THE POLITICS OF MUSIC: AMERICAN IMAGES AND BRITISH ARTICULATIONS

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The history of rock and roll in the U.S.A. has to be written as a transnational discourse, which draws the complex connections between various American (north and south), African and British musics. In the common versions of this history, the interactions amongst the various cultures marked by the first two of these terms may be acknowledged to construct a capillary network, while the British influence has been constructed as a series of invasions, beginning with the Merseybeat sound. This normalized history fails to recognize the continuous penetration of the American market by recontextualized images (both visual and sonorial), not only of our own soul and rock heritages, but also of our own national identity reflected back to us as a displaced signifier of many taken-for-granted aspects of our everyday lives. Even more importantly, such histories have failed to locate reflexively their own indebtedness to British discourses which have shaped the ways we write and talk about rock and roll, and the ways we experience and evaluate it as well. The British did not teach us how to produce rock and roll but rather, how to interpret it and thus, how to enjoy it. And the lessons, whether imperialist or intended, continue.

In a recent review of Iain Chambers' *Urban Rhythms*, Robert Christgau notes both the growing intellectual respectability of popular music studies (where?) and the apparent absence of such treatises from authors

in the U.S.A.[1]. It is in fact quite true that North America has produced few self-consciously theorized books on pop music, comparable to the body of work produced by such British authors as Simon Frith, Iain Chambers, Dick Hebdige and others. (The exceptions are themselves illuminating: Greil Marcus' *Mystery Train* locates rock and roll in a distinctly literary and mythic domain, Denisoff's *Solid Gold* and Chapple and Garofalo's *Rock 'n' Roll is Here to Pay* remain within the traditionally "empiricist" traditions of socio-economic and political-economic analyses. None of them have generated a continous critical debate[2]). However, do we know what difference this presence/absence marks? Do we know how to read the fact that many U.S. writers seem to content (condemn?) themselves with the fragmentary and often obscurely placed form of the academic article and that, moreover, when they seek a theoretical framework for their analysis, it is often taken from their more visible British colleagues?

There are obviously many conditions that have enabled this difference: the economics of publishing, the relations between academic and popular critical discourses, geography and the configuration of the music audience, the organization of the media of music dissemination, etc. These conditions have had their discursive impacts, not only on writing about music but on the dispersion and effects of musical statements themselves. Emblematic of this are the divergences between the major histories of rock and roll that each has produced: Charlie Gillett's *Sound of the City* and *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*.[3] The former is linear, rational and located within larger, if implicit, sociopolitical contexts and debates; the latter is fragmented, celebratory, with little sense of an intellectual or political argument. The former seems confident of the major trends and moments in rock history; the latter seems unwilling or unable to make such choices. The former projects a homogeneous and secure audience; the latter's audience is apparently nomadic and fleeting. In fact, a coherent framework which makes sense of the polyphonic and polymorphic (perverse?) body of pop in the U.S. would continuously have to acknowledge its inability to identify the appropriately necessary emblematic moments. Whether this means that any consistent critical discourse is impossible, it has enhanced the impact of British theorizations, making them attractive if not necessary.

There are in fact, two interrelated moments to this intellectual imperialism: subculture theory and a particular version of postmodern theory. Each rearticulates a number of common assumptions that both fans and critics use to construct their own relations to the music into a particular set of interpretive and political problematics. The former places pop within the broader terrain of the ideological politics of style organized around an opposition between center and margin; the latter

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subsumes both music and style into the question of the politics of pleasure as resistance within the space of an assumed identity of media and metropolitan defined cultures.[4] If one is ever to construct (fabricate) the uniquely North American politics of rock and roll culture, both of these articulations of rock and roll – into a subcultural politics of style, and into a metropolitan politics of pleasure – have to be challenged, not because they do not work in the context of their own presentation but because, as soon as they are appropriated into the very different landscape of North America, they essentialize the dilemmas of the politics of pop music (into expressions of class or urbanity, into the politics of ideology pleasure, and into oppositional contexts of marginality or mainstream).

Subculture theory institutionalizes the common sense wisdom of rock and roll's collective self-consciousness by equating three sets of differences: (1) the difference between the good and the bad child. The latter, marked stylistically (the teenager versus the juvenile delinquent, the high school versus the gang, the hop versus the street, the early Alan Freed movies versus *Blackboard Jungle*) was a particularly powerful discursive element of the dominant ideologies; (2) the fluid gap between *our* music and theirs (rock and roll versus Tin Pan Alley), which was itself articulated to the opposition between youth and adult. This often powerfully expressed youth's need to affirm fun (and the importance of their own experiences) in the face of the boredom and severity of the adult culture; (3) the emergent distinction within sociological (labelling) theory, between the mainstream culture and deviant subcultures (which were now to be granted their own identities, experiences and worldviews). It is the last which provided the new theoretical framework within which all of postwar youth culture and the history of rock and roll could be understood.

Subculture theory rightly points to the power of style to mark a difference. Hebdige argues that this difference is the product of the visible artificiality of such styles, of the fact that they display their artificiality on their own surfaces and thus challenge the assumed naturalness of the mainstream.[5] After all, one could learn to be a punk by observing surfaces in ways that are not available to those trying to learn to be "normal." Style's flaunting artificiality becomes a "semiotic guerilla warfare." The argument continues beyond this rather situationist reading: this difference constructs as well a "forbidden identity" which expresses the lived contradictions of the particular subculture (located between class, age and race contradictions, although the first is always and necessarily primary) and offers finally a "magical solution" to them (e.g., the mods lived the cliche that you worked so that you could enjoy the weekend). The connection between the bricolage of style and the

representation of/imaginary solution to lived contradictions is theorized as a chain of homologies which, in Hebdige, takes on the form of a signifying practice that binds together the various dimensions of the argument and levels of the subculture's sociocultural positioning; each subculture "uses" signs differently, practices its own mode of communication by differently articulating the signified to the signifier (e.g., it was not a matter of what the mods wore but of how they wore it). It is not the signs themselves but the ways they are fit together to form a language of sorts that constitutes both the identity and difference underlying the subculture's resistance.

But the rupture or double articulation – from difference to identity – within the very notion of style itself locks subculture theory into a politics of incorporation. As long as the gap remains abstract and untheorized, the assumed difference between authenticity and cooptation remains constitutive and equivalent to the difference between subcultures and mainstream, margins and center. On the one hand, style marks a difference, its artificiality is on its surface and it is, to varying degrees, disruptive of the assumed naturalness of mainstream style. On the other hand, style is ideologically oppositional insofar as it constructs something more than difference, namely a *forbidden* identity.

Subculture theory was a response against visions of hegemony as an abstract and monolithic structure of domination which allowed little or no possibility of resistance (or even, for that matter, culpability and participation). Subculture theory sought out and found pockets of resistance – in fact, it found them everywhere it looked, wherever there was an isolatable and identifiable subculture. But the demand of insularity meant that hegemony was once again reconstituted, if not as monolithic and all powerful (because full of gaps and leaks), as an abstract and omnivorous mainstream against which subcultures were always constituted as other, as a threat. To protect the claim of resistance, the subcultures had to be encapsulated and studied from within their own claims of absolute difference. A boundary, always overcoded with both signifiers and signifieds, was the only way they could be placed into the broader social context of the social formation. (There was little motivation to study mods at work, or growing up and out of the subculture, or youths who were only ambiguously and marginally identified with the subculture). Rather than examining the fluid boundaries between subcultures and the mainstream, subculture theory itself was always trying to locate the one magical moment before a particular subculture had become visible enough to begin the inevitable process of incorporation. Paradoxically, at the moment of its visibility, when it becomes available to be studied and interpreted, it has already begun its dissolution into the mainstream.

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Moreover, resistance becomes an unanalysed opposition; if subcultures resisted, it was impossible to define the unique stakes in each struggle, or to decide in which instances some victory, however small, had been won. Subculture theory failed to recognize that sometimes struggles are lost, and sometimes struggles are carried on in ways that merely end up reconstituting their own submission.[6] Recent work goes a long way to correcting this essential view of resistance: Aggleton and Whitty point out the necessity to distinguish between intentions and effects in such matters, between wide-ranging "resistances" and local "contestations" and between "transformative effects" and "reproductive resistances."[7]

Still the very difference between subcultures and the mainstream is problematic, a matter of degrees and of situated judgments. For example, both yuppies and mods mark their stylistic differences, both are consummate consumers opting for a sense of constant change that results in a game of stylish one-upmanship. The untheorized other in all of subculture theory is the mainstream, as if it were simply identifiable with hegemonic power and dominant ideologies: while it is true that the mainstream sees itself as normal and natural, it does not construct itself as conformist but rather as the site of individualism; it is the margins (whether as subcultures or capitalist extravagance) which appear as the site of conformity.

While this construction is problematic and certainly ideological, equally problematic are the ways in which subcultural differences are taken for granted in subculture theory. For while the center of mainstream is constructed as homogeneous, it is more accurately seen as a social pastiche, a bricolage of cultural codes and historical debris, constantly incorporating and rejecting pieces of the margins. The mainstream is not without its differences; it is a collection of overlapping cultural styles, defined by sets of productive and consumptive practices. And the margins are not inherently marginal, they only come to be expelled in this way in the context of the ongoing fluid articulations of the mainstream. It is only in relation to this changing mainstream that subcultures are constructed within our discourses.

And if, as I would argue, the U.S. has no center and therefore, no margins, then the center is a constantly floating configuration of marginality. In this context, it is impossible to decide whether artificiality constructs difference or difference constructs artificiality; it remains always a matter of local effectivity. Even within the parameters of subculture theory, it is historically problematic when the history of rock and roll in the United States ignores the politics of the mainstream, as if the latter were nothing but the weakening of the stylistic differences and the necessary displacing of any political resistance. Any history of pop

music which denies the possibility of a politics of the masses is likely to repeat the pessimistic conclusions of modernist critical theory.

At the same time that subculture theory makes obvious the need to interpret any cultural event only in the actual context of its deployment (e.g., one could never make sense of the connection between hardcore and skateboarding apart from the broader context of the subculture), it also ignores the possibility that the context has to include the mainstream within which the subculture is constructed and positioned. Further, it continues to read the mainstream and its signs as if they could be read in isolation, as if one could know that the simple fact of a sign's entrance into that anonymous space of the masses guaranteed that it had been coopted.

Thus, subculture theory leaves us with three problematic oppositions[8]: style as artificiality in the face of ideological naturalization, marginality as difference from the center or mainstream, and resistance as a refusal of merely living with contradictions. In fact, in the context of postwar U.S. history, subculture theory operates as a way of disarming the resistance of the mainstream and of isolating the threatening possibilities of a politics of style as in-difference. For by its criterion, the American sense of style without depth (Warhol), of the celebration of a politics of surfaces that remain disconnected from any specific social positioning or experience, can only be seen as precariously situated on the borders (but not the limits) of hegemony. And furthermore, the great mass of rock and roll fans – who refuse not only any particular subcutural identity but often, any visible sense of style as otherness – can only be written out of the history of pop music. If style has no necessary depth, no constitutive moment of identity, then subcultural events are merely conjuncturally isolated moments of bricolage, moments which operate within the mainstream to mark it as a configuration of differences (e.g. contemporary designer clothes that present themselves as the "MacDonalds of fashion"). Particular styles, whether cool or hot, do not by their own existence set themselves outside of the mainstream but rather, rearticulate the affective investments that traverse the possibilities of organizing the pieces of our cultural lives.

Pop styles (within which music functions as a powerful articulating principle) clearly mark differences, but difference is always a matter of local effects – and it can exist – it often does – without identity. Style is the commonly dispersed bricolage of fitting together our cultural debris, both past and present. Thus subcultural style is neither identical to nor different from the mainstream any more than the margins are either within or outside of the mainstream. It is not merely a matter of deconstructing these oppositions, but of seeing their historical rearticulation into in-difference. In-difference describes a particular historical

structure of self-relationship enacted in the contextual play of identity and difference. Difference exists only because it is in-difference. U.S. pop style, as well as rock and roll, refuses ever to implode into a common center or identity (it has, from its very emergence, been marked by difference); and yet, at the same time, it refuses to invest in real differences as if it could mark powerful moments of identity. Fans – youth – in the U.S. fight over territory, not identity. Style as in-indifference operates against the grain of ideology. It places one, as a nomadic subject, in an affective space. It is, at every point on the surface of the social body, the socially constructed configuration of selective affective investments.

However, moving the question of the politics of style into the affective structure of in-indifference (which does not implode but rearticulates the relation of the margins to the mainstream) away from questions of ideology (identity and representation) does not entail entering into discourses of pleasure as the site of resistance. Pleasure, whether a repressed moment of anarchic disruption, a dangerous distraction (the ultimate imaginary because so immediately real), or an excess never entirely recuperable, remains the affective economy of the historical "deployment of sexuality" (Foucault). Pleasure signals, at best, a momentary respite from the demands of ideological economies even as it remains locked within them. In-difference seeks to restructure the economy of our affective investments, offering itself as a way of "making sense" outside the logics of signification and representation.

Pop music and pop style, finally, cannot be separated from the broader historical context within which they emerged as powerfully articulated affective economies. Pop culture is a way of living well in impossible times, a celebratory defensiveness which not only enables us to "hide from the light" but to enjoy our own self-constructed difference; a defensive narcissism which cannot be reduced to Baudrillard's hypercon-formism; an anti-elitist elitism which is not merely a matter of the politics of pleasure. Pop culture cannot be separated from the hyper-realization of the experiences of modernity that constitute much of contemporary life. Nor can it be separated from the broader mediascape within which the line between image and reality, and between identity and difference, have become a matter of indifference. The danger is that one essentializes (or structures) the wild proliferation of events and experiences that are fluidly constituting our hypermodernity. Any attempt to create a center which marks the identity of the social surface – Baudrillard's simula-crum, or Lefebvre's metropolitan existence – negates the dispersed in-difference of the masses in pop style. In the terms of subculture

theory, we must recognize that the mass audience of pop, the mainstream of style, is the postmodern subculture.

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Notes

1. Robert Christgau, "All that jazz," *Village Voice* February 4, 1986: p. 50.

2. Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train*. New York: Dutton, 1976; R. Serge Denisoff, *Solid Gold*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1975; Stephen Chapple & Reebee Garofalo, *Rock 'n' Roll is Here to Pay*. Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1977.

3. Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City*. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970); Jim Miller (Ed.), *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*. New York: Random House, 1976.

4. Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985; Dick Hebdige, "Posing... Threats, Striking... Poses: Youth, Surveillance and Display." *SubStance* 37-38 (1983): pp. 68-88.

5. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen, 1979.

6. See, for example, Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour*. Westmead, G. B.: Saxon House, 1977.

7. P.J. Aggleton & C. Whitty, "Rebels Without a Cause? Socialization and Subcultural Style Among the Children of the New Middle Classes." *Sociology of Education* 58 (1985): pp. 60-72. See also Leslie G. Rothaus, "Intimacy, Labor and Class: Ideologies of Feminine Sexuality in the Punk Subculture." Madison: unpubl. ms., 1986.

8. The following is an extension of Lawrence Grossberg, "'I'd rather feel bad than not feel anything at all': Rock and Roll, Pleasure and Power." *Enclitic* 8 (1984): pp. 94-110.