

The Hauntology of Music:

**The Neo-Adornian Plugging Apparatus, Freudian Forests, and
Derridean Displacement in John Oswald's *Plexure***

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December 2005

Hamlet already began with the expected return of the dead King. After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [revenant], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.

-Jacques Derrida (from *Spectres of Marx* pg. 10)

(1;0:00)... Exploding a record slows, almost to a halt, in a massive downward pitch/temporal glissando lasting a little over a second, leaving the murky indistinguishable sound of a record being played at an incredibly slow speed. This is the simultaneous sound of an invocation and a bon voyage; a broad and blind contextualization reminding us of our point of departure, and telling us nothing of what lies ahead. This sound (the sound of a record slowing, of the tactile manipulation of a repeating instrument) will be the last sound we hear that references an analog mode of playback. Out of the sonic murk of time slowed down almost to a halt (time itself hinging upon the simple action of adding pressure with the finger to a turntable), emerges a new age: quietly, tiny digital flickers gather. These sparkling clicks multiply, become louder, and slowly lengthen to a point just on the other side of recognizability. Simultaneously, the record has gradually trudged out of the murk back to its suggested rpm, resolving to a C major chord for just a split second. Here we find ourselves at a great precipice, about to make a transition to a new kind of *plunderphonics*. The extended analog gesture that opened our listening experience is about to end, never to return. Onward we boldly/blindly travel, hands grasping the LED wheel, into a digital age...(1;0:36).

I have just presented a description of the opening thirty six seconds of John Oswald's *Plexure*: a twelve track nineteen minute and thirty six second long piece/album composed solely of bits of pop songs that range in length from barely perceivable fractions of a second to around two seconds. All of the pop songs from which the material is sourced were originally recorded during what Oswald has called "the compact disc era"¹ between 1982 and 1992. He presents these digital fragments totally unadulterated, the only elements that bar the recognizability of the samples' identity are

¹ Duguid, Brian, *Interview with John Oswald*, <http://media.hyperreal.org/zines/est/intervs/oswald.html>,

brevity of sample and density of samples. When the LED read out hits 12;1:11 (track twelve; one minute: eleven seconds. Also, nineteen minutes thirty six seconds into the piece), the listener has heard around 1,000 different sources, and many more individual samples.²

The present analysis began as a meditation on possible analytical approaches to this music. From the outset I made a promise to myself to maintain a constant proximity to an analysis phenomenologically informed by the experience of the sounds of the piece itself. However, as I progressed, this promise became impossible to keep. The material Oswald confines himself to demanded I broaden my project to a pursuit of a listening informed by economics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. I found that, after a consideration of the pop song's cultural-economic power informed primarily by a reading of Theodor Adorno's essays "*On Popular Music*" and "*Popular Music*" within the guise of Oswald's exploration of recognizability, there was a convincing connection to the sixth chapter of Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* entitled "*The Dream Work*": The success of a pop song hinges upon its being manufactured well enough so that it may repeat itself into our subconscious (whether we even like the song or not), but what it also does is drag a slew of cultural and personal referential baggage with it. This Freudian unconscious forest of rhythmic hooks and catchy melodies begged to be approached as Jacques Derrida's idea of trace. This Derrida connection also has precedence in that critiques of Oswald's plunderphonic works have often been declared deconstructive, but rarely is this declaration accompanied by a discussion of traditional deconstructive principles. So I will connect *Plexure* back to itself via an Adorno-Freud-Derrida chain that will reveal the issues of ontology, identity, commodity, displacement, presence,

digital encyclopedism, and time as all implicit in the music that is *Plexure*. However, let's not get ahead of ourselves.

1: *Plexure* Within the *Plunderphonics* Meta-Opus

Before we get to all that I mentioned above, I find it necessary to place *Plexure* within Oswald's meta-opus *Plunderphonics*. Oswald defines a plunderphone as "a recognizable sonic quote, using the actual sound of something familiar which has already been recorded."³ It is a specific category of quotation dependent on the technological development of the phonographic reproduction of music. Oswald constantly reemphasizes recognizability as an essential element: "The plundering has to be blatant though. There's a lot of samplepocketing, parroting, plagiarism and tune thievery going on these days which is not what we're doing."⁴

A plunderphone is a purchased product that has been in some way manipulated by its owner while retaining the sonic trace to its identity. A plunderphonic compositional approach problematizes musical ontology by declaring the act of plundering and manipulation a performance. A plunderphone is also necessarily a self-referential quotation, it comes with the citation included. A certain level of immediate recognizability is required of the plunderphone by the plunderphonic affect. A plunderphonic compositional approach problematizes the concept of musical property by not only reappropriating sonic material, but by reappropriating this hyper-recognizability as well. *Plexure* is a novelty within plunderphonic problematic sphere through its

² ibid

³ Igma, Norm, *Plunderphonic- interviews*, <http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xinterviews.html>, accessed 25 September 2005

⁴ ibid

approach to the above mentioned issues of ontology, recognizability, and property.

Plundering the Ontology of Performance

In his essay *Plunderphonia*⁵, Chris Cutler discusses the track *Pretender* from the first *Plunderphonic EP* in which Dolly Parton's performance/cover of the standard *Pretender* goes through the process of a grand downward-pitch-shift/sex-change. Cutler places Oswald's *Pretender* within the context of "scratch-technique", and makes the argument that what the listener hears is the recording of a real-time performance. He describes the operations Oswald performs on his instruments (slowing down a record turntable and while manipulating a tape deck) as physical actions that create the desired and preconceived effect/affect of the song lowering in pitch while maintaining a consistent tempo: Dolly Parton becomes a man. This is an analog example of blurring the borderline of sound producing machines and sound reproducing machines that is central to Oswald's questioning of traditional conceptions of the ontology of performance.

In *Plexure* Oswald is "playing" instruments that are new to plunderphonics: compact discs and digital playback. Digital playback technology has problematized plunderphonic performance through the switch from manipulation of physical reproductions of sound waves to the manipulation of 1's and 0's. *Plexure* approaches this problem by treating the plunderphones as bits of information, small splices of genetic chains of 1's and 0's to be re-linked in an appropriately digital fashion. Oswald's performative approach switches from an investigation of the elasticity of something that has already been recorded to an investigation of combinatoriality. There are several combinatorial categories that Oswald uses to organize the content: phonemic, pitch, rhythm, genre, gender, instrumentation.

The "lyrics" of *Plexure* printed on the inside of the album cover help to reveal the complexly metaphorical phonemic combinatory processes Oswald puts the samples through. He creates new meaning by rearranging words, and often creating new words by combining single syllables, from several sample sources into a poetic alterity. For example I present the lyrics to a passage from *Blur: Bolton Chili Overdire* (track 4) to which I have added slashes (/) to indicate a change of sample (no sources are repeated): "Ghan/di / a/s / a yo/ung ye/ti, eat/s Ver/di.../ ow!"

Oswald will also recontextualize pitch relationships between/within samples by: overlapping vertically to create pitch relationships that result in functional pop-harmony; and linking sequentially to create new melodies.

Tempo and rhythm are important to *Plexure* on micro-combinatorial and macro-sequential levels: samples with similar tempi meld in and out of each other, while synergetic rhythms are created vertically and/or sequentially; there is a unifying macro-formal increase in tempo over the nineteen and a half minutes of the piece.

Oswald combines genre/gender in "consonant" and "dissonant" ways. The overlapping of Prince's *When Doves Cry* with Madonna's *Like a Virgin* on *Mad Mod: Jello Bellafonte* (track 9) creates a consonance between genre (hyper sexualized auteur pop icons without birth names singing about innocence) and a dissonance/consonance between their opposing-gender/common-approach-to-gender (both pop artists, while embracing their own birth-gender, pushed the limits of gender in public life as a part of their meta-performance).

Oswald also investigates the theme of combinatoriality by orchestrating passages instrumentally: often a guitar or bass line will morph between several sample sources

⁵ Cutler, Chris, 'Plunderphonia,' in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner ed., *Audio Culture: Readings in*

before completing its unity.

There are two important themes we must take with us from the discussion of plunderphonic performance: the problematization of performative presence, which logically leads to the problematization of performative authority. Part of the ontological question posed by the use of sound reproducers as sound producers is haunted by the implicit corporeal alienation of the performer from the music's details. Analog playback technology possesses a latent corporeal immediacy in that sound is reproduced by friction over physical graphical representations of sound waves. The digital medium widens this divide and restates the problem of the performative present. If we are to follow this overall line of argument we problematize the an approach to any plunderphonic work, for these works must obey their own rules. Each listening to *Plexure* is a performance carried out by the listener. Any manipulation of the material (the compact disc) whether it be fast forwarding, rewinding, pausing, etc is a part of the whole of that performance of the piece. So we add more blurred lines to the discussion, this time the lines of where the piece begins and ends. But more on presence and the *parergon* later.

***Plexure* and the Exploration of Recognizability**

As mentioned above, a plunderphone is necessarily a transformed but still recognizable quote. However, in the case of *Plexure* the overbearing quantity of samples obscures recognizability, and the transformation happens between the samples rather than within them. Oswald prefers the term *megaplundermorphonemiclonic* when describing *Plexure*. I read this neologism as: "so many plundered elements at once that they morph into each other creating new synergetic-grammatical information presented hyper-encyclopically." Or, "in terms of participatory perception *Plexure* is extremely

interactive by its referential puzzle nature."⁶ Though Oswald is challenging recognizability, he is choosing the most highly recognizable as the plundered material: recent chart toppers from the compact disc era of 1982 through 1992. Whereas before anything from The Beatles to Beethoven to Edgard Varesse was fair game. This anomaly requires a discussion of the material (pop hits from the digital era) in greater detail.

Why pop songs? Why from the most recent ten years? Do these songs contain extra-musical powers that can give them the grammitico-phonemic quality that *megaplundermorphonemilonic* implies? Or is Oswald simply "the would be assassin of the music industry"⁷? In many ways plunderphonics is about treating the plundered music as music and not a product: to reclaim it from appropriation by appropriating it. One could say that you must plunder out of love for the plundered material. Oswald has recalled doing a piece before the first *Plunderphonic EP*:

I would make a piece for a choreographer, and as an example for rehearsal, take that guitar-chord thing from the beginning of The Beatles' *Revolution* and do an infinite loop of it. I had the intention of replacing that with another guitar player. I brought Henry Kaiser into the studio, and we'd sit around trying to imitate the timbral quality of that guitar, it was easy to get the rhythmic feel of it. We got a facsimile of it, and it was pretty good and it had its own little interesting characteristics, but in the end I liked the other one better. I might have liked it better, the John Lennon version, because it had precedence, things that are in a sense your roots, that you've heard a long time, they're difficult to supersede.⁸

I now turn to a discussion on one of the issues presented in the above quotation: specificity of repeated object in contemporary consumer culture of mass repetition.

2: The Neo-Adornian Matrix of the Plugging Apparatus

⁶ Igma, *Plunderphonics-interviews*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Duguid, Brian, *Interview with John Oswald*

(7;0:00)... A loop from that Fine Young Cannibals song is fading out: haunting remnants from the last track that, like any spectre, have already proclaimed their eventual return. And, in a cross-fade, a loop from U2's *With or Without You* takes the foreground. I'm visualizing Bono and Edge performing an acoustic version for the inauguration of the Bill Clinton Presidential museum: a recollection from some afternoon of watching cable news, which was probably interspersed with commercials for the Macintosh iPod featuring music off of U2's most recent album. Blips of low guitar chords from several sources enter the texture. The low guitar sample from that C+C Music Factory song *Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)* comes in, repeating the power chords D, A, C, D over the U2 loop. I am immediately visualizing a generalization of any sports event I've been to where they played a recording of *Everybody Dance Now* (which is probably every sporting event I've been to) which is combining with shots of Washington politicians sitting in front of U2 and pretending to listen. And didn't C+C turn their cover of U2's *Pride* into a come back hit?... (7;0:38)

In order to get at the limits of this specificity, we must discuss its gestation. Though Theodor Adorno wrote his critiques on pop music, "*On Popular Music*" and "*Popular Music*," over fifty years ago, his approach to popular music as an expression of the culture industry will be quite helpful in navigating through the complex way in which popular music effects/affects that within our immediate society. I will confine my discussion to his analysis of the music industries "plugging" of pop songs, and attempt to loosely update certain aspects of this analysis to 1982.

A cursory reading of "*On Popular Music*" and "*Popular Music*" will reveal that Adorno separates his critique into two interweaving modes: that of aestheticism and that of the economic-industrial. Here we are discriminatorily concerned with Adorno's

critique of the latter. Of course there are instances where these two categories become so closely interwoven that the former will have a brief, haunting presence in our discussion. I am taking up this censorship to be economical in my own way. I believe that an in depth analysis of Adorno's aestheticism that avoids being apologetic for pop music and gets after Adorno's metaphysical assumptions by inserting undecideability between his polar opposites of serious/popular and functionality/embellishment could be very useful, but is beyond the scope of the present project. And, besides, there will be plenty more on Derridean deconstruction later.

Plugging as Self-Perpetuating Self-Advertisement

Over years of evolution that began before Adorno's essays with the introduction of the first consumer record players and continues through the current era of shared mp3's, the music industry has created products tailored to succeed through their mass-repeatability. The byproduct of this hyper-saturation of product is a highly developed process towards an extremely abstracted form of what "we" used to call "music." What I am alluding to is what Adorno is writing about in his discussion of "plugging." Though "plugging" has evolved, complexified, and multiplied since the 1940's when Adorno wrote these essays, I don't think he would be surprised at the progress if he were alive today.

Adorno offers a brief definition of plugging:

The term "plugging" originally had the narrow meaning of ceaseless repetition of one particular hit in order to make it "successful". We here use it in the broad sense, to signify a continuation of the inherent processes of composition and arrangement of the musical material. Plugging aims to break down the resistance to the musical ever-equal. It leads the listener to become enraptured with the

inescapable. And thus it leads to the institutionalization and standardization of listening habits themselves."⁹

Above, we see plugging as a process of self preservation on behalf of the music industry. This process has both short term and long term concerns: it not only convinces the listener to buy the plugged song through its repetition, it also ingrains in the listener a broad set of compositional-aesthetic rules that are controlled by the record industry. So, by plugging one song they are also plugging an entire catalogue. We can see one facet of the plugging apparatus as a complex matrix of *free self-perpetuating self-advertisement*:

Provided the material fulfills certain minimum requirements, any given song can be plugged and made a success, if the adequate tie-up between publishing houses, name bands, radio and moving pictures.¹⁰

Plugging is more than mere repetition. Plugging has become the center of an ideology around which an entire industry has built itself. Step one is to insert the song into the matrix of institutionalized plugging mechanisms. These mechanisms include radio, television, motion pictures, magazines, news papers etc. Of course this is only the first level of the plug. The song must be easily identifiable within a larger sub-genre within pop music, which itself is simultaneously going through the same process of macro-plugging. The plug goes through an ongoing process of self-perpetuation through its mass-repetition which is taken over by the consumer. We hear hit songs advertise themselves out of car windows as they drive by, in bars and night clubs, in elevators, in supermarkets, etc. We see hit songs advertise themselves on t-shirts walking by, and sub-genres advertise themselves through general fashion trends.

⁹ Adorno, Theodor asst. George Simpson, 'On Popular Music II: Presentation of the Material', http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/On_popular_music_2.html, accessed 10 November 2005

¹⁰ *ibid*

“Glamour” and Hyper-Recognizability

What are some of these “minimum requirements” which Adorno mentions above, and what might they have to do with the neo-Adornian plugging Apparatus currently in discussion?

Most important is the following requirement: To be plugged, a song-hit must have at least one feature by which it can be distinguished from any other, and yet possess the complete conventionality and triviality of all others. The actual criterion by which a song is judged worthy of plugging is paradoxical. The publisher wants a piece of music that is fundamentally the same as all the other current hits and simultaneously fundamentally different from them. Only if it is the same does it have a chance of being sold automatically, without requiring any effort on the part of the customer, and of presenting itself as a musical intuition. And only if it is different can it be distinguished from other songs--a requirement for being remembered and hence for being successful.¹¹

Here, within the above quotation, is where our discussion will begin to jettison. The paradox that Adorno writes about is crucial to our understanding of the weight that accompanies these "trivial" bits of a larger puzzle. However, for our purposes, I am going to, for the time being, reword in order to erase the paradox: To be plugged, a song hit must conform to a macro-phonetic formal standard while creating a micro-phonetic uniqueness. Within the incestuous competition inherent in the matrix of simultaneously plugged songs, the fittest require an immediate hyper-recognizability to the music's surface. This hyper-recognizability went beyond traditional approaches to musical surface differentiation when industrial recording studio technique and technology went through the revolution from the late 1960's onward.

What made The Beatles revolutionary was not their formal compositional experiments with pop music (or that they wrote a song called *Revolution*) but rather the

¹¹ ibid

"legitimacy they provided the recording studio."¹² The Beatles stopped touring all together, no longer making a living through performance but rather through the manufacturing of a mass-reproducible and mass-distributable product. They cut out this aspect of pop music that had always been cursory (performance), and made unapologetic illusions of it. And it was during this era of transition for one band that the industry as a whole started to make a transition to creating recordings that could be distinguishable from all the rest within the first note.

This recognizability is accomplished through saturating the musical surface with tiny bits of information through recording techniques: techniques which themselves complexified and became more sophisticated between 1967 and 1982. The techniques have become so precise that, when used skillfully, they not only differentiate artists but albums and even songs within one artists catalogue. For instance, I can immediately recognize the guitar sound on the Nirvana album *Nevermind* as unique not only from other grunge bands but also other Nirvana albums; and this ability is by no means an esoteric skill, but is a byproduct of the multi-faceted product placement through the practice of plugging combined with the capabilities of micro-phonic differentiation that the modern recording studio possesses.

The term "surface" that I have been using here can loosely be equated to how Adorno uses the term "glamour" in that he sees glamour as something sculpted/manufactured in the recording studio:

A further requirement is a certain richness of sound. This requirement evolves that feature in the whole plugging mechanism which is most overtly bound up with advertising as a business as well as with the commercialization of

¹² Jeffries, Samuel, *Theodor Adorno Meets "Lo-Fi" Rock*, <http://www.netSPACE.org/~leigh/sy/lofi.html>, accessed November 13 2005

entertainment. It is also particularly representative of the inter-relationship of standardization and pseudo-individualization.¹³

Adorno goes on to present the glamorous surface of pop music as in competition with reality itself:

By glamorizing, they attract attention. But the means by which they are used to overcome the humdrum reality are more humdrum than reality itself.¹⁴

However, we must do some updating here. The era in question, that of the compact disc around which the piece in question (yes, still in question) is centered, is an era after several eras of heavy institutionalization of pop music into youth culture. At this point, pop music has created its own reality. It has even erased reality. It won that competition long ago, and the only competition left is that between the individual songs that make up the matrix of the plugging apparatus. This competition introduces a re-writing of the earlier mentioned paradox of pop music: a successful song must be at the same time itself and an advertisement for itself. In order for record companies to make money they must convince the consumer that what s/he hears on the radio is in fact not the thing, but a mere representation of the thing. This obviously becomes problematic and contradictory because the product, itself being a mere representation, is not the thing either. The irony being that if pop songs are essentially advertisements, then the experience of listening to radio is the experience of listening to advertisements between advertisements. The double irony being that the record industry has been getting away with free advertisement by disguising it within a *non-product* for decades, and now they're upset over the free download of said non-product.

¹³ Adorno, *On Popular Music II: Presentation of the Material*

¹⁴ *ibid*

Adorno goes on to offer a critique of glamour(izing) that is closer to our "surface":

The term glamour is applied to those faces, colors, sounds which, by the light they irradiate, differ from the rest.¹⁵

He continues:

But all glamour girls look alike and the glamour effects of popular music are equivalent to each-other.¹⁶

Here we can take issue with Adorno once again in order to update his analysis. While his metaphor works to reveal glamour as compartmentalized differentiation that has no effect over the whole, we must consider the power of the repeated/repeatable image in the media age that has significantly increased since 1942. Through the repetition of an image we develop a certain specificity in our relationship to it. While there are certain minimum requirements to be a glamour girl that establish a sameness between all glamour girls, we are bombarded by so many repetitions of her individual image (whether it be billboards, magazines in a supermarket etc) that her image accumulates an amazing specificity. There are several websites where you can test your ability at distinguishing subtle differences between different celebrities' images; most notably *Liquidgeneration.com's* "whose boobs" quiz in which there are several categories of testing your celebrity mammary memory (including such esoteric trivia as 1930's jazz singers, 1970's blaxploitation actresses, and many more). These sites not only point towards a general consensus to the specificity of the repeated image in our culture, but to a revelatory and ironic celebration of it. Though the culture industry has saturated our world with images

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ ibid

saturated with "ornaments or cloaks covering sameness,"¹⁷ we fight back by searching for difference-hidden-beneath-sameness-hidden-beneath-difference.

Plugging the Cult of Personality

Another facet of plugging that Adorno touches on is the plugging of band leaders independently of the songs themselves. For our purposes we will re-write "plugging band leaders" as "selling product with manufactured personality." Over the course of the forty years between Adorno's essays and the compact disc era, the cult of personality became an increasingly important marketing strategy for the music industry. The most important development in this period was the consumer television. Adorno's minimum requirements expanded outside of the song itself to the questions of how the performers looked, how they carried themselves in interviews, even their political philosophies. All of these elements were reasons for record companies to feel safer investing in the product. And these personalities, totally independent from the sounds of the music they perform, are simultaneously run through the same plugging apparatus as their music.

Extra-Musical Baggage

There are two main impressions we must take with us from the above discussion that have great bearing on our eventual understanding of *Plexure*. The first is the incredible amount of referential/inferential baggage that a pop song collects in our subconscious as we listen to it travel through the public matrix of the plugging apparatus. As Adorno writes, "The term 'plugging' originally had the narrow meaning of ceaseless repetition of one particular hit in order to make it 'successful'." But this process of plugging is also, by nature, a public process. While these songs are being pounded into our heads a myriad of non/intentional extra-musical referential information is being

¹⁷ Adorno, Theodor, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1962), pg. 29

pounded into them. This subconscious information has become increasingly immediately accessible as recording techniques became increasingly capable of saturating the immediate musical surface with informative bits of hyper-recognizability. The saturation of the plugging apparatus into our immediate surroundings is an all out rape of our subconscious, impregnating it with a dark forest of incomplete referential chains. The second impression is that, due to the competition between songs within the plugging apparatus, a pop song must be at once itself and an advertisement for itself. This concept re-opens the earlier ontological question of presence, for the song must be at once inside of itself and outside of itself. But more on the undecideability of pop songs and the ever retreating present later. First we must traverse the dark forest, wading through the Freudian condensation of cultural-referential material.

3: The Forest of Freudian Condensation and Displacement

(7;1:15)... An attack from the opening guitar riff to the Nirvana tune *Smells Like Teen Spirit* suddenly appears, naked, and is consumed by a mass of samples... (7;1:32)... *Teen Spirit* returns, the end of that opening phrase where the drums enter. Again, it disappears... (10;1:30)... Three tracks and about six minutes later, *Teen Spirit* returns to continue the first verse... (10;1:34)... Again, the song returns to reveal a split second of the first chorus. All of these appearances add up to less than three seconds, represent less than a minute of the Nirvana song, and are spread over more than six minutes of *Plexure*. Where did *Teen Spirit* go and what happened to it?...10;1:35)

In the prolifically influential sixth chapter of Sigmund Freud's prolifically influential book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud uses his earlier discussions on the origin of the manifest ideational content in dreams as a foundation for a discussion on

subconscious operations the dreamer "performs" on the manifest content which connect said content into an organizational structure called the "dream work." Here I am interested in how Freud's conception of two of these operations, condensation and displacement, can inspire a listening approach to *Plexure*.

I was lead to this impetus, however, by Freud's earlier discussion in chapter five of the same book entitled "*Material and Sources of Dreams*." In this chapter, Freud hypothesizes that dream material can be traced to sources taken from the dreamer's experiential past. While he feels that dream material is predominately sourced from the previous day, or "dream day", sources can be traced deep into the consciously forgotten infantile past. This vast personal-encyclopedic sea of subconsciously accessible material was too similar to the public/personal-encyclopedic sea presented in *Plexure* to resist going on a Freudian journey. And so, as Oswald commits to outdated pop-musical fashions I will commit to an academic one.

A Work of Condensation

The first thing that becomes clear to anyone who compares the dream-content with the dream-thoughts is that a work of *condensation* on a large scale has been carried out. Dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts.¹⁸

In other words, condensation is a process of metaphor. Freud's first example of condensation comes from his "Dream of the Botanical Monograph":

Not only the compound idea, 'botanical monograph,' but each of the components, 'botanical' and 'monograph' separately, led by numerous connecting paths deeper and deeper into the tangle of dream-thoughts.¹⁹

So, the process of condensation uses compartmentalized bits of information (words in

¹⁸Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1998), ppg. 312-313

this example) as connecting points of individual, simultaneous trains of thought. There is an imbalance between the brevity of the appearance of the dream content and the vast metaphorical significance behind it. The Freudian conception of condensation will be applied to our approach to *Plexure* through: its compositional organizational function in the macro-formal structure of the piece; and as a micro-phenomenological affect on our individual experience of the piece through cultural condensation and personal condensation.

For our investigation of the idea of condensation as part of the formal structure of *Plexure* we will return to the earlier discussion of the various combinatorial operations that Oswald uses (phonemic, pitch, rhythm/tempo, genre, gender, and instrumentation) and their metaphorical potential. As Freud states above (and as we will of course discuss further when we get to Derrida) words by themselves rely on metaphor (more on metonymy below) in order to function. Oswald uses this metaphorical richness as an extra-musical organizational force. This also amplifies the amount of condensation attached to each sample through phonemic condensation. The previously mentioned technique of orchestrating genre/gender to create dissonance and/or consonance is another example of how Oswald uses sample condensation formally.

As discussed in the previous section, pop songs collect extra-musical referential meaning as they travel through the public plugging apparatus and deeper into our subconscious through mass-repetition. Here we will interpret this information as condensation, and separate it into two categories: personal condensation and cultural condensation. It is through these two categories that we experience a manifestation of condensation during the course of *Plexure*.

¹⁹ibid. ppg. 316

An example of cultural condensation in a sample in *Plexure* could be Oswald's returning to (repeated repeated repeating of) Sinéad O'Connor's performance of the Prince tune *Nothing Compares to You*. O'Connor (like any good pop star should) had a talent for surrounding herself in controversy. We all know that controversy (another Prince title, by the way) is another means to free self-advertisement through the enhancement of the mass repeatability of one's image (I'm not sure if O'Connor is featured on the "Whose Boobs" quiz). This was certainly the effect when she tore up a picture of the pope during her performance on *Saturday Night Live* on October third, 1992. Details of this specific controversy are swinging somewhere near the end of the referential chain of condensation connected to this specific set of samples.

Examples of personal condensation are, obviously, more vague in definition. Personal condensation has more to do with the personal chronological relationship to the sample and the extent of the individual samples' personal nostalgic referential power. Here are some general examples of this (the sample could be taken from): the first song that you "slow-danced" to; the first rock concert you went to; a song you shared with a significant other; a song that your parents couldn't stand you listening to; a song that was introduced to you by a close friend; etc. There also might be samples that have more of a negative associative power: a song that has always symbolized what you despise about the music industry; a song that reminds you of a relationship that ended in sadness and/or anger; etc. The important idea here is that individuals in our culture add personal condensation to pop songs whether they like it or not. This type of condensation gives *Plexure* a certain resistance to analysis through its invitation to a highly subjective narrative listening.

A Work of Displacement

In the above examples of personal condensation, there is a simultaneous process of displacement.

... in the dream-work a psychical force is operating which on the one hand strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity, and on the other hand, *by means of over-determination*, creates from elements of low psychical value new values, which afterwards find their way into the dream content. If that is so, *a transference and displacement of psychical intensities* occurs in the process of dream-formation, and it is as a result of these that the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about.²⁰

In the above quote Freud alludes to several of the complexities of the concept of displacement. While condensation functions metaphorically, displacement functions metonymically. It is an operation in which all or part of the meaning of one thing is stripped from it and applied to another thing. It is a very important concept to any deconstructive process in that it is necessary in order to set metaphysical assumptions against each other. Of course this deconstructive potential is very important to the thought of Jacques Derrida. In Freud's thought, it is an operation of trickery that the dreaming person performs on the waking counterpart through the subconscious censoring process as a function of dream distortion. For Freud, displacement also functions more broadly:

In the dream *I* was a substitute for *him*... Here, then, in the process of changing the dream-thoughts into manifest dream-content, I have transformed cheerfulness into fear... This example proves, however, that the dream-work is at liberty to detach an affect from its connections in the dream-thoughts and introduce it at any other point it chooses in the manifest dream.²¹

For our discussion of how Freud's concept of displacement can affect our listening to *Plexure* I will present a discriminatorily localized and specific analysis. I do

²⁰ibid. ppg. 333-334

²¹ibid pg. 502

so because when we reach our discussion on Derrida the concept of displacement will broaden to such an extent that I feel it necessary to present a solid base from which to start, which we can then displace.

It should be apparent from the two above quotes from the Freud that displacement is unique from condensation within our discussion of *Plexure* in a fundamental way: condensation is an operation performed on pop songs as they travel *into* our subconscious, while Freud's displacement is an operation performed on material as it travels *out of* our subconscious and into our manifest dream-content. I will once again present this Freudian concept as it relates to *Plexure* through: cultural displacement; formal compositional issues in the piece; and to a phenomenological (psychical?) listening to the music.

In the discussion of cultural displacement of pop music we will find that condensation and displacement are more closely linked than they are in the Freudian dream-work. Displacement is a reemergence, or a repetition. If we are to speak of the reemergence of pop songs in a cultural context in at least vaguely Freudian terms we must introduce the Jungian concept of collective subconscious. The line between this Jungian subconscious from which pop songs publicly emerge, transformed, and the neo-Adornian concept of the plugging apparatus becomes blurred, for they are but two parts of a larger cultural structure. When pop tunes are incised from their original context as songs/products intended for the direct plugging of themselves and inscribed into/onto other cultural products, this is an example of cultural displacement that also extends the plugging apparatus. One example of this would be the proliferation of independently recorded pop songs later inserted into a motion picture soundtrack. Pop songs also go through a process of cultural displacement when they are appropriated by a specific

subculture as symbolic or representative of itself. For example: the Nirvana tune *Smells Like Teen Spirit* came to "represent" the so called "generation X"; or the advent of band t-shirts, which not only advertise the band on the shirt but also advertise an identity and belonging to a specific subculture on behalf of the wearer of the t-shirt.

One way that *plunderphonics* problematizes a cultural-economic displacement that permeates pop music is how it displaces property rights. Plunderphonic techniques displace rights to musical property through re-appropriation, and then *Plexure* adds a new level of property-right-displacement by being the first plunderphonic work to be sold for profit. This enters *Plexure* into a larger discourse on the deconstruction of liberal-capitalism. In Michael Ryan's essay *Deconstructive Philosophy and Social Theory*²² he extends deconstructive techniques to a critique of the modern capitalist state. He argues that the liberal ideology of the naturalism of the cohesion of individual property rights and state sovereignty creates an ambiguity:

Property, as Locke puts it, is "subtracted" from the commons. What is "proper" is such only inasmuch as it is "not" common." Property right, therefore, is not something inherent or proper to a person; it is the denial of commonality and displaceability. What seems a natural right is in fact a social force. Moreover, displaceability cannot ever be fully neutralized because it is the condition of possibility of property. Ownership as the appropriation or "subtraction" of an object to oneself from commonality (that is, from "nature," as liberal theorists define it) is itself displacement... Ownership is merely a displacement that is recognized by convention as legitimate, and nature, as the word for pre-civility in liberal theory, is merely the name for the nonrecognition of property right and for a resultant infinite displaceability of property, the removal of what one has appropriated as one's own by another or by the "commons."²³

Property right puts a leash on displaceability through its "denial of commonality." What is powerful about Oswald's re-appropriation of pop music is that pop music is a

²²Ryan, Michael, 'Deconstruction and Social Theory: The Case of Liberalism', in Mark Krupnick ed., *Displacement: Derrida and After* (USA: Indiana University Press), ppg. 139-153

²³ibid pg. 159

commonality forced onto all of us. However, the displaceability of property right is not introduced to the path of these bits of music by Oswald; rather it is endemic of the entire pop production process. In his essay “*The Problem with Music*” rock producer Steve Albini offers a typical spread sheet from a typical band's budget signed to a typical record label. After paying for recording time, a producer, an engineer, a tour bus, merchandising, promotion, etc...

The band is now 1/4 of the way through its contract, has made the music industry more than 3 million dollars richer, but is in the hole \$14,000 on royalties. The band members have each earned about 1/3 as much as they would working at a 7-11, but they got to ride on a tour bus for a month.²⁴

Though Albini is targeting the injustice of the record industry, I am inserting him here as an example of the complex undecidable displaceability of property rights to pop music when so many functionaries are involved in the end product. The band members as supposed “makers of the music” are revealed as the “face of the music.” They are only a part of the music produced and the music is only a part of the product which is only part of the plugging apparatus. The irony is that none of these functionaries actually own any physical property, that's all owned by the consumer.

Plexure is a compositional exercise in displaceability. Oswald digitally incises and then inscribes. But the violence of Oswald's incisions itself had already been displaced. Music becomes displaceable as soon as it commits the violence of displacement upon itself and incises itself onto/into the mediums of mechanical reproduction: recording music is a form of displacement. The music is stripped of its time and continually displaced onto new time segments. Oswald adds another cycle of

²⁴Albini, Steve, *The Problem With Music*, <http://www.negativland.com/albini.html>, accessed 13 November 2005

displacement to a music that is technologically, aesthetically, and economically dependent upon possessing the quality of displaceability. The hyper-sample-saturation of *Plexure* not only reveals the displaceability endemic to pop music but multiplies it through its re-contextualization and condensed sequencing of the samples.

Oswald's exposure of, and reveling in, displaceability deeply effects our approach(es) to listening to this music. We must be ready to swim through a sea of undecideability, because so many traditional assumptions we have made about listening to music have become displaced and now move freely around in this music's space. But one must ask how specific this undecideability is to *Plexure* alone. Suddenly, the metaphor of the opening gesture as analog's last breath can be re-contextualized to be a broader warning: we are in the age of mechanical reproduction of art, and music will never be the same. This issue is made apparent through pop music because it is, by necessity, recorded music. However, it is an issue that any modern listener must confront when approaching any music, recorded or not. Through this new quality of displaceability in music we have run up against a wall on which is written all of our previous metaphysical assumptions about performance, presence, boundary, authorship, and reality in music.

4: Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Displacement of the Decidable

First, a preemptive clarification: I am about to take this meditation into risky grounds--*groundless grounds*. It is my hope that introducing the obscure and difficult post-structuralist thought of Jacques Derrida is at this point an organic continuation of the discussion thus far. The problems with introducing Derrida to any analysis is that his thought and writing aim to thwart such an inclusion through the constant process of deconstructing all western metaphysical premises. Connections between thoughts and

things become at the same time more easy to establish and more difficult to maintain through their displaceability. In many ways, it is a thought that displaces itself while displacing everything else. I have no idea whether John Oswald is a reader of Derrida, nor do I think that is important. What is important is that Oswald's compositional processes call into question many of our fundamental assumptions about what music is; assumptions that are easily related to their more general metaphysical counterparts.

The Pop *Pharmakon*

Though the Greek word "*pharmakon*" is usually translated as "remedy" (also "cure," "recipe," etc), Derrida, in his essay "*Plato's Pharmacy*," notes that "*pharmakon*" is a uniquely ambiguous word in that it can mean "cure" *and* "poison."²⁵ When Plato uses the word he feels obligated to choose "cure" *or* "poison." Derrida prefers the "*and*," at first to deconstruct Plato's phonocentric argument that writing is a poison that separates man from internal memory and essential truth. So, when Derrida thinks about writing as a cure/poison there is neither a separation nor a bond, and the traditional metaphysical oppositions between internal/external, essence/appearance, true/false, life/death begin to erode. Here we will continue our investigation of the pop song as *pharmakon* by putting it inside/outside of some of these metaphysical opposition structures and observing what happens.

What is an external music? One traditional response would be that music is necessarily external, for the sound of music is the sound of waves traveling through air molecules. This is true, but the sequence is incomplete in at least two senses. The waves then travel *into* the ear and disturb the cochlea, which transmit complex nerve impulses *into* the body, these impulses travel down a chain of nerve endings and *into* the auditory

²⁵Collins, Jeff, and, Mayblin, Bill, *Introducing Derrida* (New York, NY: Totem Book, 1998), pg. 29

lobe of the brain and so on. There has been a breaching and what was external became internal, but what this breaching is and exactly where it happened is impossible to pin point, even within this currently biological rhetoric. The sequence is also incomplete in that sound travels through air molecules which themselves are contained *in* space. The acoustic experience itself is a form of internal music. The listener's inside is inside. When that acoustic experience is initiated by pre-recorded mechanical playback boundaries between internal/external multiply even more. There are the internal workings of the mechanical playback device combining to externalize vibrations into an internal/external acoustic space and then into the listener. But said listener has always-already internalized said music through its infinite mechanical repeatability.

What is an internal music? The internalization of music is traditionally equated with memory: *the most essentially internal is thought*. Memorization is a process of repetition, and this process has traditionally traveled through the act of performance. This form of repetition is a necessarily corporeal one consisting of network of internally initiated internalization. Mechanical repeatability changes the rules. Pop songs are necessarily mechanically recorded mechanically repeatable music. They are unperformable through their essential aural-mechanical specificity, they are only repeatable. Their internalization must be externally initiated. Thus the internalization is a violent one that is often nonconsensual and requires nothing on behalf of the host because it comes with the donor egg included: A completely outside growing inside.

A music that is necessarily a mechanically recorded music also problematizes the essence/appearance opposition. The music is the playing back of the recording. Its essence is the multiplicity of inscription contained on/in the mechanically reproducible product. And yet this reproducibility makes each playback a mere appearance. The

appearance is the true form, the true form is but a mere appearance. The pop song, by its mechanical necessity, is quite the *pharmakon*, moving back and forth in a play of endless possibilities.

The *Parergon* of Mechanically Reproducible Music

The larger meta-category, mentioned several places above, of undecideability is apparent in the Derridean conception of the *pharmakon*. Derrida throws another metaphysical topic onto the fire of undecideability: aesthetics. In his reading of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Derrida takes issue with the logic of the *parergon*. For Kant, the *parergon* is that which separates everything intrinsic to a piece of art from that which is extrinsic; the frame of a painting, the binding of a book, the tuning of an orchestra, the applause after a performance, the second of silence between when you press play and the first sound from the recording are all examples of *parerga*. *Parerga* are subservient to the work of art in that they decorate or call attention to it. Derrida turns the *parergon* into an undecidable. "Does it belong to the transcendent values of the art work or to the exterior, contingent world? Either, neither, both."²⁶

Derrida offers a meandering investigation of the *parergon* of the text in his essay/s "*Living On: Border Lines*." The essay/s is/are separated throughout by a line, 3/4 of the way down the page. The text above the line starts with the words "Living on," while the text below starts "Border lines." The formal symbolism is obvious. He later states his mission in *Living On*:

What are the borderlines of a text? How do they come about? I shall approach the question frontally, in the most general way. I prefer, within the limits that we have here, a more indirect, narrower channel, one that is more concrete as well: at the edge of the narrative, of the text *as* narrative.²⁷

²⁶Collins and Mayblin, *Introducing Derrida* pg. 142

²⁷Derrida, Jacques, 'Living On: Border Lines' in *Deconstruction & Criticism* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1979), 75-176 at 85

So, his critique will be a narration of a traveling through these borderlines, and there are more borderlines than meet the eye. The essay/s is/are, in part, a literary critique of, among others, two texts: Byron Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* and Maurice Blanchot's short story *La folie du jour*. Not only is his narrative of his critique aware of his superimposition of both texts onto his text and onto each other, it is simultaneously concerned with translation back and forth between English and French (the French translation of the Shelley, Derrida's English translation from the French of important words in the Blanchot) as another level of super-imposition, and the translatability between the two (three, four, five...) texts. This is even more complexified when Derrida calls to attention, in *Living On*, the ambiguity of border lines explicit in the Blanchot:

I said that "truth" appeared, at least in name, in the middle, at the beginning and at the end. And that I was going to begin at the end to recount it in turn. But how are we to decide, to fix {*arrêter*} the end of such a text? Its unfinishedness is structural; it is bound to itself in the shifting binding of the *arrêt*.²⁸

Simultaneously, or at least on the same page, in *Border Lines* he writes:

Today, respecting (up to a certain point) the contract or promise that binds me to the authors of this book [Deconstruction and Criticism], I have felt it best to confine myself to the problem of the "must" {"il faut"} and its transgression (in the realm of reading, writing, the institution of the university, and so on--all domains that defy delimitation) from the standpoint of translation (*Über-setzung*, *Über-tragung*, transference, and so forth).²⁹

Throughout this/these essay/s we follow at least two Derridas through an inferential/referential thing. I use "thing" because it's a maze, but it's not; it's a matrix, but it's not; it's a mess, but it's not. There is a multiplicity of texts swimming around inside/outside of Derrida's text. Each of these texts have bindings, but these bindings are constantly shifting, and the pages they contain often interweave with pages of the myriad

²⁸ibid. pg. 146

other texts floating through this space.

This all sounds familiar; but how closely are *Living On: Border Lines* and *Plexure* related? What is the borderline of that text and that music? Books are mechanically reproduced writing. The "binding" is at the same time the physical glue and the metaphorical glue that holds the book together. The physical glue in *Plexure* is the plastic CD that holds the digital bits in sequence, and also the LED readout that represents a version of that sequence. The bits on the CD contain information which is sent to a speaker to tell it how to operate, but they also contain information which is sent to the LED readout and functions like a page number (information to keep the listener/reader in line, to tell him/her how to operate). As a binding shifts in Derrida, a LED readout spasms in *Plexure*. As Blanchot is there/not-there in *Living On: Border Lines*, Madonna is there/not-there in *Plexure*. As Derrida's narrative is a narration of reading in the margins, Oswald's narrative is a narration of listening with your hand on the LED wheel.

A Mocking Encyclopedism

There is an unwieldy and yet confined encyclopedism to *Living On: Border Lines*. The narrative flows in and out of various species of referential and inferential material, while still staying within a basic yet broad philosophical-critical topic. Derrida critically discusses encyclopedism in his essay *Ulysses Gramophone*. The essay is not only a critique of the epically encyclopedic masterpiece of James Joyce, but also of the Joycean institution. When Joyce said of *Ulysses* that "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring ones own immortality,"³⁰ he's talking about more than just his

²⁹ibid. pg. 146

³⁰Gifford, Don with Seidman, Robert J., *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), pg. v

immortality. He is staking claim to the creation of the academic cult that has toiled devoutly over *Ulysses* since its first printing. Derrida is interested in this meta-textual power as a mocking deconstruction of academia:

I do not know how far we can speak of the modernity of Joyce, but if this exists, beyond the apparatus for postal and programphonic technologies, it consists in the fact that the declared project of keeping generations of university scholars at work for centuries of babelian edification must itself have been drawn up using a technological model and the division of university labor that could not be for that of former centuries.³¹

Does this "declared project" also deconstruct the *parergon*? Where does *Ulysses* end and scholarly labor begin and end and *Ulysses* begin again etc? What does Joyce's "declared project" have to do with Oswald's? Though Oswald describes *Plexure* in more humble wording than that of Joyce's declaration, there is a hint of the "mocking modality of Joycean laughter"³² in the presentation of *Plexure*: Oswald does not cite or reference any of the samples. Oswald declares that the lack of citation was to avoid litigation and because there were simply too many samples. But there is a mocking invitation in that declaration. In a piece with the declared theme of recognizability, in which the obscuring of many of the samples is so extreme that the pop-musician/producer/lawyer that "made"/"own" the samples can't even recognize them, the listener hears that mocking modality. The lack of citation mocks the listener as well. We hear bits in *Plexure* that we immediately recognize, bits where the recognition is delayed, bits that are vaguely placeable, bits that we can recognize as part of a sub-genre, and material that calls up no recognition. The listener can not help but wonder "where is that guitar lick from?" Oswald offers no answers. His puzzles do not come with an answer key on the back.

³¹Derrida, Jacques, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', in Derek Attridge ed. *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 253-309 at pg. 280

³²ibid. pg. 255

Oswald mocks us, even though he claims not to.

Context in a World of Displaceability

Through the lack of citation Oswald challenges our assumptions about context. The materials in *Plexure* have been plundered and then iterated, but the path in between has been erased. Pop songs demand context. The plugging apparatus is contextually fueled by context it creates through on-going plugging. Yet, by definition, a plunderphone must possess some recognizability. A plunderphone comes with contextual information included: a quotation with the citation always-already attached. It is lifted from an it/advertisement-for-itself, a thing outside/inside of its thingness. Oswald is not erasing this context and he is not not erasing it. Context has become displaceable.

And what of an immortality of *Plexure*? Will it maintain its meta-textual power after this generation of unavoidably plugged in byproducts of the plugging apparatus pass? Is there an expiration date on context? Citation: contextualization of quotation; insertion of past into present becoming past:

We cannot even speak here of a future perfect tense, if this still presumes a regular modification of the present into its instances of a present in the past, a present in the present, and a present in the future. In this requotation of the story {*ré-citation du récit*}, intensified or reinforced here by the requotation of the word "*récit*," it is impossible to say which one quotes the other, and above all which one forms the border with the other.³³

The Signatorial Presence

Where do we find the "I" in *Plexure*? If it is to be found, then who or what is it?

Derrida would call these signatorial questions.

Its end, which comes before the end, does not respond to the request of the authorities, the authorities who demand an *author*, an *I* capable of organizing a narrative sequence, of remembering and telling the truth: "exactly what happened," "recounting facts that he remembers," in other words saying "I" (I am

³³Derrida, 'Living on: Border Lines', pg 99

the same as the one to whom these things happened, and so on, and thereby assuring the unity or identity of naratee or reader, and so on).³⁴

A signature is a textual *representation* of presence, and thus is iterable, repeatable, graftable, and counterfeitable. There is an im/purity to the signature. It is a functionary of language that claims purity from within a non-masterable system of dissemination. *Plexure* is hyper-signatorial. Pop songs are designed to call up a form of counterfeit presence: the meta-performance of the pop icon. A successful pop icon has not only a sound, but an ideology and a public past. Like a politician, the pop icon must communicate that it is a person that is completely inter-relatable with and through its constituent/listener. This thing that exists only within the public plugging apparatus infests the listener, and sings for/through the listener:

To hear and understand it [Nietzsche's signature], one must also produce it, because, like his voice, Nietzsche's signature awaits its own form, its own event... Nor is it just Nietzsche's text or Nietzsche's signature that we are responsible for, since the borderless text itself is involved along with the signature and also since, given the questions we have asked about the border, the signature is not only a word or a proper name at the end of the text, but the operation as a whole, the text as a whole, the whole of the active interpretation which has left a trace or a remainder.³⁵

Where are the border lines of a pop tune? When are we just listening to this music with an ingrained repeatability, a music that we've heard always already, and when are we recalling an image of the person/thing who made it? Where are the borderlines between the keyboard line in that Depeche Mode song, the image of them playing that line in the music video from 1989, and the picture of them you saw in the back of the Village Voice in the summer of 2005 advertising their "reunion tour"? If, as Derrida writes, "dating is

³⁴Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', pg. 98.

³⁵Derrida, Jacques, 'Roundtable on Autobiography', in Christie V. McDonald ed., *The Ear of the Other: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 39-91 at ppg. 51-52

signing,"³⁶ then what does the above signature within signature have to say about time? About presence? With all of these borderless signatures floating around *Plexure*, is there room for another one?

Here we find ourselves at the mouth of the metaphysical mother-concept: presence. The search for presence is a search for origin, a tracing, a deconstruction of that which surrounds presence. But..

To say that *différance* is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of the present origin... It is a non-origin which is originary.³⁷

Tracing the Pop Presence

Natural writing is immediately united to the voice and to the breath. Its nature is not grammatological but pneumatological. It is hierarchic, very close to the interior holy voice of the *Profession of Faith*, to the voice one hears upon retreating into oneself: full truthful presence of the divine voice to our inner sense.³⁸

It is imperative to the success of pop music that it present itself as natural transcendent presence. If it did not, not only would the plugging apparatus no longer function, but we would be awakened to the sham: it is the consumer and the consumers playback equipment who are the ones really making the music. Any recorded music must recall the trace of performance, and pop must make the illusion of grand performance. Pop proclaims two forms of presence: presence as the immediately external, or performance; and presence as a shared internal, or the transcendental spiritual power of music.

If we trace the present moment of performance, which is dated and signed by the

³⁶Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', pg. 259

³⁷Derrida, Jacques, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', in Perry Meisel ed., *Freud: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1981), 145-183 at pg. 151.

³⁸Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pg. 17.

physical inscription of recording, through the pop-music-recording-process we will find it to be continually deferred through a cycle of delayed effects. The technical pop-music-recording-process starts with a "take", or a performance of a small portion of a larger whole. As soon as this inscription starts it is a symbol of presence: a presenceless presence; a symbol of death. Many "takes" are superimposed upon each other, each superimposition being a new inscription of the already inscribed. This collection is then again re-re-reinscribed onto a master tape, which creates the illusion of a grand performance. This master is then reproduced through a process of mass re-re-re-reinscription onto the consumer product. The product enters the plugging apparatus and the reinscription multiplies exponentially. Here is where *Plexure* enters into the chain of deferred presence through another layer of reinscription. The multiplicities of multiple symbolized presence are themselves treated like "takes." They are "performed" onto an inscribing surface, and etc etc. Presence is revealed as forever retreating in an ongoing process of deferment.

Without presence the listener cannot feel the sense of empowerment imparted through the implied inter-relateability between listener and the pop icon. Without the illusion of real performance as an immediately external presence the affect is lost, the listener's identity is not reaffirmed, and the entire industry of plugging becomes a powerless nuisance. The product must become more authentic. It must hide its presenceless presence through an illusion of performance: pop must sound immediately external. There are several techniques of creating such an illusion, and I will mention some of them here. The mic'ing of pop records is always intricate and close. Each instrument, each voice, each individual drum is close-mic'd and eq'd so that it sounds as though each one is right next to the listeners head. The lead vocals are eq'd to bring out

the sound of breathiness, so that the singer is singing directly and specifically to the listener, whispering in the listener's ear. There is an immediacy to each pop sound, and, conversely, a total erasure of spatial relationships between sources on the recording. This is heightened by the dry acoustics of the state-of-the-art recording studios where all pop is recorded. There is no noise, and no aural trace of a specific acoustic space. The pop sound needs to be free of space, never sound internal to something else, so that it may be an immediately external presence: clean, pure, unadulterated presence.

Presence is also experienced as a shared internal. Pop repeats itself to no less than complete spiritual transcendence across the phases of deferred performative-presence, across all the reinscription, and to communicate in all of its divine luster to each listener individually. We memorize these pop songs and belt them out in our cars in moments of ecstatic self-expression.

In an imaginary but psychologically emotion-laden domain, the listener who remembers a hit song will turn into the song's ideal subject, into a person for whom the song ideally speaks. At the same time, as one of the many who identify with that fictitious subject, that musical I, he will feel his isolation as he himself feels integrated into the community of "fans."³⁹

This is a transcendent experience in which we accept the spirit into ourselves and are, transferably, accepted into something larger than us.

A subway car is racing underneath the streets of New York. The car is comfortably full of commuters, 3/4 of whom are wearing headphones. They each watch the foundations of the city race by and, occasionally, look at the strange faces around them, all to the accompaniment of their own individual soundtrack. The headphones have taken the spatial erasure to another step: none of these people have to share their soundtrack with the others. It is theirs and it reaffirms them through a cinematic sense

³⁹Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, pg. 27.

enclosure that separates them from the external to experience the ecstasy of the internal: an external pretending to an internal through the censoring of other externals. Headphone culture revolves around the conception of an internal that is a shared reaffirmation of the listeners own presence.

Everything is internal, mental telephony; everything can be integrated into the domesticity of this programotelephonic encyclopedia.⁴⁰

The so-called transcendence and naturalism that pop affects is a byproduct of repetition. Again another presence is retreating. At what point is a pop song another iteration of itself, and where is it a shared self expression? Through the synergetic combination of contradictory internalized presence, *Plexure* sends pop presence into another sequence of deference. What was once a custom-built soundtrack for internal knowing is incised and placed against-around-atop-within other retired soundtracks. What was once different and interno-spiritually differing, what used to separate the internal from the external, melds with the external; exposing its true identity. What once differed starts to defer. *Plexure* complicates the "now" by exposing the sharing implicit in pop transcendence through a multiplicity of "nows." It forces the listener to share with too many presences. In order to avoid the sensation of being exposed to a multiplicity of presence, the listener must admit to the deferment of presence.

The internalization of pop is about ritual. Through repetition we achieve a comfortable familiarity with a completely reliable always already reiterating. This quality is a necessary quality of the plunderphone. *Plexure* alludes to this familiarity, but is constantly subverting it. *Plexure*: a series of begun rituals that fail.

What does the adding together if all of this presence illusion add up to? Illusions

⁴⁰Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', pg. 283.

of presence stripped of the illusive powers exposed as presenceless presence and re-represented inside of a massive play of presence chasing non-presence chasing presence. The incompleteness of the samples in *Plexure* is always represented. Those bits and pieces that do jar information from the subconscious forest of latent melodies want to see themselves through. That chord from the end of the second chorus wants desperately to travel on to the bridge; but it doesn't, it can't, it's not allowed to. The listener is constantly in the state of rediscovering an anticipation for that which is always coming, but never comes. In *The Politics of Friendship* Derrida references the end of Blanchot's story *Writing the Disaster*, which has been summarized by John D. Caputo:

the Messiah, having appeared outside of Rome dressed in rags, is recognized by someone who penetrates this disguise--which is meant to shelter his presence--and who, "obsessed with questioning," says to the Messiah, "When will you come?" The story, Blanchot says, has to do with the relation between the messianic "event" (événement), let us say with an event in messianic time, and its "nonoccurrence" (inavènement), its non-coming about in historical time.⁴¹

The idea of the messianic is very important to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*. The messianic (as opposed to messianism) comes to represent experience in general as an always waiting and anticipating that which never comes. He defines deconstruction as an "infinite critique:"

This critique belongs to the movement of an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to its waiting for the other and for the event. In its pure formality, in the indetermination that it requires, one may find another essential between it and a certain messianic spirit.⁴²

It is through its messianicity that *Plexure* is at its most purely deconstructive. The collision between two samples is more than digital incision and reinscription; it is a

⁴¹Caputo, John D., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), ppg. 162-163.

collision of displaced past with an anticipated future. An internal reverberation of simultaneous anticipation and nostalgia holds the entire piece together with a *hauntological* glue. As Derrida would say, the “*hauntology*” of presence.⁴³ It is this quality of *Plexure* that constantly keeps the listener somewhere between: presence and non-presence, subjectivity and objectivity, internal and external, essence and appearance.

(12;0:30)... Barely recognizable bits of plundered from fast source material exchange in a cycling crescendo; switching from thrash metal, to fast blue grass, to bebop, and who knows what else. The samples continue to get shorter and shorter, increasing the synergetic tempo. At some undecideable point the samples enter a borderline, and then cross the threshold of recognizeability. And yet they continue to contract, disintegrating down, getting closer and closer to becoming 1's and 0's. Is that what happens when the music suddenly stops?... (12;1:11)

⁴²Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pg. 90.

⁴³Ibid. pg. 10.

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