of "flexible postmodernism" (CP: 338), it is interesting to contrast the strikingly different investigative route traversed by the latter. For Harvey, the postmodern is best approached via detailed analyses of the "political-economic transformation of late twentieth-century capitalism" and of the changing "experience of space and time" (CP: 199). In Harvey's detailed account, the "transition to flexible accumulation" (CP: 284) – i.e. from the rigidities of the earlier 'Fordist-Keynesian' regime of accumulation, "built upon a certain set of labour control practices, technological mixes, consumption habits,

and configurations of political-economic power” (CP: 124), to a new post-Fordist paradigm based on “flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets [and] products” (CP: 147) – is accompanied by contemporary developments in consumption, e.g. the rise of mass markets and the service industries, with their consequent impact on postmodernist social and cultural trends, which Harvey characterizes in terms of volatility and ephemerality, instantaneity, short-termism, market manipulation and image production. These factors, when coupled with the “spatial adjustments” necessitated by the massive technological developments of the late twentieth century (CP: 293), and the manner in which not only aesthetic value, but also – through the rise of speculation and fictitious capital – financial value has been brought into question, serve to create a contemporary “crisis of representation” (CP: 298), which manifests itself in terms of the qualities of eclecticism, juxtaposition, and intertextuality which tend to typify much postmodern cultural production.

Indicting the Postmodern

Notwithstanding the contrasts in periodization and overall analytical approach identified above, it is clear that both Jameson and Harvey regard the postmodern as mediated – and, indeed, determined – by capitalist development and economic factors. In Jameson’s case, the centrality of this perspective is most clearly illustrated by his contention that postmodernism represents the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’, arguing that in “the effacement... of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high

culture and so-called mass or commercial culture... aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally” (PM: 2-4). Thus, as noted in the previous chapter (pp. 56-57), Jameson’s analysis of the “constitutive features of the postmodern” (PM: 6) consists of a series of negative cultural factors: a “new depthlessness” (PM: 6); the “waning of affect” (PM: 10); the “fragmentation” of the subject (PM: 14); a turn to “pastiche” (PM: 16) and “historicism”– the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” (PM: 18); the “nostalgia mode” (PM: 20); and the abolition of “critical distance” (PM: 48).¹⁵

Emphasising the cyclical nature of periods of ‘time-space compression’ – the revolutions of 1848, the pre and post-First World War periods, the 1970s and 1980s – and the consequent ‘crises of representation’, Harvey argues that the ‘postmodern condition’, although “somewhat special” in its “intensity” (CP: 306), is “certainly within the grasp of historical materialist enquiry” (CP: 328). Thus, although Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984a: xxiv), it is clear that no such incredulity attends Harvey’s faith in the ‘grand narrative’ of Marxism. Similarly, recalling Frow’s critique of Bourdieu, Barry Smart has suggested of Jameson’s work that “it is evident that the effects of the postmodern condition are not considered to extend to totalizing forms of analysis... In consequence... the impression is simultaneously conveyed of the existence

¹⁵ It must be noted at this stage that Jameson’s evaluations of postmodern cultural practice are not unremittingly negative, and he claims to be a “relatively enthusiastic consumer” (PM: 298) of selected aspects of postmodernism, including the “postmodern hyperspace” of contemporary architecture (PM: 44) and the “new art of experimental video” (PM: 96). I will return to these issues in more detail in the following section.

of another space or place, outside and beyond the sphere of influence described, from which, by implication, a privileged analysis can continue to be conducted” (1992: 187).

Ian Hunter has observed that “the statement that we live in an age whose fragmentation precludes its synthetic representation is typically a preface to totalizing cultural diagnoses” (1992: 352): a proposition which appears especially apposite in a consideration of the work of these ‘modernist postmodernists’. It is interesting to note, however, that rather than addressing postmodernism, Hunter employs this phrase in his discussion of the eighteenth century aesthetic theory of Friedrich Schiller: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

Notwithstanding these critical comments, Harvey’s assessment of the ‘condition of postmodernity’ is particularly convincing in its insistence on the essentially regressive and deleterious socio-economic *continuities* to be found in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, which stands in sharp contrast to the progressive futures envisaged by those who emphasize the *discontinuities* in this transition: the highly influential work of Piore and Sabel (1984) is a case in point here, offering an almost utopian, post-Fordist vision of ‘flexible specialist communities’. However, as Paul Baggulley has observed, their conclusions are based on “carefully selected case studies” which focus “mainly on the manufacturing sector, largely ignoring services” (1991: 166). Furthermore, Baggulley argues, in case studies such as these “divisions of gender and race are largely ignored”, and they are “probably not typical of most industries in many countries” (1991: 166). Similarly problematic is the perhaps somewhat premature announcement by John Urry

of 'The End of Organised Capitalism', based on his apparent recognition of an "internationalised classless culture" (Urry, 1989: 101): a culture which is perhaps hard to imagine, let alone recognize, especially in light of "the revival of the sweatshops in New York and Los Angeles, of home work and 'telecommuting', as well as the burgeoning growth of informal labour practices throughout the advanced capitalist world" (Harvey, 1989: 187). As Harvey suggests, this "does indeed represent a rather sobering vision of capitalism's supposedly progressive history" (1989: 187).

But if Harvey's critique of the socio-impact of postmodernity is powerful and incisive, his analysis and evaluation of the cultural and artistic aspects of postmodernism remains highly problematic. Echoing Jameson's central thesis, Harvey offers a similar diagnosis, suggesting that postmodernism "signals nothing more than a logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of cultural production" (CP: 62), although here the deterministic aspects are perhaps even more explicit:

Cultural life is often held to be outside rather than within the embrace of this capitalist logic... Economic determination is irrelevant, even in the famous last instance. I hold this argument to be erroneous... Precisely because capitalism is expansionary and imperialistic, cultural life in more and more areas gets brought within the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital circulation.

(CP: 344)

Thus, for Harvey, in a manner similar to Jameson, postmodernism "emphasizes the fragmentary, the ephemeral, and the chaotic... while expressing a deep scepticism as to any particular prescriptions as to how the eternal and immutable should be conceived of,

represented, or expressed” (CP: 116). In response to the economic reductionism inherent in the work of both Jameson and Harvey, Angela McRobbie has observed that:

There is a postmodern *warranty* which provides both Jameson and Harvey with a wonderfully wide analytical sweep... The critique of postmodernism simultaneously allows these writers a kind of breathing space from what were the conventional rigours (or the rigidities) of marxist cultural analysis, and at the same time brings them back to a simpler and more direct notion of determination. What happens in the economy has a direct effect on what happens in culture.

(McRobbie, 1991: 6; emphasis in original)

In Harvey’s case, it could be argued that it is this dogged economic determinism which lends his overall argument a compelling coherence and consistency: as Meaghan Morris has suggested – ironically, of course – “For all the grimness of Harvey’s vision of a gaudy and turbulent world, there is something reassuring about the confidence of his grasp on its ‘gyrations’, and a comfort in his return to... ‘[this] simpler and more direct notion of determination’” (1992: 255). However, notwithstanding the fact that Harvey perhaps avoids the more obvious conceptual contradictions and aesthetic paradoxes which are inherent in Jameson’s work, it is evident that both these theorists fail to recognise the full artistic and sociopolitical potential of postmodernism. Hence, as McRobbie argues, the economic determinism of Jameson and Harvey allows for “the evasion of... the problematizing of the relations between culture and the economy and between culture and politics” (McRobbie, 1991: 6).

It is interesting to note at this stage that both theorists have acknowledged the possibility of a less deterministic – and potentially more positive – interpretation of postmodernism: Jameson has suggested that his notion of postmodernism as a ‘cultural

dominant' "does not exclude forms of resistance" (quoted in Stephanson, 1989: 52); while Harvey has argued that "In the hands of its more responsible practitioners, the whole baggage of ideas associated with postmodernism could be deployed to radical ends, and thereby be seen as part of a fundamental drive towards a more liberatory politics" (CP: 353). Yet, in practice, neither Jameson nor Harvey concedes any such radical potential, and their characterizations of postmodern cultural practice – notwithstanding the arguably 'postmodern' examples which Jameson chooses to celebrate – are uniformly negative and pessimistic.

Thus, for example, in Harvey's analysis – in which his examples are all selectively drawn from other sources, often resembling fateful self-fulfilling prophecies – popular music styles are dismissed as "the already seen, the already worn, the already played, the already heard" (CP: 301);¹⁶ this "same sensibility" is held to exist in postmodern fiction (CP: 301), which requires "suspension of belief as well as disbelief" (CP: 56); and in postmodern cinema, he argues, "ethics is... submerged by aesthetics" (CP: 337). In similar fashion, in a vituperative repudiation of the "depthless, styleless, dehistoricized, decathected surfaces of postmodernist culture" (1985: 61), Terry Eagleton suggests that "postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of... revolutionary avant-gardism" (1985: 60), thereby situating himself firmly within a Marxist aesthetic, and drawing interesting parallels with Jameson's essentially neo-modernist faith in the

¹⁶ As noted above, I will return to the unhappy relationship between music and postmodern theory in Chapter Five.

‘postmodern’ avant-garde, as well as with Harvey’s lamenting of the triumph of postmodernism’s aesthetics over modernism’s ethics. I will return to these analyses of postmodern cultural practice in a moment, although I want to be clear at this stage that in challenging the economic determinism of Jameson and Harvey I am not suggesting that the economy has *no* impact on the field of art and culture. On the contrary, as Janet Wolff has argued:

economic considerations, often of a quite fundamental kind, are always relevant to the social production of art... In the twentieth century, where the arts no longer have the clearly institutionalised position they had in the feudal and classical periods, it is perhaps even more necessary to understand the dependence of culture on economic factors, and the extreme sensitivity and vulnerability of the arts and culture to the fortunes of the economy.

(Wolff, 1993b: 46-47)

It is intriguing to note, in a preface to Sharon Zukin’s *Loft Living* (1982), that Harvey has himself alluded to the complexity of the relationship between the cultural and the economic, although this is a complexity that he tends to disregard in his own text:

The relation between culture and economy, between arts and capitalism, has always been problematic, as the whole tortured history of modernism (and now post-modernism) shows. The artist has long occupied an ambiguous and enigmatic position in the configuration of class forces that make up capitalism. Ever since the early nineteenth century, artists have had to submit to the vagaries of an art market, but their position within that market system (as artisans? as cultural producers working to the command of the hegemonic class interest? as rebels seeking new insights? as an avant-garde of social revolution? a mere bohemian fringe?) has never been as securely anchored as the ranks of professionals (academics, jurists, doctors and the like) who make up the bulk of what Marx refers to as the ‘ideological classes’ of capitalist society.

(Harvey, 1982: x)

Given the position which I argued in the previous chapter – namely, for a mode of cultural analysis which attends to both textual and contextual issues – it should be clear that I have no objection to an analysis of postmodernism which addresses economic factors. Rather, my objection is that although a consideration of economic factors may be a *necessary* analytical approach, it is far from *sufficient* in evaluating the manifest complexities – artistic, social, historical, political, ethical – of postmodernist culture: complexities which, from an economically reductionist perspective, are otherwise obscured.

Hence, although it would be foolish to dispute the diagnoses of both Jameson and Harvey regarding the commodification of much contemporary artistic practice, Jameson's subsequent conclusions regarding postmodernism's 'waning of affect' appear overly generalized and too sweepingly critical. For example, in a comparative analysis of Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes* and Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, Van Gogh's work is characterized as "a symbolic act in its own right... a Utopian gesture" which "draws the whole absent world and earth into revelation around itself" (PM: 7-8). In sharp contrast, Warhol's images are regarded as "the inversion of Van Gogh's Utopian gesture... debased and contaminated in advance by their assimilation to glossy advertising images", their detailing a "gratuitous frivolity" (PM: 9-10). In a highly revealing – and prophetically self-fulfilling – passage, Jameson argues that Warhol's images "*ought* to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, then one would surely want to know why, and one would begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or

critical art in the postmodern period of late capital” (PM: 9; emphasis in original). Thus, Jameson suggests, in contrast to the “immediacy” of Van Gogh, the “superficiality” of Warhol “does not really speak to us at all” (PM: 8-9).

On the contrary, however, it could be argued that Warhol – not only in his art but also in his artistic practice – ‘speaks to us’ with even greater immediacy and social relevance than Van Gogh about the nature of contemporary culture. Warhol’s art, with its images of the objects of mass-produced consumer culture (Campbell’s soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles, Brillo boxes) and media celebrities (Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Jackie Kennedy) need not be read simply as evidence of a “new kind of flatness or depthlessness” (PM: 10), but rather as a critical commentary on – or, indeed, perhaps a celebration of – the consumer and media culture from which it draws its inspiration. Furthermore, it was no coincidence that Warhol’s studio was called ‘The Factory’, and many of his screen-prints were literally mass-produced by a team of willing acolytes. Warhol’s work therefore typifies the artistic and sociopolitical tensions inherent in Pop art’s *rapprochement* between ‘high art’ and popular culture: a *rapprochement* in which the appropriation and borrowing of mass culture images, ideas, and techniques is often simultaneously celebratory and critical. Richard Hamilton’s famous photomontage *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) is typical of the tension I have in mind, its popular culture references indicating both a new-found artistic freedom and a reproving social critique. A similar tension inhabits Roy Lichtenstein’s use of comic book imagery (notwithstanding his claims to a purely formal interest in such imagery).

From the reductionist perspective of Jameson's position, however, the complexity of this tension is obscured, and it soon becomes clear that Jameson's claim that postmodernism incorporates the "whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch... of advertising and motels, of the late show and grade-B Hollywood film... into [its] very substance" (PM: 2) carries not only analytical but also evaluative force. It is interesting to note that Jameson himself has subsequently conceded that "some positive features of postmodernism" might indeed employ aspects of commercial culture and commodification and "attempt somehow to master these things by choosing them and pushing them to their limits" (quoted in Stephanson, 1989: 60). Robert Hewison makes a similar point when he suggests that "Critically deployed, the postmodern devices of fragmentation, sampling, collage, of pastiche and parody can be turned against the commodified culture of style to take apart its imagery and reclaim its elements" (1990: 171). Notwithstanding Hewison's less equivocal optimism, however, it should be noted that his account parallels Jameson's in its faith in the avant-garde in the struggle against "commodification" (1990: 176) and the "passivising process of TV" (1990: 175).

Similarly negative assessments of postmodern cinema are evident in the work of both Jameson and Harvey: Jameson claims that the "insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode" (PM: 20) results in a situation in which "we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience" (PM: 21); for Harvey, as noted earlier, postmodern cinema exemplifies "a condition in which aesthetics predominates over ethics" (CP: 322). These gloomy appraisals of postmodern cinema are

deeply problematic. Many of Jameson's highly selective examples of the 'nostalgia mode' lend themselves readily to his negative critique, although he offers little convincing justification of why films such as *American Graffiti* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), *Star Wars* (1977), *Body Heat* (1981), or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) should be regarded as paradigmatically postmodern (PM: 20-21; 1983: 116-117). Indeed, Michael Eaton suggests that Jameson's reading of *Chinatown* simply serves to demonstrate "how wrong the theorists can be", suggesting that the "predominant concerns" of the film "cannot be simply reduced to those of a phoney reflection of the past" but rather lie in its "romantic anxiety about the present" (1997: 50-51). Moreover, contrary to Jameson's reading – and the comparable, though perhaps somewhat more persuasive reading of Norman Denzin (1988) – it could be argued that David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), rather than simply "reduc[ing] itself to the recombination of various stereotypes of the past" (PM: 296), offers an unflinching – if highly ambiguous – contemporary social critique: one which goes far beyond the 'pastiche' and 'historicism' identified by Jameson.

A similar range of problems is encountered in Harvey's analyses of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Wings of Desire* (1987). Both films are chastised for their "individualized and strongly aestheticized... romanticism" – as if such qualities were somehow peculiar to postmodernism – and for their 'evasion' of the "question of class relations and consciousness" (CP: 322), at which point postmodern theory slips into Marxist dogma. In Jim Collins' more positive view, *Blade Runner* is "explicitly archaeological in its attempt to discover relationships among the layers of accumulated representations" (1987: 22);

similarly, as Harvey himself somewhat diffidently concedes, far from being ‘representative’ of postmodernism, a film such as *Wings of Desire* – however ambiguously, allusively, or ambivalently – might be read as offering a critique of contemporary ‘postmodern’ values.

Contrary to the negative evaluations of postmodern cinema indicated above, I want to suggest that the films of Hal Hartley and David Mamet perhaps offer a rather different perspective on postmodernism. Quintessentially postmodern in their ironic playfulness, their parodying of cinematic genres, and their narrative ambiguities, Hartley suggests that his films represent “a desperate attempt to make some philosophic sense out of my own experience” (quoted in Fuller, 1992: xxxii).¹⁷ In his introduction to the screenplays of *Trust* (1991) and *Simple Men* (1992), Graham Fuller suggests that these films represent “a curiously lyrical, comic inquiry into the inchoate burdens of desire and duty and the elusive goals of communication and trust” (Fuller, 1992: vii): an understanding of postmodern cinematic practice which stands in sharp contrast to the pessimistic appraisals offered by Jameson and Harvey. The genre-parodying films of David Mamet similarly resist such negative stereotyping.¹⁸ In his typically densely structured *Homicide*, for example, Mamet freely employs the typical features of the ‘cop movie’ genre, happily admitting “I’ve used all these routines shamelessly” (quoted in Combs, 1991: 16). However, Mamet moves far beyond the stylishly-packaged ‘cop movie’ format, in a film

¹⁷ See, for example, *The Unbelievable Truth* (1990), *Trust* (1991), *Simple Men* (1992), and *Amateur* (1994).

¹⁸ See, for example, *House of Games* (1987), *Things Change* (1988), *Homicide* (1991), and *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997).

which finally, and despite what Jameson and Harvey would no doubt regard as its problematic recourse to postmodern ‘pastiche’, reveals itself to be a contemporary moral fable of Shakespearean proportions, with detective Bobby Gold, the film’s central character, confronting profound moral issues of identity, belonging, trust and betrayal.

The analyses and evaluations of postmodern fiction offered by Jameson and Harvey reveal similar shortcomings and omissions. Jameson suggests, for example, that in the historical novels of E.L. Doctorow (e.g. 1971, 1975) we are “condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (PM: 25), thus exemplifying “the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (PM: 21). For Harvey, as we have seen, postmodern fiction is similarly culpable: it requires “suspension of belief as well as disbelief”; in postmodernism, he argues, there is “little overt attempt to sustain continuity of values, beliefs, or even disbeliefs” (CP: 56). Responding to Jameson’s discussion of Doctorow’s work, and his assertion that the “historical novel... can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about the past” (PM: 25), Peter Brooker has argued that “in a more positive view it *competes* with and trounces dominant representations” (1992: 507; emphasis in original). Jameson’s reading of Doctorow – as with his gloomy readings of many other postmodern texts – is perhaps best regarded as an unsuccessful attempt to make the recalcitrant evidence fit the pre-coded parameters of the elegantly constructed theory. Harvey, on the other hand, offers not a single empirical example to support his contention that postmodern fiction requires the ‘suspension of belief as well as disbelief’.

Somewhat perversely, the phrase that Harvey employs is actually a third-hand quote from Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), a work that adopts an altogether more positive attitude towards its object of study.

The lack of empirical substantiation evident in Harvey's work perhaps reaches its nadir in Terry Eagleton's (1985) early essay on postmodernism, cited briefly above. Other than a passing reference to "Warhol's shoes and soup-cans" – which are negatively contrasted with "Mayakovsky's poetry readings in the factory yard" – and a cursory dismissal of Carl Andre's arguably 'postmodern' "pile of bricks in the Tate Gallery" (1985: 61)¹⁹ – without, as Nicholas Zurrugg has noted, "even bothering to mention Andre's name" (1993: 6) – Eagleton offers no empirical evidence whatsoever of the postmodern cultural practice which he so thoroughly vilifies in support of his "absurdly reductive" hypothesis (Zurrugg, 1993: 6). Similarly, Jim Collins notes that "Eagleton's rejection of Post-Modernism is total, with nary a specific textual example to mar the effect" (1989: 123); while Linda Hutcheon suggests that:

Like many before him (both defenders and detractors), Eagleton separates practice and theory, choosing to argue primarily in abstract theoretical terms and almost seeming deliberately to avoid mention of exactly what kind of aesthetic practice is actually being talked about. This strategy, however clever and certainly convenient, leads only to endless confusion.

(Hutcheon, 1988: 18)

¹⁹ As I will argue in the sections which follow, Andre's minimalism is perhaps better understood as an aspect of late modernism.

Significantly, in their considerations of postmodern fiction, neither Jameson nor Harvey consider the work of Robert Coover or Donald Barthelme, two of the most highly influential and widely-cited of postmodern writers, and two of the writers perhaps least likely to conform to these unremittingly pessimistic appraisals of postmodern culture. As Margaret Rose has noted, in an apparently unremarkable but highly significant observation: “Clearly, the concept of post-modernism chosen by a particular theorist will also play some role in the selection of works to be categorized as post-modernist by them” (1991: 137). The point I want to emphasize here is that an understanding of the specificities of postmodern cultural forms and practices should be a *prerequisite* for theorizing, rather than representing a highly selective, self-fulfilling *outcome* of theorizing.

Robert Coover’s novel *The Public Burning* (1977), for example, freely mixes fact and fiction, intertwining the lives of Richard Nixon and Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, climaxing with Nixon being sodomized by the mythic figure of Uncle Sam. The very fact that it took Coover over two and a half years to find a publisher for *The Public Burning* – his original editor suggesting that “the book might after all be ‘immoral’” (quoted in Kennedy, 1992: 109) – indicates the extent to which Coover’s particular brand of ferocious satire represents a disturbing challenge to contemporary social and political values.²⁰ It is especially interesting to note the manner in which Coover’s own reflections on his art, while confirming Harvey’s diagnosis of the ‘condition of postmodernity’, conflict sharply

²⁰ For further examples of Coover’s social and political satire, see Coover (1980, 1986, 1988).

with Harvey's unsupported conclusions that postmodern fiction requires the 'suspension of belief', suggesting a considerably more positive motivation:

All of us today are keenly aware that we are undergoing a radical shift in sensibilities. We are no longer convinced of the nature of things, of design as justification. Everything seems itself random... Under these conditions of arbitrariness, the artistic impulse is directed toward putting the random parts together in any order which provides a pattern for living... Artists re-create: they... weaken and tear down structures so that they can be rebuilt, releasing new energies. Realizing this gave me an excuse to be the anarchist I've always wanted to be. I discovered I could be an anarchist and be constructive at the same time".

(quoted in Gado, 1973: 157)

In a similar fashion, if somewhat less spectacularly, Donald Barthelme's short stories offer a comically ironic yet disquietingly accurate dissection of contemporary life,²¹ far removed from Jameson's notion of postmodern pastiche as 'blank parody': "a neutral practice... without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" (PM: 17).²² Again, it is interesting to consider Barthelme's own reflections on his creative practice, which serve to highlight the balance of epistemological and ontological concerns in his work, a balance which Linda Hutcheon (1989) would later theorize as a central characteristic of postmodernism: in his writing, Barthelme suggests, "unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and

²¹ For a typical example, see *Critique de la Vie Quotidienne* (1972). Many of Barthelme's short stories have been collected in two compilation volumes (Barthelme, 1981; 1987).

²² I will return to Jameson's problematic notion of 'blank parody' in more detail in Chapter Six.

may also be much else. It's an *itself*, if it's successful" (quoted in Bellamy, 1974: 52; emphasis in original).

In response to the negative appraisals of postmodernism advanced by Jameson and Harvey, I want to suggest that both theorists too readily conflate the economic and sociopolitical *experience* of postmodernity – the pernicious effects of which Harvey's own empirically-detailed analysis has persuasively demonstrated – with the artistic and sociopolitical *potential* of postmodernism – the cultural specificities of which are elided when viewed from within the strictures of a reductionist, Marxist perspective.²³ Or, to put this another way, I would argue that it is theoretically and analytically untenable to visit the socio-economic sins of postmodernity on the cultural forms of postmodernism. On the one hand, although Jameson fails to develop satisfactorily – either theoretically or empirically – the political economic analysis of the aspects of postmodernity which underlie his central thesis (i.e. postmodernism as 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'), it soon becomes clear that his otherwise textualist readings of postmodern forms (and their associated mass culture borrowings, which Jameson himself identifies as a constitutive feature of postmodernism) are predicated upon the fundamental links which, he claims, exist between these forms and "commodity production generally" (PM: 4): forms which, given Jameson's explicitly Marxist perspective, are then evaluated accordingly. On the other hand, although Harvey offers a sustained and detailed account of the socio-

²³ See Davis (1985: 107), for a similar line of argument.

economic aspects of postmodernity, his analyses of postmodern cultural forms are too often lacking in theoretical, empirical, and textual justification, and too often succumb to viewing ‘culture’ as merely a ‘reflection’ – albeit, in Harvey’s case, a rather sophisticated reflection – of broader social and economic forces: once again, and not surprisingly given Harvey’s analytical perspective, this results in a negative evaluation of postmodern culture.

Jameson’s response to the challenges of postmodernism takes the form of a proposed “aesthetic of cognitive mapping” (PM: 54), suggesting that “individual and collective subjects” must “regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion” (PM: 54). In reply to Jameson’s claims of spatial and social ‘confusion’, Barry Smart argues that political action has “rather increasingly assumed ‘inconvenient’ non-class forms” (1992: 190), a proposition which seems especially appropriate given Jameson’s subsequent acknowledgement that the somewhat fuzzy concept of ‘cognitive mapping’ “was in reality nothing but a code word for ‘class consciousness’” (PM: 418). As Martin Jay has observed, “the dangerous expedient of ‘ascribed’ or ‘imputed’ class consciousness... as a way to compensate for the lack of actual revolutionary militancy in the proletariat, perhaps proves to be the return of Jameson’s own repressed” (1993: 303).

Harvey’s reply to the ‘condition of postmodernity’ is to call for a “renewal of historical materialism and of the Enlightenment project” (CP: 355), in which the old certainties of Marxist analysis might be reaffirmed, although now with a suitably ‘topical’

acknowledgement of “difference and ‘otherness’”, which Harvey typically conflates as “race, gender, religion” (CP: 355) or “women, gays, blacks, ecologists, regional autonomists, etc” (CP: 48). Harvey has been justifiably criticized for his cursory treatment of gender and ‘difference’: although apparently an integral aspect of his agenda for the future development of “historical-geographical materialism” (CP: 355), these issues receive scant attention in his own text.²⁴ Harvey’s reaffirmation of historical materialism is accompanied by a restored faith in modernism’s apparently immutable and unquestioned “ethics”, which have apparently been submerged by postmodernism’s “aesthetics” (CP: 337). Hence, although Harvey acknowledges that “the environmental explanations of difference put forward by Montesquieu and Rousseau hardly appear enlightened, while the sordid facts of the slave trade and the subjugation of women passed Enlightenment thinkers by with hardly a murmur of protest” (CP: 252), his faith in a modernist sense of ethics – inherited from the Enlightenment – is apparently unshakeable.²⁵

Given these rather problematic positions, I would argue that neither theorist offers an adequate response to ‘the postmodern’: while Jameson’s ‘cognitive mapping’ tends to exaggerate the spatial and social confusion wrought by postmodernism, Harvey’s somewhat regressive call for a ‘renewal of the Enlightenment project’ overlooks

²⁴ See Morris (1992) and Folch-Serra (1993) for critiques of this aspect of Harvey’s work. See also Harvey (1992b) for his response to his feminist critics.

²⁵ Neil Postman encounters similar problems in his recent book *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* (1999), in which a regressive thesis regarding the ‘lessons’ which contemporary culture can learn from the Enlightenment is accompanied by an unconvincing apologia for the ills of the period: “Yes, Jefferson had slaves. But he knew that he *shouldn’t* have slaves” (1999: 19; emphasis in original). One cannot help but think that building a bridge to the 21st Century might be a better option.

Jameson's cautionary reminder that "we cannot... return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours" (PM: 50).

Before going on to a more detailed consideration of the conceptual contradictions and aesthetic paradoxes inherent in Fredric Jameson's work, it is worthwhile digressing briefly to consider the particular conceptualization of the postmodern advanced by Jean-François Lyotard, which similarly falls under the rubric of a 'modernist postmodernism'. To paraphrase W.S. Gilbert, Lyotard is often regarded as the very model of a postmodern major philosopher: with his emphasis on the heterogeneity and incommensurability of 'language games' (1984a), the irreconcilable 'differend' between opposing truth-claims or 'phrase regimes' (1988), and the delegitimation of customary notions of aesthetic and ethical judgement in the face of the 'unpresentable' nature of the 'sublime' (1982, 1984b, 1984c), Lyotard effortlessly fulfils the role of the postmodern theorist *par excellence*.

Perry Anderson, for example, has suggested that Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984a) became "the inspiration of a street-level relativism that often passes – in the eyes of friends and foes alike – for the hallmark of postmodernism" (1998: 26-27); and Barry Smart has noted that "at times [Lyotard] is mistakenly represented as an *advocate* rather than an *analyst* of the postmodern condition" (1992: 204; emphasis in original). Smart's observation appears particularly relevant given Harvey's curious misreading of Lyotard, in which he aligns the latter with Charles Jencks (e.g. 1989, 1992) as an enthusiastic celebrant of the "exciting and healthy... eclecticism" of postmodern

culture (CP: 87): ‘curious’ in that, as Meaghan Morris suggests, “all the pandering, wallowing and slackening imputed [by Lyotard] to ‘the epoch’ demands a view of eclecticism (‘confusion’) that not only differs from but *opposes* Jencks’s celebration” (1992: 259; emphasis in original). It is interesting to note that Terry Eagleton, apparently similarly failing to grasp Lyotard’s sarcasm, succumbs to a comparable case of ‘mistaken identity’ (see Eagleton, 1985: 72).

Notwithstanding the evident ubiquity of this characterization of Lyotard as an ‘advocate’ of the postmodern condition, I would argue that Lyotard’s neo-Kantian conceptualization of the sublime aesthetic in avant-garde artistic practice, rather than ‘exemplifying’ postmodernism in the manner suggested above, can more readily be perceived as falling comfortably within the modernist tradition, representing the anachronistic reintroduction of a profoundly problematic, and ultimately conservative, form of cultural theory. Any extended discussion of Lyotard’s contemporary definition of the sublime aesthetic – or of the historical and philosophical genealogy of the concept – is far beyond the scope of this brief digression. Having expounded his notion of the sublime in many of his writings since the early 1980s (e.g. 1982, 1984b, 1984c, 1989, 1990), it is sufficient at this stage to note that Lyotard glosses the concept as follows:

a strong and equivocal emotion: it carries with it both pleasure and pain... It takes place... when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept... We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to ‘make visible’ this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. These are Ideas of which no presentation is possible... They can be said to be unrepresentable.

(Lyotard, 1984b: 77-78)

In art, Lyotard differentiates between the ‘melancholic’ or ‘nostalgic’ sublime – which is held to characterize “modern aesthetics”, wherein some sense of form is retained and the “unpresentable... [is] put forward only as the missing contents” – and the ‘*novatio*’ or ‘postmodern’ sublime, which “*in the modern*, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself” (1984b: 80-81, my italics). Thus, for Lyotard:

The postmodern... [is] that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of the philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.

(Lyotard, 1984b: 81; emphasis in original)

This definition is clearly informed by Lyotard’s understanding that “the postmodern... is undoubtedly a part of the modern” (Lyotard, 1984b: 79), which leads him to assert – “with a little logic and perversity” (Jencks, 1992: 16) – that “a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (Lyotard: 1984b: 79).²⁶ In resorting to the philosophical conceit implicit in this form of “verbal subterfuge” (Best and Kellner, 1991: 174) – in which “*post modern* would have to be understood according to the

²⁶ The ‘perversity’ which Jencks identifies in Lyotard’s assertion is perhaps somewhat ameliorated – if only somewhat – in a more recent, alternative, translation of this passage: “Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is *recurrent*” (Lyotard, 1992: 13, my italics).

paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)” (Lyotard, 1984b: 81) – Lyotard tends to disguise, as Jameson suggests, the extent to which his conceptualization of the ‘postmodern’ sublime, with its “commitment to the experimental and the new... determine[s] an aesthetic that is far more closely related to the traditional ideologies of high modernism proper than to current postmodernisms” (Jameson, 1984b: xvi). This essentially modernist aesthetic, Jameson argues, “is indeed – paradoxically enough – very closely related to the conception of the revolutionary nature of high modernism that Habermas faithfully inherited from the Frankfurt School” (1984b: xvi). Hence, Lyotard’s somewhat idiosyncratically non-linear conceptualization of ‘the postmodern’ as ‘undoubtedly a part of the modern’ – and the consequent aesthetic orientation which stems from this understanding – perhaps serves to indicate somewhat closer links between Lyotard’s ‘postmodern condition’ (1984a) and Habermas’ ‘unfinished project of modernity’ (1981) than their acrimonious debate suggests.²⁷ Thus, as John Tagg has observed, Lyotard’s aesthetic of the sublime reveals itself to be deeply problematic:

out of the smoke and dust of the postmodernist explosion, we begin to see the familiar chunky outlines of a rough but redeeming modernism... The difficulty with this reassertion of the modernist idea that art has the crucial if feared ability to transform meaning and value for the surrounding society is that it assumes too much in the continuity of context and fails to explain the changing relation of avant-garde practices to capitalist production, dominant cultures and state apparatuses.

(Tagg, 1992b: 159-160)

²⁷ See also Steuerman (1989): “re-reading Lyotard, one is surprised to see how close his analysis of the status of knowledge in contemporary societies is to that of Habermas” (1989: 52).

Leaving aside Lyotard's somewhat convoluted definition of the 'postmodern' sublime, it is clear that his essentially modernist reassertion of the transformational potential of the avant-garde – with “the artist as male hero, expressing his freedom through his alienation” (Frith, 1992b: 172) – is achieved at the expense of a wholesale rejection of those contemporary cultural forms which Lyotard regards as “‘postmodern’ (in Jencks's sense)... Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture... It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. By becoming kitsch, art panders to the confusion which reigns in the 'taste' of the patrons. Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the 'anything goes', and the epoch is one of slackening” (Lyotard, 1984b: 76). In similar vein, Lyotard suggests that:

Innovation in art... resumes already proven formulas... throws them off kilter by combining them with other, allegedly incompatible formulas, by amalgamations, quotations, ornamentations, pastiches. One can go as far as kitsch or the baroque. One flatters the 'taste' of a public, and the eclecticism of a sensibility enfeebled by the multiplicity of forms and available objects. In this way one thinks one is expressing the spirit of the moment, whereas one is merely reflecting the spirit of the marketplace. Sublimity no longer is in art, but in speculating on art.

(Lyotard, 1984c: 43)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these passages, especially given Lyotard's renunciation of the 'grand narrative' of Marxism (Lyotard, 1984a: 36-37), is their remarkable similarity to the Marxist dismissals of a 'chaotic' and 'depthless' postmodern culture to be found in the work of Harvey and Eagleton: a similarity which is doubly paradoxical in light of these theorists' mistaken characterization of Lyotard as an enthusiastic *proponent* of postmodernism, as noted above. Moreover, the intriguing

parallels between Lyotard's 'anti-eclecticism'/'pro-avant-gardism' thesis and Jameson's profoundly ambivalent attitude towards postmodernism should not be overlooked. In common with Lyotard's decrying of postmodern 'eclecticism', Jameson's claims for the 'degraded', 'commodified' nature of postmodernism serve to encode a critique of popular culture which, as I suggested in the previous chapter (pp. 56-57), is similarly reminiscent of Frankfurt School orthodoxies.

Furthermore, Jameson's neo-modernist responses to the 'postmodern' avant-garde can be seen to have much in common with Lyotard's faith in the 'sublime', both positions recalling Roland Barthes' (1975) implicitly elitist '*plaisir-jouissance*' distinction which, as Andreas Huyssen has observed, "reiterates one of the most tired topoi of the modernist aesthetic and of bourgeois culture at large: there are the pleasures for the rabble, i.e. mass culture, and then there is the *nouvelle cuisine* of the pleasure of the text, of *jouissance*" (1986: 211), in which 'transcendent' aesthetic experience is reserved for the privileged few. Thus, although it is hard to disagree with Jameson when he argues that Lyotard's sublime aesthetic simply "reproduce[s] something of the celebration of modernism as its first ideologues projected it – a constant and ever more dynamic revolution in the languages, forms and tastes of art" (Jameson, 1984b: xvi), it is perhaps somewhat paradoxical that Jameson apparently fails to recognise the same, essentially modernist, aesthetic at work in his own cultural analyses. It is to this central paradox in Jameson's work that I will now turn.

Celebrating the Postmodern

Although Jameson is explicitly critical of the “depthlessness” (PM: 9), “waning of affect” (PM: 10), and “historicism” (PM: 18) which he claims is characteristic of postmodern culture, he also, as noted above, characterizes himself as a “relatively enthusiastic consumer of postmodernism” (PM: 298).²⁸ However, Jameson’s enthusiasms serve only to emphasize the aesthetic contradictions and category mistakes inherent in his work, highlighting his paradoxical dual role: on the one hand, as a denunciatory Marxist critic of a commodified ‘late capitalist’ postmodernism; and, on the other, as a celebratory neo-modernist cheerleader for those contemporary cultural forms which he similarly labels ‘postmodern’ – cultural forms which not only belie his own central thesis, but in which it is perhaps hard to identify the “effacement... of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” which, in Jameson’s own schema, is regarded as a “fundamental feature” of postmodernism (PM: 2). In this sense, in arguing for a “dialectical” reading of postmodernism (PM: 46), Jameson might be accused of wanting to have his postmodern cake and eat it too.

Given the evaluative positions which, as I have indicated above, are encoded within much cultural theory, it should be clear by this stage that the question of the categorization of contemporary cultural forms is one which goes far beyond simple matters of taxonomy, in the traditional art-historical sense. In other words, elaborating

²⁸ Given that Harvey finds little to ‘celebrate’ in postmodernism, his work will not feature heavily in this part of my discussion.

the point made by Margaret Rose above, my argument here is that, subject to the theoretical and political orientation of the analyst, the manner in which a cultural form is categorized will influence the manner in which the form is subsequently evaluated. In an interesting, if unconvincing, rhetorical move, Jameson has suggested that his expressed 'enthusiasms' for postmodernism are irrelevant in his analyses and evaluations: "These are tastes, giving rise to opinions; they have little to do with the analysis of the function of such a culture and how it got to be that way" (PM: 299). However, notwithstanding Jameson's contention that his critics too often confuse matters of 'taste', 'analysis', and 'evaluation' in his work, it appears that Jameson is ultimately unsuccessful in his own attempts to distinguish 'taste' from 'evaluation', while his claims for the "rigorous" nature of 'analysis' (PM: 298) perhaps suggest a re-invocation of a vision of objective, value-free scholarship: a vision which, somewhat ironically, postmodern theory has done much to dispel.²⁹

In Jameson's terms, then, 'taste' corresponds to "what used to be nobly and philosophically designated as 'aesthetic judgment'", while 'evaluation' "tries to keep alive (or to reinvent) assessments of a sociopolitical kind that interrogate the quality of social life itself by way of the text or individual work of art" (PM: 298). Similarly, in his essay on the work of the conceptual artist Hans Haacke, Jameson suggests that "To insist... on 'postmodernism' as a systematic form of capitalism... ought to free us from the more

²⁹ On questions of value and postmodernism, see Fekete (1987) and Squires (1993).

facile solutions of a purely aesthetic debate” (1986: 39). Given these admonitions, perhaps the most curious aspect of Jameson’s work is the extent to which it selectively conflates – and often confuses – ‘aesthetic judgement’ and ‘sociopolitical assessment’, and the degree to which these evaluative positions are fully implicated in the process of analysis. Thus, in Jameson’s appraisals of a ‘degraded’ postmodernism, late capitalist ‘logic’ inexorably overwhelms aesthetic – or, indeed, sociopolitical – content: recall Jameson’s self-fulfillingly negative assessment of Warhol’s images – they “*ought* to be powerful and critical political statements” (PM: 9). In sharp contrast, in Jameson’s evaluations of what he claims to be more “authentic forms” of postmodernism such as experimental video (PM: 96), this ‘logic’ is suspended in favour of strictly textualist readings, from which, curiously enough, considerably more optimistic conclusions are drawn.

Jameson’s analysis of John Portman’s Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles is a case in point: here, Jameson’s primarily aesthetic celebration – couched as it is in “Baudrillardian mumbo jumbo about ‘hyperspace’” (Zurbrugg, 1993: 10) – sits somewhat uneasily alongside his thesis that postmodernism represents the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’. Although Jameson acknowledges that “the extraordinary flowering of the new postmodern architecture [is] grounded in the patronage of multinational business, whose expansion and development is strictly contemporaneous with it” (PM: 5), in his analysis he is more concerned to highlight “the originality of postmodernist space” (PM: 38), arguing that postmodern architecture represents a new kind of “aesthetic populism” (PM: 2), and characterizing the Bonaventure as “a popular building” (PM: 39).

Mike Davis disputes the “imposing totalizations” of Jameson’s analysis (Davis, 1985: 107), suggesting that postmodernist architecture might be reinterpreted, not simply as a manifestation of capitalist growth, but, on the contrary, as a symptom of a “global crisis” in the current phase of capitalism, dominated by speculation and financial overaccumulation (1985: 109). From this perspective, Davis suggests, the Bonaventure represents a form of major inner-city development which signals the “definitive abandonment of the ideal of urban reform as part of the new class polarisation taking place in the United States” (1985: 108). Furthermore, and in sharp contrast to Jameson’s celebratory account, Davis argues that Jameson’s “vivid description” of the Bonaventure, and his claims for its “‘popular’ character”, simply fail to recognize the “savagery of its insertion into the surrounding city” (1985: 112), and the manner in which it serves to heighten the continuing segregation of America’s inner cities.³⁰

Thus, Jameson’s analysis elides the “coercive intent” of postmodernist architecture – which, Davis suggests, can be negatively contrasted with the idealist ambitions in much modernist architectural planning – in that it serves to “polarize [the city] into radically antagonistic spaces” (1985: 113). Jameson’s subsequent peevish reply to Davis – in a new footnote accusing him, somewhat cryptically, of a pseudo-Sartrean “bad faith” which, Jameson claims, is “characteristic of the more ‘militant’ sounds from the Left” (PM: 421)

³⁰ A segregation which is perhaps most clearly evident in the development of Philip Johnson’s “fortified skyscrapers” in New York City, Trump Castle being only the most obvious example (Davis, 1985: 133).

– hardly represents an adequate response to Davis’ sustained and penetrating critique. It is interesting to note, however, in his brief introduction to the three lectures collected in *The Seeds of Time* (1994), that Jameson confesses to “a certain exasperation with myself and with others, who have frequently expressed their enthusiasm with the boundless and ungovernable richness of modern artistic – in this case architectural – forms and styles” which, he suggests, led to an “impression of illimitable pluralism” in his analyses of contemporary architecture (1994: xiv).

Hence – somewhat ironically perhaps, given Jameson’s otherwise negative evaluations of a ‘late capitalist’ postmodernism – Davis’ analysis suggests that postmodernist architecture, particularly in terms of its sociopolitical implications, must be regarded somewhat more cautiously than Jameson’s essentially aesthetic celebration might indicate. Sharon Zukin arrives at a similar conclusion, proposing that “postmodernization should be carefully analyzed for the social production of its aesthetic affects” (1988: 443), a view which Harvey (1992a) develops further in his consideration of ‘positionality’ in the contemporary debate over urban form. Lawrence Grossberg makes a more general point when he argues that “In the effort to give culture its due, contemporary cultural theory too often goes overboard, erasing the relations between culture and specific economic and political realities” (1992: 359).

To add a further layer of complexity to the aesthetic and conceptual contradictions inherent in Jameson’s thesis, it is intriguing to note that, contrary to Jameson’s reading of the Bonaventure as a “full-blown postmodern building” (PM: 38), Charles Jencks

contends that the Bonaventure represents a “Late-Modernist building” (1987: 15).

Although this classificatory distinction may appear at first glance to be nothing other than architectural nit-picking, the conflict in these interpretations suggestively illuminates the extent to which Jameson’s identification and subsequent valorisation of selected aspects of contemporary cultural practice owes more to a modernist, rather than postmodernist, aesthetic. Thus, in ‘celebratory’ mode, Jameson might more readily be perceived as a “neo-modernist” cultural critic (O’Neill, 1988: 502), and Judith Goldstein’s insightful observation that “Jameson responds to the Bonaventure Hotel along familiar lines of the romantic individual undergoing a transcendent aesthetic experience” (1993: 160), applies equally well to his responses to experimental video and conceptual art, which are beset with similar problems.

In the case of experimental video, it seems essential initially to distinguish between its technological and aesthetic forebears: although the most common ‘mode of delivery’ for video art is, indeed, the television monitor, the form undoubtedly finds its aesthetic roots in the contemporary visual arts, and in conceptual art, performance art, and avant-garde film. Arguably, therefore, video art has little in common with broadcast television,³¹ perhaps the most populist of mass cultural forms, and one which is virtually antithetical to the avant-garde. Moreover, behind the question of the relationship between television and the avant-garde lies the more general issue of television’s ambivalent relationship with the

³¹ I use the term ‘broadcast television’ inclusively here, to refer to terrestrial, cable, and satellite broadcasting, with the emphasis on the notion of scheduled television programming.

broader field of art and culture: an ambivalence which is exemplified in the profoundly equivocal station motto of *Bravo!*, Canada's 'New Style Arts Channel'. With the help of red velvet drapes, a stirring fanfare, and a plummy 'English' accent, viewers are assured that *Bravo!*'s programming represents 'TV Too Good For TV': at one and the same time, then, this linguistic and philosophical conundrum invites the 'cultured' television viewer to partake, but to remain distant; to sample the cultural delights on display, but to disregard their mode of delivery; to enjoy the message, but ignore the medium. Thus, in *Bravo!*'s terms – if not McLuhan's – the message transcends the medium. McLuhan's famous dictum is perhaps more appropriate in a consideration of the video art of Nam June Paik, although in a manner which McLuhan might not have envisaged: in Paik's often elaborate video installations the television monitor and television screen – as physical, material objects – are often integral parts of the works themselves. In Paik's case, then, elaborating on McLuhan, one could perhaps venture that the medium is the medium.

Thus, notwithstanding the selective aesthetic appropriation of mass cultural elements in some video art texts³² – and recalling a point made in the introductory section of this chapter (pp. 76-77) – it is a cultural form which remains almost entirely distinct from popular culture, whether in terms of its modes of circulation, its institutional allegiances, its funding base, or its broader positioning within cultural and media policy. From this

³² For example, in Jameson's description, the video *AlienNATION* (1979) – which forms the centrepiece of his analysis of experimental video (PM: 67-96) – makes use of scenes from a Japanese Godzilla movie, 1950s kitchen advertising, disco music, the theme music from *Lawrence of Arabia*, and much more.

perspective, then, rather than typifying postmodernism, video art is more readily situated within a modernist avant-garde aesthetic. Hence, in Margot Lovejoy's otherwise comprehensive and informative review of 'art and artists in the age of electronic media' (1997), her claims for the postmodern character of video art remain unconvincing, predicated on a reductive technological determinism and a simplistic periodizing hypothesis which, not surprisingly given her singular enthusiasm for the avant-garde, are accompanied by a somewhat predictable critique of mass culture, in the shape of television.³³ Thus, Lovejoy suggests, "In the arts, electronic media such as video and the computer challenge older modes of representation. New media have created postmodern conditions and have changed the way art itself is viewed" (1997: 8-9).

No such grandiloquent claims are made for television, however, which is held responsible for creating "a vast meltdown within the public consciousness" and characterized as an arena of "confusion, a melting pot of forms, concepts and banalities" (1997: 68). Although a similar attitude toward television hovers in the background of Calvin Tomkins' work, his attitude toward video art contrasts sharply with Lovejoy's celebratory account. Arguing that "visual artists, who are trained to deal with space, often have a very uncertain grasp of time" (1981: 96), Tomkins observes: "Museum-going is a tiring business, granted, but nothing brings on a nap quicker than a semi-dark room, a sofa, and a little video art" (1981: 93).

³³ Lovejoy's work therefore has interesting parallels with that of Nicholas Zurbrugg (1993), addressed in the previous chapter (p. 52).

The aesthetic ‘mis-recognition’ of video art as ‘postmodern’ therefore raises significant questions with regard to Jameson’s analytical and evaluative conclusions. Responding to Jameson’s contention that “the logic of postmodernism... finds one of its strongest and most original, authentic forms in the new art of experimental video” (PM: 96), Steven Connor observes that “the terms used here encapsulate the paradoxes nicely. How can a culture which is allegedly defined by the decisive abandonment of originality and authenticity possibly be exemplified in any ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ way?” (1989: 49). Hence, Connor suggests, Jameson’s claims on behalf of experimental video “seem like a nostalgic revival of the language of modernist masterpiece-aesthetics which he has previously dismissed so sadly” (1989: 166).

Similarly problematic are the ‘postmodern’ claims which Jameson makes on behalf of conceptual art, highlighting either its “Utopian impulses” (PM: 159)³⁴ or, in the case of Hans Haacke’s work, its “explicitly political” character (1986: 43).³⁵ In both cases, and despite Jameson’s caveats to the contrary, there appears to be little that distinguishes his optimistic ‘postmodern’ readings of these texts from a traditional Marxist aesthetic, with its modernist faith in “revolutionary avant-gardism”, to borrow Eagleton’s phrase (1985: 60). Hence, Jameson’s celebrations of a ‘modernist postmodernism’ – especially when coupled with his sad dismissals of a ‘commodified postmodernism’ – suggest that he

³⁴ It is interesting to observe the ‘Utopian’ line that Jameson traces from Van Gogh (PM: 7) to conceptual art (PM: 159).

³⁵ For a wide-ranging anthology on the history and development of conceptual art, see Alberro and Stimson (1999).

singularly fails to avoid the “older left habits” against which he himself so vigorously cautions, namely those of “formulating politico-moralizing judgements, whereby the principal activity of the left critic is conceived as... ‘deciding’ whether works are progressive or reactionary, contestatory and oppositional or a replication of the system and a reinforcement of its formal ideologies” (1986: 39).

This central paradox in Jameson’s work has been summarised succinctly by Meaghan Morris: “Criticism swings between mourning and affirmation, installed in postmodern melancholia yet looking for radical options” (1988b: 122). Thus, Jameson’s primarily aesthetic celebration of the contemporary avant-garde proves to be unsustainable, not necessarily in and of itself, but rather in terms of the contradiction which this celebration presents to his central, Marxist thesis: a thesis which both fails to recognise the critical artistic and sociopolitical potential of the ‘degraded’ postmodernism which it denounces – namely, the blurring of the traditional, ‘universalizing’ distinctions between ‘high art’ and popular culture – while, at the same time – in its modernist reaffirmation of the avant-garde, in the language of ‘masterpiece-aesthetics’ – reinforcing those very distinctions to which postmodern cultural practice has presented such a convincing critique.

At this point, once again, it is interesting to observe the striking parallels between the work of Jameson and Lyotard: writing of *Les Immatériaux*, the 1985 exhibition of ‘postmodern’ art curated by Lyotard at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Paul Crowther has noted the extent to which the choice of art works privileged “the tradition

of avant-garde abstract/conceptual art” at the expense of a range of “eclectic” work which could equally well be categorized as postmodern (1992: 194). Somewhat ironically, given Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984a: xxiv), it is the ‘grand narrative’ of the postmodern ‘sublime’ which functions, much in the same fashion as Curtler’s unassailable “canon of high culture” (1997: 159), to exclude those art works which are considered unworthy of ‘sublime’ status. Thus, Crowther argues, Lyotard’s exclusion of representative works of “eclectic” postmodernism is based “paradoxically enough... on a persistence of *modernist* attitudes” (1992: 196; emphasis in original).

Furthermore, it appears hard to sustain Lyotard’s claims either for the ‘sublimity’ of avant-garde conceptualism, or for his separation of the fields of “cultural activities and artistic work” (Lyotard, 1990: 298), particularly in light of the manner in which such work has singularly failed to avoid ‘pandering’ (Lyotard, 1984b: 76) to the art market and gallery system.³⁶ Typically, the advocates of conceptual art have attempted to assert its ‘independence’ from such forces: “The Conceptualists opposed the commodity state of the object and promoted the idea that art as idea could become common property. Because of

³⁶ Given the demands of the academic publishing industry – and Lyotard’s not inconsiderable participation in that same industry – an analogous argument can be made against Lyotard’s somewhat extravagant claims for the ‘sublime’ status of the postmodern philosopher: an autonomous, heroic figure, apparently free from mundane institutional constraints and responsibilities: “the question ‘What is thought?’ places the philosopher in an avant-garde position. That is why he dares speak of painters, his brothers and sisters in experimentation” (Lyotard, 1982: 69; see also 1984b: 81). Lyotard’s position here has interesting parallels with Roland Barthes’ somewhat paradoxical role as the author of ‘The Death of the Author’ (1968), a famous and widely cited essay, the authorship of which Barthes did little to disavow.

its reliance on language and text, conceptual works could be disseminated beyond the context of the gallery” (Lovejoy, 1997: 63). Contrary to such idealistic claims, and notwithstanding the ‘immateriality’ of much conceptual art, Bernard Smith argues that “Conceptual art was as artefactual as traditional art but the works were particularly characterized by their ‘documentary’ function. Like other works of art they were usually encountered in dealers’ galleries and a little later in art museums” (1998: 268).

The question of ‘artifactuality’ has generated considerable debate within the field of philosophical aesthetics, particularly since the Duchampian provocation of the readymades and subsequent conceptualist interventions. Although firmly situated within this somewhat arcane debate, Stephen Davies’ (1991) insightful critique of the ‘artifactuality condition’ in much art theory ultimately indicates similar conclusions to those suggested by Smith. Namely, although conceptual art may not produce ‘works of art’ in the traditional ‘artifactual’ sense, it nevertheless generates works upon which art status is conferred, in the sense that such status can be understood as a cultural and/or institutional definition. Thus, the ‘art’ status of any such conceptualist artwork – which most often, as Smith observes, has a ‘documentary’ function – is “guaranteed by the location of the piece within the art-historical context” (Davies, 1991: 141), and, in consequence, the piece can then – in common with other, more ‘traditional’ artifacts – be bought and sold in the art marketplace. Hence, Davies concludes, those who hold to the ‘artifactuality condition’ in the traditional sense “mistake a historical for an ontological necessity” (1991: 141).

At the very heart of this debate, then, lies the fundamental question of the conceptualization and categorization of modernism and postmodernism. It is worthwhile noting at this stage that Jameson and Lyotard are not alone in characterizing conceptual art as part of the postmodern, and it is relatively common practice for theorists and critics to trace a reverse chronology from Conceptualism through Minimalism, Constructivism, and Dada to the figure of Marcel Duchamp. Ihab Hassan, for example, characterizes Duchamp as “the ironic apostle of postmodernism” (1987: 216); Nigel Wheale suggests that Duchamp “anticipated many of the strategies associated with postmodernism, in particular the notion of a Conceptual art” (1995: 17); Best and Kellner argue that “important movements like cubism, dada, and Duchamp... appear salient to postmodernist developments in painting” (1997: 192); and Scott Lash is unequivocal in his understanding of the historical roots of the contemporary, ‘postmodern’ avant-garde: “I take the avant-garde of the 1920s to be postmodernist” (1990: 158).

However, contrary to these ‘postmodern’ categorizations of conceptual art and its aesthetic precursors, and in sharp contrast to the respectively ‘utopian’ and ‘sublime’ potentialities of the avant-garde envisaged by Jameson and Lyotard, several alternative readings emphasise the essentially modernist roots – and the aesthetic and sociopolitical *limitations* – of the conceptualist avant-garde. Thus, in opposition to those who find the first stirrings of postmodernism in Duchamp and Dada, Bernard Smith characterizes Duchamp as “the paradigmatic figure for twentieth-century modernism” (1998: 123), suggesting that:

Even though Dada may now be seen as representing a major break between the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it would be misleading to present it as an epistemological break. It is to be seen rather as a rupture within which Dada emerged as a new oppositional force within the realm of Modernity.

(Smith, 1998: 126)

Smith's notion of Dada as a 'rupture' *within* modernism is echoed in Thomas Lawson's characterization of Minimalism and Conceptualism as "radical manifestations of modernist art" (1981: 153), a view clearly shared by the conceptual artists Lawrence Weiner and Jeff Wall. In a forum held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1990, Weiner described his own position as "the anathema of postmodernism" (quoted in Mastai, 1992: 30), while Wall similarly rejected the characterization 'postmodernist', arguing that his work formed part of a "critical modernism" (quoted in Mastai, 1992: 41). Peter Wollen makes a similar argument, contending that "Conceptual art sealed the fate of modernism in the visual arts", suggesting that conceptualism represented "the last avant-garde of all, the one modernism found it impossible to digest" (1999: 73-74). If nothing else, this debate serves to highlight the theoretical confusion still inherent in the concept of postmodernism. However, it is worthwhile noting that the evaluative conclusions arrived at by these various theorists are not necessarily homologous with their analytical positions: thus, for example, although Best and Kellner's analysis implicitly aligns them with Jameson, their appraisals of postmodern culture remain cautiously optimistic (1997: 188-189); in contrast, Peter Wollen's understanding of conceptual art as the 'last avant-garde' within modernism is accompanied by an understanding of postmodernism as a "new period

hold-all... somewhat pathetic in its prepositional dependence on its great predecessor” (1999: 74).

The analyses above which link conceptualism with modernism have much in common with Perry Anderson’s identification of the category of “ultra-modernism” in Hassan’s work, which, in turn, he links to Jencks’ understanding of “Late-Modernism” (Anderson, 1998: 23). Although I am understandably dubious about introducing yet another modifier to the suffix ‘-modernism’, Anderson’s intervention is helpful in that it clarifies the extent to which an increasingly avant-gardist and conceptualist ‘ultra-modernism’, rather than representing a progressive ‘postmodern’ artistic vanguard, is more accurately seen as “historically a rearguard” (1998: 23), the final gasp of an exhausted modernism; or, in Wollen’s terms, the ‘last avant-garde of all’.

The ‘already said’: Eco, Irony, and the Postmodern

In a short essay in his *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco (1985a) addresses a similar range of issues, highlighting the limits of the modernist avant-garde, and offering a brief but highly suggestive sketch of postmodernism which is altogether more modest, pragmatic, and, indeed, useful than the reductive, totalizing theories of Jameson, Harvey, and Lyotard. As noted earlier, Eco suggests that “postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or, better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating” (1985a: 66). Thus, contrary to Jameson’s gloomy understanding of postmodern ‘historicism’ and the ‘nostalgia mode’, Eco’s formulation

suggests the virtual *inevitability* of postmodernism's ironic engagement with the past. It is worthwhile quoting at length:

The past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us. The historic avant-garde... tries to settle scores with the past... The avant-garde destroys, defaces the past... Then the avant-garde goes further, destroys the figure, cancels it, arrives at the abstract, the informal, the white canvas, the slashed canvas, the charred canvas. In architecture and the visual arts, it will be the curtain wall, the building as pure stele, pure parallelepiped, minimal art; in literature, the destruction of the flow of discourse, the Burroughs-like collage, silence, the white page; in music, the passage from atonality to noise to absolute silence (in this sense, the early Cage is modern). But the moment comes when the avant-garde (the modern) can go no further, because it has produced a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art). The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.

(Eco, 1985a: 66-67)³⁷

Eco goes on to suggest that “in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely”, and that the postmodern “demands, in order to be understood, not the negation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking” (1985a: 68). Eco's understanding of the limits of modernism clearly has much in common with Wollen's characterization of conceptual art as the “last avant-garde of all” (1999: 74). Hence, if one of the defining characteristics of modernism was its negation of prior forms, then conceptual art can be understood as the logical – or, perhaps, illogical – consequence of the modernist impulse followed through to its conclusion. In other words, if early modernism rejected its Classical and Romantic

³⁷ The fact that Nicholas Zurbrugg characterizes Eco's essay as “simplistic speculations” (Zurbrugg, 1993: 101) perhaps says more about Zurbrugg's narrow commitment to the avant-garde than it does about the nature of Eco's contribution to the debate. For a contrasting perspective on Eco's work, see Jencks (1992: 22).

precursors, then later manifestations of modernism – i.e. ‘Late-Modernism’ or ‘ultra-modernism’ – rejected their own earlier modernist precursors. Thus, conceptual art represents the late modernist negation of early modernism’s prior negation, thereby producing, in Eco’s terms, ‘a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts’.

Eco’s formulation also has interesting parallels with Jim Collins’ proposition that postmodernism’s “use of past styles... is motivated not by a simple escapism, but by a desire to understand our culture and ourselves as products of previous codings” (1989: 133-134). Linda Hutcheon makes a similar point when she suggests that the use of parody and irony can lead to “a re-evaluation of aesthetic forms and contents through a reconsideration of their usually unacknowledged politics of representation” (1989: 100). From this perspective, then – and contrary to the pronouncements of the ‘modernist postmodernists’ – parody has a purpose, irony has an edge, intertextual juxtaposition and fragmentation have both artistic and sociopolitical potentialities. Moreover, Eco’s understanding of postmodernism resists strictly periodizing conceptualizations – e.g. the postmodern ‘age’/‘era’/‘world’ – in favour of attending to the specificities of postmodernist cultural practices: practices which co-exist with still prevalent modernist practices in a recalcitrant contemporary world which refuses the homogenizing impulse of theoretical neatness.

Eco’s brief sketch therefore suggests a conceptualization of postmodernism which achieves considerably greater coherence and clarity than those reviewed in this chapter: one which not only denies the possibility of simply falling back on a Marxist or ‘sublime’

faith in the modernist avant-garde – strategically ‘mis-recognized’ as ‘postmodern’ – but also necessitates an engagement with postmodern cultural forms and practices which goes beyond cursory dismissals of their ‘commodified’ nature, attending more closely to their defining characteristics and specificities, and interrogating more judiciously their artistic and sociopolitical potential. I would suggest, therefore, that from such an analytical project might emerge an understanding of postmodern culture which avoids the conceptual contradictions and evaluative paradoxes inherent in a ‘modernist postmodernism’, offering a broader perspective on questions of cultural value. These are issues that I will pursue further in Chapter Six.

Chapter Three

Dancing About Architecture: Music, Cultural Theory, and the New Musicology

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.”
Thelonious Monk (jazz pianist and composer),
quoted in Gabbard (1995a: 3)¹

Given some of the problems encountered in Jameson’s writing on architecture (as noted in the previous chapter), the idea of expressing oneself in dance on the topic may not seem like such an absurd proposition. Certainly, the folly implicit in Monk’s metaphor has done little to dissuade a new generation of revisionist music scholars and cultural theorists from waltzing their way through an apparently endless series of books and articles on their most ineffable of topics. And while much of this terpsichorean academic activity has displayed a gracefulness and fleetness of foot to make Fred Astaire proud, some of it has exhibited a toe-stepping awkwardness that is the stuff of Arthur Murray’s nightmares.²

As these metaphorical comments suggest, and as the opening remarks in my Introduction served to indicate, my review of recent revisionist work in music studies will be far from univocal in its praise. In other words, although I will certainly attend to the analytical strengths of these revisionist interventions, I will not shy away from emphasizing their theoretical and methodological weaknesses. In offering these latter criticisms,

¹ The quotation has been variously attributed to, among others, Laurie Anderson, Steve Martin, Frank Zappa, and Miles Davis. The exact nature of its provenance need not concern us at this stage.

² The metaphor stops here.

however, I must stress that it is not my intention to dismiss this work out of hand; nor do I mean to damn it with faint praise. Rather, my concern is to highlight its shortcomings and limitations in a constructive process of consolidation and development, continuing to build on its insights and innovations, proposing a critically self-reflexive ‘eclecticism of theory’ in any approach to the study of music.

From Traditional Musicology to ‘Music Studies’: A Classic Paradigm Shift

In contrast to the comprehensiveness implied by the nineteenth century German term *Musikwissenschaft* (‘music science’ or ‘music knowledge’), the conventional scope of the discipline of musicology has been considerably more circumscribed: as Joseph Kerman suggests, “It has come to mean the study of the history of Western music in the high-art tradition” (1985: 11). This emphasis has been evident not only within historical musicology, but also in the fields of music theory and analysis, in which the focus has tended to be on formalist analyses of the musical texts of this tradition.³ In the case of the sub-discipline of ethnomusicology, the customary scope has been similarly constricted, although here the emphasis has generally been on the study of the music of non-Western cultures. Writing in 1985, Kerman observed that “Semiotics, hermeneutics, and phenomenology are being drawn upon only by some of the boldest of musical studies

³ It is in this broad sense that I will use the expression ‘traditional musicology’. It is not my intention here to offer a history of the discipline and practice of musicology, tracing the fine line of the debates between historical musicology, music theory, music analysis, and music criticism. The Kerman text (1985) provides a useful guide, as well as laying the ground for “a new (and implicitly interdisciplinary) music criticism” (Kassabian, 1997: 1). See also Shepherd (1991) for a critical approach to the foundational principles of musicology, proposing a more radical – and considerably more sociologically-grounded – reorientation of the established discipline.

today. Post-structuralism, deconstruction, and serious feminism have yet to make their debuts in musicology or music theory” (1985: 17).⁴ Yet less than a decade later, and notwithstanding what Don Randel has characterized as musicology’s “resistance to theory” (1992: 11), Kerman could describe the discipline as undergoing a “classic paradigm shift” (Kerman, 1991: 142). And three years later, Susan McClary could make a similar observation in her review of the relationship between music theory and feminist criticism, suggesting that musicology was “in the throes of a paradigm shift” (1994: 68). Thus, considerably later than many of the fields surveyed in Chapter One, by the late 1980s it was clear that musicology had begun to be significantly influenced by a wide range of contemporary developments in cultural theory, extending far beyond its traditional disciplinary boundaries. Lawrence Kramer has suggested that the 1988 meeting of the American Musicological Society in Baltimore represented a “crossroads: like it or not, the conceptual innovations that had long since shaken up literary and social theory and philosophy finally crossed – or collided – with the familiar positivism and formalism of musical scholarship” (1992a: 5).

This influence – or collision – has generated a burgeoning critical literature which has not only expanded the previously limited scope of musicological study, but also stimulated an ongoing re-examination of the established theoretical and methodological protocols of the discipline. Contrary to the empirical positivist and liberal humanist agendas still dominant in traditional musicology, and as noted in the Introduction, much recent work

⁴ See Shepherd and Wicke (1997) for a review and critique of structuralist, post-structuralist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic theories of music.

in 'music studies' has stressed the inherently social nature of all music, emphasizing the importance of cultural, historical, and political factors in musical production and reception. This literature has offered a vigorous challenge to formalist notions of immanent musical meaning and idealist conceptions of autonomous musical value, confronting the conservative assumptions underlying traditional notions of cultural hierarchy and canonicity. Much of this work has therefore been extremely valuable in terms of the development of contemporary musicological thought, suggesting a series of new and revitalized agendas for the academic study of music.⁵

My aim in this chapter and the two which follow is not only to review several of the more salient trends within this revisionist work in music studies, but also to begin to focus a little more sharply on the issues which are central to my thesis: namely, the discursive construction of 'music'; the evaluative judgements and processes of canon formation which follow from such constructions; the question of the 'positionality' of the writer; the understanding of musical postmodernism; and associated questions of theory and methodology, including an acknowledgement of the limitations of any 'happy' interdisciplinarity and the need for an 'eclectic' theoretical approach.

⁵ The collection of essays in *Whose Music?: A Sociology of Musical Languages* (Shepherd *et al.*, 1977) represents an early and highly influential example of a sociologically and theoretically-informed scholarship. See also Small (1980), Durant (1984), Attali (1985), White (1987), and Norris (1989) for similarly early examples, as well as Shepherd (1991), Leppert and McClary (1987), Subotnik (1990, 1996), Bergeron and Bohlman (1992), and a wide range of related work in music studies, much of which will be considered below. Again, I make no claim to comprehensiveness in the review that follows, focusing instead on what I regard to be typical examples of the revisionist work I have in mind. See Miles (1995, 1997) for an interesting review and critique of some of the key theorists in the contemporary field.

In this chapter, then, by way of an introduction to what follows, I begin by addressing briefly the notion of the traditional, musicological canon, its false claims to universality and neutrality, and the narrow discursive construction of ‘music’ that follows from such claims. I go on to address a range of work in the ‘new musicology’, examining the manner in which issues of text and context have been conceptualized in this literature. The notion of the structural homology as proposed in Robert Morgan’s work provides a starting point for this discussion, highlighting the problematic analytical conclusions that emerge from any crude ‘reflection’ theory of the relationship between art and the social.

In the following section, I review briefly the debate between the ‘postmodern’ musicologists Gary Tomlinson and Lawrence Kramer, in which questions of text and context have been clearly foregrounded. Contrary to the apparently mutually exclusive positions which their somewhat acrimonious exchange suggests, however, I note the analytical strengths of the work of both of these writers, arguing for its theoretical complementarity. In the penultimate section of this chapter, I turn to feminist approaches, focusing especially on the work of Susan McClary, suggesting that her vigorous critique of the traditional canon is ultimately unsuccessful, predicated on an ideological reductionism and an ‘analytic tautology’ in which the textualist techniques of traditional musicology are simply reaffirmed. I conclude this chapter by considering the work of Judith Tick and Lawrence Kramer on Charles Ives: work which, I suggest, points toward an eclectic, self-reflexively critical methodology for the analysis of the complex interrelationship of musical texts and contexts.

Canons, 'Music', and Musicology

The process of canon formation is complex and multi-layered, implicating the roles of artists and performers, the publishing and recording industries, the academy, the mass media, the public, and the agencies and institutions of cultural policy. Marcia Citron suggests that canons “exert tremendous power. By setting standards they represent what is considered worthy of inclusion. Works that do not measure up are excluded, either in the sense of deliberately omitted or ignored and hence forgotten. Canons are therefore exclusive” (1993a: 15). Similarly, in the construction of the literary canon, Michael Bérubé notes the significant “gatekeeping” role of academics and academic criticism, acknowledging that while “there is not... one and only one set of protocols, one determinate series of gates, in the machinery of canonization... still, we know also that no gate would work in the absence of fences, and gatekeeping inevitably involves exclusion as the corollary of inclusion” (1992a: 8).⁶ Hence, Citron suggests:

Canons... represent certain sets of values or ideologies, which in turn represent certain segments of society. Canons self-perpetuate. As models to be emulated, they replicate their encoded values as subsequent exemplars. As canonic values become entrenched over time, the prescriptive and normative powers of canons become even greater.

(Citron, 1993a: 15)

Citron argues that canons therefore “simultaneously reflect, instigate, and perpetuate value systems” (1993a: 19). Moreover, Gary Tomlinson has proposed that three closely

⁶ On the literary canon, see also Guillory (1993, 1987), Altieri (1984) and Smith (1988). On the musical canon, see the essays in Bergeron and Bohlman (1992). See also the collection of essays in Von Hallberg (1984).

related strategies “function to distance the value and significance of canonic works from cultural constraints and situational determination”, namely:

aestheticism, the view that the meaning and expression found in artworks are of a different, higher order than those found in other cultural acts; transcendentalism, the view that artistic value and significance can somehow travel with an artwork outside of the specific contexts that determine or redetermine them; and formalism, the view, closely related to transcendentalism, that meaning and value inhere in the internal formal arrangements of artworks themselves, independent of their contexts of creation or recreation.

(Tomlinson, 1992: 75)

This ‘distancing’ that Tomlinson identifies is further illustrated in what Citron characterizes as the three ‘myths’ of canons, namely those of “universality, neutrality, and immutability” (Citron, 1993a: 22). In light of these myths, Citron argues that “as the assumed repertoire, Western art music does not have to identify itself as such... the assumption of the dominant mode implies a false universality. This results in the marginalization of other musics and masks the particular social parameters of the Western tradition” (1993a: 26). Furthermore, Citron suggests, the “tenacity and authority [of canons] create the ideology that they are timeless... In practice, however, the social values encoded in a given canon may change... All in all, the dynamics of change in canons underscore their social constructedness and their powers of reconstruction” (1993a: 15-16).

The ‘false universality’ of the canon of Western art music, along with its associated myths of neutrality and immutability, is perhaps no better illustrated than in the customary content of the typical ‘music’ encyclopedia: here, the reader will look in vain for the music of other cultures, or for any detailed treatment of the various forms of popular music or jazz. Although the scope of coverage of music encyclopedias has increased somewhat in

recent years, to include encyclopedias devoted to particular forms or genres – *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (Clarke, 1998) or *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (Kernfeld, 1988),⁷ for example – I would argue that the problem persists, especially in those encyclopedias with no declared genre affiliation. Thus, although the *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Sadie, 1980) has included entries on popular music since the most recent 1980 edition, the inclusion of ‘other’ musics functions as little more than a footnote or addendum to the classical canon: the entry on ‘Popular music’ in *The New Grove*, for example, occupies 35 pages in a 20–volume set (see Lamb and Hamm, 1980). Even in those encyclopedias and texts which restrict their focus to the twentieth century, the discursive construction of ‘music’ is routinely presupposed: as Derek Scott has observed, “if you look for Charlie Parker in the *New Oxford History of Music*,⁸ you find Horatio Parker instead. Is the latter more ‘important’ than the former, of more significance musically to the twentieth century? That, clearly, is the implication” (1990: 385). A further case in point here is Glenn Watkins’ 700–page *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (1988). Although Watkins’ text represents a compelling chronicle of the contemporary canon of Western art music, it is certainly not – despite the apparent inclusiveness of its subtitle – a chronicle of contemporary ‘music’ in any broader

⁷ Although it must also be noted that the mere presence of such encyclopedias is not necessarily a ‘solution’ to the problem: despite its otherwise comprehensive scope, a perusal of *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* reveals some remarkable omissions, including several key members of the New York ‘downtown’ scene of the 1980s and 1990s, most notably John Zorn. See also the letter from the jazz writer and photographer Valerie Wilmer to *The Wire* magazine, in which she suggests that it was “shameful that so many contemporary figures should be omitted” from *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (1989: 74; see also Wilmer, 1977). I will return to the question of jazz and its canons in Chapter Seven.

⁸ See Cooper (1974).

sense. Here, “popular repertoires” – the expression itself has something of a demeaning, evaluative ring – appear only in their function as material for the consideration of “the composer of art music” (1988: xviii). In full, the relevant passage in Watkins’ preface reads:

Some readers will note the omission of a rigorous treatment of the vernacular or jazz traditions that in recent debates has increasingly vied for the attention of the musical historian. Partial redress is offered, however, in the repeated consideration of such popular repertoires for the composer of art music. From the world of the cabaret at the turn of the century to the ‘art of the everyday’ defined by *Les Six* to the ragtime revival of the 1960s, its force is noted and its effect judged.

(Watkins, 1988: xvii-xviii)

Thus, in a text published in 1988, three decades after the advent of rock and roll – and fully six decades after the early innovations of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington – the ‘dominant mode’ of Western art music is still clearly evident, with only the briefest of caveats to disturb the complacency. And let me be clear that the issue here is not one of special pleading on behalf of ‘the vernacular or jazz traditions’: on the contrary, as Derek Scott has suggested, these traditions require no such recourse to any propitiatory court of appeal: “Measured in terms of social significance, the twelve-bar blues has been of greater importance to twentieth-century music than the twelve-tone row” (1990: 400); and if any canonic dispensation *is* required perhaps it needs to be offered in the reverse direction – to cite Scott again: “while [Gilbert and Sullivan’s] *The Mikado* manages to survive despite high-minded scorn, [Schoenberg’s] *Erwartung* survives largely as a result of special pleading” (1990: 389). Rather, the issue is that of the impact – whether musical or social, artistic or political, cultural or economic – which ‘popular repertoires’ have had in the

course of the twentieth century: a century in which, it could be argued, popular music has not only ‘reflected’ but also served to constitute broader social and cultural realities.

On this basis, then, a history of twentieth century ‘music’ can surely ill afford to ignore such ‘popular repertoires’. Furthermore, it hardly needs to be argued – although, in the face of the canon’s ‘false universality’, I will argue it nevertheless – that the various forms of popular music and jazz have their own histories and their own specificities: specificities the ‘force’ and ‘effect’ of which cannot simply be ‘noted’ and ‘judged’ in terms of the manner in which they have been appropriated and transformed by Western art music. This is not to suggest that such appropriation and transformation is in any way invalid or somehow doomed to failure: whether in the work of composers such as Hindemith or Stravinsky, or, more recently, in that of Michael Torke or Mark-Anthony Turnage, the influence of jazz and popular music has proved fertile and highly rewarding. To be more precise, the point is that such musics cannot *simply* be viewed as inspirational fodder for ‘the composer of art music’, somehow devoid of their own independent patterns of growth and development. And although it is a common rhetorical strategy to argue that Duke Ellington, for example, was as much of a ‘major composer’ as, say, Bartók or Stravinsky,⁹ such strategies merely serve to reinforce the canon, in that the canon remains the standard against which non-canonic forms are measured. Thus, as Citron suggests, canon formation is, indeed, “a political process with high stakes for shaping discourse and values” (1993a: 22), and much recent revisionist scholarship has

⁹ For a typically formalist example of this tendency, see Williams (1992).

set about challenging the canonic myths of universality, neutrality, and immutability, emphasising instead the canon's contingency, partiality, and mutability.

Don Randel has noted the extent to which the traditional analytic tools of musicological scholarship "constrain not only how things can be studied but what can be studied at all... [giving] the impression that other things are not even worthy of study" (1992: 11). Randel identifies a number of constraining factors, citing the centrality of musical notation, with its concomitant emphasis on "privileged concepts such as 'the work itself' (immutable and editable) and the composer as creative genius (whose biography and compositional process might be investigated)" (1992: 14). Citron makes a similar point when she notes that, in Western art music, "textuality has virtually become inherent in compositions. Instead of functioning as visual representations of an aural experience in time, maps to the realization of the piece, or symbols of its essence, scores are often considered first and foremost the pieces themselves"; in turn, the "formalist discourse" of traditional music analysis suggests that "the piece exists mainly for its own sake and has little to do with larger social implications" (1993a: 37-38).

As a further analytic constraint, Randel cites the exclusionary as well as classificatory function of forms and genres, which, when coupled with the nature of the written discourse of musicology, not only creates a canon of "suitable dissertation topics" but also ensures that when this canon expands it does so "not to include a greater diversity of works so much as to appropriate and dominate a greater number of works and make them behave in similar fashion" (1992: 14) – as in the case of Ellington, noted above. And finally, Randel identifies the binary oppositions which serve to frame much of this

musicological discourse – sacred and secular; high and popular; self and Other – oppositions in which one term always dominates, thereby undermining the means by which musicology claims to arrive at its results: namely, “the objective, dispassionate study of ‘the evidence’” (1992: 20) – Rose Subotnick, for example, writes of the “traditional Newtonian musicologist” whose aim is “the empirical establishment of facts” (1982: 152-153). Suggesting that “there is no such thing as a work without a context”, Randel challenges the normalising tendencies of canonic expansion within traditional musicology, and, echoing Citron, argues that “the expansion of the canon is more like a struggle for empire. It is a political move as much as an aesthetic one, for it serves first of all to incorporate foreign goods into the economy of the academy” (1992: 14-15). Thus, Randel concludes, traditional musicologists “*systematically* undervalue certain periods, composers and works and privilege others because of the very nature of the conceptual and narrative tools that [they] apply” (1992: 20; emphasis in original).¹⁰

There is little doubt in my mind that the critiques of the established musical canon offered by Citron, Tomlinson and Randel are incisive and long overdue, representing a strong call for a more socially and contextually informed musicology. But it must also be acknowledged that Randel’s critique of the ‘canons in the musicological toolbox’, and his concluding points regarding the systematic undervaluing of some musics and the privileging of others apply equally well to those revisionist approaches which merely

¹⁰ Randel’s critique of the disciplinary and institutional constraints of musicology is paralleled by John Guillory’s understanding of the literary canon: “evaluative judgements are the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the process of canon formation, and it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced and disseminated over successive generations and centuries” (1993: vii).

invert traditional canonic hierarchies. Gary Tomlinson makes an analogous point when he notes that the movement within African-American studies to institute a canon of black literature runs the risk of “reinscribing the same monological, hegemonic premises that have for so long supported the white, male, European canon to which they would offer an alternative” (1992: 75): a risk which, as I will argue in more detail below, is inherent in the ‘alternative canons’ that are proposed – whether explicitly or ‘by default’ – within some branches of feminist musicology and popular music studies. Furthermore, as I will argue in the following chapter, those approaches which respond to the ‘false universality’ of the established canon by advocating either a form of cultural relativism or a system of multiple canons prove to be equally problematic.

Homology, Reflection, and the Case of Cage

In common with much of the revisionist work surveyed in Chapter One, and in contrast to the claims of aesthetic autonomy prevalent in traditional musicology, recent work in music studies has been increasingly concerned with the socio-historical contextualization of musical texts. In some cases, music scholars have drawn on the concept of the structural homology as a means of theorizing the links between texts and contexts, although this has not been without its problems. For example, in his essay ‘Rethinking Musical Culture: Canonic Reformulations in a Post-Tonal Age’ (1992), Robert Morgan suggests that the “pluralistic cast of contemporary musical life” has resulted in “the loss of a central musical language”, arguing that we are now in a ‘post-tonal age’ (1992: 57). Morgan’s analysis raises a number of significant questions, not least

in terms of its dependence on a somewhat crude version of a homological 'reflection' theory of the relationship between art and the social:

If traditional tonality – with its highly developed notion of a musical 'centre', a focus according to which all pitches orient themselves – adequately reflected a culture characterized by a community of purpose and well-developed system of social order and interpersonal regulation, its loss, and the musical atomization that has ensued, reflects a fragmented and defamiliarized world of isolated events and abrupt confrontations.

(Morgan, 1992: 58)¹¹

In response to the homologous relationships proposed by Morgan, Lawrence Kramer argues that it is "questionable that artistic practices offer direct, perspicuous reflections of social conditions; their interrelationships may be far more perplexed and mediated" (1994: 136). Janet Wolff has suggested that the word 'reflection' is the key to the theoretical assumptions which underlie such approaches, arguing that it has "traditionally operated as a shortcut to any real sociology of the arts, either in the service of a crude determinism... or... as a way of avoiding any analysis of the actual relationships between culture and society" (1992: 707). Similarly, citing Lévi-Strauss and the influence of structuralism, Fredric Jameson has suggested that "the homology rapidly proved to be an embarrassment and turned out to be as crude and vulgar an idea as 'base and superstructure' ever was, the excuse for the vaguest kind of general formulations and the most unenlightening assertions of 'identity' between entities of utterly distinct magnitude and properties" (1991: 187). (Although given the reductively homological impulse behind Jameson's thesis on

¹¹ For a similarly crude employment of the 'structural homology' in the analysis of music, in which social forces are simply 'mapped' onto musical coordinates, see Willis (1978).

postmodernism as ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’, it is perhaps somewhat ironic that the force of his critique of the homology appears to have been lost on Jameson himself).

This is not to suggest, however, that there is *no* relationship between ‘art’ and ‘society’, nor indeed, that social conditions have no influence on artistic developments. But rather than asking how art ‘reflects’ the social, the issue is that of examining *how* art and society are related, and interrogating the nature of their interrelationship: as Kramer observes, there is little reason to believe that such interrelationships need be either simple or unidirectional, and as I suggested above in my discussion of the impact of popular music in the twentieth century, there may be every reason to believe that art and cultural forms serve, in part, to *constitute* the social. As Shepherd and Wicke have suggested, “The question... is not that of understanding the relationship between ‘music’ and ‘society’. It is rather that of understanding the constitutive features of music as a social process in relationship to other, equally non-reducible realms of social process” (1997: 95).¹² In Morgan’s analysis, however, the nostalgic idealization of the ‘community of purpose’ and ‘social order’ of a previous – and implicitly modernist – era is simply understood to be ‘reflected’ in the ordered nature of tonality, while the ‘fragmentation’ of the ‘post-tonal’ – and implicitly postmodern – age finds its corollary in the ‘musical atomization’ of ‘post-tonality’. But interestingly, notwithstanding the challenge which Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system presented to tonality, and his putative positioning as a ‘post-tonal’ composer, Morgan stresses the links which Schoenberg has to the “great

¹² In common with Richard Middleton, Shepherd and Wicke (1997: 108) argue for retaining a notion of the homology “in a qualified sense” (Middleton, 1990: 10), and the work of these writers points towards the possibility a more sophisticated theorization of the notion of the structural homology.

Western tradition” (1992: 48). Hence, Schoenberg’s work is positively contrasted with the “motley collections of cultural artifacts” which serve to constitute the ‘post-tonal age’ (1992: 59), thereby highlighting Morgan’s nostalgic faith in what might be called a ‘pre-post-tonal’ modernism.

But even more problematic in Morgan’s work is the question of the extent to which the latter half of the twentieth century can, indeed, be understood to represent a ‘post-tonal age’, and the extent to which tonality has, in fact, “surrendered its most essential attribute: its ‘universality’, its status as a common language” (Morgan, 1992: 47). Certainly, most musicians currently active in jazz and popular music – and a majority of those working in ‘post-classical’ music – would be somewhat surprised to hear of tonality’s ‘surrender’, given that tonality still remains the *lingua franca* in all of these traditions. Furthermore, even when tonality is absent, the continuing dominance of tonality as a mode of musical organisation ensures that, for the listener familiar with its ways, its presence is connoted by its very absence. This remains true even for the ‘unschooled’ listener, with no formal training in music: as Susan McClary has suggested, “any five-year-old has sufficient experience from watching Saturday morning cartoons to verify [the common semiotic codes of European classical music]” (1991c: 68);¹³ furthermore, McClary argues, “composers for movies and advertisements consistently stake their commercial success on the public’s pragmatic knowledge of musical signification” (1991b: 21). I would want to extend McClary’s point here, however, to suggest that it is not just

¹³ Although one might take issue with McClary’s understanding of the continued prevalence of Saturday morning cartoons, whether in theatres or on television, the basic point remains valid.

composers for movies, advertisements, and cartoons who exploit this ‘pragmatic knowledge’: indeed, I would argue that the majority of contemporary musicians and composers – including ‘the composer of art music’ – make productive use of this knowledge, whether through its active employment or its ‘postmodern’ subversion.

What becomes apparent in Morgan’s analysis, then, is that the ‘post-tonal age’ is visible only from deep within the traditional discipline of musicology, with its associated canon of Western art music, and its implicit faith in modernism. Thus, while Morgan is correct in citing the relativizing force of John Cage’s experiments with chance and indeterminacy, his neglect of popular musics – and those ‘post-classical’ forms in which tonality remains central – lead him to greatly overstate the impact which such experiments have had on the ‘universality’ of tonality as a common language. Furthermore, recalling the discussion of ‘co-option’ in Chapter One (pp. 24-25), I would argue that the inclusion of Cage pieces in the repertoires of major ensembles and new music groups which Morgan cites (1992: 54), rather than signalling the ‘conceptual invasion of the public sensibility and the triumphant institutionalization of innovative ideas’ that Zurbrugg (1993: 138) – or Morgan – might suggest, represents instead a rather more modest example of canonic expansion, with Cage simply taking his rightful place alongside many of the other, already-canonized, figures of twentieth century music.¹⁴ In addition to these issues, Morgan himself has identified the somewhat paradoxical nature of Cage’s interventions:

¹⁴ A similar, if perhaps more deliberately managed, process is apparent in a consideration of the career of Pierre Boulez. As Stephen Miles observes: “Boulez’s career... poses a seeming contradiction: a critic of tradition who has worked to secure a place for his own works... within that same tradition” (1997: 746). See also Born (1995) for an extended analysis and critique of Boulez’s role in the growth and development of IRCAM, the major computer music institute in Paris.

The ‘purity’ of Cage’s response to post-tonality has nevertheless carried with it something of a dilemma. As music approaches life (or as Cage might prefer to say, as life approaches music), there is ideally no longer a need for either composer or musical composition. Having shed its autonomy, ‘music’ should dissolve into an integral, all-encompassing experience. By continuing to produce musical compositions that, paradoxically, are intended to render all compositions superfluous, Cage has had to ignore his own message.

(Morgan, 1992: 53-54)

Not only does this Cageian paradox – in which Cage himself no doubt delighted – have interesting parallels with Roland Barthes’ role as the author of ‘The Death of the Author’ (1968), it also serves to highlight a somewhat more significant dilemma in Cage’s work, regarding the question of the ‘disinterested’, autonomous nature of the musical work. Cage made his artistic intentions clear in his essay ‘Experimental Music’, originally given as a lecture in 1957: namely, to “give up the desire to control sound, clear [the] mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments” (1961: 10). Cage’s famous ambition to ‘let sounds be themselves’ has long since passed into the folklore of American experimental music, and statements such as these have done much to establish Cage’s work as the very antithesis of the canon of Western art music, with its ‘man-made theories’ and ‘expressions of human sentiments’.

However, while there are many reasons to agree with Morgan’s assessment that Cage “reset the boundaries of musical art” (1992: 52), Cage’s notion of ‘letting sounds be themselves’ is far from unproblematic. An argument made by John Shepherd summarises the nature of the problem succinctly: “Music is not an object. It is a process which occurs between the sounds of music and the people who invest in those sounds their own

meanings and values” (1994: 136).¹⁵ Lydia Goehr makes a similar point when she argues that: “Music’s meaning and value might come solely from within itself as a product of its purely musical form and content, but it has meaning only for human beings who live in a human world” (1994: 110).¹⁶ The notion of ‘letting sounds be themselves’, somehow free of the fundamentally social process of meaning-making, therefore implies a mode of ‘disinterested’ listening which has much in common with the ‘disinterested’ nature of traditional aesthetic appreciation, to which Cage’s notion apparently stands opposed.¹⁷ Similarly, in an insightful and polemical critique, George Lewis notes the manner in which the ‘fictional ideal’ of autonomy is reintroduced in Cage’s work: “the Cageian notion of ‘sounds as themselves’ – possessing only frequency, loudness, length, overtone structure, morphology... divorced from social or cultural implications – would seem to harmonize well with this notion of autonomy” (1996: 119).¹⁸

¹⁵ Steven Feld’s (1994a) work on the series of ‘interpretive moves’ which listeners go through upon hearing an aural stimulus is similarly relevant here, perhaps suggesting the impossibility of the notion of ‘letting sounds be themselves’ – I will return to Feld’s work in more detail in the following chapter.

¹⁶ Although I would want to remain cautious about the implied ‘inherent’ nature of value in this statement, it is interesting to observe that Goehr is a philosopher, suggesting that the ‘socio-historical turn’ in the broader field of philosophical aesthetics which was identified in Chapter One (pp. 22-30) also has its advocates in the field of musical aesthetics.

¹⁷ See Bourdieu (1984) for a critique of the Kantian notion of ‘disinterestedness’: “the sole guarantee of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation” (1984: 41). Tony Bennett notes that, for Bourdieu, “disinterestedness constitutes a particular form of posturing on the part of the subject which, while serving specific social interests, simultaneously masks those interests as well as its own use in their service” (Bennett, 1990: 159).

¹⁸ The question of ‘positionality’ is significant here: as an African-American composer, jazz musician, and academic, Lewis has good reason to be critical of Cage, especially in light of the latter’s dismissive attitude toward jazz: “jazz is still young, and still evolving” (quoted in Lewis, 1996: 104). Lewis suggests that such attitudes cast jazz in the role of “epistemological other” (1996: 103), and serve to mask not only the similarities between Cageian indeterminacy (understood as a “Eurological” system... of improvisative musicality”) and jazz-based improvisation (characterized as “Afrological”), but also the potential aesthetic debt owed by the former to the latter (1996: 93).

Thus, whether in its implicitly ‘disinterested’ mode of listening, its idealized claims to a fictional, asocial autonomy, or in its continued assertion of authorial authority, Cage’s work perhaps represents a somewhat less radical exemplar of a ‘post-tonal age’ than Morgan suggests, exhibiting significant continuities and similarities with the canon of Western art music. In this sense, then, and in common with the conclusions reached regarding conceptual art in the previous chapter, much of Cage’s early to mid-period work is best understood as part of the lineage of the modernist musical avant-garde.¹⁹ If such a view appears overly teleological in its characterization of music history, it is interesting to turn to Cage’s own observations on the genesis of his (in)famous conceptualist ‘silent’ piece *4’33”* (1952), in which only outline structure is indicated, with no specified ‘musical’ content for the performer to ‘play’: “Actually what pushed me into [*4’33”*] was... the example of Robert Rauschenberg. His white paintings... When I saw those, I said, ‘Oh yes, I must: otherwise I’m lagging, otherwise music is lagging’” (quoted in Kostelanetz, 1988: 67).

The issue of authorship is also clearly foregrounded here: Scott notes that *4’33”* “does not avoid being commoditized, since C.F. Peters publishes a ‘score’ containing instructions for performance” (1990: 406) – the ‘artificiality’ discussed in Chapter Two (p. 123) – and although the sounds may aspire to ‘be themselves’ in this piece, they can do so only within the structure which Cage has prescribed. Notwithstanding Cage’s utopian

¹⁹ Such an understanding is consistent with Eco’s sketch of the limits of modernist conceptualism, in which he suggests that “the early Cage is modern” (1985a: 67). For a similar view, see Kramer, J.D. (1995): Kramer argues that Cage’s work is best understood as “late modern” or “transitional” because of its “avant-garde experimentation and its continued engagement with textual unity” (1995: 31).

conceptualist gesture in the notes to the score – “the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time” (Cage, 1960) – in practice, the piece tends to conform to the parameters established by the pianist David Tudor in its first performance at Woodstock in 1952.²⁰ Hence, although there is little doubt that Cage’s ideas have had a significant impact not only on contemporary art music but on contemporary art in general, and despite the ‘radicalism’ of Cage’s ideas and the implied ‘selflessness’ inherent in his faith in Eastern philosophies, it should be clear that this radicalism and selflessness does not extend to the erasure of the authority of the composer’s role as author.

Again, the links with Boulez are instructive here, and Georgina Born has observed Boulez’s “charismatic cultural authority” and the extent to which Boulez has been “complicit in the construction of his own charisma, not only by seeking a controversial public profile throughout his career but also through the minutiae of his self-representation” (1995: 92): comments which apply equally well to Cage, whether in terms of the controversy which his music generated, the aphoristic nature of his discourse, or the focus on his interest in Zen, and on the idiosyncrasies of his personal life (including his role as an expert on mushrooms).²¹ Thus, the often noted contrasts in their compositional procedures and personal philosophies should not be allowed to obscure the extent to which Cage and Boulez – apparently two of the most ‘anti-canonic’ of composers – have

²⁰ See (and hear) for example, the CD by the pianist Wayne Marshall, recorded in London in 1991 (on Floating Earth records, FCD004). A live performance of 4’33” witnessed in Birmingham in 1992 similarly conformed to these parameters.

²¹ Cage was co-founder of the New York Mycological Society, and famously won five million lire on an Italian television quiz show in 1959, answering questions on mushrooms.

been active and willing participants in the process of their own canonization as part of the continuum of Western art music. Somewhat ironically, given the parallels just drawn between Cage and Boulez, it is interesting to observe that Morgan notes the links between Cage and “integral serialism”, but fails to pursue them. Although he suggests that both share “an attempt to arrive at compositional decisions through the mediation of an outside agent: in one case operations of a quasi-mathematical nature, capable of generating compositions more or less automatically; in the other, operations of chance”, Morgan ultimately argues that “Cage alone embraced the full range of post-tonal possibilities” (1992: 52), thereby emphasizing the *discontinuities* in these traditions and failing to attend to the revealing *continuities* identified above. These continuities suggest that, despite their differences, the work of Cage and Boulez shares a number of attributes – the negation of tonality; an aesthetic and rhetorical vanguardism; an avant-garde experimentalism and theoreticism – which situates it firmly within the lineage of high modernism. Hence, as the preceding discussion of Cage indicates, the shortcomings of the crude homological ‘reflection’ theory which underpins Morgan’s notion of the ‘post-tonal age’ suggests the need for a more sophisticated theorization of the relationship between text and context: one which attends more closely to the specificities of cultural forms and practices.

Text and Context: The Tomlinson-Kramer Debate and the Mystified Aesthetic

I want to turn now to a debate within music studies in which questions of text and context – and of ‘positionality’ and methodology – are brought sharply into focus: questions which, as I will go on to suggest in Chapter Six, have considerable implications beyond the strictly musical context. Gary Tomlinson and Lawrence Kramer are perhaps

two of the most high-profile theorists in the ‘new musicology’: both have published widely, and both engaged, in 1993, in an acrimonious and much-cited debate in the pages of *Current Musicology* (Tomlinson, 1993a, 1993b; Kramer 1993; see also Kramer 1992a).²²

An early statement of Gary Tomlinson’s theoretical position is offered in his article ‘The Web of Culture’, published in 1984.²³ Here, Tomlinson draws heavily on the work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the notion of ‘thick’ description, proposing a culturally and historically-based ‘postmodern’ musicology founded on his ‘central tenet’: “that musical art works are the codifications or inscribed reflections of human creative actions, and hence should be understood through... [an] interpretation of cultural context” (1984: 351).²⁴ Furthermore, in Tomlinson’s view, “cultural history... searches for meaning, not proof. And meaning, once again, arises as a function of context, deepened as that context is made richer, fuller, more complete” (1984: 355). Given my own commitment to a sociology of culture which addresses issues of both text and context, there is little to disagree with in Tomlinson’s project up to this point. But some of the potential problems in Tomlinson’s scheme become apparent when he cites Geertz’s proposition that “cultural analysis... is intrinsically incomplete” (1984: 352), which leads him to suggest that “the process is an endless one in which the art work and its culture take on ever-deeper significance. It is a reciprocal one, in which the art work illuminates

²² See also the other related articles from this issue, including Blum (1993), Solie (1993c), and Citron (1993b). See also Galand (1995).

²³ See also Tomlinson (1992, 1993c).

²⁴ The ethnomusicologist John Blacking has similarly drawn on the work of Geertz: see Blacking (1995).

the context even as the context illuminates the art work “ (1984: 357). The proposition is an appealing one, and I certainly concur with Tomlinson’s notion of a dialogical, symbiotic relationship between text and context: “the deepest knowledge will result from the dialogue that involves the largest number of differing vantage points. Knowledge is a product of the differing displacements of reality perceived from different viewpoints, not the product of a singular, authoritative perception” (Tomlinson, 1992: 74). Too often, in cultural scholarship, the dialectical rhetoric of ‘text’ and ‘context’ results in texts and contexts being disengaged, studied separately, then ‘reunited’ in magical synthesis: seldom, however, do we learn much about the *interrelationship* of texts and contexts. More often in the process of cultural analysis, however, texts and contexts are disengaged, never to be re-engaged: and it should be noted at this point that musicology has no monopoly on textually-biased tools, generating analyses in which – as Janet Wolff has observed – ‘the social’ often appears as no more than a “painted backdrop” (1992: 706); and nor is sociology alone in its reductively contextualizing tendencies, often ignoring the text, and “[revelling] in a philistinism that it attempts to justify as methodological objectivity” (Wolff, 1992: 708; see also Bowler, 1994).

But as appealing as Tomlinson’s proposition for a ‘reciprocal’ approach to cultural analysis may be, and notwithstanding his pre-empting of the charge of cultural relativism (1984: 352), it is difficult to see how Tomlinson’s scheme can avoid the charge of methodological relativism, begging significant questions with regard to the ‘endlessness’ of cultural analysis, and drawing comparisons with Janice Radway’s similarly impractical call from within cultural studies for an “exhaustive empirical analysis, a total ethnography,

of ‘the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of cultural circulation and consumption’” (quoted in Frow, 1995: 143). More charitably, however, Tomlinson’s proposal might be read simply as a call for a greater methodological comprehensiveness, thereby avoiding the reductionist problems highlighted in the previous paragraph. But there are some problems here too: not only is such a call tinged with a certain disciplinary idealism, but one also wonders about the practical nature of its operationalization. John Shepherd’s proposal for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of music, although similarly appealing, begs a number of similar questions:

The point of value judgement is not to decide which musics are worthy of study. Rather, the point of study is to lay an informed basis for value judgement. In order to achieve this, the academic musician cannot restrict himself or herself purely to the notes, to biography or the minutiae of historical circumstance. Music as opposed to its sounds can only be understood by references to the whole range of human activity: political, economic, religious, educational and so on. The academic musician needs to be a polymath, not a pedant.

(Shepherd, 1994: 139)²⁵

The most fundamental problem here, perhaps, especially if viewed from within the strictures of the established disciplinary boundaries of the academy, is more ‘territorial’ than methodological: namely, one academic’s polymath is another academic’s dilettante.²⁶ But leaving aside such institutional matters for the moment, a more significant problem in Tomlinson’s work is the extent to which the methodological comprehensiveness implied in his ‘reciprocal’ analysis of text and context tends to be elided in favour of a focus on

²⁵ The call for a ‘multidimensional’ and ‘multiperspectival’ critical theory by Best and Kellner (1991) raises a number of similar issues, although it is a call that has been followed through methodologically: see, for example, Kellner (1995).

²⁶ I will return to the question of disciplinarity in the concluding section of Chapter Six. For a highly entertaining but trenchant analysis of the current state of higher education, see Nelson and Watt (1999).

contextual issues. Hence, Tomlinson perhaps runs the risk of an inverted form of the reductionism which – rightly, I believe – he ascribes to the textualist formalism inherent in traditional musicology; a risk which is especially apparent in his failure to recognise the complementarity of Lawrence Kramer’s similarly ‘postmodern’, but more textually-based, musicology to his own analytical project.

Tomlinson suggests that Kramer “unreservedly identifies the ‘work’ as the locus of the new musicology, even though it is one of the modernist categories contested most rewardingly in postmodern thought”, arguing that he “substitutes modernist internalism and aestheticism, both carrying still the potent charge of nineteenth-century transcendentalism, for postmodern contingency and localism” (1993a: 20). Thus, for Tomlinson, “It is the act of close reading itself that carries with it the ideological charge of modernism” (1993a: 22): a proposition which, in its radical anti-textualism, could be said to carry something of its own ideological charge. And although Tomlinson’s call for a “contextualism [that] will not circle back narrowly to the notes but instead will *resolutely historicize musical utterance*” (1993a: 22; emphasis in original), is one with which I readily concur, the doctrinaire stridency of its expression in the context of this debate remains problematic, and Tomlinson perhaps comes close to simply substituting one reductionist ideology for another. This is by no means to deny the explanatory power of Tomlinson’s analytical approach, however: on the contrary, I would argue that his primarily contextually-based scholarship represents a significant contribution to the new musicology. Rather, it is to note the manner in which the ‘all-or-nothing’ logic of academic discourse and the divisive protocols of scholarly debate tend to solidify and

exaggerate theoretical positions: in the context of this debate, then, Tomlinson's strident contextualism serves to militate against the considerably more ecumenical – and potentially more productive – 'reciprocal' analysis of text and context which he himself has advocated.²⁷

Lawrence Kramer's analytical agenda is set forth in his article 'The Musicology of the Future', published in 1992.²⁸ Arguing for a "postmodernist" approach which is "radically anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist, and anti-totalizing" (1992a: 5),²⁹ Kramer suggests that "there is no such thing as a characterologically pure, epistemologically self-contained experience":

Musical autonomy, even Carl Dahlhaus's 'relative autonomy', is a chimera; neither music nor anything else can be other than worldly through and through. Immediacy cannot be the authorizing locus of a discipline, for immediacy is a performative effect. What's more, it is an effect which, when mystified or idealized, functions to empower the persons, institutions, and social groups in control of its production. From a postmodernist perspective, music as it has been conceived of by musicology simply does not exist.

(Kramer, 1992a: 9)

Defending the 'close reading' of the musical text which is central to his analytical approach, Kramer suggests that "the emergence of a postmodernist, that is to say, a critical, musicology will depend on our willingness and ability to read as inscribed within the immediacy-effects of music itself the kind of mediating structures usually positioned

²⁷ I will return to Tomlinson's work in Chapter Seven, in the form of his incisive analysis of jazz canons and the reception of Miles Davis' fusion music.

²⁸ See also Kramer (1990, 1992b, 1995a).

²⁹ An approach which, as Stephen Blum points out, is paradoxically at odds with the categorical nature of Kramer's title: "The narrative strategies that consign earlier writing and discourse to a repertoire of *-isms*, while urging us forward to a necessary future... are as totalizing as narrative strategies can become" (1993: 48).

outside music under the rubric of context” (1992a: 10). Notwithstanding Adam Krims’ cautionary remarks regarding Kramer’s use of the phrase ‘music itself’ – implying a textualism which, recalling Randel’s critique of the tools of musicology, emerges as a “virtual effect of analytical practice” (Krims, 1998b: 6)³⁰ – I want to suggest here, *contra* Tomlinson, that Kramer’s ‘textuality’ is of a rather different stripe than the reductionist formalism and aestheticism most often encountered within traditional music analysis – a point which I hope to illustrate in the concluding section of this chapter in my brief review of Kramer’s work on Charles Ives, and one which Kramer himself alludes to in his response to Tomlinson’s critique of ‘close reading’:

we cannot understand music ‘in context’, thick or otherwise, if we have no means of representing concretely what the music does as utterance. Unquestionably, there are political and moral problems with the aesthetic ideologies that have furnished those means, but that is no reason to write off the aesthetic, the valorization of perceptual pleasure as knowledge, *tout court*. One possibility for a postmodernist, which is to say a worldly, aesthetics, is to trace out the interrelations of musical pleasure, musical form, and ideology.

(Kramer, 1993: 31-32)

The ‘aesthetic ideologies’ inherent in traditional – and in some revisionist – approaches is no better illustrated than in the work of those critics who take issue with *both* Tomlinson and Kramer: an opposition which, in itself – and notwithstanding their own somewhat ill-tempered exchange – perhaps serves to indicate the *similarities* of the critiques of modernism offered by these two ‘postmodern’ musicologists. In Joel Galand’s ‘defence’ of the aesthetic, for example, he suggests that “Kramer and Tomlinson

³⁰ Krims’ remarks are reminiscent of Raymond Williams’ similar cautions against formalist analyses of “the works of art themselves” (1981: 119). See Krims (1998a) for a collection of essays advocating a ‘postmodernist’ approach to music theory and analysis, arguing that ‘close reading’ need not succumb to formalism, nor “reinforce the ideology of aesthetic autonomy” (Krims, 1998b: 7).

exaggerate the historical force of a metaphysics that linked art to truth”, arguing that “the postmodern distrust of the aesthetic stems from a particular reading of the Cartesian tradition” (1995: 88-89). There is much to be said for Galand’s attempt to historicize the aesthetic,³¹ although he greatly underplays the universalizing tendencies of traditional musicology, concluding with an example which, in typically modernist fashion, serves to reinstate the untenable notion of *unmediated* aesthetic experience. Galand cites David Bromwich, to the effect that “the aim of art is to create a mood of attention. The mood impresses us with a sensation that has the force of an imperative – the command to *Stop; Stand back; Respect*, which Kant associated with moral freedom and with aesthetic judgement... We honour in works of art as we do in persons *the mere fact of their autonomy*” (1995: 96-97; emphasis in Galand).

Here, then, we are returned to the “mystified doctrine of aesthetic value” which Christopher Norris identifies as characteristic of the Romantic poets (1990d: 217): a doctrine which musicology would go on to inherit as one of its standard rhetorical tropes. Noting the “parallels between the religious discourse exemplified in the sermon and the musicological discourse that... is a prominent feature of the discipline as institutionalised in North American universities” (1998a: 19), David Gramit has suggested that this trope virtually represents an article of faith in traditional musicology, in which ‘aesthetic experience’ is regarded as “essentially unspeakable” (1998a: 29) – “an experience no

³¹ See Eagleton (1990) for a considerably more sceptical view of the aesthetic than that offered by Galand.

words can adequately describe” (1998a: 32). Tomlinson similarly notes this trope at work in traditional musicology, which he summarizes in terms of two typical modes of inquiry:

positivistic description of historical data around the music and analytic description of the workings of the notes themselves. In the first option the experience itself of music was separated off entirely from the scholarly endeavor, while in the second it was transformed, its quasi-religious transcendence sublimated in technical accounts of musical process. Neither option challenged the autonomy and ‘epistemologically self-contained’ character of the musical experience.

(Tomlinson, 1993a: 18-19)

Thus, notwithstanding the socio-historical turn in philosophical aesthetics which was identified in Chapter One (pp. 22-30) – exemplified by the early interventions of Arthur Danto and illustrated by Paul Mattick’s contention that the ‘readability’ of art “depends on mastery of the cultural code utilized in its production” (1993d: 256) – this mystified notion of unmediated aesthetic experience continues to be evident not only in much musical scholarship, but also within its disciplinary and institutional contexts.³²

³² The ‘mystified aesthetic’ is similarly evident in the visual arts, exemplified in the controversy over Barnett Newman’s *Voice of Fire* at the National Gallery in Ottawa. The painting – a large abstract-expressionist canvas consisting of three vertical stripes of colour – became a *cause célèbre* in March 1990 when the National Gallery announced it had purchased the painting from Newman’s widow for \$1.76 million. In the months that followed, the painting and the gallery became the subject of much media attention and political debate, with questions of value – both cultural and economic – occupying centre stage (see Barber *et al.*, 1996). But perhaps the most striking aspect of the controversy was the extent to which the gallery – apparently failing to grasp the nature of public anger over the purchase – ‘defended’ the painting on purely aesthetic grounds, employing the language of a formalist art history. The first press release issued by the gallery’s then Assistant Director, Brydon Smith, gives some idea of the tone: “*Voice of Fire*’s soaring height, strengthened by the deep cadmium-red centre between dark blue sides, is for many visitors an exhilarating affirmation of their being wholly in the world and in a special place where art and architecture complement each other” (quoted in O’Brian, 1996: 19). In response to such claims, John O’Brian has suggested that “at the heart of the *Voice of Fire* controversy was a profound questioning of elite accountability in the public sphere... In the minds of audiences, the high arrogance of Barnett Newman’s *Voice of Fire* was matched by the high arrogance of the institution that had purchased the painting” (1996: 20-21). The *Voice of Fire* controversy therefore represents a cultural ‘moment’ which has some intriguing lessons not only for the traditional discipline of musicology but also for the broader fields of cultural policy and arts funding.

There is little doubt, however, that both Tomlinson and Kramer are equally sceptical of traditional musicological aestheticism, whether in terms of Tomlinson's proposal to 'resolutely historicize musical utterance' (1993a: 22) or Kramer's rejection of "musical autonomy" and his admonition that "neither music nor anything else can be other than worldly through and through" (1992a: 9). The concordance of their views here only serves to highlight the unnecessarily divisive nature of their heated debate and the illusory mutual exclusivity that characterizes their respective positions with regard to issues of context and text. Perhaps the most suggestive contribution to the debate – and one which holds the promise of moving the discipline beyond the parochialism of internecine debate – comes from Kramer, when he argues that: "On reflection... the opposition between criticism and ethnography proves to be a mirage... if either project bans the other, it will suffocate itself" (1993: 31).

Here, then, however brief, is a further proposal for the 'eclecticism of theory' which Tomlinson's 'intrinsically incomplete' vision of cultural analysis, with its understanding of the reciprocity of text and context, had apparently beckoned us toward: although, as noted above, it is a reciprocity which tends to remain underdeveloped in Tomlinson's own work. But if Tomlinson's work remains overly contextualist, there should no doubt that Kramer remains an unrepentant, card-carrying textualist, and it is interesting to note the ordering of priority in Kramer's new-found analytical magnanimity: "we cannot carry out the ethnographic program of thickly contextualizing musical works, styles, or genres without some understanding of their meaningfulness. The knowledge-claims of a dialogical criticism are prerequisite to those of musical ethnography" (1993: 31). Notwithstanding

their respective analytical tendencies, however, the key point which I want to draw from this debate is that Tomlinson's proposal for a 'reciprocal', dialogical form of analysis and Kramer's reflections on the mutuality of criticism and ethnography suggest not only the interdependence of text and context but also the complementarity of contrasting analytical approaches within the discipline. Hence, far from being mutually exclusive, these contrasting but complementary approaches to the study of music hold the prospect of being usefully and productively combined in a critical 'eclecticism of theory'.

Railing at Canons: Feminism, McClary, and Sexual/Textual Reductionism

In this section, I want to turn to a consideration of feminist approaches to musicology, focusing particularly on the high-profile work of Susan McClary (e.g. 1990, 1991a, 1993, 1994): work which exhibits not only a problematic lack of analytic self-reflexivity, but also a disabling reductionism in terms of both the centrality afforded issues of sexuality and the extent to which textual issues ultimately take precedence over socio-historical contextualization. Notwithstanding these specific criticisms, it must be acknowledged, more generally, that feminist interventions in musicology have inspired a positive reconfiguration of ways of thinking, writing, and talking about music, addressing a range of issues previously neglected by the traditional field, including the writing of the history of women in music, the analysis of musical constructions of gender and sexuality, the consideration of music itself as a gendered discourse, and the investigation of gendered processes of canon formation. A feminist musicology therefore represents a vitally important contribution to contemporary musicological thought, prompting a radical

reappraisal of the traditional musical canon.³³ Not surprisingly perhaps, much of this work has been highly controversial, and reactions have varied from mild outrage to open hostility, as in the case of responses by Pieter van den Toorn (1991, 1995) and Elaine Barkin (1992) to Susan McClary's work.³⁴ However, much of the criticism directed against feminist musicology from within the established discipline simply serves to confirm the formalist inertia of traditional approaches, highlighting the extent of cultural investment in the established canon. Such criticism, based on 'absolutist' perspectives and positivistic methods, has been convincingly countered by feminist scholars.³⁵ But I want to suggest that there are some criticisms of feminist musicology that are less easily dismissed: criticisms which must be addressed if the significant contributions that have been made by feminist approaches are to be successfully consolidated and further developed. To make this argument, however, is not to single out feminist approaches for particular criticism: in broader terms, as noted above and in my previous chapters, the turn towards more socially and historically-grounded modes of analysis has been far from unproblematic. But if feminism has no monopoly on the interrogation of universalizing modes of thought, then it follows that it cannot remain insulated from compelling critiques of the theoretical and methodological shortcomings of related developments in a range of academic fields.

³³ It is not my intention here to explore the full range of feminist perspectives and protocols. For typical examples of feminist approaches to musicology, see the work of Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (1986), Eva Rieger (1985), Catherine Clément (1988), Marcia Citron (1993a, 1993b, 1994), Susan Cook and Judy Tsou (1994), and Ruth Solie (1993a, 1993c), among others. See also the range of related work in gay and lesbian musicology – Brett *et al.* (1994) provides a useful overview; see also Brett (1994b). See also my own article on feminist musicology (Stanbridge, 1998a) which offers a somewhat shorter version of the arguments presented in this section.

³⁴ See also Rosen (1994), Schiff (1992), and Edwards (1991).

³⁵ See, for example, Solie (1991) and McClary (1992, 1993).

As I have indicated, common to critiques of work that adopts a socio-historical perspective on art and culture are charges of ideological reductionism, of the privileging of particular analytical modes of inquiry, and of an absence of self-reflexivity on the part of the analyst. While such charges have sometimes been exaggerated, apparently aimed more at a caricature of the work in question than the work itself, they are often equally warranted: for example, in the Marxist determinism of Hadjinicolaou's art history; in the narrow 'governmentality' of Bennett's cultural policy studies; in the economic reductionism of the postmodern theory of Jameson and Harvey; in the sociological 'imperialism' of Bourdieu; or in the absence of analytical self-reflection which is evident not only in these positions, but also in a populist cultural studies which, in its prescriptive valorisation of popular culture, simply inverts established cultural hierarchies. The relevance to feminist musicology of these critiques will, I trust, become apparent in a consideration of the work of Susan McClary, perhaps the most visible and controversial of feminist commentators in the field. McClary's work has been enormously important in the continuing development of feminist musicology, attracting fulsome praise and rabid condemnation in equal measure. Given the extent of McClary's popular appeal, and the extent of the controversy that her work has generated, it is perhaps time for a somewhat more considered appraisal of her claims.

One of the thorniest issues to be confronted in any consideration of McClary's work is that of essentialism. Although McClary's critique of the established musical canon is certainly a powerful one, her readings of the work of Janika Vandervelde, Madonna, and Laurie Anderson remain highly problematic (1991d, 1991e, 1991f). Rita Felski has

highlighted the shortcomings of similar approaches in literary studies and art history, suggesting that “simply to present a woman-centred canon of great texts as the basis for an autonomous feminist aesthetic is surely to leave a number of key questions unanswered” (1995: 433); and, as Michael Bérubé has suggested of the literary canon, “Canon revision is by no means reducible to affirmative action” (1992a: 28). Moreover, given McClary’s acceptance of Vandervelde’s programmatic references to childbirth in her piece *Genesis II* – and notwithstanding her extravagant claims that “the piece addresses a very basic level of Western culture’s metaphysical foundation” (1991d: 124) – it is difficult to see how such analyses might avoid valid charges of essentialism. Noting this playing of the essentialist “trump card” of childbirth, Ruth Solie asks: “is there a meaningful sense in which this is really an alternative discourse and is not buying into an essentialist discourse?” (1993b: 576).³⁶

But more significant, to my mind, is the identification by Solie of “another essentialism” in McClary’s work: namely, that of “sex itself” (1993b: 577). As Solie suggests, McClary’s “musical universe” is one in which “sexuality overrides all other possible human meaning”, and in which “other struggles, other ideals and experiences... are first acknowledged but then surreptitiously turned to account as evidence of sexual conflict” (1993b: 577). Paula Higgins makes a similar point when she argues that “it seems needlessly arbitrary to reduce music to only one of the multivalent sensory pathways by which it can act on our physical bodies and thereby engage us psychically, spiritually, and

³⁶ See also Kallick (1993) for a similarly sceptical reading of McClary’s essentialist claims for Vandervelde’s work.

emotionally as well” (1993: 184). Thus, although much of McClary’s work is undeniably persuasive and highly suggestive, the almost singular focus on sexuality remains problematic, constituting its own form of reductionism, and serving to obscure broader social, cultural, historical, and artistic factors.

In her synoptic review of the state of musicology and feminism in the 1990s, McClary describes ‘essentialism’ as that “dreaded word... held up like a crucifix to ward off vampires” (1993: 415). But given the ‘sexual reductionism’ evident in McClary’s work – and a distinctly *heterosexual* reductionism at that³⁷ – her rejection of charges of ‘essentialism’ is somewhat unconvincing. McClary herself has conceded that “the tactical zone between accommodation and essentialism is difficult to negotiate” (1993: 416), and, in an earlier article, she cautioned that “we cannot afford to focus solely on obvious instances of gender – to be one-issue critics – but we must also be alert to the politics of race, of class, of subjectivity, of popular culture” (1990: 15). Despite such caveats, however, McClary’s work too often remains singularly focused on ‘sex itself’, the reductionist shortcomings of her work serving to highlight the need for a considerably more sophisticated theorization of the links between music and sexuality. As Ruth Solie has suggested, it may be more productive to “explore the ways in which representation does its cultural work before assuming sexuality *per se*” (1991: 410).

³⁷ Susan Cook, for example, notes McClary’s “heterosexist slant”. Observing that “women’s music presents many kinds of female subjectivities”, Cook suggests that McClary “need[s] to take more care in defining what she means by sexuality, otherwise she perpetuates lesbian invisibility” (1992: 161).

It is also interesting to observe that McClary's "eclectic toolkit of methods" (1991b: 23) perhaps serves to disguise the manner in which her musical analyses often simply reiterate the established tropes of traditional music theory and analysis, locating the affective qualities of music in the musical text itself. As Gary Tomlinson has suggested, behind this approach "hides the view that meaning (and hence value, which only arises alongside meaning) inheres somehow in the notes themselves. Behind it lurks the absurd proposition that music alone, independent of the cultural matrices that individuals build around it, can *mean*... can convey *something* even in the hypothetical absence of the complex negotiations we each pursue with them" (1992: 77; emphasis in original).³⁸ McClary's celebrated reading of Bizet's *Carmen* (1991c) is a case in point here: although the analysis is often compelling, it circles narrowly around the musical text, with socio-historical 'grounding' restricted to no more than a few brief paragraphs, most often of the 'painted backdrop' and homological kind.

Hence, the "irreconcilable contradictions" of 1870s France – "the limits and reversals of imperial expansion... both women and the working class were organizing to demand their economic, political, and cultural rights" – and the "tension" of the period – "between liberal overextension and the need to assert control" – is seen as "inform[ing] the terms of musical discourse itself: the nineteenth century's indulgence in hedonistic chromaticism and exoticism in music gradually becomes addictive, and the purging of this slippery stuff

³⁸ It is worthwhile noting that in the article from which this quote is taken, the target in Tomlinson's cross-hairs was the formalism of the neo-traditionalist builders of the contemporary jazz canon, which, he suggests, "embodies the aestheticism that continues to circumscribe our teaching of European canons and that short-circuits our understanding of the conditions in which they are made and remade" (1992: 77). The irony of this critique should not be lost on McClary.

for the sake of diatonic order” is held to represent “the brute imposition of convention from the outside” (1991c: 66-67). To paraphrase Janet Wolff, this is nothing other than “facile sociologizing” (1992: 707). In her critique of the work of the dance historian Frances Rust, Wolff has noted the problems with this approach, which she caricatures as “‘The French Revolution killed the minuet’ school of thought” (1992: 711):

On the one hand we have the ‘social facts’; on the other, we have the changing styles of dance, which can be explained as a cultural response to such things as industrialization, revolution, changes in sex roles, and so on... But... cultural forms, like dance, do not just directly represent the social in some unmediated way. Rather they *re-present* it in the codes and processes of signification – the language of dance. Moreover, far from reflecting the already-given social world, dance and other cultural forms participate in the production of that world.

(Wolff, 1992: 707; emphasis in original)

Furthermore, McClary’s textual analyses are heavy with ideological baggage, often employing a clumsy, sexually-metaphoric language which serves to undercut her sometimes persuasive arguments.³⁹ Writing of José’s famous ‘Flower Song’, for example, she suggests that the male protagonist:

sets up a pitch-ceiling that constricts his melodic line (thus creating in sound the experience of frustration), which he penetrates on ‘te revoir, ô Carmen’. Following this explosive moment, his energy gradually seems to subside almost to a kind of whimpering. But as he sings of submitting himself masochistically to her power... he rises again – this time through an unaccompanied scale – and attains climax on b flat, the highest most vulnerable pitch in the aria. Strangely, he sings to Carmen of his masturbatory practices right at the moment when she expects them to make love.

(McClary, 1991c: 59)

³⁹ The use of sexual metaphors reaches its absolute nadir in an article co-written by Susan McClary and Robert Walser, not in the context of a musical example, but in the comparison of traditional musicologists to gynecologists. By the point that the musicological “graphs, pitch charts, semiotic dissections, guidelines of political correctness” are characterized by the authors as “the Pap smears of musicology” (1990: 287), one cannot help but think that a somewhat stronger editorial presence was required.

And suggesting that the “chromatic excesses” of Carmen’s music – grounded in “the physical impulses of exotic, pseudogypsy dance” (1991c: 57) – make it “undeniably more powerful” than José’s “well-behaved discourse of masculine European classical music”, McClary concludes that “the opera demonstrates vividly how impotent the sublime experience of transcendence is in the face of the lowest common denominator” (1991c: 59).

Similarly problematic is McClary’s reading of the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s *Fourth Symphony*, not least in the manner in which, while apparently challenging stereotypical constructions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ – whether in social or musical discourse – McClary’s analyses often simply *reinscribe* these constructions. Thus, for example, when McClary suggests that, “in contrast to the more typical heroic opening themes”, the principal – and, in musicological terms, ‘masculine’ – theme of the first movement is “limping... hypersensitive, vulnerable, indecisive” (1991c: 71), her subsequent – and implicitly concomitant – identification of Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality simply mobilizes the most hackneyed of sexual stereotypes. Furthermore, when McClary identifies the second ‘feminine’ theme as “sultry, seductive, and slinky” (1991c: 71), suggesting that the symphony therefore represents “a narrative in which the protagonist seems victimized both by patriarchal expectations and by sensual feminine entrapment” (1991c: 76), not only do her narrative fabrications far outstrip the evidence of ‘the notes themselves’, but she also offers a rather problematic caricature of the ‘victimized’ homosexual.

Jenny Kallick has noted that, contrary to McClary’s sexual stereotyping, “some of the recent gay criticism has suggested different priorities. Whereas McClary seeks to delineate

gay and straight narratives, some gay theorists emphasize the importance of rethinking ‘the stability and ineradicability of the hetero/homo hierarchy’. Just as feminist theory stresses the need to deemphasize the polarity of male/female, with all its fused identities, so also does gay criticism see the binary opposition of homosexual and heterosexual as an obstacle to critical understanding” (1993: 399). Given the antagonistic nature of the binary oppositions which inform McClary’s ‘sexual reductionism’, however – whether straight or gay – it is clear that her work does little to ‘deemphasize the polarity’ of either male/female or heterosexual/homosexual, thereby “cementing the orthodoxies of ‘separate spheres’” which Judith Tick has cautioned against (1993: 105).⁴⁰

Hence, despite the stated intention of reconstructing “historically grounded social meanings” (McClary, 1993: 415), McClary’s project remains a curiously formalist one, in which the established techniques of music analysis have primacy over detailed sociological and historical research.⁴¹ Somewhat paradoxically, then, given her fulsome critique of traditional musicology, McClary’s own work tends to exhibit the “ultimate analytic tautology” which Tomlinson has identified as characteristic of conventional music analysis: namely, that “analysts tacitly and arbitrarily assign to the works they study the meanings that arise from their own analytic ideologies” (Tomlinson, 1984: 360). Thus, McClary’s ‘analytic ideology’, coupled with her sexually reductive focus, not only downplays the

⁴⁰ See the discussion below of Judith Tick’s work on Charles Ives.

⁴¹ The ultimately formalist character of McClary’s analytic approach is echoed in Ellie Hisama’s reading of Ruth Crawford’s *String Quartet*: in this case, claims for the “specific feminist strategy” enacted by Crawford – knowingly or otherwise – are made solely in terms of traditional music theory (Hisama, 1995: 293). Here, the specifically social aspects of Crawford’s compositional practice – which, paradoxically, are so central to Hisama’s argument regarding ‘feminist strategies’ – do, indeed, feature as little more than a ‘painted backdrop’.

importance of socio-historical contextualization, but also – and despite her claims to the contrary – serves to deny any polysemic interpretation of musical texts, offering instead a series of singular, univocal readings in which the critical authority of the analyst is ultimately reaffirmed.

Not only has the work of Steven Feld (1994a)⁴² and others suggested strongly that such univocal readings are theoretically untenable, but within the context of McClary's own analytical framework such readings become even more problematic, highlighting a central paradox in her work: namely, that while her aggressively revisionist readings of the traditional canon may appear to confirm Barthes' structuralist notion of the 'death of the author' (1968), her sympathetic studies of female composers – and her tacit acceptance, for example, of Vandervelde's own programs for her work (1991d) – serve to reinstate the author in quintessentially modernist fashion, although this time under the auspices of a specifically feminist aesthetic.

This absence of analytic self-reflexivity is evident not only in McClary's claims for Vandervelde's work, but also in her readings of Madonna's songs and music videos: somewhat over-enthusiastically, perhaps, McClary assures us that Madonna "is engaged in rewriting some very fundamental levels of Western thought" (1991f: 160), suggesting that Madonna "offers musical structures that promise narrative closure, and at the same time she resists or subverts them" (1991f: 154). Similarly, McClary argues that Madonna's videos "explore... various ways of constituting identities that refuse stability, that remain

⁴² See Chapter Four for a discussion of Feld's notion of 'interpretive moves'.

fluid, that resist definition” (1991f: 150). Thus, in common with the uncritical populism of much work in cultural studies and in postmodern analyses of popular culture, McClary neglects any detailed analysis of social, political and economic realities in favour of the now rather tired rhetoric of resistance and subversion.

Contrary to McClary, however, George Biddlecombe suggests that “To imply that imperfect (‘deceptive’) cadences... are atraditional because ‘they provide the means of avoiding closure’, is, quite simply, wrong; they are *always* a means of avoiding closure, for they postpone the (in McClary’s terms) hegemonic tonic” (1992: 375; emphasis in original). Similarly unsustainable are McClary’s claims for Madonna’s use of the fade – “The piece ends not with definite closure but with a fade. As long as we hear her, she continues to fluctuate” (1991f: 160). Again, given the ubiquity of the fade in popular music, the avoidance of ‘closure’ – if that, indeed, is what such a technique connotes – is far from peculiar to Madonna. And in response to the celebratory ‘postmodern’ readings of Madonna by McClary and others,⁴³ Susan Bordo has suggested that claims for Madonna’s “liberating postmodern subjectivity” are achieved only through “the effacement of the material praxis of people’s lives, the normalizing power of cultural images, and the sadly continuing social realities of dominance and subordination” (1990: 288-289).⁴⁴

Given McClary’s adherence to an uncritically populist form of cultural studies, her subsequent call for cultural studies as “a mediating factor” (1994: 69) between music

⁴³ See also Schwichtenberg (1993b), Fiske (1992), and Kaplan (1987). For an amusing but insightful critique of the ‘Madonna Phenomenon’, see Daniel Harris (1992).

⁴⁴ See also Freccero (1994) for a similarly critical reading.

theory and feminism can be seen to represent a form of ‘happy interdisciplinarity’, in the sense that it chooses simply to ignore significant critiques of the populist approach which her work exemplifies – critiques which were addressed in Chapter One (pp. 57-70).

Furthermore, McClary’s enthusiasm for the early work of Raymond Williams, expressed in the same article, sits uneasily alongside persuasive critiques of the ‘residual Romanticism’ which Ian Hunter (1988a) has identified in Williams’s ‘social definition’ of culture (as noted in Chapter One, p. 58): a latently conservative aspect of Williams’s work which runs entirely contrary to the revisionist nature of McClary’s project. Hunter suggests that the ‘whole way of life’ in Williams’s ‘social definition’ of culture still betrays an ‘improving’ agenda in which the process of ‘ethical self-shaping’ is achieved via the “privileged disciplines of cultural history and literary criticism” (Hunter, 1988a: 87). In this sense, Hunter argues, Williams’s cultural materialism does not represent a radical response to Leavisite conceptualizations of culture: rather, it is “nothing more than a variation on the same theme” (Hunter, 1988a: viii).⁴⁵

Thus, powerful and compelling though it may be, Susan McClary’s work is also highly problematic, sharing a range of shortcomings – ideological reductionism, the privileging of particular modes of analysis, and a lack of analytic self-reflexivity – with work in other fields which similarly attempts to destabilise the cultural assumptions underlying traditional academic perspectives. There can be little doubt that this process of destabilisation is an important enterprise, and McClary has certainly been successful in

⁴⁵ For a similar critique, see Bennett (1993, 1992).

making one of the most traditional and hidebound of disciplines sit up and take notice. But it soon becomes clear, however, that such ‘railing at canons’,⁴⁶ while a necessary – and necessarily polemical – gesture, is one which also has severe limitations. Indeed, to paraphrase Paula Higgins, it is difficult to see how this might lead to anything other than a “theoretical cul-de-sac” (1993: 183).

The parallels with recent revisionary approaches to the literary canon are highly instructive in this context, the problem having been succinctly summarised by Mary Eagleton in her reflections on the construction of feminist literary studies – a field which has a somewhat longer history than feminist musicology. Eagleton observes: “we have created a literary history which is both selective and schematic. It suggests that we should be more critically aware of what we are constructing, how we are constructing it and of the political consequences of these constructs” (1996a: 1; see also 1996b). Furthermore, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has suggested, although the feminist re-evaluation of canonical literary texts has been undeniably significant, this has “not amounted as yet to the articulation of a well-developed noncanonical theory of value and evaluation” (1988: 24).

The challenge for a feminist musicology, then, is to move beyond simply ‘railing at canons’ – and the simplistic evaluative regimes which such a project implies – towards an understanding of value and canonicity which is both more self-reflexive and critical. Any

⁴⁶ The phrase is Perry Anderson’s – see Chapter One (pp. 69–70): “railing at canons is not the same as replacing them, which they have resisted. Evacuation of the terrain of literary evaluation in the traditional sense necessarily leaves its conventional practitioners in place” (1992: 243). Significantly, Anderson was writing here of the “pyrrhic” nature of Marxist literary criticism.

such understanding would admit neither polemical denials of the traditional canon nor ideological claims for an alternative canon; nor would it accept a reductive analytic focus on sexuality as the sole basis for evaluation. This is not, of course, to suggest that all feminist musicology has simply succumbed to such polemicism and ideological reductionism, and the shortcomings which such approaches imply. The critical perspectives of commentators such as Ruth Solie (1993a, 1993b) and Paula Higgins (1993), for example, simply serve to contradict any such claim, and, in any case, given the current complexities of feminist thought, the reductionist critique of ‘feminism’ as a monolithic entity is surely more untenable now than it ever was. But it is, however, to suggest that there are real dangers involved in some of the more high-profile and controversial examples of feminist approaches to musicology – and the often extravagant or over-enthusiastic claims which accompany such approaches – becoming normative models for future scholarship, whether in terms of reductive analyses of the “phallic and sexually violent... conventions of classical form” (McClary, 1991d: 131),⁴⁷ the “phallic backbeat” of rock music (1991f: 154) – McClary’s world is, indeed, “a world rife with phallic posturing” (1991d: 127) – or in the populist rush to enlist Madonna to the cause of a “postmodern feminism” (Schwichtenberg, 1993b: 129).

⁴⁷ In the original – and somewhat less ‘temperate’ – version of the article from which this quote is taken, McClary writes of the “assaultive pelvic pounding... and sexual violence” of Beethoven’s symphonies, suggesting that “the point of recapitulation in the first movement of the Ninth is one of the most horrifying moments in music, as the carefully prepared cadence is frustrated, damming up energy which finally explodes in the throttling, murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release” (1987: 8). It is interesting to note that the similarly intemperate initial response of Pieter van den Toorn – “Surely not all women are adverse to ‘pelvic pounding’” (1991: 297) – was similarly revised and ‘softened’ for publication in book form (1995).

Ideology, Self-Reflexivity, and Cultural Evaluation: The Case of Ives

In contrast to the theoretical extravagance illustrated above, a study by Judith Tick (1993) of the American composer Charles Ives is indicative of the critical self-reflexivity I have in mind. Ives is a potentially easy target for revisionist feminist and gay and lesbian scholarship: Maynard Solomon, for example, identifies Ives's "preoccupation with emasculation, his incessant ranting against 'effeminacy' in music, and his quite pathological aversion to homosexuals" (1987: 466); Philip Brett suggests that Ives was "thoroughly saturated in homosexual panic" (1994a: 16); and Susan McClary asks us to "witness... Ives's pathetic insistence on his own exaggerated masculinity and his homophobic renunciations of predecessors and contemporaries (including friends and colleagues)... This obsession is manifest in almost every document Ives wrote" (1989: 73).⁴⁸

In the face of such invective, Ives's own recourse to gendered language in his criticism of the musical establishment of the 1920s and 1930s perhaps seems rather tame: his descriptions of virtuoso pianists "all dolled up in their purple dressing gowns... in their cissy-like postures over the piano keys" (quoted in Tick, 1993: 85); his characterizations of the repertoire of the Haydn Quartet – "nice little easy sugar plum sounds... nice sweetie silk bonnet melodies" (1993: 99); or his 'renaming' of Toscanini and Rachmaninoff as

⁴⁸ McClary's (largely unsubstantiated) claims are based primarily on Solomon's psychoanalytic reading of Ives. Tick is critical of Solomon, however, suggesting that "a psychoanalytic perspective masks the power of society to transmit gendered views of culture, rife with prejudice and viable precisely because issues other than sexuality are engaged through tropes of masculinity and femininity" (Tick, 1993: 89).

“Toss a Ninny” (1993: 104) and “Rachnotmanenough” (1993: 99).⁴⁹ Refusing the reductionist tendencies of Solomon, McClary and Brett, Tick avoids simplistic attributions of cultural value, offering instead a richly detailed and subtly nuanced analysis of the socio-historical context from which Ives “inherited both a social grammar of prejudice and an ideology of gender differences in art”, but through which, Tick suggests, he “expressed other kinds of meanings and values” (1993: 84). Thus, Tick argues:

The purpose of Ives’s militant gender ideology was to weaken his adversaries by inverting gender discourse, rendering the patrimony – the heritage of male achievement – suspect on its own terms... If new music was pilloried by snobbish comparisons to the Old Masters (as it often was), then Ives desecrated the false idols. If Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms were ranked as hard and masculine, then he suggested that they were soft and tainted with effeminacy. In this sense his name-calling was purposeful. His project was the emasculation of the cultural patriarchy. (Tick, 1993: 104-105)

Tick is careful to note, however, that her research is not offered “as an apology for Ives”, but rather “to demythologize his anger and to confront our own cultural legacies”, and in a telling conclusion – which has considerable import for feminist scholars such as McClary – she observes:

Given our post-Freudian habit of reading sexuality into every context, it is all the harder to read it out when it misleads. Given our cultural addiction to the music of the past, we have been uncomfortable confronting Ives’s apostatic treatment of the canon. In our gender ideology of music the ‘masculinization’ of high art has been no less powerful and pervasive than the ‘feminization’ of musical ‘accomplishment’, these associations retaining some resonance even today. Unless we distance ourselves from this legacy, we run the risk of cementing the orthodoxies of ‘separate spheres’ into our own interpretations.

(Tick, 1993: 105)

⁴⁹ Tick’s extensive research suggests that Ives’s use of such language was relatively commonplace in its day: Paul Rosenfeld, a leading critic of the 1920s, perhaps goes further than Ives in his characterizations of the music of Edward MacDowell: “MacDowell minces and simpers, maidenly, and ruffled. He is nothing if not a daughter of the American Revolution” (quoted in Tick, 1993: 95).

Here, then, is a feminist scholarship which refuses an easy ‘sexual reductionism’; one which takes the reconstruction of ‘historically grounded social meanings’ seriously; and one which draws its conclusions from a judicious appraisal of the contextual evidence, rather than from an ideologically pre-coded reading of the musical text.⁵⁰ Tick’s contextualism has much in common with Gary Tomlinson’s approach, and her work on Ives’s discursive employment of gender ideology offers an interesting example of the manner in which “discourses are created and evolve in dialogue with other discourses” (Tomlinson, 1992: 72). Furthermore, as an illustration of the complementarity of contrasting approaches which I argued above in my consideration of the Tomlinson-Kramer debate, it is interesting to consider Tick’s work alongside another recent study of Ives by Lawrence Kramer (1995b), offering not only a good example of the analytical power of Kramer’s ‘postmodern textualism’, but also suggesting the benefits of combining Kramer’s textual insights with Tick’s socio-historical contextualization, moving towards a fuller and deeper understanding of the complex character of Charles Ives: an understanding which goes far beyond facile dismissals of his ‘homosexual panic’ and ‘exaggerated masculinity’.

Although potentially more problematic in its somewhat formalist focus on Ives’s musical texts and its reliance on an (albeit sophisticated) version of the structural homology, Kramer’s study is equally revealing and suggestive. Noting Ives’s “obsessive efforts, both overt and covert, to construct a ‘manly’ aesthetic, and his reliance on culturally ascendant concepts of purity and social hierarchy”, Kramer suggests that “all

⁵⁰ For further examples of Tick’s work, see Tick (1995, 1997) and Bowers and Tick (1986).

too often, Ives is formally most advanced precisely where he is socially most retrograde” (1995b: 175). Contrary to the reading of Ives which – focusing on the radical heterogeneity in much of his music – casts him in the role of a revolutionary “pre-postmodernist”, Kramer argues instead that Ives’s work reveals a somewhat more reactionary impulse, representing a “nostalgia for the unattainable” (1995b: 175). As Kramer observes, claims for Ives’s ‘postmodern’ status apparently find support in Lyotard’s notion of the ‘postmodern sublime’, in which – contrary to a modernist “nostalgia for the unattainable” – ‘postmodern’ artists deny themselves “the solace of good forms” and search for “new presentations... in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (Lyotard, 1984b: 81). However, although Kramer suggests of Ives that “no one ever searched for ‘new presentations’ more avidly or scorned good forms more cheerfully”, he ultimately casts Ives as a modernist, arguing that “Ives’s emancipatory ideal repeatedly proved to be a mystified form of populist-nativist ideology, an ideology foreign neither to the forms of Ives’s music nor its ethos” (1995b: 174-175).⁵¹

One of the aspects of Ives’s music which is most often cited in ascribing it any ‘postmodern’ status is the extent of musical quotation, his pieces often incorporating hymn tunes, patriotic songs, marches, and the music of popular composers such as Stephen Foster, thereby lending his work its radical eclecticism, intertextuality, and heterogeneity. Peter Burkholder has exhaustively documented Ives’s use of musical borrowing, observing

⁵¹ While not wishing to be too arcane, it is nevertheless interesting to note here that whether one accepts Kramer’s reading of Lyotard’s postmodern sublime – thereby denying Ives’s ‘postmodern’ status – or whether one accepts my own critique of Lyotard’s ‘postmodernism’ outlined in Chapter Two (pp. 106-111) – which proves, in fact, to be a ‘modernist postmodernism’ all along – one arrives at similar conclusions regarding Ives’s essentially modernist aesthetic.

that “there are almost two hundred pieces or movements that incorporate music by other composers, spanning his entire career and representing more than a third of his output” (1995: 1). Although Burkholder acknowledges that this extensive use of borrowed material might appear to differentiate Ives from his predecessors – “as the quotations stick out inexplicably from the musical texture, Ives’s music in turn will seem to stand apart from the European tradition as an unintegrated mixture of heterogeneous elements” (1995: 2) – he goes on to identify fourteen compositional procedures which Ives employed,⁵² arguing that “most of the ways in which Ives used existing music are familiar techniques common to many composers, including some of the most fundamental procedures of the European tradition” (1995: 3-4). Thus, Burkholder argues:

The reworking of existing music is central to the musical tradition, taking many forms throughout history, and most of Ives’s borrowing practices are common property... For all that Ives’s ‘quotations’ may seem outlandish and unprecedented, his uses of existing music are less unusual than we have realised, and even the most extraordinary are simply extensions of traditional procedures.

(Burkholder, 1995: 5)

Burkholder cites a number of examples, from the paraphrase masses of the Renaissance to Mozart’s keyboard variations on popular songs, and briefly mentions Heinrich Biber’s *Battalia* of 1673. This piece perhaps represents the most remarkable precursor of Ives’s celebrated use of overlapping tunes in different key signatures. Scored for an instrumental ensemble of 10 players, in its brief second movement, ‘The dissolute company with humour of all kinds’, Biber offers a programmatic depiction of a group of

⁵² These include modeling, variations, paraphrasing, medley, stylistic allusion, collage, patchwork, and extended paraphrase (Burkholder, 1995: 3-4).

drunken, singing musketeers. Here, in Biber's words, "all voices are at variance, as different songs are being roared out simultaneously" (quoted in Harnoncourt, 1966: 8). In a further parallel with Ives's techniques, Biber employs a popular song of the period, which Bach would later use in his *Goldberg Variations*. It is interesting to compare Biber's description of his piece with a famous anecdote in which Ives recounts one of the early musical experiments of his father George, a bandmaster in Danbury, Connecticut, and one of the younger Ives's most significant early influences. Ives recalls that two marching bands, each playing different tunes in different keys, approached the town square from opposing directions: "As they approached each other the dissonances were acute, and each man played louder so that his rival would not put him off" (quoted in Nyman, 1974: 35).

More significant than the question of compositional precursors, however, is Burkholder's argument that in his "mature period (1908-18), Ives... goes beyond claiming an American identity within the European tradition and uses the methods of European art music to assert the value of the American vernacular tradition in its own right" (1995: 419). Thus, Burkholder suggests, Ives "set out to disinherit himself from European music... in order to deny the influence of the past" (quoted in Tick, 1993: 99). Moreover, in Ives's writings, as Tick suggests, "his name-calling of European composers was a way of effecting the rupture" (1993: 99). In this sense, then, Ives's musical borrowings, and the use of gender ideology in his writings, are better understood as a series of compositional and rhetorical strategies which represent a prototypical modernist rejection and negation

of prior aesthetic forms and conventions, rather than as any ‘postmodern’ blurring of the boundaries between high art and popular culture.

As Kramer observes, “much as Ives idealized ‘the people’, he scorned the popular music composed by the urban Jewish immigrants of Tin Pan Alley. His notorious aversion to the radio and phonograph seems linked to their role in creating a mass audience for that music at the expense of native musical vernaculars” (1995b: 181). Although Burkholder notes that Ives did, in fact, quote from “the leading figures of the first Tin Pan Alley generation” (1995: 325)⁵³ – also noting the extent to which the early Tin Pan Alley composers themselves drew on notions of compositional “patchwork”, which may have influenced Ives to some extent (1995: 322-327) – it is clear from Burkholder’s text that Ives’s use of such quotations was far less extensive than his employment of hymn tunes, Civil War songs, marches, etc. And, as Kramer suggests, Ives’s music shows little or no evidence of quotation from the later generation of Tin Pan Alley composers such as Irving Berlin or Jerome Kern, both of whom worked as ‘song-pluggers’ on New York’s famous 28th Street during the period when Ives was compositionally active. Furthermore, Kramer notes that “Ives’s musical collages virtually exclude black spirituals, which encroach uncomfortably on the privileged position of white gospel music... In a sense, Ives’s music reproduces the social order as well as the sound of the nineteenth-century revival meetings

⁵³ Including quotations from the popular songs of Charles K. Harris (*After the Ball*) (1995: 385), George M. Cohan (*Over There*) (1995: 364), and Paul Dresser (*On the Banks of the Wabash*) (1995: 286). For a brief overview of this early period, and the subsequent development of Tin Pan Alley, see Hyland (1995).

so formative of its style and spirit (1995b: 181).⁵⁴ Thus, for all his outspoken opposition to the musical establishment of the day, Ives's position can be seen to be one of profound ambivalence, especially in his continuing employment and extension of the compositional means of the European art music tradition to challenge the cultural dominance of that same tradition, thereby promoting a new form of American vernacularism. Furthermore, Ives's faith in indigenous 'folk' – and explicitly white – forms rather than in the new, commodified 'popular' forms of the period represents an intriguing early variation on the 'populism against mass-culture' perspective identified in Chapter One (pp. 47-51), which was evident, for example, in the work of Richard Hoggart (1958).

At the core of Kramer's argument is the hypothesis that Ives's modernist ambivalence – clearly evident in his artistic and social philosophy – is encoded in the music itself. Arguing that "the spatiality of Ives's music serves to model or prescribe the larger, socio-culturally constructed space in which the music is situated" (1995b: 176), Kramer proposes a complex theoretical model in which, through phases of "interplay", "excess" and, "hierarchy", Ives's compositional procedures can be understood to embody "a movement *away* from a primary, radical heterogeneity" (1995b: 186-187; emphasis in original). Thus, Kramer suggests, the "Ivesian masterplot" (1995b: 187) is one in which "formal and ideological unity is achieved through the exclusion of radical heterogeneity"

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note, however, that Ives drew on ragtime for his *Ragtime Dances* of 1902-1904 (which also include quotes from popular hymn tunes, including *Bringing in the Sheaves*), and for some of his piano pieces (see Burkholder, 1995: 212-214). As Glenn Watkins notes, Ives's use of ragtime "antedates its appearance in the music of European composers by a decade and a half" (1988: 438). For a history of ragtime, and its influence on jazz, popular, and 'classical' composers, see Gammond (1975).

(1995b: 189), thereby encoding “the triumph of old-time, rural, Protestant America over the irreducible diversity of modern urban life” (1995b: 192).

Thus, denying “the extreme formalist position that art, personality, and ideology are separate spheres”, in which “only what we can posit as purely artistic – here purely musical – values really matter” (1995b: 198), Kramer’s intriguing model suggests a reversal of the structural homology as it is commonly understood: one in which an understanding of ‘context’ – in this case, the “ideological freight” which Kramer identifies in Ives’s social philosophy – is gained from a reading of formal characteristics in the musical text. Moreover, Kramer suggests that “the freight... alters, or should alter, our use and understanding of the music and the cultural status we are willing to grant it” (1995b: 198).

It could be argued, therefore, that Kramer’s model has much in common with McClary’s reductively textualist readings of contextual issues – and his virtuoso display certainly suggests an excess of residual formalism, with several rather intuitive leaps to ‘the social’. But the differences in the two approaches are highlighted in Kramer’s analytical aims – “My purpose... is neither to praise Ives nor to bury him but to understand him” (1995b: 175) – and in his conclusion, which perhaps indicates a somewhat lighter load of ‘ideological freight’ than that found in McClary’s work: “So where we stand with Ives, and with virtually any other artist of consequence, is at the juncture of the aesthetic and the real, a site at which all sorts of valuations, but no idealization” – nor, I would want to add, demonization – “may arise” (1995b: 199-200).

Thus, notwithstanding the manifest contrasts in the work of Tick and Kramer – on the one hand, a contextualist ‘rescuing’ of Ives from reductionist pathologization, and on the other a textualist ‘debunking’ of Ives’s radical ‘pre-postmodernism’ – perhaps the most striking aspect of the work of these two authors is the extent to which they both deny facile evaluative judgements, claiming neither analytical objectivity nor grinding any ideological axes. Tick modestly concedes that her essay does no more than acknowledge “the complexity of the larger relationship between Ives’s rhetoric and his music” (1993: 105); and although Kramer is somewhat less modest in his analytical claims, his rejection of the ideology of autonomy and his faith in a form of ‘postmodern’ music criticism indicate a similar degree of ‘provisionality’ in his own work: “criticism can do more than merely perpetuate the myths of authorship and authority. Precisely because it is historically and rhetorically engaged with those myths, it can also destabilize them, undo them, and experiment with alternatives. Criticism can interrogate both its own myths and the myths of art” (1993: 30-31).

Furthermore, the analytical complementarity of their work points toward an eclectic but critical methodology which acknowledges the irreducible interdependence of texts and contexts, highlighting their dialogical mutuality: if cultural texts are, indeed, embedded in their socio-historical contexts, then the specificities of those contexts are equally embedded in those same cultural texts. It is in this sense, then, as John Frow suggests, that the world must be understood as “fully relational, fully interconnected” (1995: 134):⁵⁵ a

⁵⁵ I will return to Frow’s work in Chapter Six.

proposition which emphasises the inadequacy of both those textualist approaches which render the social as a ‘painted backdrop’, and those contextualist approaches which succumb to a reductionist ‘philistinism’. The critically self-reflexive work of Tick and Kramer confirms therefore, forcefully and persuasively, the point made earlier: that the reassessment and revaluation of the traditional canon – with its false claims to universality, neutrality, and immutability – cannot be achieved by either proscriptive ideological critique or prescriptive canonic inversion. As Kramer suggests of Ives: “If the communicative action of Ives’s music is in some respects equivocal, even dismaying, then the music should surely be revalued. But it should not simply be *devalued*, or not devalued simply, any more than it should be dismissed... Demonology, after all, is just hagiography turned inside out” (1995b: 175-176; emphasis in original).

In this chapter, in addition to identifying the ‘false universality’ of the canon of Western art music, I have suggested that a review of salient trends in the contemporary literature of the ‘new musicology’ reveals a number of analytical weaknesses: in the work of Robert Morgan, for example, the dependence on a homological, ‘reflection’ theory of the relationship between text and context results in a mis-reading of Cage’s positioning within a supposedly ‘post-tonal age’; in Gary Tomlinson’s work, a reductive privileging of contextual issues runs the risk of simply inverting the textualist ideology of traditional musicology – an ideology which is still alive and well in the shape of the mystified aesthetic; and in Susan McClary’s work, a sexual and textual reductionism, coupled with an absence of analytical self-reflexivity, results in the neglect of the ‘historically grounded

social meanings' which are held to be central to her revisionist project. But my review has also highlighted the strengths of those perspectives – evident particularly in the work of Lawrence Kramer and Judith Tick – which make no such reductionist claims on behalf of either their analytical methods or their evaluative judgements, suggesting instead the possibility of a critical 'eclecticism of theory', which acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between texts and contexts.

Chapter Four

The Question of Canons: On Relativism, Imperialism, and Canonic Inversion

“The controversy over the canon is being fought in the enchanted wood of values.”
From: ‘Canonical and Non-Canonical’,
John Guillory (1987: 487)

In the previous chapter, I noted the myths of universality, neutrality, and immutability that Marcia Citron (1993a) ascribes to the established canon of Western art music, and the extent to which the analytical tools of traditional musicology serve to constrain the objects of study. Moreover, I suggested that some recent work in music studies exhibits a reductive privileging of either text or context, whether in terms of a continuing faith in a mystified notion of the aesthetic (Galand, 1995), or in the crude application of a contextualist ‘reflection’ theory (Morgan, 1992). Furthermore, despite its strongly stated intentions, I argued that Susan McClary’s work ultimately fails to offer an effective critique of the established canon, revealing a problematic reductionism and lack of analytic self-reflexivity, and a paradoxical reliance on the analytical tools of the discipline which represents the focus of her critique. However, notwithstanding their textualist and contextualist biases, I suggested that the analytical complementarity of the work of theorists such as Gary Tomlinson, Lawrence Kramer, and Judith Tick pointed towards the eclectic, critically self-reflexive theoretical approach which I propose.

In this chapter, drawing on a number of examples from ethnomusicology, sociology, and popular music studies, I focus more sharply on the question of canons, arguing that although much of this work is laudable in its critique of established canons – whether

those of academic scholarship or cultural practice – it nonetheless remains problematic. I suggest that some of this work reveals a disabling canonic relativism (the postmodern bogey-man of traditionalist scholarship, but a concept which is no less troubling in the hands of revisionist scholars), sometimes accompanied by a disciplinary ‘imperialism’, with concomitantly untenable claims to detached objectivity and unique analytical insight. In the case of popular music studies, I note the tendency to invert canonic systems of privilege: here, rather than challenging traditional hierarchies of cultural value, I argue that a delimited definition of ‘popular music’, and the positing of an alternative, populist canon, serves simply to reconfirm such hierarchical boundaries. In the light of such canonic inversion, I suggest, revisionist critiques of ‘universalism’ and ‘absolutism’ become somewhat difficult to sustain. Drawing on Simon Frith’s notion of ‘musical discourses’, and notwithstanding the problematic conceptualization of ‘value’ in Frith’s later work, I conclude by arguing that music must be understood as a ‘single field’, which has, nonetheless, been discursively shaped by the musical discourses of ‘art’, ‘folk’, and ‘pop’: an approach which suggests a more detailed textual and contextual analysis of the complex *interrelationship* of different musical forms, styles, and genres.

The previous paragraph should not be read as implying or presaging a comprehensive review of the fields of ethnomusicology, sociology, and popular music studies, however: rather, my focus will be on those approaches which raise a number of interesting issues in terms of canonicity, disciplinarity, and cultural value. In common with the examples in Chapter Three, many of the authors and theorists I cite are highly influential in their fields, and the work has been chosen for its salience and typicality.

Relativism and Social Structure

It is within the sub-discipline of ethnomusicology that the understanding of the social and contextual basis of music has been most extensively developed. In its earliest incarnations, however, as Philip Bohlman has noted, ethnomusicology perhaps found it hard to cast off the influence of its positivist predecessor ‘comparative musicology’:

The problem posed by comparative musicology that so plagued ethnomusicologists in the 1950s was one of distance, namely, the gap between... [Western art] music and the music of the Other. Comparative musicology, by its very nature, took that gap as a given, as a fixed element in a skewed cultural equation in which the canonic presence of Western art music was also a given.

(Bohlman, 1992: 120)¹

Since the 1960s, however, in a manner similar to the discipline of anthropology, ethnomusicology has moved into a ‘post-positivist’ phase, engaging in “an increasingly reflexive process of self-examination, self-criticism, and self-reflection” (Bohlman, 1992: 117). The reflexivity and self-examination which Bohlman identifies as characteristic of a ‘post-positivist’ ethnomusicology has led to a considerable broadening of the scope of the field, extending beyond the previously singular focus on ‘pre-literate’ or ‘pre-capitalist’, non-Western societies. Not only has this involved a greater emphasis on contemporary ‘vernacular’ and popular musics, but it has also suggested that the Western art music tradition is itself a valid object of ethnomusicological enquiry: in Jocelyne Guilbault’s *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies* (1993), for example, a detailed textual and contextual account of the growth and development of zouk is accompanied by a broader

¹ The term ‘ethnomusicology’ only came into common usage in 1950, coined by the Dutch scholar Jaap Kunst. See Myers (1992) for a history and overview of the field; see also Nettl and Bohlman (1991). See Blum *et al.* (1991) for a representative indication of the range of contemporary work within the discipline. See also Bergeron and Bohlman (1992).

consideration of its positioning within the international ‘world music’ market; and in Philip Bohlman’s ‘Of Yekkes and Chamber Music in Israel’, his examination of the ‘ritualization’ of classical chamber music as a form of ‘ethnic music’ among a specific ethnic group – the Israeli German-Jewish community – suggests that, contrary to traditional musicological opinion, the history of Western art music is “not a single, monolithic music history, but a multitude of music histories”, in which there has been a “constant renegotiation of the cultural values attached to absolute music” (1991a: 266-267).²

The expanded scope of contemporary ethnomusicology is perhaps best illustrated, however, by Charles Keil and Steven Feld’s *Music Grooves* (1994), a fascinating collection of essays and dialogues which moves effortlessly between analyses of Bo Diddley and Kaluli songs, Madonna and polka music, jazz and karaoke. In particular, Feld’s essay ‘Communication, Music, and Speech About Music’, represents a significant and important contribution to an understanding of the discursive social construction of musical meaning. Arguing that “musical meaning cannot be reduced to the textual level” (1994a: 84), Feld suggests that people engage in a series of “interpretive moves” when listening to music:

They *locate* and *categorize* musical experiences in relation to similar or dissimilar experiences. They *associate* musical experiences with experiences of other types. They *reflect* on how an experience relates to like or unlike imagery. And they *evaluate* the experience by relating it to their particular preferences.

(Feld, 1994a: 92; emphasis in original)

² For similarly ethnomusicological approaches to Western art music, and its institutional base, see Nettl (1995, 1992) and Kingsbury (1988). For related ethnographic approaches see Born (1995) and Cameron (1996). Born’s work in particular represents an interesting model of a theoretically informed but empirically based scholarship – I will consider Born’s understanding of musical modernism and postmodernism in the following chapter.

Feld's essay is therefore a suggestive attempt to "explicate the role of listening as symbolic engagement in order to redress the imbalance common in analytic perspectives that equate musical communication with the extent to which a listener receives a composer's or performer's intentions, or receives what a music analyst can uncover in the score" (1994a: 94). Hence, in common with much reader-response theory,³ Feld's scheme locates the listener as a key player in a socially-constituted communicative process, thereby denying reductively textualist readings of musical meaning. Given the overall structure of Feld's argument, there can be little objection to his statement that "there is no isomorphism between the density and involvement of interpretive moves and the importance, greatness, aesthetic value, or enduring quality of a piece as socially placed and understood" (1994a: 88). The statement does, however, point toward some of the potential problems in Feld's scheme, suggesting the possibility of a relativistic reading of his work: a problem which it shares with much of the related work in reader-response theory.⁴

One of the most striking aspects of employing Feld's ideas in the classroom context has been the extent to which his notion of 'interpretive moves' has been read by some students as a relativistic statement of the irreducibility of questions of personal taste and preference – a conclusion which, given the overall emphasis of Feld's work, is certainly far

³ Feld's scheme has much in common with the notion of 'interpretive communities' to be found in the work of Stanley Fish (1980, 1989), while Jonathan Culler (1981) similarly employs the concept of 'interpretive moves'. See also Eco (1979), Barthes (1968), and Foucault (1977).

⁴ See Norris (1992) for a lively and highly entertaining critique of what he regards to be the "modish ultra-relativist ideas" (1992: 65) of Fish, Rorty, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. See also Norris (1990b, 1990c).

from his intentions.⁵ But the potential problem here is that, in common with other ‘reader-centred’ theories, the location of the listener as the primary source of ‘meaning’ can tend to underplay the broader structural and institutional forces at work in the process of ‘symbolic engagement’, resulting in a reading which presents something of a challenge to a theoretical framework based on the premise of music having a “fundamentally social life” (1994a: 77) rather than one predicated simply on individualistic or subjectivist ‘preference’. As John Frow has observed – in a mordant statement which perhaps leaves itself open to creative misinterpretation by the weary student of culture, tired of the endless theoreticism of contemporary cultural discourse – “the whole vocabulary of ‘preference’... has the great theoretical advantage of being ineffable” (1995: 134-135).

Hence, notwithstanding Feld’s rejection of “psychological constants as the deep sources enabling music to express emotions” and his recognition of the “social character of the musical communication process” in which “the listener is implicated as a socially and historically situated being” (1994a: 84), what is lacking in his scheme as outlined here is an understanding of the manner in which – collectively, institutionally, politically – these individual, situated listeners are, in turn, implicated in the broader social framework. Although similarly sceptical of psychologistic theories (see Shepherd, 1991: 19-35), a similar criticism might be made of the recent work of John Shepherd and Peter Wicke (1997), in which a highly sophisticated and rigorously theorized account of the signifying potential of music – conceptualized as “a medium in sound” (1997: 95-124) – tends to

⁵ See, for example, Feld (1994b, 1994c, 1982).

emphasize, in common with Feld's scheme, a somewhat 'internalist' perspective on questions of affect and meaning in music. As Tim Wall has suggested, "The difficulty which emerges in this approach is that it abstracts music entirely into the realm of theory. An emphasis on music as culture should surely push us to discuss it more in, and as part of, the concrete cultural moments that it forms and is formed by" (2000: 124).

Furthermore, although Feld suggests that his related concept of 'boundary making' or 'framing' "involves value" (1994a: 90), it is a concept which remains under-developed and under-theorized in this article, doing little to address the problems highlighted above. Rejecting either the ineffable discourse of personal taste, or the reductionist impulse of totalising theory, Frow summarises the problem succinctly: "if the use of cultural objects is something more than a matter of individual preference... then it becomes a problem to account for the systemic formation of value without assuming criteria that hold good right across the cultural field" (1995: 134-135). I will return to these issues in Chapter Six, although at this stage it is worthwhile saying a little more about the problem of relativism.

Perhaps the most obvious question to be posed about the problem of relativism is why I would choose to characterize it as a 'problem' at all. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has noted, the charge of relativism is often nothing other than "a phantom heresy dreamt by anxious orthodoxy under siege" (1988: 151), the relativistic spectre which haunts Hugh Curtler's "canon of high culture" (1997: 158) representing only one of the most recent examples of the traditionalist fears which attend postmodernism's challenge to established cultural hierarchies and value systems. But leaving aside such siege mentality, there is little doubt that, in the hands of some revisionist scholars, the notion of relativism remains

problematic: as noted above, a relativistic reading of any reader/listener-centred theory can serve to reinstate the ineffability of personal taste as the final court of appeal in judgements of cultural value. Furthermore, as I will argue below, in the case of those who claim to argue from a relativistic position (e.g. Scott, 1990), any recourse to a discourse of value represents an internal, logical contradiction to an argument which claims to be relativist; and in the case of those who propose a system of multiple canons (e.g. Bohlman, 1992; Morgan, 1992), such arguments often ignore not only questions of power relations but also the political and institutional realities of the processes of canon formation.

For a commentator such as Derek Scott – and in sharp contrast to the traditionalism of a writer such as Hugh Curtler – cultural relativism is simply regarded as characteristic of the pluralism and diversity of contemporary life. Moreover, in his review of ‘Music and Sociology for the 1990s’, Scott suggests that it is this same relativism which not only informs but, indeed, enables his persuasive critiques of “modernist idealism” (1990: 387) and the “universalist culture” of modernism (1990: 399): “Cultural relativism will certainly not provide the key to all our problems, but it has opened the door to a method of interpretation which seems in keeping with the late twentieth century” (1990: 409).

However, notwithstanding Scott’s claim that cultural relativism represents “a recognition of cultural distinctions, not a blanket disregard of values” (1990: 400), the limitations of Scott’s faith in relativism become apparent in its acknowledged inability to address the problem of “artistic distinction” (1990: 409), and his albeit droll conclusion regarding the relativistic nature of cultural relativism remains something of a theoretical abrogation – Scott writes: “those who wish to dismiss cultural relativism should be

warned: since we hold that all values are relative and that there are no independent standards of truth, we refuse to accept that there is any way of establishing the validity of cultural relativism itself" (1990: 410). Moreover, although I find little to disagree with in Scott's critique of the 'naturalised' nature of the modernist canon (1990: 393), the force of his critique of modernism – "[it has] disintegrated into irrationality, failure, and irrelevance" (1990: 400) – seems curiously at odds with his claim to hold a relativist position which apparently recognises 'cultural distinctions', thereby begging the question of the nature of Scott's positionality and perhaps casting doubt on his conclusions. As Steven Connor has observed:

Since canonization depends not on what one says about texts, so much as where one says it from, there is no real reason why a postmodernist world of shifting or open canons need do anything to the canonizing effect of discourses within institutions, except perhaps make them ideologically more subtle and inconspicuous.

(Connor, 1987a: 188)

Hence, Scott's position can be seen to be profoundly paradoxical: while advancing a relativistic viewpoint which he refuses to defend – indeed, one which he claims, by its very nature, is beyond either defence or critique – he adopts an extremely *non*-relativistic position in his extended and vigorous critique of modernism, thereby confirming his own denial of the relativism to which he lays claim, and highlighting the logical contradictions inherent in such an approach.

Multiple Canons and Disciplinary Imperialism

A range of similar problems is encountered in the work of those theorists who argue for a system of multiple canons to replace the dominant canon of Western art music. Given the degree of reflexivity which Philip Bohlman identifies in contemporary ethnomusicology – i.e. “the field’s own self-criticism and the examination of its own values” – he argues that it would be “historically uncharacteristic – even impossible – for this reflexivity to settle upon any single canon. Instead, the field embraces what must be regarded as the anti-canon notion that many canons are not only possible but desirable, and that engaging in the persistent process of forming these many canons will only enhance their desirability” (1992: 134).

A first objection to Bohlman’s proposal might be to query the privileged position of ethnomusicology in his critique of the processes of canonization: there seems little reason to believe that it is only the protocols of ethnomusicological discourse which might offer such insights.⁶ Moreover, given the theoretical and methodological heterogeneity evident in the history of comparative musicology and ethnomusicology, the degree of retrospective coherence which Bohlman accords the discipline, accompanied by claims for the field’s prescient anticipation of postmodernist ideas, remains unconvincing: “the history of the field has a remarkable wholeness comprising an abundance of individual parts. The multitude of cultural meanings it sets out to discover and the diverse forms of musical ethnography with which it attempts to express those meanings seem to bear

⁶ See Shepherd (1998) for a critique of the “new conformity” in ethnomusicology and ethnographic studies of popular music, in which, Shepherd argues, an emphasis on “fieldwork” results in such ethnographic approaches perhaps becoming “disengaged from a politics of theory” (1998: 9).

witness to a disciplinary postmodernism that predates the fashionable invention of that concept in our own times” (1991b: 148). But Bohlman’s ‘ethnomusicological imperialism’ (to adapt Paul Crowther’s critique of Bourdieu) is even more explicit in the conclusion to his essay on the Yekkes of Israel: here, Bohlman ventures, “It may be that the truly diverse and complex levels of meaning in music history can *only* be explored fully when viewing music and history from the abundant perspectives that ethnomusicology not only tolerates, but encourages” (1991a: 267; my italics). Thus, it becomes clear that Bohlman’s approach, as Lawrence Kramer suggests, “is neither reflexive nor self-critical in its idealization of its own discipline” (1994: 135).

In the work of Robert Morgan, the call for a system of multiple canons raises a number of related, if somewhat different, problems. As noted in the previous chapter (pp. 142-151), Morgan argues that the “pluralistic cast of contemporary musical life” in the ‘post-tonal age’ has resulted in “the loss of a central musical language” (1992: 57); as a result, “when all music becomes equally acceptable, then all standards become irrelevant. We are left in a world where, since everything is valued, nothing has particular value” (1992: 60). In response to this relativistic heterogeneity, Morgan proposes a multicanonic system, although one which significantly – and in contrast to Bohlman’s ‘anti-canonic’ notion – retains the central idea of canonicity: “What is required, then, is not one amorphous, all-encompassing canon but a set of multiple canons that, taken individually, are relatively precise in delineation... While this arrangement would allow for alternative canonic models for alternative subcultures, it would preserve the core of the notion of canonic authority” (1992: 61). It soon becomes apparent, however, that what is singularly

lacking in the accounts of either Bohlman or Morgan is any indication or explication of how such multicanons would be constituted and regulated. Given the network of power relations that serves to shape the canon (as indicated in the previous chapter), it seems theoretically – and practically – naïve to imagine that a system of multiple canons might be somehow self-constituting or self-regulating. But if Bohlman simply ignores the problem, Morgan side-steps it in unconvincing fashion. Suggesting that the constitution of such a multicanonic structure is “beyond the scope” of his article, he slips instead into a clumsy relativism, arguing that the structure is “in any event, inherently resistant to precise and detailed formulation... it could not be tied down in any authoritative way” (1992: 62) – a proposition which seems somewhat at odds with his notion of the preservation of “canonic authority” (1992: 61). And at the point that Morgan muses that such a multicanon “would perhaps be the reflection more of a particular mental disposition” (1992: 62), the solid institutional realities of canon formation simply melt into air.

The problem with the evasion of such realities is that the inevitable result is a lapse into political quietism: as Frow argues, “In so far as cognitive relativism posits a plurality of equivalent spheres, it necessarily fails to conceive of inequalities and asymmetries between these spheres (and therefore leaves the existing distribution of power untouched)” (1995: 153). To compound Morgan’s problems further, Lawrence Kramer observes that a multicanon “says nothing at all about the specific status, value or history of any of the musics of which it consists”; furthermore, “membership in a multicanon does not settle the question of the relative value of the members”. In short, then, as Kramer suggests, “the multicanon does not solve a problem; it is a problem” (1994: 135-136).

Imperialism, Objectivism, and Positionality

The issues and problems highlighted above find some interesting parallels in Peter Martin's work. In his *Sounds and Society: Themes in the sociology of music* (1995), a comprehensive review and critique of sociological approaches leads Martin to argue for a 'social constructionist' understanding of music, suggesting that "the meaning of music is not inherent... it is not a direct expression of group values, but is, rather, socially constructed by particular people in particular times and places" (1995: 231). Such a view clearly has much in common with the strengths of Feld's scheme, in that it challenges purely intentionalist or reductively textualist understandings of musical meaning. But Martin's approach also shares some of the potential weaknesses of Feld's scheme, in that, while arguing for a perspective of *social* constructedness, its focus on *individual* agency produces a somewhat atomized view of the social: as Richard Middleton suggests, "the micro-social emphasis makes abstraction and generalization difficult, limiting explanatory power", resulting in an "anti-hierarchical relativism" (1996: 657). Thus, in addition to its links with Feld's scheme, Martin's thesis can be seen to share a degree of disabling relativism with the work of Bohlman and Morgan, whether in Martin's 'micro-social' emphasis on agency, or in the latter pair's somewhat implausible call for a system of multiple canons.

But considerably more problematic in Martin's work is the disciplinary 'imperialism' which it shares with Bohlman: here, the latter's exclusionary faith in the theoretical protocols of ethnomusicology is mirrored in Martin's commitment to the 'detached' nature of the sociological enterprise:

The proper role of sociological analysis is neither to attack nor to defend any particular style of musical expression. On the contrary, the only defensible position for the sociological analyst is that of the detached observer, in so far as this is possible: we must remain indifferent to the arguments of musicians, critics and so on in their various debates and disputes. It is no business of the sociologist to take sides, or to arbitrate the validity of their claims, but rather to examine the perpetual processes of conflict and negotiation in their own right.

(Martin, 1995: 12)

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of these words is that they were written as recently as 1995, since they seem to hark back to a positivist, objectivist vision of ‘detached’ sociology that belongs more to the 1950s. Furthermore, Martin’s “Olympian detachment” (Middleton, 1996: 657) is accompanied by a falsely restrictive understanding of the purview of the sociologist:

There may be those... who will judge the position to be evasive, in the sense that it appears to free the researcher from the onerous tasks of deciding what the ‘real’ nature of music is, and of evaluating music in an aesthetic sense. These are after all, as I readily acknowledge, vital matters for those who create music and those who listen to it. They are also, respectively, the concerns of the philosopher and the aesthetician, and... I make no apology for excluding such speculations from the sociological agenda.

(Martin, 1995: 13)

Given the sociological and historical agendas now evident in philosophical aesthetics (as outlined in Chapter One, pp. 22-30), Martin’s view of ‘the philosopher and the aesthetician’ appears to be based on a similarly outmoded understanding of their disciplinary remit, and only serves to indicate the increasing redundancy of a sociology which continues to hold to this objectivist model. A number of years before Martin’s text was published, Elizabeth Bird had offered an astute critique of a reductively sociological perspective, arguing that “the premises of the sociological model reflect an anxiety about

the ‘proper’ sphere of sociology which results in a restricted, and consequently impoverished, analysis of artistic or cultural forms” (1979: 47).

But my main reason for quoting Martin at length is to illustrate the disingenuousness that lies behind such claims to detached and value-free scholarship. In Martin’s text, these claims immediately follow a passage in which he bemoans the level of funding which jazz receives from the Arts Council of Great Britain, particularly when compared to the funding which goes toward ‘classical’ music, and especially when compared to their respective levels of public appeal. Given the statistical evidence, I find little to disagree with in Martin’s argument regarding arts funding. Indeed, the argument is one I have made myself, both as a professional arts manager and an academic.⁷ Rather, my disagreement is with the naivety of the position which claims that the making of such arguments is unmotivated and free of evaluative considerations, somehow predicated on the ‘detached’ analysis of a ‘neutral’ corpus of data.

In my own case, the arguments which I have made (and continue to make) on behalf of jazz funding are based on a number of factors: my personal enthusiasm and enjoyment as a listener to various forms of jazz; my involvement, as an amateur musician, in playing the music; my involvement as a reader of ‘jazz discourse’, whether journalistic or academic; my previous professional involvement with the music, as a festival director, producer, and board member; my current academic involvement with music and

⁷ Whether, for example, in my various professional roles in music promoting organisations (see my Introduction), or in my academic role as the author of the paper ‘Big is Beautiful: The Spectacularization of Culture and the Perils of Paternalism’ (Stanbridge, 1998b), which not only offers a critique of existing patterns of arts funding, but also speculates on new models for the future development of cultural policy.

contemporary culture as a ‘cultural scholar’; and finally, a factor which draws on all the preceding factors, my feeling that jazz – and much other contemporary music – is as ‘important’, as ‘valuable’, and as worthy of support as ‘classical’ music. These factors, individually and collectively, serve not simply to ‘inform’ my approach to academic scholarship, but rather to *constitute* it. Therefore, I freely admit that my choice of topics, examples, literature, and analytical techniques is highly motivated, with no pretence to ‘detachment’ or value-freedom. The fact that Martin is a practicing jazz musician as well as a sociologist perhaps tends to indicate the ‘un-detached’ nature of his own choice of example. It should be clear by this stage that I have no objection to this lack of ‘detachment’, but rather to the internal, logical contradiction that it presents to Martin’s positivist thesis.

The personal statement of motivated involvement need not imply a collapse into free-floating subjectivity, however: on the contrary, I regard the statement of ‘positionality’ as a necessary prerequisite to cultural analysis. But such statements do not imply sufficiency, and Janet Wolff has highlighted the problems inherent in the enthusiasm for the ‘autobiographical’ in some recent work in cultural theory:

self-reflection *need* not be politically radical, ethically correct or analytically illuminating. It *can* be simply self-indulgent, embarrassing and irrelevant... it can’t simply be assumed that the memoiristic provides guaranteed access to knowledge, because we still have to address the question of *typicality*. So where the personal is valuable in laying bare the structures and prejudices of academic work, it does not necessarily provide the route to ‘better’ cultural history, unless we can be persuaded that this particular experience is somehow *typical* or indicative of a moment.

(Wolff, 1993c: 120; emphasis in original)

Furthermore, although the teachings of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and deconstructionism may have suggested the adoption of an attitude of world-weary agnosticism to even the most apparently innocent of truth-claims – an attitude which, if pushed to its limits, leads to “the idea that ‘reality’ is a purely discursive phenomenon” (Norris, 1992: 16)⁸ – this need not result in a position of either radical relativist scepticism or total analytical paralysis. As Tony Bennett has argued: “It by no means follows, because we cannot establish certain propositions as absolutely true, that we have no means of establishing their provisional truth – of determining that they meet conditions which justify our understanding them as true and so as capable of serving as a basis for further thought and action” (1990: 55). Similarly, as Janet Wolff has observed:

It does not follow from the recognition that all institutions and practices are discursively mediated that we cannot identify persistent structures and their effectivities in the social world... While recognising that histories are always discursively produced (and hence partial accounts), we can still insist that some accounts are better than others.

(Wolff, 1993a: 113)

⁸ See Baudrillard (1995); see also Norris (1990c, 1990b). See Merrin (1994) for a critique of Norris’s reading of Baudrillard. It is interesting to note – contrary to the postmodernist ‘ultra-relativism’ which he ascribes to the work of Baudrillard, Lyotard, Fish, and Rorty – that Norris ‘rescues’ Derridean deconstruction in spirited fashion from such disapprobation, arguing that “deconstruction sustains the impulse of enlightenment critique even while subjecting that tradition to a radical re-assessment of its grounding concepts and categories” (1992: 17). (For a considerably less sympathetic reading of the deconstructionist project, see David Lehman’s account of ‘deconstruction and the fall of Paul de Man’ (1991). See also Jameson (1991: 219-259) for a contrasting view, emphasising the ‘misunderstanding’ and ‘misreading’ of De Man’s ‘irony’). But however sceptical one might wish to remain with regard to Derrida’s profoundly logocentric critique of logocentrism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offers a succinct characterisation of the aims of much revisionist scholarship when she describes the project of deconstruction as “a reexamination of the familiar”, challenging the manner in which “a certain view of the world, of consciousness, and of language has been accepted as the correct one” (1976: xiii).

If we are to agree with Bennett and Wolff on these points – and I feel that we must⁹ – then the question for the cultural analyst becomes that of assessing ‘typicality’ and ‘provisionality’, and of adjudicating between different and competing accounts. And at this point, the task of the self-reflexive academic begins to resemble the paradox of the ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail, “the prototype of the *vicious circle*... the height of masochism... unproductive, painful, and in the end impossible” (Hughes and Brecht, 1978: 36-37).

But fear not, dear reader, the ouroboros is also an ancient symbol of continuity and perpetual renewal, which perhaps offers a somewhat more optimistic perspective on the future of academic scholarship. I will return to these issues in Chapter Six, but I want to turn now to a range of work in popular music studies in which the discursive construction of ‘music’ proves to be as restricted and problematic as that within traditional musicology; in this case, the problem of relativism is elided by recourse to a simple reversal or inversion of established canonic hierarchies.

⁹ Up until this point, I have attempted to avoid the use of the falsely inclusive ‘we’ in my own discourse. Too often, the use of ‘we’ *presupposes* the agreement of the reader, its employment in the form of categorical modalities – ‘we must’, ‘we should’, ‘we ought’ – brooking no contradiction. As Norman Fairclough suggests, the prevalence of such modalities “supports a view of the world as transparent – as if it signalled its own meaning to any observer, without the need for interpretation and representation” (1989:129). The use of ‘we’, therefore, falsely masks the rhetorical nature of all academic scholarship; and there can be no doubt here that my own argument is a rhetorical one, and depends, for its success, on its suasive force. It is in this considerably less presumptuous sense, then, that I include the reader as part of this ‘we’, as a sceptical interlocutor, and as a part of the broader social collectivity to which my argument is addressed.

Canonic Inversion and Default Definitions: Popular Music Studies

In a manner similar to the broader field of cultural studies, the relatively new field of popular music studies is one which tends to resist disciplinary constraints, drawing variously on sociology, mass communication, musicology, and cultural studies itself. The vast majority of work in popular music studies has been rooted in the social science disciplines, however, and it is no coincidence that three relatively recent introductory texts were written by scholars in sociology, mass communication, and media studies (Longhurst, 1995; Negus, 1996; Shuker, 1994).

As these texts tend to suggest, the field of popular music studies now constitutes, if not a 'discipline' in any conventional sense, then certainly a significant intellectual trajectory, in which the overriding emphasis has been contextualist, most often focusing on social, subcultural, and institutional issues.¹⁰ Although the discipline of musicology has been the source of some critical work on popular music (e.g. Middleton, 1990; Shepherd, 1991; Brackett, 1995), many musicological studies of popular music have proven to be highly problematic, adopting – in sharp contrast to social scientific approaches – a predominantly textualist perspective which, as Don Randel has suggested, is virtually

¹⁰ Again, I offer the caveat that the discussion which follows will not claim to address the full range of work in popular music studies: my focus is particularly on the range of critical, theoretical work which finds its roots in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For examples of work addressing social and subcultural issues, see Frith (1983, 1988a), Chambers (1985), and Grossberg (1983, 1984, 1992); see also Wicke (1990). For examples of an institutional focus, see Lull (1992) and Bennett *et al.* (1993). On MTV and music video, see Frith *et al.* (1993) and Goodwin (1992). See also Frith and Goodwin (1990) and Kelly and McDonnell (1999) for wide-ranging collections of writings on rock and popular music.

inherent in the analytical tools of the discipline: tools which are fundamentally unsuited to the object of study.¹¹ Randel summarizes the nature of the problem:

Popular music forces some issues which [musicology has] paid only lip service and some others that threaten musicology's most ingrained habits. In this domain, 'the work itself' is not easily defined and certainly not in terms of musical notation. The composer/author is not always clearly identifiable and does not leave the kind of paper trail that [musicology's] tools can investigate readily. Rhythm, timbre, and performance styles, for which [musicology has] only primitive vocabularies, tend to overwhelm harmony and counterpoint as significant elements, with the result that traditional musicological discourse quickly takes on a dismissive cast with respect to popular music. Producers, engineers, and marketing people may rival [musicology's] traditional subjects – composers and performers – in their contributions to the character of 'the work itself', whatever that turns out to be. Popular music aims at specific audiences, and those audiences, both as groups and as individuals, use popular music as a means of identifying and defining themselves in society... In this way, popular music forces the study of social context at a level sometimes talked about – but rarely undertaken – with respect to Western art music. Finally, popular music foregrounds its own temporality. It claims importance only for the here and now, and thus is bound to threaten an academic community that represents and justifies itself as preserver and transmitter of enduring values.

(Randel, 1992: 15)

The inadequacy of musicology in addressing the 'texts' of popular music has been highlighted by Simon Frith: "Our reception of music, our expectations from it are not inherent in the music itself – which is one reason why so much musicological analysis of popular music misses the point: its object of study, the discursive text it constructs, is not the text to which anyone listens" (1990b: 96-97). John Shepherd elaborates the point, in a suggestive critique of musicology's formalism: "The problem... is not simply that

¹¹ For an example of this problematic approach within musicology, see Moore (1993). For a critique of such approaches – which also acknowledges the pitfalls of sociological reductionism – see Shepherd (1991: 189-212). Susan McClary and Rob Walser (1990) are similarly critical of traditional musicological approaches to the study of popular music, although their own reliance on such techniques perhaps makes their critique ring somewhat hollow: on McClary, see the previous chapter (pp.161-174); on Walser, see Chapter Seven (pp. 340-360).

musicology constitutes the wrong discourses around popular music. It is that musicology and ethnomusicology tend to construct the wrong discourses around all musics” (1993: 33). But if the textualist formalism of musicology finds its counterpart in the somewhat over-enthusiastic pursuit of ‘the study of social context’ within popular music studies, the question begged is whether the discursive construction of ‘music’ in the latter field is any more appropriate to the task.

In Chapter One (p. 46), I alluded to the definitional complexity of notions of ‘folk’, ‘mass’ and ‘popular’, suggesting that the debate need not concern us further at that stage. In order to understand some of the problems and challenges of popular music studies, however, it is necessary to return to this debate. Within the academy, attempts to define ‘popular music’, whether quantitatively or qualitatively, remain inconclusive and unsatisfactory. The inconclusive nature of this exercise is perhaps unsurprising, given the slipperiness of the notion of ‘the popular’.

In her review of the continually shifting socio-historical discourses around popular culture, Morag Shiach identifies a multiplicity of meanings and implications. The precise meaning of the somewhat troublesome notion of ‘the people’ is also far from self-evident: as Shiach suggests, “the analysis of popular culture is severely limited by the extent to which the rhetorical power of the concept of ‘the people’ far outstrips its descriptive specificity” (1989: 9). Tracing the etymological roots of the word ‘popular’ to its early usage as a legal and political term, Shiach goes on to discuss its subsequent discursive deployment:

- to indicate a particular social stratum – namely, ‘the people’ – generally conceived of negatively, as lowly or plebian;
- to refer to cultural expressions by, and of, ‘the people’;
- to refer to a particular set of cultural forms, intended for “‘ordinary people’, whether in terms of accessibility, of mode of address, or of the facts of reception” (1989: 27);
- to indicate the exclusion of these forms from the legitimating institutions and practices of the dominant culture;
- to refer to the conditions of production of these forms, again viewed in the negative as mass-produced and trivial;
- to indicate, in a quantitative sense, that such forms are ‘accepted’ or ‘favoured’ by ‘the people’.

Attempts to define ‘popular music’ have been similarly inconclusive, despite the fact that the term has been the subject of considerable debate over a number of years. Richard Middleton (1990: 4) suggests that four main categories have been evident:

1. *normative definitions*, in which ‘popular music’ is regarded as inferior, or vulgar;
2. *negative definitions*, in which, somewhat unhelpfully, ‘popular music’ is conceptualized as that which it is not: i.e. not ‘art music’, not ‘folk music’, etc;
3. *sociological definitions*, in which ‘popular music’ is regarded as that music produced by, or for, particular social groups or sub-groups;
4. *technologico-economic definitions*, which regard popular music as mass-produced, disseminated by mass media and/or in a mass market.

From these, Middleton identifies “two definitional syntheses that have a particular currency, both in everyday discourse and among scholarly approaches”: quantitative or positivist, drawing primarily on category 4, but also to some extent on categories 2 and 3 (1990: 4-5); and qualitative, representing a form of “sociological essentialism”, which draws mainly on category 3, and to some extent on categories 1 and 4 (1990: 5-6). A quantitative, positivist approach to a definition of ‘popular music’ focuses on music as commodity, with ‘popularity’ measured in terms of sales figures and chart positions.

Such definitions involve considerable conceptual problems and contradictions, since the objectification of ‘the popular’ ignores a range of significant historical, socio-cultural, and institutional factors: much ‘classical music’ is mass-produced, for example, while much ‘popular music’ is produced by small, independent labels. Furthermore, such definitional approaches are readily mobilized pejoratively, often by those observers notionally sympathetic to popular culture: thus, commercialised, trivial ‘pop music’ is contrasted negatively with authentic, genuine ‘rock music’, thereby serving simply to confound definitional difficulties further. Sociologically essentialist approaches are similarly fraught with problems, since they tend to simplify and reify both musical forms and social relations, whether from ‘above’ in terms of a critique of mass culture, or from ‘below’ in the sense of a populist reading of ‘grass-roots’ ‘authenticity’ and ‘spontaneity’ (Middleton, 1990: 6).¹² Thus, as Anne Bowler has suggested in a more general context, a reductively sociological perspective results in “mechanistic conceptions of the relationship between cultural forms and social processes” (1994: 248).

Aside from this definitional inconclusiveness, however, there is a much more significant reason to regard such debates with considerable caution: as Morag Shiach notes in her discussion of popular culture, “ideological and practical struggles over definitions... are reproduced, or refought, in language, and not solved by it”. Such struggles therefore serve to “legitimate certain meanings and to repress others” (Shiach, 1989: 19-20). This wariness of definitions is clearly expressed in an early essay by Chris

¹² See the latter half of Chapter One (pp. 45-70) for a review and critique of such approaches.

Cutler, which introduces both the collection of papers from the 1983 IASPM¹³ conference entitled *What is Popular Music?*, and his own book of essays, *File Under Popular* (1985).

Cutler argues that the term ‘popular music’ “is only useful so long as it remains vague, commonly ‘understood’, but not defined”. Thus, in response to the question ‘what is popular music?’, Cutler concludes:

It is that which we wish to study; it is the academically ignored that can be ignored no longer, for as the world changes and the old class patterns of domination come under stress; as new productive and communicative means press against old and inadequate social and political institutions, so new voices and new expressive forms emerge which alone can objectify and aestheticise the new reality – and the immanent potentiality. These new forms are emerging where the contradictions are deepest and embody a living struggle for expression locked within a dead force of oppression. Where the battlefield is, is popular music.

(Cutler, 1985: 28)

Written in 1983, when the academic study of ‘popular music’ was still in its relative infancy, these words have the bold ring of a scholastic rallying cry. More than fifteen years on, they can only be read as highly problematic, not only in their sociopolitical naïveté, but in terms of how the project of popular music studies has progressed since that time.

Although it would be unwise to over-state the influence of Cutler’s essay – and although I share his unwillingness to delimit the object of study – his proposition that this object is ‘commonly understood’ has continued to plague the development and expansion of the field, and it is clear that many popular music scholars have adopted a similar approach. In consequence, ‘popular music’ has too often come to be defined ‘by default’, as ‘that music which is studied by popular music scholars’. In practice, this has meant an overarching

¹³ The International Association for the Study of Popular Music, founded in 1981.

emphasis on rock music, as exemplified in the work of Iain Chambers, Lawrence Grossberg, and Andrew Goodwin, among many others. And although writers such as these generally eschew definitions and categorizations, it is clear that it is most often the social and technological or market-based definitions – with their concomitant shortcomings – which are implicitly invoked in their analyses. In this sense, the prevalent ‘default’ definition of ‘popular music’ can be seen to be an essentially genre-based definition, which privileges sociological, and – if only occasionally – musical, analyses of musics which have their roots firmly in rock and roll. The tendency is readily apparent, for example, in Roy Shuker’s textbook *Understanding Popular Music* (1994): notwithstanding a chapter on ‘Texts and genres’, the overall emphasis is on contextual analysis, and the terms ‘rock’ and ‘popular music’ are read as virtually synonymous. And the problem persists: commenting on the recent collection of essays in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory* (Swiss *et al.*, 1998), Tim Wall observes:

The over-emphasis on American Rock music within the collection reveals the pre-occupations of most academics in this field with [an] increasingly uninteresting genre. Although to some extent this is simply the use of the term ‘rock and roll’ as a synonym for popular music, some attempt to interrogate this fault-line in cultural discourses about popular music would not have gone amiss.

(Wall, 2000: 124-125)

Against this background it is interesting to observe that, in a recent essay which is explicitly critical of the narrow focus of much work in popular music studies (including some of his own), Lawrence Grossberg has suggested that “only slowly are scholars beginning to realize that the musics and audiences that constitute popular music are much more diverse and multiple than we have been willing to admit” (1999: 103).

Thus, if Western art music has been understood – apparently self-evidently and unproblematically – as circumscribing the scope of traditional musicological study, then this ‘default’ definition in popular music studies has similarly served to delimit the boundaries of the field. Hence, within the established disciplines of musicology and popular music studies, the student of culture will look in vain for any extensive, critical literature on musical traditions such as jazz, film music, easy listening music, the Broadway and Hollywood musicals, or American popular song.¹⁴ In addition to these neglected genres, and apart from isolated studies of minimalism and other forms of arguably ‘postmodern’ music, the mutually exclusive biases – avant-gardist and populist – of established approaches to the study of twentieth century music have resulted in certain forms being similarly overlooked, especially those new musics – often located within the world of ‘high culture’ – in which popular musics and technologies have been a significant influence (a point which I will return to briefly in my concluding chapter). The result of these disciplinary blindnesses is that although traditional musicology and popular music studies can – and do – offer detailed and sophisticated analyses – primarily and respectively textualist and contextualist – of particular musical styles and genres, both fields are virtually silent on the question of the complex *interrelationships* between different styles and genres, and especially so in terms of the mutual interdependence of ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms. In the existing literature, then, rather than examining connections

¹⁴ Although this is a situation which is beginning to change – particularly in the case of jazz (e.g. Gabbard, 1995a, 1995b) and film music (e.g. Brown, 1994; Kalinak, 1992) – the nature of the problem is evident simply in the disparity of the number of critical academic texts dealing with rock and pop music compared to these other genres.

and correlations across the entire field of musical practice, a delimited canon of ‘art music’ is *counterpoised* to a similarly impoverished canon of ‘popular music’, as if these two forms were axiomatically discrete and canonically self-evident.

Therefore, one of the initial strengths of popular music studies – namely, its focus on previously neglected musical forms – has ultimately become one of its most significant weaknesses, its populist reductionism resulting in the field becoming entrenched in a highly selective canon of popular forms and practices. The conceptualization of ‘popular music’ – and, more broadly, ‘popular culture’ – as dominant culture’s ‘other’ is one with potentially powerful implications. As John Frow has observed, “the construction of popular... culture as a distinctive theoretical object... offered the promise not only of breaking with traditional hierarchies of cultural value, but of opening up a new and fertile site of political intervention” (1992: 25): an agenda which Chris Cutler’s rallying cry had pointed toward. But arguably, popular music studies has realized little of this promise, the political imperatives which fuelled Cutler’s work – however naively – often having been lost in the uncritical populism which typifies much work in cultural studies: a tendency which Steven Connor has characterized as the “ventriloquizing co-option of the value of the popular” (1996: 24).

And in terms of the possibility of ‘breaking with traditional academic hierarchies of cultural value’, popular music studies has been similarly unsuccessful. Rather than breaking with such hierarchies, thereby challenging them and opening them up for critical interrogation, the tendency has been simply to invert or reject such hierarchies, in favour of a singular focus on ‘oppositional’ readings of ‘popular music’, most often understood in

terms of its 'default' definition. Hence, to the extent that the academic study of 'popular music' is taken to represent a challenge to traditional musicological approaches to the analysis of Western art music, the circularity of the 'default' definition reveals a significant irony in the current disciplinary positioning of popular music studies: namely, rather than challenging or engaging critically with traditional musicology, popular music studies – and, more broadly, cultural studies in general – has tended to become comfortably institutionalized, effectively marginalized, and often shorn of its political potentialities, thereby serving simply to *reconfirm* disciplinary boundaries and delimitations.

These problems suggest the need for a theoretical re-orientation of the field of popular music studies, acknowledging that the object of study cannot be considered to be 'commonly understood', and that those approaches which claim – or presuppose – any such common understanding most often employ a 'default' definition which simply serves to delimit the field by implicitly invoking a problematic range of genre-based limitations. Such a re-orientation need not imply, however, either the re-opening of the rather tired debate on 'what is popular music?' or the explicit acceptance of one particular definition. Rather, it suggests the need for 'popular music', as an object of theoretical inquiry, to be conceptualized in a manner which is considerably broader – and more broadly inclusive – than that which is currently evident in much recent work in popular music studies. To a large degree, this will involve accepting – rather than attempting to resolve – the contradictions, inconsistencies and paradoxes which are evident within the range of definitions discussed earlier.

A brief consideration of the discursive origins of the term ‘popular music’ – as opposed to ‘default’ definitions of the term – is particularly suggestive here, indicating an altogether broader range of musical styles and influences than are dreamt of in the contemporary philosophy of popular music studies. In its common understanding in the late nineteenth century, popular music encompassed operetta, choral music, dance music, and music hall: a history which has been explored in fascinating detail by Lawrence Levine (1988, 1993a) and Paul DiMaggio (1982a, 1982b), both authors also tracing the process of the ‘sacrilization’ of ‘high art’ which worked to separate such art from popular forms. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* notes that, in the nineteenth century, the repertoires of the ‘popular’ musics of the day could be seen to “overlap substantially with the main body of concert, theatre and domestic music” (Lamb and Hamm, 1980: 87), a situation which, it might be argued, has become prevalent again over the last decade, when some aspects of ‘classical’ music appears to be more ‘popular’ than ever. A few examples will serve to illustrate the point:

- The BBC’s use of Puccini’s *Nessun Dorma* to introduce the 1990 World Cup – making Pavarotti a mainstay in the singles charts for several months – and the unprecedented popularity of the Three Tenors.
- The popularity of Gregorian Chant and the music of Hildegard von Bingen, and the surprising success of Górecki’s Third Symphony in the early 1990s. Although Górecki was otherwise known as something of an avant-gardist, the Nonesuch recording of his Third Symphony was championed by the London-based radio station Classic FM, and peaked at number six on the British pop charts (alongside Michael Jackson, Madonna, and R.E.M.) in February 1993. The Nonesuch disc became the first recording of a major orchestral work by a living composer to reach the number

one position in the *Billboard* classical charts, and held that position throughout most of 1993, selling over one million copies.¹⁵

- The ubiquity of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (and the 'pop' persona of Nigel Kennedy), and the more recent acclaim for classical performers such as David Helfgott and Andrea Bocelli: Bocelli's pop-oriented CD *Sogno*, released in 1999, has sold over 10 million copies.¹⁶
- The remarkable popularity of much classically-oriented film music should also be acknowledged here: the 1997 CD of James Horner's score for *Titanic*¹⁷ has broken numerous sales records, and it was the first soundtrack to hold the number one position on the *Billboard* chart since *Chariots of Fire* in 1982. The *Titanic* soundtrack was the highest selling album of 1998, selling 9.2 million copies, twice as many as the highest selling album of the previous year: the Spice Girls' *Spice*.¹⁸ The film music of John Williams has been similarly – if not quite so spectacularly – successful.

And if the quoting of sales figures appears to indicate a lapse into a simply quantitative definition of the popular, I would argue that rather than representing a delimitation of the field, the adoption of such an inclusive approach represents exactly the opposite: namely, the re-introduction of a historically broader conceptualization of 'popular music' – or, simply, 'music' – which acknowledges a series of social, cultural, and musical continuities and specificities.¹⁹

¹⁵ On the Górecki phenomenon, see Howard (1996).

¹⁶ Polygram 547222.

¹⁷ Sony Classical CD 63213.

¹⁸ Sales figures are taken from the *Billboard* website (www.billboard.com).

¹⁹ And nor should sales figures and chart positions be taken as the definitive measure of 'popularity': for critiques of such positions, see Frith (1991: 104) and Brackett (1995: 36-37).

‘A Single Field’: Music, Musical Discourses, and Cultural Value

The work of Richard Middleton is especially important for any such broader conceptualization of ‘music’, particularly in terms of his admonition that “‘Popular music’... can only be properly viewed within the context of the *whole musical field*, within which it is an active tendency; and this field, together with its internal relationships, is never still – it is always *in movement*” (Middleton, 1990: 7; emphasis in original).

Hence, citing the definitions considered earlier, Middleton argues:

If one must assert, against the positivists, that it is impossible simply to wipe out the ideological accretions to a term like ‘popular music’, it is also necessary to insist, against the essentialists, that these accretions, and the musical practices to which they refer, cannot be simply disentangled, either from each other or from cultural relations as a whole. They always contain contradictions.

(Middleton, 1990: 7)

Similarly suggestive is the more recent work of Simon Frith, in which he proposes that “music is valued according to three types of discursive practice” (1996: 36): namely, ‘art’, ‘folk’, and ‘pop’. The discourse of ‘art’, Frith suggests, is “organized around a particular notion of musical scholarship, a particular concept of musical talent, and a particular sort of musical event, in which music’s essential value is its provision of a transcendent experience that is, on the one hand, ineffable and uplifting but, on the other, only available to those with the right sort of knowledge, the right sorts of interpretive skills” (1996: 39). The ‘folk’ discourse holds that “the value of music has to be understood in terms of cultural necessity – ideally, there is no separation of art and life. The appreciation of music is therefore tied up with an appreciation of its social function” (1996: 39-40). The folk festival embodies these folk values: it “seeks to solve the problem of musical ‘authenticity’; it offers the experience of the folk ideal, the experience of

collective, participatory music making, the chance to judge music by its direct contribution to sociability” (1996: 41).²⁰ Finally, the values of the ‘pop’ discourse are “created by and organized around the music industry, around the means and possibilities of turning sounds into commodities – musical value and monetary value are therefore equated, and the sales charts become the measure and symbol of ‘good’ pop music” (1996: 41).

The analytical strength of Frith’s simple – though far from simplistic – scheme is that it does not simply propose the ‘mapping’ of these discourses – art, folk, and pop – onto those genres with which they appear most homologous: classical music, folk music, and popular music. On the contrary, Frith suggests that:

what is involved here is not the creation and maintenance of three distinct, autonomous musical worlds but, rather, the play of three historically evolving discourses across a single field... For musicians and listeners in the bourgeois, folk, and commercial music worlds alike, value judgements reflect a path being traced with some difficulty through the confusing noise of competing discourses.
(Frith, 1996: 42)

Although not pursued by Frith himself, the three discursive practices he identifies suggest a number of defining characteristics, attributes, and modes of analysis that are peculiar to each discourse, thereby serving to clarify further the nature of each of these discourses. These characteristics are best summarized in tabular form:

²⁰ Middleton makes a similar point: “the supposed ‘purity’ of folk society... goes hand in hand with the ‘authenticity’ of the music... both are myths” (1990:139).

MUSICAL DISCOURSES

ART	FOLK	POP
high culture	traditional culture	mass culture
serious art	folk craft	popular commodity
universal	local	generic
autonomy	authenticity	commerciality
transcendence	solidarity	consumption
ineffable	material	ephemeral
disinterested	political	commodified
asocial	social	market-driven
elite	community	the masses
connoisseur	participant	fan
text	text in context	context
formalist aesthetics	ethnographic fieldwork	political economy

*Table 1: Summary of the characteristics of the musical discourses of 'art', 'folk', and 'pop'*²¹

An understanding of the characteristics of the musical discourses of art, folk, and pop therefore allows the musical analyst to 'make sense' of a range of otherwise confusing and paradoxical phenomena:

²¹ The characteristics proposed here are offered as a general or typical indication of the key tendencies within each discourse. It must be noted, however, that the three discursive practices often overlap and share common features, and the table is offered simply as a suggestive summary of their most distinctive attributes.

- The ‘artistic’ claims made on behalf of some aspects of popular music – whether by critics, fans, or the musicians themselves – from late-period Beatles to progressive rock. See, for example, Wilfred Mellers’ work on the Beatles (1973) and Bob Dylan (1984), which, Frith suggests, “describe in technical terms their subjects’ transcendent qualities” (1987: 136). In the case of progressive rock, Jon Stratton has suggested that it represented “an attempt to legitimate rock music by linking it to an image of classical music located in the lush symphonic works of nineteenth-century Romantic composers” (1989: 45).²²
- The lingering view that punk rock – notwithstanding its ‘artistic’ influences and ultimate exploitation by the music industry – represented an ‘authentic’, spontaneous musical outpouring by disenfranchised, working class youth;²³
- The aggressively ‘commercial’ marketing of ‘classical’ music, whether in the form of the ‘sexy’ cover poses of artists such as Ofra Harnoy, or the *Set Your Life to Music* series on the Philips record label: in addition to *Bach For Breakfast*, *Tchaikovsky at Tea Time*, and *Beethoven at Bedtime*, the series includes *Liszt for Lovers*, *Puccini and Pasta*, and *Mozart for Massage*.
- The rejection, in 1997, by Toronto’s CISS-FM of Garth Brooks more ‘authentic’ single *Longneck Bottle*, on the grounds that it was “too country” for a ‘new country’ music radio station.²⁴
- And the accusations of ‘selling-out’ – whether from the ‘authenticity’ of ‘folk’ and supposedly ‘non-commercial’ rock or the ‘seriousness’ of post-bop jazz – levelled against artists as diverse as Bob Dylan, R.E.M., or Miles Davis.²⁵

²² Whether progressive rock can therefore be understood as ‘art’ is another issue: one which I will return to in the following chapter, in my discussion of Andrew Goodwin’s work (pp. 261-267).

²³ For a collection of articles that challenges this ‘standard mythology of punk’, see Sabin (1999). See also my comments in the following chapter (pp. 256-257).

²⁴ See the article in the *Ottawa Citizen*: ‘Brooks moves closer to old-time country’ (Provencher, 1997).

²⁵ On the prevalence of the view that R.E.M. ‘sold-out’ after their early recordings, see Gracyk (1996: 181). I will return to the accusations of ‘selling-out’ made against Miles Davis’ fusion music of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Chapter Seven.

The charge of the ‘sell-out’ perhaps provides one of the best examples of the discursive construction of the musical field, with the competing claims of the discourses of art, folk, and pop in sharp competition. The controversy over Dylan ‘going electric’ at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 is the classic case here. Serge Denisoff reports the audience reaction to Dylan appearing on stage with an electric guitar: “The sight of the instrument infuriated the crowd. It was to them the hated emblem of rock ‘n’ roll, the tool of performers whose only aim was to make money from dumb kids. In the hands of the man who had been their god, it was the symbol of the sell-out... ‘Git rid of that guitar!’ someone screamed – and the crowd applauded” (1971: 182-183). Dylan encountered a similar intensity of ‘folk’ feeling during his first ‘electric’ tour of Britain in 1966: at the famous ‘Royal Albert Hall’ concert, Dylan’s ‘sacrilege’ prompted one audience member to yell ‘Judas!’.²⁶

Over 30 years later, Dylan was again accused of ‘selling-out’ when he authorized the use of his song *The Times They Are A-Changin’* by the Bank of Montreal in the launch of its online banking service *mbanx* in 1996.²⁷ Although there was certainly an (unintended) irony in the bank’s use of the song – given that such ‘establishment’ institutions were undoubtedly one of the targets of Dylan’s critique of contemporary values (‘The order is rapidly fadin’, and the first one now will later be last’) – many fans and critics also claimed

²⁶ The famous ‘Royal Albert Hall’ concert – as it was known for years on bootleg recordings of the concert – actually took place in Manchester’s Free Trade Hall. So prevalent was this misunderstanding that the ‘official’ 1998 release of the tapes by Columbia Records was entitled *Bob Dylan Live, 1966: The ‘Royal Albert Hall Concert’*. Dylan’s 1966 European tour is chronicled in C.P. Lee’s *Like the Night: Bob Dylan and the Road to the Manchester Free Trade Hall* (1998). Lest I descend into the popular music equivalent of train-spotting, I will say no more on this matter.

²⁷ The song originally appeared on Dylan’s 1964 album of the same name (Columbia CK-8905).

to be outraged by the crass ‘co-option’ and ‘commercialization’ of this canonical 1960s statement of generational revolt, apparently failing to notice its cultural status as an already commodified classic. Some observers had little time for such romanticism, however: writing in *Marketing* magazine, Justin Smallbridge suggested that the “howl of betrayal from the refugees of the Love Generation... prove[s] that a position in middle management is not at odds with purity, grooviness and freaky naiveté” (1996); a similar perspective was evident in Charles Gordon’s article in *Macleans*: “Now...[baby boomers] are all grown up and somebody is claiming on their behalf that a bank has betrayed them by using a song in a commercial. Get real, yuppies. This is the Nineties, and you helped make them” (1996: 13).

A similar incongruity was apparent during Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign in 1984. At a campaign stop in New Jersey, Reagan cited Bruce Springsteen’s song *Born in the USA*²⁸ as a ‘message of hope’, thereby not only missing the irony inherent in Springsteen’s apparently ‘patriotic’ rallying cry but similarly failing to grasp the bitterness of the song’s social critique (‘Got in a little hometown jam so they put a rifle in my hand; Sent me off to a foreign land to go and kill the yellow man’; ‘Had a brother at Khe Sahn fighting off the Viet Cong; They’re still there he’s all gone’). In a doubling of the irony attached to this example – and offering a sobering illustration not only of the marketing imperatives which lie behind much popular music but also of the rhetorical ambivalence which informed both Springsteen’s music and his critique of American values – Steven

²⁸ Featured on the 1984 album of the same name (Columbia 38653).

Connor has noted the subsequent promotion of this song “with all irony purged. The album of the same title is marketed with the Stars and Stripes emblazoned across its cover, a motif repeated in the publicity for Springsteen’s ‘Born in the USA’ world tour of 1985-86. Doubt and disaffection are effaced; the song has become a bullying motto for the cultural imperialism of American rock music” (1987b: 129). These examples perhaps serve to confirm Theodore Gracyk’s observation that “the distinction between more and less authentic rock has attained the status of commonsense truth for rock fans and musicians... But... the identification of a more authentic mode of expression with the noncommercial makes even less sense today that it did in the nineteenth century” (1996: 183).

Hence, contrary to much work in popular music studies, with its disabling ‘default’ definition of ‘popular music’, Frith’s scheme offers the opportunity of interrogating the complex relationships between different forms and genres – ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘authentic’ and ‘commercial’ – focusing on the discursive claims which are made on their behalf. As Frith argues: “It seems unduly restrictive... to treat the classical, folk, and pop music worlds (as most analysts have) as if they were distinct objects of study; it is more fruitful... to treat them comparatively, tracing contrasting solutions to shared problems” (1996: 43). And he concludes:

The issues concerned – the position of the artist in the marketplace, the relations of class and community, the tensions between technology and tradition, the shaping of race and nation, the distinction of the public and the private – are not confined to any one social group, to any one musical practice. Whether they become pressing or not depends on circumstances, not ideology.

(Frith, 1996: 46)

Frith’s notion of musical discourses therefore represents a valuable contribution to an understanding of music as a ‘single field’, highlighting the discursive construction of

varying conceptualizations of ‘music’, and their concomitant attributes. Notwithstanding its analytical usefulness, however, the concept of musical discourses has perhaps remained under-utilized in Frith’s own later work. As noted in Chapter One (p. 62), Frith’s theoretical and methodological approach has shifted markedly over the years, from an early populism, through a sociological focus on political economy, to an interest in questions of value and evaluation.²⁹ But the academic journey has not been without its problems, and especially so in the case of Frith’s more recent work on value in popular music. Hence, despite the usefulness of his model for understanding the play of musical discourses across a single musical field, Frith’s claim for the aesthetic effects of literature and music – that they “subvert all sociological assumptions about cultural position and cultural feeling” (1996: 274) – represents, as Michael Pickering and Keith Negus have observed, an “unwarrantable metaphysical leap” (1998: 125), particularly in light of Frith’s otherwise sociologically-grounded argument. And in his reply to Pickering and Negus, Frith perhaps appears to have painted himself into a theoretical corner.

Suggesting that their essay is helpful in clarifying “the gap between the sensual experience of music and the discursive means by which it becomes pressed into experience”, Frith goes on to argue that if popular music studies “have mostly avoided psychoanalysis... they haven’t avoided the recurring reduction of musical experience to the social characteristics of the audience” (1998: 128) – i.e. the ‘essentialism’ of Middleton’s ‘sociological’ definition of popular music. While I share Frith’s aversion to

²⁹ Pickering and Negus (1998) offer a brief summary of these analytical shifts in Frith’s work.

such sociological reductionism, I find his subsequent conclusion considerably more problematic, especially when he suggests that such reductionism simply confirms “how much we need a psychological (or phenomenological) approach to culture which starts precisely from experience... rather than discourse” (1998: 128). Not only does this conclusion ignore the penetrating critique of psychologistic and psychoanalytic theories of music offered by Shepherd (1991) and Shepherd and Wicke (1997), but it also ignores the ‘performative semiological model’ developed by these same writers (1997).

Notwithstanding my earlier comments on the somewhat ‘asocial’ character of this model as it currently stands, it is one which – given his call for an approach which ‘starts precisely from experience’ – might prove useful in the pursuit of Frith’s ends, especially if incorporated in a ‘thicker’ theoretical framework which adequately locates individual experience in the broader social context: a point similar to the one I made on Feld’s notion of ‘interpretive moves’.

More significantly, however, Frith’s proposal appears to imply that the question of value necessitates a move *away* from the social, toward an understanding of individual ‘psycho-sensual’ experience, thereby invoking the relativism and political quietism inherent in several of the approaches surveyed above. Suggesting that “people’s individual tastes... are a necessary part of academic analysis”, Frith asks: “Does this mean, in the end, that the value of popular music is simply a matter of personal preference?” (1996: 276). His answer remains ambiguous and inconclusive, prompting Pickering and Negus to note that Frith “appears to have suddenly lost sight of the peculiar complexities and contradictions which the sociology of culture attempts to grapple with. Does it, then, all

come down to the question of which subjective choices offer us the ‘transcendence’ we desire?” (Pickering and Negus, 1998: 125). Notwithstanding Frith’s earlier claim that “in pop, transcendence marks not music’s freedom from social forces but its patterning by them” (1987: 144), his closing comments do little to ameliorate the problem: “For me, to describe culture properly is to make it more mysterious (not less). Understanding is not necessarily the goal. Imagination is just as important” (1998: 128). Thus, confronted with the problem of ‘value’, Frith’s response is to defer to the ‘mysteriousness’ of personal psychology and individual experience in the face of the ineffability of ‘the aesthetic’: a variation on a rhetorical theme which – as noted in the previous chapter (pp. 157-159) – has been something of a standard trope in traditional musicology, and one which offers little insight into the social and institutional realities of the canon, and the cultural evaluations encoded therein. These are issues I will return to in Chapter Six.

In this chapter, I have suggested that a review of a range of work in ethnomusicology, sociology, and popular music studies reveals some problematic claims for canonic relativism and multicanonic systems, often accompanied by an untenable disciplinary imperialism. Furthermore, I have suggested that this work exhibits a number of analytical weaknesses which it shares with some of the literature in the new musicology surveyed in the previous chapter, including an absence of analytical self-reflexivity, a tendency toward canonic inversion, and a reductive privileging of either text or context. But my review over the course of the last two chapters has also highlighted the strengths of those approaches which make no claims to ‘absolute truth’ on behalf of either their analytical

methods or their evaluative judgements, suggesting instead the possibility of a critical ‘eclecticism of theory’: as Janet Wolff has argued, some accounts are, indeed, better than others. Such an approach – coupled with an understanding of music as a ‘single field’ which has, nevertheless, been discursively shaped – therefore allows access to the complex interrelationship and mutuality not only of texts and contexts but also of those cultural forms which, because of their discursive construction (due, in part, to the analytical weaknesses highlighted above), have tended to be posited and analysed separately: a bifurcation which has most commonly expressed itself in terms of the discursive rift between the mutually exclusive categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’. Given the claims of much postmodern theory to have effected a *rapprochement* between these categories, it is to that body of work, and its relationship to music, to which I will turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Conceptual Chaos: Music and Postmodern Theory

“Post-modernism re-embraces an artistic friend from the past and gives it new life... [it’s] a kind of renegade conservatism.”
David Del Tredici (contemporary composer),
quoted in Dufallo (1989: 165)

In Chapter Two, I noted that it has become something of a theoretical orthodoxy – whether from a pessimist or populist perspective – to characterize postmodern cultural forms and practices in terms of the blurring of the boundaries between high and popular culture. It would seem likely, then, that such a body of literature might offer the theoretical protocols with which to analyse the interrelationships between the contrasting discursive practices which, as suggested in the previous chapter, have served to shape the musical field. Furthermore, given the postmodern refusal of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy, and the concomitant reconciliation with a more socially-grounded popular culture, it would appear that this same literature might hold the prospect of allowing an analysis of the complex interdependence of texts and contexts. In this chapter, however, I will suggest that a review of the relationship between musicology, popular music studies, and postmodern theory offers no such cause for academic optimism. Rather, the relationship is one in which the confusing – and often confused – spectrum of approaches which characterizes the broader postmodern debate is simply replicated, revealing a similar degree of conceptual chaos, a similar polarization of pessimist and populist positions, and a similar failure to address the specificities of postmodern cultural forms and practices. My comments here are directed primarily at the debate over the categorization and analysis of

postmodern musical forms and practices, and the evaluative claims which follow from such categorizations and analyses. This should not be confused with the more general influence which postmodern thought has had on the discipline of musicology, as evident, for example, in the work of Lawrence Kramer and Gary Tomlinson (see Chapters Three and Seven). In this latter case, the impact of postmodernism has been manifested more in questions of theory and methodology than in those of taxonomy. In the review that follows, then, I will focus particularly on a range of literature in musicology and popular music studies that aims either to identify examples of musical postmodernism, or to illustrate the claims of postmodern theory in musical terms.

Modernist Nostalgia, Postmodern Orthodoxy

In sharp contrast to the often lively debate between postmodernism and a wide range of other contemporary cultural forms – especially literature, architecture, and the visual arts – the relationship between music and postmodern theory has been highly sporadic and seldom less than problematic. To cite a few examples: in Hans Bertens' otherwise comprehensive study, *The Idea of the Postmodern* (1995), there is virtually no discussion of music; in the collection *Postmodernism - Philosophy and the Arts* (Silverman, 1990), the influence of postmodernism is discussed in terms of nine different 'sites' – architecture, painting, literature, theatre, photography, film, television, dance, and fashion – from which music is excluded; and in the two-volume, 1200-page Routledge *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought*, published in 1992 and including 57 articles on all aspects of music theory and practice, the concept of postmodernism does not even appear in the index (Paynter, 1992).

In its most unsophisticated theoretical incarnation, for some observers the concept of ‘postmodernism’ simply serves as a periodizing synonym for contemporary culture, with all its ‘consumerism’ and ‘declining morals’. At this traditionalist end of the ideological spectrum stands the philosopher Roger Scruton, with his recent book *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997). Displaying a chauvinist elitism and cultural pessimism which makes Hugh Curtler look like a model of tolerance and moderation,¹ Scruton advances a *reductio ad absurdum* thesis which appears to belong to a bygone era: one which is all the more surprising given that his text was only published in 1997. Aside from his views on postmodernism, Scruton’s work represents an outstanding example of the false universality and mystified aestheticism identified in Chapter Three. The reader is given fair warning of the latter tendency in Scruton’s preface, where he announces that “the ordering of sound as music is an ordering of the soul” (1997: ix); but in typical fashion, as Gary Tomlinson has suggested of such analyses, Scruton’s ‘aesthetic’ remains unexamined, its “quasi-religious transcendence sublimated in technical accounts of musical process” (1993a: 19).

The false universality of Scruton’s project – exemplified in his treatment of non-Western musics – similarly confirms Citron’s observations on the traditional canon: “as the assumed repertoire, Western art music does not have to identify itself as such” (Citron, 1993a: 26). Thus, in a text of over 500 pages, Indian, Arabian, Chinese, Balinese, Japanese, and African musics are dispatched in no more than 10 pages, and then only

¹ See Chapter Two (pp. 79-80) for a brief discussion of Curtler’s work.

in passing. And jazz fares no better: “many jazz improvisations”, Scruton assures us, are characterized by “an undemanding vacuousness” (1997: 184), although he fails to offer any examples. And when Scruton describes the harmonies of the pianist Art Tatum in terms of their “lazy consonance and delicious relaxation” (1997: 67), and applauds Louis Armstrong for his “cheerful and life-enhancing sound” (1997: 480) – two of only a handful of references to jazz in the text – all the ‘laziness’ and ‘cheerfulness’ imputed here carry the faint whiff of an ugly stereotype.²

But it is in his treatment of postmodernism that Scruton shows his true colours. Having summarily dismissed the artistic potential of postmodernism – “the faint sarcastic smile of the postmodernist is... incompatible with greatness (1997: 492-493) – Scruton’s text reveals an easy slippage between this understanding of ‘postmodernism’ as an ironic artistic discourse and the strictly periodizing concepts of “the ‘postmodern’ age”, “postmodern society” (1997: 496), and “the postmodern world” (1997: 505). This slippage allows Scruton, in turn, to dismiss wholesale the contemporary “consumer culture” (1997: 496) which he so abhors.³ In what follows, popular music – tellingly indexed simply as ‘pop’ – is subjected to a stream of invective which is difficult even to begin to summarize. Not since Adorno, perhaps, has popular music – and its audience –

² See Taylor (1978) for a similarly problematic treatment of jazz, based on an alternative set of stereotypes: “[the] element which...is... most relevant to understanding the early significance of jazz... is the general possibility of *debauchery*” (1978: 98; emphasis in original). See also Bogle (1994) for an analysis of the range of black stereotypes in American films – stereotypes that have been more broadly prevalent beyond the world of cinema.

³ Theodore Gracyk similarly notes this theoretical slippage at work: “Where genuine understanding of music involves aesthetic judgement, Scruton offers sociological criticism of popular forms as a mirror of the response of the rock audience” (1999: 208).

been the target of such elitist anger and resentment:⁴ “the music of mass culture is saturated with banality” (1997: 480); “If the music sounds ugly, this is of no significance: it is not there to be listened to, but to take revenge on the world” (1997: 500); “music is a character-forming force, and the decline of musical taste is a decline in morals. The *anomie* of Nirvana and REM is the *anomie* of its listeners” (1997: 502); “Much modern pop is cheerless, and meant to be cheerless. But much of it is also a kind of *negation* of music, a dehumanizing of the spirit of song” (1997: 504; emphasis in original); “In the condition in which we find ourselves, it is inevitable that popular music should be both sentimental and idolatrous” (1997: 506).⁵ In common with Simon Frith (who was commenting on an earlier work by Scruton), I too find myself “bristling at... Scruton’s obvious ignorance of the music mentioned. He presumes that a high theorist can talk about the meaning of low music without listening to it, without liking it, without needing to know anything about it at all” (1996: 252-253).

It is not only popular music that bears the brunt of Scruton’s scorn, however. For example, in sharp contrast to the “utter simplicity” (1997: 389) of Schubert’s song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin* – Scruton assures us that “there is a rightness in this which opens the possibilities of feeling” (1997: 390)⁶ – the neo-tonal simplicity of Górecki’s Third Symphony is chastised for its “thinness” and “morose spirituality” (1997: 507). (One

⁴ See, for example, Adorno (1941; 1978).

⁵ For a sharply contrasting approach to the aesthetics of popular music, see Gracyk (1999). See also Davies (1999).

⁶ Scruton also writes of the “exquisite simplicity” (1997: 184) of Schubert’s piano waltzes. I will return to the problematic claim for Schubert’s “unmediated communicative power” (Gramit, 1998b: 180) in the following chapter (pp. 298-299).

cannot help but think that, for Scruton, the ‘success’ of Górecki’s Third Symphony – see Chapter Four (pp. 215-216) – has irredeemably tainted it with ‘consumerism’. And there’s more: in addition to the ‘denatured’ products of the ‘postmodern world’ (1997: 505), Scruton’s sweeping, scatter-gun critique also embraces the “state-funded priesthood” of the modernist avant-garde (1997: 506) and the “helpless nostalgia” of Vaughan Williams and Havergal Brian (1997: 492-493). Hence, in this arch-traditionalist jeremiad, Scruton sits Canute-like on the shores of contemporary culture, attempting not only to hold back the inexorable waves of ‘postmodern’ popular music and ‘new tonality’, but also to stem the ebb tides of avant-garde modernism and the English pastoralists, finally finding refuge in a tiny pool of hallowed ‘classical’ composers – Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert among them. Ironically then, for all Scruton’s lamentations of the cultural impoverishment of the ‘postmodern world’, it soon becomes clear that it is his own world which is impoverished. But unlike Neil Postman, Scruton has no need to ‘build a bridge’ to the 18th Century: it appears that he already lives there.

If Scruton’s work represents an extreme position in the postmodern debate, his reductionist, periodizing thesis at least has the virtue of consistency: a virtue which much other theorizing of musical postmodernism appears happy to forego. In the case of much musicological discourse, when the relationship between music and postmodernism *has* been discussed, the trend has been towards a similarly periodizing – but often highly confusing – conflation of postmodernism with the post-war avant-garde and experimental music traditions, most often simply ignoring jazz and popular musics. The essays by Jost

Hermant (1991) and Charles Boone (1991) in the collection *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy* (Hoesterey, 1991) are indicative of this trend: both offer lists of potential musical postmodernists yet fail to analyse the relationship between the music and the concept in any detail. Moreover, Boone's title – 'Has Modernist Music Lost Power?' – betrays the modernist nostalgia that lies behind many such taxonomic encounters. Minimalism is the form most often identified with musical postmodernism, as exemplified in Robert Carl's essay 'The Politics of Definition in New Music' (1989), although his subsequent article – which claims to be 'A Postmodern Music Gallery' (1990) – succumbs to the 'list' syndrome: in a veritable rag-bag of taxonomic eclecticism, Carl includes composers as diverse as Brian Ferneyhough, John Adams, Pauline Oliveros, and Ben Johnston. Somewhat more helpful is Gary Clarke's (1985) contribution to *The Postmodern Moment: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts* (Trachtenberg, 1985), which similarly notes the centrality of minimalism to an understanding of musical postmodernism, citing the work of Philip Glass and Steve Reich among others. In addition to minimalism, Clarke also identifies the use of quotation and the return to tonality in the work of composers such as David Del Tredici and the performance art of Laurie Anderson as typical of postmodernism.⁷

In sharp contrast, however, in Christopher Butler's review of 'Postmodernism and Innovation' (1980), he simply disregards minimalism, neo-tonality, and performance art, as well as jazz and popular music, discussing postmodernism almost solely in terms of the

⁷ On Anderson and postmodernism, see also Prinz (1989) and McClary (1991e). On Anderson's use of technology and her relationship with popular music, see Théberge (1993: 174-178).

European avant-garde, citing Messiaen, Boulez, and Stockhausen, with Cage as the lone American experimentalist. Given the clearly circumscribed field of enquiry indicated in the title of Robin Hartwell's essay 'Postmodernism and art music' (1993) – a relatively rare event in the universalizing world of musicological discourse – one would not expect to find any discussion of popular musics. But Hartwell similarly eschews – and, indeed, fails to discuss – minimalism and the neo-tonality of Del Tredici, Corigliano, Rochberg, and others, insisting that "postmodernism is best seen as part of the modernist line, and not as a capitulation of modernism to a version of Classicism" (1993: 28). Again, the notion of 'capitulation' betrays Hartwell's inherently modernist agenda, and he concludes that "the best contender for the position of post-modernist is Alfred Schnittke" (1993: 47), although there is arguably little to distinguish Schnittke's penchant for quotation and pastiche from that of the American neo-tonalists.

Paul Griffiths' *Modern Music and After* (1995) does little to resolve this confusion. Suggesting no explicit links between minimalism and postmodernism, nor citing any of the neo-tonalists, Griffiths tends to employ the term in a simple periodizing fashion, characterizing Brian Ferneyhough, for example, as a "postmodern modernist" (1995: 264): here, the adjective 'postmodern' has little explanatory power beyond connoting 'contemporary'. Furthermore, Ferneyhough's 'new complexity' is surely better understood as the prime representative of an avant-garde 'ultra-modernism' within contemporary music.⁸ And, in a manner similar to Boone and Hartwell, Griffiths reveals

⁸ Jonathan Kramer, for example, includes Ferneyhough as part of the "healthy number of modernists composing today" (1995: 23).

a modernist nostalgia for the avant-garde when he laments the postmodern use of quotation and re-appropriation: “A freedom only to quote and re-enact is a limp sort of freedom” (1995: 265).

Typically, of course, popular music has no place in Griffiths’ history of ‘modern music’, even in its role as influence and inspiration. Hence, for example, despite the prominence of Boulez in Griffiths’ text, there is no mention of Frank Zappa’s compositional work, of which Boulez was a great supporter; nor is there any mention of John Zorn, whose work has been championed by the Kronos Quartet, alongside many of the composers discussed by Griffiths; and nor do any of a more recent generation of composers, many of them heavily influenced by popular music – Paul Dresher, Scott Johnson, John Harbison, Michael Gordon, Dave Laing, Michael Torke, among others – warrant either inclusion or extended discussion. A similar – if more explicit – perspective is evident in Nicholas Zurbrugg’s *The Parameters of Postmodernism*. As noted in Chapter One (p. 52), in Zurbrugg’s text a neo-modernist valorization of the avant-garde and the experimental is accompanied by an explicit animosity towards popular culture. Thus, while invoking a now-familiar litany of postmodern musical suspects – Cage, Glass, Reich, Anderson, Ashley – Zurbrugg also cautions against confusing “the stupidities and superficialities of mass culture with the subtleties and substance of... the postmodern avant-garde” (1993: 131). Not much ‘blurring of boundaries’ here.

A similarly stereotypical view of popular music is suggested in Alastair Williams’ *New Music and the Claims of Modernity*: “popular music depends less on the subjectivity encoded in the material for its validity than on the subjectivity encountered in performance

and reception' (1997: 123). Here, Williams simply perpetuates the myth of artistic intentionality and 'inherent' value in the works of the classical and post-classical traditions – 'the subjectivity encoded in the material' – while popular music is afforded only 'social' value, in that the music itself is entirely secondary to 'performance and reception'. Similarly tiresome claims – invoking a crude, periodizing homology – are made on behalf of the "hedonistic feel" of a 'postmodern' minimalism:

Indeed, minimalism does bear striking parallels with the image-dominated aspects of contemporary life: the ceaseless activity of self-referential ostinati suggests a surface with no depth, an endless circulation of signifiers, and Reich's and Glass's techniques resemble information banks that disgorge huge quantities of repetitive data, criss-crossing to form new permutations within the identity of a self-contained system.
(Williams, 1997: 126)

Here, the theoretical orthodoxy – and cultural pessimism – of Jameson and Lyotard is simply laid, template-like, over contemporary music. Hence, for Williams, Schnittke's work – similarly identified as postmodern – resembles "a confused image bank, blending irreverence and nostalgia as it rifles through music's warehouse": a prospect which, to me, sounds potentially extremely interesting. But Williams has an alternative agenda: "It is akin to a form of surrealism without the unconscious – to borrow Jameson's term – reducing historical depth structure to surface configurations of the present" (1997: 128). So here, once again, with a helping hand from Jameson – and in sharp contrast to the 'historical depth structure' of modernism – we are offered a periodizing understanding of postmodernism as 'depthless', 'trivial', 'affectless'. And the "trinity of godly minimalists" – Henryk Górecki, Arvo Pärt, John Tavener – fare no better at Williams' hands than at Scruton's: "At best such experiences unlock inner nature, at worst they warm up and spiritualise reified social relations" (1997: 129).

Avoiding the periodizing and often ideologically-motivated claims identified in much of the work surveyed above, in his essay ‘Beyond Unity: Toward an Understanding of Musical Postmodernism’ (1995), Jonathan Kramer proposes a considerably more serviceable understanding of postmodernism as an artistic discourse which challenges the modernist value of ‘unity’: a value which, Kramer suggests, is virtually inscribed in the tools of musicological research. This is an understanding which offers some helpful clarifications, allowing Kramer not only to identify Cage’s work as primarily “late modern” (1995: 31),⁹ but also – and contrary to the more common view noted above – to distinguish between different forms of minimalism, arguing that much early work in minimalism displays a modernist sensibility, in terms of its structural unity, its organicism, and its urge “to define a new kind of music” (1995: 25).

It is interesting to note that Dominique Richard offers a similarly helpful clarification with regard to computer music: in her article ‘Computer Music and the Post-modern: A Case of Schizophrenia’, although she acknowledges that much computer music could be arguably categorized as postmodern in terms of its use of pastiche and its employment of a technology which it shares with much popular music, she concludes that computer music’s discourse of “progress” represents a “modernist ideology” and that the form is more

⁹ It is worthwhile recalling, however, that Eco suggests that “the *early* Cage is modern” (1985a: 67; my italics). Hence, although Kramer may be correct in categorizing the majority of Cage’s work as modernist in character, as Eco’s comment implies, some of the later work arguably falls under the rubric of postmodernism. Having reached the conceptualist limit-point of 4’33” – a philosophical modernist milestone, but perhaps something of an artistic *impasse* – Cage turns, for example, to the radical juxtaposition of ‘found sounds’ and traditional Irish music in his *Roaratorio* (1979) and to the ironic operatic parody of his *Europas* series (1985-91). Cage therefore provides an interesting example of Eco’s pragmatic proposition that “in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely” (1985a: 68).

appropriately recognized as a “fundamental continuity of the modernist spirit” (1994: 31). Paul Théberge makes a similar point, arguing that “the high-tech fringe of art music – the computer music researcher and composer – tends to be still largely modernist in character, still concerned with notions of progress and exhibiting a hostile attitude towards mass culture and a lack of interest in the processes of musical reception by the audience” (1993: 180).

More problematic in Kramer’s article, however, is his claim that “the postmodernist does not feel the need to retreat behind a mask of ironic commentary, of art as critique. Thus postmodern music often eschews irony... Modernist pastiche acknowledges history: the past is reinterpreted in the present. But postmodern pastiche is anti-historical: the past coexists with, and indeed is indistinguishable from, the present” (1995: 26). Here, Kramer seems trapped in a strictly modernist understanding of irony and pastiche that appears to owe much to Jameson’s notion of ‘blank parody’. Indeed, in support of his argument, Kramer quotes Madan Sarup who, in fact, is simply paraphrasing Jameson: “In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible all that is left... is pastiche” (1995: 27). And this perhaps explains Kramer’s somewhat contradictory comment – given his critique of traditional musicology – that “the postmodern aesthetic” encourages us to conceive of “the text – the music – as autonomous” (1995: 14). Not only does this represent a somewhat regressive return to the ideology of aesthetic autonomy, but it also misreads – and greatly underestimates – the potential of postmodern irony and parody: a point which I will return to in more detail in the following chapter. But at this stage I simply want to note the manner in which a Jamesonian orthodoxy can serve to inhibit the conclusions of

an interpretation of postmodernism which is ostensibly more ‘optimistic’ than Jameson’s own.

A similarly problematic theoretical orthodoxy is evident in Michael Chanan’s *Musica Practica: The Social Practice of Western Music from Gregorian Chant to Postmodernism* (1994). Relying heavily on a specifically Jamesonian understanding of the concept, the relationship between postmodernism and contemporary music remains largely uninterrogated,¹⁰ while Chanan offers the reader a typically gloomy pronouncement on cultural commodification, worthy of Jameson himself: “The result is the electronification, integration, and now the computerization of the production, processing and distribution of information, entertainment, education, and cultural activity in general, which washes daily over the atomized consumer from cradle unto grave” (1994: 282). The patronising image of the passive, uncritical ‘atomized consumer’ is typical of such theorizing – an image which Lawrence Grossberg has subjected to mordant and convincing critique:

it is the critic’s taken-for-granted understanding of political and economic structures, and of the historical narrative, that defines the ideology and politics of postmodern practices... For Jameson, for example, we need new ‘maps’ to enable us to understand the organization of late capitalism. The masses, on the other hand, remain mute and passive, cultural dopes who are deceived by the dominant ideologies, and who respond to the leadership of the critic as the only one capable of understanding ideology and constituting the proper site and form of resistance. At best, the masses succeed in representing their inability to respond. But without the critic, they are unable even to hear their own cries of hopelessness. Hopeless they are and hopeless

¹⁰ Although less informed by theoretical orthodoxy – confessing simply to a “general sense of dismay at much of the circularity surrounding the concept of Postmodernism” (1994: 8) – Glenn Watkins’ *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (1994) likewise fails to interrogate the relationship between music and postmodernism in detail. It should be noted, however, that the considerable scope of Watkins’ study – encompassing Western art music, jazz, popular music, and contemporary art – stands in sharp contrast to his earlier *Soundings* (1988) – see Chapter Three (pp.137-140).

they shall remain, presumably until someone else provides them with the necessary maps of intelligibility and critical models of resistance.

(Grossberg, 1988a: 174)

An immediate point of clarification is required here, however: in citing Grossberg – a theorist often identified with the problematic cultural studies populism identified in Chapter One (pp. 57-70)¹¹ – I am not advocating the familiar populist trope of ‘micro-political’ resistance and subversion. On the contrary, as I will argue in more detail in the following chapter, a populist position often simply replicates the conservative positioning of ‘the masses’ as ‘cultural dopes’.¹² Rather, it is to suggest, given the interpretive skills required in the ‘decoding’ of postmodern cultural forms – again, a point I will return to in the following chapter – that the positing of the contemporary audience as passive, atomized consumers is simply untenable, and a gross misrepresentation of the ‘cultural work’ involved in our complex relationships with art and culture.

Anti-Modernist/Quasi-Modernist Populism

Contrary to the primarily modernist perspectives evident above – whether motivated explicitly by a form of modernist ideology or sometimes implicitly by the importunings of theoretical orthodoxy – in her essay ‘Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition’ (1989), Susan McClary adopts an aggressively populist orientation, offering

¹¹ It is worthwhile observing, however, that Grossberg’s position has shifted considerably over the years – as noted in the previous chapter (p. 211), in a recent essay Grossberg is critical of much work in popular music studies: “I do not think we have gained a significantly better understanding of how popular music works, nor have we developed a vocabulary in which to argue about the differences between music, or between critical interpretations and analyses... the academic disciplinization of popular-music studies... has taken on such a force of its own that it has now become a serious stumbling block” (1999: 99-100).

¹² For a similar critique of academic populism, see Morris (1988a).

a fierce diatribe against avant-garde modernism. In common with many other approaches, McClary suggests an understanding of musical postmodernism which defines the minimalism, performance art, and neo-tonality of Glass, Anderson, and Del Tredici in opposition to the modernist practices of Schoenberg, Boulez, and Babbitt. But this is no mere taxonomic exercise on McClary's part: her primary target is Milton Babbitt, and the discourses of autonomy and prestige that accompany the modernist avant-garde. In his infamous article 'Who Cares if You Listen', published in 1958,¹³ Babbitt advocated the contemporary composer's withdrawal from a public world of "unprofessional compromise and exhibitionism" (1958: 126) to the sanctity of the university. Although he acknowledged that the failure to support "complex" and "difficult" music (1958: 126) would have little effect on "the whistling repertory of the man in the street" or the "conspicuous consumer of musical culture", he argued that without such support "music will cease to evolve, and, in that important sense, will cease to live" (1958: 127).

In response to Babbitt's "ivory tower" rhetoric, McClary poses the question "Who cares if you compose?", suggesting that "the claim that one's music is valuable precisely because of its autonomy from social function is itself precariously dependent on particular social definitions of prestige" (1989: 62-63), and arguing that "all music – even that of the most austere avant-garde composer – is inevitably tied to the social conditions within

¹³ It is worthwhile noting that the original title of Babbitt's essay was 'The Composer as Specialist', and that the more provocative re-naming was the work of the editors of *High Fidelity Magazine*, as indicated by the tone of their brief introduction: "Wherein a contemporary composer, who is also a trained mathematician, puts it to us straight" (Babbitt, 1958: 38). I tend to agree with McClary, however, that the editors' title appears to be a relatively accurate statement of Babbitt's position. The composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim – a student of Babbitt's at Princeton in the 1950s – has characterized Babbitt as "the avant-gardist's avant-gardist" (Sondheim and Lipton, 1997: 264).

which it is produced, transmitted, preserved, or forgotten” (1989: 76). Furthermore, McClary observes that “ironically, the ‘avant-garde’ no longer identifies with the new: institutionalized as it is in the universities, it has become the conservative stronghold of the current music scene” (1989: 67).¹⁴ Here, McClary is perhaps at her most persuasive and convincing, and the force of her populist critique of the “terminal prestige” (1989: 66) of the modernist avant-garde represents a welcome rejoinder to the nostalgic modernism which, as noted above, pervades much of the postmodern musical debate. Furthermore, her acknowledgement of the centrality of popular music, jazz, and postmodern practices to the “unparalleled explosion in musical creativity” (1989: 64) in the twentieth century offers a refreshing contrast to the ‘false universality’ that pervades much musicological discourse.

But in the concluding pages of her article, McClary perhaps overplays her hand: in a simplistic canonic inversion, McClary offers an analysis of Earth, Wind and Fire’s ‘System of Survival’¹⁵ which is both theoretically unsophisticated and highly problematic. Apparently failing to recognize that her rejection of Milton Babbitt and her valorization of Earth, Wind and Fire are simply two sides of the same coin, McClary does nothing other than perpetuate the hierarchy which she sets out to deconstruct. Thus, rather than viewing music as a single field which has been shaped by a range of competing discursive practices,

¹⁴ Similarly, writing of the “reactionary tendency in modern music”, Brian Morton suggests that the postmodern musical practices of David Del Tredici represent a “challenge to the paradoxical conservatism of the old avant-garde” (1996: 226). Del Tredici’s own reflections on postmodernism provide an interesting complement to Morton’s observations: see the quotation that serves as an epigraph for this chapter (p. 228).

¹⁵ The successful single from the 1987 album *Touch the World* (Columbia 4604091).

McClary simply reinstates the rhetoric of distinct musical fields. Moreover, in rejecting the discursive *claims* of the modernist avant-garde, she fails to reject its discursive *practices* in a similar fashion, and hence – in a paradoxical analytical move which reveals itself to be deeply rooted in the binary oppositions which served to shape these practices in the first place – McClary legitimates and justifies ‘System of Survival’ primarily in discursive terms which belong to the modernism she has so forcefully renounced.¹⁶

Hence, over two pages, the song is lauded for its technical and structural accomplishments: its “musical excellence and imagination”; the “virtuosity of the singers”; its “pungent dissonances that refuse to resolve, the continual resistance to harmonic closure”;¹⁷ its “effusive sax solo”; the “rhythm itself... the most compelling yet most complex component of the song”; and its “tremendous technological sophistication” – citing an article from the electronic equipment trade magazine *Roland Users Group*, McClary suggests that “the exhaustive discussions of the mechanical details of execution in this article strongly resemble many program notes for ‘serious music’”. Thus, McClary concludes, “if you want difficulty, you’ve got it” (1989: 78-79). Hastily, however, she assures us:

¹⁶ A similar tendency is evident in Robert Walser’s (1993) study of heavy metal music. Notwithstanding a series of brief encounters with ethnography, cultural theory, and postmodernism, Walser’s work leans heavily on the standard musicological techniques of formal analysis. Furthermore, drawing on an inadequately theorized conception of “postmodern logic” (1993: 157) and a periodizing notion of “the anxieties and discontinuities of the postmodern world” (1993: 159), Walser arrives at some extravagantly populist conclusions, suggesting, for example, that through Iron Maiden’s “eclectic constructions of power, which might usefully be called postmodern... fans can experience a utopia of empowerment, freedom, and metaphysical depth” (1993: 154-155). See also Shepherd and Wicke (1997: 144-149) for an interesting critique of Walser’s understanding of ‘musical discourse’.

¹⁷ Recall that McClary makes similarly problematic claims for the ‘resistance to harmonic closure’ in Madonna’s work (1991f) – see Chapter Three (pp. 170-171).

no one... would mistake such technical descriptions for the content of the pieces... the kind of intelligence that shines through this song is of quite a different order: it is an intelligence that accepts the experiences of the body – dance, sexuality, feelings of depression and elation – as integral parts of human knowledge that accrue value precisely as they are shared and confirmed publicly. ‘System of Survival’ is, in other words, a song that gives no credence whatsoever to the mind/body split or to the defensive autonomy that infects so much of Western music, especially that of the avant-garde which fetishizes intellectual work for its own sake.

(McClary, 1989: 79-80)

The problem with McClary’s analysis, however, is that – in sharp contrast to the extensive preceding summary of technical and structural features – the ‘experiences of the body’, and the manner in which they ‘accrue value’, are left unexplored and unexplained, as if such aspects of musical experience were somehow beyond analysis. Lawrence Grossberg has identified the tendency in the study of popular music to employ “a set of signifiers – the body, fun, affect, feeling, energy, pleasure, sentiment, emotion – without any attempt to adequately theorize them” (1999: 106): hence, “without such theoretical work, these terms are little more than mystifications” (1999: 119). Thus, having vigorously denounced the modernist ‘fetishizing’ impulse of musicological discourse, McClary advances a populist claim for the ‘value’ of ‘System of Survival’ which is predicated, on the one hand, on a quasi-modernist appraisal of its technical ‘difficulty’ (in the language of musicological discourse), and, on the other, on an anti-modernist notion of the ‘experiences of the body’ (which remains uninterrogated and mystified). In short, then, rather than denying the credence of the common rhetorical splitting of ‘mind’ and ‘body’, McClary’s analytical approach simply serves to reiterate their separation, thereby further solidifying the discursive divide between the categories of ‘art’ and ‘pop’.

A Wielding of Empty Signs?: The Modern, the Postmodern and the Popular

Perhaps the most coherent and consistent understanding of musical postmodernism is that proposed by Georgina Born in her book *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (1995), a detailed ethnography of the Paris-based computer music research institute of which Boulez was the founding director. Born grounds her analysis in a theoretical framework which identifies the general defining characteristics of modernism and postmodernism, “tracing a set of dominant, recurring characteristics at the heart of these discourses”, and arguing that musical modernism – and postmodernism – must be “understood within the context of broader cultural-historical forces” (1995: 40).¹⁸

Focusing particularly on postwar serialism, Born characterizes musical modernism in terms of its formalist determinism, scientistic rationalism and vanguardist theoreticism, highlighting its emphasis on institutionally based high technologies, and its teleological, text-centred musical practices. These characteristics, Born suggests, coupled with the modernist negation of tonality, have served to assert the movement's aesthetic difference from popular music. Thus, in contrast to many other approaches, Born offers a clear understanding of both the musical and discursive practices of musical modernism, linking these aspects to the broader characteristics of modernist artistic and cultural practice.¹⁹

¹⁸ For a brief summary of the defining characteristics of modernism and postmodernism, see the introductory section of Chapter Two (pp. 74-80).

¹⁹ In addition to Born's work, see Chanan (1994) and Griffiths (1978, 1995) for detailed accounts of these developments.

Citing the experimental music tradition,²⁰ Born suggests that, contrary to modernist principles, musical postmodernism has emphasized indeterminacy, alternative (often Eastern) philosophies, a performative, politicized attitude toward social relations, an ‘artisanal’ approach to small-scale technologies, and a minimalist, performance-based approach to music making. Furthermore, musical postmodernism has made significant reference to, and draws considerable influence from, popular and non-Western musics, whether in terms of musical forms and structures or in relation to performance practices.

Musical postmodernism has thus appeared to effect a *rapprochement* with popular forms, a tendency apparent not only in the significant precursors of postmodernism – the eclectic neoclassicisms and the jazz and folk music influenced works of the early part of the twentieth century – but also in the work of many of the postwar experimentalists and minimalists. Born suggests, however, that any such *rapprochement* has remained at the level of reference and appropriation, arguing that these forms of musical postmodernism have remained “aesthetically, ideologically, and institutionally distinct from commercial popular music” (1995: 61). Hence, in sharp contrast to the often sweeping claims which are made on behalf of postmodernism’s blurring of the boundaries between high art and popular culture, Born identifies a “basic discursive continuity” between musical modernism and postmodernism, suggesting that “Popular music is either unaddressed (by serialist modernists), or held as an ‘other’ to be represented, drawn upon as a source or influence (by postmodernists)” (1995: 63). And she concludes:

²⁰ See Nyman (1974) for an early account of the experimentalist musical tradition.

The counterpoint of modernism and postmodernism may thus be conceived as a continuous and centripetal antinomy, a kind of mobile stasis. Two unities bind the antinomy: a belief in the necessity, and the exploration, of technology... but above all the assertion of difference from popular music and culture... although some postmodern composition evidences aesthetic and broader sociocultural awareness of the 'other', this is no 'neutral' acknowledgement of difference but, implicitly, another form of attempted control and domination – a statement that popular music, rather than being adequate in itself, must be brought into the ambit of art music for the full realization of its aesthetic potential... Popular music remains, for modernist and postmodernist composers, an 'other' to be ignored, or reformed, reworked, controlled at the composer's will.

(Born, 1995: 64)

Born's work suggests, therefore, not only that postmodern claims for the effacement of high and low are greatly exaggerated, but that the postmodern appropriation of popular musical forms and techniques often has much in common with the nature of their modernist appropriation. In other words, although such forms and techniques may be drawn upon as inspiration and material by "the composer of art music" (Watkins, 1988: xviii), they remain discursively and institutionally separate from the art music realm. A considerable amount of evidence can be mustered to confirm Born's conclusions: for example, there is little indication of the blurring of high and low in the work of either Schnittke or many of the neo-tonalists such as Del Tredici and Rochberg – although their work is certainly characterized by pastiche and musical borrowing, their sources are often those of the classical tradition itself, and the work remains firmly based in classical instrumentation and performance practices.

Furthermore, as noted above, 'postmodern' claims for the links between popular music and minimalism often choose to ignore the modernist rigour and vanguardism which characterizes much of this work: Steve Reich's early tape and 'process' pieces, for example, although certainly cyclical in their basic musical structure, have a musical

austerity and asceticism which owes little to popular music.²¹ And in an earlier article, Born observed that composers such as Glass, Reich, and Nyman “still inhabit a mixed economy of art and commerce” – Glass, for example, “has his work performed at the English National Opera” – and she argues that such composers “do not (and cannot) work within, or respect the integrity of, extant pop music forms”. Thus, she concludes, “this is, aesthetically, a pseudo-reconciliation, a wielding of empty signs” (1987: 69).

Notwithstanding this range of evidence, however, I want to suggest that Born perhaps overstates the case, her antipathy toward the musical, discursive, and institutional practices of the Western art music tradition leading her to ignore the complexity of the interrelationships which she herself identifies. As someone who has spent much of his professional life promoting ‘alternative’ musics within the established frameworks of British cultural and musical policy, I have every reason to sympathize with Born’s antipathy; but the problem here is that her conclusions run the risk, once again, of cementing the discursive orthodoxies of *distinct* musical fields, as noted above in McClary’s work. In his critique of Born’s study, Julian Anderson suggests that Born’s “sympathy and enthusiasm... for... free jazz and rock” (1997: 26) betray an “underlying agenda” in her study; hence, he argues, her “recourse to anthropological methodology [suggests] a neutrality which it cannot truly possess” (1997: 25).

²¹ This is not to deny, however, the possibility of a ‘postmodern’ reading of some of Reich’s later work, especially pieces such as *Electric Counterpoint* written for jazz guitarist Pat Metheny: rather, the issue is that of attending to the specificities of musical forms instead of erasing differences for the benefit of theoretical neatness.

Contrary to Anderson, however – who fears that Born may have “actively sought to justify her suspicions” regarding the ‘repressiveness’ of musical institutions (1997: 26) – my own view is that Born perhaps did not pursue her suspicions and sympathies far enough. Despite the usefulness of Born’s framework, the identification of the discursive continuities between modernism and postmodernism, and of their mutual ambivalence toward popular music, surely provides only a starting point for analysis: an analysis which must necessarily move beyond the rhetoric of either *rapprochement* or “absolute difference” (1995: 63), not only to acknowledge but to *incorporate* the full range of jazz and popular musics alongside the avant-garde and experimental traditions in a more comprehensive understanding of music as a ‘single field’.

Admittedly, given Born’s primarily ethnographic project, this theoretical clarification was perhaps not an analytical priority. Paradoxically, however, for all her sympathy toward popular culture, Born’s model fails to transcend traditional taxonomies, ultimately – and perhaps by default – reinstating the history of twentieth century ‘music’ as the history of the ‘post-classical’ tradition, and ironically relegating the “commonly unacknowledged” (1995: 62) influence of contemporary jazz to a brief footnote (1995: 351) – I will return to the complex musical and discursive relationships between jazz, art music and popular music in Chapter Seven.

Even more problematic, however – and here I tend to agree with the spirit if not the content of Anderson’s critique – is that the rigid demarcation line which Born draws between the worlds of art music and popular music reveals a tendency to demonize the former while idealizing the latter. Hence, the ‘wielding of empty signs’ which she claims

is characteristic of the work of Glass and Reich, for example, can simply be read as a form of populist elitism on Born's part: an elitism which is predicated on a false vision of the "integrity" of the world of popular music (1987: 69) and an equally unsustainable view of the "omnipotence" of the field of art music (1995: 64). Not only does this perspective over-simplify the often complex interrelationships between the worlds of 'art' and 'pop', but its homogenizing impulse also serves to erase the complex relations of privilege and canonicity which exist *within* these worlds, whether in terms of the conflict between the European modernist and American experimentalist traditions or the tension between 'authentic' rock and 'commercial' pop. The mixture of ambivalence and triumph with which Philip Glass describes the success of his own music indicates his somewhat uneasy positioning within the world of art music:

Within ten years of my ensemble being together, I was at the Metropolitan Opera House. I mean, how could that be? I could not get the music played in 1966. I formed my own ensemble basically because no one would play the music. We couldn't play in concert halls, we played in galleries and lofts and cafeterias. It's funny, this beautiful edifice of 20th century music that seemed like it was going to last forever, within ten years it was a shambles. And there I was at the Metropolitan Opera House. Ligeti wasn't there, Boulez wasn't there. Stockhausen wasn't there, but I was. How could that be?

(quoted in Barnes, 1996b: 66)

And contrary to the 'pseudo-reconciliation' which Born suggests, Steve Reich reveals an altogether different attitude toward popular music: commenting on the unauthorized sampling of his piece *Electric Counterpoint* by the ambient-house group The Orb in 1990,²² Reich notes "I was flattered, I was genuinely flattered, because then I was in my

²² On the CD *Little Fluffy Clouds* (PolyGram 865139).

mid-fifties and these guys, I guess, were in their twenties, and the fact that they found what I was doing relevant to what they were doing makes me feel, well, this is great... If I can have helped in tearing down the wall between concert music and popular music, then that's the normal state of affairs, that's the healthy state of affairs" (quoted in Barnes, 1996a: 35). In another interview, responding to a question about his feelings toward popular music that imitates his sound, Reich observes "I believe that it helps the classical music and the popular music of a period to have some kind of discourse" (quoted in Duckworth, 1995: 317).

Hence, as these comments by Glass and Reich suggest, and as Frith's analysis of "the play of three historically evolving discourses across a single field" has already indicated (1996: 42), it can be argued that *all* music inhabits 'a mixed economy of art and commerce' – and in ways which go far beyond Born's rather dubious assertions regarding the dalliances of art music composers with popular music. Born's claim, for example, that these composers "have produced records that they try to market commercially" and are therefore "keen to be accepted as popular musicians" (1987: 69) seems overly exaggerated, and she offers no evidence to substantiate this assertion. To my knowledge, neither of these composers has expressed any such ambition, and, as the quotes above indicate, even later in their careers they were still expressing a degree of surprise at their public acceptance, both 'establishment' and 'popular'. Indeed, Glass is unequivocal in his understanding of the relationship of his own music to popular music: noting the popular music of the sixties culture in which he grew up, he observes: "We wanted to be part of that world, too. It didn't mean writing popular music; that wasn't possible for people like

myself. I have no training in it, and I have no inclination to do it. But it did mean that we saw the role of the artist in a much more traditional way – the artist being part of the culture that he lives in” (quoted in Duckworth, 1995: 337). Similarly, asked about his relationship to popular music, Reich responds: “I don’t get very involved in it” (quoted in Duckworth, 1995: 316). There is clearly a need here to separate the claims made on behalf of these composers from their own views on the nature of their relationship with popular music.²³

This is by no means to suggest that the artist’s view is the final word on the matter: rather, it is to argue that the rejection of artistic intentionality need not result in either a reductive textualism or an equally reductive contextualism in which the views of the producer of the text go unheard. On this point, I tend to agree with Catherine Cameron when she asks – in her review of “the changes taking place in American art music” – “Is there not something to be gained by considering the actors’ views about the changes they are committed to making?” (1985: 430-431).²⁴ It is interesting to note a degree of inconsistency here in Born’s position: in a critique of John Caughie’s (1991) argument on the “aesthetic politics” of mainstream television, Born rejects Caughie’s reading of *Hill Street Blues* as representative of a parodic genre, citing the producers’ and director’s own reading of the series in terms of a “heightened stylistic ‘realism’”, and asking: “What status

²³ In addition to Duckworth (1995), for further interviews with Glass, Reich, and other contemporary composers, see Strickland (1991), and Smith and Smith (1994). See also Dufallo (1989), Ford (1993), and Cameron (1985).

²⁴ I remain somewhat sceptical about aspects of Cameron’s style of content analysis, however, especially with regard to her tabular presentation of “Composers’ Attitudes about Contemporary Music” (1985: 448-449), which tends to betray a positivist methodology. See also Cameron (1996) for a more extended ethnography of the experimental movement in American music.

the producers' own exegesis?" (1993: 232). In the case of Born's reading of musical postmodernism, one cannot help but feel that more attention to the composers' own comments might have resulted in a somewhat more nuanced understanding of the complex interrelationship of the discursive fields of 'art' and 'pop'.

Indeed, Born's *lack* of attention to the views of the composers here seems strangely at odds with her call for a "return to agency in theorizing cultural production, and for acknowledgment of the place of originating creativity or, simply, work". Born argues "against the reduction of the author to a nostalgic trope standing for an illusory point of origin, a means of legitimation, or an authoritarian fixer of meaning", suggesting that "cultural works are produced... through the conditioned interaction of originating subjects with extant forms and, in some cases, extant audiences", and that we must "complexify our conception of authorship; in particular, its embeddedness in extensive divisions of labour and its varying functions within specific discursive, aesthetic, and institutional regimes" (1993: 235). On these points, I am in full agreement with Born, and it is worthwhile noting here that my professional background in music promotion and cultural policy plays a significant part in my attitude toward these issues.

Furthermore, it is useful at this stage to recall Frith's contention that "The issues concerned – the position of the artist in the marketplace, the relations of class and community, the tensions between technology and tradition... are not confined to any one social group, to any one musical practice. Whether they become pressing or not depends on circumstances, not ideology" (Frith, 1996: 46). Throughout the 1990s, more than ever, the increasing fragmentation and cross-fertilization of musical styles and genres – both

‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘commercial’ and ‘non-commercial’ – served to highlight the inadequacy of the conceptualization of distinct, separate musical fields. The key point here is not simply that popular music has had a significant influence on ‘art music’ composers, but rather that the contemporary field of popular music has itself become a significant site of creative artistic experiment and crossover, easily rivalling that of the contemporary classical field. In terms of crossover, witness, for example, the re-mixing of Steve Reich’s work by popular musicians in the fields of techno, electronica, and trip-hop,²⁵ and the collaboration between Philip Glass and the techno/ambient artist Richard James of Aphex Twin.²⁶

And, as a final point, it should also be noted that Born’s ‘demarcation line’ between ‘art’ and ‘pop’ fails to take into account the extent to which some contemporary composers, based broadly within the field of ‘art music’, experience resistance from within this field to their employment of popular music forms and techniques: a resistance which can have a considerable impact in terms of funding and policy decisions, and one which suggests a far from unitary musical field. I will return briefly to these points in my concluding chapter.

²⁵ See (and hear) the CD *Reich Remixed* on the Nonesuch label, featuring remixes of Reich pieces by Coldcut, Howie B., Andrea Parker, DJ Spooky, and others (Nonesuch 79552).

²⁶ On the Aphex Twin CD *Donkey Rhubarb* (Warp 63). The continuing collaboration between Glass, Brian Eno and David Bowie is also highly relevant here, for example in the “Heroes” Symphony (Point Music 454388) and Low Symphony (Point Music 438150).

Popular Music, Postmodern Populism, and the Myth of Authenticity

I want to turn now to the relationship between postmodernism and popular music: a relationship in which the somewhat higher profile of postmodern theory has led to an even more advanced level of conceptual chaos. As noted in the previous chapter, the field of popular music studies is somewhat loosely constituted, drawing equally on disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, mass communication and musicology. This disciplinary eclecticism has resulted in an engagement with postmodernism that has been theoretically broad, but often unconvincing and lacking in specificity. Reaching its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the complex and often confusing debates between postmodernism and popular music have focused on three key issues: the identification of postmodern popular music forms and practices; the analysis of MTV and music videos; and the use of sampling technologies. In each case, the debate has addressed not only aesthetic issues, but also questions of consumption, identity and representation, involving the theorizing of the relationships between postmodernism, postmodernity, and popular music.²⁷

The attempt to identify postmodern popular music forms and practices has been considerably hindered by the familiar rhetoric of the postmodern effacement of cultural hierarchies: Fredric Jameson's ill-considered opposition of a 'high-modern' Beatles and Rolling Stones to a 'postmodern' punk and new wave springs readily to mind here, his periodizing thesis serving to efface not the frontier between 'high' and 'low' as he suggests, but rather the musical and socio-economic specificities of his empirical examples

²⁷ See Longhurst (1995) and Woods (1999: 164-179) for summaries of the intersections between popular music and postmodern theory. See also Goodwin (1991) for a somewhat more problematic guide to the literature. (On Goodwin, see my further comments below).

(Jameson, 1983, 1984a, 1984c, 1991).²⁸ As Andrew Goodwin observes, there is perhaps more analytical clarity to be gained in attending to the *differences* between the ‘artistic’ ambitions of late-period Beatles and the continuing ‘authenticity’ of the Rolling Stones (1991: 178). Furthermore, although Sid Vicious’ vicious parody of the overblown Sinatra classic ‘My Way’²⁹ might be read as an exemplar of postmodern irony, the ‘oppositional’ stance of punk, with its fierce negation of the forms of commercial pop and progressive rock, represents a classic modernist gesture: a gesture which is simply confirmed in punk’s reliance upon avant-garde Situationist theory.³⁰ Indeed, Greil Marcus goes further, linking punk to Adorno and the Frankfurt School: “in a way, punk was most easily recognizable as a new version of the old Frankfurt School critique of mass culture” (1989: 70). Similarly, Robert Garnett suggests that punk represented “a negation of pop... what Adorno would have referred to as an immanent and transcendental critique of the pop culture industry” (1999: 22).

As noted in Chapter Two, Jameson’s ultimate ambivalence towards popular culture is echoed in David Harvey’s typically pessimistic disparagement of “popular music styles”, which are characterized as “a flexible collage of ‘the already seen, the already worn, the

²⁸ Although critical of Jameson’s overall position, John Beverley – in his essay ‘The Ideology of Postmodern Music and Left Politics’ (1989) – chooses simply to replicate Jameson’s periodizing schema, citing minimalism and punk as exemplars of postmodern music. See also Stratton (1989).

²⁹ On the 1979 album *Sid Sings* (Virgin 2144).

³⁰ On the links between punk and Situationism, see Marcus (1989) and Hewison (1990). Recalling Wollen’s characterization of high modernist conceptualism as “the last avant-garde of all” (1999: 74), Hewison describes Situationism as “the last true avant-garde”, suggesting that, “in Britain the Situationists had their own illegitimate offspring, who replayed their ideology and imagery through the anti-spectacle of punk. Jamie Reid adapted the graphic style, Malcolm McLaren set out to subvert the entire music industry, by turning the avarice and the love of shock of promoters and record companies against themselves, and laughing all the way to the bank” (1990: 28-30).

already played, the already heard” (1989: 301). The quotation which Harvey employs here is from an essay by Iain Chambers (1987: 9), and is one which – taken out of context and read against the grain – appears consistent with Harvey’s negative assessment of postmodern culture as “fragmentary... ephemeral, and... chaotic” (1989: 116). Curiously, however, and in a paradoxical manner similar to his citation of Brian McHale on postmodern fiction (see Chapter Two, pp. 99-100), Harvey apparently remains unaware – or simply heedless – of Chambers’ considerably more optimistic appraisal of the sociopolitical potential of popular culture. The essay in question was the inaugural article in the journal *Cultural Studies*, and Chambers’ concluding remarks suggest a populist agenda sharply at odds with Harvey’s Marxist determinism:

behind all the talk of commerce and corruption and the subsequent intellectual distaste for popular culture we discover a deeper drama. A certain intellectual formation is discovering that it is losing its grip on the world... As a minimum this involves the recognition... that the world cannot be measured against an abstract mean, that critical distance has to dissolve into the networks of critical involvement. The ‘truth’ – the intellectual and political authenticity of the moment – is no longer the object of a theoretical imperialism, to be sought and subsequently seized, but becomes rather the horizon in front of which we all more modestly and self-consciously operate.
(Chambers, 1987: 20)

But in their celebration of cultural eclecticism, heterogeneity, and difference, populist claims for the postmodern character of popular music are no less troublesome than pessimistic assertions of ephemerality and triviality. As we have seen, implicit in any periodizing thesis is the notion that all popular music is ‘postmodern’ by virtue of belonging to ‘the postmodern era’.³¹ Such theories have tended to ignore the fact that

³¹ The collection *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism* (Hayward, 1992) appears to subscribe to this periodizing notion: here, ‘postmodernism’ functions as little other than a chronological marker, and the concept remains largely unexplored.

some aspects of popular music are simply antithetical to postmodernism: for example, as noted in the previous chapter (p. 220), rather than illustrating a postmodern eclecticism, the high-culture borrowings of progressive rock can be more accurately read as a neo-modernist claim to cultural legitimacy (Stratton, 1989: 45); similarly, the continued investment within rock music in notions of ‘authenticity’ and the Romantic view of the artist is simply at odds with a postmodern reading.³² Similarly problematic are those populist accounts that privilege the cross-cultural intertextuality of popular music, celebrating its heterogeneity and resistive marginality, although often at the expense of any detailed analysis of political economy: as, for example, in the case of George Lipsitz’ somewhat romanticized account of Mexican-American musicians in Los Angeles (1990).³³

In sharp contrast, Lawrence Grossberg (1992) has theorized the links between popular music and the political and socio-economic characteristics of postmodernity, defining the “postmodern sensibility” in terms of an “authentic inauthenticity” (1992: 224), claiming that the purported oppositional stance of rock music is readily co-opted by the political conservatism of dominant mainstream culture. Reynolds and Press (1995) arrive at similar conclusions, although based on a psychoanalytically decontextualized approach to questions of music and gender. Neil Nehring (1997) takes issue with the postmodern “cynicism” (1997: 48) of theorists such as Grossberg and Reynolds and Press, drawing on feminist philosophy and theories of anger and emotion in a populist thesis which emphasizes the role of popular music in “progressive change” (1997: xiii).

³² For a classic statement of rock Romanticism, see Paglia (1992). For a convincing critique of this position, see Gracyk (1996: 175-206).

³³ See also Lipsitz (1994), Hebdige (1988), and McRobbie (1994).

By far the most salient and persistent aspect of the debate between postmodernism and popular music has been the analysis of MTV and music videos. Much of the early work in this field was characterized by a populist theoretical extravagance, a focus on the visual over the musical text, and a lack of empirical substantiation, as in the case of E. Ann Kaplan's claims for the postmodern "decenteredness" and "exhilarating... heteroglossia" of MTV (Kaplan 1987: 148).³⁴ Kaplan's study of specific music videos, for example, draws predominantly on psychoanalytically-based film theory, eschewing any detailed musical or contextual analysis. In response to such work, Andrew Goodwin's contextualist, empirically-based readings of MTV and music videos have been invaluable in debunking some of the more extravagant claims made on behalf of these forms (Goodwin, 1992, 1993).³⁵ Closely related to the work on music videos has been the 'Madonna Phenomenon' in late twentieth century scholarship, in which Madonna's music, videos and public persona became a locus for postmodern and feminist theorizing. As noted in Chapter Three (pp. 170-171), this work similarly exhibits both populist and critical orientations.³⁶

Debates over the postmodern character of the use of sampling techniques have been similarly contradictory and problematic. Richard Shusterman, for example, drawing on pragmatist philosophy and emphasizing "social function, process, and embodied experience" (1992b: 212), offers an understanding of rap and its appropriative techniques

³⁴ See also Fiske (1986) and Tetzlaff (1986).

³⁵ For similarly critical readings, see Straw (1993) and Frith (1988b).

³⁶ For examples of populist readings, see Schwichtenberg (1993b) and McClary (1991f); for critical approaches, see Bordo (1990) and Freccero (1994).

as characteristically postmodern (1992b, 1995). Although not without its problems – most notably the valorization of autonomous textual examples in terms of traditional aesthetic criteria – Shusterman's reading suggests that “postmodernism’s highlighting of appropriation does not entail the end of originality, only the welcome loss of a certain absolutist conception of it” (1995: 154).³⁷ Focusing on ‘vernacular poetics’, black identities and the politics of resistance, Russell Potter (1995) advances a similarly postmodern reading of rap and hip-hop culture. Paul Théberge (1993, 1997) adopts a somewhat more agnostic perspective, suggesting an understanding of postmodernism based on a detailed analysis of the uses of technology: hence, in some cases, sampling may “exhibit a continuity with... modernist ideals and may exemplify the absorption of modernism into popular culture”; in others, it may signal “an aesthetic fundamentally based in collage and ironic juxtaposition” (1997: 204).

In his essay ‘Popular Music and Postmodern Theory’ (1991), Andrew Goodwin denies a postmodern interpretation of the use of sampling technologies on the basis that textual incorporation cannot be adequately understood simply as pastiche (1991: 175) – i.e. Jameson’s ‘blank parody’ (1991: 19).³⁸ In this essay, Goodwin’s adherence to a specifically Jamesonian/Lyotardian understanding of postmodernism offers an interesting illustration of the conceptual stranglehold which their canonical texts continue to exert. Here, rather than simply rejecting the problematic category of ‘blank parody’ (a concept which I will return to in the following chapter), the analysis seems trapped within the

³⁷ For a critique of Shusterman’s position, and an ensuing lively debate, see Brennan (1994, 1995). See also Rose (1994)

³⁸ See also Goodwin (1988).

orthodoxy of Jameson's original formulation.³⁹ Goodwin's subsequent work on music videos has addressed this issue, illustrating the manner in which pastiche represents only one of several possible modes of textual appropriation and incorporation, alongside social criticism, parody, promotion, and homage. This is a welcome and useful clarification, although Goodwin's methodological privileging of "political economic and ideological analysis" (1992: 157) remains problematic, suggesting a totalizing determinism that owes much to Jameson's central thesis.⁴⁰ In addition to Jameson, Lyotard's particular brand of 'modernist postmodernism' also weighs heavily on Goodwin's argument: citing Crocker Coulson (1987) – who simply quotes Lyotard's gloomily idealist pronouncements on the 'eclecticism' and 'slackening' of contemporary culture – Goodwin claims that to find social parody in David Byrne's *True Stories* (1986) is to give it a "strictly modernist reading" (1991: 188): strictly modernist, that is, only if one denies postmodernism the possibility of social parody.

Hence, although Goodwin accurately identifies the "conceptual chaos" (1991: 181) inherent in much postmodern theorizing of popular music, his own work does nothing other than exacerbate the chaos. Displaying the equivocal collocation of a neo-modernist theoretical orthodoxy with a naïve cultural studies populism, Goodwin makes a series of unconvincing claims, citing, on the one hand, a reductive, inverted elitist notion of 'art',

³⁹ It is interesting to observe that Roy Shuker (1998) reveals a similar tendency toward a Jamesonian orthodoxy. In the brief entry on postmodernism in his *Key Concepts in Popular Music* (1998: 229-230), Shuker cites Jameson's work as a "key contribution", and writes of "a culture centred around the marketing and consumption of surfaces and appearances, epitomized by the ubiquity of commercial television" (1998: 229).

⁴⁰ I will return to the debate between cultural studies and political economy in Chapter Six.

and, on the other, a populist myth of an ‘authentic’ sphere of popular music production and consumption.⁴¹ Hence, Goodwin’s “rock fan’s sensibility” (1991: 184) results in a disdain for those artists associated with the minimalist tradition, as well as for progressive rock and art rock, which are all characterized as “music for college students and middle-class graduates” (1991: 180-181); i.e. those who possess the requisite degree of cultural capital to decode their formal and contextual features. In Goodwin’s analysis, then, not only Glass, Reich, and Anderson, but also Talking Heads, Brian Eno, and, it would appear, the entire history of art rock and progressive rock, constitute “Art” (1991: 184): try telling that *either* to a bunch of head-banging Emerson, Lake & Palmer fans, *or* to Roger Scruton.

Conversely, the world of “mainstream, ‘commercial’ rock and pop” (1991: 183) remains idealized in its total separation from the world of high culture, and although Goodwin offers plenty of examples of what, in his terms, ‘real’ popular music is ‘not’ – not progressive rock; not art rock; not minimalism; not performance art; not New Wave; not ‘industrial’; not “noise-makers like Sonic Youth”, who “defy pop codes” (1991: 185); not rap, not heavy metal, not thrash metal, with their “*antipathy to popular culture*” (1991: 185; emphasis in original) – he fails to offer any coherent definition of the ‘authentic’ popular sphere he has in mind. Hence, Goodwin’s work appears to confirm Lawrence Grossberg’s diagnosis of much of the academic writing on popular music:

⁴¹ If the similarities with McClary (1989) and Born (1987) are apparent here, it should come as no surprise that Goodwin cites both – uncritically – in his article. Goodwin notes the “pertinence” of Born’s comments (1991: 182), and characterizes McClary’s highly problematic article as a “careful analysis of avant-garde and postmodern musics” (1991: 181).

[it] operates *within* the discourses and relations of popular-music culture and fandom, and often from within specific taste cultures, even though it presents itself as offering something else – namely, an analysis of such discourses, relations, and cultures... popular music has become little more than an excuse for the scholar to reenact his or her own theoretical (and aesthetic and political) agenda.

(Grossberg, 1999: 100-101; emphasis in original)

Furthermore, rather than “clarify[ing] the terms of the debate” (Goodwin, 1991: 177), Goodwin’s work simply serves to compound further the definitional ambiguities highlighted in the previous chapter. In citing McClary’s understanding of musical postmodernism (1989) – i.e. Glass, Reich, Anderson – Goodwin appears to hint at a quantitative definition, arguing that such an understanding fails to illustrate a “central tenet of postmodern theory – the convergence of art and mass culture”, since “none of these artists are mass sellers” (1991: 181). In contrast, uncritically citing the absurdly reductive and highly problematic work of Roger Taylor (1978) on jazz – in which the ‘authenticity’ of early jazz is ‘corrupted’ by ‘Art’⁴² – Goodwin appears to adopt a romanticized ‘folk’ vision of popular music, as a ‘grass-roots’ phenomenon which is unwillingly conscripted into an ‘art’ discourse: Goodwin assures us, for example, that for all their popular cultural borrowings, the Kronos Quartet and Philip Glass “clearly have very little to do with popular culture as it is actually lived by fans of rock and pop” (1991: 182). Again, however, the manner in which popular culture is ‘actually lived’ by rock and pop fans remains unexplained. Hence, in Goodwin’s article, the “conventions... of the art-rock ‘concept’ performance” are negatively contrasted with “a rock and roll show... The

⁴² See Taylor’s chapter “A Warning of the Corrupting Influence of Art on Popular Culture” (1978: 89-155). See also my comments above on Taylor’s employment of racial stereotypes.

music may share an abstract principle with rock and roll... but its sound and staging hardly resemble that world at all” (1991: 180-181). Similarly, citing a program note by Steve Reich – which Goodwin’s populist anti-intellectualism leads him to characterize as “rather comic” – Goodwin argues that such writing, and similar technical writing in “musician’s magazines”, represents a “critical discourse [that] illustrates a manner of promoting the music and assumes a mode of listening both of which are the antithesis of popular music” (1991: 184). Predictably, however, he offers no clarification of the manner of promotion and mode of listening which typify ‘real’ popular music. It is interesting to note here the sharp contrast in the populist rhetoric of McClary and Goodwin: McClary’s populism leads her to quote a technical magazine article on Earth, Wind and Fire, liken it to a program note for ‘serious music’, and thereby legitimate popular music in terms of its ‘difficulty’; Goodwin, meanwhile, cites a Steve Reich program note, likens it to a technical magazine article, and suggests that both are ‘the antithesis of popular music’. Conceptual chaos, indeed.

Despite his populist idealism, however, it becomes clear that Goodwin’s own brand of populism has its limits, especially in terms of his attitude toward the popular music audience. Commenting on Linda Ronstadt’s collaboration with Philip Glass on the 1986 album *Songs from Liquid Days*,⁴³ Goodwin asks “but how many Ronstadt fans will have heard it, let alone *understood* it?” (1991: 188; emphasis in original), thereby displaying the paradoxical condescension which so often accompanies academic ‘populism’. At this

⁴³ Columbia CD 39564.

stage, it is useful to recall Jostein Gripsrud's critique of a populist cultural studies, noted in Chapter One (p. 68): given the university's positioning within the "high-culture institutional realm", Gripsrud argues that academic "attacks on the notion of high culture... appear ludicrous in their ideological blindness. They represent an implicit denial of the social determination of discourses, not least their own very obvious belonging to a high-culture discourse on culture" (1989: 197-198). Furthermore, given the theoretical paradox inherent in Goodwin's populist disdain for 'high art' and his concurrent academic condescension toward the popular music audience, we might also recall John Frow's critique of Bourdieu, querying Goodwin's "own critical exteriority to... dominant norms", and the extent to which he occupies "an *impossible* perspective, a point that transcends the social space" (Frow, 1987: 72; emphasis in original). As Lawrence Grossberg has suggested:

We are always and already one (if not many) of the masses. Consequently, we cannot start by dividing up the terrain according to our own map of tastes and distastes (although our travelogues are always contaminated by them), or our own sense of some imaginary boundary which divides a mythic (and always dominant) mainstream from a magical (and always resisting or reflexive) marginality, or our own notion of an assumed gulf between our intellectual self and our popular-media self.

(Grossberg, 1988b: 385)

There is, in other words, no idealized position outside of social relations and discourse for the critic to occupy: a proposition that applies equally to traditionalist and populist perspectives. The challenge for the cultural analyst, then, is to adopt a critical, self-reflexive perspective which recognizes that idealized claims for either aesthetic autonomy or populist authenticity are equally spurious: a perspective which privileges

neither, but instead acknowledges the discursive construction – and mutual interdependence – of ‘high’ and ‘low’.

In this chapter, notwithstanding the postmodern rhetoric of the effacement of high and low, I have suggested that a review of the literature on music and postmodernism reveals a tendency to simply reinstate these categories, thereby reconfirming an understanding of art music and popular music as distinct discursive fields. Much of the work in musicology appears to be motivated by a modernist nostalgia or informed by a neo-modernist ‘postmodern’ theoretical orthodoxy: from these perspectives, postmodernism is viewed with suspicion, and its artistic and sociopolitical potential undervalued. The predominantly populist orientation in much revisionist work in music studies proves to be equally problematic, predicated on an inverted elitism and a myth of popular ‘authenticity’. Despite these shortcomings, however, I have also suggested that some musicological analyses have offered helpful clarifications in terms of a clearer understanding of the relationship of music and postmodern theory; and although I identified problems with Born’s analysis, I suggested that her theoretical framework offers a coherent starting point for a broader conceptualization of musical postmodernism and a closer analysis of the specificities of postmodern cultural forms and practices. In the chapter that follows, acknowledging the weaknesses but also building on the strengths of the various approaches surveyed in this chapter and the two preceding chapters, I will begin to pursue these ideas further.

Chapter Six

The Game of Irony: The Postmodern Attitude and Cultural Value

“The postmodern... demands, in order to be understood, not the negation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking.”
From: ‘Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable’,
Umberto Eco (1985a: 68)

At the conclusion of Chapter Two, I suggested that Umberto Eco’s brief sketch of the limits of the modernist avant-garde offered the prospect of an understanding of the postmodern that avoided the totalising impulses of a ‘modernist postmodernism’. Moreover, I argued that Eco’s pragmatic interpretation of postmodernism demanded a more careful engagement with the specificities of postmodern cultural forms, thereby avoiding the reductively homologous ‘mapping’ of social conditions onto cultural practices. In the previous three chapters, having surveyed a wide range of work in music studies, I noted the equally reductionist consequences of many revisionist and populist perspectives, suggesting that such approaches fail to offer a convincing critique of traditional canonic hierarchies, succumbing either to a disabling relativism, or simply positing an alternative canon, thereby leaving existing structures of privilege and canonicity relatively undisturbed. In the course of this survey, however, I also drew upon an alternative range of work which eschews ideological reductionism and simplistic evaluative judgement, suggesting the need for an eclectic and critically self-reflexive approach to the study of art and culture.

In this chapter, I develop these ideas further, proposing an understanding of the ‘postmodern attitude’ which focuses on the defining characteristics of postmodern forms

and practices. Contrary to an understanding of art music and popular music as distinct discursive fields, this approach suggests an analysis of music as a single field: an approach which not only acknowledges the complex interrelationship of the textual, contextual, and discursive aspects of music, but also allows an effective critique of the traditional canon, recognizing the artistic and discursive interaction between contrasting musical forms and genres. Drawing on the work of Eco and Charles Jencks, and concentrating especially on the prevalence of irony and parody in contemporary cultural forms, I suggest that an understanding of the 'double-coded' nature of much postmodern practice raises significant questions with regard to cultural value. In the latter half of this chapter, drawing on the work of John Frow and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, I discuss the question of value in more detail, exploring the methodological issues which arise from the recognition of the impossibility of any 'happy' interdisciplinarity, and reiterating my proposal for an 'eclecticism of theory' in cultural analysis.

Irony and the Postmodern Attitude

As I argued in Chapter Two (pp. 126-129), Eco's brief essay 'Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable' (1985a), suggests a conceptualization of postmodernism that focuses on the defining characteristics of postmodern forms and practices. From this perspective, postmodernism is understood as a mode of artistic expression that embraces parody, eclecticism, appropriation, self-reflexivity, juxtaposition, and a populist intertextuality. For Eco, however, perhaps the most fundamental feature of postmodernism is that of irony, as he makes clear in his witty characterization of 'the postmodern attitude':

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.

(Eco, 1985a: 67-68)

The levity inherent in Eco's "classic formulation" (Jencks, 1992: 22) should not blind us to its essential seriousness, however. Eco's point here – although the point hardly needs further amplification – is that the postmodern 'game of irony' need not result in meaningless gestures; that the postmodern recourse to parody and pastiche need not be understood as simply 'blank parody'; that postmodern appropriation, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity need not signal 'depthlessness', 'historicism', or the 'waning of affect'.¹ On the contrary, Eco's formulation demands the acknowledgement that the employment of parodic irony is virtually a *pre-condition* of postmodern expression: a mode of expression which, unlike its modernist precursors, no longer attempts to deny or negate the past – "since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence" (1985a: 67) – but rather – *necessarily* – engages it in a meaningful dialogue. It is worthwhile recalling, too, that Eco's conceptualization of postmodernism is neither periodizing nor essentializing: he characterizes the postmodern simply as "a way of

¹ The terms are Jameson's: see Chapter Two.

operating” (1985a: 66), and suggests that “in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely” (1985a: 68).

In adopting an understanding of the concept based on Eco’s pragmatic, suggestive sketch, I will therefore view postmodernism neither as a radical break with modernism, nor as a historical “cultural dominant” (Jameson, 1991: 3), since postmodernism – understood as ‘a way of operating’ – needs to be interpreted as a continuation of and contiguous with – and, perhaps, in some cases, overlapping with – a corresponding modernist ‘way of operating’. Nor will I accept the ‘blurring of high and low’ as a *necessary* defining characteristic of postmodernism: as noted in Chapter Two (p. 77), the categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ are themselves cultural constructs which, to a very large extent, are products of a modernist ideology. The putative acknowledgement of their ‘effacement’, therefore, simply serves to confirm the discourse of modernism: a rhetorical move which not only highlights, for example, the nature of Jameson’s ‘modernist postmodernism’ but also underlines the fundamental problems which accompany populist inversions of canonical hierarchies, as noted in the previous chapters. Hence, as Robert Garnett has observed:

populist postmodernist accounts of the high/low interface... reproduce... a residual form of rather un-postmodern binary thinking. The agenda... is not really to deconstruct the opposition between art and the ‘popular’, it is to affirm the ‘popular’ side of the equation, which is, consequently, over-privileged and thus the opposition is reinforced.

(Garnett, 1999: 20)

But I will, however, note the often sharply contrasting characteristics of modernist and postmodernist cultural practice, attempting to disentangle the confusing skein of competing claims and definitions (as in the case of Cage and Ives in Chapter Three, and

as illustrated in the previous chapter). For an observer such as Andrew Goodwin, however, the “epistemological feedback loop” (1991: 188) in much postmodern theorizing simply confirms the inadequacy of postmodernism as an analytical tool, leading him to conclude that “unless we are committed to demonstrating the coherence or explanatory purpose of postmodern theory (which I am not), there is no need to construct rational order from these confusions” (1991: 186).² However, as noted in Chapter Two (pp. 72-73), in common with Goodwin, I am of the view that the continuing prevalence of the term means that “it must be describing something” (Goodwin, 1991: 175) – a proposition which suggests a two-fold need for further clarification: firstly, to resist the increasing entrenchment of the concept in narrow academic orthodoxies (a project to which I devoted myself in Chapter Two); and secondly, to refine the concept’s usefulness as an explanatory paradigm (the task that I have set myself here).

Although Goodwin claims to have no interest in the latter objective, it is interesting to observe, as noted in Chapter Five (pp. 261-267), that the confusion which he identifies leads to an unstated Jamesonian/Lyotardian orthodoxy in his own work, resulting in a self-fulfillingly negative appraisal of the concept’s explanatory power, and a concomitant devaluing of the forms of postmodern expression. But more significantly, perhaps, I want to suggest that the increasingly mainstream ubiquity of postmodern techniques such as parody, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity in contemporary cultural practice suggests the need for a clearer understanding of both the structural mechanisms and the artistic and

² Somewhat inexplicably, given that, a mere ten pages earlier Goodwin has suggested that: “There is an urgent need to clarify the terms of this debate” (1991: 177). See Chapter Two (p. 73).

sociopolitical potential of such techniques. This ubiquity is evident not only in the contemporary visual and performing arts, but also in a wide range of more popular forms, from television sitcoms, drama series, and Hollywood cinema to animated cartoons, media advertising, and websites. As Jim Collins has observed, the “hyper-self-reflexivity about the nature of popular culture that once distinguished the work of Laurie Anderson, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman and other New York scene artists in now ubiquitous *within* popular culture” (1995: 2; emphasis in original). A few examples will illustrate the prevalence of the techniques I have in mind:³

- The popular NBC sitcom *Seinfeld* – which is famously about ‘nothing’ – was virtually founded on a parodic self-reflexivity, as epitomised in ‘The Pitch’, a 1992 episode in which Jerry and George pitch an idea to an NBC executive for a television show about ‘nothing’.
- Douglas Kellner has argued that the television drama series *The X-Files* is “prototypically postmodern” in its “genre hybridity” and “aggressive use of pastiche and quotation”, suggesting that these are employed as an ambivalent form of “social critique” (1999: 165-167). A similar case might be made for *The Sopranos*, with its constant references to the *Godfather* movies, and its unsettling unwillingness to judge its central characters.⁴
- In Wes Craven’s hugely successful series of *Scream* movies,⁵ the typical genre moves of the horror film are deployed in ironic, self-reflexive fashion, with much of the humour in the movies dependent on the audience’s comprehensive knowledge and

³ For a range of other popular culture examples, see Collins (1995). Collins notes the “semiotic excess” which characterizes contemporary cultural forms and practices, suggesting that “their realizations depend on their ability to access and refashion the ‘already said’, which is now most decidedly the *still being said* due to the technologies of information storage and retrieval” (1995: 6).

⁴ *Twin Peaks*, the creation of David Lynch and Mark Frost, is often cited as a classic example of ‘postmodern television’: see, for example, Jim Collins (1992) who argues that *Twin Peaks* “epitomizes the multiple dimensions of televisual postmodernism” (1992: 341).

⁵ *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997), and *Scream 3* (2000).

expectations of the genre. Although Craven has perhaps taken them to new heights, such techniques are hardly new in cinema: writing of the ‘Odessa Steps’ sequence in Woody Allen’s film *Bananas* (1971), Eco notes that “aware of the quotation, the spectator is brought to elaborate ironically on the nature of the device and to acknowledge the fact that he has been invited to play upon his encyclopedic competence (1985b: 171).⁶

- The animated cartoon show *The Simpsons* provides perhaps the most striking example of the encyclopedic, intertextual knowledge which is now expected of the television viewer, drawing on a wealth of quotations, allusions, and parodic references.
- And finally, even some television advertisements for breakfast cereal now display a degree of parodic self-reflexivity, demanding a sprinkling of postmodern theory for their successful interpretation. I have in mind the Rice Krispies campaign in which Snap, Crackle and Pop are portrayed as disgruntled actors in their own advertisements, quibbling over their scripts and contracts: “That’s no way to treat a cultural icon!”. The theme is continued in the Rice Krispies website, in which Crackle’s ‘Career Objective’ is listed in his Scrapbook: “To pursue my career as an animated short-film actor. But someday I’d like to direct”.⁷

An immediate clarification is required at this point, however. The claims which I have made above regarding the ubiquity of postmodern techniques is not to suggest that the cultural texts which I have identified – from *Seinfeld* to Rice Krispies ads – are necessarily ‘postmodern’; and nor should this caveat be taken to indicate that they are therefore

⁶ Similarly, Eco cites two scenes in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) as a typical example of intertextuality, which puts into play “an intertextual encyclopedia” (1985b: 172). In the first film, ‘Indy’ simply shoots a huge, sword-wielding opponent, while in the second, his nonchalance in the face of several huge, sword-wielding opponents – shared with the audience in a quick glance to camera – is frustrated when he finds his gun is missing from its holster.

⁷ See www.snapcracklepop.com/kids/sbook.html

‘modern’. The crucial point here is that the categories of ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ were not discursively conceived with popular texts such as these in mind: rather, their discursive lineage is that of ‘art’, finding their genesis in the discourses of literature, architecture, and the visual arts. Hence, the templates of ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ – conceived of specifically as mutually exclusive discursive categories of ‘art’ – are inappropriate and inadequate in dealing with such texts: indeed, as inappropriate and inadequate as the discursive practices and techniques of traditional musicology in dealing with popular music (see Chapter Four, pp. 205-207). As Robert Garnet has argued: “Art terms, when transposed into the context of popular culture, are more often than not reduced to metaphors that retain little of their original meaning” (1999: 20). This is not to suggest that art terms are entirely inappropriate in the context of popular culture, however: rather, it is to argue that they must be employed with care, acknowledging the specificities of popular forms. But this point of clarification does serve to confirm my lack of interest in the taxonomic exercise which attempts to classify and categorize cultural forms and practices as either ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’: more often than not, as noted in Chapter Two, this exercise proves to be ideologically motivated, with little to offer in terms of theoretical clarity or explanatory power.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile reiterating at this point that the approach which I am advocating neither regards postmodernism in a periodizing sense as a ‘cultural dominant’ nor suggests that *all* contemporary cultural production is informed by the postmodern techniques identified above. It does insist, however, that *all* contemporary cultural production – whether postmodernist, modernist, or a hybrid of the two – occupies a

‘mixed economy of art and commerce’ which the rhetoric of ‘high’ and ‘low’ – and the rhetoric of their ‘postmodern’ effacement – only serves to obscure. Moreover, while denying their ‘dominant’ role, such an approach does acknowledge the remarkable prevalence of the postmodern techniques of irony, parody, and self-reflexivity, arguing that the accounts of both neo-modernists and populists are equally inadequate in understanding the artistic, cultural, and sociopolitical implications and potential of such techniques. Typically, as we have seen, dystopian neo-modernist accounts dismiss these postmodern techniques as ‘blank’ or ‘depthless’; on the other hand, populist accounts are divided between either utopian claims for their ‘empowering’ hybridity and pluralism or inverted elitist claims for their ‘co-option’ by ‘high culture’, with a concomitant faith in a mythical, ‘authentic’ sphere of ‘popular culture’. Given these confusions, it is relatively easy to agree with Lawrence Grossberg when he argues that “the significance and politics of postmodern practices are too important to be left to debates about postmodernism” (1988a: 179).

And it is here that the advantages of Eco’s pragmatic conceptualization of the ‘postmodern attitude’ become clear. Rather than pursuing reductive, periodizing examples of structural homological correspondence – which, as Jameson himself has observed, are often “the excuse for the vaguest kind of general formulations” (1991: 187) – or ‘objective’ questions of postmodern taxonomic categorization – which, on the contrary, often turn out to be highly motivated, whether by neo-modernist or populist agendas – the cultural analyst is directed instead toward the defining characteristics and specificities of cultural forms, building an *a posteriori* understanding of ‘postmodernism’ which, in

contrast to the reductionism and determinism of *a priori* theorizing, is based on a detailed observation of contemporary cultural practice.

Moreover – and highly significant in terms of the analytical project which I have proposed in the previous chapters – a focus on the ‘defining characteristics and specificities of cultural forms’ does not imply a purely aestheticist or textualist perspective. On the contrary, Eco’s understanding of postmodernism as the ‘ironic rethinking’ of the past is one which insists – almost by definition – on a contextualist reading of cultural texts: one which acknowledges the complex interaction and interdependence of texts and contexts. Hence, virtually as a pre-condition of postmodernism in Eco’s scheme, the past is understood to be encoded in contemporary texts; it follows, then, that the cultural analyst is obliged not only to attend to the specificities of those contemporary texts – and their contexts – but also to the specificities of the historical texts – and *their* respective contexts – which provide contemporary inspiration. As Linda Hutcheon has argued, “even the most self-conscious and parodic of contemporary works do not try to escape, but indeed foreground, the historical, social, ideological contexts in which they have existed and continue to exist” (1988: 24-25). In this sense, then, the dialogical mutuality of texts and contexts which, as noted in the previous chapters, is so often elided in much cultural theory and music studies, is in effect inherent in Eco’s formulation.

My intention here has been to employ Eco’s brief, seven-page essay as a suggestive starting point for a conceptualization of postmodernism which is appropriate to my own purposes. My concern has been to suggest an understanding of the postmodern that is both coherent and serviceable: one against which other claims can be measured and one

which, in itself, has a considerable degree of explanatory power. In this sense, then, contrary to the confusion surrounding much postmodern theory, a conceptualization of postmodernism founded on Eco's formulation can serve – to paraphrase Bennett – as 'a basis for further thought and action'.

It is worthwhile noting at this stage, however, that my conceptualization of postmodernism differs markedly from that of Janet Wolff (1990b), for whom "the best kind of postmodern theory and practice is in fact a kind of modified modernism" (1990b: 99). Although I have thus far cited Wolff's work primarily in support of my own, I would suggest that this understanding of postmodernism remains problematic. Wolff argues that the "so-called failure of modernism is, of course, the impasse it reached as a result of certain processes of bureaucratization, institutionalization, and commercialization", and, citing Griselda Pollock, claims that we must therefore "separate modernism-as-institution from modernism-as-practice". These propositions, I would argue, indicate not only a misplaced faith in the modernist potential for a "feminist (and indeed any radical) politics", but also a similarly unwarranted mistrust in the artistic and sociopolitical potential of postmodernism, based on a selective stereotyping of the "radical relativism and scepticism of much postmodern thought" (1990b: 99).

In their review of the "encounter between feminism and postmodernism" (1988: 84), Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson offer an analysis that contrasts sharply with that of Wolff. Fraser and Nicholson argue that "the ultimate stake" of such an encounter is "the prospect of a perspective that integrates their respective strengths while eliminating their

respective weaknesses” (1988: 84), suggesting that such a perspective would be “pragmatic and fallibilistic” (1988: 101): an approach which can be understood to have much in common with my own analysis of the encounters between cultural theory, music studies and postmodernism. Wolff’s objection to such approaches – that they “*are* mainly pragmatic” (Wolff, 1990b: 89; emphasis in original) – perhaps suggests a degree of ‘sociological imperialism’ in her work here, in the sense that her identification of an “epistemological paradox” (1990b: 89) in such approaches appears to indicate a belief in an implicitly modernist ‘epistemological absolute’ to which theory – and a ‘radical politics’ – might defer. On the contrary, however, I would suggest that Wolff’s putative ‘objection’ to such approaches stands as an accurate, pragmatic statement of my own analytical intentions to defer neither to reductionism nor relativism:

it may be that the justification of new critical theories can only be made on other, non-epistemological, grounds, including those of usefulness (one theory explains more of the world than another), politics (acknowledged commitment to a point of view), or self-reflexive provisionality (admission that this theory, though valuably deconstructive of dominant discourses, is itself open to such deconstruction).
(Wolff, 1990b: 89)

More specifically, however, it should be noted that there are some observers for whom Eco’s pragmatic formulation of an ironic ‘postmodern attitude’ remains problematic. Not surprisingly, Roger Scruton has little time for Eco’s postmodern irony: citing the relevant ‘Barbara Cartland’ passage – in which the man and woman recognize that “it is no longer possible to speak innocently” (Eco, 1985a: 67) – Scruton argues that the couple in Eco’s scenario are simply “playing at love: for the ‘innocence’ to which Eco refers is part of love, and the loss of it makes love impossible. You do not recover innocence by placing it in inverted commas” (1997: 491). Hence, for Scruton, as we

have seen, “the faint sarcastic smile of the postmodernist is... incompatible with greatness... Postmodernist irony is simply a more sophisticated way of avoiding the question of modern life” (1997: 492-493). As noted in the previous chapter (pp. 230-233), however, Scruton’s own absurdly reductionist answer to the ‘question of modern life’ proves to be considerably more problematic than Eco’s.

But even Charles Jencks, who characterizes Eco’s formulation as “classic”, suggests that “such knowing can get rather tiring” (1992: 22). More significantly, however, Jencks goes on to observe that “self-consciousness is a natural consequence of living in a post-Freudian age... There is no going back in time... no way of eradicating Nietzsche, Einstein, Lévi-Strauss and our view of the expanding universe” (1992: 22-23):⁸ an admonition which David Harvey (with his call for a ‘renewal of the Enlightenment project’) and Neil Postman (with his plans to ‘build a bridge to the 18th Century’) might do well to heed. And surprisingly, perhaps, even some otherwise hard-core postmodernists appear to pine for ‘non-ironic’ times. In the CD booklet notes to a collection of music by Spike Jones (the great musical satirist of the 1940s and 1950s), Thomas Pynchon – himself a paradigm of postmodern literary practice⁹ – reveals more than a hint of nostalgia: “Nowadays, when everybody knows everything and nobody takes any text seriously, it’s hard to remember how it felt once to share a public world not as contaminated by the terminally wisened-up irony that has come to pervade our own lives” (Pynchon, 1994).

⁸ Recall Jameson’s similar reminder that “we cannot... return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours” (1991: 50). The similarity in these two proposals should not be confused with their sharply contrasting motivations, however, exemplified in Jencks’s postmodern optimism and Jameson’s modernist nostalgia.

⁹ See, for example, Pynchon (1973, 1984). See also Maltby (1991).

Notwithstanding the wised-up irony which often pervades his own artistic practice, one can perhaps sympathize with Pynchon's wistfulness, and his comments highlight the need to retain a *critical* perspective on postmodernism: one which neither succumbs totally to ironic self-reflexivity, nor sacrifices the evaluative impulse in the face of postmodern relativism.

Postmodern Parody and Double-Coding

In his analysis of Michael Graves's Disney Building in Burbank – in which the Seven Dwarves serve as cartoon caryatids, decorating the building's frontage – Charles Jencks indicates the potential problems involved in postmodern parody:

This phase in Graves's work has been called 'hokey-tecture' because its tongue-in-cheek fakery is so knowing... the attempt, as in kitsch, is to succeed through excess; but when it is this calculating and obvious, one wonders. 'I've tried to walk the line between the whimsical and the jokey,' Graves has said, 'or navigate the chasm of the cute and the easy abyss of irony.' The question is, what positive terrain exists between these four trifles?... Dopey, the central dwarf caryatid – a mere nineteen-foot midget – looks for the moment only like Dopey... [there is] no ambiguity, abstraction and transformation of the image.

(Jencks, 1991: 172)

Perhaps, then, it might be argued that Graves's Disney building exemplifies the postmodern "pastiche" or "blank parody" which Jameson proposes: "a neutral practice... without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse" (1991: 17), although one could hardly suggest that Graves's architectural deployment of the Seven Dwarves is "devoid of laughter" (Jameson, 1991: 17), or that his classical parody has "lost its sense of humour" (Jameson, 1983: 114). But the fundamental problem here – as with so much of Jameson's theorising – lies in the totalizing nature of the category. Jameson seems to insist that postmodern parody – understood as 'pastiche' – is *necessarily* 'blank':

a proposition which I am concerned to resist, leaving the possibility open for an interpretation of postmodern parody and irony which recognises the critical, satirical impulse which may lie behind the use of these techniques. And here, again, the internal contradictions of Jameson's work are apparent: notwithstanding his hypothesis that postmodernism represents a "radical break" with modernism (1991: 1) and his claim that "the two phenomena... remain utterly distinct" (1991: 5), he argues that the role of irony in Robert Venturi's work represents "the survival of just such residual modernist values into full postmodernism" (1991: 427). For Jameson, then, parody and irony are fundamentally *modernist* concepts, which are somehow 'emasculated' in the transition to postmodernism. Hence, postmodern "pastiche" signals:

a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.

(Jameson, 1983: 116)¹⁰

Margaret Rose notes that inherent in Jameson's work is "not just a set of category errors in which something defined as modern parody has been projected onto something called post-modern pastiche, and the latter then applied to all kinds of pastiche (both architectural and literary), but also an artificial distinction between parody and pastiche which tries to argue that parody is modern and pastiche is post-modern" (1991b: 29).

¹⁰ Responding to Jameson on these points, Ihab Hassan concludes in a manner which is curiously reminiscent of Jameson's own warning about returning to prior models: "the judgement *both* defines and critiques innovation in modernist, even Edwardian terms, applicable to a society very different in its modes of self-representation, its immanent procedures" (1987: 221; emphasis in original).

Furthermore, Jameson's 'modernist postmodernism' fails to comprehend a further point elaborated by Rose: "One of the major differences between modern and post-modern uses of irony and parody, as implicitly suggested in Jencks's work, is... that with the latter, post-modern usage of them, modernism itself may become the object of the post-modernist's parodic, ironic or historicising reflection" (Rose, 1991a: 147). In sharp contrast to Jameson's perspective, and notwithstanding his own critique of Graves's Disney building, Jencks suggests a more positive interpretation of parody, arguing that "one of the virtues of parody, besides its wit, is its mastery of cliché and convention, aspects of communication which are essential to Post-Modernism" (1991: 93). Hence, the use of parody and irony is central to Jencks's notion of postmodern 'double-coding', in which cultural forms are understood in terms of the hybridity and juxtaposition of a range of competing, contrasting, and complementary 'codes'.¹¹ Moreover, as Rose suggests:

it is also possible to make several distinctions between the types of parody used in post-modern literature and the arts, including distinctions between specific and general parody, and satiric and ironic parody. In all cases parody may be said to have 'double-coded' one text with another, although in the case of satiric parody one text (or code) will generally be the target of the other, while in ironic parody the different codes embedded in the parody may reflect on each other to modify or change the meaning of both, or simply add a variety or complexity of codes to the parody text. (Rose, 1991a: 270)¹²

¹¹ Although not explicitly linked to the term 'postmodernism', Jencks's concept of double-coding was perhaps anticipated by Robert Venturi's preference for "an architecture of complexity and contradiction", which expressed a "both-and" attitude, rather than "either-or" (1966: 22). The provocatively populist Venturi has famously declared that "The A&P parking lot is a current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles" (1972: 13); that "Amiens Cathedral is a billboard with a building behind it" (1972: 105); and – in response to Mies van der Rohe's celebrated dictum 'less is more' – that "less is a bore" (1966: 25).

¹² For a fuller discussion of parody and pastiche, see Rose (1993, 1991b); see also Hutcheon (1985, 1988). On irony, see Hutcheon (1994). For a salutary lesson on the problems inherent in the uses of irony in an institutional setting – expressed in terms of exhibition design – see Hutcheon's analysis of the controversy surrounding the Royal Ontario Museum's *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit of 1989-90 (1994: 176-204; see also Hutcheon, 1995).

In his analysis of ‘interpretive moves’, Steven Feld has noted the challenges which parodies present to the listener: “parodies – whatever their initial text or reference – involve more fixed and preset musical semantic parameters than do other pieces; parodies involve conscious and intentional manipulations that require certain analytic prowess in the process of conceptualisation and production” (1994a: 88). Hence, commenting on Carla Bley’s ‘Spangled Banner Minor’¹³ – in which the American national anthem and a collage of other national anthems are arranged in a minor key – Feld suggests that “one must grasp the importance and tacit generality of the major mode to Western patriotic songs, anthems, and the like in order to alter just that while preserving almost every other typical code feature – brass instruments, stately pace, clear articulation – of a serious performance in the genre” (1994a: 88).

But the need for ‘analytical prowess’ – which, as Feld observes, is a prerequisite in the listener’s interpretation of parodies – is an aspect of Jencks’s postmodern double-coding which has left it open to an ‘elitist’ reading: for some observers, in a manner similar to Barthes’ *‘plaisir-jouissance’* distinction (1975), Jencks’s concept appears to imply a group of cultural ‘haves’ – equipped with the analytical skills to interpret the postmodern juxtaposition of competing codes – and a group of cultural ‘have-nots’ – for whom the tangle of contrasting codes is simply confusing. John Storey suggests this type of reading when he argues that, in addition to being a way of “attacking bourgeois taste”, Eco’s ‘postmodern attitude’ (with its awareness of the ‘already said’) and Jencks’s ‘double-

¹³ On the 1978 Carla Bley Band album *European Tour 1977* (Watt 8).

coding' can also be "a means of patronising those supposedly without taste – those who speak without the inverted commas" (1998: 192).¹⁴ Apart from the fact that such a reading would lead us to the somewhat counter-intuitive conclusion that everything from *The X-Files* and *Scream* movies to *The Simpsons* and Rice Krispies advertisements are 'elitist' or 'patronising', Jencks' own understanding of the concept of postmodernism suggests a considerably more 'democratic' perspective at work. Observing the manner in which previous usages of the term had tended to connote the forms of 'ultra-modernism' which Anderson identifies as characteristic of Hassan's work (see Chapter Two, p. 126), Jencks suggests that he employed the term postmodernism "to mean the opposite of all this: the end of avant-garde extremism, the partial return to tradition and the central role of communicating with the public" (1991: 6).

Moreover, the populist rejection of the notion of postmodern double-coding on the grounds of its purportedly 'elitist' or 'patronising' nature begs the concomitant question of what forms of 'simple' or 'authentic' cultural expression might be regarded as 'non-elitist' or 'non-patronising'. The fundamental problem here is that in its condescending view of the interpretive abilities of 'those who speak without the inverted commas', a populist position runs the paradoxical risk of casting 'the people' in the role of 'cultural dopes'¹⁵ in a fashion which is alarmingly similar to the discursive positioning of 'the

¹⁴ For a more positive reading of Jencks's notion of double-coding, see Collins (1989).

¹⁵ Recall that the term 'cultural dopes' is Lawrence Grossberg's (1988a: 174). Although Grossberg employs the term in his critique of 'high' critics such as Fredric Jameson and Hal Foster (see Chapter Five, pp. 240-241), his comments apply equally well to the patronizing role of 'populist' critics within cultural studies.

masses' evident in those conservative positions to which it claims to stand opposed.¹⁶ The problematic theoretical perspective on which such a position is based is well illustrated in Iain Chambers' contrasting characterizations of 'official culture' and 'popular culture':

Official culture, preserved in art galleries, museums, and university courses, demands cultivated tastes and a formally imparted knowledge... Popular culture, meanwhile, mobilizes the tactile, the incidental, the transitory, the expendable; the visceral. It does not involve an abstract aesthetic research amongst privileged objects of attention, but invokes orders of sense, taste and desire.

(Chambers, 1986: 12)

As John Frow has observed, one of the problems with such a perspective is that "in setting up spontaneous learning against formal learning, it plays down the part of learning and discrimination in all cultural formation (think, for example, of the effort that teenagers put into constructing a learned canon of recorded music, and of the whole pop-scholarly apparatus that goes into that construction" (1995: 68). Similarly, recalling Feld's notion of interpretive moves, Simon Frith suggests that involvement in rock and popular music:

rests on a substantial body of knowledge and an active sense of choice – musicians and audiences alike have a clear understanding of genre rules and histories, can hear and place sounds in terms of influence and source, have no hesitation about making and justifying judgements of musical meaning and value... The pedagogical difference between rock and classical music... is not that one group of musicians is taught, one untaught, but that they are taught differently, in different institutions, though often according to the same values.

(Frith, 1992a: 174-175)

Furthermore, the invocation of an 'unmediated' or 'authentic' mode of cultural interpretation – one which involves no complex 'decoding' on the part of the listener/viewer – results in a conception of 'unmediated' experience which – again,

¹⁶ Goodwin's condescending comments on "Ronstadt fans" (1991: 188), noted above, is a case in point here.

somewhat paradoxically – can be seen to have much in common with the supposedly ‘disinterested’ nature of traditional aesthetic appreciation, suggesting a pair of rather odd bedfellows. Bruce Baugh (1993), for example, in a manner similar to Chambers, proposes an ‘aesthetics of rock music’ in which – in contrast to the ‘formal’, ‘intellectual’ mode of listening ascribed to classical music – the rock music listener is understood to respond in a manner which is ‘emotional’ and ‘visceral’. In his critique of Baugh’s model, however, Stephen Davies suggests that it tends to underplay the nonformal aspects of classical music, while similarly ignoring the formal aspects of rock music, and he argues: “I doubt that a distinction can be drawn between formal and nonformal properties that will be such as to show that a person might listen in terms of the one without an awareness of the other” (1999: 196); as Davies observes, “most Western listeners can make little of the ‘nonformal’ properties of Japanese *gagaku* or Chinese opera when they encounter such music for the first time” (1999: 195). Furthermore, Davies suggests, “all music, classical as much as other kinds, produces a visceral response in those who are familiar with, and who enjoy, its style and idiom” (1999: 197).

Similarly problematic is Nicholas Cook’s distinction between “musical” and “musicological” modes of listening (1990: 152). In the case of the former, Cook claims, listening to music is “for purposes of direct aesthetic gratification”; in the latter, the purpose is “the establishment of facts or the formulation of theories” (1990: 152) – and it is the latter, ‘analytical’ mode which Cook deplores. But the fundamental problem in Cook’s model is that the two modes are posited as entirely distinct, with ‘musicological’ listening involving “some kind of judgement or behavioural response” (1990: 154), while

'musical' listening is characterized as "just listening" (1990: 160), as if the latter were direct and unmediated. In sharp contrast to this notion of 'unmediated experience', Feld's work has served to highlight the complexities involved in the processes of "musical communication" (1994a: 94): as noted in Chapter Four (pp. 190-193), in addition to reflecting upon and evaluating a piece of music, Feld suggests that listeners also engage in an elaborate comparative process of locating, categorizing, and associating the piece with other like and unlike pieces. In so doing, listeners draw upon – consciously or unconsciously – their particular knowledges of both musical form and music history in the course of ascribing meaning. And in his incisive critique of Cook's model, Lawrence Kramer pinpoints the paradoxical false dichotomy that lies behind the mutually exclusive notions of 'musical' and 'musicological' listening:

What Cook fails, crucially, to recognise is that the terms by which he opposes the regime of formalist aesthetics are themselves the historical product of formalist aesthetics. Only with the development of the normative concept of aesthetic pleasure – a higher pleasure structured by the formal design of the artwork – does the concept of a deviant, lower, unstructured pleasure become thinkable. Reversing the hierarchy, so that the unstructured pleasure is idealized as a primary, vital force and the structured pleasure demoted to a pedantic illusion, only perpetuates the regime that it means to oppose.

(Kramer, 1992c: 65)¹⁷

Lydia Goehr makes a similar point in her critique of the claims for "autonomous music form", suggesting that "to assert utter separability from the ordinary world without involvement in it is just as dangerous as asserting that music must be reduced to

¹⁷ Kramer's astute critique is equally relevant in the case of Goodwin's 'populist' claims for a "mode of listening" unique to popular music – which he asserts is the "antithesis" of an art music 'mode of listening' (1991: 184) – as well as in the case of McClary's 'anti-modernist' valorization of Earth, Wind and Fire, and her mystified notion of the "experiences of the body" (1989: 80).

involvement without any form of separation. Both deprive music of its meaning” (1994: 110).

In this sense, then, the critique of double-coding as ‘patronising’, and the consequent positing – whether implicitly or explicitly – of an ‘authentic’, ‘unstructured’ mode of cultural interpretation can be understood to be highly problematic. As noted above, the notion of an ‘unmediated’ response – whether ‘authentic’, ‘emotional’, or ‘visceral’ – remains just as mystified as the quasi-religious notion of the aesthetic which informs traditional musicological discourse. But more significantly, perhaps, in terms of the assumptions which it makes regarding the interpretive competences of ‘ordinary’ people – i.e. those ‘who speak without inverted commas’; ‘Ronstadt fans’; the ‘rock music listener’; those who ‘just listen’ – such a critique runs the risk of being itself patronising, serving, by way of hierarchical inversion, simply to reinscribe ‘elitist’ notions of a higher level of formal, structured interpretive skills.

This is by no means to suggest that ‘formal, structured interpretive skills’ are *necessarily* ‘elitist’: on the contrary, in common with Frith, Feld and Davies, I would argue that such skills are fully implicated in *all* cultural encounters. Rather, it is to suggest that it is the privileging of such skills in relation to *particular* cultural forms, styles, or genres which is inherently elitist – and here I use the term ‘elitist’ not in its more common, ideologically-coded fashion, but drawing instead on the strict dictionary definition of ‘elite’, understood as ‘that which is chosen’.¹⁸ On the basis of this usage, then, a populist

¹⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition.

position which rejects such skills can be understood as just as elitist as those positions which valorize them.

As Stephen Davies has noted, "Music is patterned sound, and one can hear the music in the noise it makes only by detecting its pattern... This way of listening is not any more 'intellectual' than is hearing a sentence in one's mother tongue with understanding. In both cases, a great deal of enculturation lies behind the process" (1999: 195). In a manner similar to that of hearing and understanding musical structure, the 'decoding' of parody and irony demands, as Feld suggests, a high degree of 'analytical prowess' that is similarly the result of a process of enculturation. Noting the manner in which the irony in much British political satire is "baffling" to her Canadian sensibilities, Linda Hutcheon argues:

this is not a matter of in-group elitism; it is merely a matter of different experiential and discursive contexts... It is less that irony creates communities, then, than discursive communities make irony possible in the first place... The multiple discursive communities to which we each (differently) belong cannot be reduced to any single component... Of course, things like class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference are involved, but so too are nationality, neighbourhood, profession, religion, and all the other micro-political complexities of our lives to which we may not even be able to give labels.

(Hutcheon, 1994: 18)¹⁹

The notion of discursive communities, and the associated concept of discursive or communicational competence, has its roots in sociolinguistics,²⁰ although, as the comments of Davies and Hutcheon imply, these concepts can be usefully generalized to the broader arena of musical and cultural interpretation. This is not to suggest, however, that the signifying potential of music can be understood simply in discursive, linguistic

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion of the 'enabling' role of discursive communities in the understanding of irony, see Hutcheon (1994: 89-115).

²⁰ For a useful summary, see Coulthard (1985). See also Fairclough (1989, 1992).

terms.²¹ Rather, it is to argue that musical communication and meaning must be understood, as Feld proposes, to be a process of “symbolic engagement” (1994a: 94) between the sounds of music and socially situated listeners, each of whom belongs to a range of overlapping discursive communities. More significantly, however, nor is it to imply that discursive communities are socially constituted in a ‘neutral’ or relativistic fashion. In the case of our understanding of ironic communication, for example, although Hutcheon is surely correct to deny the notion of ‘in-group elitism’ – on the basis that “the discursive community *precedes* and *makes possible* the comprehension of irony” (1994: 94; emphasis in original) – it is also essential to observe, paraphrasing Orwell, that if all discursive communities are equal, then some discursive communities are more equal than others. In other words, our membership of different discursive communities always carries with it inequalities of power, status, and privilege: as Hutcheon suggests, “In the economy of exchange that we call irony, there is always a power imbalance” (1994: 95).

The range of issues discussed above raises a number of significant questions in terms of cultural evaluation and canon formation, not least in the understanding of ‘value’ which follows from the rejection of both the traditional notion of the mystified, ineffable aesthetic and the equally untenable populist notion of unmediated, authentic experience. As we have seen, those who would mount a critique of the established canon of music – which is predicated primarily on the former – will find no useful recourse in the latter. These are issues that I will pursue further in the following sections.

²¹ On the inadequacy of ‘language-based’ theories of music, see Shepherd and Wicke (1997).

Cultural Value, Canons, and Positionality

At this stage, it is worthwhile reiterating a point made above: that interpretive skills – at varying levels of expertise or ‘analytical prowess’, depending on the nature of our enculturation and our membership of discursive communities – are *always* implicated in the process of ‘meaning-making’ in our apprehension of cultural forms; and, further, that such skills are no more or less ‘valuable’ when applied to particular cultural forms rather than others. Such an understanding, then, appears to imply a notion of ‘value’ that is discursively located at the level of individual ‘competence’. In many respects, I have little objection to such an approach: indeed, given the preceding discussion, it seems unremarkable – perhaps even irrefutable – to propose that our personal pleasure, gratification, or ‘meaning-making’ in the apprehension of cultural forms is linked to the nature and extent of our knowledge and understanding of the codes and techniques employed in their production and dissemination, and to the skill with which we are able to ‘decode’ or translate such codes and techniques.

Indeed, we may want to go further, and suggest that there are certain aspects of human perception and psychology which predispose us to particular responses, whether visually in terms of colour and form, or aurally in terms of our relationship to the natural overtone series (or, in fact, in terms of any number of other physical, perceptual, and psychological attributes). Such responses are not my concern here, however, since it is clear that these responses – if understood as ‘aesthetic’, and hence ‘valuable’, rather than simply ‘human’ – are neither generalizable (in terms of the discursive – and hence fundamentally *social* – canonic privileging of certain forms over others), nor entirely

individualistic (given that their rootedness in *shared*, species-specific attributes logically precludes their understanding in terms of the singular ineffability of personal ‘preference’).

Furthermore, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues:

such presumably biophysiological mechanisms will always operate differentially in different environments and interact with a broad range of other variables (historical, cultural, situational, etc.) and, therefore, the experience of literary and aesthetic value cannot be accounted for, reduced to, or predicted by them.

(Smith, 1998: 15)²²

What follows, then, from such an understanding of these responses – i.e. an understanding which regards them simply as ‘human’ attributes, rather than in any way intrinsically ‘aesthetic’ or ‘valuable’ – is that although the study of such responses may tell us a great deal about human cognition and psychology, it will tell us nothing – literally nothing – about the manner in which these responses have been mobilized – historically, socially, institutionally – in the service of the discursive construction – whether traditionalist or populist – of a ‘mystified’ aesthetic: an aesthetic which, for all its mystification, must also be understood as a profoundly political, profoundly ideological, and profoundly *real* phenomenon: *real*, that is, if only in terms of its social, institutional and canonic actuality. Hence, the individual understanding of ‘value’ suggested above should not be confused with the more broadly discursive construction of what I am calling ‘cultural value’ at the social and institutional level, whether in terms of the processes of

²² It is worthwhile noting here that I differ from Smith when she suggests that what is understood as “aesthetic value” may be a function of “biophysiological mechanisms” (1988: 15). There seems little reason to employ the problematic and ideologically loaded language of ‘aesthetics’ in discussing such mechanisms. For a critique of Smith’s understanding of ‘aesthetic value’, see Guillory (1993: 283-303).

canon formation within the academy or the decision-making mechanisms of cultural policy. As Linda Hutcheon has argued:

Art, theory, criticism are not really separable from the institutions (publishing houses, galleries, libraries, universities, and so on) which disseminate them and which make possible the very existence of the field of discourse and its specific discursive formations (the system of norms or rules that govern a certain way of thinking and writing at a certain time and place). So, when we speak of discourse, there is also a concrete material context implied.

(Hutcheon, 1988: 185)

It is for this reason, then, that my interest lies in the ‘question of canons’ and the notion of ‘cultural value’ rather than in ‘mystical’ questions of aesthetics or aesthetic value. And it is in this sense – and only in this sense – that there is perhaps a form of agreement between Hugh Curtler and myself. Curtler, we will recall from Chapter Two (pp. 79-80), warns against the ‘postmodern’ tendency “to confuse values with evaluation” (1997: 166). The tendency is one that I, too, am concerned to avoid, although I would want to reverse the terms of the equation and suggest instead that the problem is the traditionalist one of confusing evaluation with ‘values’. Indeed, I would want to go further, and reject the notion of ‘values’ – conceived of in either an ‘absolute’ or ‘aesthetic’ sense – on the basis that ‘values’ are *always* the result of evaluation: as John Frow suggests, “value is always *value-for*, always tied to some valuing group” (1995: 143; emphasis in original).

Two examples, one drawn from the visual arts and one from classical music, will serve to illustrate this point. The work of Michael Baxandall (1988) on fifteenth-century Italian painting suggests that the contemporary aestheticization of these cultural forms as

autonomous works of art represents a misunderstanding and misinterpretation not only of their social function, but also of their formal and artistic qualities. Baxandall's careful reconstruction of social and historical context identifies a wide range of factors which served to influence the content and form of the paintings of this period, suggesting that "a fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship" (1988: 1). Baxandall notes, for example, the extent of the involvement of the patron or client, as indicated in the often highly detailed contracts which accompanied a commissioning request: these contracts usually specified the theme of the painting, and were often explicit about the use of colours, especially ultramarine:

After gold and silver, ultramarine was the most expensive and difficult colour the painter used. There were cheap grades and dear grades and there were even cheaper substitutes... To avoid being let down about blues, clients specified ultramarine; more prudent clients stipulated a particular grade – ultramarine at one or two or four florins an ounce. The painters and their public were alert to this and the exotic and dangerous character of ultramarine was a means of accent that we, for whom dark blue is probably no more striking than scarlet or vermilion, are liable to miss... the contracts point to a sophistication about blues, a capacity to discriminate between one and another, with which our own culture does not equip us.

(Baxandall, 1988: 11)

Furthermore, as Baxandall suggests, "money is very important in the history of art. It acts on painting not only in the matter of a client being willing to spend money on a work, but in the details of how he hands it over" (1988: 1).²³ In addition to the use of colours, Baxandall also notes the value which was placed on the "skilful working of materials" as a "conspicuous index of consumption" (1988: 15-16): this involved skill not only at the level of brushwork and use of materials but also in terms of the ability to satisfy "the period

²³ See also Mattick (1993c).

eye” (1988: 29). Hence, Baxandall suggests, many Quattrocento paintings played on the public skill of “gauging”:

It is an important fact of art history that commodities have come regularly in standard-sized containers only since the nineteenth century: previously a container – the barrel, sack or bale – was unique, and calculating its volume quickly and accurately was a condition of business. How a society gauged its barrels and surveyed its quantities is important to know because it is an index of its analytical skills and habits.

(Baxandall, 1988: 86)

And the fifteenth century painter made full use of these skills and habits, employing shapes and proportions which invited the viewer, in turn, to make use of such skills:

the painter... depended on his public’s general disposition to gauge. To the commercial man almost anything was reducible to geometrical figures underlying any surface irregularities – the pile of grain reduced to a cone, the barrel to a cylinder or a compound of truncated cones... and so on. This habit of analysis is very close to the painter’s analysis of appearances... As a man gauged a bale, the painter surveyed a figure. In both cases there is a conscious reduction of irregular masses and voids to combinations of manageable geometric bodies. A painter who left traces of such analysis in his painting... was leaving cues his public was well equipped to pick up.

(Baxandall, 1988: 87-89)

Noting also the emphasis which Quattrocento education laid on certain mathematical skills, including rules of proportion, Baxandall argues that “the status of these skills in his society was an encouragement to the painter to assert them playfully in his pictures. As we can see, he did. It was for *conspicuous* skill his patron paid him” (1988: 102; emphasis in original). The painter’s use of colours and the awareness of the viewer’s gauging and proportional skills are only two examples which Baxandall cites of the contextual knowledge which is essential in interpreting and understanding fifteenth century Italian painting; but it should be clear from these examples that any autonomous aestheticization of these forms as somehow independent of their socio-historical contexts and the

specificities of the ‘period eye’ is simply a wilful misinterpretation of the complexities of cultural production.²⁴ As Baxandall suggests: “An old picture is the record of visual activity. One has to learn to read it, just as one has to learn to read a text from a different culture, even when one knows, in a limited sense, the language: both language and pictorial representation are conventional activities” (Baxandall, 1988: 152).

The reason for this brief detour through Quattrocento painting is that I want to propose that Baxandall’s methodology is more broadly generalizable, suggesting that the complex interplay of text and context is an issue which is central to *all* artistic and cultural forms, whether those of fifteenth century painting, classical music, or contemporary popular culture. Notwithstanding the discourse of aesthetic autonomy which informs the canon of Western art music, issues of patronage and money have been no less relevant in the history of this tradition, and the ultimately contingent and culturally-located nature of Western musical evaluation is illustrated in a marvellous anecdote recounted by Christopher Small:

a fine Albanian folk musician... was taken, as a first taste of western concert music, to hear Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. After much persuasion he gave his opinion of the work, which was, ‘Fine – but very very plain’... The Albanian was neither arrogant nor incompetent. He just had a different standard. The unified, oversimplified rhythm could not possibly satisfy his eastern ears... He was presented with ‘divisive’ rhythms where quite mechanically a stress preceded every two or three unstressed units of equal duration as ONE-two-three – an impoverishment of European music owed to the growing impact of chordal harmony.

(Small, 1980: 16-17)

²⁴ Baxandall also notes the centrality of religion and religious imagery, as well as the social activities of dancing and preaching.

The anecdote serves to highlight the ‘naturalized’ nature of the tonal-harmonic tradition in Western ‘classical’ music, and Small suggests that “we need not look for anything in the physics of sound to explain the feeling of expectation and satisfaction, tension and relaxation” which we obtain from the harmonic progressions peculiar to this tradition (1980: 15).²⁵ Rather, Small argues, “it is a purely linguistic convention, a syntax” which engenders “a purely learnt response; people from other musical cultures, even musicians, who are unfamiliar with the syntax of this music, on hearing the most ravishing (to our ears) harmonic progressions of Schubert, remain as unmoved as a monolingual Englishman hearing Homer read in ancient Greek” (Small, 1980: 15-16). Small’s point is one that Roger Scruton might do well to heed: recall that Scruton insists that in Schubert’s songs there is an “utter simplicity... a rightness... which opens the possibilities of feeling” (1997: 389-390).²⁶ David Gramit has noted the prevalence of “the conviction that Schubert’s songs achieve an immediacy of emotional expression that has no precedent”:

That immediacy removes the lied from any particular historical or social context and places it in unmediated contact with the individual listener, who can then be moved by, analyze, converse with, or simply luxuriate in the song as an autonomous work of

²⁵ For many critics, of course, Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* remains one of the pinnacles of Western musical achievement, and Tolstoy’s categorization of the *Ninth* as “bad art” (Tolstoy, 1962: 249), still arouses fierce passions. Fred Inglis, in his apparent horror at the Russian author’s rejection of the symphony as “unmelodious, laboured, and boring”, is all too keen to concur with Tolstoy’s own acknowledgement that his lack of appreciation “may certainly be because *he* [Tolstoy] is insufficiently developed to understand and like it” (Inglis, 1993: 192; emphasis in original) – one wonders, at this point, what became of our ‘natural’ responses (see the following footnote). Similarly relevant here is the “defensive vehemence” (Gramit, 1998a: 23) of Pieter van den Toorn’s initial response to Susan McClary’s similarly ‘intemperate’ reading of the *Ninth Symphony* (see Van den Toorn, 1991; McClary, 1987).

²⁶ Recall also Fred Inglis’s similarly problematic – and similarly culture-specific – claim (quoted in Chapter One, p. 17) that “our *natural* response when we recognize great accomplishment is wondering admiration” (Inglis, 1993: 190, my italics).

art... Appropriate and rewarding though all these activities may be, the understanding of the lied that makes them possible is not 'natural' or automatic, but rather culturally determined; it is influenced by and participates in the social formation of the listener who learns so to hear lied.

(Gramit, 1998b: 180)

Lawrence Kramer makes a similar point when he argues that the lied's "origins as a popular middle-class form have been obscured by its later status as art music, which is to say, in the aesthetic era, as music that transcends its origins" (1995c: 144). Hence, noting that we cannot hope to duplicate "the experience of hearers in Schubert's lifetime", Gramit argues that any interpretation of Schubert lied – or, indeed, any musical form – must attend to "the critical role of the listener – and of the listener's socially constituted (and constituting) ideology – in constructing musical meaning" (1998b: 207). Thus, from a traditionalist perspective, in the work of Scruton for example, the discourse of immediacy and of unmediated emotional experience serves both as a shield to protect the alleged aesthetic autonomy of the canon of high culture, and as a weapon with which to attack the contextual contingency of contemporary culture.

But if aesthetic autonomy is an idealist myth, then contextual contingency is a social fact: one that applies equally to *all* music. 'Value', therefore, is not a quality which is inherent in a canonized work; rather, we must look for 'value' in the canons and the processes of canon formation (including the ideology of aesthetic autonomy) which serve to ascribe 'value' and to empower 'valuable' works: as Michael Bérubé has observed of the literary canon: "we... confer 'value' on works every time we assign them the aesthetic function... It follows, then, that even the most apolitically formalist interpretations of literary works constitute an assignation of 'value'" (1992a: 9).

It must be noted, however, that the apparently unproblematic notion that ‘value’ is always ‘value-for’ carries with it a potentially disabling cultural relativism that demands several points of clarification. Given the point made above with regard to the inequalities of power relations between different discursive communities, I would want to deny the relativism inherent, for example, in the notion of ‘interpretive communities’ in the work of Stanley Fish (1980, 1989), and the problematic claim, as Christopher Norris summarizes it, “that truth is *always and only* what counts as such within a given ‘interpretive community’” (Norris, 1992: 64; emphasis in original; see also Norris, 1990b). Similarly, I would want to resist the “happy relativism” (Frow, 1995: 137) of Zygmunt Bauman’s view of postmodernism as an “unlimited number of models of order, each one guaranteed by a relatively autonomous set of practices” (1987: 3). Frow observes the strengths and weaknesses of such a model:

This ‘postmodern’ model ... [has] the merit of openness towards the discrepant and often disdained structures of value of different social groups... it refuses to maintain the privilege of any one culture over any other. But this openness can easily become a kind of contempt in its own right, since it entails a certain indifference towards the otherness of other domains; no domain of value has anything to say to or about any other, and indeed there is an active prohibition on intercommunication; each domain is hermetically sealed from each of the others.

(Frow, 1995: 138)

It is this form of relativism, then, which – somewhat paradoxically – can serve to reinforce the ‘absolutism’ and universality of the traditional, institutionalized canon, since the lack of communication between the domains results in the dominant discourse no longer having to justify or legitimate itself: recall Citron’s critique of the “false universality” of Western art music (1993a: 26), noted in Chapter Three (p. 136).

Similarly, it is this same relativism which confirms the inadequacy of simplistic canonic inversion in the populist critique of the established canon, since the inversion simply confirms the mutual exclusivity of the distinct domains, thereby, as Anderson has suggested, ‘necessarily leav[ing] its conventional practitioners in place’ (1992: 243). There is, then, as Frow suggests, “no escape from the discourse of value, and no escape from the pressure and indeed the obligation to treat the world as though it were fully relational, fully interconnected” (1995: 134). Rejecting the ‘happy relativism’ noted above, as well as the sociological claim to “methodological objectivism” – which “works as a denial of the principle that ‘culture’ is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, *between* subjects in relations of power (1995: 136; emphasis in original) – Frow proposes the concept of the “regime of value” as a “mediating institutional mechanism” (1995: 144-145).²⁷ In Frow’s terms:

Regimes of value are... relatively autonomous of and have no directly expressive relation to social groups... The concept of regime expresses one of the fundamental theses of work in cultural studies: that no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value, and function are always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms of signification.

(Frow, 1995: 145)²⁸

²⁷ In what follows, I will draw extensively on the discussions of cultural value in Frow (1995) and Smith (1988).

²⁸ Frow notes the similarity between the concept of the regime of value and Bennett’s concept of the ‘reading formation’: “a set of discursive and intertextual determinations that organize and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another by constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways” (quoted in Frow, 1995: 145). See also Bennett’s discussion of “discourses of value” (1990: 150).

This suggests, then, that there is no simple, homologous relationship between, for example, regimes of value and discursive communities: rather, as Frow suggests “every act of reading, and hence every act of ascribing value, is specific to the particular regime that organizes it” (1995: 145). Hence, if the history of shifting canonic hierarchies and changing modes of cultural evaluation can be understood as the history of the intellectual universalization of specific (but equally changeable) knowledges and competences as norms – which can then be used “to totalize the cultural field” (Frow, 1995: 169) – then the task for the cultural analyst becomes that of interrogating the complex series of interrelationships between incommensurate evaluative regimes.

The recognition of this incommensurability, and the accompanying acknowledgment that value is always ‘value-for’, need not be interpreted as a position of absolute relativism, however, but rather, to paraphrase Charles Jencks, as one of “relative absolutism” (Jencks, 1989: 59): as Frow suggests, “judgements of value are always choices made within a particular regime” (1995: 151). Barbara Herrnstein Smith elaborates the point: “Although... *relative* uniformities and constancies are just that and therefore not, strictly speaking, absolute, nevertheless, to the extent that they operate within some community as *in effect* unconditional and universal, they may be said to be ‘contingently absolute’, and norms based on them can be said, accordingly, to be ‘contingently objective’” (Smith, 1988: 182; emphasis in original). Smith is quick to point out, however, that this need not signal a return to “traditional objectivist/axiological formulations or neo-objectivist/communitarian ones”:

it must be remembered that a community is never totally homogenous, that its boundaries and borders are never altogether self-evident, that we cannot assume in

advance that certain differences among its members are negligible or irrelevant, and that the conditions that produced the relative unconditionality, local universality, and contingent objectivity are themselves neither fixed forever nor totally stable now.
(Smith, 1988: 182)

The understanding of literary value – which, for my purposes here, I will interpret more broadly as ‘cultural value’ – on which Smith’s observations are based is one that is especially suggestive in pursuing the project which I have proposed:

with respect to value, everything is always in motion with respect to everything else. If there *are* constancies of literary value, they will be found *in those very motions*; that is, in the relations among the variables. For, like all value, literary value is not the property of an object *or* of a subject but, rather, *the product of the dynamics of a system*.

(Smith, 1988: 15; emphasis in original)

Smith’s conceptualization of value suggests, therefore, that cultural value can be understood neither in an axiological fashion, as an inherent property of cultural texts, nor in a relativistic sense, as the product of a uniquely asocial relationship between a text and an individual listener/viewer. Rather, an understanding of cultural value as ‘the product of the dynamics of a system’ acknowledges the complex interrelationship not only of texts and contexts, but also of the range of discursive practices with which cultural texts have been – and continue to be – evaluated and legitimated. Although Smith’s own intellectual project has been accused of a problematic relativism – John Guillory, for example, characterizes her argument as “more-relativist-than-Rorty” (1993: 283)²⁹ – I would

²⁹ For a similar view, see Connor (1992). It is worthwhile noting that Smith is critical of Rorty’s neo-pragmatism: see Smith (1988: 150-184). It is interesting to note the extent to which Guillory’s own theoretical perspective is firmly grounded in the work of Bourdieu. Given Guillory’s singular faith in Bourdieu’s ‘imperialist’ objectivism, there is perhaps reason to query his charge of ‘relativism’ on the part of Smith. See Bennett (1996) for a critique of Guillory’s “more or less exclusive reliance on Bourdieu” (1996: 542).

argue that her conceptualization of value is an extremely useful one, and consistent with the aims of my own project. Moreover, rather than succumbing to relativism, it could be argued that Smith simply refuses the terms of the debate altogether: responding to charges of relativism, Smith argues that “part of what is at issue here is the viability in which the charges themselves are framed and of the entire system of conceptualizations and attendant conceptual syntax by which they are generated and through which they are articulated” (Smith, 1988: 150). What follows from such a refusal is not a position of even greater relativism, as Guillory seems to suggest, but rather a somewhat more realistic assessment of the socially contingent nature of cultural evaluation. As Frow argues:

If the concepts of validity and objectivity, which continue to be presupposed by the arguments against relativism, are rejected as vacuous, this by no means entails that judgements of value cannot be evaluated and said to be better or worse... What is entailed is that judgements of value and truth are relative to a social position of enunciation and to a set of conditions of enunciation.

(Frow, 1995: 152-153)

And an important point here is that the ‘social position of enunciation’ need not be understood simply in terms of traditionalist claims for the established canon. Noting the “uncanny symbiosis of ‘high’ culture and ‘popular’ culture, their mutually reinforcing sacrilization”, and focusing on questions of “positionality” and “institutional structures” (1995: 154-155), Frow also resists Andrew Ross’ “urging that intellectuals must learn to ‘engage’ with the anti-intellectualism of popular culture” (1995: 158; see Ross, 1989), arguing that “there are clear limits to the extent to which it is possible for intellectuals to associate themselves with anti-intellectualism” (1995: 158). Frow goes on to summarize succinctly the “central aporia... for cultural studies in confronting... questions of value”:

the impossibility either of espousing, in any simple way, the norms of high culture, in so far as this represents that exercise of distinction which works to exclude those not possessed of cultural capital; or, on the other hand, of espousing, in any simple way, the norms of 'popular' culture to the extent that this involves, for the possessors of cultural capital, a fantasy of otherness and a politically dubious will to speak on behalf of this imaginary Other... Despite its exaggerated form, this dilemma... speaks to the heart of the political difficulty of being a cultural intellectual in a world where culture is defined by its relation to one or another market in distinction.

(Frow, 1995: 158-159)³⁰

Thus, Frow suggests, "the overlap between regimes of value is the condition that makes it possible to move between incommensurate regimes, at the same time as it both produces and frustrates the will to totalizing judgement" (1995: 159). Furthermore, posing a set of "ethical and political questions: who speaks? who speaks for whom?", Frow argues that "there can be no simple refusal of the role of judge or of universal witness, since to do so is to denegate the institutional conditions, consequences, and responsibilities of intellectual work" (1995: 163). Such an approach therefore recognizes the specificities and contingencies of particular regimes of value, and has a self-reflexive awareness of the significant role that academic intellectuals play in the mediation and evaluation of the cultural field. As Frow suggests:

there is no escape from the consequences of the possession of cultural capital, just as there is no way of getting outside the game of value judgement and the game of cultural distinction... The question of our relation to regimes of value is not a personal but an institutional question. A key condition of any institutional politics however, is that intellectuals do not denegate their own status as possessors of cultural capital; that they accept and struggle with the contradictions that this entails; and that their cultural politics, right across the spectrum of cultural texts, should be openly and without embarrassment presented as their politics, not someone else's.

(Frow, 1995: 168-169)

³⁰ Frow's observations here clearly have much in common with Gripsrud's (1989) critique of a populist cultural studies – see Chapter One (p. 68).

The Myth of Interdisciplinarity: Towards an Eclecticism of Theory

Frow's work has been invaluable in clarifying the contemporary debate over cultural value, although it raises a number of significant methodological questions, not least in terms of his understanding of 'cultural intellectuals' as a "new middle class": namely, the "knowledge class" (1995: 121), which Frow links to the "structural possibility of converting knowledge into cultural capital" and the "establishment of knowledge as a central productive force" (1995: 91). Although Frow notes that any such class is "structured 'internally' by multiple splits and antagonisms", and would therefore be "*weakly formed as a class*" (1995: 124-125; emphasis in original), it is nevertheless held to have a "progressive political potential" (1995: 165).

While one might want to applaud Frow's optimistic conclusions here, they perhaps betray a degree of academic and disciplinary idealism which is hard to sustain. As Steven Connor has observed, "the quantitative indications of the increase in the production of knowledge... are not enough to demonstrate a distinctive sharing of interest or professional solidarity between the different spheres of cultural knowledge and production"; indeed, as Connor suggests, "one might set against the idea of the class of cultural intellectuals much of the evidence that Frow gathers... regarding the growing volatility of cultural uses and patterns of identification" (1996: 24).³¹

³¹ Milner (1996) offers a similar critique of Frow's conceptualization of the 'knowledge class', suggesting that "the 'liberal intelligentsia', as we once used to describe ourselves, are much better characterized by an expertise in legitimation than by possession of economically 'productive' knowledge" (1996: 80).

The ‘volatility’ that Connor identifies is nowhere more evident than in the range of intellectual and disciplinary conflicts within the contemporary academy. Too often, it seems – and contrary to Frow’s notion of ‘class-based’ solidarity – academic discourse is subject to a violent ‘all-or-nothing’ logic,³² in which the stereotypical roles available to the cultural academic tend to present themselves as a series of ideological – and ultimately false – antinomies: textualist versus contextualist; aestheticist versus materialist; elitist versus populist; relativist versus reductionist.³³ Or, worse yet, in the face of such gnostic certitude, one finds oneself cast in the role of the indecisive, fence-sitting agnostic. But if the preceding chapters have successfully illustrated the all-or-nothing logic I describe – the reductionist tendencies of much postmodern theory; the unnecessarily divisive Tomlinson-Kramer debate; McClary’s sexual and textual reductionism; the parochial populism of popular music studies – I trust that it is similarly clear by this stage that my own theoretical agnosticism need not be interpreted as either fence-sitting or indecisive.

On the contrary, my fundamental point here is that the identification and denial of the polar oppositions inherent in much contemporary academic discourse is a prerequisite for a critical, self-reflexive scholarship. Moreover, I would argue that there is, in fact, no dialectical fence for the agnostic scholar to sit upon: there is, in other words, no ‘middle ground’ to be occupied, no ‘middle course’ to be taken, and no magical theoretical

³² See Bennett (1990: 41-77) for a broader discussion of the similar ‘all-or-nothing’ logic that he identifies in contemporary philosophy and epistemology. See also Norris (1992, 1990a).

³³ To avoid any potential confusion, it is worthwhile noting that these antinomies are neither mutually exclusive nor entirely consistent in their ‘positionality’: as I have indicated in the previous chapters, reductionism comes in both textualist and contextualist guises; and, as noted above, elitism is open to both aestheticist and materialist interpretation.

synthesis to be achieved. Rather, the agnostic scholar has to think outside the antinomic framework which the ‘all-or-nothing’ logic of contemporary scholarship posits as natural and inevitable, suggesting a move towards the ‘eclecticism of theory’ which I have been proposing, and emphasizing the need for a critical, self-reflexive appraisal of the complementarity of contrasting approaches.

The nature of the academic problem that I describe is summarized succinctly by Nelson and Gaonkar: “many traditional academics [are] ideologically positioned to believe they are barely restrained by the... habits of [their] disciplines. But that is how disciplines police their boundaries, by training their members to internalize them, naturalize them, and then fancy themselves free as birds” (1996b: 2-3). The all-or-nothing logic of academic discourse – and its ‘naturalized character’ – is readily apparent in the ongoing debates between cultural studies and the fields of sociology and political economy: debates in which the lack of resolution simply emphasizes the fixity of disciplinary perspectives and the resistance to change among many discipline members.

Here, as noted in Chapter Three (p. 154), the problems move beyond ‘academic’ questions of theory and methodology to encompass ‘institutional’ questions of territoriality and positionality: a positionality perhaps of a somewhat different – if still closely related – kind than that implied by my usage up until this point, which has focused more on academic theory than academic territory. In a now folkloric anecdote in the history of cultural studies, Stuart Hall tells of the letters that he received on the day of the opening of the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham:

we received letters from members of the English department saying that they couldn’t really welcome us; they knew we were there, but they hoped we’d keep out of their

way while they got on with the work they had to do. We received another, rather sharper letter from the sociologists saying, in effect, ‘We have read *The Uses of Literacy* and we hope you don’t think you’re doing sociology, because that’s not what you’re doing at all.’

(Hall, 1990: 13)

Ironically, given the English department’s initial indifference, it was the disciplines of English and literary studies which most openly embraced cultural studies when it migrated to the United States, investing the field with a textualism that was in sharp contrast to the political imperatives of its earlier British variant.³⁴ But, arguably, the attitude of the social sciences has remained largely hostile since Hall first received his letter from the disgruntled Birmingham sociologists. Although some sociology departments have remained impervious to cultural studies’ advances, more commonly one sees a departmental structure divided – some might say riven – by the demarcation line between the ‘bean-counters’ and the ‘theory-types’ – and never the twain shall meet. Nelson and Gaonkar have suggested that sociology offers the foremost contemporary example of the “hopeless character” of disciplinary debates within the academy, arguing that “the homicidal confrontation between quantitative and qualitative methodologies made it inevitable that cultural studies would be positioned as yet one more opportunity for mid afternoon plotting and late night murders... a new terrain for the fratricidal struggles that have all but broken some sociology departments in two” (1996b: 8).³⁵

³⁴ A point that was noted in Chapter One (p. 66). See Goodwin and Wolff (1997) for a critique of this tendency. See also Grossberg (1993) and Turner (1990) for reviews of the early development of British cultural studies.

³⁵ On the relationship between sociology and cultural studies, see also Gray (1996) and the collection of essays in Long (1997).

In the field of political economy, the antipathy toward cultural studies has been equally strong, and the debate is one that James Carey has characterized as “the interminable conflict” (1995: 82). Nicholas Garnham summarizes the nature of the objection from the political economist’s point of view:

Political economists find it hard to understand how, within a capitalist social formation, one can study cultural practices and their political effectiveness – the ways in which people make sense of their lives and act in the light of that understanding – without focusing attention on how the resources for cultural practice, both material and symbolic, are made available in structurally determined ways through the institutions and circuits of commodified cultural production, distribution, and consumption.

(Garnham, 1995a: 71)

And, in the cultural studies corner, Lawrence Grossberg responds:

while I do agree with Garnham... that too much work in cultural studies fails to take economics seriously enough, I am also convinced that political economy – at least this version of it – fails to take culture seriously enough. And, ironically, I think it also fails to take capitalism seriously enough. Moreover, the way in which cultural studies takes economics seriously must be radically different from the assumptions and methods of political economy. For cultural studies does not believe that all forms of power can be explained by capitalist relations or in economic terms.

(Grossberg, 1995: 78)³⁶

And so it goes. On the one hand, the fear of a consumptionist, populist cultural studies; and on the other, the fear of an economicist, reductionist political economy. Both fears, to some extent, are valid; and both fears, in part, are equally unfounded. Garnham is surely correct to protest that political economy is not “necessarily either reductionist or functionalist” (1995b: 98); and Grossberg is equally correct when he states that although “some work in cultural studies has been caught up in a rather celebratory mode of

³⁶ The debate took place in the pages of *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*: see also Garnham (1995b), Carey (1995), and Murdock (1995).

populism... it is absolutely necessary to distinguish this from the more prevalent and nuanced position of cultural studies” (1995: 73-74): a position which has become increasingly evident as cultural studies leaves its early populism behind.³⁷

But the point that I want to draw from this acrimonious debate is the extent to which it serves to demonstrate the limits of any ‘happy’ interdisciplinarity. The notion of interdisciplinarity is one that has become increasingly common currency in contemporary academic literature (and one in which I myself have occasionally invested). But ultimately, ‘interdisciplinarity’ appears to be something more spoken about than practiced, found more on the page than in the institution, and the contrasting and often incompatible protocols and techniques of differing disciplines too often militate against any such ‘happy’ notion.³⁸ It was interesting to observe, for example (as noted in Chapter One, pp. 40-41), that Tony Bennett’s call for a ‘cultural policy studies’ was predicated not, as one might have expected, on a broad interdisciplinary approach to questions of cultural and institutional policy, but rather on a rejection of cultural studies commitment to “cultural critique” (1993: 83), and a turn to an ultimately reductionist model founded on a structuralist reading of Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1978). But a somewhat more pragmatic ‘solution’ to the problem is evident in Tom O’Regan’s critique of Bennett’s position – and it is a solution that is more generally suggestive in terms of addressing the ‘problem’ of interdisciplinarity:

³⁷ See, for example, the collections of articles in Nelson and Gaonkar (1996). See also Long (1997).
³⁸ As Jim Collins suggests: “That which escapes the academy is the unmanageability of contemporary cultural production, the divergent flows of information and evaluative energies that cannot be measured or contained by existing forms of cultural analysis, except in the forms of binary oppositions and summary judgments” (Collins, 1995: 222).

Policy and cultural criticism are contiguous styles of reasoning involving shared discursive resources and reasoning procedures, but they deploy such shared resources in different ways... So a choice cannot be made *between* policy and cultural criticism – we simply do one or the other depending upon the circumstance, sometimes we do both at the same time... our contemporary society has a number of different information-handling practices and ways of action and intervening in the world. Such diversity cannot and will not be ‘remedied’ by *fiat*, by turning cultural critics into bureaucrats, or by taking no account of the *varieties* of textual, critical and analytical techniques that are associated with the humanities and cultural studies.

(O'Regan, 1992a: 417; emphasis in original)

If we substitute ‘sociology’ (or ‘political economy’) for ‘policy’ in this quote, we can see that O'Regan's deceptively simple observation – ‘so a choice cannot be made *between* sociology and cultural criticism – we simply do one or the other depending upon the circumstance, sometimes we do both at the same time’ – points towards, not an idealized notion of a ‘happy’ interdisciplinarity, but rather to an ‘eclecticism of theory’ in which the cultural analyst draws upon the necessary analytical tools at the appropriate time – but judiciously and critically. Elizabeth Bird's reflections on the limitations of a strictly sociological model for cultural analysis perhaps point to a similar conclusion:

The problem is now not whether art or literature are related to society, but how they are related. The question of whether culture is determined, or determining, or both, is a sociological question, but it is not one which *sociology* has to answer, for it is a question which transcends the boundaries of any one discipline.

(Bird, 1979: 48; emphasis in original)

Lawrence Grossberg's observations on the question of disciplinarity in relation to the practice of cultural studies are also highly relevant here, representing a useful summary of my own methodological approach:

If cultural studies is interested in contexts as structures and milieus of power, if it is interested in the articulations between cultural practices and the noncultural, if understanding the cultural requires understanding everything that is not cultural, then any cultural studies project must transgress the institutionalized boundaries of the disciplinary organization of questions and answers... This does not mean cultural

studies must overthrow the disciplines or transcend them in a new unity. Rather it means any project will demand work, unpredictable in advance, that crosses those disciplinary lines. It means not that the cultural studies scholar knows the other disciplines (effectively becoming multi-disciplinary) but that, whenever necessary, he or she draws on the disciplines, critically and reflectively appropriating the most useful knowledge. At other times, it may be necessary to redo what other disciplines have tried to do... None of this suggests re-mastering the disciplines into a new mega-formation; rather it suggests a rigorous and pragmatic approach to gaining whatever knowledge is necessary to map a particular context and answer a strategic question.

(Grossberg, 1996: 145)

But in rejecting the ‘all-or-nothing’ logic of much academic discourse, the cultural analyst must also beware the potential pitfalls of the ‘both-and’ logic that follows from its rejection. Although Janet Wolff’s proposition, quoted in Chapter One (p. 14), that the study of art and culture “must be *both* at the level of texts *and* at the level of institutions and social process” (1990c: 110; emphasis in original) is one which has served as something of a rallying cry for my own scholarship over the last few years, it is also one which begs the question of its mode of operationalization. And if Wolff’s notion of a ‘sociological aesthetics’ represents a significant improvement on her earlier position – in which sociology had “the last word” (1993a: 109) – it poses a range of similar methodological questions: questions which have tended to remain unaddressed in Wolff’s own work. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the urge to neologize – whether Bennett’s ‘cultural policy studies’ or Wolff’s ‘sociological aesthetics’ – seems predicated on a sense of mistrust in the fields of study which serve, in part, to constitute the neologism. In place of this disciplinary ambivalence, I would argue that the solution lies in a more critical assessment of the analytical strengths and weaknesses of particular approaches, acknowledging both their scope and their limitations.

And if the oxymoronic character of the term ‘sociological aesthetics’ is ameliorated somewhat by Wolff’s contention that “aesthetics itself has to be understood as a discipline with a social history” (1993a: 105), it is perhaps simply confounded further by the claim that “art also retains an autonomy with regard to the specifically aesthetic nature of the appreciation and enjoyment of works of art” (1993a: 108). The problem here is that although it may be possible to imagine a non-reductive sociology which acknowledges the specificity of artistic and cultural forms – and one which addresses the social history of the discipline of aesthetics itself – the invocation of ‘autonomy’ and of the ‘specifically aesthetic nature’ of the appreciation of art runs the risk of reintroducing a mystified notion of the ineffable aesthetic: one which fails to acknowledge that the ineffable aesthetic is itself a relatively recent product of a specific set of discursive practices which can be historically and socially located. It is clear from the trajectory of Wolff’s work that this is not her intention; but the risk is there, nevertheless.

A similar risk is apparent in Georgina Born’s argument for the “specificity of the aesthetic” (1993: 233): although the overall trajectory of Born’s work is similarly antithetical to the notion of an autonomous aesthetic, the specifically *aesthetic* nature of the ‘aesthetic specificity’ for which Born argues remains uninterrogated. The inevitable corollary of a mystified notion of the aesthetic is a similarly mystified notion of value, in which cultural value is held to be an *inherent* characteristic of cultural forms: a position which, as I have argued above, is unsustainable. We would do well at this point to recall Lawrence Kramer’s admonition that “neither music nor anything else can be other than worldly through and through” (Kramer, 1992a: 9).

In this chapter, I have proposed an understanding of the ‘postmodern attitude’ that not only acknowledges the prevalence of irony, parody, and self-reflexivity in contemporary cultural practice, but also admits their artistic and sociopolitical potential. Furthermore, I have suggested that such an understanding is sensitive to the complex interrelationship of texts and contexts and recognizes the multifaceted interpretive skills that are involved in all cultural interactions. Rejecting mystified claims for either ‘aesthetic’ or ‘unmediated’ experience, I have argued that cultural value must be understood as socially and culturally located, the complex product of discursive practices and processes of canon formation that are mediated primarily in institutional and disciplinary terms. Acknowledging the limits of any ‘happy interdisciplinarity’, I have concluded by reiterating my pragmatic proposal for an ‘eclecticism of theory’, suggesting that such an approach holds out the prospect of a critique of the traditional canon which neither rejects the specificities of ‘high culture’ nor idealizes the sphere of ‘popular culture’: as John Guillory has argued, “the point is not to make judgement disappear but to reform the conditions of its practice” (1993: 340). In the following chapter, with the aid of several case studies in contemporary jazz, I will go on to illustrate the analytical approach that I have proposed.

Chapter Seven

The Challenge of the Past: Jazz and Its Canons – Case Studies

“The person who sees furthest into the future is likely
to be the person who sees furthest into the past.”

Bill Evans (jazz pianist and composer),
quoted in Harrison (1976: 112)

Over a number of years, the evocative proposition by Bill Evans that serves as an epigraph for this chapter has been interpreted – knowingly or unknowingly – in a variety of ways by a wide range of jazz musicians, critics, and scholars. For some, it has represented a traditionalist mantra, invoking an ultimately conservative vision of the music, entirely beholden – indeed, held hostage – to its own ‘authentic’ history, resulting in an understanding of ‘jazz’ which is narrowly reductionist (e.g. Marsalis, 1988); for others, it has served as a classicizing, canonizing statement of organicism and teleological progress, in which the various styles, schools, and genres of the music are understood to have been shaped by a cyclical process of artistic cause and effect, allowing them to be retrospectively ordered and categorized by the jazz equivalent of the periodizing, taxonomic discourses prevalent in historical musicology and traditional art history (e.g. Berendt, 1975); and for yet others, it has been read as a postmodern invitation to artistic engagement with the ‘already said’, revisiting, reassessing, reworking – and sometimes ironically ransacking – the musical past in the forging of new forms of innovation and creativity (a point to which I will return in more detail below).

The perspectives outlined above are readily apparent in the increasingly contested contemporary terrain of jazz scholarship, in which narrowly discursive constructions of jazz history and reductively formalist interpretations of jazz texts have become the subject of considerable critique and debate.¹ Drawing on the range of theoretical issues and scholarly debates surveyed in the previous chapters – and building on the proposal for an analytical ‘eclecticism of theory’ developed in Chapter Six – my theoretical and methodological objectives in this chapter are twofold: firstly, by way of an introduction, to offer a critical overview of the canons of jazz, both musical and scholarly; and secondly, to illustrate in more detail the analytical approach that I have proposed.

In the introductory section of this chapter, I will address the question of the discursive construction of the jazz canon, examining the troublesome relationship between jazz and modernism, and highlighting briefly some of the potential shortcomings of revisionist jazz scholarship. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, with specific reference to several recorded jazz performances, I will explore the manner in which the postmodern techniques of intertextuality, irony, parody, and reappropriation have manifested themselves in contemporary jazz, highlighting the complex interrelationship of texts and contexts, and illustrating the manner in which jazz performers and composers have responded to what Umberto Eco characterizes as “the challenge of the past, of the already said” (Eco, 1985a: 67).

¹ See, for example, DeVaux (1998), Gabbard (1995c, 1996b), Tomlinson (1992), Radano (1993), and Lewis (1996). See also the range of essays in Gabbard (1995a, 1995b), especially Walser (1995), Kenney (1995), Gendron (1995), and Elworth (1995).

Given the illustrative nature of these case studies, it is not my intention to undertake comprehensive analyses, but rather to offer suggestive readings that not only exemplify the proposed approach but also indicate potential avenues for future research. My reading of several recorded performances of ‘My Funny Valentine’ will proceed by way of a critique of Rob Walser’s analysis of Miles Davis’ 1964 recording of this piece, radically expanding the notion of intertextuality which Walser brings to his primarily textualist study; my reading of George Russell’s parodic arrangements of ‘You Are My Sunshine’ will locate this piece in its broader musical and socio-historical context, addressing the complex construction of musical meaning; and finally, addressing the work of Anthony Braxton and John Zorn, I will highlight not only the mutuality of text and context, but also the interplay of modernist and postmodernist techniques in their work, indicating the multifaceted nature of contemporary cultural value.

Jazz Scholarship, Jazz Canons, and the Canons of Jazz Scholarship

Until relatively recently, jazz was a music which had tended to ‘fall between the cracks’ of critical academic scholarship: historically marginalized within traditional musicology for its ‘popular’ affiliations and emphasis on improvisation rather than a fixed score, the study of jazz has been similarly – if somewhat paradoxically – peripheral to popular music studies, on the basis of its ‘high art’ associations and lack of conformity to the norms of rock and pop music – forms which, as noted in Chapter Four (pp. 205-216), tend to serve as the ‘default’ definition of ‘popular music’ within this field. Some of the earliest academic criticisms of jazz – characterized as simply another ‘pre-digested’ aspect

of the mass culture industry – are to be found in Adorno’s work, the flavour of which is typified by a brief quote from his essay ‘Perennial Fashion – Jazz’: “Anyone who allows the growing respectability of mass culture to seduce him into equating a popular song with modern art... has already capitulated to barbarism” (1981b: 127). But if Adorno’s cursory dismissals of jazz and popular music are well documented,² then so are more recent critiques of his narrow perspective.³ Moreover, writing of the 1930s Adorno-Benjamin debate over questions of ‘aura’ and mechanical reproduction, Jim Collins has noted that, rather than being “directly applicable to the present”, many of these arguments “must now be considered historically delimited and therefore likely to lead to mischaracterizations of the current situation” (1995: 22).

The contemporary neglect of jazz within popular music studies has been equally problematic: Roy Shuker’s market-based characterization of both jazz and classical music as “more selective musical forms” in comparison to “pop/rock” (1994: 18) not only neglects the quantifiable ‘popularity’ of these forms in the market place,⁴ but also – in common with much work in popular music studies, and as argued in Chapters Four and Five – fails to address the complex musical and discursive *interrelationship* of these forms.

² See, for example, Adorno (1941, 1976, 1978).

³ See, for example, Gracyk (1992) and Schonherr (1991); see also Born (1993). And see also Witkin (1998) and Wilcock (1996) for somewhat more sympathetic readings of Adorno’s perspective on jazz.

⁴ On the contemporary ‘popularity’ of classical music, see Chapter Four (pp. 215-216). The crossover between the categories of jazz and ‘easy-listening’ – although apparently anathema to jazz purists and popular music scholars alike – has been far from insignificant: Kenny G’s 1992 album *Breathless* (Arista 18646) sold over eight million copies in the U.S.A. alone (Erlewine *et al.*, 1996: 270), and his total album sales stand at over 30 million copies.

Notwithstanding this mutual scholarly neglect, however, jazz has generated an extensive literature of its own, much of it historical, biographical, and anecdotal in nature, and primarily based in journalistic criticism, often finding its expression in the form of magazine articles (many now available in collected form), record and concert reviews, and record album liner notes.⁵ But if jazz was not reliant on the formal structures of the academy as a primary factor in the early stages of canon formation, it is clear that the formation of a jazz canon has been predicated, to a very large extent, on a mode of criticism that owes much to the traditional discourses of historical musicology and musical analysis.

Prior to more recent revisionist interventions in jazz scholarship, it was something of a standard rhetorical trope to suggest that jazz, in the course of its own musical development, has paralleled the evolution of Western art music. Indeed, Scott DeVeaux has noted that “there is a certain tone of pride with which Leonard Feather and André Hodeir independently calculate that jazz has evolved at roughly twenty times the pace of European music” (1998: 499). Hodeir, for example, writes that “jazz does indeed seem to have retraced in five decades the road that European music took ten centuries to cover” (1956: 36); while Feather suggests that:

we find that a period extending from 590, when Gregory became Pope, until 1918, when Debussy died, produced developments in music for which a corresponding degree of development in jazz was accomplished between about 1897 and 1957 – a ratio of more than 1300 years against 60, which means that jazz has been evolving more than 20 times as fast.

(Feather, 1959: 37)

⁵ The somewhat more specialized field of jazz discography might also be added to this list. See Gabbard (1995c) for a review of the historical protocols of jazz scholarship. For wide-ranging collections of jazz writing, see Walser (1999), O’Meally (1998), and Gottlieb (1996).

Similarly, commenting on the transition from swing to bop, Henry Pleasants has suggested that “these romantic into modernist visions have been supported by jazz critics and have produced in jazz an accelerated history of the development of classical music” (1969: 140); and in his widely cited *The Jazz Book*, invoking an all-encompassing vision of the structural homology, Joachim-Ernst Berendt argues that:

The evolution of jazz shows the continuity, logic, unity, and inner necessity which characterize all true art... It is my conviction that the styles of jazz are genuine, and reflect their own particular times in the same sense that classicism, baroque, romanticism, and impressionism reflect their respective periods in European concert music.

(Berendt, 1975: 3-4)

In response to such homologously accelerated, periodizing rhetoric – in which “the ‘periods’ of jazz... succeed one another not at the leisurely pace of centuries, or even generations, but roughly every ten years” – DeVaux suggests mordantly that “there is a certain heedlessness, even cruelty, with which the narrative of jazz history shunts its innovators from the vanguard to stylistic obsolescence before they even reach middle age” (1998: 499). More significantly, however, such rhetoric has resulted in a teleological, and characteristically modernist, reading of the history and musical development of jazz: as DeVaux notes of the recent proliferation of jazz textbooks aimed at the college market, “there is substantive agreement on the defining features of each style, the pantheon of great innovators, and the canon of recorded music” (1998: 483).⁶ But, as DeVaux observes, “the conventional narrative of jazz history is a simplification that begs as many questions as it answers” (1998: 484).

⁶ For a typical example, see Gridley (1999).

The revisionist reply to such confident, linear tropes has been to interrogate more closely the discursive construction of jazz history, examining the complex processes of canonic re-evaluation and reformulation which have influenced and mediated the formation of jazz and its canons. This has involved a focus on significant ‘moments’ in the development of jazz, addressing the range of factors that have contributed to debates over musical value and canonicity.⁷ A significant early ‘moment’ in the history of jazz was the period in the early decades of the century when the understanding of the music began to shift from that of popular entertainment to that of art music: a shift in which the discourses of jazz criticism played a major part.⁸ The debate here was between an essentialized notion of jazz as a ‘primitive’, ‘authentic’, ‘folk’ form of black expression – a view still being expressed much later in the century (e.g. Taylor, 1978) – and an understanding of the music which privileged musical form and individual creativity, with Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington featuring as key figures in this latter scenario.

The debates between swing and bop – between the ‘Moldy Figs’ and the Modernists⁹ – in the 1940s intensified this discursive construction of jazz as an autonomous art form, representing not only a divisive conflict between the discourses of (predominantly white) populist entertainment and (primarily black) artistic innovation, but also serving, in distinctly non-divisive fashion, to legitimate jazz as an ‘organic’ tradition. As DeVeaux has suggested:

⁷ For a useful summary of several of these ‘moments’, see Harvey (1991).

⁸ See, for example, Welburn (1986) and Frith (1988c). See also Peretti (1992), and the early articles in Walser (1999).

⁹ See Gendron (1995). See also Gabbard (1996b) and DeVeaux (1997).

In the long run, it proved as much in the interests of the modernists to have their music legitimated as the latest phase in a (now) long and distinguished tradition, as it was in the interests of the proponents of earlier jazz styles (whether New Orleans jazz or swing) not to be swept aside as merely antiquarian.

(DeVeaux, 1998: 494)

But the discursive shifts in the understanding of ‘jazz’ – from a ‘folk’ music to a ‘popular’ music to an ‘art’ music’ – have been neither linear nor categorical, and the various discourses continue to co-exist and clash in an often jarring and confusing manner. In an amusing but insightful analysis of a scene from the 1957 Elvis Presley film *Jailhouse Rock*, Krin Gabbard (1996b) has noted the manner in which a portrayal of jazz as an elite form appropriated by the white intelligentsia¹⁰ – and the Presley character’s rejection of it – is accompanied on the soundtrack by bluesy trumpet playing backed by a string section. As Gabbard suggests, “It is a strange moment indeed when extradiegetic music inflected with jazz follows the hero’s stinging *rejection* of jazz” (1996b: 125).¹¹ But the discursive ambivalence and confusion that Gabbard identifies only intensified as jazz continued to expand its musical influences and resources in the following decades.

¹⁰ Gabbard quotes some typical dialogue from the scene in question: “I think Brubeck and Desmond have gone just as far with dissonance as I care to go.” “Oh, nonsense... have you heard Lennie Tristano’s latest recording? He reached outer space.” (1996b: 124).

¹¹ Gabbard continues: “Or to conceptualize the scene in another way, a popularized white appropriation of black music (Presley) is privileged over an elite white appropriation of black music (West Coast jazz) to the unobtrusive accompaniment of a middle-brow appropriation of black music (the background score)” (1996b: 125). Although Gabbard’s droll summary is not without analytical insight, his easy characterization of West Coast jazz as a white ‘appropriation’ of a specifically *black* music hints at some of the essentialist problems which attend much revisionist jazz scholarship – a point I will return to below.

Within the context of the mainstream of jazz scholarship, the discursive construction of jazz as an art form was accompanied by the employment of a range of analytical techniques that reflected the primarily modernist perspectives underlying such constructions. Indeed, as jazz began to be assimilated into the academy in the 1960s, it was most often on the basis of the familiar modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and transcendence, focusing on formalist, decontextualized readings of musical texts, and the valorization of individual artists and their exemplary contributions (e.g. Schuller, 1968, 1989; Gioia, 1988).

Hence, when jazz improvisations have been subjected to close musical analysis, it has tended to be at the expense of the specificities of the music, the very nature of the analytical tools resulting in a formalist self-fulfilling prophesy, privileging characteristics such as thematic unity and structural coherence over any alternative readings, and virtually ignoring broader questions of socio-historical context (e.g. Schuller, 1958).¹² As Gabbard has suggested, “when jazz writers perform close analysis of the music, many engage in a kind of canon-building based on paradigms that have been radically questioned in other disciplines” (1995c: 12).

¹² For critiques of this approach, see Gabbard (1995c) and (Walser, 1995). In sharp contrast to the formal, ‘syntactical’ tropes prevalent in traditional musicology (e.g. Meyer, 1956), Charles Keil’s concept of ‘participatory discrepancies’ (1994a, 1994b) represents a singular – and singularly neglected – attempt to theorize the fundamental characteristics of jazz improvisation. See also George Lewis’ (1996) discussion of the links between Cageian indeterminacy and jazz improvisation, as noted in Chapter Three (p. 148). Although Lewis’ notion of “Afrological” and “Eurological” (1996: 93) approaches to improvisation has potentially essentialist connotations, any such essentialism is denied by the breadth of his musical references. Thus, in addition to the African-American musicians of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) – and exhibiting an inclusiveness too seldom encountered in jazz writing – Lewis also cites the New York ‘downtown school’ and the work of the European ‘free’ improvisers (1996: 111-113). On improvisation, see also Bailey (1993).

Notwithstanding such criticisms, however, Alan Lewis has argued that jazz can be understood to mirror “the evolution of modern art”. Hence, contrary to those readings which, in Lewis’ view, “overestimate the strength” of the connections between “black collective consciousness and jazz”, the music is therefore held to exhibit a series of modernist characteristics:

the disassociation of its aesthetic, organizing conventions from the human center of song and dance; the exploration of new techniques and instruments at an increasingly rapid pace; and an intensification of stylistic fragmentation which, at this point in time, threatens to dissolve jazz as a musical idiom. Jazz also shares with modernism in the arts an intense individualism which is embodied in the cult of the artistic genius and, increasingly, in the subjectivism which exalts the artist’s experience as the object-discipline whose expression subordinates all artistic conventions.

(Lewis, 1987: 53-54)

Such formalist emphasis on questions of aesthetic autonomy, musical structure, and individual creative genius has done nothing other than confirm the views of many popular music scholars regarding the ‘high art’ status of jazz: a status which is explicitly asserted in those canonical characterizations of jazz which claim it as ‘America’s Classical Music’ (Sales, 1984; Taylor, 1986), or in the contributions of those commentators who claim to know ‘What Jazz Is – and Isn’t’ (Marsalis, 1988). Even the layout of many CD stores simply offers further confirmation of this categorization, ‘jazz’ being filed alongside ‘classical’ in a dedicated section which remains safely insulated from the sonic ravages of ‘popular music’. But recent revisionist jazz scholarship has offered significant critiques of such claims, highlighting the problematic nature of the relationship between jazz and modernist aesthetics.

DeVeaux, for example, characterizes Gunther Schuller's work on early jazz and swing as "a monument to the ideal of jazz as an autonomous art" (1998: 496); Bruce Johnson suggests that Gioia's work provides "an excellent example of an attempt to talk about jazz as though it is essential to situate it in the landscape of 'high art', as mapped by Modernism" (Johnson, 1993: 6); and in his incisive critique of the processes of canon formation in jazz, and recalling the arguments made in Chapter Three (p. 135-136), Gary Tomlinson suggests that:

the jazz canon has been forged and maintained according to old strategies – Eurocentric, hierarchical notions behind which the rules of aestheticism, transcendentalism, and formalism are apparent... Like the canon of European music, the jazz canon is a strategy for exclusion, a closed and elite collection of 'classic' works that together define what is and isn't jazz.

(Tomlinson, 1992: 75-76)

Noting the manner in which jazz textbooks present the 'classics' of jazz as "exemplars of timeless aesthetic value", Tomlinson suggests that "the jazz canon embodies the aestheticism that continues to circumscribe our teaching of European canons and that short-circuits our understanding of the conditions in which they are made and remade" (1992: 77). Hence, Tomlinson argues, "the jazz canon now shares all the misguided pretensions to transcendent value and meaning that characterize... [earlier European] canons" (1992: 78). Similarly, in an article addressing the 'problems of jazz discourse', Bruce Johnson has suggested that there is "a radical incompatibility between twentieth-century Modernist aesthetics and jazz" (1993: 10), a point which is further elaborated by Mark Harvey when he argues that:

While jazz evolved simultaneously with modernism, and therefore may certainly be termed a 'modern' music owing to its historical situation, it has not always partaken

of the modernist spirit. And even when doing so, the jazz tradition has selectively manifested various attributes of that movement.

(Harvey, 1991: 131)

Thus, as Harvey suggests, “although modernism elevated innovation to the level of a primary aesthetic principle and sought release from perceived limitations of tradition, jazz has always valued both its sources and its evolving tradition” (1991: 132). Contrary to the more typically modernist *negation* of modern forms, even the free jazz of the 1960s – which Harvey characterizes as “perhaps the most truly ‘modern’ of all the developments in jazz” – must be understood in terms of specific notions of innovation and tradition, encompassing both “a radically new aesthetic and a radical *reclaiming* of the larger cultural tradition of which the jazz tradition was a part” (1991: 138; my italics).¹³ Ronald Radano makes a similar point when he suggests that, by the 1960s, “free musicians had transformed the modernist aesthetic for their own uses, recasting it to assert a specifically black-oriented artistry” (1993: 109). Hence, notwithstanding DeVaux’s valid criticisms of overly-linear, ‘organicist’ conceptualizations of jazz history, these critiques of modernist aestheticism point towards an understanding of the musical specificities of jazz development, acknowledging the particular relationship of innovation and tradition which serves to characterize the music.

But if free jazz represented a discursive controversy within jazz development that refused to conform to the aesthetic dictates of modernism, there is little doubt that it served to further confirm the discursive understanding of jazz as ‘art’. The controversy

¹³ See, for example, Jost (1981), Wilmer (1977), Kofsky (1970) and Thomas (1995). See also Budds (1990).

over free jazz, then, is perhaps best understood as an *intradiscursive* debate: i.e. as a debate *within* the discourse of ‘art’, in which – in a manner analogous to conceptual art’s rejection of earlier forms of artistic modernism (see Chapter Two, pp. 124-126) – an avant-garde, ‘ultra-modernist’ gesture served to challenge earlier modernist conceptualizations of jazz. Hence, although free jazz was, indeed, a controversial musical development – and one which was often accompanied by a radical black political agenda – it was not one which ultimately challenged the status of jazz as ‘art’. On the contrary, for some critics, it simply served to confirm modernist aesthetic notions of avant-garde progress and change.¹⁴

It was perhaps Miles Davis’ fusion music of the late 1960s and early 1970s which generated one of the most significant contemporary *interdiscursive* debates within jazz, highlighting the manner in which questions of cultural value have been central to the construction and mediation of the jazz canon. In this case, in contrast to (and in a fascinating reversal of) earlier discursive debates – in which established constructions of jazz as either a ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ form were challenged by its claims as ‘art’ – the discursive point of issue was the challenge to the (by then, well-established) understanding of jazz as an ‘art’ form by the ‘threat’ of ‘pop’. The most common criticisms of Davis in

¹⁴ Although the avant-garde spirit of 1960s free jazz continues to survive in the work of American artists such as David S. Ware and Charles Gayle, it is interesting to note the extent to which – and in contrast to its earlier asceticism – many of the free improvisers of the British and European scenes have increasingly turned to a range of ‘postmodern’ techniques and practices: the work of the Clusone Trio (e.g. on the 1993 CD *Soft Lights and Sweet Music*; Hat Art 6153) and Derek Bailey’s recent recording with the ‘free-funk’ rhythm section of Jamaaladeen Tacuma and Calvin Weston (on the 2000 CD *Mirakle*; Tzadik 7603) are excellent cases in point here.

this period were that he had ‘sold out’ to commercialism, and that the ‘bastardized’ music he was playing was no longer ‘jazz’. Stanley Crouch, for example, characterizes Davis as “the most brilliant sellout in the history of jazz... Davis turned butt to the beautiful in order to genuflect before the commercial” (1990: 30); and, for Amiri Baraka, fusion was simply “dollar-sign music” or “new-style mood-music” (1987: 177-178). The entry on Miles Davis in *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Jazz* (Case and Britt, 1978) offers a fine example of the exclusionary nature of the jazz canon, and emphasizes the highly *non*-arbitrary nature of generic labelling and categorization: “[In 1969], Miles cut what, from a jazz fan’s viewpoint, was to be his last album (*In a Silent Way*). Although labels are arbitrary, Miles Davis’ subsequent output is of little interest to the jazz record collector” (Case and Britt, 1978: 59). Hence, in turning to the commercial, ‘commodified’ world of rock as a musical influence, fusion was understood by many observers as an aberrant step in the evolution of a ‘pure’ or autonomous jazz.¹⁵

However, citing the work of Crouch, Baraka, John Litweiler (1984), and Martin Williams (1989), Tomlinson refutes the charges of ‘selling-out’ levelled at Davis by these authors, suggesting that such charges simply represent an “antipopulist chauvinism”, amounting to “elitism pure and simple, to a snobbish distortion of history by jazz purists attempting to insulate their cherished classics from the messy marketplace in which culture has always been negotiated” (1992: 82). Thus, Tomlinson argues – in a proposition that

¹⁵ Noting a similar – if perhaps less virulent – critical response to the ‘funky’ hard bop styles of the 1950s – characterized as “regressive” by the critic Martin Williams (quoted in DeVaux, 1998: 509) – DeVaux suggests that “dalliance with popular trends seemed to betray the movement of jazz as an art music toward complexity and intricacy” (1998: 502).

has implications far beyond the world of fusion – “music created with an eye to eternal genius and blind to the marketplace is a myth of European Romanticism sustained by its chief offspring, modernism” (1992: 83).¹⁶ Moreover – and contrary to the notion of a populist ‘sell-out’ – it is worthwhile noting that many of Davis’ fusion experiments, particularly those of the early to mid-1970s, represented some of the most uncompromising music of his entire career.¹⁷ As Tomlinson suggests, then, “the fusion mix as a whole challenges, with an aggressiveness matched only by some of the free jazz of the early and mid-1960s, the ‘verities’ of earlier jazz” (1992: 87).

Notwithstanding Tomlinson’s comments, however, the emphasis on collective improvisation in Davis’ fusion music can be understood to suggest links not only with the radical innovations of free jazz, but also to hearken back to an even older jazz tradition. In the liner notes to John Coltrane’s 1965 recording of *Ascension*¹⁸ – a paradigm of 1960s free jazz – the saxophonist Archie Shepp makes these links explicit: “The precedent for what John did here goes all the way back to New Orleans, where the voicings were

¹⁶ Contrary to the narrow chauvinism of those critics identified by Tomlinson, it is worthwhile noting that Berendt’s work (1975) is an interesting exception to the rule here, representing an early inclusion of fusion in the jazz canon. See also Coryell and Friedman (1978). And see Nicholson (1998) for a contemporary history of the field. Lee Brown has noted that the continuing contemporary contempt for fusion results in some unusual bedfellows: neo-conservatives such as Marsalis and Crouch; avant-gardists such as the Chicago AACM; and – with the obvious exception of Tomlinson – many of the revisionist scholars of what Brown characterizes as the ‘critical theory of jazz’, in which “late-century fusion is apparently so far beneath contempt that it is barely mentioned” (Brown, 1997: 328). The exclusion is one that lends a degree of irony to revisionist claims of traditionalist ‘essentialism’.

¹⁷ Hear, for example, *Live-Evil* (1970; Columbia 65135) or *Agharta* (1975; Columbia 65348), neither of which is readily categorizable as ‘mood-music’. Indeed, further confounding the charge of ‘selling-out’, some critics have noted the explicit links between Miles’ music of this period – especially the 1972 album *On the Corner* (Columbia 65343) – and the work of Stockhausen: see Bergstein (1992) and Carr (1982: 211-213).

¹⁸ On Impulse A-95.

certainly separate even though the group idea held. This is like a New Orleans concept, but with 1965 people” (quoted in Spellman, 1965). Here, then, is a clear statement of the avant-garde’s ‘reclaiming’ of the jazz tradition that Mark Harvey suggests, linking the collective improvisation of New Orleans jazz with the techniques of free jazz, both of which, in turn, can be understood to have influenced fusion. Noting the complex, dialogical interaction of musical, racial, and contextual factors in Davis’ fusion music, Tomlinson suggests that this music therefore represents “a logical outgrowth of [Davis’] earlier musical development and the mediating concerns expressed in it” (1992: 87).

Notwithstanding its earlier renunciation – and in line with an appropriately accelerated version of Nicholas Slonimsky’s rule of thumb regarding the initial rejection and ultimate canonization of artistic innovation¹⁹ – it is fascinating to observe the manner in which fusion has now been largely – if not necessarily comfortably – accommodated within the jazz canon: over the last few years virtually all of Miles Davis’ music from the 1970s (much of it previously unavailable, at least in North America and Europe) has been remastered and lavishly repackaged as part of the Columbia Jazz Masterpieces series;²⁰ similarly, most jazz textbooks now conclude – although still often somewhat unwillingly, it seems – with a section on fusion or ‘jazz-rock’;²¹ and, as a final point, it is interesting to

¹⁹ Slonimsky suggests that ‘a modernistic monstrosity in 20 years becomes a sophisticated curiosity, and in another 20 years becomes a modern masterpiece’. (On the recording of ‘Heavy Aspirations’ by Charles Amirkhanian, on the 1974 album *10+2: 12 American Text Sound Pieces*, 1750 Arch Records, 1752).

²⁰ A point which simply emphasizes the fact that academic scholars and critics have no monopoly on the process of canon formation.

²¹ This is not to suggest that the canonic fences have been completely removed, however, and there remains a substantial discursive line between ‘classic’ fusion of the Miles variety and its more recent ‘light’ manifestations, in the form of Spyro Gyra or Kenny G (see DeVeaux, 1998: 506-507).

note the more recent debate over Bill Laswell's remixing of Davis' fusion music,²² the latter's now canonic status only being confirmed by the charges of 'blasphemy' levelled at the former.²³

The 'chauvinism' and 'elitism' which Tomlinson identifies in the fusion debate is also readily apparent in more recent debates within jazz, especially in terms of the 'neo-conservatism' evident in the involvement of Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch in the Jazz at Lincoln Center program.²⁴ In this case, a highly restricted and often racially-motivated understanding of the 'classical' jazz canon has been mobilized in support of a high-profile, publicly-funded jazz series within a major cultural institution.²⁵ As Scott DeVeaux has noted, "what distinguishes the neoclassicist attitude is... its heavy-handed

²² On the 1998 CD *Panthalassa: The Music of Miles Davis 1969-1974; Reconstruction and Mix Translation by Bill Laswell* (Columbia 67909). Hear also *Panthalassa: The Remixes* (1999; Columbia 69897), on which a range of contemporary producers and DJs offer further remixes of these tapes. Tomlinson has noted Amiri Baraka's shifting position on Davis' fusion music (1992: 84), and it is interesting to note that the CD booklet notes for *Panthalassa* include a brief essay by Baraka in which he suggests – echoing Tomlinson's analysis – that "fusion can be seen as a logical motion of Miles' American pop-connected aesthetic" (Baraka, 1998).

²³ See, for example, the discussions in Ouellette (1998) and Corbett (1998). The key point here, however, is that, other than in their finally released versions, there were no 'authentic' Davis performances for Laswell to commit blasphemy upon, since all of these performances were studio creations, assembled and edited by Davis and producer Teo Macero from hours of recordings. Furthermore, rather than being 'blasphemous', it could be argued that Laswell's remixes simply serve to confirm Davis' musical prescience, the remixed music, in my view, sounding more 'contemporary' than much of the techno, drum 'n' bass, and jungle which it ultimately served to inspire.

²⁴ For wide-ranging, and generally critical, discussions of this phenomenon, see Lees (1994), Nisenson (1997), and Porter (1997b). For a cautiously alternative reading, see Gray (1997).

²⁵ Jazz at Lincoln Center has recently announced plans for a new \$103 million, 100,000-square-foot performing facility designed specifically for jazz. Somewhat ominously, Marsalis is quoted as saying that "The whole space is going to be dedicated to the feeling of swing". (See the press release of 23 May 2000, on the Jazz at Lincoln Center website: <http://www.jazzatlincolncenter.org/jalc/news/000523news.html>).

attempt to regulate the music of the present through an idealized representation of the past” (1998: 504). In somewhat less circumspect fashion, Lee Brown has characterized Marsalis as a “blatant canonizing elitist” (1997: 328). But perhaps the most incisive contribution to the debate has come from Miles Davis – a ‘non-traditional’ but nonetheless canonical figure derided by both Crouch and Marsalis.²⁶ Commenting on a speech made by Marsalis at the 1984 Grammy Awards, Davis observed: “He sounded to me like he’s supposed to be the savior of jazz. Sometimes people speak as though someone asked them a question. Well, nobody asked him a question” (quoted in Lees, 1994: 227).

Marsalis’ positioning in this debate is somewhat problematic for much revisionist jazz scholarship: while the stereotypical figure of the white canonizing elitist presents a relatively easy target, the figure of the *black* canonizing elitist offers a somewhat different challenge, and Lee Brown has noted the extent to which Marsalis’ conservative rhetoric simply fails to be addressed by much of this scholarship, especially that scholarship which otherwise focuses heavily on issues of race and ethnicity. Hence, although much of the recent revisionist work in jazz studies has been invaluable in clarifying many of the issues highlighted above, some of this work has not been without its own significant problems. Citing the collections edited by Gabbard (1995a, 1995b), Lee Brown has offered a pointed critique of what he characterizes as the “Afrocentric essentialism” of much “critical theory

²⁶ See Crouch’s comments on Davis above (p. 329). Despite the obvious influence, Marsalis has been quoted as saying “[Miles] was never my idol. I resent what he’s doing because it gives the whole scene such a letdown... Then he sits up and talks about how he listens to Journey and Frank Sinatra. He’s just co-signing white boys, just tomming”. Responding to Marsalis’ comments, and noting that “he’s got a lot of technique, but that’s about it”, Davis remarked “Without me, [he’d] be all *Flight of the Bumble Bee*” (quoted in Lees, 1994: 227-228).

of jazz” (1999: 236).²⁷ Indicating a troublesome academic strategy which is familiar from my own reviews of revisionist cultural theory in the previous chapters, Brown notes the tendency in much of this work simply to substitute an equally reductionist “externalist” or contextualist emphasis on issues of race and ethnicity for the previously narrow “internalist” focus on aesthetic autonomy (1999: 239). Although the revisionist emphasis on racial issues certainly represents a necessary corrective to the often ‘colour-blind’ conclusions which emerge from strictly formalist analyses, an *over*-emphasis on these issues remains equally problematic.

Firstly, such a perspective reveals a tendency to underestimate considerably the extent to which questions of race and social context have been central to much ‘traditional’ jazz scholarship, as in the work of well-established, ‘non-revisionist’ critics such as Nat Hentoff and Leonard Feather, for example: a point which Gabbard himself somewhat diffidently concedes (1996b: 105). Here, then, the common revisionist strategy of staking out new academic territory by narrowly stereotyping previous scholarship has been clearly evident. Both of these authors have addressed the broader racial and social aspects of jazz: Hentoff has written extensively about issues of jazz and race, in numerous books, magazine articles, and liner notes (e.g. 1962, 1976);²⁸ and Leonard Feather has suggested that “no study of jazz can be complete without a consideration of the socio-racial factors that determined the associations and frustrations of the men who created it” (1959: 39).

²⁷ It is worthwhile noting that Brown also characterizes this work as “postmodernist” (1999). The term remains unexplored, however, and appears to be employed simply in the pejorative.

²⁸ See also Hentoff and McCarthy (1974).

Although DeVeaux's (1997) recent 'social and musical history' of bebop represents a richly contextualized study of the field, his easy criticism of Feather's early introduction of racial issues into any consideration of the music represents a surprising *lack* of scholarly contextualization. DeVeaux argues of Leonard's work that the "point of the exercise... is not to connect the expressive power of the music to oppressive social conditions, but to exorcise them so that the rest of the book may be safely devoted to the development of musical language" (1997: 20). As DeVeaux himself acknowledges, however, "to insist on the dignity and inherent worth of the black expressive arts was... a risky political act in the 1940s and 1950s" (1997: 20), and his critique perhaps underplays the extent to which writers such as Feather and Hentoff were successful in introducing a form of contextualist discourse into music criticism in a historical period which was inimical to statements of black creativity and equality: a point which serves to deny blanket revisionist dismissals of the formalism and aestheticism of 'traditional' writing on jazz.

A second problem with this perspective is the danger of essentializing both the music and its history,²⁹ as in Jed Rasula's narrow claim that "jazz music *is* black history" (1995: 156; emphasis in original), or in Charley Gerard's fallacious comparison of the playing of Johnny Griffin and Jimmy Giuffre: "A constant flow of blues phrases mixed into bebop lines marks Griffin as African American, just as their scarcity in Giuffre's music marks him

²⁹ This critique of revisionist black essentialism provides an interesting contemporary counterpart to the revisionist critique of formalist essentialism levelled at the early jazz writer André Hodeir: see Gabbard (1995c: 14). See Brown (1999, 1997) for a fuller discussion of these issues.

as *not* African American” (1998: 163; emphasis in original).³⁰ Gary Tomlinson’s observations on earlier jazz writing are equally – or perhaps even more – relevant in this case:

[The] forfeiture of dialogue can cut both ways. Just as white writers have sometimes been intent on ignoring or minimizing the blackness of jazz innovations and of individual jazz voices, so black writers have sometimes proved just as intent on impoverishing the interethnic dialogues that inform jazz styles... both start from premises that drastically reduce the dialogics itself of cultural production.
(Tomlinson, 1992: 79)³¹

Moreover, the impoverishment of interethnic dialogue which Tomlinson identifies is paralleled by an equivalent impoverishment of *intraethnic* dialogue, as DeVaux suggests of the politically-motivated linkage of ‘authenticity’ and ethnicity in the 1960s, exemplified by the interplay of free jazz and black nationalist politics in this period: “As always, the actual diversity of expression within the black community was masked by the tendency for any and every viewpoint within it to claim the collective history of the people as a source of legitimacy” (1998: 501). And it is interesting to note here that DeVaux’s argument

³⁰ These remarks are indicative of the reductively essentialist claims made throughout Gerard’s *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community* (1998). Typically, Gerard argues that “white innovators... interests in jazz are primarily aesthetic, since their music does not play a part in establishing a group’s social cohesion, as African-American music does for African-American culture. Whites have a strong interest in expanding the technical aspects of jazz by introducing elements from modern classical music. They are less interested in making their music sound like jazz than in expressing themselves” (1998: 114-115).

³¹ I refuse to be drawn on the question of identifying writers as black or white. Although ‘positionality’ is an important issue in these debates, it is apparent that neither black nor white writers have any monopoly on either elitism or essentialism: I am more interested in their arguments than their ethnicity. Nor will I succumb to the common rhetorical technique of listing a pantheon of great white jazz musicians in order to ‘prove’ that jazz is not *solely* a mode of black expression. Such strategies only perpetuate the myths that they claim to deny. (Those who feel the need for ‘proof’ of white involvement in jazz, however, may wish to consult Richard Sudhalter’s 900-page tome *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915-1945* (1999), an equally interesting ‘corrective’ to the reductionist essentialism of some revisionist scholarship).

applies equally to the radical, emancipatory black rhetoric of Amiri Baraka and Archie Shepp in the 1960s, to the conservative, canonizing black rhetoric of Stanley Crouch and Wynton Marsalis in the 1990s, or to the reductionist, essentializing black rhetoric of Jed Rasula and Charley Gerard in the same decade.

These issues point to a final problem with this perspective, especially in its more contemporary academic or Lincoln Center manifestations: namely, the extent to which it overplays the rhetoric of marginality, claiming – from an incongruous position of academic or institutional centrality – to speak on behalf of a disempowered ‘other’. Recalling Frow’s argument with regard to the “social position of enunciation” (1995: 152),³² Tomlinson has noted the manner in which such rhetoric “can collapse into a monologue of empowered speakers speaking with themselves about marginalized and excluded others” (1992: 73). Similarly, Michael Bérubé’s ‘demystificatory’ observations on the academic discourse of literary marginality hold some interesting lessons for revisionist jazz scholars:

it is by now axiomatic to post-Romantic thought that the rhetoric of marginality can be a powerful enabling device, even though marginality itself is synonymous with disempowerment: to claim to speak from the margin is paradoxically to claim to speak from the position of authority, and to describe a margin is to describe an authoritative challenge to hegemony... Margins are real, but they are always relational.

(Bérubé, 1992a: 16-17)

Aside from the tendency towards an over-emphasis on issues of race, perhaps one of the most striking aspects of much revisionist jazz scholarship – especially given the strength of its critique of modernist aestheticism – is the extent to which the concept of

³² See Chapter Six (pp. 304-305).

postmodernism in much of this literature remains either unexplored, underdeveloped or subject to crude Jamesonian and Lyotardian orthodoxies: an important point in terms of the objectives of my own intellectual project. Hence, although Bruce Johnson notes the “radical incompatibility” of jazz and modernist aesthetics, he goes no further than suggesting that the “insights... of Post-modernism... are likely to be useful here” (1993: 10). Similarly, in Ronald Radano’s (1993) otherwise fascinating study of Anthony Braxton, the concept of postmodernism remains largely unexamined, despite the fact that it appears to underpin the introductory chapter, which includes the obligatory Jameson citations, and the familiarly tiresome claim that: “In the postmodern era, cultural projections appear ‘flat’, divorced from history and traditional mystifications, as mechanical reproduction, electronic communication, and standardized packaging have turned art into a technological mix of hierarchically confused, commodified symbols” (1993: 9).

And notwithstanding Mark Harvey’s claim to “optimism” (1991: 142), his vision of the postmodern reveals a wearisome Jamesonian bias: “playful ironic commentary may have displaced protest and the will for transformation or transcendence of the present order, especially as artistic experiences increasingly become consumer products” (1991: 141). The question begged by such rhetoric, of course, is the question of the analyst’s conceptualization of ‘artistic experiences’ in the mythical time period before they became ‘consumer products’: notwithstanding Harvey’s cautious denial of modernist aesthetic principles applied to jazz, this rhetoric betrays a fundamentally modernist vision of autonomous art, and a problematically modernist faith in the separation of art and

everyday life, thereby denying the “messy marketplace in which culture has always been negotiated” (Tomlinson, 1992: 82).

In the context of an article which addresses the bop propensity for quotation – a musical practice which appears ready-made for a ‘postmodern’ reading – Krin Gabbard argues instead for a specifically modernist interpretation of quotation as an “avant-garde gesture” (1991: 93), suggesting an ambivalent understanding of postmodernism which is equally problematic. Uncritically citing Lyotard’s pessimistic pronouncements on “eclecticism”, and suggesting that “the anti-aestheticism of the old avant-garde has become one of the many available aesthetics in the cultural marketplace”, Gabbard’s antipathy toward the “new avant-garde” of postmodernism is made clear in his claim that “even popular music has found room for conceptualist poseurs such as David Byrne and Laurie Anderson” (1991: 105-106). Arguing that “the pluralism of some recent jazz is most consistent with the new postmodern avant-garde”, and noting its “affirmation of the past”, Gabbard concludes: “for better or worse, today’s jazz artists create in a climate of postmodern live-and-let-live” (1991: 106-107): a somewhat artless observation which hardly represents a commensurate corollary to the force of his own revisionist critique of modernist aestheticism (e.g. 1995c), suggesting the need for a considerably more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between contemporary jazz and the theory, techniques, and practices of postmodernism. These are issues that I will pursue further in the following sections.

A Question of Standards:

'My Funny Valentine', Intertextuality, and the 'already said'

'My Funny Valentine' made its Broadway premiere on 14 April 1937, as part of the score for *Babes in Arms*, the stage musical by the songwriting team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. The song was only one entry on the show's remarkable list of now-classic standards, which included 'Where or When', 'I Wish I Were in Love Again', 'Johnny One-Note', and 'The Lady is a Tramp'. Suggesting that the score for *Babes in Arms* "is one of the richest of the entire Rodgers and Hart canon", Frederick Nolan notes that 'My Funny Valentine' has "over the years become one of their most-performed ballads" (1994: 217).³³

The song reached a peak of popularity in the early 1950s, following hit recordings by Chet Baker and Frank Sinatra, and although Baker's 1952 performance with Gerry Mulligan preceded Sinatra's recording by over a year,³⁴ it is perhaps the latter version which has served as the definitive early reading of the song. *Songs For Young Lovers*, the 1953 album on which 'My Funny Valentine' appeared,³⁵ was the first of Sinatra's 'concept' albums for Capitol Records, and employed the new LP format to great effect, featuring a series of themed songs, with a consistent mood and pacing: as Pete Welding observes, the songs finally chosen for recording were "superior ballad standards of proven,

³³ In a survey on America's National Public Radio in October 1999, a panel of musicians and some 14,000 listeners voted 'My Funny Valentine' one of the '100 most important American musical works of the 20th century'. (See the relevant page on the NPR website: www.npr.org/programs/specials/vote/list100alphabet.html).

³⁴ The Baker/Mulligan performance is available on *The Pacific Jazz Years* (Blue Note 89292).

³⁵ Now available on *Songs For Young Lovers & Swing Easy* (Capitol 48470).

enduring worth that while immediately familiar were felt not to have suffered from over-recording” (1987: 3). Following hot on the heels of his Oscar-winning performance in *From Here To Eternity* (1953), and presaging a spectacular revival in Sinatra’s then struggling career, *Songs For Young Lovers* was “an immediate sensation on its release, selling as briskly as many singles of the day” (Welding, 1987: 3). The album was no one-off success, however, and the importance of Sinatra’s continuing role in popularizing otherwise obscure or overlooked songs should not be underestimated: as Will Friedwald has observed, “beginning in the 1940s, Sinatra concentrated... on classic songs that had usually originated in Broadway shows. This at a time, it should be stressed, when [the popular radio series] *Your Hit Parade*... was dominated by ephemeral novelties” (1995: 27).³⁶ Hence, Friedwald suggests:

no performer turned more songs into standards than Sinatra... He even took songs out of flop shows... and made them into important standards... Sinatra’s influence in this area even bounced back to the artists who had originally influenced him. In the 1930s, Billie Holiday, Bing Crosby, and Louis Armstrong were content to take whatever tune the pluggers pushed down the pike at them and transform it into something special, whereas a great deal of their 1950s albums constituted what amounted to *The Frank Sinatra Songbook*.

(Friedwald, 1995: 157)

Since the 1950s, ‘My Funny Valentine’ has been recorded literally hundreds of times,³⁷ by singers such as Tony Bennett and Sarah Vaughan, jazz players like Charlie

³⁶ Throughout much of his contract with Columbia Records (1943-1952), Sinatra’s song selection was heavily influenced by producer Mitch Miller, and he recorded his own share of novelty songs, including his duet with Dagmar on ‘Mama Will Bark’, the “dog tune to end all dog tunes” (Friedwald, 1995: 193). By the time of his contract with Capitol (1953-1960), however, Sinatra had virtually full control over the choice of material to be recorded.

³⁷ The All Music Guide website lists over 700 recordings (<http://allmusic.com>).

Parker and Milt Jackson, and contemporary performers as diverse as Chaka Khan, Van Morrison, Nico, Carly Simon, and Elvis Costello. But perhaps the most well-known jazz performance of the piece is the live recording by Miles Davis' quintet at New York's Philharmonic Hall in February 1964,³⁸ a performance which is as famous for Davis' infamous 'mistakes' as for any more positive musical reasons: Gary Giddens, for example, suggests that Davis' solo on this recording includes "one of the most notorious fluffs ever released" (1985: 84). But the solo has also been widely celebrated, Ian Carr noting its "dramatic inner logic" and "dazzling power" (1982: 139), and Howard Brofsky suggesting that the solo "has an emotional intensity that... makes it a masterpiece" (1983: 150).

In his essay "Out of Notes": Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis' (1995), Robert Walser employs this recorded solo as a textual example with which to challenge the standard critical rhetoric on Davis, proposing an alternative, more positive reading of Davis' 'mistakes', and suggesting that his approach offers an "analytical vocabulary" which is lacking in the work of Carr, Brofsky, and others (1995: 180). Although Walser's analysis is certainly suggestive in its rejection of established critical tropes, and insightful in its understanding of the technical aspects of Davis' playing, its ultimately textualist focus proves to be contradictory and highly problematic, prompting a series of further questions with regard to intertextuality and musical meaning. In what follows, I will offer a critique of Walser's reductively textualist approach, suggesting a

³⁸ On *The Complete Concert 1964: My Funny Valentine+Four & More* (Columbia 65358).

considerably broader understanding of intertextuality than that which informs Walser's study.

Walser rejects the “modernist attitudes” and “‘classicizing’ strategies for legitimating jazz” which he holds to be characteristic of traditional scholarship (1995: 169): strategies which are no better illustrated than in Cynthia Folia's (1995) strictly formalist analysis of polyrhythm in jazz improvisation. Here, questions of context or of textual-contextual interaction are totally elided in favour of an analytical approach that simply aims to legitimate jazz in an autonomous fashion. Folia argues, for example, that “much of the motivic and structural coherence so characteristic of ‘composed’ music is present in this improvisational art form” (1995: 133), thereby offering a convincing example of Don Randel's contention that when the musicological canon expands it does so “not to include a greater diversity of works so much as to appropriate and dominate a greater number of works and make them behave in similar fashion” (Randel, 1992: 14). Folia's analysis of the opening of Ornette Coleman's ‘Lonely Woman’ (1959) is typical of the mode of discourse employed throughout the article:

The tune of the A section is 15 bars of 4/4, played very freely, and lasting 24 seconds, making the quarter note equal to an average of 150. But the bass and drums play at a faster tempo than the two horns and can be clocked at about 176, or approximately 1.17 times faster, and this in a double-time feel. The bass and drums play 17-18 bars to the horns' 15 bars in each A section, for a ratio of 15:17.5. The ratio of tempi, 150:176 is close to 6:7 ($6:7 = 150:175$), suggesting a high-level 6 against 7 – a type C polyrhythm.

(Folia, 1995: 118)

Following this technical onslaught, the reader is assured (by way of a second-hand quote) of the authoritative ‘meaning’ of this structural pattern: “The background seems desperately urgent, and the melody becomes still more eloquently mournful” (1995: 120). Claiming to reject such formalist and critical rhetoric, Walser draws on Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theory of “signifyin’” in African-American literature and discourse as a method for “rethinking some of our assumptions about what and how music means” (1995: 167).³⁹ The concept is one which Gary Tomlinson (1992) has also drawn upon, emphasizing its “*dialogical* aspect” (1992: 66; emphasis in original), and suggesting that “African-American theory is one major variety of recent theorizing... that has urged us to recognize the vernacular selectivity of all theory in the human sciences” (1992: 71). However, given Gates’ own acknowledgement that ‘signifyin’ represents “an indigenous black metaphor for intertextuality” (quoted in Tomlinson, 1992: 65), Tomlinson also queries the implicit essentialism of the concept, suggesting that a narrow focus on the notion of a black canon – whether that of music or literature – runs the risk of “impoverishing... interethnic dialogues” (1992: 79).⁴⁰

But the cautiously critical perspective which characterizes Tomlinson’s approach to Gates’ theory of ‘signifyin’ is one that is lacking in Walser’s analysis, and, as Lee Brown has suggested, “Walser does not qualify his specific ethnic characterization of the concept” (1999: 240). Hence, although Walser notes that “as Gates himself insists, signifyin’ is not

³⁹ Following Walser, I will refer to the concept as ‘signifyin’’, rather than Gates’ more cumbersome formulation of ‘Signifyin(g)’ (Walser, 1995: 167-168).

⁴⁰ See Tomlinson’s comments above on jazz writing, and see also his observations on the black literary canon, quoted in Chapter Three (p. 142).

exclusive to African American culture”, and although he goes on to compare the concept to “Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas about dialogue in the novel, or to a variety of other twentieth-century philosophical interrogations of the nature of language and meaning, from Wittgenstein to the American pragmatists to the French poststructuralists” (1995: 168), the potentially essentialist character of the concept remains problematically implicit in Walser’s study. Thus, although in his 1964 performance of ‘My Funny Valentine’ Miles Davis is understood to be “signifyin’ on all the versions of the song he has heard” in a radically intertextual fashion (1995: 173) – with the transcribed solo subsequently subjected to five pages of rigorous textual analysis – Tony Bennett’s 1959 performance is afforded no such theoretical luxury.⁴¹ On the contrary, Bennett’s variations on the printed score are characterized simply as “modest customizing” (1995: 173) and dispatched in one paragraph with comments that – we are told in a brief footnote – “could apply just as well to Frank Sinatra’s recording on *Songs For Young Lovers*” (1995: 184).

Furthermore, despite Walser’s putative focus on questions of intertextuality – a point that I will return to in more detail below – and notwithstanding his vigorous critique of modernist ‘attitudes’ and ‘strategies’, his study seldom moves beyond the analytical and critical verities of traditional musicological analysis. Admittedly, Walser makes a convincing case against those critical perspectives that read Davis’ “experimenting with unconventional techniques” (1995: 176) as simply ‘mistakes’. Noting the continual

⁴¹ Bennett’s recording is available on the Smithsonian collection *American Popular Song* (RD 031).

technical ‘improvement’ in the trumpet during the course of the nineteenth century – in which the “striving for a smooth, even timbre across the whole range of the instrument” was part of the standardization of many instruments “for the needs of the symphony orchestra” – Walser suggests that “as a consequence, jazz trumpet players like Miles Davis have had to wrestle with an instrument that was literally designed to frustrate their attempts to produce a wide variety of timbres” (1995: 174-175).

Thus, Walser argues, employing cracked notes, half-valve effects, altered fingerings, a loose embouchure, and ‘messy’ articulation, “Davis constantly and consistently put himself at risk in his trumpet playing” (1995: 176); and in his performance of ‘My Funny Valentine’, Walser suggests, Davis used such techniques “to signify on the melodic possibilities, formal conventions... harmonic potentials, and previously performed versions of the original song” (1995: 173). But in the course of Walser’s textual analysis, the discourse of intertextuality slips quietly into the background, and the technical aspects of Davis’ playing are described in the familiar language of music analysis: here, DeVeaux’s critique of Leonard Feather – that the invocation of contextualism is merely a pretext to strictly musical analysis – seems especially apposite (and somewhat paradoxically so, given Walser’s aggressively ‘revisionist’ positioning). But if Feather’s position can be ‘defended’ on the basis that, as noted above, his contextualism was of a new and potentially ‘risky’ kind, Walser has no contemporary recourse to any such line of defence. On the contrary, given the contextualist turn in cultural scholarship identified in the previous chapters, Walser’s textualism appears curiously anachronistic, and his forceful renunciation of much

of the language of critical jazz discourse reveals itself to be simply contradictory, given his own recourse to such language.

Arguing that much critical commentary is not “musically specific”, Walser rejects, for example, Bill Cole’s reading of the “intensity” (1974: 156) of Davis’ playing: “how do we actually hear an abstract quality like ‘intensity’?” (Walser, 1995: 179). And in response to Tomlinson’s contention that “the power of [Davis’] vision was such that it could embrace as a convincing expressive aspect even his famous cracked and fluffed notes” (1992: 91), Walser suggests that Tomlinson’s approach is unconvincing in that it “appeals to a fairly misty notion of ‘vision’” (Walser, 1995: 179). Unfortunately, however, Walser’s own analysis is fully of ‘misty visions’, and despite his claim to be proposing “a kind of analysis that takes us into the notes but acknowledges the centrality of rhetoric” (1995: 179), Walser fails to acknowledge the centrality of the notes to his own critical rhetoric. Thus, the reader is offered a veritable catalogue of the qualities of Davis’ playing, grounded in the standard tropes of traditional musical criticism and analysis: its “idiosyncratic yet restrained” nature; its “stark and vulnerable” qualities (1995: 173); its “sense of dramatic engagement” (1995: 174); its ability to “create a temporary sense of dislocation” (1995: 175); and the “enigmatic and inconclusive” ending to Davis’ solo (1995: 178).

Furthermore, notwithstanding Walser’s rejection of Cole’s notion of ‘intensity’, we are assured that Davis uses vibrato to “intensify” his playing (1995: 174); that Davis’ placement of dissonant notes is an indication of his “willfulness and strength” (1995: 177); that a three-bar pause in Davis’ solo is a “confident assertion of his stature as a

soloist”;⁴² and that – in something of an adjectival traffic jam – his juxtaposition of two phrases, one “messy”, the other “simple”, “furthers our sense of Davis’ playful, adventurous, multifaceted, sometimes strained but ultimately capable character” (1995: 178).

That such confident, categorical, univocal, sometimes insightful but ultimately textualist statements of musical meaning can be derived simply from the notes and their technical articulation does nothing other than confirm the prevalence of modernist attitudes and strategies in Walser’s own discourse: a discourse which, for all its claims to be attending to issues of ‘signifyin’ and intertextuality, remains narrowly – and paradoxically – focused on the text, and which, contrary to his rejections of ‘traditional’ approaches, can therefore be understood to have much in common with Folio’s reductionist formalism. Hence, despite his forceful critique of the “mystified, ahistorical, text-based legitimacy” which he claims is characteristic of “prevalent methods of jazz analysis” (1995: 179), Walser’s own analytical method simply reiterates such legitimating techniques, ultimately failing to address the “web of social practices, histories, and desires” which is held to be so central to his revisionist scholarship.⁴³

⁴² Not wishing to reject Walser’s reading outright – silence can certainly be used to considerable dramatic effect by jazz soloists – a somewhat more mundane explanation might consider the option of Miles being merely distracted or briefly uninspired: having seen Davis perform on several occasions, he was certainly among the most ‘distracted’ of soloists.

⁴³ It should be clear by this stage that the paradoxically textualist nature of Walser’s contextualist claims has much in common with McClary’s similarly forceful – and similarly unrealized – ambition to “reconstruct historically grounded social meanings” (McClary, 1993: 415) – see Chapter Three (pp. 161-174).

The untenable theoretical inconsistency in Walser's analysis is no better illustrated than in the fundamental imbalance between the level of analytical detail devoted to Davis' performance and that of Tony Bennett, as well as in his claims that his brief comments on Bennett's version of the song 'apply just as well' to Sinatra's performance. Is there no reason to believe that Bennett is similarly engaged in intertextual dialogue with 'all of the versions of the song he has heard'?; is there any reason to believe that Walser's cursory comments might 'apply just as well' to Sinatra?; is there not a case to be made – in contrast to the 'looser' interpretations of jazz instrumentalists⁴⁴ – that 'tighter' vocal performances of the song such as those by Bennett and Sinatra are engaged in an even more subtle version of intertextual dialogue and therefore even more worthy of detailed textual – and intertextual – analysis?

These questions serve to highlight not only the problems inherent in the essentialist application of the concept of 'signifyin'', but also the theoretical 'thinness' of Walser's understanding of intertextuality. The concept of 'signifyin'' is one which I will pursue no further here: as Tomlinson's critique convincingly demonstrates – and as Gates' own characterization of 'signifyin'' as "an indigenous black metaphor for intertextuality" (quoted in Tomlinson, 1992: 65) tends to indicate – the concept is implicitly problematic, representing a potentially essentialist, and hence needlessly restrictive, reading of intertextuality. It is the issue of intertextual reference to which I will now turn, however,

⁴⁴ Similar comments would apply to those 'looser' interpretations by jazz singers such as Sarah Vaughan.

addressing the rhetorical questions posed above, and suggesting a radically expanded understanding of the notion of intertextuality.

That Tony Bennett – or indeed *any* performer – was (and is) engaged in a form of intertextual dialogue is, to my mind, beyond doubt: the argument developed in Chapter Six – that interpretive skills are *always* implicated in the process of ‘meaning-making’ – applies equally as well to performers as it does to listeners, and Feld’s notion of the “interactively cumulative” nature of musical experience is similarly applicable to the performer-as-listener: “We rarely confront sounds that are totally new, unusual, and without experiential anchors. Hence, each experience in listening necessarily connotes prior, contemporary, and future listenings. Engagement reproduces one’s sense of meaningful pattern and experience” (1994a: 83).

Furthermore, intertextuality is not restricted simply to the level of text, and any understanding of the concept must necessarily engage with the complex *interaction* of texts and contexts. Walser’s comments regarding the implied similarity of the Bennett and Sinatra performances not only ignores the significant textual differences in these examples, but also disregards their complex textual and contextual interrelationship. In what follows, I trust that my own textual analyses will not be confused with the reductionist textualism identified above. My intention in this section and the one which follows is to offer a level of textual detail sufficient to allow comparative textual and intertextual analysis: hence, rather than being an end in itself, textual analysis is simply a means to broader analytical ends. Furthermore, a key point here is that any analysis of the interrelationship of texts and

contexts *necessarily* involves an element of textual analysis, while denying the reductionist position which claims that authoritative, univocal musical meanings can be derived from the text alone.

The textual differences in the Sinatra and Bennett performances are striking: Sinatra is accompanied by a small orchestra including strings, saxophone, flute, harp, celesta, acoustic guitar, double bass and drums, arranged by his frequent collaborator Nelson Riddle. After five bars of only strings and guitar accompaniment, the opening A sections⁴⁵ feature the strings and rhythm section with a flute obbligato; in the B section and closing A section the obbligato role is taken up by an alto saxophone; the return to the B section (a common Sinatra technique)⁴⁶ features a contrasting shift to waltz time with the flute again taking the obbligato role; and the song concludes with a brief allusion (on celesta) to ‘Bess, You Is My Woman Now’, from Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.⁴⁷ Although staying close to the original melody, Sinatra’s singing throughout displays his distinctive “conversational phrasing” (Petkov, 1995: 74), subtly altering the rhythmic placement of the notes; the style is generally restrained, reaching a dynamic high only on the final line of the closing A section (“Stay, little Valentine, stay!”). In contrast to the instrumental detail of Riddle’s arrangement, Bennett’s performance of the song is accompanied only by piano;

⁴⁵ With the exception of a four-bar extension to the final A section (“Each day is Valentine’s Day”), the refrain or chorus of the song is in standard 32-bar AABA format: i.e. a repeated A section (often with minor variations); a contrasting B section (usually in a different key, and referred to as the middle-eight, bridge, or release); and a return to the A section. This classic Tin Pan Alley structure is characteristic of most Broadway show tunes, many of which also included an introductory verse, usually of 16 bars. This introductory verse is a structural feature of standards that has often been omitted in popular and jazz performances, and neither Bennett’s nor Sinatra’s performance – nor, indeed, that of Davis – includes the verse of the song.

⁴⁶ Sinatra’s reading of the song therefore follows an AABABA pattern.

⁴⁷ ‘Morning time and evening time; Summer time and winter time’.

the contrast in the B section is achieved by a shift to a bluesy piano style; and the piece finishes (with no return to the B section) with a quotation (on piano) from ‘Greensleeves’. Bennett’s singing is distinctly more jazz-influenced than Sinatra’s, altering both melody and rhythm in a series of melismatic variations; and the dynamic peak on the penultimate line is somewhat higher than Sinatra’s, approaching Broadway-style ‘belting’. Bennett employs vibrato freely throughout his performance, while Sinatra uses the technique more selectively, primarily on longer held notes.

In his brief analysis of Bennett’s performance, Walser suggests that Bennett “uses vibrato as a component of the vocal sound rather than an ornament, so that it projects sincerity and expressivity evenly over the course of the entire song” (1995: 172). Similarly, Walser argues that Bennett varies the song’s melody and rhythm “to suggest even more personal earnestness. A few deft appoggiaturas serve to underline his casual control of the music and to complete his modest customizing... The pianist’s nod to ‘Greensleeves’ at the very end completes the atmosphere of poignant sincerity Bennett has worked to create” (1995: 173). Aside from the question of whether the musical techniques identified by Walser do, indeed, connote the univocal musical meanings he ascribes to them – and given my critique above, there is little reason to believe that I would subscribe to Walser’s singular assertions of meaning – I trust that the previous paragraph has clarified the significant musical and technical contrasts in Bennett’s and Sinatra’s performances, suggesting the fallaciousness of Walser’s contention that his comments apply equally well to both. More significantly, however, the cursory nature of Walser’s comments serves to disguise the complex intertextual relationship of these two

performances, a complexity that can only be grasped by a focus which goes well beyond the horizon of textuality.

Bennett's performance of 'My Funny Valentine' was recorded in 1959, and although this was fully six years after the Sinatra performance which appeared on *Songs For Young Lovers*, there can be little doubt that Bennett would have still been aware of the canonical presence of Sinatra's earlier version. Indeed, the late 1950s found Sinatra at a peak of both public popularity and artistic form, and especially so in terms of his acclaimed ballad singing, which was heavily featured on the award-winning *Only the Lonely* of 1958, and which included his definitive reading of 'One For My Baby'.⁴⁸ Will Friedwald has noted the 'problem' which Sinatra's dominance of the field of ballad singing created for a fellow-performer such as Bennett: "more than thirty years ago Tony Bennett discovered that there actually was a way to do 'One For My Baby' so that it wouldn't make his listeners think of Sinatra's devastating ballad rendition – by belting it as a rock-em, sock-em romper. It worked for him in the mid-1950s, and it still works for him in the mid-1990s" (1995: 42).

In an analogous fashion, then, it is possible to speculate that Bennett's performance of 'My Funny Valentine' – in a somewhat less dramatic manner than his radical re-working of 'One For My Baby' – was crafted with an eye to Sinatra's version of the song, attempting to find a distinctive approach which distanced itself from this earlier, canonical

⁴⁸ On Capitol 48471.

reading.⁴⁹ Although certain basic differences in their respective singing styles are a given, it is interesting to note the subtle intertextual manner in which these performances go about distinguishing themselves (for reasons, in Bennett's case, of 'career necessity' as much as artistic variety): the contrast in the mode of instrumental accompaniment; the waltz-time versus blues-inflected B sections; Bennett's shorter, 'non-return' version of the AABA format; and the contrasting use of vibrato.

But it is perhaps the brief keyboard quotations at the end of each of these performances that offer the most explicit indication of a 'knowing' intertextuality. In sharp contrast to Walser's contention that the quote from 'Greensleeves' simply "completes the atmosphere of poignant sincerity Bennett has worked to create" (1995: 173), I would argue that this quote serves to indicate that Bennett – in common with Davis – is similarly "'signifyin' on all of the versions of the song he has heard" (Walser, 1995: 173), and specifically, in this case, the earlier Sinatra version. Moreover, as Walser suggests of Davis (although not of Bennett) – and perhaps more significantly, given the popularity of Sinatra's recording of the song – Bennett is also "'signifyin' on all of the versions each listener has heard" (1995: 173).

In the case of the Sinatra performance, the brief closing quote from a Gershwin song – especially in the context of a Rodgers and Hart song – might be understood simply to

⁴⁹ Given the popularity of Chet Baker's 1952 recording of 'My Funny Valentine', Howard Brofsky has noted that Miles Davis confronted a similar problem in making his own first recording of the song in 1956: "Chet Baker, in his recording, played the song with his broad, open tone and little vibrato. Davis, in his first recording, immediately distinguishes himself by playing with a Harmon mute into the microphone, an effect he used frequently at that time" (1983: 144). (Davis' 1956 recording was originally released on the album *Cookin' With the Miles Davis Quintet*, Prestige 507).

represent a mini-homage to another renowned Tin Pan Alley songwriting team – although in this case the choice of quote is significantly inflected and ‘elevated’ by the status of *Porgy and Bess* as an ‘opera’, albeit an “American folk opera” (Hyland, 1995: 181). But by substituting ‘Greensleeves’ – an old English folk song – in place of this indigenously American ‘folk song’ reference, Bennett’s performance of ‘My Funny Valentine’ thereby suggests a complex chain of intertextual references which serve both to distinguish his performance from – and allusively link it to – the canonical Sinatra version. Hence, given his audience’s almost certain knowledge of Sinatra’s earlier recording – and in a manner analogous to Baxandall’s argument regarding the Quattrocento ‘period eye’ – Bennett’s performance offers a subtle form of intertextuality which the ‘period ear’ of the late 1950s, with its awareness of the ‘already said’, would have been well-equipped to ‘decode’. In its narrow understanding of intertextuality, however, Walser’s analysis simply fails to grasp the deft intertextual complexities of Bennett’s performance.

But Walser’s reading also serves to obscure a further layer of intertextuality, which he barely acknowledges. In his analysis of the Bennett version, Walser suggests that:

Bennett’s rich tenor presents the singer as an ostensibly benevolent patriarch, for when the song is sung by a man to a woman (the opposite of the original context in the Broadway musical *Babes in Arms*), the text’s enumeration of faults (‘Is you figure less than Greek? Is your mouth a little weak?’) becomes somewhat condescending and insulting, however well masked by the tender music.

(Walser, 1995: 173)

The naïve ‘political correctness’ which prompts Walser’s characterization of the song as ‘condescending’ and ‘insulting’ when sung by a man to a woman suggests a fundamental misunderstanding not only of the song and its lyric, but also of its original

function within the plot of the Broadway show from which it is taken. The fundamental point here is that the song is *meant* to be condescending and insulting, and that rather than ‘masking’ the condescension of the lyrics, the ‘tender music’ counterpoints their ambivalence: this is far from being a typical ‘love song’. The lyrics, after all, were written by Lorenz Hart, well known as one of the most acerbic wits of Broadway, and a lyricist whose relationship to matters of love was distinctly ambivalent – an ambivalence which was expressed in a range of songs throughout his career: ‘Glad To Be Unhappy’ (1936); ‘Spring Is Here’ (1938); ‘Falling In Love With Love’ (1938); ‘It Never Entered My Mind’ (1940), to name only a few.⁵⁰ Indeed, the story goes that perhaps the most famous of the few ‘simple’ love songs which Hart wrote – ‘Blue Moon’ (1934) – was written with tongue in cheek as a response to a music publisher’s comment that Hart’s lyrics were not ‘commercial’ enough (Nolan, 1994: 193-194).

In sharp contrast to Walser’s reading of Bennett’s performance, a brief consideration of the original Broadway plot which informs the lyrics of ‘My Funny Valentine’ indicates a complex and suggestive web of intertextualism.⁵¹ In the original stage version of *Babes In Arms*,⁵² ‘My Funny Valentine’ is sung by the female lead character, Billie Smith, to the

⁵⁰ Hart’s musical and private life – his homosexuality (the *New York Times* noted euphemistically in its obituary that “Mr. Hart was not married”; Nolan, 1994: 2), his alcoholism, and his final, self-destructive demise – are chronicled in Frederick Nolan’s detailed biography (1994).

⁵¹ This is not to suggest a return to ‘artistic intentionality’, or that every reading of the song is necessarily shaped by the original meaning of the lyric. It is, however, to suggest that the question of musical meaning is considerably more complex – and considerably richer – than Walser indicates.

⁵² It is worthwhile noting that, in typical Hollywood fashion, the film version of *Babes in Arms* (1939), starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, is radically different from the stage production, featuring a revised plot and retaining only two of the original songs – ‘Babes In Arms’ and ‘Where or When’ (although the music from ‘The Lady is a Tramp’ – sung by the Baby Rose character in the stage show – serves as a leitmotif for the same character in the film).

male star of the show, Valentine LaMar. The production is set in the imaginary community of Seaport, Long Island, where the adult population of vaudeville performers is away on a five-month tour. In their absence, the temporarily abandoned children – the ‘babes in arms’ of the title – decide, in classic Broadway fashion, to ‘put on a show’. Billie, a young hitchhiker only recently arrived in Seaport, is soon enlisted by her new beau Valentine, the director of the show. The only member of the group with the financial wherewithal to back the production is Lee Calhoun, “a Southern bigot who expounds the theory of superior races” (Krasker, 1990: 11).

Calhoun’s sole stipulation for funding the show is that the two black members of the group, the DeQuincy Brothers, be omitted from the program. Billie is willing to compromise to Calhoun’s demands, and, in response, Valentine “brands her an opportunist; Billie, who doesn’t know what that means, calls him a dope” (Krasker, 1990: 12), and she then proceeds to sing ‘My Funny Valentine’. The commonly omitted verse of the song confirms the ambivalent, condescending tone: “my dim-witted friend”; “Thy vacant brow”; “Thou noble, upright, truthful, sincere, and slightly dopey gent” (Hart and Kimball, 1995: 229). On the night of the performance, Valentine “frets that the show is failing. Confident that Ivor [DeQuincy] can give it a much-needed lift, he instructs him to prepare for his entrance. When Lee interferes, telling Ivor that he can’t appear in the show because he’s ‘too black’, Val socks Lee in the jaw. Ivor performs to the acclaim of the crowd” (Krasker, 1990: 12).⁵³

⁵³ The rest of the plot involves the children being sent to a work farm, one of them winning a raffle, and a surprise landing in Seaport by the trans-Atlantic French aviator Rene Flambeau, but sadly, it need not concern us further here.

It is fascinating to observe, then, that in the original Broadway show, ‘My Funny Valentine’ is sung by Billie, the ‘colour-blind’ opportunist, to Valentine, the principled anti-racist, suggesting that any understanding of the lyric, and of its mode of address, needs to be considerably more complex and nuanced than Walser’s perfunctory observations indicate. The lyrics are, indeed, condescending, but not in the ‘benevolently patriarchal’ fashion which Walser suggests; rather, Hart’s finely balanced lyric attempts to portray the defensive petulance of a lover accused of opportunistic prejudice, in the context of a plot which pits southern racism against northern liberalism.

Hence, belying the more commonly vacuous Broadway tropes of its ‘kids puttin’ on a show’ plot-line, *Babes In Arms* also addressed a range of social, racial, political, and moral issues uncommon for the period – a point which is only confirmed by the *Variety* correspondent’s prediction regarding the show’s failure to conform to Broadway norms: “No nudity, no show girls, no plush or gold plate may mean no sale” (quoted in Krasker, 1990: 10). Notwithstanding the *Variety* correspondent’s warning, and despite slow early sales, *Babes in Arms* went on to run for 289 performances, comfortably turning a profit and presaging a new style of Broadway musical theatre, of which Rodgers and Hart were the prime exponents. Based on a series of *New Yorker* stories by John O’Hara, Rodgers and Hart’s *Pal Joey* (1940) successfully ushered in this new style, offering, as Richard Rodgers noted in his autobiography, “a more realistic view of life than theatregoers were accustomed to” (1975: 198).

But this gradual shift in Broadway conventions was not without its problems, further emphasizing the complexities involved in the contemporary interpretation of earlier

cultural forms, and the need for detailed socio-historical contextualization. In *Babes In Arms*, for example, it is interesting to note – despite the show’s otherwise liberal, anti-racist perspective – that the original production included a dance routine for the DeQuincy Brothers⁵⁴ which, although it barely raised an eyebrow on late 1930s Broadway, would now be regarded as unacceptable in its racial stereotyping. The routine was accompanied by a song entitled ‘All Dark People’, which included the lyrics “And just the same as flowers get honey; All God’s chillun got buck-and-wings; Paleface babies don’t dance in the street; All dark people are light on their feet” (Hart and Kimball, 1995: 229).⁵⁵

Apart from a recording made by the jazz trumpeter Bunny Berigan in 1937,⁵⁶ the song has languished in thankful obscurity since that time, although it was potentially an issue in the recent revival of *Babes in Arms*.⁵⁷ Defusing any possible controversy, however, the booklet notes to the CD of the new production state simply that: “The authors’ estates felt that the lyric to the DeQuincy Brothers’ song, ‘All Dark People’, might be misinterpreted out of context and asked that the number be omitted” (Krasker, 1990: 11). Although one can certainly sympathize with this decision, it is intriguing to note that the much-touted movement towards ‘authenticity’ in the revival of Broadway musicals, in the work of John

⁵⁴ The DeQuincy Brothers were portrayed in the original Broadway production by the Nicholas brothers, the famous dancing team who had just made their debut at the Cotton Club (see Krasker, 1990: 9).

⁵⁵ Although it does not include ‘All Dark People’, the film version of *Babes In Arms* includes a full-blown blackface Minstrel Show, as does the follow-up Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland vehicle *Babes on Broadway* (1941). It is worthwhile noting that the BBC’s *The Black and White Minstrel Show* ran on British television until 1978 (!).

⁵⁶ On the 1996 CD *The Chronological Bunny Berigan and His Orchestra 1936-1937* (Classics 749).

⁵⁷ The recording of this production is available on New World Records (NW3862).

McGlenn and others,⁵⁸ often stops short of confronting these problematic issues. Similar problems are regularly encountered in revivals of *Show Boat* (1927) and *Porgy and Bess* (1935), in which the shrillness of the rhetoric surrounding many of the debates reveals an alarming absence of socio-historical contextualization and an apparent unwillingness to explore in critical detail the full range of highly complex issues that emerge from such analyses.⁵⁹

Whether any of these issues were on Miles Davis' mind as he walked onto the stage of New York's Philharmonic Hall on 12 February 1964 is, of course, a moot point; but the resonance of intertextual reference is only further intensified by the knowledge that Davis' concert was a fundraising benefit for voter registration in Mississippi and Louisiana, and was co-sponsored by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the Congress for Racial Equality, and the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee.⁶⁰ Hence, given the nature of the occasion, and in light of the liberal racial agenda underlying Rodgers and Hart's classic song, Davis' choice of 'My Funny Valentine' as a concert opener can be understood to have been an extremely felicitous – and richly intertextual – gesture.

⁵⁸ See, for example, the brief essay in the CD booklet by Theodore Chapin, executive director of the Rodgers and Hammerstein office in New York (1990: 14-18). McGlenn's fascinating revivalist work has been well documented on EMI Records.

⁵⁹ For a typical example of both these tendencies – addressing the controversial 1993 revival of *Show Boat* in Toronto – see Tator *et al.* (1998); see also Breon (1995). For a somewhat more nuanced and suggestive argument concerning contemporary revivals of *Porgy and Bess*, see Horn (1994, 1996).

⁶⁰ Tickets for the concert were \$50 and \$20, at a time when \$10 was the typical ticket price for a Broadway show.

Of Sunshine and Happy Endings: Jazz, Parody, and the Postmodern Attitude

Broadway show tunes such as ‘My Funny Valentine’ have been an integral part of the jazz repertoire since the music’s earliest days. In particular, the bop musicians of the 1940s and 1950s revelled in the harmonic sophistication of the songs written by Broadway’s classic composers – Gershwin, Kern, Berlin, Porter, and Rodgers – drawing heavily and repeatedly on this popular canon.⁶¹ In addition to playing standard songs, it was also common bebop practice to alter the melody of standards while retaining the chord sequence, offering the instrumentalist a familiar set of ‘changes’ upon which to improvise. Of the 35 recorded performances on Charlie Parker’s famous Dial sessions of 1946–47,⁶² for example, 14 are variations on standard songs, of which six are based on the changes of Gershwin’s ‘I Got Rhythm’.⁶³

The technical sophistication of harmonically-based improvisation on chord changes developed by bebop musicians reached its apogee in John Coltrane’s work of the late 1950s, especially in his composition ‘Giant Steps’, in which – at an extremely fast tempo – the improviser must negotiate a series of harmonic ‘hurdles’, the chord changes cycling

⁶¹ It is fascinating to note that the feeling was sometimes far from mutual: even in its earlier swing incarnation, the practice of jazz musicians improvising on his songs was one that incensed Richard Rodgers. In response, he and Hart penned ‘I Like to Recognize the Tune’ (1939), which includes the immortal lines: “A guy named Krupa plays the drums like thunder; But the melody is six feet under” (Hart and Kimball, 1995: 260). In his autobiography, Rodgers noted that he and Hart “really had nothing against swing bands *per se*, but as songwriters we felt it was tough enough for new numbers to catch on as written without being subjected to all kinds of interpretive manhandling that obscured their melodies and lyrics. To me, this was the musical equivalent of bad grammar” (1975: 193).

⁶² On *The Legendary Dial Masters, Volumes 1 & 2* (Jazz Classics 5003).

⁶³ As Will Friedwald notes, “The Dials include the original and definitive recordings of the records that first pronounced Gershwin’s ‘I Got Rhythm’ as the basic framework for uptempo bebop flagwavers” (1996). In addition to the 14 standard variations, the sessions include performances of eight standards (by Kern, Gershwin, and others), four originals in 32-bar AABA format, and nine blues.

through all 12 keys in the space of one 16-bar chorus. Alongside these developments, Miles Davis' modal experiments on the 1959 album *Kind of Blue* indicated another avenue for jazz improvisation, releasing the improviser from what Jimmy Giuffre has characterized as the "vertical prisons" of traditional harmony (quoted in Harrison *et al.*, 1978: 106). In addition to his modal explorations, Davis also continued to play standards, although by the time of his 1964 performance of 'My Funny Valentine', he had "taken the technical and emotional exploration of standard song structures as far as was possible before they disintegrated completely and metamorphosed into something else" (Carr, 1982: 139). In Davis' case, as noted above, the 'something else' which his music ultimately metamorphosed into was fusion; for another group of musicians, it was free jazz; but, for many jazz musicians, improvisation on standard songs – or models based on standard songs – remained common practice, as it still does today.

Given the technical complexity and sophistication of the musical developments in jazz from the 1940s to the 1960s, it is perhaps hardly surprising that it was a primarily textually-based mode of analysis and criticism which emerged in tandem with these developments. However, although such forms of analysis have undoubtedly been the source of considerable musical insight, there is also little doubt that the charges of autonomous aestheticism levelled by revisionist scholarship are largely warranted. In turn, however, and as noted above, the reductionist focus of some forms of revisionist work – whether on issues of race or textuality – are often equally problematic. Moreover, and as similarly noted above, although some scholars have identified the incompatibility of jazz

and modernist aesthetics, the understanding of postmodernism has remained largely underdeveloped in jazz scholarship.

In this section, highlighting the shortcomings of both traditionalist and revisionist perspectives, I will examine two recorded performances which can be understood to exhibit a ‘postmodern attitude’ – the 1962 and 1965 recordings of ‘You Are My Sunshine’ by George Russell – suggesting that an exclusive focus on issues of either text or context fails to illuminate the complex meanings and implications inherent in these performances. Illustrating the eclectic theoretical approach which I have proposed, I will argue that the use of parody, irony, and reappropriation in these pieces demands a mode of analysis which addresses the elaborate interplay of text and context, suggesting an understanding of musical meaning which is richly intertextual but radically unstable, thereby denying the tendency towards the categorical fixity of meaning which is characteristic of both traditionalist and revisionist approaches.

‘You Are My Sunshine’ was written in 1940 by Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell. Although Mitchell remains a less well-known figure, Davis has led a long and varied career during which he was a songwriter, country music performer, film star, college professor, police commissioner, and twice Governor of Louisiana (1944-48 and 1960-64). Davis used ‘You Are My Sunshine’ as a campaign song, and it was eventually adopted as an official state song of Louisiana. Elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1972, Davis wrote many other popular country songs, including ‘Nobody’s Darling But Mine’ (1935) and ‘It Makes No Difference Now’ (1937). Davis’ 1940 recording of ‘You Are

'My Sunshine' sold over a million copies in the United States, and the song was later recorded and widely popularized by Bing Crosby and Gene Autry, among many others: Autry's 1941 recording of the song won him a Gold Record. Autry, of course, was the archetype of the 'singing cowboy',⁶⁴ a musical form which Philip Furia (author of Ira Gershwin's biography) has characterized as a "Hollywood monstrosity" (1996: 74): a 'monstrosity' which was anticipated – and mercilessly parodied – in the song 'I'm Bidin' My Time' from the Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* of 1930, in which a quartet of cowboys sing: "while other folks grow dizzy I keep busy – bidin' my time" (quoted in Furia, 1996: 74). Rodgers and Hart were on similarly satirical form in *Babes in Arms* (1937): in a "wicked lampoon upon the current craze [for] cowboy songs" (Nolan, 1978: 105), the songwriting team penned 'Way Out West' for Baby Rose, the sixteen year old star of the production's show-within-a-show. Stranded in Long Island, Baby Rose pines for New York, "Way out west on West End Avenue", and in the opening verse sings: "I've roamed o'er the range with the herd, Where seldom is heard an intelligent word" (Hart and Kimball, 1995: 229).

Given Ira Gershwin's and Larry Hart's urbane – not to say urban – parodies of the singing cowboy and his simple country songs, and in light of the jazz predilection for the sophisticated harmonies and melodies of Broadway composers such as Gershwin and Rodgers, the choice of 'You Are My Sunshine' for a jazz performance might seem like a curious one indeed. The song has been given a number of different readings over the years

⁶⁴ Autry made his Hollywood debut in 1934, scoring a huge success the following year with the Saturday afternoon series *The Phantom Empire*. By the late 1930s, Autry was one of Hollywood's biggest box-office attractions, and was voted number one Western Star by the theater exhibitors of America in 1937.

– including Ray Charles’ R&B treatment and Aretha Franklin’s soul version⁶⁵ – but with the exception of Errol Garner’s 1954 trio recording and a minor-key ballad performance by Mose Allison,⁶⁶ the song has been largely ignored by jazz musicians. The reason for the neglect is not difficult to fathom: given its harmonically simple, rhythmically four-square character, ‘You Are My Sunshine’ has little to offer the improviser more accustomed to Broadway sophistication, the ‘down-home’ folksiness of Crosby’s and Autry’s canonical performances simply serving to highlight the song’s distance from the polished complexities of the typical jazz standard.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the song occupies a similar position in the critical pantheon: commenting on Jimmy van Heusen’s ‘Imagination’ (first recorded by Frank Sinatra with Tommy Dorsey’s orchestra in 1940, and something of a Sinatra standby), Allen Forte has observed: “In a year (1940) that saw only a small number of noteworthy songs published, it stands with the best... It is definitely superior to ‘You Are My Sunshine’, a three-chord encomium with lyrics to match” (1995: 301).⁶⁷ Against this background, then, George Russell’s complex, multi-faceted arrangement of the song stands as a somewhat unusual entry in the jazz canon. First recorded in 1962, the 12-minute performance of ‘You Are My Sunshine’ featured Russell’s working sextet of the period, augmented by the vocalist

⁶⁵ Ray Charles’ version is on the 1961 album *Modern Sounds in Country & Western Music* (Rhino 70099), and the Aretha Franklin recording is on the 1967 album *Aretha Arrives* (Rhino 71274).

⁶⁶ Garner’s recording is on *The Original Misty* (Mercury 834910) and Allison’s on the 1972 album *Mose In Your Ear* (Atlantic 40460). The saxophonist Dave Liebman has also recorded the piece on his 1995 CD *Songs for My Daughter* (Soul Note 121295).

⁶⁷ Having summarily dispatched ‘You Are My Sunshine’, Forte then proceeds with a detailed technical analysis of the harmonic structure of Van Heusen’s ‘Imagination’.

Sheila Jordan, making only her second recording.⁶⁸ Russell subsequently recorded an instrumental version of a similar arrangement at a live concert in Stuttgart's Beethoven Hall in 1965.⁶⁹ Before considering these recordings, some brief background on Russell is appropriate.

George Russell is a highly regarded figure in jazz circles, known not only as a composer and band-leader, but also as a music theorist, and author of *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, first published in 1953. Although this is no place for a detailed exposition of Russell's concept, he has helpfully summarized it as "a way of exploring the chromatic possibilities that exist within the traditional chord-based jazz frame" (quoted in Jones, 1974: 65). The concept was influential in John Coltrane's harmonic explorations and in Miles Davis' modal work in the late 1950s, and has been widely celebrated: John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet has suggested that Russell's work represents "the most profound theoretical concept to come from jazz"; Ornette Coleman has commented that "it surpasses any musical knowledge I have been exposed to" (Jones, 1974: 65); and the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu claims to have been strongly influenced by the concept.⁷⁰ Despite such ringing testimonials, and notwithstanding numerous awards (including the prestigious MacArthur Foundation

⁶⁸ On the album *The Outer View* (Riverside/Original Jazz Classics 616-2). 'You Are My Sunshine' is regularly referred to as the recording debut by the 33-year-old vocalist, although Francis Davis notes that Jordan recorded the song 'Yesterdays' a year earlier with the bassist Peter Ind (on the album *Looking Out*, Wave WS1). See Davis (1988) for a brief account of Jordan's career.

⁶⁹ Previously available only on two rather obscure vinyl albums, the concert can now be heard on the 1998 CD *At Beethoven Hall: Complete Recordings* (MPS 539084).

⁷⁰ See Russell's website: www.georgerussell.com.

Fellowship in 1989), Russell has remained a somewhat peripheral figure in jazz history, never achieving the canonical centrality of some of his contemporaries.

Over the years, Russell's work has embraced small group jazz, big bands, choral pieces, and early experiments with tape and electronics, most notably in his 1968 piece 'Electronic Sonata for Souls Loved by Nature',⁷¹ which blended tape recordings of African singing and lute playing with Russell's sextet. In an interview in 1960, Russell suggested that "you might characterize the whole era as the decline and fall of the chord" (Russell and Williams, 1960: 7), although he describes his musical approach not as atonal but rather as "pan-tonal" (1960: 7), and "pan-stylistic" (quoted in Jones, 1974: 67) – musical qualities which are also evident in the liberal humanism of his social philosophy, as expressed in his liner notes to the recording of the 'Electronic Sonata':

The wedding of non-electronic pan-stylism to electronic pan-stylism was meant to convey the cultural implosion occurring among the earth's population, their coming together. Also it is meant to suggest that man, in the face of encroaching technology, must confront technology and attempt to humanize it: using it to enrich his collective soul... not only his purse... to explore inner, as well as outer space.

(Russell, 1985)

An African-American – although mistaken for white in Wilfred Mellers' *Music in a New Found Land* (1965: 365) – Russell remained ambivalent about the free jazz of the 1960s – "I don't believe in freedom" (quoted in Jones, 1974: 68) – and chose not to subscribe to the radical black politics which accompanied much of the movement. In a discussion forum in *Down Beat* magazine in 1964, in response to the proposition that "the 'new thing' reflects the era we're in" (DeMichael, 1964: 16), Russell commented:

⁷¹ Available on Soul Note records (SN1034).

I don't think some of the people in the 'new thing' really know what it's all about... I don't think the seeds of this new music lie in a racial protest alone... it's a cry against the whole social structure. It's a cry for truth. It transcends race – and that can be done, you know. As much as the racial thing is pushed, there are problems that transcend it, which have to do with all of us as human beings.

(quoted in DeMichael, 1964: 16-17)

Russell's liberal, 'ecumenical' views were less than popular among some of his more 'politicized' contemporaries, and he was among the "bigots" and "chauvinists" to whom Archie Shepp addressed his 1965 *Down Beat* essay 'An Artist Speaks Bluntly': "I address myself to George Russell, a man whose work I have always respected and admired, who in an inopportune moment with an ill-chosen phrase threw himself squarely into the enemy camp" (quoted in Porter, 1997c: 212). It is fascinating to observe, however, that Russell's wide-ranging musical creativity has long outlasted Shepp's narrowly chauvinist attacks, while Shepp himself has ultimately renounced his earlier iconoclasm, returning to bop and mainstream jazz, thereby acknowledging the limitations of an 'ultra-modernist' free jazz.

In more recent years, however, Russell has found himself in another kind of 'enemy camp': his current working big band, the Living Time Orchestra, employs a wide range of acoustic and electric instruments, drawing freely on jazz and rock techniques, and – in a gesture which further highlights the narrow chauvinism of the Marsalis-Crouch circle – a commission to Russell from Jazz at Lincoln Center was withdrawn after the organizers discovered that Russell's band included electric instruments (see Nisenson, 1997: 239).

Given the complexities of his musical thought, Russell has been a prime target for formalist analysis, exemplified in Max Harrison's various writings on the composer, which emphasize Russell's use of polytonality, his intricate rhythmic schemes, and his unique instrumental textures.⁷² Harrison's elegant criticism has been singularly invaluable in clarifying the structural aspects of Russell's music, and, indeed, played a significant part in my own early appreciation of Russell's *oeuvre*. But Russell's reading of 'You Are My Sunshine' presents itself as something of a conundrum to Harrison's formalism, and in his review of the later Beethoven Hall recording of the piece he characterizes it simply as a "many-voiced meditation on... seemingly the least appropriate melody possible" (1983: 21). The alternative contextualist view of the piece is usually based on the background information contained in the 1962 album's original liner notes by Joe Goldberg:

The arrangement... had its genesis when Russell and [Sheila] Jordan were singing and playing for their own amusement in a small tavern in her home area, the coal-mining region of Pennsylvania. Someone at the bar asked to hear 'Sunshine' ('It's really a folk song there,' Russell says, 'a drinking song'), and Russell began to experiment with it. The resulting treatment mirrors his impression of the humanity of the people pitted against the cold, bleak, often brutal demands of the region.

(Goldberg, 1962)

Sheila Jordan tells a similar story in her interview with Francis Davis: "[Russell] wanted to know, 'Where do you come from to sing that way?' So I took him back to Pennsylvania and showed him the mines. A miner asked me to sing 'You Are My Sunshine.' I said, 'Oh, I don't sing that anymore.' He said, 'Well, you used to.'... My grandmother said, 'Well, let's all sing it.' So she played it on the piano, and we all sang it,

⁷² See, for example, Harrison (1983), and the relevant sections in Harrison (1976) and Harrison *et al.* (1978).

and George got an idea, and that's how 'You Are My Sunshine' came about on *The Outer View*" (quoted in Davis, 1988: 163).

These accounts of the origins of Russell's arrangement have become a standard part of its critical reception, and Jordan's vocal performance is typically described as "eerie" (Porter *et al.*, 1993: 435) or "haunting" (Erlewine *et al.*, 1996: 636). Similarly, Max Harrison characterizes Jordan's vocal as "highly introspective" (1983: 21), while Bob Palmer suggests that "Sheila's three choruses build to a pitch of guileless emotion which is unlike anything else in the jazz of the period, and the shifting voicings and rhythms of the arrangement... are so evocative you can see and feel the Appalachian landscape" (1975). Although these descriptions are all arguably appropriate, I want to suggest here that such descriptions, whether contextually or textually biased, ultimately fail to address the full range of potential musical meanings inherent in the piece: a range which is indicated in the sharp conflict between Goldberg's more positive recounting of Russell's motivations and Russell's own more ambivalent rationale, as outlined in the original liner notes to the later Beethoven Hall recording.⁷³ Although hampered by a cumbersome translation from the German, Russell's perspective seems relatively clear:

I visited Pennsylvania and saw the mines on the hills... and then you see these simple people living in this 'You-are-my-sunshine-world'. There I decided to play this tune. I think, playing it the way we do is the only way you can play it today. Otherwise it would be a lie... People of our times living in a world of computers and H-bombs, of Vietnam wars and astronauts and singing 'You Are My Sunshine' – it is impossible to believe in the good ending of this all [*sic*].

(quoted in Berendt, 1965)

⁷³ On the album *At Beethoven Hall II: Guest Don Cherry* (SABA 15060).

Hence, contrary to Harrison's formalist contention that 'You Are My Sunshine' represented 'the least appropriate melody possible', Russell's later observations suggest that the song was perhaps the *only* appropriate melody to express the meanings he had in mind: meanings which embody the equivocal tension between Russell's liberal social philosophy, noted above, and his cynicism with regard to what he characterizes as the "brainwashing" of contemporary society (quoted in DeMichael, 1964: 16). Furthermore, although Jordan's vocal may indeed be 'eerie', 'haunting', 'introspective', or 'guileless', a closer examination of her performance suggests a potentially broader range of interpretations.

My key point here, drawing on the discussion in Chapter Six, is that the complex 'double-coding' inherent in Russell's parody of the original song can only be interpreted on the basis of a fuller understanding of the dialogical interrelationship of the texts – its earlier canonical versions, and Russell's contemporary readings – and their respective contexts: an understanding, in other words, which examines Russell's response to the 'challenge of the past', and interrogates his relationship with the 'already said'. Notwithstanding the forceful cynicism underlying Russell's own description of the motivation behind the piece, as outlined in the notes to the later recording, I will argue that the earlier recorded performance embodies an ambivalent tension which refuses a univocal reading.

An initial point to make in considering the 1962 recording is that the unusualness of the choice of song could not have been lost on Russell: the early 1960s were a period of considerable musical innovation in jazz (of which Russell's sextet work was a significant part), and the selection of a country song popularized by a singing cowboy must have seemed to his audience to be little short of perverse. As Goldberg noted in his liner notes: "Probably, the idea of Russell playing 'Sunshine' will cause some wisecracks among the hippies, before they hear it" (1962). But the 'hipness' of Russell's arrangement, and its manifest musical sophistication, perhaps served to dispel any such fears. Moreover, this was not the first time that Russell had incorporated 'unusual' pieces into his musical repertoire. In his 1956 piece 'The Day John Brown Was Hanged',⁷⁴ stark quotes from 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' are juxtaposed with dense quartet textures: hence, as Max Harrison suggests, "the melody's diatonic squareness throws into relief the emotional and technical complexity of the surroundings" (1976: 60). In Russell's 'Sunshine', however, the 'diatonic squareness' of the melody becomes the focus of the piece, and the song is subjected to a series of fascinating melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic variations.

The piece opens with sparse piano and imitative horn statements over a martial drum beat, the piano making brief allusions to the theme;⁷⁵ a dissonant ensemble passage leads to a gentle 'jazz-style' statement of the theme on the horns, accompanied by powerful bass counterpoint; this gives way to a stark chorus of dissonant piano chords, backed by held tones on the horns, and bass and brushes. A gently swinging series of chorus-long horn

⁷⁴ On the Hal McKusick album *Jazz Workshop* (RCA 43637).

⁷⁵ The sextet consists of piano, trumpet, trombone, tenor saxophone, bass and drums, plus Sheila Jordan on vocals.

solos follows – muted trombone, muted trumpet, tenor, and muted trombone again – the players fashioning brief improvised statements from the simple harmonic material, which is extended and elaborated by Russell’s chordal accompaniment. In the opening six minutes of the piece, then, the treatment of the theme alternates between spare dissonance and more ‘conventional’ jazz readings, generating equivocal episodes of musical tension and relaxation. Following the horn solos, a 15-second up-tempo passage in the rhythm section – with the horns spelling out the opening phrase of the theme in a musically dislocated quarter time – offers a brief foreshadowing of the ending of the piece.

This leads, in turn – by way of a parodic Vegas-style piano flourish (and a rather clumsy edit) – to Sheila Jordan’s entrance. Her *a cappella*, rubato reading of the chorus does little to recall either Bing or singing cowboys: a chorus which takes Crosby and Autry a perfunctory 20-25 seconds is expanded by Jordan to a two minute meditation, her vocal variations suggesting a new range of meanings for this somewhat hackneyed ditty. In contrast to the vulnerability of the opening lines, Jordan’s subtle change in the lyric – from “You’ll never know dear how much I love you” to “...how much I want you” – introduces an element of eroticism to the song which is totally absent in its country incarnations. Francis Davis is one of the few critics to have noted this aspect of Jordan’s performance, suggesting that she sings “the beery, unlovely melody as sweetly as a child intones a prayer – yet the words acquire an unaccountable erotic chill” (1988: 163).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The fact that, in more recent decades, ‘You Are My Sunshine’ has become firmly ensconced in public imagination as a children’s song only further widens the potential range of intertextual reference. See, for example, the 1990 CD *Children’s Favorite Songs Vol 4* (Disney 60608) and the 1998 CD *Mommy and Me: Rock-a-Bye Baby* (Madacy 124).

After Jordan's unaccompanied chorus, the horns reenter with their imitative statements, underpinned by a more forceful return to the martial drumming from the song's opening. Again, subtle changes to the lyric generate new connotations, the shift from "I dreamed I held you in my arms" to "I dreamed you held me in your arms" emphasizing the child-like vulnerability of the solo chorus, and the change from "I hung my head and cried" to "I bowed my head and cried" suggesting the prayer-like religiosity which Davis identifies. The start of a new chorus signals a quickening of tempo and a key change which, as Davis notes, "forces [Jordan] above her natural range... Although she makes the notes, it sounds like she's straining" (1988: 163). Half way through the chorus a walking bass line and a shift to a more swinging rhythmic accompaniment dispels the tense mood, the closing eight bars of this chorus relocating the listener – briefly and somewhat uncomfortably, perhaps – in 'jazz' territory, returning to the mood of the earlier horn solos, with Jordan's scat-style singing momentarily invoking the stylings of a Betty Carter or a Sarah Vaughan.

But perhaps the most striking aspect of Russell's arrangement is the final chorus, which had been hinted at in 'gentler' fashion in the brief section that preceded Jordan's entrance. This time, however, the piano is even more agitated, and the horns highly dissonant – a "negating three-horn raspberry", as Davis describes it (1988: 163) – giving the piece a rug-pulling, pie-in-the-face ending which casts doubt on all that has gone before: were the dissonant passages really as tense as they first appeared?; was the band really swinging the tune, or was it all tongue in cheek?; was Jordan's solo chorus really as erotically-charged as it seemed, or was she just kidding?; were the lyric changes really as

meaningful as one thought, or merely absent-minded gestures?; was this piece really 'about' the 'humanity of the people pitted against the brutal demands of the region' or was it actually 'about' the 'impossibility of believing' in a happy ending? After more than 25 years of listening to Russell's 'Sunshine', I am convinced of two things: the need to keep asking these questions; and the refusal of the piece to succumb to a single, univocal 'meaning'. Perhaps, then, the purpose of cultural analysis might not be that of finding definitive answers to a finite number of questions, but rather that of posing an ever-expanding number of questions, based on an ever-widening understanding of the interrelationship of texts and contexts.

Such a proposition clearly has much in common with Tomlinson's understanding of cultural analysis which we encountered in Chapter Three (pp. 152-156): "the process is an endless one in which the art work and its culture take on ever-deeper significance. It is a reciprocal one, in which the art work illuminates the context even as the context illuminates the art work " (1984: 357). Hence, as Tomlinson suggests, "the deepest knowledge will result from the dialogue that involves the largest number of differing vantage points. Knowledge is a product of the differing displacements of reality perceived from different viewpoints, not the product of a singular, authoritative perception" (Tomlinson, 1992: 74). Much as I agree with the spirit of Tomlinson's proposals, there are two fundamental differences in the approach which I am proposing: firstly, as I have indicated in the previous chapters, the methodological relativism and idealism inherent in the notion of analytical 'endlessness' is replaced by a more critically grounded theoretical self-reflexivity, assessing the strengths and weaknesses, and appropriateness and efficacy,

of particular methodological approaches; and secondly, such an approach does not privilege contextual issues over textual considerations – as noted in the case studies above, a close reading of the musical text is a necessary adjunct to an analysis of musical context.

This latter point is well illustrated in a brief analysis of Russell's instrumental recording of 'You Are My Sunshine', at Beethoven Hall in 1965. In this later arrangement, Sheila Jordan's vocal part is replaced by Don Cherry's solo trumpet and Russell's solo piano, perhaps offering a clearer statement of the satirical nature of Russell's parody, and confirming his own more cynical observations on the song. Here, Margaret Rose's distinction between satiric and ironic parody is helpful in understanding the somewhat more delimited range of meanings implied by the instrumental version. We will recall from Chapter Six (p. 283) that Rose proposes that: "In all cases parody may be said to have 'double-coded' one text with another, although in the case of satiric parody one text (or code) will generally be the target of the other, while in ironic parody the different codes embedded in the parody may reflect on each other to modify or change the meaning of both, or simply add a variety or complexity of codes to the parody text" (Rose, 1991a: 270). What I want to suggest here is that Jordan's vocal performance in the earlier version is pivotal in ameliorating the strong satirical nature of Russell's intent, generating an ironic ambivalence and ambiguity in which the resulting 'complexity of codes' in the piece resists either a straightforwardly satirical reading, or an equally untenable 'evocative' reading, in which the listener is apparently able to 'see and feel the Appalachian landscape'.

The opening sections of the Beethoven Hall arrangement are broadly similar to those of the 1962 recording, replicating the alteration of ‘stark’ and ‘swinging’ choruses, and duplicating the order of horn solos. In sharp contrast to the equivocal ‘sincerity’ of Jordan’s unaccompanied chorus, however, Cherry’s solo trumpet aims straight for the satirical funny-bone: in this case, the earlier text is very much a parodic ‘target’. Cherry bends the simple tune out of shape, his low fart in the fifth bar (“You make me hap-py”) and the abrupt, expectation-cheating ending to his solo (“Please don’t take my...”) drawing laughs from the live audience.

Russell takes the next chorus (without the accompaniment of the horns and martial drumming from the Jordan arrangement), similarly transforming the tune with melodic variations and dissonant chord substitutions. Russell also ends his explorations abruptly (“Please don’t take my sun...”), but proceeds immediately to a series of extravagant avant-garde flourishes, totally – and deliberately – at odds with the song’s basic diatonicism. He finishes his solo with a mocking perfect cadence, briefly restoring the simple harmonic framework. Following an ensemble chorus – the equivalent of Jordan’s third chorus, in which Russell’s piano now takes a more active role – the final, dissonant theme statement is perhaps even more frantic than in the earlier version, prompting a two-minute ovation from the crowd.⁷⁷ The original liner note records the contrast between the enthusiastic big-city audience response in Stuttgart and the distinctly cool reception of the piece in the smaller town of Koblenz the following evening: whistles from the Koblenz

⁷⁷ Although present on the original vinyl recording, the ovation has been edited from the CD re-issue.

audience prompted Russell to stop the performance and tell the audience “If you know it better, why don’t you finish the concert?” (quoted in Berendt, 1965; see also Knauer, 1998: 5-6).

One could speculate that a less ‘sophisticated’, small-town audience was more likely to take offence at the more delimited range of musical meanings inherent in Russell’s 1965 arrangement of the piece: an arrangement which perhaps displays less ambivalence than the earlier recording with Jordan. Contrary to Wolfram Knauer’s contention that “the Stuttgart version is even livelier, more adventurous in its improvisation, more convincing in its overall development” (1998: 6) than the earlier recording, it might be argued, then, that the former’s mode of satiric parody denies the latter’s intertextual richness and musical ambiguity: rather than simply employing the original text as a ‘target’, Jordan’s affecting performance enters into a complex dialogue with its canonical predecessors, offering a new and radically unstable series of meanings and connotations, and denying definitive or categorical interpretation.

I would suggest, therefore, that a comparative analysis of these two Russell texts, and of their complex interrelationship both with one other and with the canonical texts which served as their inspiration, serves not only to confirm the impossibility of believing in analytical ‘happy endings’, but also to highlight the potential musical richness of the postmodern engagement with the ‘already said’.

A Non-Hierarchical Overview: Contemporary Jazz, Postmodernism, and Cultural Value

Bob Palmer's comments on Sheila Jordan's vocal performance on the 1962 version of 'You Are My Sunshine' – that it was "unlike anything else in the jazz of the period" (Palmer, 1975) – are equally applicable to George Russell's parodic arrangement, and this seminal recording can therefore be seen as a fascinating precursor of the musical developments of the 1980s and 1990s: developments which, in their recourse to a range of 'postmodern' techniques, are regularly misunderstood and undervalued. In this concluding section, I will address some of these developments, suggesting the need for a fuller understanding of such techniques, and a reassessment of established notions of cultural value. In his sceptical essay on jazz historiography, Scott DeVeaux has noted the tendency in jazz textbooks for the comfortably linear early history of the music to become somewhat confused by the time the chronology reaches the 1950s and 1960s:

the student of jazz history is confronted with a morass of terms – *cool jazz*, *hard bop*, *modal jazz*, *Third Stream*, *New Thing* – none of which convincingly represents a consensus. For the most recent decades, the most that writers of textbooks can manage is to sketch out the contrasting directions pointed to by free jazz and jazz/rock fusion.

(DeVeaux, 1998: 484)

Indeed, even in the seventh edition of Mark Gridley's *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* (1999) the reader is given the impression that 'Jazz-Rock Fusion' is the last 'style' of jazz worthy of analysis, and the 'Chronology of Jazz Styles Chart' (1997: 372-373) goes no further than the 1970s, despite the fact that the new edition dates from 1999. The two-hour television documentary *Masters of American Music: The Story of Jazz* (1993) – widely screened on American PBS and the Canadian *Bravo!* channel – makes this

view even more explicit. Dismissing fusion in a cursory one and a half minutes – “there were many who felt that jazz had been diluted beyond recognition” – the authors are similarly sceptical of the 1980s neo-classical “backlash”,⁷⁸ painting a sad picture of jazz in the closing decades of the twentieth century:

the problem is that jazz seems to have been at a standstill since the innovations of John Coltrane... [jazz] appears to be in a state of arrested development. But that does not in any way lessen its significance... Just as the music of Bach and Mozart continues to be vital, so jazz will retain its importance even if it does not undergo further evolution.

(Albertson and Seig, 1993)

Such myopic, classicizing rhetoric – in common with the narrow perspective evident in many jazz textbooks⁷⁹ – simply fails to acknowledge – or understand – the new forms of musical creativity and innovation that have been prevalent in jazz over the last few decades. Hence, if the free jazz of the 1960s can be understood as an ‘ultra-modernist’ limit point in the music’s development, then much of the jazz in more recent decades can be understood to represent, in Eco’s terms, a postmodern reply to the modern, in which the past is revisited, “but with irony, not innocently” (Eco, 1985a: 67). Thus, in sharp contrast to the conservative neoclassicism of the Jazz at Lincoln Center program – with its “idealized representation of the past” (DeVeaux, 1998: 504) – and contrary to the pessimistic prognosis of Albertson and Seig – with its spurious diagnosis of ‘arrested development’ – many contemporary jazz musicians and composers have turned productively to a range of postmodern techniques – irony, parody, juxtaposition,

⁷⁸ Although it is interesting to note that it is Wynton Marsalis, in a recorded interview, who is given virtually the last word in the documentary.

⁷⁹ A similarly narrow perspective is evident in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (Kernfeld, 1988) – see Chapter Three (p. 137).

intertextuality – in their music making. Drawing on an eclectic range of influences and musical styles, this work challenges and expands the existing categories of the jazz canon, and raises a new set of questions with regard to musical value and canonicity.

In light of Eco's understanding of postmodernism as "a way of operating" (1985a: 66), it is interesting to consider the reflections of the composer and multi-instrumentalist Anthony Braxton on his own musical practice. Braxton observes that:

the normal progression... seemed to be for a musician to start at one point, like say Dixieland, and then progress up to avant-garde. That's a linear progression. We've come to think of it as being logical and normal. Someone like John Coltrane fits that progression... I consciously made a decision to start at a number of points and develop these points independently. And that's how I've been moving.

(quoted in Ansell, 1977: 249)

Braxton's musical output certainly reflects this 'conscious decision', encompassing solo alto saxophone recitals, jazz quartet and quintet work, free improvisation, and composed music for a range of ensembles, from small-scale chamber music and performance pieces to large-scale music theatre and his Composition No. 82 for four orchestras. Braxton has been regularly criticized for his 'intellectualism' and his failure to 'swing' in a conventional jazz sense; indeed, Braxton has often denied the use of the term 'jazz' in relationship to his music, telling Bill Smith, for example, "I'm not a jazz musician" (quoted in Smith, 1974: 2). But, as Kevin Whitehead argues:

at a time when neo-conservatives are attempting a major rewrite of jazz history, eliminating all of which they don't approve, it's important to recognise Braxton as a jazz musician and composer. He puts a premium on improvisation; most of his pieces are springboards for improvisers... Braxton uses propulsive riffs, and calls for blues

feeling. A surprising number of pieces were inspired by New Orleans collective improvisation... If all this isn't jazz, what is?

(Whitehead, 1995: 157-158)⁸⁰

Braxton's Composition No. 58 (1976) offers an excellent illustration of the rich musical possibilities offered by postmodern parody and reappropriation: scored for 'creative marching orchestra', the piece is an ironic response to Sousa's 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' (1896), and reflects Braxton's "interest in parade music (both as an avenue for extension as well as a legitimate form to be pursued on its own)" (Braxton, 1976). Although Sousa's famous march might seem like an even more unlikely choice for a 'jazz' treatment than 'You Are My Sunshine',⁸¹ the nature of Braxton's intertextual musical thinking is made clear in his *Composition Notes: Book C* (1988):

the extended implications of the work involve the weight of what is perceived as normal (traditional) – as a point of definition to view structural evolution (and growth). Composition No. 58 is conceived as an experience that opens up the sound space of the music – to show us that nothing is necessarily what it seems 'or is in only one state'... Composition No. 58 is an extended structural platform that establishes traditional march music as a basis for post-AACM creative exploration dynamics. The reality of this work is conceived as a time warp musical context that suddenly shifts into another gear (and later returns). With an experience of this nature it is possible to re-see (experience) the familiar.

(Braxton, 1988: 340-342)

⁸⁰ For an interesting range of commentary on Braxton's work and its critical reception, see Radano (1993, 1995) and Lock (1988, 1999). See also Lock (1995) and Heffley (1996). In addition, Braxton's five volumes of *Composition Notes* (1988) offer fascinating insights into his musical and compositional practice.

⁸¹ On Sousa's ambivalent attitude toward jazz, see Bierley (1973: 18-19): although Sousa was one of the earliest popularizers of ragtime in Europe (during his European tour of 1900), Bierley notes that "when dixieland and hot jazz made their debut a few years later, Sousa first viewed them with disgust... He made a few statements which he probably wished later he had not made" (1973: 18). See also the comments by Sousa in his contribution to the August 1924 issue of *The Etude*, on 'The Jazz Problem': "Jazz, like the poor, are [*sic*] ever with us... Jazz is an excellent tonic but a poor dominant" (quoted in Walser, 1999: 50). Sousa goes on to suggest, however: "There is no reason, with its exhilarating rhythm, its melodic ingenuities, why it should not become one of the accepted forms of composition" (1999: 50).

Hence, Braxton's reappropriation of Sousa (to whom the piece is dedicated) should be understood as neither simply playful tribute nor strictly satirical parody. In a suggestive analysis of this composition, emphasizing the musical – and sociopolitical – potentialities of Braxton's parodic intertextuality, Ronald Radano has highlighted the complex range of musical meanings inherent in the piece:

Subtly mocking through black modernist innovation the bravado of literal march rhythm, Braxton seems to be making fun of the music's most self-serious features. By casting displaced march elements in rhythmically and timbrally adventurous improvisational settings, Braxton gives voice to the presence and power of black musicality at the expense of a deformed master text. Significantly, if paradoxically, Braxton's recasting also expresses an ecumenical message consistent with a global, all-embracing populist vision. By refashioning the conventions of the march in the context of an experimental language, he calls attention to the radical potential of the everyday, much in the same way that the early modernist Charles Ives recast the ordinary into the supra-real. Whereas Ives championed the Euro-American voice, Braxton undermines its authority as he appropriates the music's spirited sense of freedom to articulate a multicultural ideal.

(Radano, 1993: 204)⁸²

In light of my comments above regarding the underdeveloped conceptualization of postmodernism in Radano's work, it is interesting to note that Radano characterizes Braxton's Composition No. 58 specifically in terms of "*modernist* innovation" (1993: 204; my italics), and it could certainly be argued – notwithstanding its populist source – that the improvisatory sections of the piece display the features of "avant-garde experimentation and... textual unity" which Jonathan Kramer (1995: 31) argues are typical of modernism. Rather than representing an irreconcilable analytical contradiction, however, I want to

⁸² Given the discussion of Ives in Chapter Three (pp. 175-185), we may wish to take issue with Radano's characterization of Ives as championing a '*Euro-American voice*', noting instead the extent to which Ives "goes beyond claiming an American identity within the European tradition and uses the methods of European art music to assert the value of the American vernacular tradition in its own right" (Burkholder, 1995: 419).

suggest that the contrast here between my own characterization of Braxton's piece as a 'postmodern' reappropriation of Sousa and Radano's focus on its 'modernist' innovation serves to highlight the prototypically 'postmodern attitude' which the piece exhibits, offering a striking example of Eco's understanding of postmodernism as a 'way of operating' and of his contention that "in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely" (1985a: 68). Hence, recalling Charles Jencks' contention that "one of the virtues of parody, besides its wit, is its mastery of cliché and convention" (1991: 93), Braxton's complex 'double-coding' of the formal structures of marching music juxtaposes a range of more 'conventional' musical elements against 'modernist' avant-garde experimentation.

The piece opens in 'traditional' fashion, Braxton stressing that this is a "march structure that can actually be marched to – and performed in a parade" (1988: 342), and suggesting that "this is every music you've ever heard... at the high school basketball game" (1988: 345). In the following section, however, Leo Smith's exploratory trumpet playing is pitted against a fractured 'oompah' rhythm, "that attempts to dismantle the metric (pulse) implications... as a means to establish fresh operatives (and context) for post-Ayler creative exploration... This is a rhythmic music state that gives a refreshing context for extended solo postulation" (1988: 345-350). The next section juxtaposes George Lewis' playful trombone with a five-note repeated theme which Braxton describes as "a kind of good ole southern melody... I felt a light motif of this kind could... remind us of the composite route of the music – and that this is has come from a march" (1988: 351). In turn, Braxton's extended clarinet solo is accompanied by a dense variation on the

five-note motif from the previous section, the piece concluding in ‘traditional’ fashion with Jon Faddis’ piccolo trumpet solo replacing the piccolo part in ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever’. Confirming Radano’s ‘ecumenical’ reading of the piece, Braxton concludes his comments in the *Composition Notes* by observing that: “I have constructed this vehicle as a testament to the wonder of march music and march music dynamics. The challenge of the next time cycle will call for an expanded awareness of creative music – regardless of region and/or perceived classification” (1988: 353).

Braxton’s ‘expanded awareness of creative music’ is an attribute which is shared by many of his contemporaries, and the elaborate ‘double-coding’ which characterizes his Composition No. 58 is typical of much contemporary jazz and new music – classificatory categories which are becoming increasingly meaningless as forms and genres continually cross-fertilize and overlap. It is perhaps the New York ‘downtown’ scene of the 1980s and 1990s which best illustrates this eclecticism: for example, the guitarist Bill Frisell’s 1993 CD *Have a Little Faith* included arrangements of Charles Ives’s ‘Three Places in New England’ and Aaron Copland’s ‘Billy the Kid’, a version of Sousa’s ‘Washington Post March’, Stephen Foster’s ‘Little Jenny Dow’, covers of Madonna, Bob Dylan and John Hiatt, Muddy Waters’ ‘I Can’t Be Satisfied’, a Sonny Rollins tune, the traditional song ‘Billy Boy’, and a reading of the Heyman and Young standard ‘When I Fall in Love’.⁸³ The trumpeter and composer Dave Douglas reveals a similarly broad palette, his

⁸³ On Elektra Nonesuch 79301.

work drawing on everything from mainstream jazz and eastern European folk music to Robert Schumann songs and avant-garde composition.⁸⁴ But it is perhaps the work of John Zorn which epitomizes the ‘downtown’ scene, and in the concluding part of this chapter I will examine briefly the range of evaluative responses which Zorn’s work has provoked.

The *Penguin Guide to Jazz* offers a typical – or, perhaps more accurately, stereotypical – description of Zorn’s music: “Listening to John Zorn is like flicking through a stack of comic books or watching endless Hanna-Barbera and Fred Quimby re-runs on a TV set whose brightness and contrast have been jacked up to migraine level” (Cook and Morton, 1992: 1174). From this perspective, Zorn is readily characterized as the paradigmatically postmodern artist, to be enlisted by populists and pessimists alike: Zorn’s fast-cutting eclecticism and radical heterogeneity seems to typify the age of MTV, while his status as “the bad boy of new music” (Davis, 1991: 97) lends him a convincing air of marginality. But for some observers, Zorn’s work simply epitomises the depthless, chaotic triviality of the postmodern era, playing readily into the hands of Jameson’s understanding of the manner in which the various forms of postmodernism “no longer simply ‘quote’... but incorporate into their very substance” the “whole ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Readers’ Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film... the murder mystery, and

⁸⁴ Douglas has recorded extensively over the last few years: for typically eclectic examples, hear *Constellations* by Douglas’ *Tiny Bell Trio* (1995; Hat Art 6173), *In Our Lifetime*, a sextet tribute to the jazz trumpeter Booker Little (1995; New World 80471), and *Charms of the Night Sky*, featuring a quartet of trumpet, accordion, violin, and acoustic bass (Winter & Winter 910015).

the science fiction or fantasy novel” (Jameson, 1991: 2-3). After listening to Zorn’s *Spillane* (1987)⁸⁵ one might think that Jameson’s attention had been focused on Zorn’s work; but for Graham Lock, following Jameson’s evaluative lead, *Spillane* is simply “high gloss muzak for trash-culture trendies” (1989: 37). And for Francis Davis, Zorn’s re-working of the Ornette Coleman canon is “a feeling-less, monochromatic din... the concert amounted to heresy” (1991: 97). But Zorn’s work frustrates such easy criticism, and his response to an interviewer’s observation that his work seems to blend ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ offers an interesting insight into his musical motivation:

This is something I react really strongly against, the idea of high art and low art. I mean, that distinction’s a bunch of... *bullshit*... There’s good music and great music and phoney music in every genre and all the genres are the... same!... People who grew up in the ‘60s listening to blues, rock, classical, avant-garde, ethnic music – I think we all share one common belief, that all this music is on equal grounds and there’s no high art and low art.

(Strickland, 1991: 128-129; emphasis in original)

Rather than confirming ‘postmodern’ claims for a blurring of boundaries, I want to suggest that Zorn’s denial of ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ serves instead to highlight the extent to which the categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ have themselves been constructed through theoretical orthodoxy, academic and institutional traditionalism, and the hierarchical conservatism of cultural policy. In his liner notes to a CD by Carl Stalling⁸⁶ – composer of the music for many Warner Brothers cartoons of the 1940s and 50s, and acknowledged by Zorn as a significant influence – Zorn observes of Stalling that: “no musical style seemed beyond his reach – and his willingness to include them, any and all, whenever necessary,

⁸⁵ Elektra Nonesuch 79172.

⁸⁶ *The Carl Stalling Project: Music From Warner Bros. Cartoons 1936-1958* (Warner Bros. 26027).

implies an openness – a non-hierarchical overview – typical of today’s younger composers” (1990). The ‘non-hierarchical overview’ which Zorn identifies is evident throughout his own work, and has led to the development of a unique compositional style in which the employment of parody, irony, and intertextual juxtaposition has served to articulate a coherent, if highly eclectic, aesthetic: one which draws freely on a wide range of musical styles and genres, employing modernist and postmodernist techniques in a similarly ‘non-hierarchical’ fashion. The repertoire of Zorn’s band Naked City – now sadly defunct – gave a clear indication of his eclecticism, encompassing hardcore thrash pieces (most of them no longer than a minute), film music (by Morricone, Barry, Mancini, and Goldsmith, among others), ambient minimalism, surf music, extended compositions, and arrangements of Debussy, Scriabin, Messiaen and Ives. Gene Santoro, for example, has suggested that “eclectic is far too weak a word to describe [Zorn’s] demanding yet playful sonic assaults, which raise questions and rearrange expectations about how music can go about being whatever it is” (1988: 23-24).

Writing of Zorn’s composition ‘Carny’ for solo piano, the pianist Stephen Drury suggests that the piece “is an implosion of references in which the meaning of each gesture collides with both the image of its source in the listener’s memory and its juxtaposition in the piece as a whole” (1994: 196).⁸⁷ Describing the piece as a “furious pile-up of Liszt, Nancarrow, cartoon music, Ives, and Art Tatum”, and likening it to works by Boulez,

⁸⁷ Drury was one of the three pianists – along with Yvar Mikhashoff and Anthony deMare – for whom the 13-minute piece was written, under a grant from Meet the Composer (see Drury, 1994: 196). Drury’s recording of ‘Carny’ is on the 1998 CD *Angelus Novus*, available on Zorn’s own record label, Tzadik (7028).

Reich, Palmieri, and Cage, Drury suggests that “John Zorn’s ‘Carny’, with its cacophony of styles, references and inferences, and its running commentary on itself, rudely shoulders its way into such company” (1994: 200). Similarly, writing of Zorn’s composition ‘Forbidden Fruit’ (1987),⁸⁸ scored for string quartet, turntables and female Japanese voice, Jonathan Kramer suggests that the piece “offers a considerable dose of postmodern chaos, despite its nostalgia for other musics... Listening to ‘Forbidden Fruit’ can be as dizzying as it is electrifying. You never know what is coming next, nor when. The stylistic juxtapositions are amazingly bold” (1995: 22). Of this latter piece, Zorn has observed: “Composed of sixty sections in all, four sets of twelve variations each, and the twelve themes, all squeezed into ten minutes, this is perhaps my most compact and fast-moving piece to date” (Zorn, 1987).

But to suggest, on the basis of primarily formalist analyses, that Zorn’s work displays a ‘non-hierarchical’ eclecticism and is characterized by a radical intertextual juxtaposition is hardly the last word here on the question of cultural value. One might consider, for example, the charges levelled at Zorn in terms of the derivative character of some of his more recent ‘modernist’ chamber music: Tim Owen, for example, has suggested that “‘Carny’ treads a knife edge between iconoclasm and dilettantism”, and characterizes Zorn’s string quartet ‘Memento Mori’ (1992)⁸⁹ as “scraping the bottom of the inspirational barrel” (1998: 70).⁹⁰ Or, more significantly perhaps, one might look beyond

⁸⁸ The piece is recorded on Zorn’s *Spillane* CD (Elektra Nonesuch 79172).

⁸⁹ On the 1999 CD *The String Quartets* (Tzadik 7047)

⁹⁰ See also Stuart Broomer’s (1998) review of a concert of Zorn’s chamber music at the Festival International Musique Actuelle Victoriaville in May 1998, in which he notes Zorn’s “obedience style school of conducting” and observes musical debts to Louis Andriessen and Arvo Pärt.

purely textualist issues to consider the accusations of racism and sexism which have been directed at Zorn's work: as I have indicated in the preceding chapters, one of the key points of this thesis is that any understanding of cultural value must address the complex interrelationship of texts and contexts. Thus, for the musicologist Ellie Hisama, for example, the formal characteristics of 'Forbidden Fruit' are less significant than the manner in which, she claims, the piece "appropriates Asian female identity" (1993: 96). In the context of an article that explores the "pernicious racial and sexual stereotype" underlying pieces by John Cougar Mellencamp, David Bowie, and Zorn, Hisama argues that Zorn's 'Forbidden Fruit' indicates "a disturbing obsession with Asian women's sexual impact upon him" (1993: 95).

On the basis of Hisama's analysis, then, it might seem appropriate to characterize Zorn in the terms which Lawrence Kramer employed to describe Charles Ives: namely, that he is "formally most advanced precisely where he is socially most retrograde" (1995b: 175). The parallels between Zorn and Ives are certainly intriguing, and Zorn has identified Ives' use of "weird juxtapositions and discontinuity" as among his "biggest influences" (Strickland, 1991: 127). But beyond these strictly aesthetic factors the parallels in this case are less than convincing, and Hisama's analysis is highly problematic, and especially so in terms of her claims for Zorn's attitude towards Japanese culture. Hisama characterizes Zorn as the "James Bond of the downtown music scene: he travels to exotic locales where he encounters numerous beautiful women; when he emerges triumphant at the end of the adventure, his exploits are routinely celebrated" (1993: 95). Such analytical extravagance is strangely at odds with Zorn's own cautiously self-reflexive attitude towards Japanese

culture. Commenting on his decision to live in Tokyo for six months of each year, Zorn observes: “It’s a stimulating change in perspective, not only with regard to the music scene, but also with regard to who I am as a person, how I fit into American culture, what I am in Japanese culture” (Zorn, 1987).

Furthermore, Hisama’s cursory analysis fails to confront adequately the differing modes of address in the empirical examples she cites: in the case of the pieces by Mellencamp and Bowie (both entitled ‘China Girl’), a white, male singer addresses an Asian woman in English; in the case of Zorn’s piece, a female Japanese singer addresses an unnamed ‘he’ in Japanese. In the latter case, Hisama’s claims for Zorn the composer in the “role of puppet master” (1993: 97) are unconvincing, and need to be explored in the broader context of the relationship between composer and performer. Kevin McNeilly suggests an altogether different interpretation of Zorn’s compositional role, arguing that in his ‘game’ pieces, for example, Zorn “creates... a functional community, a group interaction in which the individual creative will cannot be subsumed by the collective whole in which it participates” (1995).

Zorn has also attracted considerable controversy over his CD cover art, which has included stills from Japanese pornographic films and references to sado-masochism and Chinese torture.⁹¹ In response to protests by Asian-American groups, Zorn has argued that the images “were not chosen lightly” and “have been used for their transgressive quality, illustrative of those areas of human experience hidden in the gaps between pain and

⁹¹ See, for example, the covers of the 1990 Naked City album *Torture Garden* (Earache 28) and the 1990 CD *Naked City* (Elektra Nonesuch 7559-79238).

pleasure, life and death, horror and ecstasy” (quoted in Hamilton, 1994: 9; see also Lee, 1994a, 1994b). But if Hisama’s critique is relatively easily dismissed, Zorn’s position here is perhaps more problematic, and has led to cancelled concerts, a split with his original record company, and debates regarding radio play: in this case, it can be readily argued that Zorn’s formal advances are, indeed, outweighed by the more socially retrograde aspects of his overall aesthetic. Thus, for example, the journalist Elisa Lee has highlighted the problems inherent in Zorn’s ‘transgressive’ gestures:

How is it that in a society where an episode of ‘Roseanne’ showing a kiss between two women causes a flurry of public attention and sparks rumours of censorship, a musician who conducts concerts in front of screens of Japanese pornography, distributes albums with covers of Asian women being hung, mutilated and tortured and dedicates an album to Chinese torture, can incite nary a protest in mainstream American media?

(Lee, 1994a)

In contrast, Michael Dorf, owner of the Knitting Factory performance space in New York, argues that Zorn “is not doing this without a consciousness about what it means for women and Asian women and the history of the Japanese exploiting other Asian countries” (quoted in Hamilton, 1994: 9). In similarly ameliorative fashion, Ginny Berson, program director at KPFA, a Berkeley radio station, argues “Our mission is to promote understanding, the building of bridges between people of different cultures and groups... and artwork that depicts torture of Asian women does not promote that... But what does John Zorn playing his sax have to do with that? And what about Miles Davis’ misogyny? Does that mean we have to discuss his attitudes toward women each time we play his music?” (quoted in Hamilton, 1994: 9).

The controversy and debate – extremely heated at times – surrounding Zorn’s cover art and stage performances raises a number of significant issues with regard to artistic freedom and censorship, simply highlighting further the complexity inherent in any consideration of cultural value. Hence, for example, given the aesthetic centrality which Zorn claims for the ‘extra-musical’ aspects of his work, one wonders if Berson’s position represents an adequate response to these issues, begging important questions with regard to the separation of the ‘musical’ and the ‘extra-musical’. Again, Kramer’s study of Ives is highly suggestive in terms of indicating the impossibility – from a ‘postmodern’ perspective – of disengaging issues of text and context, and his comments apply equally well in the case of Zorn. Noting the ‘contextualist’ aspects of Ives’s social philosophy and his use of gender ideology, Kramer argues that:

well-meaning critics might be tempted to write them off as quirks in order to concentrate on what really matters, his music. But we can do that in good conscience only if we take the extreme formalist position that art, personality, and ideology are separate spheres, so that only what we posit as purely artistic – here purely musical – values really matter. I am not willing to take that position, and neither, not for a minute, was Ives himself.

(Kramer, 1995b: 198)

Against this background, it is interesting to observe the more specifically political edge to Zorn’s recent work, in which a didactic, neo-modernist rhetoric of social activism and involvement is expressed through a primarily postmodern musical aesthetic. In direct response to the rise of anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism in both Europe and the United States,⁹² Zorn conceived his Radical Jewish Culture project as “a positive act of

⁹² It is worthwhile noting that this is not confined to political extremists and militia groups: in a television talk show, Wynton Marsalis complained of the music business being controlled by “people who read the Torah and stuff” (quoted in Teachout, 1995: 52).

identification that we hope may point towards the light of a new Jewish self-awareness". Musically, Zorn suggests that the project "explores the diversity of American new music, as well as searching for a continuity with a destroyed past" (quoted in Gilardino, 1995: 19). Zorn's most obviously political piece, *Kristallnacht*, makes direct reference to the infamous 'night of broken glass' in November 1938, when the Nazis mounted a concentrated attack on Jewish businesses and property; the composition offers a musical collage which draws on klezmer music, contemporary jazz, the classical avant-garde, Hebrew texts, and Nazi speeches.⁹³

Zorn's quartet *Masada* further exemplifies the approach he describes, mixing Jewish klezmer music and Ornette Coleman-inspired jazz.⁹⁴ The quote from the Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem reproduced on the band's CD covers offers a fascinating perspective not only on Zorn's more recent politically-inspired work, but also on the nature of much postmodern cultural practice, whether Jewish or otherwise:

There is a life of tradition that does not merely consist of conservative preservation, the constant continuation of the spiritual and cultural possessions of a community. There is such a thing as a treasure hunt within tradition, which creates a living relationship to tradition and to which much of what is best in current Jewish consciousness is indebted, even where it was – and is – expressed outside the framework of orthodoxy.

(Scholem, 1994)

⁹³ The 1992 live premiere in Munich – a postmodern provocation if ever there was one – was a vivid, visceral, and memorable experience. The 'extreme' nature of the piece is illustrated by the fact that the CD recording (Tzadik 7301) includes the warning that the track 'Never Again' "contains high frequency extremes at the limits of human hearing & beyond, which may cause nausea, headaches & ringing in the ears. Prolonged or repeated listenings is [*sic*] not advisable as it may result in temporary or permanent ear damage – The Composer" (Zorn, 1992).

⁹⁴ The group takes its name from the controversial ancient city of Judea, whose inhabitants allegedly took one another's lives rather than surrender to the besieging Roman army.

Scholem's evocative notion of a 'treasure hunt within tradition', has intriguing parallels with the suggestive Bill Evans quote which opens this chapter – 'The person who sees furthest into the future is likely to be the person who sees furthest into the past' – and also serves to recall Eco's understanding of the ironic postmodern engagement with the 'already said': perspectives which serve to indicate the manner in which much contemporary practice is involved not in a modernist, avant-garde pursuit of artistic 'progress', but rather in a postmodernist revisiting, reappraisal, and reworking of the past, juxtaposing an eclectic range of styles, forms, and genres – and modernist and postmodernist techniques – in a manner which denies traditional notions of cultural value.

In this chapter, then, I have illustrated the ways in which the 'challenge of the past' has been addressed by a range of artists, from Tony Bennett to John Zorn. I have highlighted the shortcomings of modernist, teleological notions of artistic development, and of reductively textual or contextual analyses, suggesting that much contemporary musical practice displays a complex – and often ironic – intertextuality which demands an analysis of the dialogical mutuality of texts and contexts. Furthermore, I have suggested that, in adopting such an approach, the cultural analyst can no longer claim an authoritative position from which to pronounce on questions of meaning and value: rather, the analyst must forego the 'verities' of traditional scholarly interpretation and focus instead on constructing a broader and deeper understanding of the elaborate textual and contextual *interrelationship* of contemporary cultural forms and practices.

Conclusion

I Got Rhythm, I Got Music: Theory, Music, and Value

“There is no escape from the discourse of value, and no escape
from the pressure and indeed the obligation to treat the world
as though it were fully relational, fully interconnected.”
From: *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, John Frow (1995: 134)

The story goes that after Ethel Merman gave her legendary performance of ‘I Got Rhythm’ at the premiere of the Gershwin brothers’ *Girl Crazy* in 1930, George Gershwin rushed to her dressing room and urged her never to take singing lessons.¹ At stake here was an investment (both artistic and economic) in a singing style – Merman’s archetypal Broadway ‘belting’ – that differentiated itself completely from the European norms of operatic *bel canto*. At the time, notwithstanding the Broadway musical’s mixed inheritance of vaudeville and operetta, it was the latter influence that still tended to dominate,² and Gershwin’s advice to Merman therefore served to highlight the tensions – both musical and discursive – that existed between the categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’.

But these are tensions which are evident far beyond the context of 1930s Broadway: as I have suggested in the previous chapters, the competing discourses of high and low continue to be prevalent not only between but also within a wide range of contemporary

¹ See Merman (1978: 39-40) and Hyland (1995: 119).

² Thus, for example, although Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s *Show Boat* (1927) is often hailed as one of the first truly ‘integrated’ Broadway musicals, addressing (in contrast to the exotic ‘princes’ and ‘castles’ of European operetta) a range of specifically American themes (see Block, 1993: 535), the vocal roles of both the female and male leads, Magnolia Hawks and Gaylord Ravenal, remain firmly rooted in operatic tradition.

musical styles, forms and genres. Furthermore, I have argued that much academic scholarship is ill-equipped either to identify or to interrogate these tensions. Whether in its traditionalist or revisionist guise, I have suggested that much work in cultural theory and music studies exhibits a theoretical and disciplinary reductionism that fails to address the specificities of contemporary cultural forms and practices, similarly eliding the complex interrelationship of textual and contextual factors. In response to the shortcomings of much of this work, I have argued for a critically self-reflexive analytical method which builds on the strengths but acknowledges the weaknesses of revisionist scholarship, proposing an 'eclecticism of theory' in any approach to cultural analysis: one which makes no claims for a 'happy' interdisciplinarity, but which nevertheless draws on a wide range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives.

One of the fundamental claims underlying this thesis is that my critique of the partiality and reductionism of much revisionist work in music studies – and of those approaches in the broader field of cultural theory which have informed this work – has been a necessary prerequisite to the development of the theoretical and methodological protocols which are essential for a more comprehensive analysis of contemporary musical forms and practices. A key point here is that my critique has involved neither the outright rejection of extant forms of scholarship, nor magical claims for the dialectical synthesis of contrasting approaches. Furthermore, a significant corollary to my critique is that the notion of analytical 'progress' on these issues is unlikely to be achieved by the continual development of new theoretical paradigms that claim to offer unique, univocal, or authoritative insights. While not wishing to deny the possibility of the development of new

paradigms, such thinking betrays an essentially modernist position which is totally at odds with my own analytical perspective. Rather, in a spirit of postmodern eclecticism, I have argued that many of the required theoretical and methodological protocols are already available, but simply in need of pragmatic reappraisal, retooling, and recombination in ways which allow for a wide-ranging analysis of the specificities and intertextual complexities of contemporary culture and its canons. Thus, if postmodern forms of cultural practice have responded to the challenge of the past with new models of artistic innovation and development, I want to suggest that, in analogous fashion, a postmodern cultural theory can draw upon its own theoretical past in fashioning a new model of analytical inquiry. Such a model would succumb neither to the reductionist paradoxes of a 'modernist postmodernism' nor to the disabling relativism of the common caricature of postmodernist theory. Rather, the theoretically eclectic model I have proposed is one that is both critically grounded and self-reflexive, offering a degree of explanatory power and analytical insight which is denied by the partiality of many existing scholarly approaches.

In the preceding chapter, I illustrated this analytical model with the aid of several case studies in the field of contemporary jazz, highlighting the discursive construction of jazz canons, and suggesting the need for a broader understanding of questions of musical meaning and cultural value. These case studies allowed me to focus on a number of areas – jazz, the Broadway tradition, American popular song – which have either been somewhat neglected by critical scholarship or commonly interpreted in a reductionist fashion. Notwithstanding the fact that it was these musical forms and practices which served, to a large extent, to motivate my thesis work in the first place, a further – and

highly significant – claim which I want to make is that the proposed model can be understood to be more broadly applicable to questions of meaning and value across the entire musical field. Given Eco’s conceptualization of postmodernism in terms of the ‘ironic rethinking’ of the past, the analytical model which I have proposed is one which virtually insists on an historical, contextual, and intertextual reading of cultural forms and practices. In light of this wide-ranging analytical agenda, then, the model developed in this thesis need not be restricted to the analysis of postmodern and contemporary musical forms. Indeed, perhaps the central claim of this thesis is the analytical need to move beyond the often mutually exclusive discourses which inform much academic scholarship, whether those of text and context, of high and low, of modernism and postmodernism – or, indeed, of ‘historical’ and ‘contemporary’ – acknowledging that the world is, without a doubt, “fully relational, fully interconnected” (Frow, 1995: 134).

The understanding of music as a single – yet discursively constructed – field suggests not only the dialogical mutuality of these concepts but also the need for a radically expanded understanding of intertextuality. While not wishing to deny the textual and socio-historical specificities of particular musical forms – in fact, as the case studies in the previous chapter demonstrated, the proposed model is especially sensitive to such specificities – there is little reason to believe that the concept of intertextuality – at least in this ‘expanded’ version – is necessarily limited to postmodern and contemporary forms: indeed, the proposed analytical model is likely to prove equally useful in the study of those musical practices which have more commonly been subjected to modernist forms of analysis. By way of a conclusion, then, rather than reiterating the arguments already made

in the course of this thesis, I want to sketch out some potential directions for future research, thereby highlighting the broad applicability of the analytical model I have proposed.

The Western art music tradition offers several interesting research areas: for example, given its musical and discursive claims, the ‘authenticity’ movement in Early Music (e.g. Kenyon, 1988) represents a potentially productive and fascinating area for further investigation. Similarly, those instances in which modernist claims for aesthetic autonomy conflict with contextual evidence offer rich material for analysis: as evident, for example, in the tension between Stravinsky’s oft-repeated idealist claims that he was merely “the vessel” through which his music passed (quoted in Small, 1980: 109),³ and the fact that a piece such as his *Serenade in A* for piano (1925) was “composed so that each of its four movements would fit onto a single side of a ten-inch disc” (Scott, 1990: 386). As Scott suggests, the modernist discourse of ‘art’ insists that “we must interpret this not as a concession to the requirements of the commercial medium of recording but as an example of the composer’s delight in self-imposed limitations” (Scott, 1990: 386). Scott also notes the extent to which more ‘mundane’ issues of commissioning and publishing have been

³ Stravinsky’s comments have interesting parallels with Coleridge’s similarly idealist claims for the dream-inspired composition of his poem *Kubla Khan* in 1816. In his famous prefatory note, Coleridge suggested that the poem was composed “without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (quoted in Schneider, 1953: 23), and the critic Warren Stevenson has observed that “for over a century this account of the poem’s genesis was taken at face value” (1983: 25-26). Such idealist views were sorely tested, however, by the discovery, in 1934, of an alternative manuscript in Coleridge’s handwriting, which included a radically different – and somewhat more mundane – account of the poem’s composition, suggesting that it was “composed in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery” (quoted in Schneider, 1953: 24-25).

disregarded by a modernist discourse of ‘artistic genius’: “one can show that Mozart abandoned a flute concerto in mid-composition because a commissioner failed to pay up; the same composer was persuaded by a concert promoter to change a movement of his Paris Symphony; and it was a publisher who persuaded Beethoven to replace the finale of his late B-flat quartet with something more conventional” (1990: 405). Examples such as these could be readily – and productively – pursued with the proposed analytical model; and it is worthwhile noting that in Scott’s review of ‘Music and Sociology for the 1990s’, these examples appear in the concluding section of his article, entitled ‘Areas of Neglect’ (1990: 405).

The analytical inadequacy of modernist discourses is further highlighted in a consideration of the contemporary field of new music, and especially so in relation to those composers who draw upon a range of popular music forms, practices, and technologies. This is an area that demands a mode of analysis which avoids the often pre-coded evaluative positions of much contemporary scholarship, and it is one in which I have already begun to pursue initial research, conducting interviews with several composers and musicians. For composers such as Paul Drescher, Scott Johnson, and Nick Didkovsky, popular music is simply an integral, generational part of the musical landscape they inhabit. Hence, at the level of artistic influence, rather than suggesting the blurring of cultural hierarchies, the work of these artists – in common with that of John Zorn and others – simply indicates a refusal of the terms of the debate. Drescher, for example, states that “this is all music to me, and each of us forms our musical world from the elements that inspire us, and we... have done that without worrying about the boundaries of

whether it came from high or low... from what part of the world, or what era of history” (Dresher, 1998).⁴ Similarly, contrasting the ‘sacred’ nature of the ‘classical’ tradition and the “‘profane’ world of rock and its variants”, Johnson suggests:

It seems to me that this stylized encoding of the natural distinctions between the different uses of music has become arbitrary and exaggerated. Like many of my fellow composers, whose music bears the marks of our culture because its creators bear those marks, I look forward to a new century in which composer-based music doesn’t need to purge itself of references to the world which surrounds it, and is free to describe our moment in history in its native tongue.

(Johnson, 1996)

The attitude of these composers to technology is similarly ‘non-hierarchical’: all three are electric guitarists, and all employ sophisticated sampling technologies.⁵ For Dresher, technology is “just there; it’s one of my tools” (Dresher, 1998), an attitude which is further elaborated in the statement that appears on the Dresher Ensemble website:

My goal in integrating traditional acoustic instruments with the new electronic instruments is not to explore the technology for its own sake but rather to approach these developments as the next step in the evolution of the resources from which composers may draw their sounds and compositional resources. Musically, my goal is to bring to as wide an audience as possible a repertoire of contemporary chamber music that is largely unavailable from touring chamber ensembles and which I believe can cross traditional aesthetic boundaries and appeal to many diverse audiences.

(Dresher, 2000)⁶

In his heavy-metal influenced work with his band Doctor Nerve, and in his solo performance work, Nick Didkovsky reveals a similar attitude towards technology,

⁴ Dresher’s work reflects this attitude: hear, for example, *This Same Temple* (1996; Lovely Music 2011), *Casa Vecchia* (1995; Starkland 204), *Dark Blue Circumstance* (1993; New Albion 053), and his ‘electric opera’ with Rinde Eckert, *Slow Fire* (1992; Minimax 010).

⁵ These are characteristics which are shared by several other contemporary composers, including Steve Mackey, Fred Frith, Tim Brady, and René Lussier.

⁶ See www.dresherensemble.org/comp.html. For interviews with Dresher, see Smith and Smith (1994: 103-112) and Israel (1990).

employing computers as both a compositional and performance tool.⁷ Several Doctor Nerve pieces were composed on a software program of Didkovsky's own design, and his real-time "statistical re-synthesis" (Didkovsky, 1999) of Schubert's *Impromptu in Eb Major, Op. 90* involves an interactive Java program which allows the piece to be transformed in relation to several musical parameters, including pitch, harmonic complexity, and 'event density'.⁸ Didkovsky has also explored the notion of interactivity in relation to CD technology, and the 44 'Nerve Events' (ranging from one to six seconds) that conclude the Doctor Nerve CD *Beta 14 ok* (1991)⁹ were conceived by Didkovsky as "a generative experiment. In other words... 'Nerve Events' was not a piece to be played; it was a bag of sound with the technology to deliver it in a number of different ways that gave rise to new pieces" (Didkovsky, 1999).¹⁰ Didkovsky subsequently invited 23 composers to create new works based on the 'Nerve Events', and the resulting compositions were documented on *Transforms: The Nerve Events Project* (1993).¹¹

In common with Drescher and Didkovsky, Scott Johnson works extensively with tape loops, electronic instruments, and sampling technology, often employing the pitch and

⁷ Hear, for example, the Doctor Nerve CDs *Every Screaming Ear* (1997; Cuneiform Rune 88) and *Skin* (1995; Cuneiform Rune 70). Hear also the Doctor Nerve/Sirius String Quartet CD *Ereia* (2000; Cuneiform Rune 126) and Didkovsky's solo CD *Binky Boy* (1997; Punos Music 0003).

⁸ Further information on Didkovsky's compositional techniques – and much more – is available on the Doctor Nerve website: www.ingress.com/~drnerve.

⁹ Cuneiform Rune 26.

¹⁰ Didkovsky's early experiments with CD interactivity – and the contemporaneous multimedia experiments by the Residents – represent interesting examples of the "production practice within consumption" which Paul Théberge has noted is characteristic of electronic and digital technologies (1997: 251). The 'benefits' of such 'interactivity' are far from unequivocal, however: citing a range of CD-ROM and computer game products, Théberge goes on to observe that "Whether the demands placed on the consumer to 'interact' with the objects of consumption result in a form of self-realization or simply in more consumption is still an open question" (1997: 254).

¹¹ Cuneiform 55011.

rhythmic content of human speech as musical material, as on his celebrated piece ‘John Somebody’ (1982).¹² Here, the artistic relationship with the ‘already said’ is perhaps more literal than even Eco might have envisaged, and Johnson’s use of speech fragments raises some interesting creative and technical challenges. Noting the “technological sea-change” of the last two decades, Johnson observes that “the process of choosing rather than inventing your thematic material puts extra constraints upon a composer’s customary freedom of pitch choice and tempo, and requires choices between the several methods of interfacing performer and machine” (Johnson, 1996).

The manner in which these composers employ technology therefore demands an analytical approach which goes beyond equating ‘authenticity’ with acoustic instruments, a problem which Drescher has encountered in his dealing with Chamber Music America, for example: “We’re not what they call chamber music” (Drescher, 1998). Similarly, Johnson has noted the manner in which the instrumental make-up of traditional performing ensembles militates against the performance of pieces that combine electronic and acoustic instruments, thereby limiting their repertorial circulation (Johnson, 1999). Groups such as the Drescher Ensemble, Bang On a Can, and Icebreaker have begun to address this problem, although they remain in a minority compared to more conventional classical

¹² On the 1986 CD *John Somebody* (Nonesuch 79133); hear also *Rock/Paper/Scissors* (1996; Point Music 454053), and the soundtrack for the film *Patty Hearst* (1988; Nonesuch 79186). Although Steve Reich had used looped speech phrases in his early tape pieces such as *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966) – both available on *Early Works* (Elektra/Nonesuch 79169) – Johnson’s attention to the rhythms and pitches of everyday speech represents a somewhat different approach. René Lussier’s piece *Le trésor de la langue* (1989; Ambiances Magnétique 015) has much in common with Johnson’s work, although Lussier’s use of language has a more political – and specifically Québécois – focus.

ensembles. These issues serve to emphasize the continuing dominance of traditionalist thinking within the realm of cultural policy, and the problems that such thinking poses for a new generation of composers.

I want to conclude by returning briefly to the Broadway musical tradition: a tradition which not only provides the title (and motivation) for my thesis, but which also offers a fertile and shamefully neglected area for scholarly research.¹³ The musical and discursive tensions embodied in Gershwin's advice to Merman never to take singing lessons were tensions which both informed and vexed Gershwin's work throughout his career, exemplified in the critical response to *Porgy and Bess* (1935): was it a serious opera or a 'just' a Broadway musical?; was it high art or 'just' popular entertainment?; was Gershwin a serious composer or 'just' a Tin Pan Alley hack?

The art music composer Virgil Thomson favoured the latter options, characterizing Gershwin's arrangements as "gefilte-fish orchestration", and suggesting that Gershwin's "lack of understanding of all the major problems of form... is not surprising in view of the impurity of his musical sources" (quoted in Levitch, 1998: 10). Given that Gershwin was Jewish, and given that *Porgy and Bess* made extensive use of black vernacular forms, Thomson's comments reveal an anti-Semitic and racist bias which, in itself, offers intriguing material for further research.

¹³ In contrast to the primarily historical and/or anecdotal work which has tended to dominate these fields, it is only in relatively recent years that a more critical literature on Broadway and American popular song has begun to emerge (e.g. Lawson-Peebles, 1996; Block, 1993), although this work has been far from unproblematic, as I will indicate below.

Responding to his ‘high art’ critics, Gershwin argued “I am not ashamed of writing songs” (quoted in Hyland, 1995: 192), the overly-defensive tone neatly – and somewhat sadly – encapsulating the narrow canonic presuppositions underlying the debate. And the debate is far from over: although the 1998 centenary of Gershwin’s birth certainly confirmed his canonical centrality, it was also the occasion for a series of newspaper and magazine articles which posed, once again, the same questions that had first been asked in 1935, emphasizing the continuing influence of the ‘classical’ canon in any assessment of Gershwin’s work.¹⁴ The influence of the classical canon is made explicit in Geoffrey Block’s review of the ‘Broadway Canon’ (1993), in which, on the basis of the repertorial and critical stature of several selected musicals (including *Porgy and Bess*), Block argues that “the European operatic ideal is within Broadway’s grasp” (1993: 540). In this case, and again confirming Randel’s (1992) analysis, the musicological process of canonic expansion is predicated not on the *specificities* of the cultural form in question, but on the *similarities* of the form to an existing canonic ‘ideal’. Approaches such as these simply highlight the need for a scholarship that finds the Broadway tradition compelling and interesting *because* of its populist orientation, not in spite of it.

But if Gershwin was unequivocally unashamed of ‘writing songs’, the composer Leonard Bernstein’s perspective on the matter was considerably more ambivalent. In 1986, four years before his death and some 30 years after the premiere of the piece in question, Bernstein was reportedly “really distraught” at the prospect that he was “only

¹⁴ For a typical example, see Gerald Levitch’s (1998) article in the *Globe and Mail*.

going to be remembered as the man who wrote *West Side Story*” (quoted in Secrest, 1994: 394). The composer Stephen Sondheim – who wrote the lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957) – has been similarly critical of his own work on the show. In response to an interviewer’s comment that “I’ve heard you disparage your lyrics for *West Side Story*, but I would give a great deal to have written, ‘Oh, moon, grow bright and make this endless day endless night.’”, Sondheim responded “It’s fine until you remember that it’s sung by an adolescent in a gang” (quoted in Sondheim and Lipton, 1997: 265). On the one hand, the views of these artists are curious indeed, given that both have worked extensively – and highly successfully – in the field of ‘popular culture’ as well as that of ‘high art’ (although admittedly, in both cases, at the ‘high’ end of the ‘popular’); on the other hand, however, their self-deprecation simply highlights the hierarchical, canonical pecking-order which ranks the importance of ‘the musical’ beneath the artistic rewards of ‘opera’ or ‘musical theatre’.

Bernstein’s response to his fears regarding his artistic legacy was to record a version of *West Side Story* with high-profile opera singers: a decision which, as Meryle Secrest observes, was part of a trend “to reconsider the great Broadway musicals of the past not just as high popular culture but as high art” (1994: 395). But this ‘legitimizing’ exercise on Bernstein’s part did nothing other than confirm the specificities of ‘the musical’ as a cultural form, representing an unhappy enforced meeting of ‘high’ and ‘low’. The recording sessions were filmed for a television documentary, and highlight – in often nerve-wracking fashion – the musical incompatibility of the two traditions. As Secrest observes, the casting of José Carreras was undoubtedly “a mistake” (1994: 396), and

despite several convincing performances, and a dynamic reading of the score by the specially commissioned orchestra, Carreras' singing in the role of Tony was hampered not only by accent problems but also by more fundamental musical ones, his operatic singing style and sense of time totally unsuited to the jazz-inflected rhythms of a song such as 'Something's Coming'.¹⁵ Commenting on his later attempts to collaborate with Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, the librettist of *West Side Story*, has suggested that Bernstein was "a victim of classical snobbism... he went out of his way to complicate his talent" (quoted in Steyn, 1997: 301).¹⁶

In sharp contrast to Bernstein's problematic attempt to 'elevate' his own 'degraded' musical, Jane Feuer (1993) has observed exactly the opposite tendency at work in the reflexively populist Hollywood musicals of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In a fascinating canonic reversal, a devalued 'high' is commonly posited as the 'other' of a celebrated 'low', defining classical music as "a castrated form of popular music" and almost invariably showing "the triumphant victory of the popular style" (1993: 56). These evaluative tropes were evident in many other works from this period: for example, the series of Bugs Bunny cartoons from the 1940s and 50s – including *Long-Haired Hare* (1949), *Rabbit of Seville* (1950), and *What's Opera, Doc?* (1957) – that satirized the conventions and practices of opera and classical music; and several Marx Brothers films which offered a savage critique of high culture, most notably *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and *At the Circus* (1939). In the latter film, a travelling circus – that most 'low' and

¹⁵ See Secrest (1994: 395-397) for a brief account of the recording sessions.

¹⁶ See also Denby (1998: 47).

carnavalesque of popular cultures – emerges triumphant over the pretentious French conductor ‘Jardinet’, who is set adrift on a floating bandstand, still furiously conducting Wagner. It is interesting to note, then, that while the Frankfurt school critique of mass culture had to await the advent of cultural studies for its academic riposte, a convincing and contemporaneous populist rejoinder to Adorno and Horkheimer’s pessimism was already evident in the products of popular culture themselves.

In the film version of Rodgers and Hart’s *Babes in Arms* (1939), the musical number ‘Opera vs. Jazz’ exemplifies the populist trope identified by Feuer: while the ‘jazz’ duo of Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney are characterized by their “intensity, energy and movement”, the ‘opera’ singer Betty Jaynes is portrayed as “stiff and stationary” (1993: 58). By the end of the number, however, “both girls are swinging and snapping their fingers to the beat, representing yet another victory for swing... The strategy of the number consists in strongly implying that a difference in musical idiom is *significant*, then demonstrating swing’s superiority. Swing is contagious and Jaynes catches it” (1993: 59; emphasis in original).

Feuer also notes the “quality of dialogue” in many musicals of the period, in which “the classical presence elevates the status of popular music just as jazz imbues concert music with humanizing folk qualities” (1993: 60). In *Shall We Dance* (1937), for example, starring Fred Astaire and with a score by George Gershwin, “Astaire puts taps on his ballet shoes to make ballet dancing more fun” (1993: 60). Noting the musical cues throughout the film, and drawing parallels between Gershwin and the Astaire character in the film, Feuer suggests that “repeatedly the film reminds the audience that Gershwin was

the man who actually did what Astaire wants to do in the film, to bring a revitalizing jazz influence to classical music” (1993: 61). Given the populist, evaluative tropes which Feuer identifies, and in light of Leonard Bernstein’s artistic ambivalence towards his own jazz-inspired Broadway work, it is no small irony that the famous MGM musicals of the 1940s and 50s – often held to be the epitome of ‘pure’ entertainment, and including the Bernstein, Comden and Green classic *On the Town* (1949) – were introduced by a roaring Leo the Lion, accompanied by the Latin motto *Ars Gratia Artis*: ‘Art For Art’s Sake’.

What I want to suggest here, then, is that the broad range of textual, contextual, and discursive complexities evident across the entire musical field are simply not amenable to reductionist forms of analysis, whether those of traditionalist or revisionist scholarship. In sharp contrast to the partiality and reductionism of much work in contemporary cultural theory and music studies, the analytical model which I have proposed in this thesis is one which allows a more broadly eclectic theoretical approach to these complexities, denying narrow interpretations of musical meaning and cultural value, and offering instead a richly intertextual reading of musical forms and practices. One can only hope that Ethel Merman and George Gershwin might have approved: who, indeed, could ask for anything more?

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