

INTERPRETING CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL IDEAS AND THEMES
THROUGH POPULAR MUSIC

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ABSTRACT:

“Interpreting Contemporary Cultural Ideas and Themes through Popular Music”

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The aim of this thesis is to use a selection of albums by various artists as a means to explore the ways in which popular music can be understood as enabling new and different perspectives on some well-established cultural themes. Thus, the first chapter will look at Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* (2002) in relation to the idea of ‘the city’ as it has evolved throughout various twentieth-century discourses and art forms, focusing specifically on the notion of the ‘postmodern metropolis’ (or “postmetropolis”) as it has been theorised by writers such as Edward Soja, Paul Virilio, and Celeste Olalquiaga, amongst others. The second chapter explores Tom Waits’ *Bone Machine* (1992) as a musical registration of the Apocalyptic theme, once again attending to how various ideas of the Apocalypse put forward in the work Frank Kermode and Jacques Derrida can be illuminated through reference to Waits’ album. My final chapter will study Bjork’s all-vocal album *Medulla* (2004) in relation to a range of theoretical writings on ‘the voice’ (Steven Connor, Joseph Auner, Michel Poizat and Simon Frith), in order to discuss the way in which the album can be understood as calling attention to the voice as a ‘gesture’ – that which both articulates and displaces the threshold between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

While all of these cultural themes – ‘the city,’ ‘the apocalypse’ and ‘the voice’ – continue to incite scholarly discussion across a range of disciplines and art-forms (whether literature, poetry, cinema or the visual arts), thus far there has been very little written about the way in which such ideas might be registered sonically – through *music*. This is, perhaps, not surprising, given that music, as so many theorists have testified, is a particularly slippery medium to analyse, and popular music is arguably even more so. For where classical musicology at least has the advantage of musical notation (which is itself a kind of language), and a lexicon of critical terminology used to interpret and classify its various stylistic devices and aesthetic practices, the study of popular music tends to exist, in the words of Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “in a methodological vacuum”. Moreover, in analyses of pop music there is often a significant tension between its status as a ‘mass’ cultural art form and ‘commodity’, and the desire to take it ‘seriously’ as an object of study; a tension which can lead to “counterclaims of greatness” – whereby pop music is elevated to the status of capital ‘A’ ‘Art’ (effectively ignoring the “popular” part of the equation); or, alternately, to

discussions of the ‘mass culture industry’ – the record business, the star system, music videos, fashion and subcultural studies – in short, everything *but* the “music” itself.

Some of these issues have already been raised within a number of academic studies of popular music, and there is evidence of a growing awareness of the need for closer ‘textual’ analysis of the music itself, whilst bearing in mind the difficulties inherent in separating popular music from its social and cultural context. By foregrounding the ‘album’ format as my primary object of study throughout this thesis, I hope that the discussions conducted herein can help towards the formulation of alternate ‘textual’ models for the analysis of popular music, demonstrating that popular albums *can* be critiqued and analysed in much the same way as other kinds of cultural ‘texts’ (for example, in terms of composition and thematic development, cultural context and so on), whilst attending to the specificities of the medium which necessarily mark it out as *different* to these other kinds of texts. In doing so, I would like to think that each of the analyses presented here can contribute equally to both the ongoing development of popular music studies, as well as to the existing literature on these highly complex yet ever-enduring cultural themes.

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INTERPRETING CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL IDEAS AND THEMES THROUGH POPULAR MUSIC

When I first began work on this thesis, my original argument concerning popular music was based upon an as yet untested conviction that popular albums could be analysed and critiqued in much the same way as other kinds of cultural ‘texts’ – in terms of composition, thematic development, cultural context and so forth. While this conviction has certainly been subject to much revision and reworking over the course of my doctoral studies – not least because I have come to believe that popular music disrupts the very idea of the ‘text’, not to mention the ‘author’ – it has nonetheless continued to inform the approach which I have developed throughout this thesis: namely, to conduct a detailed analysis of a selection of albums in order to construct an understanding of how ideas and themes pertinent to other contemporary theoretical and artistic discourses might be interpreted through popular music. To that end, each chapter will consist of a close analysis of just one album by different artists as a means of exploring the ways in which popular music can be understood as enabling new and different perspectives on some well-established cultural themes.

Thus, the first chapter of my thesis will look at the thematic concerns of love and communication explored throughout Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* (2002), in relation to ideas of the postmodern metropolis discussed by writers such as Edward Soja, Paul Virilio and Celeste Olalquiaga. This chapter aims to demonstrate the way in which *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* can be understood as enabling different perspectives on the ideas of the postmodern cityscape. The second chapter will discuss Tom Waits’ *Bone Machine* (1992) as a musical registration of the Apocalyptic theme. By interpreting the album through the framework of the apocalyptic discourse provided by Frank Kermode and Jacques Derrida, I wish to argue that *Bone Machine* provides a unique vantage point from which to consider the changing ideas of Apocalypse within late-twentieth-century culture. My final chapter will use Bjork’s all-vocal album *Medulla* (2004), as a platform from which to address contemporary cultural debates concerning the idea of the ‘human voice’ as a sign of interiority, subjectivity and presence. Drawing on the conceptions of the voice put forward in work by

Steven Connor, Joseph Auner, and Simon Frith, I will argue that *Medulla* can be understood as calling attention to the voice as a site of intersection and exchange.

While all of these cultural themes and ideas – ‘the city,’ ‘apocalypse’ and ‘voice’ – have already been extensively documented in relation to other discourses and art forms (whether literature, poetry, cinema or the visual arts), there has been very little written about the way in which such ideas might be registered or explored sonically – through *music*. This is, perhaps, not surprising, given that music, as so many theorists have testified, is a particularly slippery medium to analyse. As Roland Barthes famously commented in the introduction to his seminal essay on “The Grain of The Voice”: if language “is the only semiotic system capable of interpreting another semiotic system,” then when it comes to the task of interpreting music, it appears to fare “very badly” indeed.¹ Moreover, where classical musicology at least has the advantage of musical notation (which is itself a kind of language, as I will come back to shortly) and an established lexicon of critical terminology used to interpret and classify its various stylistic devices and aesthetic practices, the study of popular music tends to exist, in the words of Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “in a methodological vacuum”.² As yet, there have been few successful attempts to devise an aesthetic approach which is specific to popular music and sensitive to those aspects of the music which do not readily transfer to existing analytical models (whether those of literary theory, musicology, sociology and so forth), and even fewer attempts to apply such aesthetic approaches to any actual musical ‘texts.’

Having said this, since the early-1990s there have been an increasing number of academic publications by theorists working within the field of what has become known as ‘popular musicology’, which have explicitly addressed the need for more in-depth analysis of actual musical texts. Books such as Richard Middleton’s *Studying Popular Music* (1990)³ and *Reading Pop: Approaches to the Textual Analysis in Popular Music* (2003)⁴; Allan F. Moore’s *Analyzing Popular Music*

¹ Barthes, R. “The Grain of the Voice” in S. Frith & A. Goodwin, (eds.) *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London, New York, 1990) p. 293; italics deleted (this reference to language as “the only semiotic system capable of *interpreting* another semiotic system” is attributed to Beneviste).

² McClary, S. & Walser, R. “Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock” in S. Frith & A. Goodwin (eds.) *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. (London, New York, 1990) p. 280

³ Middleton, R. *Studying Popular Music*. (Milton Keynes, Philadelphia, 1990)

⁴ Middleton, R. (ed.) *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*. (Oxford, New York, 2000)

(2003)⁵; and David Brackett's *Interpreting Popular Music* (1995)⁶ – amongst others – are all publications which, as their titles suggest, are not only concerned with studying popular music but also, more self-reflexively, with the study of popular music. That is to say, the common object of analysis for these books is not just popular music, but also what it means to analyse popular music – they are books about the “*practice*” and “*activity*” (to use Moore's terminology) of “music analysis”.⁷ As such, these studies raise issues not dissimilar to those which I will raise here, by scholars who are, like myself, struggling to forge an approach to the analysis of popular music whilst being mindful of those aspects of the music that do not easily translate to existing methodologies.

However, while the kinds of musicological approaches pioneered by these theorists have been pivotal in sharpening the focus on the musicality of popular music – rather than using it primarily as a vehicle for cultural or sociological analysis – there is, as yet, no definitive model or methodology for the study of popular music. Moreover, I would argue that there is still a further need for more comprehensive engagement with actual musical texts. As Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin argue:

The emergence of a fully developed musicology or semiotics of rock and pop remains a distant prospect; at present we have a collection of intriguing and highly suggestive fragments rather than a group of schools of thought with their own competing lines of investigation. The majority of musicologists are happy to ignore pop music because they believe it is so obviously of no great aesthetic importance... and most semioticians are more confident about the study of visual and literary signs than the slippery world of music. Consequently, the textual study of the music itself (as opposed to its lyrics, iconography, or consumption) remains quite underdeveloped.⁸

There are numerous reasons for this lack of textual analysis which I will discuss further throughout this chapter; one of the more obvious being that it is neither possible nor desirable to study a popular CD/album in the same way one might approach a novel, poem, or even a play or film. However, I also have issues with the phrasing used by Goodwin and Frith here. While I agree with the general point they

⁵ Moore, A. (ed.) *Analyzing Popular Music*. (Cambridge, New York et al, 2003).

⁶ Brackett, D. *Interpreting Popular Music*. (California, Berkley, 2000)

⁷ Moore, A. (2003) p. 5

⁸ Frith, S. & Goodwin, A. “Musicology and Semiotics.” in S. Frith & A. Goodwin, (eds.) *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London, New York, 1990) p. 276

are making, I would nonetheless suggest that the very notion of “the textual study of the music itself” seems to already assume the existence of some kind of musical ‘text’ – or at least, that it is possible to conduct a “textual study of the music itself”, “*as opposed* to its lyrics, iconography, or consumption”. Of course, I do not necessarily think this is what Frith and Goodwin mean to imply here – they are, rather, pointing to the limitations inherent within those discussions of popular music which tend to focus on the “lyrics, iconography, [and] consumption” without any recognition of the role actual musical practices play in shaping the ‘meanings’ audiences and critics alike make of popular music. Nonetheless, it does raise some questions which are, I believe, integral to the problems that “the textual study of the music itself” poses to academic analysis.

That is, what defines a popular music ‘text’ in the first place? Is it the lyrics? Is it the ‘music itself’? Is it the ‘technological artefact’? Where exactly is this ‘text’ located? What are its parameters – where does it ‘begin’ and ‘end’? What are its relationships to other media and discourses of pop music – music videos, ‘star’ interviews, artwork and packaging, and so on – and what impact do these have on our understanding of the ‘text’? Indeed, to what extent is it possible to isolate the “music itself” from “its lyrics, iconography, or consumption”? How does the format through which popular music is produced and consumed impact on our understanding of it as a ‘text’?

Thus I would argue that any ‘textual study of the music itself’ must be aware of the way popular music forms part of a much broader discursive framework, in which the ‘music itself’ is but one part. This is important because unlike literature and classical music, we are dealing with an art-form which, as Goodwin argues: “lacks any dominant discourse, in which the different sites of meaning production (records, cassettes, posters, gigs, films, newspaper articles, music video, etc) are interdependent.”⁹ Moreover, Brent Wood argues that with each new development in the technologies of sound production and consumption, the boundaries between various media and art-forms tend to blur, “not only stylistically and thematically, but also technically”, creating what Wood refers to as “inter-mediality”: “modernist

⁹ Goodwin, A. “Music Video in the (Post) Modern World.” *Screen*. 28:3 (1987) p. 38

intertextuality explodes into a post-modernist inter-mediality.”¹⁰ Thus it is not only that popular music operates at the intersection of a number of discourses and media other than the strictly ‘musical’, but that the idea of the ‘music itself’ is itself one which is constantly in the process of being contested and renegotiated.

It is immediately apparent that to try and discuss all of the different ways in which popular music is produced and consumed – even within an isolated time-frame and context – would require a level of abstraction which I find is too often the case in popular music studies, and would therefore necessarily prevent me from treating any one of these mediums in detail. I have, therefore, decided to focus on a single medium through which popular music is produced and consumed at the turn of the twenty-first century: the album format, specifically as compact disc (CD). In doing so, I will not only be attending to the *sound* of these albums, but also dealing with the particularities of the CD-album format itself – what marks it out as different to other music formats (vinyl, singles, live performance and so on), as well as from other kinds of cultural ‘texts’. That this format is also a commodity object and technological artefact – a piece of software dependent on the requisite hardware and already in the process of being rendered outdated (through iPods, MP3s, digital downloads and so on) – is also a significant concern for my argument.¹¹ This is why technology, particularly the interrelationship between music and technology, will be a recurring issue throughout my thesis, and why I have selected artists and albums which, I believe, can each be interpreted as drawing attention to the compact disc medium itself – its status as a work of art intrinsically tied to an age of digital technology.

I am aware that in making the decision to focus on albums I am not only setting the parameters for my own discussion – thereby ruling out a number of other important aspects of contemporary popular music’s production and consumption (I will *not* be discussing singles, music videos or radio-play, for example) – but also admitting to the parameters of my own tastes and values: I am predominantly an ‘album’ fan. This, in turn, marks me out as belonging to a particular demographic (or ‘apparatus’)

¹⁰ Wood, B. “Bring the Noise! William S. Burroughs and Music in the Expanded Field” in *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism*. 5:2 (1995) [Online] available at: http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/journals/postmodern_culture/v005/5.2r_wood.html (accessed 06/01/06) paragraph 2

¹¹ Witness the title of a recent Will Straw article: “In Memoriam: The Music CD and its Ends” in *Design and Culture*. 1:1 (2009) p. 79-92

within popular-music culture – one which subscribes to a ‘vinyl-based model’ of the album (and one which is, perhaps, increasingly ‘out of touch’ when it comes to more contemporary music practices). The same could also be said, no doubt, of the particular artists and albums I have chosen to study. Thus, it is apparent that even while I am using these parameters to avoid the ‘abstraction’ which I believe tends to dominate many discussions of popular music, these parameters are themselves an abstraction – and, more than that, they are inherently arbitrary, subjective and ideologically-determined. However, I do believe that the close analysis of a limited selection of popular albums – however unusual or atypical they may be with regard to the broader range of popular styles and practices, and however much they may occlude other important aspects of contemporary popular music – can illuminate the study of popular music in general, as well as address the specificities of these albums.

Since there is, at this stage, no body of work specifically concerned with the analysis of popular albums, this also means that there is no pre-existing template or terminology for the kinds of analyses I have aimed to undertake throughout this thesis. (Indeed, I am not even certain that ‘analysis’ is the right term for what I am trying to achieve here – insofar as analysis usually implies the existence of some kind of ‘text’.) Therefore the methodology which I have developed throughout this thesis is one which necessarily brings together theories and studies conducted across a range of disciplinary fields, and forging connections between them which may then produce insights I can work into my overall argument and analyses in each chapter. By drawing on analytical models and approaches forged through a variety of theoretical fields – literary criticism, musicology, the visual arts, soundscapes and sociology – my discussion here aims to foreground the way in which popular albums enable new and different perspectives on cultural ideas and themes with their own established histories.

Writing About Music:

The most obvious touchstone for this kind of analysis is probably rock criticism. Indeed, despite the repeated calls for an ‘aesthetics’ of popular music, there is nonetheless an extensive body of work on this subject collected in any number of

music magazines across the planet. And yet, except insofar as it serves as part of the ‘secondary materials’ of popular music culture and aids the study of taste formations, the ‘star’ system and so on, rock criticism – unlike, say, literary or classical music criticism – is rarely treated as a legitimate field of inquiry in its own right. Of course, one could argue that the reason why such writing is not taken as seriously within academia is because the writers themselves are not academics. This is, I think, a valid criticism. Rock criticism does, by and large, lack the ‘rigorous scholarship’ which is, or is supposed to be, the hall-mark of ‘good’ academic theory (as evidenced, most obviously, in the importance placed on the role of ‘peer-review’ within theoretical discourses). The evaluative nature of such writing also goes against the precepts of much contemporary popular music theory (and cultural studies generally), which generally prefers to distance itself from concepts of ‘judgment’ and ‘taste’.¹²

Indeed, there is a sense in which contemporary popular music theory – both sociological and musicological – can be understood as having emerged, at least in part, as a corrective against precisely the kinds of evaluative and interpretive models typical of rock criticism, particularly that forged by the ‘first-wave’ of ‘serious’ rock criticism in the mid/late-1960s. Thus, where rock criticism aimed to treat its subject ‘seriously’ (often through the appropriation of ‘canonical’ terms and frames of reference taken from ‘high’ cultural discourses), popular music theory emphasised concepts of ‘fun’ and ‘pleasure’. Where rock criticism has often espoused a model of ‘serious’ listening and music appreciation not dissimilar to notions of “quiet, solitary, engrossed reading” or “attentive listening” favoured within literary cultures and classical music, popular music theory has foregrounded notions of the body, leisure and dancing.¹³ Where rock criticism is seen to mythologise artists and albums, popular music theory has sought to demystify the star system and notions of musical creation.

Despite this seeming rift or opposition between the ‘academic’ and the ‘popular’ reception of popular music, the writer whose work has most influenced the initial approach, if not the content, of my discussions here, is the American rock critic

¹² For a discussion of the way in which ideas of ‘judgment’ and ‘evaluation’ have been dealt with – and dismissed – in a contemporary academic context, see Frith, S. *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. (Oxford, 1996) p. 10-12

¹³ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 45

Greil Marcus. Throughout his career, Marcus has worked in a range of both academic and non-academic fields – having taught “American Studies” at the University of California, Berkley, in the early 1970s, and worked as the editor of *Rolling Stone* from 1969-70, for which he has continued to contribute articles as well as in the *Village Voice*. While he has published numerous articles on music and other subjects across a range of journals and magazines, it is not Marcus’ journalistic work which interests me here, but rather the seminal book-length studies he has published over the past four decades, including *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music* (1975), *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth-Century* (1982), and *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (1997). These studies cover a range of genres and performers – from Elvis and Sly Stone, to Dylan and the Sex Pistols.¹⁴

Marcus’ work is sometimes associated (somewhat erroneously) with that of another iconic American rock journalist, Lester Bangs, whose work has also, albeit to a lesser extent, influenced my approach here, and for whom Marcus edited a collection of music articles and reviews, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, published after Bangs’ death in 1982. Stylistically the two writers could not be further apart, with Bangs’ highly personalized and often seemingly drug-and booze-fuelled soliloquies drawing on the ‘Gonzo’ school of music journalism (as pioneered in the work of Hunter S. Thompson), while Marcus employs a far more disciplined and – dare I say – ‘academic’ approach. What the two writers do share in common, however, aside from the field of rock journalism which they both helped to establish, is their commitment to treating popular music – and particularly the album format – as a distinct art-form in its own right, and their willingness to engage with the music in relation to broader cultural ideas and themes. However, while the spirit of Lester Bangs is certainly evident in my decision to study popular music in the first place, it is Marcus’ work which has most influenced my approach here.

Not quite theory but not exactly rock criticism either, Marcus’ work generally occupies an ambiguous stance in relation to academic theory. While he is not directly affiliated with any academic institution, his work has been complicit with –

¹⁴ The dates to Marcus’ books provided above are those of their original publication: *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music*. (New York, 1975); *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes*. (New York, 1997); *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989)

and recognised by – the development of ‘Cultural Studies’ (especially in the United States), and has been credited as a pivotal figure in the legitimisation of ‘rock criticism’ as a distinct literary form.¹⁵ Discussing the critical reception of Marcus’ study of the UK punk movement, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth-Century*, Barry Faulk argues that the significance of Marcus’ work, both within academia and popular music culture generally, lies in its ability to fulfil a further need for “writers [who are] able to move between academic analysis of popular culture and more conventional media”, in particular with an awareness of those aspects of pop music which do not translate so easily into academic discourse.¹⁶ Faulk suggests that Marcus’ work raises questions which “cut across a broad range of disciplinary concerns”, and which are “crucial to any type of cultural study”.¹⁷ These questions include: “To what extent is it useful to understand an event, including the ‘event’ of the work of art, as relatively autonomous from other cultural forces? In what sense can we usefully speak of popular events as linked to larger social determinants – and how do we figure these determinations?”¹⁸ It is important to recognise that such questions are not unique to Marcus’ work in themselves, in that, as I will discuss further throughout this introduction, popular music has frequently been studied in terms of its relationship to “larger social determinants” – whether those of ‘class’, ‘gender’, ‘race’, the ‘music industry’ or ‘cycles of symbol production’, to name a few. What is, however, unique to Marcus – and this is Faulk’s point – is that along with these issues, he also discusses other kinds of interrelationships, drawing on discourses of history, politics, cultural theory, and literary criticism, amongst others, to generate different perspectives on popular music.

Marcus’ aim, as stated in the original 1975 prologue to his first book, *Mystery Train*, has been to broaden the cultural framework through which rock music has, traditionally, been understood and interpreted. As Marcus writes:

Well, then, this is a book about rock ‘n’ roll – some of it – and America. It is not a history, or a purely musical analysis, or a set of personality profiles. It is an attempt to broaden the

¹⁵ Faulk, B. “Tracing *Lipstick Traces*: Cultural Studies and the Reception of Greil Marcus” in *Works and Days* 11:1 (1993) p. 52 & 56

¹⁶ Faulk, B. (1993) p. 59

¹⁷ Faulk, B. (1993) p. 51-52

¹⁸ Faulk, B. (1993) p. 52

context in which the music is heard; to deal with rock ‘n’ roll not as youth culture, or counterculture, but simply as American culture.¹⁹

Marcus has been criticised at times for going *too* far: the connections he draws are too tenuous; he ignores significant cultural and historical distinctions; his attempts to link trends in popular music with other cultural discourses are too sweeping in scope, and so on.²⁰ While these are, for the most part, fair criticisms, I think the *gesture* itself is important. When reading Marcus’ work, the thing that has always grabbed me the most is his enthusiasm for the subject – his willingness to trawl through countless little-known facts in order to make a connection that no one before has noticed. And while these connections may be tenuous and lacking foundation in some instances, he is, nonetheless, one of the few writers to have genuinely attempted to broaden the cultural framework of popular music and to take it ‘seriously’ – not as “youth culture” or “counterculture”, but as “culture”, full stop.

This, in turn, raises the issue of definition. That is, in choosing to define popular music, “not as youth culture, or counterculture, but simply as American culture”, Marcus is not only outlining the parameters of his discussion (albeit in this case, by opening the parameters through which popular music has, traditionally, been studied), but also, as Marcus himself suggests, effectively defining the parameters within which the music itself “is heard”. Thus, it is apparent that how one chooses to define popular music is not incidental to one’s understanding of the ‘music itself’; on the contrary, as Simon Frith argues, different analytical approaches to the study of popular music effectively “produce different aesthetic objects”.²¹ Moreover, as Frith also suggests, the reason *why* these varying analytical models produce such differing conceptions of the music is because they are essentially “concerned with different sorts of musical experience” – and, oftentimes, writing for different music audiences.²² This no doubt accounts, in large part, for the curious phenomenon in discussions of popular music – whether academic or non-academic – whereby one can find oneself wondering if they are, in fact, talking about the *same* piece of music. And, in a sense, they are not: in subjecting popular music to analysis, the music itself shifts; the kinds of frameworks or models through which the music is

¹⁹ Marcus, G. (1997) p. 4

²⁰ See Barry Faulk’s discussion of the academic reception of Marcus’ *Lipstick Traces* (1993) p. 47-63

²¹ Frith, S. (1996) p. 267

²² Frith, S. (1996) p. 267

analysed necessarily determines, to a certain extent, how the music itself will be heard and understood.

This can, perhaps, be attributed to what Georgina Born refers to as a “strange property” of music, particularly in the hands of early sociological studies, whereby “music can be used as a transparent medium through which to project a deeper message, like a blank tape on which to record, or a rhythm track to be overdubbed. Music becomes simply a means to express the writer’s particular variety of theory.”²³ Born attributes this “strange property” to music’s “particular phenomenology”: that is, on the one hand, “[m]usic in itself is alogocentric, completely unrelated to language, and it is non-artefact, having no physical existence. It is an *auto-referential* aural abstraction.”²⁴ On the other hand, however, there is also what Born refers to as music’s “‘historical phenomenology’, which would trace the complex and changing mediations of music – as social and ritual occasion, theoretical text and object of discourse, notated score, musical instrument, commodity form (sheet music, radio, soundtrack, record tape, computer).”²⁵ Born concludes: “These two factors – music’s pure abstraction, and its complex historical mediations – may explain why it is a difficult to medium to study and, therefore, why it is liable to be treated as a *tabula rasa*.”²⁶ Being mindful of these issues, the section that follows will consider some of the different academic models through which popular music has been interpreted and thus the kinds of understandings of the music which such models enable.

Producing Popular Music as an Object of Academic Analysis:

In order to understand the way in which artists as diverse as Wilco, Bjork, and Tom Waits can all be grouped together under the banner of ‘popular music’, it is necessary to re-think the way in which ‘popular music’ itself is defined and heard. Indeed, in qualifying her use of the term “rock” to categorize a similarly diverse group of musicians – including Patti Smith, Marvin Gaye and the Beach Boys, amongst others – Carys Wyn Jones makes the intriguing observation that perhaps

²³ Born, G. “Modern Music Culture: On Shock, Pop and Synthesis.” *New Formations* 2 (1987) p. 58-59

²⁴ Born, G. (1987) p. 59

²⁵ Born, G. (1987) p. 59

²⁶ Born, G. (1987) p. 59

the time has come in which “a new term is needed to describe music that is defined primarily by albums, one that transcends the different styles of soul, punk, pop and folk but that creates a more satisfying umbrella term than ‘rock’ (which has its own set of connotations).”²⁷ This is an interesting idea, particularly within the context of my thesis here, and I will come back to consider it further in the latter half of this chapter.

However, for the purposes of my discussion here I will be using the term ‘popular music’ to designate any type of music that is, according to Georgina Born’s definition: “primarily produced and circulated through commercial market mechanisms”.²⁸ Such a definition obviously conflates a number of genre and taste distinctions, along with the traditional ‘art’/‘commerce’, ‘authentic’/‘co-opted’ oppositions which have often been central to the delineation of ‘rock’ and ‘pop’. This is not to dismiss the importance of such distinctions or to deny that they can have genuine implications for the ways in which audiences, musicians, critics, and even the music industry itself, make use and meaning of popular music. However, as Born suggests, it is first necessary to define the context in which such distinctions and oppositions are made in order to “get to work” on “the real and significant differences and conflicts that do exist – *within* commercial popular culture.”²⁹ As Simon Frith argues:

Twentieth-century popular music means the twentieth-century popular record; not the record of something (a song? a singer? a performance?) that exists independently of the music industry, but a form of communication that determines what songs, singers, and performances are and can be.³⁰

It is not a matter of subsuming differences within an all-encompassing category, but rather of re-thinking the way we define and understand what popular music is (and can be).

²⁷ Jones, C. W. *The Rock Canon: Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Albums*. (Aldershot, Burlington, 2008) p. 2

²⁸ Born, G. (1987) p. 51

²⁹ Born, G. (1987) p. 54

³⁰ Frith, S. “The Industrialization of Popular Music” in J. Lull (ed.) *Popular Music and Communication*. (Newbury Park, London, New Delhi, 1992) p. 50

It is for this reason that Brent Wood (following Rosalind Krauss' discussion of sculpture) makes the case for an "expanded field" for the study of popular music. As Wood states:

It seems we have reached a point where it has become necessary to think of music as operating in an 'expanded field' if we are to have any possibility at all of comprehending Public Enemy and Stravinsky, Woody Guthrie and John Cage, Michael Jackson and The Dead Kennedys (all available in the same digital format at the same retail outlet) as instances of one and the same 'art'.³¹

It is unfortunate that Wood does not really elaborate on this idea of an "expanded field" here; however, in a footnote he puts forward one possible example of what such an "expanded field" for popular music studies might look like, hypothesising: "a four-cornered field bounded by music, soundscape, advertising and poetry."³² It seems odd that Wood does not include technology as part of his "expanded field", especially since it is central to both the example he provides above, and his discussion overall. That is, it is precisely the shared "digital format" and the "commercial market mechanisms" of production and circulation (as outlined by Born above), which enables such a diverse array of artists, who might otherwise appear to have little in common, to be categorised "as instances of one and the same 'art'."

My approach here has been to expand on Wood's "expanded field" – drawing on a range of disciplinary fields, including musicology, sociology, cultural theory, literary criticism, sound studies, and technological discourses, in order to explore the way in which popular music operates at the intersection of numerous discourses and media.

The second part of this introduction will focus specifically on the album format and outline my approach to what I will tentatively call 'album studies'. However, before I do so, I would like to spend some time situating my own approach to popular music in relation to some of the existing work in this field. Of course, a comprehensive survey of the 'history' of popular music studies could easily constitute an entire thesis on its own, and besides the fact that similar terrain has

³¹ Wood, B. (1995) paragraph 2

³² Wood, B. (1995) footnote 2

already been covered, it would also preclude any in-depth engagement with the music itself. Therefore, I will limit my discussion here to those theorists and schools of thought which have directly influenced my approach here and, rather than directing my critiques at the theorists/theories themselves, I would like to foreground the different kinds of understandings of popular music which each enables.

PART I: POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES

One of the things that I find interesting about the history of ‘popular music studies’ – bearing in mind that there is, as yet, no unified disciplinary field by that name – is that it has, traditionally, been broached as a subset of other disciplinary fields (most notably, sociology, and more recently, ‘cultural studies’) rather than as an object of study [or legitimate area of academic enquiry] in its own right. As Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin argued in the preface to their own compendium of pop music analyses, *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, published in 1990: “many of the most significant studies of pop music ever produced” are “available only in relatively obscure journals or within the pages of books about *other* things.”³³ This is no doubt the reason why books or essays on the subject of popular music can often be found scattered throughout the various sections of a library, nestled in alongside books on subcultural analyses, classical musicology, ethnomusicology, popular culture studies, fine arts, cinema, literary criticism, and even business studies, rather than being assigned a specific location of their own.

As this perhaps suggests, the writings on popular music do not constitute a ‘body’ of research as such, and while there have been several efforts, since the late-‘eighties and early-‘nineties in particular, to group these writings together – a move which was complicit with the increasing legitimation of popular music studies as an area of academic enquiry in its own right – it arguably still bears something of this slightly tangential, interdisciplinary character. This is not a bad thing – even if it can make research a difficult and somewhat laborious process. Indeed, in a weird kind of way, it makes sense that the study of an art form which is, perhaps by nature, subject to so

³³ Frith, S. & Goodwin, A. ‘Preface’ in S. Frith & A. Goodwin, (eds.) *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. (London, New York, 1990) p. x

many different interpretations and ‘meanings’, should have developed along so many different (often unknown to the other) lines. As I stated earlier, my intention here is not to provide an extensive discussion of each particular school of theory, but rather to identify what seem to me to be some of the key issues and understandings which have been developed. Furthermore, it is important to recognise from the outset that while I will attempt to deal with these issues separately, in practice they are not easily or desirably prised apart.

Music as ‘Commodity’ and ‘Recorded Music Object’:

Since I have begun by defining popular music, in Born’s terms, as “a music that is primarily produced and circulated through commercial mechanisms”, it makes sense to begin my discussions here from that premise. Indeed, while the analyses throughout the chapters that follow are not directly concerned with the commodification of music or the “commercial market mechanisms” through which it is “produced and circulated”, such discourses are necessarily implicated in any analysis of the ‘music itself’ – whether one chooses to acknowledge them or not. That is, in isolating these albums for analysis I am not (only) talking about music as an ‘abstract’, ‘ethereal’ entity – a collection of songs which exist independently of their particular historical mediation. Rather, I am discussing a compact disc: a techno-cultural artefact, a piece of software, a commodity and a medium for music that circulates within a number of both musical and non-musical discourses. Thus it is apparent that my decision to focus on the CD-album immediately situates my discussion within a specific nexus of economic, cultural and technological discourses – what Grossberg might refer to as an “apparatus” – which serve, as Frith suggests, to shape and determine my understanding of “what songs, singers, and performances are and can be.” Furthermore, in identifying a specific medium such as a compact disc, one is also talking about a specific place and time: compact discs have only been in widespread public circulation since the 1980s, and their use obviously coincided with the development of new kinds of hardware, which is to say, compact disc players. And just as their arrival signalled the decline of once-dominant analogue music formats such as records and cassette tapes, so too their

own life-span is already in the process of being superseded by the development of other new hardware and software – iPods and music files.

Therefore, by foregrounding the (extremely complex) interrelationship “between that area of the cultural formation known as ‘popular music’ and the ideological and economic structures which enable it to exist in modern society” in a manner which is completely up-front and unambiguous, it means that we cannot ‘ignore’ (or ‘other’) the commercial nature of the music under discussion.³⁴ It follows from this that any ‘serious’ or ‘aesthetic’ analysis of popular music needs to be aware of the way in which its ‘meanings’ and ‘understandings’ take place within the context of (and are enabled by) the “commercial market mechanisms” through which contemporary popular music is produced and distributed.

However, to define popular music *as* “primarily, and simply, commercial”, is not necessarily to say that popular music is defined *by* the “commercial market mechanisms” through which it is produced and distributed.³⁵ Indeed, my aim throughout this thesis has been to demonstrate the ways in which looking at – or rather, listening to – music through other kinds of cultural lens/frameworks can produce different ‘readings’ of the music itself. However, it is also apparent that the question as to the extent to which popular music is defined, or determined, by its status as a commodity is one which has, in its own way, determined the academic study of popular music throughout the twentieth-century and, for this reason alone, deserves some consideration.

To what extent is popular music defined by its status as commodity? This question was first raised in the writings of Theodor Adorno, a theorist who, for better or worse, pre-empted many of the issues which have since become central to academic discussions of popular music. Adorno was one of the first writers to attempt to theorise the implications inherent in what Dave Laing refers to as the “emergence” of recorded music “as a nascent cultural industry”,³⁶ constructing a homological model which explored the ways in which the *formal* structure of pop music (as opposed to just lyrics) and the listening experience were informed – or ‘determined’

³⁴ Stratton, J. “Capitalism and Romantic Ideology in the Record Business” in *Popular Music* 3 (1983)

³⁵ Born, G. (1987) p. 143

³⁶ Laing, D. ‘A Voice Without a Face: Popular Music and the Phonograph in the 1890s’ in *Popular Music* 10:1 (1991) p. 2

– by its status as a mass produced commodity item within the capitalist nexus of supply and demand. Indeed, even if one disagrees with Adorno, it would still be difficult to discredit the insights his work seems to yield regarding the future directions of academic studies of popular music throughout the twentieth-century.

In his 1941 essay, “On Popular Music”, Adorno famously conceived a homological model for the study of popular music, wherein the still-emerging discourses of consumer capitalism (Adorno’s use of terms such as “industrial” and “machine age” prefigure the “logic of consumer capitalism” discussed more recently by Frederic Jameson) are played out, or reproduced, at every level of the popular musical experience: from the formal structure and details of the “song-hit”; to its mass production and promotion as a commodity; to the listening experience of the consumer. The term Adorno uses for this process is “standardization”, which he considers to be “the fundamental characteristic of popular music”.³⁷ As this perhaps suggests, while Adorno uses the term ‘popular music’, this process of ‘standardization’ to which he refers is focused specifically around the ‘pop song’.

This ‘standardization’ of popular songs “extends from the most general features to the most specific ones”, which essentially means that both the song format as a whole, and the details in particular, are formulaic and pre-determined, and thus interchangeable or “substitutable” with any other “hit-song” within the same genre: “The whole is pre-given and pre-accepted, even before the actual experience of the music starts: therefore, it is not likely to influence, to any great extent, the reaction to the details, except to give them varying degrees of emphasis.”³⁸ And what this, in turn, means for the listening experience is that it, too, is determined or “pre-digested” in advance: since the individual details and the structure as a whole of any one “hit-song” are essentially interchangeable with any other song within the same genre (of which Adorno counts only two: “sweet” and “swing”),³⁹ the listener is spared “the effort of participation (even in listening or observation) without which there can be no receptivity to art.”⁴⁰ That is, so long as the listener is familiar with the “natural” language of standardized pop (“the sum total of all the conventions and

³⁷ Adorno, T. “On Popular Music” in S. Frith & A. Goodwin (eds.) *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London, New York, 1990) p. 302

³⁸ Adorno, T. (1991) p. 302-303

³⁹ Adorno, T. (1991) p. 309

⁴⁰ Adorno, T. (1991) p. 310

material formulas in music”), and so long as the song adheres to the prescribed formula (and Adorno argues that “standardization” effectively eradicates the possibility that it could be otherwise), the listener need not really listen at all.⁴¹

Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with Adorno’s arguments, the influence of his critique is surely indicated by the fact that the study of popular music throughout the twentieth-century has been mobilised, at least initially, in response to the kind of ‘homological model’ established through his work, and those of his contemporaries (and while I have obviously chosen to foreground Adorno here, his work formed part of a much broader school of critique, the Frankfurt School of social philosophy). Moreover, what Adorno could not conceive – what his argument could not have allowed for – was the possibility that his own critique of popular music has simultaneously been validated and undermined by the fact that popular musicians, critics, theorists, audiences and even some record labels, seem to *agree with him*. As McClary and Walser argue, despite the fact that Adorno “spent much of his energy trashing popular music”, “it is the scholars of popular music who are most attracted to his methods – thus the common genre of article that attempts to strip Adorno’s attacks on popular music of their content, to preserve the methods, and to use those methods toward the explication and legitimation of popular music.”⁴² In doing so, a particular model of popular music studies has been established – one which is focused around the ‘pop song’ as the primary object of critique, and in which the study of popular music is inextricably tied to its status as a “cultural commodity”.⁴³

This, in turn, has created what John Corbett refers to as the ‘either/or’ dichotomy “in the evaluation of ‘popular music’ as a cultural commodity”, whereby on the one hand, popular music may be studied in terms of the way its ‘meaning’ is determined by the ‘standards’ of the music industry, or on the other hand, it can be studied in terms of the way its meaning is defined through the various uses which are made of it by audiences. This ‘either/or’ dichotomy corresponds to that between ‘mass’ and ‘popular’ culture, a distinction which, as Georgina Born suggests, is imbued with “evaluative connotations”, and which she summarises as follows: “‘mass culture’ as

⁴¹ Adorno, T. (1991) p. 307

⁴² McClary, S. & Walser, R. (1990) p. 284

⁴³ Corbett, J. “Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Music Object” in *October*. 54: Autumn (1990) p. 79

produced by monopoly culture industries, bearing ideology and imposed on a passive public; ‘popular culture’ as authentic (working-class) and vernacular, an active and self-produced resistance to bourgeois hegemony.”⁴⁴ Thus, where the former approach reproduces both the logic and content of Adorno’s argument, the latter, as McClary and Walser suggest above, adapt the ‘methods’ whilst ‘stripping away’ the content, to foreground a conception of pop audiences as multiple and diverse. This latter approach is evident in one of the first academic journals to explicitly take the study of popular music as its focus: *Popular Music and Society*, which commenced circulation in 1971. Looking back in 1997, one-time editor Richard A. Peterson proudly discusses the way in which theorists like himself have demonstrated, contrary to theories of ‘massification’, that popular music is, in fact “plural”. As Peterson writes:

Two conclusions that fly in the face of the prediction of massification can be drawn from all this research of two decades ago. First, the mass production of popular music does not necessarily make for an increasingly homogeneous popular music. Clearly the homogeneity or diversity of popular music is historically variable. Second, the mass production of music does not make for the mass consumption of music. While there are fads, and trends, and mania, people transform music as they appropriate it and make it their own.⁴⁵

As this suggests, Peterson’s emphasis here (and, by implication, that of the journal itself over the past two decades) is almost entirely focused around disproving the ‘massification’ theories previously established by theorists such as Adorno, whilst foregrounding a conception of the music in which the ‘music itself’ is either inconsequential, or else is so inextricably bound up with its commodity status and the uses which are made of it by audiences that its analysis may take the form of studying the record industry, the star system, music videos or youth subcultures – in short, anything *but* the music itself. Indeed, some of the most sophisticated and influential critiques of popular music have been conducted with only partial (if any) reference to actual musical ‘texts’.

The point I want to make is that while many have sought to challenge the ‘content’ of Adorno’s argument, the terms of the argument itself – the ‘mass’/‘popular’ divide

⁴⁴ Born, G. (1987) p. 54

⁴⁵ Peterson, R. “Popular Music is Plural” in *Popular Music and Society*. 21:1 (1997) [Online] <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=27649101&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=20923&RQT=309&VName=> (accessed 08/09/06) paragraph 5

– and the “evaluative connotations” they imply, have not only remained largely intact, but have also been reproduced from *within* popular music culture itself. As Frith writes: “The contrast between music as expression and music as commodity defines twentieth-century pop experience and means that however much we may use and enjoy its products, we retain a sense that the music industry is a bad thing – bad for music, bad for us.”⁴⁶ Hence the ‘authentic’/‘co-opted’, ‘art’/‘commerce’ distinctions within popular music cultures which, as I suggested earlier, have been integral to the delineation between ‘rock’ and ‘pop’ – whereby ‘rock’ is equated with ‘authentic’ music, and ‘pop’ with market-driven pop. As several theorists have discussed, these distinctions are a testament to both the continuing influence of the ‘mass culture’ debates, as well as the extraordinary resilience of Romantic ideology within late twentieth-century discourses of popular music.⁴⁷ In fact, as Born suggests (following Peter Burke), it is doubtful as to whether there was ever such a thing as “pristine people’s folk cultures beyond the influence of the market and larger exchange networks.”⁴⁸ Similarly, Frith argues:

What such arguments assume (and they are part of the commonsense of every rock fan) is that there is some essential human activity, music making, which has been colonized by commerce... The flaw in this argument is the suggestion that music is the starting point of the industrial process – the raw material over which everyone fights – when it is, in fact, the final product.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, it is apparent that such distinctions remain extremely important to contemporary conceptions of popular music, and continue to inform the way people think about and value music.

Perhaps as a result, I find that there is often a significant tension within academic analyses which aim to engage with the music as a ‘serious’ cultural art-form in its own right, between the desire to take popular music ‘seriously’ as an object of study, and its status as a mass-produced commodity. This ‘tension’ or ‘contrast’ can sometimes lead to what McClary and Walser call “counterclaims of greatness” – whereby popular music is elevated to the status of capital ‘A’ ‘Art’, effectively

⁴⁶ Frith, S. (1992) p. 49-50

⁴⁷ (Frith, Stratton, Weinstein, Born)

⁴⁸ Born, G. (1987) p. 54

⁴⁹ Frith, S. (1992) p. 50

‘ignoring’ the ‘popular’ part of the equation.⁵⁰ Thus, as in the ‘rock’/‘pop’ distinction mentioned above, in these instances the dichotomised conception of popular music is reproduced from within popular music culture itself, whereby the majority of popular music is, indeed, homogenised and market-driven, but there are some ‘true’ Artists who stand apart from the rest. This is the angle that Steven Hamelman, for instance, takes when he argues that: “While we might hesitate... to acknowledge the artist in all rock musicians – an insupportable idea, after all – it would be difficult to refute the contention that genuine rock artists stand above their less competent or less visionary peers.”⁵¹ And of course, the way we turn them into ‘real’ Artists, is through recourse to ‘high’ cultural discourses.⁵² Interestingly, this generally involves not so much invoking what might appear to be popular music’s closest artistic relative – classical or art musicology – but rather literary criticism; or rather, literary criticism as it is filtered through film theory: with the idea of the ‘auteur’ replacing that of the ‘author’. These accounts have traditionally focused on the ‘art’ of the singer-songwriter – since that fits most easily with a literary model – but have since been updated to include the ‘image-maker’ as ‘auteur’, as for example the “academic idolization of Madonna”.⁵³

Thus the understanding of popular music which is produced within such arguments is often severed from the “commercial market mechanisms” through which it is “produced and circulated”, or else its commodity status is ‘othered’. What such arguments ignore, as Jon Stratton points out: “is that ‘popular music’ in its present formation would not exist were it not for the corporate economic structures which manifest it – in the same sense that the novel would not exist were it not for publishing companies.”⁵⁴ Moreover, the application of the literary model means that there is often a tendency to foreground an idea of the song as ‘text’ – thereby not only reiterating the familiar song-based conception of popular music, but also one which privileges the words or lyrics (often to the exclusion of its musical elements). As Frith writes, the elevation of pop lyrics to the status of ‘poetry’ was integral to

⁵⁰ McClary, S. & Wasler, R. (1990) p. 281

⁵¹ Hamelman, S. *But is it Garbage? On Rock and Trash* (Georgia, 2004) p. 19

⁵² Referring to this process – using Oliver Stone’s film *The Doors* – Frith argues that “[w]hile it is possible to find Hollywood biopix of pop stars... to match its biopix of classical composers – the life pouring out in the sounds – this tells us more about Hollywood (and the attempt to turn Jim Morrison into a Real Artist) than it does about pop music.” Frith, S. (1996) p. 185

⁵³ Frith, S. (1996) p. 244

⁵⁴ Stratton, J. (1983) p. 143

the legitimation of popular music as a ‘serious’ cultural art-form during the 1960s, and it arguably remains the case that “the highest critical compliment” that one can pay to a popular artist is to treat their lyrics “as poetry, as printed texts.”⁵⁵ I will deal with the role of lyrical analysis within studies of popular music in more depth throughout the chapters that follow.

Music as ‘Social/Cultural Practice’:

It was partly in response to the kinds of literary models discussed above, as well as Adorno’s ‘homology model’, that more recent developments within the field of popular music studies have taken shape. In an essay first published in 1984, American cultural studies theorist Lawrence Grossberg begins by establishing a “paradox”: “Although we are inundated with words about rock and roll, we understand very little about its place in the lives of its fans and its relation to the structures of power in our society.”⁵⁶ It is this imbalance which Grossberg’s work seeks to redress. Writing again in 1999, Grossberg reiterates this argument, stating:

My commitment has been to theorizing and analyzing the relations among popular culture, popular politics, and the systemic structures and forces of political inequality and domination. Consequently, I have argued for more than twenty years (and I have certainly not been alone in this) that rock music cannot be studied in isolation, either from other forms and practices of popular culture or from the structures and practices of everyday life.⁵⁷

As this perhaps suggests, within Grossberg’s work, ideas of “interpretation” and “empirical description” take a back-seat to notions of ‘social process’ and ‘affectivity’, whereby the ‘meaning’ of popular music cannot be ‘read’ from either ‘texts’ or ‘audiences’ alone, but rather must be understood in terms of the complex matrix of discourses and practices which constitute the “material context” in which popular music serves to “to produce and organize desires and pleasures”.

⁵⁵ Frith, S. (1996) p. 176

⁵⁶ Grossberg, L. *Dancing In Spite of Myself: Collected Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, London, 1997) p. 64

⁵⁷ Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 100

Thus Grossberg argues that we need to recognise the ways the in which popular music is situated within a much broader nexus of contexts and ‘apparatuses’ which contribute to the “material reality” of our “everyday life”.⁵⁸ Discussing what he perceives to be “the limitations of using communicative models to study... mass phenomena” such as popular music, Grossberg writes:

Such models isolate texts from audiences and contexts and then struggle to reconstitute the relationship through notions of expression, signification, and representation. But popular music is so deeply and complexly interwoven into the everyday lives of its fans and listeners that its study, even more than that of other cultural forms, has to recognise that the music is inseparable from the entire range of activities that fill up our lives, activities that are defined by and respond to the contrary, sometimes terrifying, and often boring demands of work (paid and unpaid, domestic and nondomestic), education, politics, taxes, illness, romance, and leisure (whether sought out or enforced). As a result, the meaning and effect of specific music always depend upon its place within both the broad context of everyday life and the potentially multiple, more specific contexts or ‘apparatuses’ of other texts, cultural practices (including fashion, dance, films), social relationships, and emotional investments that define the material reality of so-called taste cultures.⁵⁹

Within Grossberg’s statement here, and indeed his work as a whole, it appears that popular music is so inextricably bound up with the minutiae of ‘everyday life’ (“the entire range of activities that fill up our lives”), that analysis of the ‘music itself’ is neither possible nor desirable – except insofar as it serves “to produce and organize desires and pleasures”.⁶⁰

This (deliberately) leaves aside a whole bunch of questions concerning sound and representation/interpretation, in favour of focusing on “the ways rock and roll produces the material context within which its fans find themselves, a context defined by affective investments rather than by semantic representations.”⁶¹ Indeed, Grossberg seems to argue that the ‘meaning’ of the ‘music itself’ is practically unknowable, since “the power of rock and roll... depends not upon meaning but upon affective investments”.⁶² As Grossberg continues:

⁵⁸ Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 104

⁵⁹ Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 104

⁶⁰ Grossberg, L. (1997) p. 38

⁶¹ Grossberg, L. (1997) p. 31

⁶² Grossberg, L. (1997) p. 38

For in fact different audiences interpret the same texts differently, and there seems to be little correlation between semantic readings and uses/pleasures. I do not mean to suggest a disjunction of lyrics and sounds (which may operate in a variety of relations to each other) but rather that rock and roll cannot be approached by some textual analysis of its message. Rock and roll, whether live or recorded, is a performance whose ‘significance’ cannot be read off the ‘text.’ It is not that rock and roll does not produce and manipulate meaning but rather that meaning itself functions in rock and roll affectively, that is, to produce and organize desires and pleasures.⁶³

Thus ‘understanding’, in this case, refers not to any quality of the ‘music itself’ or even to the interpretations made of it by individual audience members, but rather to “the place and operation of popular music in the context of people’s lived realities and the structures of power of the social formation.”⁶⁴ The fundamental questions which popular music poses to academic analysis are those which concern “what popular-music practices are doing and what are being done with them”, and, as Grossberg argues, these “questions cannot be answered in terms of individuals, whether texts or audiences.”⁶⁵ This is assuming, of course, that these are the only questions worth answering.

In order to demonstrate the uselessness of ideas of ‘textual analysis’ in relation to popular music, Grossberg provides an example which, I believe, serves not only to demonstrate Grossberg’s argument, but also to demonstrate what I consider to be its fundamental weakness. Arguing that the “power” of rock n roll “lies not in what it says or means but in the textures and contours of its uses”, Grossberg writes:

When David Susskind asked record producer Phil Spector what the meaning of the song “Do Doo Ron Ron” was, Spector responded, “It’s not what it means. It’s what it makes you feel! Can’t you hear the sound of that record, can’t you hear that?” ... What both Spector and his fans knew was that the answer to his question was no.⁶⁶

What Grossberg does not really acknowledge here is the fact that inherent in the Spector quote he uses is an assumption that the ‘meaning’ of the music – whilst necessarily dependent on a shared “musical culture” or “scheme of interpretation” –

⁶³ Grossberg, L. (1997) p. 37-38

⁶⁴ Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 105

⁶⁵ Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 102

⁶⁶ Grossberg, L. (1997) p. 38

also lies in the sounds; as Spector says: “can’t you *hear* that?”⁶⁷ As Frith argues: “This is the sociological paradox: musical experience is socially produced as something special; the importance of music is therefore taken to be that its meaning is not socially produced, is somehow ‘in the music.’ Pop fans too have an aesthetic mode of listening.”⁶⁸ That is, aesthetic evaluation of popular music need not be considered anathema to a consideration of its social practices and affectivity, since, as Frith suggests, “the peculiarity of the musical experience – its specialness as a form of sociability – makes it necessarily an aesthetic matter.”⁶⁹ And, contrary to Grossberg’s formulation, I would argue further that these ideas of ‘meaning’ and ‘value’ are an important part of the way in which audiences use music to structure and organise their ‘everyday lives’.

Grossberg’s work has been extremely important in laying the foundation for contemporary popular music studies and cultural studies generally. But for all that these discussions tell us about the various uses and practices which are made of popular music by audiences within society, about its ‘politics’ and ‘pleasures’, they still do not tell us very much about the music itself. More insidiously, I think there is an implied ‘message’ that it is neither possible, nor desirable, to ‘understand’ the music, since, as Grossberg suggests, “rock and roll may represent different things for different audiences and in different contexts.”⁷⁰ In contrast, I think it is possible to agree that ‘musical meaning’ cannot be ‘read’ from the ‘text’ without assuming that any attempt to interpret music is necessarily pointless, and this is what the discussions throughout the chapters that follow have attempted to redress.

This is also where I have found Frith’s work to be particularly useful, in that while Frith, like Grossberg, is wary of the application of literary and other communication models to the analysis of popular music, he also recognises that ideas of interpretation and meaning continue to be extremely important within popular music cultures, and for that reason alone deserve further investigation. As Frith argues:

Music does not have a content – it can’t be translated – but this does not mean that it is not ‘an object of the understanding.’ Or, to put it another way, the gap in music between the

⁶⁷ This reference to a shared “musical culture” or “scheme of interpretation” is taken from Frith, S. (1996) p. 249

⁶⁸ Frith, S. (1996) p. 252

⁶⁹ Frith, S. (1996) p. 252

⁷⁰ Grossberg, L. (1997) p. 30

nature of the experience (sounds) and the terms of its interpretation (adjectives) may be more obvious than in any other art form, but this does not mean that the pleasure of music doesn't lie in the ways in which we can – and must – fill the gap.⁷¹

Having said this, while Frith recognises that questions of meaning and interpretation are important to popular music cultures, he is also critical of the way these ideas might structure “musical appreciation as a kind of decoding”, preferring rather to focus these issues in terms of *performance* – a term which takes on its own particular meaning within Frith's work which is consistent with a more sociological approach to popular music.⁷² That is, ‘performance’ in Frith's conception is defined as “a social – or communicative – process. It requires an audience and is dependent, in this sense, on interpretation; it is about *meanings*.”⁷³ Thus the questions of meaning and interpretation are reframed in Frith's work in terms of “experience” and “collusion” – terms which necessarily implicate an audience/performer relationship (if only, as in the case of recorded music, ‘implied’ rather than ‘actual’), and which suggest that these are ideas are not ‘inherent’ within the text, but rather are brought into being through the performative process.

While Frith's work, like Grossberg's, largely eschews in-depth ‘textual analysis’ in favour of a more ‘abstract’ approach to the study of popular music – although there are numerous references to specific examples drawn from a range of popular genres throughout Frith's studies – there is nonetheless, a practicality to his discussions which I have found to be extremely useful throughout the analyses conducted here. At the same time, however, the unwillingness to engage with music as ‘music’, in favour of foregrounding an idea of popular music ‘performance’, remains a point of contention. As Timothy D. Taylor writes in the introduction to his book *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*:

It is possible to have great insights into cultural production, resistance, youth, or whatever, but I wonder how many people would accept, for example, discussions of literature that never actually engaged with how the given literature was put together, or how it worked to affect its readers. Some theorists have theorized away the necessity for studying music as music. To give one recent example, Simon Frith writes that music ‘is both performance and

⁷¹ Frith, S. (1996) p. 264-265

⁷² Frith, S. (1996) p. 272

⁷³ Frith, S. (1996) p. 205

story.’ It is these, and more, as Frith outlines in his important essay. But music is also sound, and if we are to understand the ways that music affects the body and the way we feel and creates meanings, we have to go beyond the discursive and verbal. This isn’t an attack on Frith, whose work I greatly admire, or cultural studies in general; it is rather, an attempt to point out what is missing in some cultural studies work on music... As Susan McClary writes: “the study of popular music should also include the study of popular music.”⁷⁴

As this suggests, while the approaches developed by Frith and Grossberg have been extremely important in attempting to move beyond the established terms of the ‘mass culture critique’ and to engage with popular music culture ‘seriously’ without making recourse to literary models of textual analysis, they have also helped to foreground a conception of popular music in which the ‘music itself’ often appears to be incidental – whether to ideas of ‘affectivity’ in Grossberg, or to those of ‘performance’ in Frith. Therefore, it is this idea of popular music as ‘music’ that I would like to turn to now.

Music as ‘Music’:

The difficulties inherent in writing about music as ‘music’ are well-known. These difficulties derive partly from music’s peculiarly unstable ontological status as a sonic *event* – its transient, ephemeral nature, the way in which it moves through time, and its ambiguous relationship to materiality and space. As Aden Evens writes:

Music resists theorization at every step. As a form of art that is set in time, that takes its time, a piece of music does not sit still to be observed. One cannot subject sound to a persistent observation; rather, one can only listen and then, maybe, listen again. Music is apprehended in chunks of time. Partly because sound is dynamic, Western intellectual tradition shows a marked preference for vision as the figure of knowledge. We articulate more clearly the fixed image than the dynamic sound.⁷⁵

Hence the usefulness of the score within musicological analyses – even if the musical experience itself is ambiguous, at least with the score we have something ‘concrete’ we can point to in order to explain how the music works and produces its effects. Indeed, Frith suggests that this may be the reason for the centrality of the

⁷⁴ Taylor, T. D. *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*. (New York, London 1997) p. xvii-xviii

⁷⁵ Evens, A. *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience*. (Minneapolis, 2005) p. ix

score in discussions of ‘art’ musics – as it allowed the piece of music to be represented spatially, and thus understood and appreciated in its a ‘totality’.⁷⁶

And yet, the point I would like to make here is not that the score helped to ‘fix’ music in place and time, giving it a sense of structure and definition which the piece of music previously lacked, but that the creation of the musical score was what gave music a particular structure and definition in the first place. And it was precisely through doing so that the score thereby enabled a new conception of music and model of “structural interpretation”, which, in turn, shifted the parameters through which the ‘music itself’ was heard and understood. As Frith writes: “Structural interpretation is necessarily dependent on music’s spatial representation, on the score”; and the “transition” that this enabled “was from the analysis of music as rhetoric to the analysis of music as art.”⁷⁷ And while it may be the case that this model of interpretation could not have existed prior to the invention of the score, it does not necessarily follow that before this time, the ‘music itself’ had some other kind of mode of existence which the score, in turn, helped to ‘capture’. The same argument can also be made with regard to recording technologies, in that, again, it was not that recording technologies effectively ‘revealed’ musical subtleties which previously remained inaudible within earlier listening experiences, but that these musical qualities were effectively created by the new technologies.

Indeed, as Frith argues, the conception of music as ‘ephemeral’, ‘formless’ and ‘incomplete’ was itself the product of Romantic ideologies, which deliberately came to define and value music “for those qualities that discredited it to the empiricists”.⁷⁸ Thus, while Evens’ passage above aptly captures some of the difficulties which music, and indeed sound in general, may be understood as posing to ‘textual analysis’, it also produces a particular conception of music – one which has its own aesthetic agenda and rationale which serves, in turn, to structure and define the way the ‘music itself’ will be heard and understood. That Evens’ conception of music is tied to a specific aesthetic agenda and rationale is made abundantly clear, in later sections of his book, when he goes on to use this definition of music to formulate what seems, to him, to be an entirely logical and irrefutable argument against digital

⁷⁶ Frith, S. (1996) p. 256-259

⁷⁷ Frith, S. (1996) p. 258 & 255

⁷⁸ Frith, S. (1996) p. 254

recording and playback technologies. According to Evens, such technologies serve to reproduce a vastly 'inferior' version of the musical event and, within the context of his argument and definition of music, this does indeed appear to be irrefutable. However, it is only irrefutable if one follows his definition of music in the first place.

Thus it is not that each mode of capturing or representing music (whether the score, the recording, or the performance) somehow gets closer – or further – from the 'music itself', but that these modes are themselves what help to produce and define what the 'music itself' is and can be. It is not so much a matter of sound and 'representation' – with the 'music itself' as the medium in-between, and which the act of analysis or interpretation aims to uncover through various means – and nor is it a matter of 'fixing' the 'music itself' – which exists prior to and independent from the act of interpretation – in place and making it 'stand still'. Rather, it is a question of the models one uses to suit one's aims in the kinds of interpretations and understandings of the 'music itself' that one wishes to enable. The 'music itself' is not some kind of abstract entity which exists independently of the means one uses to make sense of or structure it, but is created through the means that one uses to interpret and define it.

It is here that the question of terminology, and the kinds of models one uses to define and interpret music, become crucial. As Frith writes: "In what terms do I make sense of my musical experiences? Where do these terms come from? What *is* musical understanding?"⁷⁹ And, as the discussions above suggest, these questions are not secondary to the act of analysis or interpretation. In the sections above I have discussed the ways in which different models of interpretation are brought to bear on popular music, and the different kinds of musical understandings which each enables. Here I would like to deal, finally, with two models which may be used to interpret the music as 'music'; the first of which is musicology.

Musicology is the discipline which is most closely associated with close textual analysis of music *as* music; as Roy Shuker writes: "The study of the formal properties of music *qua* music is termed musicology."⁸⁰ However, it is arguable that

⁷⁹ Frith, S. (1996) p. 253

⁸⁰ Shuker, R. *Understanding Popular Music*. (London, New York, 2001) p. 139

traditional musicology has never developed the terminology necessary for an analysis of popular music (or to explain its appeal), since pop music is rarely comprised of sheet music or scores, and models of tonality, pitch and meter – the conventional frameworks and devices of musicology. Born argues that while “it is as possible cerebrally as it is libidinally to distinguish the rhythmic [and aesthetic] character of popular musics from that of classical or modernist music”, there are, however:

other aesthetic criteria, particularly the timbral inflections and vocal styles of popular music, [which] are less susceptible to written transcription and so far harder to analyse. These criteria have been likened to the difference between mainly notated and mainly aural music traditions. Allowing for aural aspects in the interpretation of modernist music, and notation as also central to popular music, the distinction remains suggestive of their origins and of their continuing character.⁸¹

Thus where musicology is, at least traditionally, designed for the score it remains largely inapplicable to popular music. Moreover, as McClary and Walser argue: “insofar as the traditional agenda of aesthetics is tied to appeals to universal consensus that eliminate the possibility of political struggle over discourse, aesthetic approaches per se are incompatible with studies that treat music as socially constituted.”⁸² Thus it is not only that the model of analysis which is typical of musicology is unsuited to popular music as a performance-based art-form, but that the values which are often implicit within this model would necessarily distort the conception of popular music it enables.

At the same time, however, it is also important to recognise that there have been developments within musicology, particularly over the past two decades, which have both recognised and attempted to correct the limitations of the discipline, especially through its encounters with non-classical forms and genres of music, including pop. As Allan F. Moore argues in the introduction to *Analyzing Popular Music*, while the academic stance towards popular music within musicological disciplines has shifted dramatically at the turn of the twenty-first century, such that there are now “degree programs devoted entirely to it”, it has also become apparent that “to treat popular music as simply another genre (as simply another sort of ‘music’ that people listen

⁸¹ Born, G. (1987) p. 52

⁸² McClary, S. & Walser, R. (1990) p. 281

to) and to make use of the techniques developed for the study of the bourgeois music canon, is similarly insufficient.” Moreover, as Moore continues, these issues themselves speak to broader issues within the musicology field, since “even the techniques through which the ‘bourgeois music canon’ is addressed are no longer unquestioned.”⁸³ And part of what is being brought into question – or at least redefined – here is the very notion of the ‘score’ as *the* definitive musical text, in order to make way for other kinds of musical encounters, and thus other ways of ‘knowing’ music.⁸⁴

Something of the nature of this shift away from the conventional score-based conception of music is articulated by McClary and Walser, who, in their important essay “Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock”, argue that:

What popular music has instead of the score is, of course, recorded performance – the thing itself, completely fleshed out with all its gestures and nuances intact. What would seem to be an indisputable advantage over notated music converts to a disadvantage only because analytic methods are still tied to those aspects of music that can be fixed or accounted for in notation.⁸⁵

Thus in popular music, the ‘recorded music object’ may be understood as assuming the place which is traditionally held by the score in musicology. This is an important point, for, as I will discuss further shortly, it can be argued that the album – like the score – has been crucial to the construction/formation of a popular music ‘canon’. However, while I appreciate the point that McClary and Walser are making here, I would prefer not to think of albums and the like as constituting a “recorded performance”, but rather a ‘recorded music event’, in order to avoid any possible

⁸³ Moore, A. (2003) p. 2

⁸⁴ This idea of musicology as recognising the way in which different forms of interacting with music produce different ways of knowing music is made especially clear in the introduction to Moore’s book, *Analyzing Popular Music*. As Moore writes: “How do we ‘know’ music? Although music has a variety of distinct audiences, one way of approaching a universally applicable response is by looking at the activities we undertake in its presence. Most widespread, of course, is listening. We may listen for pleasure, for identification, as an accompaniment to other activities (dancing, cooking), distractedly (as when watching a film) and in many other ways. In pre-modern societies, listening without any more active form of participation was rare indeed, whether that activity focused on performing itself, on some form of dance, or even on banter with the musicians: some would argue that in modern society too, the musical experience is impoverished without such participation. Many of us are either fortunate or wilful enough to insist on performing, and even composing. All of these activities may be defined as ways of ‘knowing’ music, even if that knowledge is not something that can be communicated verbally.” [Moore, A. (2003) p. 1] This to me provides an excellent summary of the various possible approaches which have been opened up within much contemporary musicology.

⁸⁵ McClary, S. & Walser, R. (1990) p. 282

confusion with 'live' performance. Indeed, within the context of McClary and Walser's argument/essay, it appears that the two – recorded music and live music – are practically interchangeable, insofar as each appears to present the same kinds of issues to analysis.

This seeming failure to distinguish between live and recorded music (which is not, I might add, characteristic of musicology in general) serves, in turn, to elide the crucial role that recording technologies have played in helping to define exactly what popular music is understood to *be*.⁸⁶ That is, the significance of records is not, as McClary and Walser suggest, that they represent "the thing itself" – "*recorded performance*" – but that they effectively offer *new* ways of understanding what popular music is and can be. As Frith argues:

By the end of the 1960s, records, not concerts, defined the 'best' sound. Nowadays both classical and popular musicians have to make sure that their live performances meet the sound standards of their records. The acoustic design of concert halls has changed accordingly, and rock groups take sound checks, sound mixers, elaborate amplification systems, and these days the use of taped material to enhance their 'live' performance is taken for granted.⁸⁷

What Frith's point aptly demonstrates here is that recording technologies have not only changed the way music is produced and consumed, but have also served to call into question and redefine what popular music – and indeed musical performances of *all* kinds – actually *is*. Far from offering listeners "the thing itself" – the musical event "completely fleshed out with all its gestures and nuances intact" (which was once the dubious marker of 'high-fidelity') – recordings enable the creation of entirely artificial musical events which need not bear any direct relationship to a 'real' or 'live' event.

It is apparent that while the role of the recording in popular music may have taken on or subsumed some of the values and attributes commonly associated with the score in classical music cultures – such as "status, dignity, [and] durability"⁸⁸ – they

⁸⁶ The role of recording technologies in helping to both shape and problematise conceptions of the musical 'work' has been insightfully addressed in Michael Talbot's edited volume *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention* (Liverpool, 2000).

⁸⁷ Frith, S. (1992) p. 60

⁸⁸ Talbot, M. "Introduction" in M. Talbot (ed.) *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention*. (Liverpool, 2000).

still do not make the ‘music itself’ any easier to analyse or study, and nor do they render music’s peculiar phenomenology any more stable. On the contrary, as further developments in sound recording and (re)production technologies have made it possible to construct musical performances out of “numerous, quite separate events, happening at different times and, increasingly, in different studios”, it means that when it comes to contemporary musical mediums such as records or CDs, we are talking about musical events that not only “never existed... in a single time and place”, but events that “never *could* exist”.⁸⁹ As Simon Reynolds writes: “What a record documents is not an event, but a phantasm constructed out of different takes. It never ‘happened.’ Sampling takes the fictitious nature of recording even further, creating events that never could have happened.”⁹⁰ This, in turn, requires an analytical approach to popular music which not only attends to the specificities of music as ‘music’, music as ‘song’, or even music as ‘performance’, but rather with music as a *recorded event*.

It is precisely in this respect that I have found work conducted in the area of ‘auditory cultures’, ‘acoustemology’ and ‘sound studies’ to be extremely useful, particularly insofar as it enables an approach to recorded music which deals not only with the structural complexities of the popular ‘song’, but also with the use of music and sound over the course of an album as a ‘whole’. Indeed, I find it surprising that while the study of ‘soundscapes’ and ‘auditory cultures’ has gathered momentum during approximately the same period as the burgeoning field of popular music studies, thus far they have not really interacted all that much. This may owe, in part, to the traditional emphasis within much of this research on exploring the role of sound in shaping and mapping out ‘actual’ spatial environments and geographical landscapes. However, as suggested above, I have found that the research in this area has a strong resonance in helping to explore the use of sound and music on the albums which I have chosen to study here. Moreover, insofar as such work is concerned with contesting the dominance of visual-based epistemologies – not necessarily to replace them with aural-based epistemologies, but rather to “point to the equally crucial role that sound plays in our experience and understanding of the

⁸⁹ Frith, S. (1992) p. 62; and Frith, S. (1996) p. 211, italics added

⁹⁰ Simon Reynolds, quoted in Wershler-Henry, D. “O.G. Style: Ice-T/Jacques Derrida. A Carousel CD Recording Remixed by Darren Wershler-Henry for *Postmodern Apocalypse*” in R. Dellamora, (ed.) *Postmodern Apocalypse. Theory and Practice at the End*. (Philadelphia, 1995) p. 244

world”⁹¹ – I find it provides a useful way to critique both ‘literary’ and ‘classical’ models of the ‘text’/‘score’, as well as providing an opening into alternate modes of analysis particularly suited to the study of ‘albums’ rather than individual ‘songs’ as such.

This body of research – much of it spurred on by Murray Schafer’s seminal 1977 text on ‘soundscapes’, *The Tuning of the World*⁹² – is concerned with exploring the role of sound and hearing in shaping understandings of the relationship between self and environment. Anthropologist Steven Feld defines the study of ‘acoustemology’ – “a union of acoustics and epistemology” – as an investigation into “the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world.”⁹³ It is important to recognise that, like rock criticism, the study of ‘soundscapes’ and ‘auditory cultures’ does not represent a coherent, unified academic discipline; it is not defined by a singular impulse, but rather by a desire to open up questions concerning the contributions of the senses in shaping perceptions. As Michael Bull and Les Back state in their introduction to *Auditory Culture Reader*: “Contributors come from the fields of sociology, cultural studies, media studies, anthropology, cultural history, philosophy, urban geography and musicology... [J]ust as sound is no respecter of space, so sound studies transgress academic divisions.”⁹⁴ It is partly this interdisciplinary approach which makes sound studies so useful for an analysis of popular music – since the study of popular music has similarly taken an interdisciplinary approach. Moreover, through its emphasis on the interactive relationship between sound and hearing, it also opens up different ways of conceiving the role of the listener in the musical experience. As Feld writes:

Soundscapes, no less than landscapes, are not just physical exteriors, spatially surrounding or apart from human experience. Soundscapes are perceived and interpreted by human actors who attend to them as a way of making their place in and through the world. Soundscapes are invested with significance by those whose bodies and lives resonate with

⁹¹ Bull, L. & Back, L. ‘Introduction: Into Sound’ in L. Bull, & L. Back (ed.) *Auditory Culture Reader*. (Oxford, 2003) p. 3

⁹² Schafer, M. *Tuning of the World*. (New York, 1977)

⁹³ Feld, S. ‘A Rainforest Acoustemology’ in M. Bull, & L. Back (ed.) *Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2003) p. 226

⁹⁴ Bull, L. & Back, L. (2003) p. 3

them in social time and space. Like landscapes, they are as much psychological as physical phenomena, as much cultural constructs as material ones...⁹⁵

Furthermore, unlike musicology, which has its own well-established history (which many contemporary musicologists are keen to break away from), the study of auditory cultures is still in a relatively early stage of development, and I find that this has helped to invest the field with a sense of openness and flexibility which makes it especially appealing for further academic analyses of popular music.

More importantly, I believe that ‘Sound Studies’ may be particularly useful in the analysis of albums, insofar as it is concerned with the creation and interpretation of ‘sonic environments’, as it were, rather than ‘songs’ as such. As I will discuss further in the closing section of this introduction (as well as within the chapters that follow), all of the albums I have selected for analysis here make use of recurring sounds and noises, which serve to blur the boundary between where one song ends and the next begins, whilst simultaneously situating these songs within a specific sonic context. In each analysis I have therefore tried to foreground the way these artists use of the album format to create a ‘sound world’ – a world into which the listener enters when they press ‘play’ on their stereo (and which is incomplete without such participation on the part of the listener). In creating these kinds of idealised sonic environments, the albums studied here arguably lend themselves more readily to the modes of critique developed within ‘Sound Studies’ than they do to musicological critique – which, as suggested above, is generally concerned with the analysis of individual songs rather than with albums as a ‘whole’.

And yet, while albums lend themselves to studies of ‘soundscapes’, they also raise a number of issues and complications which are quite different from those created in ‘real’, physical environments. It is these issues and complications which are distinctive to the album format that I would like to address now.

PART II: ALBUM STUDIES

I mentioned earlier that my decision to focus exclusively on albums is possibly indicative of my own personal tastes and values – I am, it must be said, an ‘album-

⁹⁵ Feld, S. (2003) p. 226

person', specifically CDs. While my home stereo is limited, at this point, to a cheap DVD player (hardly the most effective playback apparatus), my CD collection, on the other hand, takes pride of place and is something I take great pleasure in maintaining and up-dating. I should also probably state up-front that while I do own, and use, an iPod, I have little interest in downloading music; I am not 'against' it for any reason, and I can understand how it appeals to others, but I personally like to *own* the whole 'package' of an album: the artwork, the lyrics booklet and liner notes, and above all the physical object itself (hence my somewhat fetishistic attachment to my CD collection). I am aware that my position on this is, perhaps, indicative of what increasingly appears to be a minority view, as albums and especially CDs are currently being superseded by what some suggest may be a return to the 'single format' enabled by music downloads and other digital modes of music consumption. However, it is also important to recognise that, thus far, they have not been outmoded completely, and while the compact-disc medium may wither into oblivion – or whatever 'limbo' awaits useless commodities – the album format will, I think, survive, if only through the established loyalty of others like myself.⁹⁶

Having said this, my decision to focus on albums is not entirely dictated by personal taste alone, and while my chosen medium of study may be in the process of being superseded by another, I do not think this automatically invalidates the project I have undertaken here. On the contrary, as I will discuss further throughout this chapter, in a sense it is new technologies which, in destabilising the taken-for-granted status of both album and CD (and it is important to recognise that these need not be the same thing), have helped to give the album a certain 'clarity', both literally and figuratively, that it might not have had a decade ago. Amidst such changes and developments, I think we have an opportune vantage point from which to consider the cultural and aesthetic significance of the album format within late-twentieth century popular music.

For the past fifty years, the album has provided the dominant format for popular music across a variety of genres and discourses – particularly rock – such that the particularities of the medium are often assumed as a given. Certainly within the sphere of rock criticism, the album format continues to provide the primary object of

⁹⁶ This reference to the 'limbo' awaiting useless cultural commodities is informed by Will Straw's discussion: "Music as Commodity and Material Culture" in *Repercussions* 7:8 (2002) p. 147-172

critique: it is taken-for-granted that the ‘reviews’ sections in most music magazines will be almost exclusively concerned with albums, and where other mediums are considered (such as concerts, DVDs or singles) they are generally specified as such and dealt with separately (and, for the most part, briefly). As Keir Keightley argues in her discussion of the “long-play [or LP] format” as the music industry’s “core commodity”, the album has not only enabled popular music to ascertain a ‘cultural capital’ on par with that of literature, but has also represented a source of ‘stability’ and ‘continuity’ – owing to both the loyalty of its fan base and its extended ‘shelf-life’ – within an industry which is otherwise renowned for its perceived instability and unpredictability.⁹⁷

Moreover, as Carys Wyn Jones demonstrates in her book *The Rock Canon: Canonic Values in the Reception of Rock Albums*, as well as representing the “core commodity” of the late-twentieth-century music industry, the album has also been integral to the creation of a popular music ‘canon’. Music magazines regularly feature ‘best album’ compilations (of a particular era or genre), along with feature interviews in which fans, musicians, critics and so on, discuss their own personal ‘canons’ (i.e. ‘The Records that Changed My Life’). There is also the ‘Classic Albums Series’ of documentaries in which each programme provides a “track-by-track look” at the making of a “classic album” (for example, Nirvana’s *Nevermind*, Lou Reed’s *Transformer*, Jimi Hendrix’ *Electric Ladyland*). A slightly different example is that of the ‘All Tomorrow’s Parties’ series of concerts in which bands and singers perform live a particular album in its entirety (The Lemonheads’ *It’s a Shame About Ray*, Teenage Fanclub’s *Bandwagonesque*, Sonic Youth’s *Daydream Nation* etc). In both cases the album serves as a means of establishing a ‘canon’, as well as serving to mark a definitive moment in a band or artist’s career, although of course they both operate according to very different logic and represent different kinds of ‘affective alliances’. The former, as the title suggests, is the more ‘serious’, ‘classic’ approach, whereas the latter is more a self-conscious exercise in mid-‘nineties ‘indie’ nostalgia.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Keightley, K. “Long-Play: Adult-Oriented Popular Music and the Temporal Logics of the Post-War Sound Recording Industry in the USA.” *Media Culture & Society* 26:3 (2004) p. 375-391

⁹⁸ This self-conscious nostalgia has been carried over into the recent spate of reunions of bands from that era – some of whom admit quite openly that they’re only doing it for the money (Lou Barlow from Dinosaur Jr., Frank Black/Black Francis from the Pixies).

A different example of the importance of the album format within popular music, this time taken from the field of literature, is the 33 1/3 series published by Continuum Press: a beautifully-packaged collection of pocket-size books, with each one taking as its subject a particular album – from the obviously ‘canonic’ (for instance, the Rolling Stones *Exile on Main Street*, the Beatles *Sgt Peppers*), to the more obscure and contemporary (PJ Harvey’s *Rid of Me*, the Beastie Boys’ *Paul’s Boutique*). The Continuum website features an excerpt from the *New York Times Book Review* which states: “It was only a matter of time before a clever publisher realized that there is an audience for whom *Exile on Main Street* or *Electric Ladyland* are as significant and worthy of study as *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Middlemarch*.”⁹⁹ While the formatting of the book prohibits the kind of referencing which is normally associated with academic writing, and there can often be a significant ‘jump’ in the style of writing from one book to the next – owing to the fact that each one is written by a different author – the series is notable for the wide variety of albums that it covers and its in-depth treatment of each album.

As the review quoted on the Continuum website suggests, the album has also been integral in establishing popular music as a ‘serious’ art-form – one as deserving of critical attention as the ‘great’ works of literature. The analogy with literature is pertinent here, for, as I will discuss further shortly, it was precisely by establishing an analogous relationship between books and albums that popular music was first able to ascertain a cultural status on par with ‘works of art’ and thus taken ‘seriously’ as a musical art-form. As Jon Stratton suggests:

[T]he legitimation of popular music as a cultural sphere equal to literature, or more recently, film, has taken place by way of the singling out of certain records for their unique qualities. LPs which spring to mind are *Music from Big Pink* (The Band), *Astral Weeks* (Van Morrison) and *The Clash*.¹⁰⁰

Similarly Carys Wyn Jones, in a chapter entitled “The Album as a Work of Art”, argues that a conception of rock as ‘art’ has been enabled precisely *through* the album format; as she writes:

⁹⁹ Anon. “Browse Series Titles – Continuum.” [Online] available at <http://www.continuumbooks.com/series/browse.aspx?SeriesId=2101> (accessed 08/02/10)

¹⁰⁰ Stratton, J. (1983) p. 145-146

In the field of rock music albums, far more than individual songs, have the potential to satisfy the criteria of ‘the work’... Not only are they ‘discrete, reproducible and attributable’, and can be attributed with ‘status, originality and “aura”’, but they are also relatively large-scale and complex, and organicism, unity, coherence, completeness and self-sufficiency can all potentially be located in these albums.¹⁰¹

And such a conception of the album as ‘work’ has, in turn, allowed popular bands and performers to be recognised as ‘artists’ – or perhaps rather ‘auteurs’. Indeed, while there is still some debate as to the appropriate nomenclature – ‘artist’? ‘author’? ‘auteur’? – Jones argues that “if the album-as-work is taken to be the ruling logic of values”, then popular musicians “can be described as poets or poetic; but what they are primarily is authors of albums. As such they have a strong identity within histories of rock.”¹⁰² ‘Heritage’ magazines will often feature articles in which musicians discuss their own back-catalogue in terms of the albums they have released (UK music magazines *Mojo* and *Uncut* are prime examples of this). The album has become the ‘serious’ musician’s medium of choice – and, as with so many aspects of the album’s cultural and commercial ascension, it is difficult to tell which came first: the ‘serious’ musician/auteur (thereby enabling a conception of the album as ‘art’), or the ‘serious’ album/art-work (thereby enabling a conception of the musician as ‘auteur’).

Given this centrality of the album to the various ways in which pop fans, critics and musicians construct meanings and values in music, it seems surprising that academic popular music theory has given the subject such little attention (although it may be that the very importance and value the album is accorded within popular music cultures is in fact be the reason *why* it has received so little attention). This is not to say that popular albums have never been studied or critiqued; on the contrary, there are plentiful examples both from within and outside the bounds of academic theory, many of which have, either directly or indirectly, influenced the project I have undertaken here. But the problem with many of these discussions is that the album format itself is simply taken for granted, in much the same way as the score might be taken for granted in classical musicology, or the novel in literary criticism (although it is arguably getting much harder these days to rely on assumed

¹⁰¹ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 42

¹⁰² Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 52

understandings of the score or the novel). As a result, there is little engagement with the particularities of the album format, or indeed the kinds of economic, technological and cultural circumstances which have helped to give it shape and definition and thus invest it with the significance it carries today.

Jones' book on *The Rock Canon*, which I discussed earlier and will return to throughout the sections that follow, is an excellent example of this. As the title suggests, the album – or at least, an idealised conception of what Jones calls “the album-as-work”¹⁰³ – is central to the book's thesis, as indeed it is, Jones argues, to rock music generally. Jones argues that “the idea and ideal of the album” has been integral to the formation of a distinct ‘rock aesthetic’ – as is made clear when Jones states in the introduction that “the word ‘rock’ will be employed throughout the book in its most general meaning in that it is defined primarily by the album (for the most part incorporating other terms such as rock ‘n’ roll, pop, folk-rock and so on).”¹⁰⁴ In taking such a stance, Jones not only accurately recognises the centrality of the album within discourses of popular music; she provides a fascinating study of its role in the creation of a ‘rock canon’. Yet at no stage does she deal in any real depth with the particularities of the album format itself – or indeed, define exactly what an album *is*. Instead, the book tends to rely on an assumption that readers will already share a common conception of what an ‘album’ is. As a result, the status of the album itself remains untheorised, and while by the end of her study the reader has a much a better understanding of how the album has enabled a conception of rock music as ‘art’, we are still no closer to understanding what an album actually is.

Jones' discussion of the album's role in processes of canon formation is an important contribution to a practically non-existent field, and has been a valuable resource in the writing of this thesis, but it seems to me that there are a range of questions and issues which need to be addressed regarding the specificity of the album – its status as a ‘work of art’ intrinsically tied to technological reproduction. In contrast, Dai Griffiths, in his discussion of Radiohead's 1997 album *OK Computer* (for Continuum's ‘33 1/3’ series, discussed above), begins by formulating a question which is, I believe, fundamental to any study of the album: “what is *OK*

¹⁰³ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 44

¹⁰⁴ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 2

Computer?” Griffiths suggests that such a question is deceptively straightforward, before going on to tease out the implications:

If you said, ‘it’s an album’ or ‘it’s a record’ or ‘it’s a CD’ or even ‘it’s just *music!*’ (ah, sweet!), what set of references were you implying? Imagine language has you locked in its prison and, however above these things you may consider yourself, all you’re doing is selecting a word which carries on its shoulders a distinct history. So the term you choose involves not only the history of the recorded album as it had developed by 1997, when *OK Computer* was issued, but its immediate past, and the longer past on record, but also, more speculatively, archetypes of musical form which may indeed transcend the fact that this happens to be a recorded album.¹⁰⁵

While Griffith’s phrasing here may be a little hyperbolic, it nonetheless serves to register a sense of the kinds of preliminary issues and questions that the album presents to critical analysis before one can even *begin* to consider the ‘music itself’. Are we dealing with a piece of music? A work of art? A techno-cultural artefact? A commodity? What are the conditions of its existence – how did it come to be? How does each of the mediums through which the album format is produced and consumed change our understanding of the ‘music itself’? And how is it that a medium which was originally designed for the recording and preservation of classical music has become the ‘core commodity’ within popular music cultures of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries?

I do not claim to answer *all* these questions here, however I do think it is necessary to map out *some* of the key issues, since these have not been adequately dealt with in any of the existing writings on popular music. As Griffiths points out, there is as yet no disciplinary field known as ‘album studies’, and while Griffiths’ remark is made half-facetiously, it is nonetheless apparent that something of the sort is needed if we are to try and really understand the role of the album format within discourses of popular music. Unfortunately Griffiths himself for the most part elects to leave these questions where he found them, in the opening pages of his book, but by raising them there it at least helps to give some idea of the instability and uncertainty at the heart of the album – an instability and uncertainty which is, in many ways, *built into* the album, irrespective of its particular musical or lyrical details. Therefore I would like to begin by attempting to *define* the ‘album’.

¹⁰⁵ Griffiths, D. *OK Computer* (New York, London, 2007) p. 2

Defining the Album:

I will be using the term ‘album’ to designate a particular format for popular music: a format which was complicit with the development of the vinyl LP or ‘long-player’ record in the ‘fifties and ‘sixties, and with which the term is arguably still most closely allied, despite the fact that these days an ‘album’ can be used to refer to any number of technological artefacts (for instance, cassette, CD, music file). The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two definitions of ‘album’: first, as “a blank book in which photographs, stamps, or other items can be kept and displayed”; and second, as “a collection of musical recordings issued as a single item.”¹⁰⁶ While obviously it is the latter definition which applies to the items under discussion here, the analogy with the photograph or stamp album is suggestive, in that in both instances, the ‘album’ provides a format for the preservation and display of ‘records’ – whether visual or sonic. The analogy with the photograph album is also apparent in the term’s earliest usage, when it “originally referred to an empty, unmarked container that was purchased for storing assorted 78 rpm singles. The containers often featured blank spaces in which to write the names of songs and performers, reinforcing an early sense of the album as a personal collection (like a photograph album).”¹⁰⁷ It is an analogy that remains resonant today, and I will come back to it in the closing section of this introduction.

It is possible, at least in theory, to formulate a distinction between the ‘album’, as a kind of ‘ideal’ or ‘concept’, and its particular material manifestation, as ‘artefact’, for example vinyl, cassette, compact disc, and so on. In practice, of course, this distinction between the album as ‘ideal’ and the album as ‘artefact’ is far more difficult to make: the album depends, for its existence, on these specific material mediations, as is evidenced most obviously by the fact that it simply did *not* exist prior to the development of the LP (or ‘long-play’) record in 1948, and its survival will be contingent on further developments in both the ‘software’ and ‘hardware’ which enable its use. Moreover, each change or development in the particular material ‘form’ or ‘item’ of the album has effectively altered our conception of what

¹⁰⁶ *Oxford English Paperback Dictionary* (2006) p. 16

¹⁰⁷ Keir Keightley quoted in Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 3

an ‘album’ actually *is*, as for example in the transition from the LP-analogue model of the album to the CD-digital model – a transition I will discuss further at the end of this section.

At the same time, however, while the exact nature of the ‘item’ in question has undergone numerous transformations in the sixty years since the album first came to cultural prominence, thus far the *idea* of the ‘album’ itself has not been rendered obsolete. Indeed, the simple fact that I am now able to *choose* the ‘medium’ through which I will study the album format suggests that it is possible (if only in theory) to distinguish between the two. Therefore, whilst recognising the difficulties inherent in isolating the ‘album’ as an ‘idea’ or ‘concept’, from the particular form or ‘item’ that it takes, I think it might be useful to try to deal with each separately – looking first at the origins of the album as ‘artefact’, and the kinds of technological, economic and cultural conditions which enabled it to come into being in the first place, before moving on to consider the way the album has developed as a ‘concept’ or ‘ideal’.

The origins of the album format:

The album was (and is) first and foremost a technological artefact: it was borne of technology, its existence has been shaped by technology, and it will continue to depend on technology if it is to remain in existence. Both the album and its counterpart, the single, first came to public attention as distinct formats for music in the late 1940s, with Columbia issuing the 33 1/3 LP in 1948, and the 45 rpm single by RCA-Victor in 1949.¹⁰⁸ In its original form – as an LP or ‘long-player’ – the album, like the single, consisted of two ‘sides’: an A-side and a B-side (although of course this could be extended, in the case of double-albums). However, unlike the single, which generally held only one song per side, the LP could carry multiple songs, with each side capable of holding, on average, between twenty and twenty-five minutes of music, with a maximum of fifty minutes in total.¹⁰⁹ This differentiation in terms of their storage capacity and duration of playback helped to

¹⁰⁸ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 378

¹⁰⁹ Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 10

engender a distinction between the album and the single which has been crucial to the album's development as a distinct format for music.

Thus, as a technological artefact, the role or significance of the new LP format – particularly in contrast with the single – was initially perceived to lie in its basic functional capacity: namely, its ability to hold multiple songs, hence the name: 'long-player'. It allowed record companies to release several three-minute pop songs (whether by a single performer or 'various artists') in a single package. In economic terms, however, there soon emerged further points of differentiation between the album and the single – relating to their differing 'lifespans' as commodity items – and these were to be equally important to the evolving cultural status of each. In particular, it was found that the album had a much slower rate of turnover than singles, which meant that while initial sales might be low, many albums continued to sell long after their initial release. This was in contrast with the 'single', which not only carried a shorter amount of music, but was also perceived to have a more instantaneous and immediate commercial impact, after which its value (both cultural and economic) decreased far more rapidly. As Keightley writes:

One of the central themes of trade press writing about the LP in the 1950s is the contrast between the long-term sales stability of the market for albums versus the turbulent market swings associated with the selling of singles. This is crucially tied to the LP back catalogue, which emerges during this period as the slow-but-steady 'foundation' or 'backbone' of the record industry. The reliable sales and long 'shelf-life' of albums effectively moderate the risks of trying to create ephemeral hit singles, which, in practice, are more often 'misses' (and, which, even when they become 'hits', have a much shorter window of saleability than albums).¹¹⁰

Thus the album soon came to accrue greater value within the record industry as a means of counterbalancing "the ups and downs of the uncertain market for new releases, thereby ensuring long-term profitability."¹¹¹ This is what Keightley refers to as the "long-play logic" of the album, by which she means not only its "extended duration of musical playback", but also its lifespan as a commodity – the "temporal logic" of which, she argues, is characterised by "slow velocity sales over an

¹¹⁰ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 381

¹¹¹ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 381

extended period of time”.¹¹² That is, just as the actual playing time of the album extended well beyond that of the single, so too it went on to have a longer “shelf-life” than the single, both culturally and economically.

Part of the reason for the relative ‘stability’ of the album as compared to the single owed to the respective audiences of each. Both the album and the single were released at a time when the music industry was first beginning to organise its musical releases in terms of two clearly distinct markets: namely, the ‘adult’ or (to use industry parlance of the era) ‘long-hair’ market, and the newly emergent ‘teen’ market. The introduction of the LP and the single were not only complicit with this market segmentation, but actively facilitated it, as albums were explicitly marketed towards ‘adults’, while singles were predominantly geared towards the latter.

On one level at least, this distinction between “teen/single” and “adult/album” makes a certain amount of sense: albums would have been more expensive to produce and therefore more expensive to buy – according to a 1957 *Newsweek* breakdown, their pricing ranged from “\$1.49 to \$4.98”, compared with the “89-cent [singles] packages”¹¹³ – thereby restricting their audience to those with a higher income (which would likely have ruled out the average teenager of the time). Moreover, prior to the introduction of ‘Album-Oriented-Rock’ (or AOR) radio in the early-‘seventies, albums were primarily marketed via “store display and print advertising” – modes of advertising and promotion with a slower but longer-lasting impact and generally aimed at more ‘mature’ audiences.¹¹⁴ In contrast, the format of singles –the fact that they are substantially smaller and carry less music – made them well-suited for jukeboxes and radio-play, and because of their relative cheapness to produce they were released in much greater numbers, meaning that their promotion tended to be more “widespread and intense” than that of albums, before quickly tapering off.¹¹⁵

However, while on one level this “age-format stratification” might seem to appeal to common sense, it could very easily have been otherwise.¹¹⁶ As Keightley notes, singles were initially marketed “as a medium for classical music”, and it was only

¹¹² Keightley, K. (2004) p. 383

¹¹³ Keightly, K. (2004) p. 380

¹¹⁴ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 377

¹¹⁵ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 382

¹¹⁶ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 377

after they failed to attract an audience as such that they were rebranded as a vehicle for pop songs.¹¹⁷ More importantly, it is apparent that tied in with this early “bifurcation of the white mainstream into teen/single and adult/album segments” was a similar divergence in the genres of music associated with each, with the single predominantly “identified with teen pop”, while the album became the “medium” for “classical, jazz, Broadway musical scores, mood music” and “adult pop vocalists like Sinatra.”¹¹⁸ This, in turn, “contributed to a more complex kind of stratification”, whereby, largely through virtue of their associated music genres (and other associated values pertaining to these), the LP and the single were divided again – this time in terms of differing value-systems. As Keightley writes:

Because European art music and jazz (increasingly seen in the 1950s as ‘America’s classical music’) were grouped with adult pop via their shared format, the LP, it was increasingly possible to conceive of adult pop as itself a kind of ‘classical’ or bourgeois high art... By the late 1950s, it was clear that classical and adult pop were grouped together via LPs...¹¹⁹

It is here that the ‘adult/album’, ‘teen/single’ opposition starts to be structured “in terms of high/low discourses”, as the LP is invested with an elevated cultural status, largely due to its associations with ‘serious’ genres of music and a more ‘mature’ audience. This differentiation in terms of cultural capital is also evident in the analogy between albums and books, mentioned earlier, which developed at this time. As Simon Frith suggests, in its effort to identify and exploit the album’s “market potential”, “the record industry certainly looked to book publishing for guidance”, and Keightley similarly argues that one of the ways in which “the album’s cultural significance can be glimpsed” throughout the 1950s was in the way it was increasingly “seen to be related to the book, assembled in libraries, and respected as a repository of cultural tradition... in opposition to ‘commercial’ and ‘ephemeral’ teen pop.”¹²⁰ Like books, albums begin to be promoted as objects worth keeping – objects with enduring value – rather than simply the product of the latest musical trend.

¹¹⁷ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 377

¹¹⁸ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 377

¹¹⁹ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 378

¹²⁰ Frith, S. (1996) p. 33 & Keightley, K. (2004) p. 380

Complicit with this heightened “symbolic capital”¹²¹ for the album were changes in the kinds of listening practices and modes of behaviour normally associated with it – listening practices “more akin to the rarefied atmosphere of the high arts than that of noisy gigs or background music.”¹²² That is, just as the album came to ascertain a cultural status on par with works of literature – with audiences persuaded “to build a ‘library’ of recordings, to treat music-on-record as something to treasure and keep”¹²³ – so too the modes of behaviour associated with it evolved so that albums were increasingly conceived to be listened to in a similar manner as one might read a novel or watch a film. This is what Jones (following Barbara Herrnstein Smith), calls “canonical condition[s] of reception” – which is to say, the idealised conditions for the experience and appreciation of canonical works of art. As Jones writes: “The canonical condition of reception for literature is usually that of quiet, solitary, engrossed reading. For classical music similarly attentive listening is expected, often in the rarefied yet communal environment of the concert hall.”¹²⁴ And, despite the fact that such ‘conditions of reception’ were not commonly associated with popular music at this time, albums similarly began to be received in this way – particularly as developments in home stereo equipment made it possible for audiences to exercise ever-greater control over the listening experience and the recorded music event.

I will come back to the role of sound recording and reproduction technologies in enabling the album’s emergence as a ‘serious’ art-form shortly. Here I would like to point out that it appears that, practically from the very beginning, the distinction between the album and the single has been imbued with ideological and hierarchical connotations – many of which are still in play today, having been passed on from ‘adult pop’ to ‘youth rock’ via “their shared, core commodity form, the LP album”, despite the fact that the latter was itself predominantly classified as a ‘youth’ or ‘teen’ market.¹²⁵ Indeed, Keightley argues that it was precisely by adopting the ‘long-play logics’ of the LP-album first established with ‘adult pop’ that rock was able to emerge as a ‘serious’ art-form – positioned in contrast to ‘ephemeral’ teen

¹²¹ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 380

¹²² Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 46

¹²³ Frith, S. (1996) p. 33

¹²⁴ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 45

¹²⁵ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 376

pop, which continued to be exemplified, as it was in the ‘fifties, by the single. As Keightley writes:

The institution of the adult album simultaneously minimized risk, maximized profit for record labels and contributed to a heightened symbolic capital for LPs (which were more and more perceived to occupy a cultural space similar to that of books). Over time, the LP was positioned as a kind of anti-novelty, even at times anti-modern, and anti-mass, commodity. Albums were seen to participate less in the ephemeral fads associated with singles; albums were geared toward long-term sales. This is tied to the slower temporal logic of the LP (compared to that of the single) and its back catalogue, with the latter functioning as an economic ‘anchor’ or stabilizing ‘backbone’ for the labels. These factors contributed to a sense of cultural ‘heft’ associated with LPs, with the gravity of the cultural space occupied by albums deriving in part from their length of time ‘in play’, both culturally and industrially.¹²⁶

However, lest it should appear that the album arrived ready-made for “cultural sacrilization”, it is also important to recognise that while many of the ideas and values which are now associated with the album were already in play prior to the emergence of rock in the mid-1960s, there was still little sense at this time of the album as a discrete entity with its own distinct identity as an ‘art-form’. Rather, it was primarily, to quote once again from the definition provided by the *OED*: “a collection of musical recordings issued as a single item”. It was not until the 1960s, when bands and producers began experimenting with the album format – employing it as a medium for an extended exploration of ‘serious’ themes and ideas – that the album came to be conceived as an ‘art-form’. Therefore what I aim to do now is explore the shifting cultural status and definition of the album – the way in which it accrued greater meaning and significance – throughout the 1960s, so that by the decade’s end, it has come to be “associated with ideas of complexity”, rather than “*merely* a collection of songs”.¹²⁷

The Concept Album:

¹²⁶ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 385-386

¹²⁷ Keightley quoted in Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 7; italics added

Arguably the most formative instance in the album's development as an 'art-form', the 'concept album' was a 'type' of album popularised in the late-'sixties and early-'seventies, in which the sequencing of songs throughout the course of an entire LP could be used to play out an extended series of 'stories' or 'themes', creating an idea of the album as "a self-contained world".¹²⁸ There is some disagreement regarding the *first* concept album, although the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (1966) and the Beatles' *Sergeant Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club* (1967) are often cited as progenitors of the form. As Simon Frith writes: "The emergence of rock as art was symbolized by the Beatles' self-conscious studio artefact, *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club*"¹²⁹ (and elsewhere: "The Beatles' 'Sergeant Peppers' LP symbolized the moment when rock musicians began to claim to be making complex artworks.")¹³⁰ Griffiths similarly argues that "If we talk of 'pop music' as a self-contained world, the Beatles *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club* (1967) functioned as the archetype of the unified record."¹³¹ Of *Pet Sounds*, Jones observes:

The general perception ... is that before *Pet Sounds*, albums 'consisted of hit singles surrounded by obvious filler', and therefore 'Pet Sounds was a giant step towards artistic freedom in the name of rock 'n' roll.' Kingsley Abbott even suggests that 'the use of the word "album" can be dated from the conceptual approach [Brian Wilson] introduced' with the recording of *Pet Sounds*.¹³²

Other instances of well-known concept albums include the Who (*Tommy*, *Quadrophenia*), Elton John (*Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*) and his oft-collaborator [*CHECK!*] Bernie Taupin (*Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*), and, later, Pink Floyd (*The Wall*, *Dark Side of the Moon*). The latter album – *Dark Side of the Moon*, originally released in 1973 (and "the longest-lived and best-selling catalogue album of all time")¹³³ – returned to headlines in early 2010, after the band took legal action against their record label, EMI, to block the release of individual songs from the album on iTunes. The case appeared to hinge on whether or not the band's earlier contract with EMI, renegotiated in 1999, well before the invention of

¹²⁸ Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 22

¹²⁹ Frith, S. (1992) p. 62

¹³⁰ Frith, S. (1985) p. 271

¹³¹ Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 17

¹³² Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 44

¹³³ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 384

iTunes, “applied to both physical albums and internet sales”,¹³⁴ a technicality which raises a raft of complex issues regarding the album’s shifting status within an era of digital technologies, as I will discuss further in the section below.

Nowadays the notion of the concept album is often regarded with suspicion – having accrued “negative connotations of excess and (now embarrassing) artistic pretensions”¹³⁵ – and bands and artists will take great care to distance themselves from the term. However, as Jones suggests, many of the features which are now considered integral to conceptions of the album were originally “associated with the idea of the ‘concept album’ that arose from the late 1960s onwards. The term... was first applied to albums that were a cohesive whole; only later did it accrue negative connotations of excess and (now embarrassing) artistic pretensions.”¹³⁶ In particular, I would argue that the concept album distinguished itself through its innovative approach to the album format itself – it helped to formulate an idea of the album *as* ‘concept’ – and *this* is its contribution to contemporary popular music.

The concept album constructed an idea of the pop record as a form with its own internal ‘unity’ and ‘coherence’ – a ‘self-contained entity’ – capable of mediating an extended exploration of complex themes and issues; as Keir Keightley writes: “More than merely a collection of songs, the album here is associated with ideas of complexity.”¹³⁷ It achieved this not so much through its central conceit – arguably not its strongest feature: even Pete Townshend, the ‘author’ of *Tommy*, admitted he had trouble following the ‘plot’ – but rather through its attempt to realise and define the peculiarities and potential of the 12” vinyl-format as a *whole*, rather than simply as a vehicle for multiple three-minute songs. There is some sense of an overall ‘design’, which encompasses not only the music and lyrics, but also the track-listing and production aesthetic, the cover artwork and album packaging (which help to ‘naturalize’ “our sense of a given album as distinct, coherent and generally inviolable”), and even the listener at home (what Straw characterises as a “model of

¹³⁴ A.P. “Pink Floyd Beats EMI in iTunes case.” *The Age*. (March 12, 2010) [Online] available at <http://www.theage.com.au/technology/technology-news/pink-floyd-beats-emi-in-itunes-case-20100312-q326.html> (accessed 09/04/2010) paragraph 2

¹³⁵ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 43-44

¹³⁶ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 43-44

¹³⁷ Keightley quoted in Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 7

home-based contemplative listening” “which first took shape around the vinyl LP”).¹³⁸

The significance of the concept album to contemporary understandings of the album owes to the way it facilitated new ways of thinking about the pop record as both a cultural *and* technological artefact. As Brian Wilson states of *Pet Sounds*: “It wasn’t really a *song* concept album, or *lyrically* a concept album: it was really a *production* concept album’.”¹³⁹ As Wilson’s description of *Pet Sounds* suggests, one of the definitive features of the concept album was its sophisticated use of ‘new’ post-production technologies such as ‘multi-tracking’ and ‘stereo imaging’. This emphasis on the post-production stages of recording began with the invention of magnetic tape, which allowed producers to “cut and splice, edit the best bits of performances together, cut out the mistakes, make records of ideal, not real events”.¹⁴⁰ Added to this were innovations such as multi-tracking – which “enabled sounds to be stored separately on the same tape and altered in relationship to each other in the final mixing stage”¹⁴¹ – and stereo imaging – which allowed these sounds to be distributed across the ‘stereo field’ in such a way that they created a sense of height and depth, a space which seemed to exist within the recording itself, as it were.

Such technical innovations opened up a raft of new opportunities in the studio, as for the first time bands and producers stopped using ‘live’ performance as the blueprint for recorded music, and the recording became, rather, entirely artificially-staged – the “records of ideal, not real events”.¹⁴² As Frith writes: “Recording perfection ceased to refer to a specific performance (a *faithful* sound) and came to refer... to a constructed performance (an *ideal* sound). The ‘original’, in short, ceased to be an event and became an idea.”¹⁴³ And it was in this way that, freed from the obligation to refer to any ‘actual’ performance outside of itself, the album was pioneered as a piece of technological wizardry – a “self-conscious studio artefact” – whereby the act of mixing and mastering became just as important in creating the final ‘work’ or ‘product’ as the performances of the musicians themselves. As such, it is

¹³⁸ Straw, W. (2009) p. 86

¹³⁹ Wilson quoted in Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 44

¹⁴⁰ Frith, S. (1992) p. 61

¹⁴¹ Frith, S. (1992) p. 61-62

¹⁴² Frith, S. (1992) p. 61

¹⁴³ Frith, S. (1996) p. 235

unsurprising that this was linked to a shift in the role of the sound engineer or producer, who now begins to be conceived less as a ‘technician’ than as an ‘artist’ or ‘auteur’.¹⁴⁴

Such developments were complicit with similar innovations taking place in the manufacture of home stereo equipment, which not only improved the overall quality (or ‘purity’) of recorded sound (‘hi-fi’), but also allowed listeners to exercise ever-greater control over the recorded musical event – which is to say, the event that takes place in the listener’s home. The elimination of background noise and a heightened clarity of sound, combined with the use of stereo imaging, all helped to foster a new sense of authority in recordings – the idea of the record as the definitive musical ‘text’. This was to be integral in the formulation of the album as ‘ideal’; as Aden Evens observes, thanks to technology, “[s]uddenly it became possible to isolate and control the musical work of art, to identify something as a work, and to represent it to oneself under conditions of one’s choosing.”¹⁴⁵ Indeed, Evens goes so far as to argue that “the piece of music [only] becomes an artwork in the age of technology” – and while I am not sure I agree with the logic of Evens’ argument here – unless he is referring to popular music, it would be hard to ignore the role of the score two centuries earlier – it is certainly true that sound reproduction technologies have allowed the pop recording to assume an ‘idealised’ status, not unlike that provided by the score within classical music.

This in turn placed a new emphasis on the role of the listener at home, as pop audiences became accustomed to thinking of the album, not as a simulation or ‘authentic reproduction’ of a ‘real’ performance, but as the vehicle for the production of “*ideal* listening event”. As Frith writes:

The increasing ‘purity’ of recorded sound – no extraneous or accidental noises – is the mark of its artificiality. Prewar records were always heard as a more or less crackly mediation between listeners and actual musical events; their musical qualities depended on the

¹⁴⁴ And, as Jones demonstrates, it has become increasingly important for performers themselves, especially solo artists, to be perceived as producers themselves, as a means of retaining ‘creative autonomy’. Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 36-37

¹⁴⁵ Evens, A. (2005) p. 8-9

listeners' own imaginations. To modern listeners these old discs (and particularly classical 78s) are 'unlistenable' – we're used to treating albums as musical events as themselves.¹⁴⁶

Thus, at the same time as sound recording technologies were severing the ties between the 'original' and the 'record' – moving away from the 'authentic' reproduction of an 'actual' music event in favour of creating "an *ideal* sound" – developments in sound *reproduction* technologies were staging a similar manoeuvre, moving away from an idea of the home recording as an inferior reproduction of a 'live' musical event, in favour of an 'ideal' event.¹⁴⁷

This is what Will Straw characterises as "a vinyl-based model of home-based contemplative listening"¹⁴⁸ – a model "which imagined domestic environments designed for a perfectly controlled experience of music".¹⁴⁹ And, as Straw also argues, an important aspect in the creation of this "ideal listening event" was the album's 'paratexts' – "the annotations, bindings, images and written commentary meant to enclose and illuminate the music recording."¹⁵⁰ The album's artwork and packaging, sleeve design and fold-out, all helped to promote an idea of the album as something to be listened to and handled in the same way that one might read a novel or watch a film – a model of 'contemplative listening'. Indeed, as Straw's appropriation of the literary notion of the 'paratext' suggests, the album itself becomes a kind of book: with a front cover and a back cover, which can be opened up; a 'precious object', to be treasured and filed with their spines showing the title and band name. As Straw observes: "These paratexts imply a particular form of ideal listening event, in which a listener would pore slowly through the accompanying booklet while a musical work unfolded, each illuminating the other within a necessary interconnection."¹⁵¹ Even the fact that the record itself is inserted into a sleeve implies a tender touch – an object to be protected and handled with care.

These paratextual features also served to reinforce a sense of the album as a 'self-contained whole'; as Jones writes:

¹⁴⁶ Frith, S. (1992) p. 60

¹⁴⁷ Straw, W. "In Memoriam: The Music CD and its Ends." *Design and Culture*. 1:1 (2009) p. 86; italics added

¹⁴⁸ Straw, W. (2009) p. 86

¹⁴⁹ Straw, W. (2009) p. 86

¹⁵⁰ Straw, W. (2009) p. 86

¹⁵¹ Straw, W. (2009) p. 86

The album works particularly well as a discrete work since it not only presents a single frozen performance of the music, but is also encased in deliberately memorable and individualized cover artwork. This was especially true in the 1960s and 1970s when albums would first arrive in 12-inch vinyl, and its impact has diminished somewhat with the shrinking of the record to CD. Each album cover conveys a message that contributes to the meaning of the work. ... Such cover images are now iconic in their own right, adding a visual dimension to the album that increases its ability to become a discretely individual artefact.¹⁵²

I dislike Jones' description of albums as presenting "a single frozen performance of the music" – it is misleading, in much the same way as Walser and McClary's designation of the record as offering "the thing itself" had the potential to be misleading. It makes the recorded music event sound static and uncomplicated, which it certainly is not. And it is this instability that I would like to move on to discuss now.

The Album as a 'Work of Art' in an Age of Digital Reproduction:

As we have seen, the idealised conception of the album as a 'work of art' can be traced to the mid/late-1960s. What does this 'ideal' album consist of? What are its defining attributes or properties? In a chapter entitled "The Album as Work of Art", Jones describes the "ideal album" as it has been formulated since the 'sixties as:

...an album that is a coherent body of work as a whole (not singles with 'filler'), that possesses the canonical criteria of originality, complexity and truth and that is associated with an autonomous artist/genius. This idealized 'canonical' album demands repeated listening and can sustain multiple interpretations, has withstood the test of time and influenced subsequent albums, but it is also complete in itself, forming an object of endless study and value.¹⁵³

As this no doubt suggests, this 'ideal album' is one which is very much informed by 'high' art theories and practices – to such an extent that, if one ignores the fleeting references to listening (substituting 'reading' or 'viewing') and "singles with fillers", Jones could be describing a novel or a poem, a play or a film, a sculpture or

¹⁵² Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 45

¹⁵³ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 42

painting. In short, any other kind of canonical ‘work’. And, as several theorists have discussed – most notably Simon Frith and Howard Horn in *Art Into Pop*, their seminal study of the ‘art-school influence’ on British popular music from the ‘fifties onwards – this was complicit with the maturation of a generation of rock musicians, audiences and critics who were often university educated and, therefore, more fully cognizant of ‘high’ art/cultural theories and debates.¹⁵⁴

Jones’ description of the ‘ideal’ album also says nothing of the various different forms that the album can take – record, cassette, CD, music file. Indeed, it appears that such an idealised conception of the album can be identified and defined with no mention whatsoever of the particularities of its form. Such an approach is typical of writings on the album in general – within both popular and academic discourses – which tend to treat the album as though it exists *apart* from its particular material and technological manifestation. And in a way, it does – as is evidenced by the fact that the album has managed to outlive the demise of vinyl, and may well be in the process of outliving the CD, which is currently in a state of cultural and commercial decline (a decline which Straw charts so well in his essay “In Memoriam: The Music CD and its Ends”).¹⁵⁵ The transposition of the ‘vinyl-based model’ of the album to CD could not have occurred unless it was possible, in principle, to distinguish the ‘album’ from the LP. To put it simply, if the album was intrinsically bound to the LP-format it could not have made the transition; rather, it would have been stuck as an LP, and suffered the same fate – becoming a curiosity or relic, still valuable but available only through second-hand dealers and specialist outlets.

Thus, in being attributed with an ‘ideal’ existence, the album has been able to survive multiple transformations – from LP to cassette to CD to iPod. And as the Pink Floyd case, cited earlier, demonstrates, this idea that an album has an ‘ideal’ existence, apart from its particular manifestation, now has legal precedent; as the judge pronounced in his ruling: “There is nothing in the terms ‘album’ or ‘record’ to suggest they apply to the physical product only.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, one might plausibly wonder whether the material form of music is entirely superfluous within the

¹⁵⁴ Frith, S. & Horn, H. *Art into Pop*. (London, New York, 1987).

¹⁵⁵ Straw, W. (2009) p. 79-92

¹⁵⁶ McGregor, N. “Pink Floyd Shows iTunes Concept the Dark Side of the Moon.” *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law*. (*JETLawBlog*. March 15, 2010) [Online] available at <http://jetl.wordpress.com/2010/03/15/pink-floyd-shows-itunes-concept-the-dark-side-of-the-moon> (accessed 09/04/2010) paragraph 5

contemporary context of ‘digital downloads’ and ‘virtual tracks’ – in which entire libraries of albums can be stored on an item the size of a thumb-drive.

But then, this raises the question: is an album which has been saved as a ‘music file’ an ‘album’, in the traditional and ‘idealised’ sense of the term described by Jones above, or is it something else? At what point does an album cease to be an ‘album’ and become ‘something else’? What makes an album an ‘album’? And what exactly *is* this ‘something else’ which the ‘album’ is not, but could be? [The album is defined in opposition to ‘singles’ – and their album-length corollary, ‘singles with filler’ (or the ‘various hits’ compilation album).]

Indeed, one of the things I find fascinating about the album is that its exact form cannot be taken for granted – it is continually evolving and changing shape. How many other art-forms – aside from perhaps film – can you say that of? And each of these manifestations presents its own specific version of the ‘album’, such that every change or development in the particular material ‘form’ the album takes has effectively altered our understanding of what an ‘album’ actually *is*. This can be seen in the transition from the ‘vinyl-based model’ of the LP to the digital-model of the CD; a transition which not only enabled a far greater amount of music to be stored within one (much smaller) item, but also, in its elimination of the ‘side’ enabled a much longer period of *uninterrupted* listening – what Griffiths describes as a “continuous stream of music”.¹⁵⁷ And our conception of the album has evolved accordingly. Griffiths cites the Dire Straights’ *Brothers in Arms* album, in particular, as an exemplary instance of the CD-based model of the album when it was first introduced – one which made use of the CD format itself to pioneer a *new* kind of album.¹⁵⁸

Thus, to say that the ‘album’ is capable of existing as different forms – and often *several* different forms *at once* – is not necessarily to say that it exists independently of such forms. The album as ‘ideal’ cannot exist without some form of technological or material manifestation – it requires *some* kind of ‘form’. This is apparent on the

¹⁵⁷ Griffiths: “Clearly, the CD album expanded the available duration from 40-50 minutes max to about 74 minutes (an additional 50 per cent), though its other feature – the eradication of the ‘side’ – meant a huge increase in continuous music, from 25-74 minutes (an additional 200 per cent!).” Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 8

¹⁵⁸ Griffiths goes so far as to call it the “*Brothers in Arms* phenomenon”, of which he writes: “This was, evidently, the record which showed off your new gadget, the CD player, notably the great, ‘air-guitar’ entry in ‘Money for Nothing’.” Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 9

most basic level – as Jones suggests, in order “to physically survive through time”, the album “must therefore either be physically durable or set in a form that is easily and faithfully reproducible”.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, it is also apparent that the album requires some kind of ‘form’ if it is to remain an ‘album’ and not just ‘a collection of songs’. All the defining features of the ‘ideal album’ as described by Jones above – ‘unity’, ‘coherence’, ‘structure’ and so on – imply a sense of shapeliness and boundaries: a definiteness of form. These are its defining features because without them it would not be an ‘album’, just ‘a collection of songs’. The album *is* shape – or rather, it is shape imposed onto shapelessness.

To return to the Pink Floyd case, it is here that the use of the term ‘unbundled’ takes on an added resonance, as this is precisely what online media like iTunes threaten to do to the album – to pull it apart and corrupt its integrity and autonomy. The word ‘unbundled’ recurs frequently throughout press reports on the case, as did references to ‘artistic integrity’ – suggesting that what was at stake here was not just the material form of the album, but its autonomy, as a ‘self-contained entity’. Of course, the band was not opposed to the online sale of the album as such; rather, what they opposed was the form – or lack thereof – it was being sold in. The point was that the songs on the album were not intended to function individually as ‘songs’, but rather as parts of a greater ‘whole’; therefore, to release the songs individually – to have the album ‘unbundled’ – was to corrupt the ‘integrity’ of the album as a ‘self-contained entity’ or ‘whole’. (Evidently such an idea of ‘integrity’ was not damaged at all by the fact that the band actually stood to make more money by taking their stance.) The case can be interpreted as an attempt to reinstate the boundaries and integrity of the album against the potential formlessness of cyberspace.

When the band took their record label to court to prohibit the release of individual songs from their landmark album, *Dark Side in the Moon*, the case was heralded in the press as a ‘victory’ for album fans against the propulsions of technological ‘progress’. As *The Age* tag-line proclaimed: “Album lovers may rejoice a little at last: a British court says Pink Floyd, purveyor of iTunes-unfriendly concept records, cannot be unbundled.”¹⁶⁰ The case appeared to hinge on a technicality, as to whether the use of the term ‘album’ in the band’s revised contract (written in 1999, “long

¹⁵⁹ Jones, C. W. (2008) p. 67

¹⁶⁰ A.P. (2010) paragraph 1

before iTunes even existed”) “covered only physical media and did not extent to the Internet.”¹⁶¹ And yet, if this is an argument *for* the continuing relevance of “the idea and ideal of the album” in an era of digital downloads and ‘virtual tracks’, it does not look promising. And if multimillion dollar law suits are the only way, at present, to combat the threat of ‘miscellany’ and preserve the album’s authority, then the future for the ‘album’ as a ‘self-contained entity’ looks very dire indeed.

Thus, far from asserting the continuing value and significance of the album within the current context, what the Pink Floyd case actually highlights is its fragility (especially when deprived of material form). Separated from the solid specificity of the vinyl form, the album has become increasingly fluid and permeable. First there were cassettes, which were more durable and easily manipulable than vinyl, and as such were well-suited to ‘mobile’ listening – which is to say, music to be listened to ‘on the move’, outside the home, in the car or on public transport. Hence the proliferation of mobile playback devices such as the Walkman and car stereo throughout the ‘seventies and ‘eighties. And, as Straw argues, while the CD initially appeared to offer a heightened version of the “vinyl-based model” of the album – “conceived as a precious form combining music, imagery and textual annotation” – the very qualities which made CDs appear so valuable in the first place – its “increased storage capacity” and “light portability” – have made its status even more precarious.¹⁶² As Straw continues:

As it moved out of domestic space... the CD lost its integrity as an artifact. More than cassettes, CDs were easily removed from their packages, arranged in binders, stacked in carrier cases, and flipped through by automobile drivers or joggers in moments of selection... More and more, a CD’s jewel box and booklets remained at home, like the instruction manuals for digital watches or cell phones, in neglected collections of uncertain status and weakened paratextual usefulness. ... Any sense of the CD as a complex package, fully meaningful only through the interaction of music and its annotative accompaniments, withered.¹⁶³

At the same time, CD playback functions such as ‘skip’, ‘shuffle’ and ‘program’, were also allowing listeners to take liberties with the album in hitherto unforeseen

¹⁶¹ McGregor, N. (2010) paragraph 4

¹⁶² Straw, W. (2009) 80-82

¹⁶³ Straw, W. (2009) p. 87

ways – to programme the album out of sequence, to listen to particular songs on repeat, or to hear the album played at random. And, as Griffiths suggests, such functions raise the question as to whether one “can continue to speak of the CD album as a pre-programmed entity”.¹⁶⁴

On the other hand, Griffiths also suggests that with the increasingly user-oriented formatting enabled by contemporary digital sound recording and reproduction technologies, the concept of the album is, in a sense, again becoming more closely aligned with that of the photograph album: “It puts the emphasis of control of an album back on the listener. In a way, it takes the album back to the idea of the photograph album.”¹⁶⁵ This is consistent with one of the more intriguing arguments Griffiths makes – the idea that one of the defining features of the album as it has evolved over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is a “pull between the album as miscellany, a personalized invention (the photograph album), and something specially produced as a single thing”.¹⁶⁶ This idea of a tension or ‘pull’ between, on the one hand, ‘the album as miscellany’ – the ‘mixed tape’ or photograph album – and the album as ‘something specially produced [or issued] as a single thing’, on the other, is useful in dealing with the questions raised earlier, regarding what exactly it is that makes an album an ‘album’, and not ‘something else’. An ‘album’, in this conception, is not an abstract entity with its own internal ‘form’ and ‘coherence’; an album is ‘form’/‘unity’/‘coherence’/‘shape’ imposed against ‘miscellany’/‘chance’/‘arbitrariness’. It struggles against what it has the potential to become – namely, ‘a collection of musical recordings’.

Thus I would argue that it is not that the album is unbound to any particular form, but that its relationship to materiality is complex. This is the source of its instability – not just in the sense that its exact form cannot be taken for granted, but also because the album *needs* shape. Indeed, it is precisely the slipperiness of the relationship between the two – the fact that there is nothing intrinsic binding them together, but that one requires the other nonetheless – which is the source of both the album’s instability *and* its longevity. That is, it is the albums’ shape-shifting powers – its tenuous relationship to material form, the elasticity of its boundaries, and its

¹⁶⁴ Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 13

¹⁶⁵ Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 13

¹⁶⁶ Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 6-7

ability to mutate and adapt itself to new forms – which have enabled it to survive as long as it has. But it is also these very qualities, having enabled the album to outlast the lifecycle of vinyl, cassette, DAT, and now CD, which render it fluid and unstable, capable of permutation.

How long can the album survive in a realm where albums are no longer physical objects in space but sequences of binary digits – all 0s and 1s – stored as information in the hard drive of a computer? Keir Keightley has suggested that, with the advent of the internet and music downloading, the album is possibly now being surpassed in favour of a return to the ‘singles’ format as the dominant mode of popular musical production and consumption.¹⁶⁷ This may well be the case. And yet, it is interesting to note that while the album format is problematic, at best, within an age of digital reproduction, thus far it has not been phased out entirely. Indeed, to use the iPod example, these colourful slithers of plastic allow users to download/upload the feature artwork and packaging of their albums in a manner which simulates an actual CD collection – so that you can literally scroll through the albums like a personalised jukebox. The creation of ‘digital booklets’ to accompany USB music files also seems to suggest a lingering attachment to the album format – evidence perhaps of a continuing desire to think of music, not (only) as sequence of binary digits, but as a distinct entity, in which music, lyrics, visual arts and packaging all serve to engender the creation and appreciation of a singular musical ‘world’.

Therefore I would suggest that arguments regarding the supposed ‘death’ of the album are not so much as premature/incomplete – they simply do not take into account the complexity of the issue. That is, if we understand the album to be defined, not by ‘unity’ or ‘coherence’, but rather by the tension or ‘pull’ between ‘unity’ and ‘miscellany’, there is no reason why it cannot continue to adapt itself to new forms as they develop. The album has not been ‘corrupted’ by such developments; rather, the album itself is inherently corrupted. And it may well be this tension and instability inherent in the album which will ensure its survival, in one form or another, well into the twenty-first century.

¹⁶⁷ Keightley, K. (2004) p. 388

CONCLUSION:

The discussions of the albums which feature in the chapters that follow are not ‘reviews’, and nor am I simply trying to ‘describe’ them – to ‘translate’ them into words. (That is a danger when writing about music – not to mention very boring to read). I am also wary of the term ‘interpretation’, insofar as that can either veer into description, or be so subjective that its links to the musical ‘text’ become tenuous. In this respect, at least, I am, like Lawrence Grossberg, “committed” to “the detour through theory”, which is to say, to the development of a critical apparatus – a “vocabulary”, “concepts” and “a logic by which they can be related” – adequate to the task of facilitating a “*better understanding*” of popular music. That is, Grossberg argues that before you can begin to “describe” or “interpret” popular music, you need a “vocabulary”, and at this level [perhaps] ‘abstraction’ is a necessary part of the process. As Grossberg writes:

[A]n understanding and analysis of popular music demands more than either empirical description and/or interpretation; at the very least, it requires theoretical work, and a vocabulary in which one can begin to describe what is the same and what is different (between popular-musical and other cultural apparatuses, and among popular-musical apparatuses themselves), what is changing and what is not. That is, as an academic at least, I am committed to what Marx called the ‘detour through theory,’ to the need to develop concepts (and a logic by which they can be related) that will enable one to redescribe and transform the empirically available world into something else, what Marx called ‘the concrete.’ Such theoretical concepts are, inevitably, abstractions, operating without all of the specific determinations that provide the density of everyday life.¹⁶⁸

What I am trying to do here *is* ‘analysis’, in Grossberg’s sense, in that it is not just aiming for “empirical description and/or interpretation” – it is also aiming towards a “*better understanding*” of popular music, specifically through the albums chosen here for study. However, this is also the point at which the projects envisioned by Grossberg and myself diverge, for what Grossberg means by ‘understanding’ and what I mean by ‘understanding’ are two very different things. A “*better understanding*”, in Grossberg’s case, refers to “the place and effects of popular

¹⁶⁸ Grossberg, L. “Same As It Ever Was? Rock Culture. Same As It Ever Was! Rock Theory” in K. Kelly & E. McDonnell (eds.) *Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*. (London, 1999) p. 105-106

music”, rather than to any quality of the “music itself”.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, the ‘music itself’ seems practically unknowable in Grossberg’s work; its particularities only useful in “the last instance”.¹⁷⁰ In contrast, I have tried, as far as possible, to use the albums themselves as my primary object of study, and to allow them to dictate their own terms of analysis – to suggest their own “detour through theory”.

This ‘detour through theory’ has taken in the idea of ‘the city’ in relation to Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*; the ‘apocalyptic theme’ and Tom Waits’ *Bone Machine*; and the human voice on Bjork’s *Medulla* – in each case exploring the way in which theories and concepts appropriated from other disciplinary fields and art-forms might be brought to bear on a particular album, and to be illuminated themselves in the process.

I am, in a sense, making it up as I go along. This has been partly a matter of necessity – owing to the absence of an ‘available model’, as I have already discussed. However, it has also developed in response to what I perceive to be a tendency within academic analyses of popular music to use musical ‘texts’ in order to prove a particular brand of theory – a practice which is, thankfully, less common these days.¹⁷¹ And while this has been an incredibly exciting process, often yielding unexpected and novel results, it is not an exact science and trial-and-error has ultimately played a part in determining how my analyses would progress. For example, in the early stages of working on my second chapter I spent four months writing on an album (*Henry’s Dream* by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds) which eventually proved unsuitable for the kind of analysis I was trying to undertake. I started writing with certain assumptions which, it turned out, I could not back up; the connection between theory and music would not hold, and no particularly innovative insights were forged. As much as this experience was frustrating, it was also extremely valuable, as it helped me to clarify both my argument and methodology – not only how I planned to approach the analysis of each album, but also why I have chosen to work with these particular themes and ideas, what it is that makes popular albums distinctive from other kinds of cultural ‘texts’ (books,

¹⁶⁹ Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 106

¹⁷⁰ Grossberg, L. (1999) footnote 2, p. 119

¹⁷¹ On this point, again, Grossberg and myself are in agreement; as Grossberg writes of “empirical” research: “it is often strangely content to rediscover what we already knew; in fact it is often strangely content to ‘discover’ what it has already presupposed... Rarely am I surprised; instead, my most common experience is that I have heard it before: been there, done that.” Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 105

films, poems etc), and my reasons for selecting certain artists and albums for analysis over others.

To begin by addressing the specific themes and ideas I have elected to discuss in relation to these albums, I have deliberately chosen those which have already been extensively explored within other cultural discourses, particularly literature. This owes partly to my own background in literary theory and cultural studies; however it has also provided an important means of broadening the framework through which popular music is heard and understood, thereby demonstrating the ways it enables *different* perspectives on these well-established themes and ideas. In doing so, my aim was not simply to apply these themes and ideas to the albums under discussion, regardless of whether or not they ‘fit’; and nor have I attempted to study the albums in terms of what I think the artist’s intentions might be. Rather, as suggested above, I have tried to take the albums themselves as the starting point, and for each one develop a mode of critique which, I feel, does justice to that particular album.

While it was unintentional, I realise now that I have also tended to draw most frequently on theorists whose work provides an unusual or innovative ‘take’ on these established themes – Jacques Derrida’s subversive formulation of the ‘apocalyptic tone’, Steven Connor’s inspired take on the ‘ventriloquial voice’, and Edward Soja’s conception of ‘cityspace’ – in each case allowing the albums’ ‘voices’ to mix with those of the theorists, providing yet another ‘take’ on what are already themselves reinterpretations of well-worn cultural themes and ideas.

As far as the albums themselves are concerned, I believe that all the albums I have chosen to study can be understood as making use of the album format in interesting ways – attending not only to the lyrical and musical content of the individual songs, but also to the ‘form’ of the album itself, its structure and production as a ‘whole’. On all of these albums there is the use of recurrent melodic and lyrical motifs, as well as distinctive sounds and noises, which help to ‘frame’ the individual songs, as it were, within a specific sonic context. However, at the same time as these recurrent motifs help to reinforce a sense of the album as a ‘self-contained world’ – providing a sonic/rhythmic ‘foundation’ which links the songs together (thus drawing attention to the album format as a whole) – they also serve to blur the boundary between where one song ends and the next begins, undermining the integrity and coherence

of the album as a ‘unified whole’. Thus the album format as a ‘whole’ is privileged and invested with coherence and continuity, at the same time as the individual songs themselves – as autonomous, discrete units (with clear beginnings and endings) – are undermined and compromised.

In each case, I would argue that what is highlighted is a sense of the album itself as an ‘emergent structure’ – a ‘work-in-progress’ rather than ‘finished’ or ‘completed piece’. That is, rather than presenting the listener with a set of discrete, completed, polished ‘songs’ – each with their own clear, concise beginnings and endings, moving forward in a linear progression, and so on – we are allowed to hear/witness the process through which incoherent and fragmentary sounds are made to cohere into ‘song’. In the words of Simon Frith: we are able to *hear* “the music *being assembled*”;¹⁷² in one way or another, all of the albums studied here can be understood as drawing attention to the album format and its processes of construction. Of course, this is not to suggest that this ‘process’ itself is not artfully constructed, or that the final ‘product’ – the album – has not been finished and polished, in its own way, well before the listener enters the scene. On the contrary, the ‘process’ to which I am referring here is one which is very much artificially-contrived – an aesthetic gesture rather than a ‘natural’ process (as is foregrounded by the fact that the fragmentary sounds and noises which throughout the album are far from ‘random or haphazard – that is, they are not just any sounds, but rather sounds which serve an aesthetic purpose or ‘agenda’).

Jay Bennet – the late guitarist and co-songwriter of Wilco who was ‘dropped’ during the making of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* – said of Wilco singer-songwriter Jeff Tweedy: “Jeff is a vinyl collector living in a CD age... He saw records in terms of how songs were sequenced and how they fit together”.¹⁷³ Bennett’s point is pertinent here in a couple of ways – firstly, because it makes reference to the ‘vinyl-based model’ of the album, and its continuing resonance within a contemporary context; and secondly, because he also calls attention to the way this model of the album is being displaced, through digital downloads, iTunes and so on. And this, in turn, raises another reason why I have chosen to study these albums: that is, I am interested in albums which help to draw attention, in different ways, to the problems and issues

¹⁷² Frith, S. (1996) p. 245

¹⁷³ Bennett quoted in Kot, G. (2004) p. 197

specific to popular music produced and consumed in this format. Earlier I discussed the kinds of complications which the CD presents to the ‘vinyl-based model’ of the album; as Griffiths writes:

If the CD album was... produced, invented even, against the background of the vinyl model, what did those models sound like? The basic issue, we’ve already seen, is unity against diversity, album as carefully ordered or conceptual unity against the principle of compilation (the photograph album).¹⁷⁴

And, as I have discussed above, the CD has served to heighten/exacerbate this tension or ‘pull’ of “unity against diversity”. This idea of the album as holding in tension the pull between ‘miscellany’ and ‘coherence’ is something that is explored on all of the albums discussed here.

The cover artwork and packaging is also an important aspect of these albums, for similar reasons to those cited above. That is, on the one hand, the cover artwork and album packaging helps to reinforce a sense of the album as a ‘self-contained world’. On the other hand, it also serves to situate the ‘music itself’ at the intersection of multiple discourses and media in a manner which effectively undermines the autonomy and authority of the album as a whole. Perhaps the best example of this is Bjork, who recently re-released her entire back catalogue as a series of multi-media packages, including music videos, extensive album packaging and visual artwork, surround sound DVD versions of the albums (many of which are designed to feature visual graphics while the music plays) and so on, such that the album itself is literally but one part of the overall package. And while Bjork may be the most obvious example of such ‘inter-mediality’, I would argue that all of the artists here are doing similarly interesting things with the album.

As this perhaps suggests, all of the albums I have selected for analysis here are ones which have been made by self-aware and conceptually-savvy artists – artists who make use of the album format, as well as the extra-musical discourses and media of popular music, in what I perceive to be innovative and interesting ways. They are also artists whose work arguably invites a more ‘serious’ analytical approach, of the kind normally reserved for literary theory or classical musicology. And in saying this I have to admit that it was not especially difficult to forge the initial links

¹⁷⁴ Griffiths, D. (2007) p. 17

between these particular albums and the ‘literary’ themes and ideas cited above. On the contrary, literary references and ‘high’ cultural allusions are littered throughout discussions of these artists in the popular media, often corroborated by statements made by the artists themselves. What has been more difficult, however, is substantiating these links in a manner appropriate to the rigorous scholarship required of a doctoral thesis – and here it has been necessary ‘dig deeper’, as it were, beyond the biography or intentions of the musicians themselves, in order to make these links ‘stick’. That is, it is one thing to pepper one’s talk with literary allusions; it is quite another thing to take these literary allusions as the basis for academic critique – and I hope the difference between the two will be evident in the chapters that follow.

I have also deliberately chosen to foreground the role played by the musicians, songwriters, and producers themselves. This was, in large part, a response to the way such players are generally treated within academic studies of popular music. Indeed, musicians often appear to be conceived in these writings as little more than hapless bystanders – by-products of the ‘mass communications’ industry. Their ‘voices’ are rarely heard, and one wonders: is it that they are not considered ‘legitimate’? This is a point raised by Frith and Horne, who take a similar stance to that which I have taken throughout this thesis, arguing:

[O]ur questions can only be answered by putting the musicians themselves at the centre of the pop process. Embedded in the high/mass cultural distinction is the assumption that while high art meaning is derived from the artists themselves – from their intentions, experience and genius – mass cultural meaning lies in its function (to make money/to reproduce the social order).¹⁷⁵

In contrast, they suggest that “populist version” of this argument “finds the positive meaning of mass culture not in its making but in its *use*” – an argument which is based on a similar assumption “that mass media exclude real creativity”.¹⁷⁶ This “populist version” states that:

[T]echnology/capital logic shapes mass culture which, in turn, provides people with particular sorts of ideological experience; there is no moment in this chain when artists have

¹⁷⁵ Frith, S. & Horne, H. (1987) p. 2; italics added

¹⁷⁶ Frith, S. & Horne, H. (1987) p. 2

the power to do anything but occasionally (Laurie Anderson) reveal contradictions. Our assumption, by contrast, is that people embedded in particular ideologies and experiences shape communication technologies and thus shape mass culture. This is not to deny the power of capital but to assert that, nevertheless, cultural producers can and do make significant decisions, can and do draw on ideas of what it is to be an artist. The best pop musicians respond to the ideological problems of their place in a commercial process and so make music that resonates for their listeners.¹⁷⁷

Thus, following Frith and Horne, I would argue that one can acknowledge that albums complicate the notion of the ‘author’, without necessarily disputing the fact that (most) albums *are* created by people, as much as they may be products of technological and economic imperatives.

It would certainly be possible to argue that while the approach which I have developed throughout this thesis works within the context of these particular albums and artists – ones already widely consecrated as intellectual – it is not one that applies so easily to, say, Christina Aguilera’s or Robbie Williams’s latest albums. This may well be true – I wouldn’t know since I have never tried to apply such an approach to albums by Robbie Williams or Christina Aguilera. And while this might sound a little disingenuous, it is apparent that there are already numerous academic studies of artists like Williams and Aguilera. All I can say in my defence is that I have not attempted – or claimed – to devise an approach which can be applied equally to *all* popular music. The assumption that popular music can only be studied in terms of its popularity – an assumption which appears to be based on the idea that ‘popular’ artists provide a more accurate indication of the pop music field as a whole, and are therefore more worthy of study – is ultimately limiting, and would sound ridiculous if one were to make a similar argument in relation to the field of literature or classical music.

I am aware that all this could sound somewhat hypothetical, at best, or calculated and contrived, at worst. As Grossberg writes: “How does one know what the relevant relations between texts or between texts and cultural practices are?”¹⁷⁸ There is no necessary or pre-existing connection between Tom Waits’ *Bone Machine* and Jacques Derrida, or between Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* and

¹⁷⁷ Frith, S. & Horne, N. (1985) p. 24-25

¹⁷⁸ Grossberg, L. (1999) p. 104

Edward Soja. On the other hand, I do not think I have simply ‘invented’ these points of intersection – any more than any theorist ‘invents’ connections that no-one before has noticed between seemingly disparate fields of enquiry. In any case, the whole point of these discussions is to broaden the context through which popular music is understood, and, hopefully, to initiate rather than foreclose further discussion – and I welcome anyone to offer a different interpretation.

“OF LOVE AND THE CITY”: WILCO’S *YANKEE HOTEL FOXTROT*

You could argue that pop is a metaphor for the city; certainly, that it is a continuation by other means of the urban mind... The simple fact is that pop is better on cities than it is on anything else, apart from love. It’s taught us to be intrigued by cities, to fear them, to face up to them.¹

In this chapter I wish to discuss the ways in which Wilco’s 2002 album, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* can be understood as bringing these twin themes – of love and the city – together. *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* – or *YHF* – is an album of love songs that explores the (im)possibility of communication within a postmodern cityscape in which ideas of ‘space’ and ‘distance’ are being transformed in many different ways. Images of the urban landscape as a locus of globalized information systems, consumer culture, and mass communication networks, recur throughout the album’s artwork, lyrics, and publicity – from the skyscrapers and city skylines depicted in the cover artwork and CD booklet, to the repeated lyrical references to “buildings” and “sidewalks”, “cash machines” and “diet coca-cola”. The question of communication – the idea that you send a message ‘out there’, not knowing how it will be received or interpreted, or even *if* it will be received at all – permeates the album, and relates to ideas about how sounds, signs, and meanings “travel” within a technocratic, globalized, information society. White noise – a ubiquitous descriptor of the postmodern city’s sound – often acts to formally reinforce the lyrical concerns of communication breakdown and isolation by acting as a literal barrier to the communicative medium of music itself – intruding into the music and overwhelming the vocals and lyrics. *YHF* can be understood as exploring the possibility that despite, or even because of, the so-called ‘revolution’ in communications and information technologies which characterise the contemporary urban landscape, the ability for individuals to make and sustain any ‘meaningful’ connection with one another is nonetheless increasingly fraught with anxiety and uncertainty.

Wilco Background:

As with all the artists I have selected here for analysis, one of the defining features of Wilco’s career to date has been their resistance to generic categorisation, whereby each

¹ Coleman quoted in Cohen, S. *Decline, Renewal and the City in Popular Music Culture: Beyond the Beatles* (Aldershot, England, 2007) p. 1

new musical release represents a significant departure from their previous work. Thus far, their career spans fifteen years, seven albums, plus two volumes of the *Mermaid Avenue* sessions (released in 1998 and 2000), on which the band collaborated with British singer-songwriter Billy Bragg to record songs using previously unrecorded Woody Guthrie lyrics. With each new release the band are seen to have broken new ground, which has earned them critical acclaim whilst often threatening to alienate their existing fans. As a result, their recorded output has spanned a diverse array of genres and music styles – from the ‘alt.country’ of their debut, *AM*, to orchestral pop on *Summerteeth* (1997), through to the more ‘mellow’, ‘seventies rock sounds of *Sky Blue Sky* (2007). The band itself has also seen frequent line-ups changes, with only two of the original members still present in its current incarnation: singer Jeff Tweedy and bass player John Stirratt. Having said this, however, it should also be noted that since the band’s two most recent releases – *Sky Blue Sky* and *Wilco (The Album)* (2009) – their line-up has remained more or less consistent, featuring Nels Cline, Glen Kotche, Mikael Jorgensen and Pat Sansone alongside Tweedy and Stirratt. Moreover, despite the marked shifts in personnel and music styles, Jeff Tweedy has remained the primary songwriter, and I would argue that it is his voice – which is as distinctive in terms of his songwriting and lyrics as it is an instrument – which provides a point of continuity across the band’s oeuvre, irrespective of other changes.

Yankee Hotel Foxtrot was the fourth ‘official’ Wilco album – not including the *Mermaid Avenue* sessions – and, like most of their albums both before and since, represented a significant departure from their previous work, marking a decisive break, in particular, from both the highly-orchestrated power-pop of the band’s preceding album, *Summerteeth*, and the ‘Alt.Country’ genre with which the band had previously been associated.² As was consistent with the band’s history, until this point, of effecting line-up changes (albeit perhaps unintentionally) with each new musical release, the production of *YHF* witnessed the departure of lead guitarist and multi-instrumentalist

² The association with the ‘alt.country’ genre owed largely to singer-songwriter Jeff Tweedy’s early associations with Uncle Tupelo – the band he formed with fellow singer-songwriter Jay Farrar in the late ‘eighties (currently of Son Volt). Alt.country is a genre whose origins remain murky, at best, but which is generally recognised for fusing bluegrass and country music with a ‘punk’ sensibility, emerging in the early-‘nineties. For an informative discussion of the origins and development of Alt.Country see Richard A. Peterson’s essay “Alternative Country: Origins, Music, World-View, Fans, and Tastes in Genre Formation” in *Popular Music and Society* 25:1-2 (2001), p. 259-283; and Hughes, R. “Are You Ready for the Alt.Country: Uncle Tupelo” in *Uncut* Aug:87 (2004) p. 80-83

Jay Bennett during the latter-stages of recording (who nonetheless co-wrote and performed on a number of tracks from the album), and long-time Wilco drummer Ken Coomer. The latter was replaced early in the recording process by drummer and percussionist Glen Kotche, whose distinctive, experimental style of percussion is immediately apparent from the opening bars of the album's first track, "I Am Going to Break Your Heart" (which I will discuss further later in this chapter), and whose drumming was to be crucial to the album's overall sound. Multi-instrumentalist Leroy Bach also joined the band in 1998, and was present during the entire *YHF* recording session. Most crucially perhaps, *YHF* was the first Wilco album to feature the assistance of maverick musician/producer/composer/electronic artist (amongst other things) Jim O'Rourke, who took on mixing and engineering duties as well as adding instrumental parts to some tracks, and whom many in the band credited with steering the album away from "the occasionally treacly sweet production" of the band's previous album, *Summerteeth*, towards a more 'stripped back', 'textural' soundscape.³

I will come back to discuss the use of sound and music on *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* shortly; first, however, I would like to address some of the issues regarding the album's release.

Much has already been written about the 'controversy' surrounding the album's release, such that I am sure I would have little to add to it that has not been said before – in any case, the unfolding events are captured for posterity in Sam Jones' documentary detailing the making-of *YHF: I Am Trying to Break Your Heart* (2002). However, it is necessary to at least make reference to them here, partly because they were pivotal in shaping early interpretations of the album, but also because I believe that they are important to understanding the way the album can be interpreted as exploring the themes of communication within the contemporary urban landscape. The blurb featured on the back-cover of Greg Kot's 2004 biography, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, may be

³ This reference to "the occasionally treacly sweet production" on *Summerteeth* is taken from Schacht, J. "Audio Reviews: 'Yankee Hotel Foxtrot'. *Popular Music and Society* 26:3 (2003) p. 416 [Online] http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xra:&rft_dat=xri:iimp:article:citation:iimp00300019 (accessed 18/03/2010) Bass player John Stirratt, the only band-member other than Tweedy to have played in Wilco from the outset, states of O'Rourke's impact: "When I go back and listen to the record before Jim got a hold of it, I realized it was *Summerteeth 2*. There were elements of it that were buried. We had a chance to make a complete departure from that, and Jim helped us to do it. It was liberating to give it to someone else. It's less dense, more open, even with all the textures and sound collages." Stirratt quoted in Kot, G. *Wilco: Learning How to Die* (New York, 2004) p. 199

instructive in this regard, not only in the sense that it provides a neat summary of the events leading up to and following the album's release, but also because it captures the 'tone' of much of what was written at the time:

When alt-country heroes-turned-rock-iconoclasts Wilco handed in their fourth album, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, to the band's label, Reprise, a division of Warner Brothers, fans looked forward to the release of another challenging, genre-bending departure from their previous work. The band aimed to build on previous sales and critical acclaim with its boldest and most ambitious album yet, but was instead urged by skittish Reprise execs to make the record more 'radio-friendly.' When Wilco wouldn't give, they found themselves without a label. Instead, they used the Internet to introduce the album to their fans, and eventually sold to Nonesuch, another division of Warner. Wilco was vindicated when the album debuted at No. 13 on the *Billboard* charts and posted the band's strongest sales to date.⁴

The questions and issues that this raises for Kot – and for many others – were ones that were central to the music industry at the turn of the millennium, a particularly turbulent juncture in popular music, following the global phenomenon of MTV and the shift towards multi-media formats for music promotion, the rise of the Internet and music-downloading, and the reconsolidation of the music industry as it attempted to redefine its place and authority within the new 'global media economy', amongst other things. It was a time in which ideas of popular music as a form of 'human communication' were undergoing significant transformations, as the Internet made it possible for audiences and musicians to connect in ways that would have been previously unimaginable. Of course, changes in the production and consumption (music video, cassette, compact disc) have often been configured in terms of 'rupture' and 'revolution' – with new developments portending the 'end' of this or the 'death' of that. And yet, whilst bearing this in mind, the transformations occurring within popular music culture at the turn of the twenty-first century have now been well-recognised as marking a period of genuine upheaval in the organisation of the music industry, and, at least for that period of time, the 'future' of popular music really did appear 'unwritten'.⁵

⁴ The blurb to *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, Kot, G. (2004)

⁵ For an even-handed account of this period, see Bennett, A., Shank, B., and Toynbee, J. 'Introduction' in A. Bennett, B. Shank, and J. Toynbee (ed.) *The Popular Music Studies Reader* (London, New York, 2006) p. 1-4 The references to 'rupture' and 'revolution' are taken from Keightley, K. "Long-Play: Adult-Oriented Popular

While *YHF* was not necessarily ‘about’ any of these things, the circumstances surrounding its release situated it so firmly within this context that it was all but impossible to find a review of the album at the time of its release which did not segue, at some point, into a discussion of the music industry and the broader pop musical milieu. Indeed, within discussions and reviews of the album, *YHF* often became emblematic of everything that was ‘wrong’ with the music industry, at the turn of the millennium. As John Schacht writes in his review in *Popular Music and Society* (which I will come back to shortly) “No matter what happens from here on out to Wilco’s ballyhooed new recording *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, its genesis will always be a parable for the lunacy of the music industry.”⁶ Moreover, I believe that these developments within popular music culture were implicated in broader issues and questions concerning the role of music within the urban landscape, and that the album itself helped to raise some of these issues.

Indeed, I would argue that the uncertainties and anxieties which recur throughout the album, which I will discuss in more depth shortly, may be understood as being expressive of the cultural climate at the time, not only within popular music, but across the urban context generally – questions and anxieties concerning the turn of the millennium, the impact of information technologies and global communications networks on ideas of space and distance, and further transformations in the way individuals relate to their ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ environments. The album can be understood as self-reflexively exploring the role of popular music as a form of ‘human communication’ within an urban landscape in which, as Robert Miklitsch suggests: “rock has become a commodity like any other commodity, at best a depoliticized form of fun and, at worst, Muzak to divert you while you’re shopping.”⁷ These concerns permeate the album, both musically and lyrically, as well as the publicity surrounding the album’s release.

Music and the Temporal Logics of the Post-War Sound Recording Industry in the USA” in *Media Culture & Society* 26:3 (2004).

⁶ Schacht, J. (2003) p. 415-416

⁷ Miklitsch, R. “Rock ‘N’ Theory: Autobiography, Cultural Studies, and the ‘Death of Rock’”, in *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism* 9:2 (1999) [Online]

<http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu> (accessed 06/01/06) paragraph 30

This self-reflexivity, exploring the idea of popular music as a mode of communication, was not unique to *YHF* – Wilco’s earlier albums, particularly 1996’s double-album *Being There*, had also explored the role of music in a manner which blurred the perspective of audience and musician.⁸ However, I would suggest that in this case, it was largely restricted to the albums’ lyrical content. It was not until their third album *Summerteeth* (1997) that the band really began to experiment with post-production technologies, using over-dubs, multi-tracking, sound effects and stereo imaging to create highly-orchestrated (and overtly artificial) soundscapes for the songs to ‘inhabit’. It was a practice that went directly against the ‘alt.country’ ethos – in which “overdubbing” was, apparently, the equivalent of “selling out” – and served to mark a clear point of departure from the genre (which was, incidentally, enjoying a massive resurgence of popularity at the time).⁹ This, in turn, facilitated what has since become one of the defining features of Wilco’s work – namely, an attention to the ‘form’ and ‘content’ of each album, whereby the sonic landscape of the record is integral to framing the thematic content of the lyrics within a specific aural context. However, where *Summerteeth* used the lush embellishments of strings and sound effects to contrast against the somewhat ‘sinister’, ‘dark’ subject matter delivered in the song lyrics (what one reviewer likened to “the Beach Boys covering Nick Cave’s murder ballads”),¹⁰ on both *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* and the album that followed, *A Ghost is Born*, the relationship between ‘form’ and ‘content’ is more symbiotic, with the musical landscape serving to “complement” and “enhance” the thematic content of the lyrics.¹¹

The album that followed *YHF*, *A Ghost is Born* (2004), is in many ways a more sophisticated pop record, with the band taking the ‘stripped back’, ‘textural’ soundscapes of *YHF* into more obscure, experimental territory – fusing intricate pop melodies and tight grooves with avant-garde stylings (for the album’s tour they

⁸ As Greg Kot writes of *Being There*: “The album would become an extended commentary on the creative process, one which tacitly states that no piece of music is finished until the listener makes it his own, that a recording is only as brilliant and realized as the person hearing it: fan and artist as uneasy confidants, subject to the same doubts, ecstasies, and betrayals that invade only the most intimate relationships.” Kot, G. (2004) p. 110

⁹ As Wilco biographer Greg Kot writes: “For them, the studio was nothing more than an extension of the living room or the stage: a facility for recording the interaction of a band, in real time. Any sort of tinkering – extra instruments, weird sound experiments, layered harmonies – was an inexcusable excess.” Kot, G. (2004) p. 154

¹⁰ Schacht, J. (2003) p. 416

¹¹ Kot, G. (2004) p. 199

recruited ‘avant-guitarist’ Nels Cline, who has since become a mainstay in the band’s line-up). However, I believe that *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* has a topicality to it which the latter album arguably does not – owing not only to the broader circumstances surrounding its release but also to the way its thematic concerns and sonic imagery appeared to speak to/of a particular cultural context, a particular moment in time. Indeed, listening to *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* now, almost ten years on from its release, it sounds very much ‘of its time’ in a way that *A Ghost is Born*, or indeed the other albums I have selected for analysis here, arguably do not. This is not to suggest that the album sounds ‘dated’ (although that may well be the case for future audiences), but rather that it provides a unique platform from which to consider some of the issues and questions pertinent to the turn-of-the millennium urban landscape.

Critical reception and approach

While *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* was critically lauded at the time of its release – and has since gone on to feature prominently in the inevitable ‘best album’ lists as the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close – thus far there has been little in the way of academic discussion of either the album or the band.¹² This is particularly notable when contrasted with the amount of attention the album attracted on its release, and the academic reception of other bands who might be considered Wilco’s peers – in particular, the work of Radiohead. Indeed, when *YHF* was (finally) released it was hailed by many in the music industry as “America’s answer to Radiohead”¹³ – in reference to the British band’s landmark recordings *OK Computer* (1997) and *Kid A* (2000), which effectively helped to redefine the parameters of popular music (not to mention the album format). However, while Radiohead have since gone on to be the

¹² When UK music magazine *Uncut* compiled its “150 Greatest Albums of the Decade”, in November 2009, Wilco had three albums included: *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* ranked number 35; *Sky Blue Sky* (2007) at 138; and *A Ghost is Born* ranked third (following the White Stripes’ *White Blood Cells* at number one, and Bob Dylan’s *Love and Theft* second). Anon. “The 150 Greatest Albums of the Decade” in *Uncut* (Nov:150) (2009) p. 39, 53 & 59

¹³ Kot, G. (2004) p. 227

subject of numerous theoretical discussions, Wilco's work, by comparison, has remained largely neglected.¹⁴

At the time of their release, both *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* and *A Ghost is Born* were reviewed, by John Schacht and Steven Hamelman respectively, within the popular music journal, *Popular Music and Society*, and while I believe there are problems inherent in each writer's approach to the albums (perhaps owing, in part, to the review format itself), I would nonetheless suggest that these limitations serve to illuminate the direction further critical discussions of such albums might take.¹⁵ To begin with, both reviews begin by situating the albums within a broader popular music context – drawing on other critically acclaimed albums by (much) older artists (the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix et al in the case of Hamelman; The Clash in Schacht). Given that there are numerous more recent bands and albums with which Wilco's work could easily be aligned and, moreover, would possibly serve to give a more accurate sense of the contemporary musical landscape, it seems a little odd that both writers should choose to invoke bands from an era which is firmly situated in the past. However, it serves a purpose (which is, I assume, the writers' intention), in that it helps to establish the band as belonging to a more established musical lineage – which may have seemed especially important within a popular musical context in which the future of the music industry appeared somewhat precarious. In Schacht's review in particular, it also appears to be used as a way of articulating what was 'wrong' with the contemporary musical context – in that the only current bands he mentions are those with whom he clearly believes that Wilco shares no affinity. As Schacht concludes:

Yankee Hotel Foxtrot is like a faint transmission from a distant time when popular music was not defined by marketing shares and units sold but by the quaint notion of artistic vision. In its own quiet way, it's as loud and brash a statement as punk's call to arms in the '70s. The question is, then as now, will anyone heed the call?¹⁶

¹⁴ For academic discussions of Radiohead see Tate, J. (ed.) *The Music and Art of Radiohead* (Aldershot, Burlington, 2005). There was also an edition of the journal *Popular Culture and Philosophy* devoted exclusively to Radiohead, entitled *Radiohead and Philosophy: Fitter Happier More Deductive* 28 (2009)

¹⁵ Schacht, J. (2003) and Hamelman, S. "Audio Reviews: 'A Ghost is Born' – Wilco" in *Popular Music and Society* 28:5 (2005) p. 684-688 [Online]

http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:iimp:article:citation:iimp00444626 (accessed 18/03/2010)

¹⁶ Schacht, J. (2003) p. 418

Thus, within Schacht's review, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* is understood as 'harking back' to an earlier – and, by implication, more 'authentic' – era, in which music was dictated by passion rather than money (a sentiment which recurs often throughout discussions of Wilco). On the other hand, at least Schacht's review explores the contemporary musical context – if only as something which he situates in opposition to Wilco – which is more than can be said of Hamelman's review, which tends to read more as an exercise in espousing the writer's own personal tastes than a piece of music criticism in its own right (a tendency which is evident elsewhere in his work).¹⁷

Moreover, given that both Hamelman and Schacht's reviews took place in an academic journal by the name of *Popular Music and Society*, it is disappointing to observe that while each review is keen to situate the albums under discussion within a more established musical lineage, neither bothers to address the way in which the thematic concerns explored throughout each album might have a further resonance and application with regard to the broader cultural context. Of course, it would be possible to argue that the review format itself serves to limit the scope of analysis; however, I find that it is indicative of the kinds of problems inherent within academic discussions of popular music generally, whereby the music often appears to be severed from its cultural context – as though popular music is produced in a vacuum, which, as the title of the journal suggests, it clearly is not.

Finally, neither review attends to what I suggested earlier to be one of the defining characteristics of Wilco's work, particularly on *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* and *A Ghost is Born*: namely, their attention to the 'form' and 'content' of each album, whereby the music and production serve to frame the thematic content of the lyrics within a specific aural context. Hamelman, for instance, after (somewhat ironically) belabouring the album's lengthiness – arguing that "although *A Ghost is Born* packs top-shelf tunes, the album's collective energy lags because some lovely but lengthy tracks retard the program and diminish its impact" – goes on to suggest that: "It is even probable that *A Ghost is Born*'s [sic] tendency to drag has both a musical point and a thematic

¹⁷ See in particular his book *But is it Garbage? On Rock and Trash*. (Georgia, 2004)

implication.”¹⁸ This is an important aspect of the album, and yet he does not address it in any further detail, other than to hypothesise that perhaps it is meant to “imply” that:

Wilco has ascended to such a rarefied height that perceived signs of exhaustion and entropy are actually imprints left by a band of virtuosos who realize that the beauty of their current nearmasterpiece [sic] lies once again in the ironic fact that it must fall short, just barely, of the ultimate peak.¹⁹

Or whatever that means...

In contrast, one might turn to rock critic John Mulvey’s review of *A Ghost is Born* in UK music magazine *Uncut* – a review which is, for the record, much more comprehensive and detailed than those listed above, and which helps to give some sense of the complexity of both *YHF* and *A Ghost is Born* – a complexity which derives, in large part, from the way each album uses the interplay between ‘form’ and ‘content’. As Mulvey writes:

Increasingly... Tweedy has a knack of allying his sonic inventions to his lyrical concerns. So, on *YHF*, the theme was communication breakdown, whether it be garbled, encoded radio signals used as texturing, or lyrics which described long-distance misunderstandings. On *A Ghost is Born*, he remains a great writer of songs... which portray love as fundamentally constant, but assailed by ambiguities, very human glitches. And in common with the album’s questing, untethered sound, Tweedy continually sings of escape and liberation. Or, at least, of invigorating struggles to be free.²⁰

Here, Mulvey not only identifies some of the recurring lyrical themes throughout Wilco’s oeuvre – namely, an emphasis on love and (mis)communication – but also addresses the way in which the interplay between ‘form’ and ‘content’ serves a thematic as well as a musical purpose on both of these albums, something which neither Hamelman or Schacht think to consider.

I would, therefore, like to take these limitations as the point of departure for my own discussion here, specifically with regard to *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, in order to explore the way in which the album uses the interplay between form and content to create a tension

¹⁸ Hamelman, S. (2005) paragraph 13

¹⁹ Hamelman, S. (2005) paragraph 13

²⁰ Mulvey, J. “Spirits Rising” in *Uncut* (86, July 2004) p. 95

or conflict between the quest for ‘love’ and ‘human connection’ articulated within the lyrics, and its sonic backdrop of white noise and interference. In doing so, I believe the album can be understood as feeding into broader cultural debates concerning the ways in which global information and media networks are serving to reconfigure and redefine the urban milieu – a transition which has been described in terms of a shift from a “space of places” to a “space of flows”.²¹ As Steven Shaviro writes:

We live in a time of massive technological, as well as social and political, change. Much of this change has to do with globalization, that is to say, with an economy that networks itself ubiquitously across the planet thanks to the instantaneous transnational communication of flows of information and money.²²

Within this context, ideas of space and time, distance and communication are undergoing numerous transformations, as notions of ‘here’ and ‘there’ begin to shift and fluctuate according to what Julian Murphet refers to as the “invisible truth of postmodern urbanism”.²³ These transformations form the backdrop to *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* – both literally, in the sense that the album itself was borne of this context, and sonically, through its production and soundscape. This is what I will move on to discuss now.

Album Overview:

Wilco biographer Greg Kot has suggested that *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* can be understood as plotting a narrative arc, with its “foundation” consisting “of three songs, placed at the beginning, middle, and end: ‘I Am Trying to Break Your Heart,’ ‘Ashes of American Flags,’ and ‘Reservations.’”²⁴ This idea of a narrative arc recurs throughout Kot’s discussion of the album – he goes on to suggest that “[t]he ten-second transition from ‘Ashes of American Flags’ into ‘Heavy Metal Drummer’” represents “a key moment in

²¹ This is Manuel Castells formulation as quoted in Shaviro, S. “The Erotic Life of Machine” in *Parallax* 8:4 (2002) p. 21

²² Shaviro, S. (2002) p. 21

²³ Murphet, J. ‘Postmodernism and Space’ in S. Connor (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge, 2004) p. 125

²⁴ Kot, G. (2004) p. 193

the album's story line."²⁵ Of course, ideas of 'narrative' and 'story' are often problematic when applied to popular music, particularly albums, where they can sometimes bring to mind the dubious notion of the 'concept' album – something which many contemporary bands and performers are, understandably perhaps, keen to distance themselves from. There is also an association between narrative and text, which means that when ideas of narrative are raised within the context of popular music they are often closely associated with lyrical analysis – a mode of analysis which has its place within popular music criticism, but which has recently fallen out of favour, no doubt owing in large part to its over-usage within earlier studies. Whilst recognising these issues, however, I think there is room to consider the ways in which ideas of narrative might be incorporated into understandings of popular music in a manner which does not focus exclusively on the printed lyrics, but rather on how sound, music and lyrics work together to further a sense of narrative or thematic progression.

In the case of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, I would argue that this idea of a narrative or thematic progression is enacted through the interplay which the album creates between its 'form' and 'content', whereby the singer's voice and lyrics are pitted against a continual backdrop of white noise and interference which frequently threatens to intrude and cancel the lyrics completely. S. Renee Dechert discusses this effect in her article on *YHF* for the online music press *Pop Matters*, in which she suggests that the album can be understood as constructing "a dialogue" between "noise" and "distortion", on the one hand, and "melody" and "lyrics" on the other. Dechert argues further that this "dialogue" is not only played out within the framework of the songs themselves, but also in the relationship *between* songs, whereby there is a contrast between the "noisy, distortion-laded tracks that have a harmonic subtext, where Tweedy's voice is lost in the mix", and the "more traditional pop songs with clearer vocals against a subtext of distortion".²⁶ While I would argue that even on the "noisy, distortion-laden tracks" Tweedy's voice often remains privileged in the mix, and that it is only during certain key moments in the songs (usually towards the end) that his voice becomes "submerged", I think Dechert's distinction here, between those songs in which melody

²⁵ Kot, G. (2004) p. 195

²⁶ Dechert, S.R. "It Feels Like Christmas' – Or the Story of How Wilco Gave Itself Creative Freedom" in *Pop Matters* (2002) [Online] <http://www.popmatters.com/music/reviews/w/wilco-yankee.shtml> (accessed 26/07/05) paragraph 35

provides the “subtext” and those in which noise provides the “subtext” – suggesting as it does a struggle or “dialogue” between ‘foreground’ and ‘background’, ‘melody’ and ‘distortion’, ‘lyrics’ and ‘noise’ – helps to articulate the tension which is created throughout the album.

As pure, indiscriminate sound that conveys so much information as to be rendered unintelligible and meaningless, the term ‘white noise’ has become a ubiquitous descriptor of the postmodern cityscape, standing in as a sign of its consumer culture and mass media, its influx of information technologies and globalized communications networks. It denotes a constant flow of information, evidenced for example by the Internet, or the static of radio and television stations. The term is intrinsically associated with electricity and, interestingly, is often referred to in relation to rock music to describe the feedback produced by electric guitars when they are held up towards amplifiers.

White noise is of course a commonplace, even clichéd, feature of rock music – the feedback, distortion, crackling leads and humming amplifiers serving as a signifier of the ‘spontaneity’, ‘energy’ and ‘raw power’ which is central to the construction of ‘authenticity’ in discourses of rock n roll. Along with the smashing of instruments and stage-diving, white noise serves to convey the pathos and rebellion so often associated with “authentic” genres of rock n roll, in the sense that it is harsh, grating, piercing noise produced through the deliberate mistreatment of musical instruments.²⁷ Indeed, white noise is an important part of what makes rock n roll, as a genre, so unique – its electrical power: rock n roll without amplifiers and electricity would not be rock n roll – at least not according to its generic conventions and common understandings of the genre.

At the same time, however, the ostensible limitations of white noise are constantly being exceeded with new trends and developments. Indeed, there is now an entire genre of music known simply as ‘noise-bands’, wherein the use of white noise is not necessarily intended to convey ‘spontaneity’ or ‘live’ performance, but rather has come

²⁷ Discussing the way in which distortion has come to serve as a sign of “raw power” in popular music, Nicola Dibben writes: “When sounds are distorted it is because there is more energy than can be recorded or re-produced, thereby invoking the idea of an excess of power.” Dibben, N. *Bjork*. (Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2009) p. 59

to be treated as an art-form in its own right, as something that can be sculpted and manipulated to evoke particular sounds, textures and moods. Within the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, a number of bands began experimenting with the artificial construction of ‘noise’, along with loops, samples, and electronic sound effects, which were then juxtaposed alongside what might be thought of as more ‘conventional’ song structures and modes of instrumentation. Albums that come to mind – aside from *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* – include Beck’s *Sea Change* (2002) Granddaddy’s *The Sophtware Slump* (2000), the Flaming Lips’ *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* (2002), and, perhaps the progenitor of them all, Radiohead’s seminal *OK Computer* (1997) and *Kid A* (2000).

Joseph Auner has suggested that the combination of “traditional song structures with elaborate production featuring electronic noises, unexpected and densely layered effects, and other distancing techniques”, as used on albums such as *YHF*, served “to provide what might be thought of as technological quotation marks around more familiar materials.”²⁸ While Auner does not discuss this further here, I think this idea of ‘technological quotation-marking’, along with Dechert’s discussion of the noise/melody ‘subtext’ above, provides an interesting opening into thinking about the way *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* can be understood as using the interplay between ‘form’ and ‘content’ to register ideas of the contemporary urban landscape as a locus of globalised information networks. Discussing the way in which technology has impacted on the conception of ‘noise’ and ‘music’, as well as shifting the boundary between the two, Simon Frith writes:

Music is an ordered pattern of sounds in the midst of a vast range of more or less disorderly aurality. Music is marked out as different from noise; as our sense of noise changes, so does our sense of music. In the twentieth century there has not only been a significant increase in the sheer quantity of noise, but also a shift in our underlying sense of silence: technology provides us with a permanent hum, a continued sonic presence. What does it mean to his music, as Philip Tagg once asked, that Mozart never heard a steam engine, a car, an aeroplane, a power drill, a ventilator, air conditioning, a refrigerator, a police siren, the central heating boiler, or the mains

²⁸ While Auner does not specify any Wilco album in particular, given the content and timing of his essay (it was published in 2003, a year after the release of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*) he is almost certainly referring to *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. Auner, J. “‘Sing it for Me’: Posthuman Ventriloquism in Recent Popular Music.” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 128:1 (2003) p. 115

buzz; what does it mean for our listening to Mozart's music that we rarely hear the sound of horses' hooves on cobbles, a wood fire, the rustle of layers of petticoats? Is such noise entirely irrelevant to the meaning of his music?²⁹

I think that Frith's passage here goes some way towards explaining the significance of the 'technological quotation-marking' within *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, and perhaps the other albums discussed above. That is, this backdrop of 'noise' provides the underlying 'subtext' which frames our understandings of 'music' (and 'silence'), and the use of such 'technological quotation-marking' on the album serves to render this 'subtext' of 'noise' explicit. By framing the songs within an aural context riddled with white noise and radio static, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* invokes a contemporary urban landscape in which technology has provided us "with a permanent hum, a continued sonic presence", and there is a continual slippage or tension between 'noise' and 'music', as the songs emerge out of, or become submerged within, this backdrop of static and interference. This tension between 'form' and 'content', 'foreground' and 'background', 'melody' and 'noise' is central to the sense of narrative or thematic progression which is enacted throughout the album.

Framed within this context of white noise and interference are the songs, almost all of which are love songs – which is not only to say that they are songs about 'love' (although they are also that), but that the songs themselves provide the vehicle for the desire for 'human connection' expressed within the lyrics. For example, in the opening song, "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart", the singer recites garbled insults and weird innuendo, as if taunting and toying with the object of his affection before returning, at the end of each verse, to a recollection or remembrance of someone he loves but has hurt – "What was I thinking when I let go of you?" While the content of the recollection takes different forms within each verse ("What was I thinking when I said it didn't hurt"; "What was I thinking when we said goodnight" and so on), the effect is the same every time. Coming as it does at the close of each verse, this remembrance of a loved one appears to serve as something akin to a 'punchline' – as though all the rambling imagery and strange detours enacted in the preceding lyrics were simply a way of delaying the inevitable moment of realisation. Each time it arrives it appears to jolt the

²⁹ Frith, S. *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. (Oxford, 1996) p. 100

singer, momentarily, out of his torpor, as though bringing him back from his reveries. It is a lyrical device that recurs later in the album, on “Radio Cure”, except that in this case it occurs at the beginning of each verse, in which the voice of a loved one serves more as a gentle reminder, as if calling the singer back from somewhere far away with a tender gesture: “cheer up/honey I hope you can...” The lyrics which then follow appear as a response to this voice, which seemingly prompts the singer each time. And then, of course, there is the final track “Reservations”, in which the singer appears to make peace with the ambiguities and uncertainties which pervade the preceding songs on the album, concluding that while he has “reservations about so many things”, there is one thing he is certain about: “you.”

As this perhaps suggests, along with the dialogue or exchange between lovers enacted within the lyrics, and the tension between ‘form’ and ‘content’ discussed earlier, there is also a kind of call-and-response motif set up in the relationship *between* songs, particularly between the opening and closing tracks, whereby the latter appear to ‘answer’ the confusion and uncertainty articulated within the opening tracks with an increasing sense of certainty and resolution. The track-listing of the album is particularly important in this regard, sequencing the songs in such a way as that they appear to chart a course (or a thematic progression), moving from the uncertainty and disorientation which pervades the opening tracks, to an uneasy sense of resolution and closure during the finale. For example, chorus lyrics from the eighth track, “I’m the Man Who Loves You”, first appear in the coda to the opening track, “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart”, albeit in this instance submerged beneath a spiralling wave of discordant piano and distortion, their delivery slurred and out-of-tune, sounding like the lustful ramblings of a drunk. This opening song has been called an “antilove [sic] ballad” – the title of which, “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart”, says it all really – and the appearance of these lyrics within this context is consistent with the general tone of the song, in which the singer appears dazed, possibly hungover (“you were so right when you said I’d been drinking”), recalling spiteful things he has said to someone he cares about.³⁰ However, when these same lyrics recur, several tracks later, the tone of the album has shifted, the singer proclaiming “I’m the man who loves you” without hesitation or malice. Thus, at the same time as the songs themselves appear to enact a

³⁰ This reference to the song as an “antilove [sic] ballad” is taken from Schacht, J. (2003) p. 417

dialogue or exchange between lovers, so too the album as a ‘whole’ creates a dialogue between songs, such that the later tracks on the album appear to confirm or ‘answer’ those which come earlier.

In an earlier era, one might have likened these love lyrics to ‘love letters’ – a mode of communication which has already been explored with regard to popular music. In his discussion of the way in which love songs “functioned as commercial substitutes for personal letters” during the Second World War, B. Lee Cooper raises some ideas which are pertinent to the love songs throughout *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*.³¹ Of course, the context which is being discussed by Cooper is markedly different from that of the postmodern cityscape which I am interested in here; and yet I think this difference in context itself serves to illustrate some of the ways in which ideas of popular music as a form of communication – and indeed, the very idea of communication itself – have both changed and remained constant. It is also worth pointing out that Cooper’s analysis is, unfortunately, limited, in that all he does is provide a survey of love songs written during the specified period and the way they articulate themes and ideas similar to those within love letters. He does not explain *how* these songs provided a “substitute for personal letters”, and while he attends to the particularities of the love letter form – using no apparent secondary resources to do so – his obvious desire to emphasise the similarities between the two formats precludes him from considering in any detail the differences between the two. However, I would like to use some of the ideas and issues raised within Cooper’s essay which are relevant to my discussion here. In particular, I think his idea of love songs as “audio letters” provides a useful way of thinking about the love lyrics on *YHF*.³²

Cooper begins by outlining the primary differences between popular songs and personal letters according to what he conceives to be “[c]onventional wisdom” – for example, where “[l]etters are produced privately for individual enlightenment”, “recordings are commercially manufactured for public entertainment”. He continues:

³¹ Cooper, B. L. “From ‘Love Letters’ to ‘Miss You’: Popular Recordings, Epistolary Imagery, and Romance During War-Time, 1941-1945” in *Journal of American Culture* 19:4 (1996) [Online]

<http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/pqdweb?did=15113129&sid=2> (accessed 08/02/06)
paragraph 3

³² Cooper, B. L. (1996) paragraph 3

Other distinctive characteristics of letters in contrast to recordings include an assumption of prior knowledge held by the receiving audience, the lack of any required literary rhyme scheme, anticipation of a written response, and the integrated nature of a written communication exchange. It seems obvious that a personal letter, as one half of a written dialogue, is the antithesis of a sound recording, an oral monologue.³³

Whilst recognising that Cooper's analysis here is exclusively concerned with lyrics rather than music, it seems odd that he neglects to explore what I would think to be one of the most obvious differences between personal letters and popular songs – namely, that where one is a form of written exchange, the other is a musical mode of communication. His equation of “sound recording” and “oral monologue” at the close of the passage above makes this explicit – for all intents and purposes, he could just as easily talking about the recording of a theatrical monologue, and it would make little difference to the substance of his analysis. It is in this way that Cooper's essay not only demonstrates the limitations of lyrical analyses which assume that the meaning of a song can be read from the printed lyrics, but also overlooks one of the more interesting aspects of the love song – one which it possibly shares, in a sense, with the letter. That is, the carriage of the song – the way in which the music itself provides the carriage from sender to receiver. Where a letter is born by mail to reach its destination, a love song is borne by music.

However, as suggested above, I am less interested in providing a critique of Cooper's analysis here than in drawing out some of the ideas that his discussion raises which may be useful for my purposes here. Thus, after considering (or glossing over), the differences between songs and letters, Cooper then moves on to discuss the similarities between the two formats – similarities which, like the differences he outlines above, are assumed to be ‘commonsense’. These similarities include the way “the exchange between the communicator (singer/writer) and the receiver (recipient of either oral or literary information) is conducted on an I/You basis”, in which the notion “that a third party may intercept the personal message is neither considered nor discussed within the context of the intimate communication.”³⁴ He also suggests that within both formats “the point of view of the audio communicator is usually presented in the first person”,

³³ Cooper, B. L. (1996) paragraph 4

³⁴ Cooper, B. L. (1996) paragraph 10

in which “the highly personalized perspectives” offered by the singer/writer is based on their own “personal experiences”.³⁵ Rather than assuming this uncritically, as Cooper does, I would suggest that part of the love song format – which it possibly borrows from that of the love letter – is that it invites autobiographical ‘readings’. Finally, Cooper argues that a further similarity between love songs and love letters is that “elements of time and distance usually generate the need for communication.”³⁶ He does not consider the question of how the song/letter will reach its destination, or the way these “elements of time and distance” might impact on the meaning or interpretation of its contents. Nor does he delve into the possibility that the message might not be received, or indeed whether it will be interpreted correctly if it is received at all.

Within the context of the Second World War discussed by Cooper I would think such questions merit further investigation – one imagines there were possibly countless letters which never reached their destination, or which were so severely hampered by these “elements of time and distance” that the love they aimed to express and communicate had already turned cold. Within a contemporary cultural context one might assume such questions no longer apply. Cooper notes the way in which the “volume of personal letters has declined” as they are superseded by the use of email and telephone.³⁷ Indeed, it would be possible to argue that the “elements of time and distance” which helped to engender the need for communication articulated by both the love letter and the love song have now been rendered insubstantial. In her work on postmodern urban culture, Celeste Olalquiaga discusses the ways in which traditional notions of ‘human contact’ have been reconceived through discourses of information technology and cybernetics, citing the example of an advertising campaign for a telephone company: “In its “Reach Out and Touch Someone” campaign... sophisticated telephone communications were attributed a human tactile quality: by calling someone you love (no other calls were contemplated in this campaign) you could actually touch that person.”³⁸ Thus it appears that technology takes on the role of the love letter, which no longer travels by air or by sea, but rather through the invisible channels of increasingly sophisticated communications networks which allow us to cross barriers of

³⁵ Cooper, B. L. (1996) paragraph 5 & 6

³⁶ Cooper, B. L. (1996) paragraph 11

³⁷ Cooper, B. L. (1996) paragraph 8

³⁸ Olalquiaga, C. *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis, 1992) p. 12

space and time with seemingly remarkable ease of access. And yet, within the context of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, such “elements of time and distance” continue to matter – not only as the space to be crossed, but also as that which generates the need for communication in the first place. The love songs on *YHF* are those borne of the twenty-first century urban landscape, but the quest for ‘human connection’ remains.

The Postmodern Cityscape:

Before I move on to discuss *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* in further detail, I believe it is necessary to situate my ‘reading’ of the album in relation to some of the critical debates surrounding ideas of the postmodern city. My intention here is not to provide a comprehensive overview of these debates, but rather to foreground some of the key issues which are important for the purposes of my discussion here.

In his book *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, urban theorist Edward Soja documents the development of what he refers to as “cityspace” as it has evolved since “at least ten millennia ago.”³⁹ In a section entitled “Summarizing the Geohistory of Cityspace”, Soja focuses in particular on the past 150 years’ development of ‘cityspace’ in terms of its “macroeconomic rhythms” (and one wonders what such ‘rhythms’ might *sound* like if rendered musically).⁴⁰ Briefly, these initially involve a period of “accelerated economic growth and expansion in the most advanced industrial countries”, which Soja classifies as a “boom period”:

These boom periods eventually peak in disruptive crises usually related in some way to growing constraints on continued capitalist accumulation and profits, and are followed by equally long periods of decelerated economic growth, increasingly frequent social crises, and what present-day scholars have termed restructuring processes, described most simply as attempts to restore the conditions for accelerated economic expansion. These periods of restructuring usually conclude in another round of crisis and upheaval... Successful recovery from this second round of crises initiates the next long wave.⁴¹

³⁹ Soja, E. *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford, 2000) p. 4

⁴⁰ Soja, E. (2000) p. 109-116

⁴¹ Soja, E. (2000) p. 110

Soja suggests that with each new ‘wave’ in the development of ‘cityspace’ there is often a renewed interest in the *idea* of the city across a variety of art-forms and discourses, including philosophy, sociology, economics, politics and the arts, as they each struggle to adapt to the changing conditions of urban life and to theorise the implications inherent in such developments.

Within the arts, in particular, these periods of transition may culminate in a ‘crisis’ of representation, whereby the changing dynamics of the city – including technological developments, changes in the organization and structure of labour and capital, innovations in communication and information networks, amongst other things – appear to render older artistic ‘languages’ and modes of representation obsolete. Focusing specifically on the impact of the industrial revolution in ushering in the ‘Age of Modernity’, Soja writes:

The comprehensive deconstruction and reconstitution of modernity arising from its spatio-temporal convergence with urban-industrial capitalism and the rising power of the nationalist state changed the critical discourse in nearly every field of knowledge and action. In particular, it radically redefined and refocused political theory, philosophy, and socio-spatial praxis.⁴²

Hence the emergence of a variety of ‘modernisms’, each related by their perception of the present moment as one which required the construction of new idioms and aesthetic forms capable of representing and responding to the changing conditions within the modern metropolis.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, a great deal of theoretical work suggested that the organisation of ‘cityspace’ was undergoing yet another period of radical transition. Various theories, such as ‘postmetropolis’, ‘mega-cities’, the ‘world city’, ‘information society’, to name but a few, the millennial transformation of the city encompassed such diverse yet interrelated phenomena as the impact of globalization on culture, economics and politics; the reorganization of the capitalist system; the growth of consumer culture, the ‘mass media’ and entertainment industry (which includes the music industry); and the proliferation of global networks of information and communication.

⁴² Soja, E. (2000) p. 75

While the question as to whether the ‘postmodern city’ marks an absolutely new ‘stage’ or ‘moment’ in ideas of urbanism and cityspace, or is rather an “extension” or “outgrowth” “of that modern and modernist urbanism”, remains open to interrogation, within critical discourses and theoretical debates throughout the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century there is often the recurring sense that something has fundamentally changed in both our ways of thinking about the city and the ‘actual’ organization of ‘cityspace’ itself.⁴³ As Soja argues, whilst recognising that the ‘postmetropolis’ remains “a still partial and incomplete metamorphosis that will always bear traces of earlier cityscapes”, he nonetheless contends that:

[A]t the same time, the postmodern, postfordist, postkeynesian metropolis *does* represent something significantly new and different, the product of an era of intense and extensive restructuring as profound in its impact on every facet of our lives as any other period in at least the past two centuries – that is, since the origins of the industrial capitalist city.⁴⁴

And, like the modernisms it succeeded – or broke from/reshuffled/coexists with, depending on one’s point of view – a variety of ‘postmodernisms’ emerged in response to, or as part of, the changing urban context.

Soja cites Manuel Castells’ description of the emergent urban phenomena as “megacities”: “discontinuous constellations of spatial fragments, functional pieces, and social segments.”⁴⁵ That is, where in the past cities were marked by clear distinctions from one another, such that the architecture and urban organization of European and North American cities, for instance, represented the epitome of distinctive cityscapes and cultural identities, within the postmodern era such geographical and cultural distinctions are seen to be collapsing. With the global ‘flow’ of information, media, capital, labour, and communication, our spaces of co-habitation – both ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ (assuming such categories continue to mean anything) – are increasingly becoming “the dispersed loci of a commonly shared and shaped world.”⁴⁶ This, in turn, has contributed to a world which is said to be simultaneously ‘expanding’ and ‘shrinking’, whereby ideas of ‘space’ and ‘distance’ are being reconfigured in ways

⁴³ Soja, E. (2000) p. 148

⁴⁴ Soja, E. (2000) p. 148; italics added

⁴⁵ Castells, M. quoted in Soja, E. (2000) p. 235

⁴⁶ Iain Chambers quoted in Soja, E. (2000) p. 149

which would have been previously impossible – a world in which we are experiencing what Soja describes as “the conceptual and material *unbounding* of the modern metropolis.”⁴⁷ Thus the ‘postmodern city’ no longer appears to represent a ‘fixed’ geographical location, but becomes rather a fluid, amorphous entity of which the material limits or boundaries are open to constant fluctuation and permeability.

It is this ostensible dissolution of material boundaries and limits which Paul Virilio takes up in his essay “The Over-Exposed City”, in which Virilio writes:

If the metropolis is still a place, a geographic site, it no longer has anything to do with the classical oppositions of city/country nor centre/periphery. The city is no longer organized into a local and axial estate. While the suburbs contributed to this dissolution, in fact the intramural-extramural opposition collapsed with the transport revolutions and the development of communication and telecommunications technologies. These promoted the merger of disconnected metropolitan fringes into a single urban mass.⁴⁸

Virilio compares this “dissolution” of material limits and distinctions with the perspectives on ‘matter’ enabled by the invention of the microscope – a perspective which served to demonstrate that even the smallest known particle could be broken down “infinitesimally”, such that the world of physical structures and beings comes to appear fluid and temporary. As Virilio writes:

This sudden reversion of boundaries and oppositions introduces into everyday, common space an element which until now was reserved for the world of microscopes. There is no *plenum*; space is not filled with matter. Instead, an unbounded expanse appears in the false perspective of the machines’ luminous emissions... The ancient private/public occultation and the distinction between housing and traffic are replaced by an overexposure in which the difference between ‘near’ and ‘far’ simply ceases to exist, just as the difference between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ vanished in the scanning of the electron microscope.⁴⁹

Hence the title of his essay: “the over-exposed city” – as though the city itself has been put under the microscope, no longer comprised of bricks and mortar, of solid structures and architectural monuments, but an array of atoms and molecules which is constantly in the process of being arranged and rearranged.

⁴⁷ Soja, E. (2000) p. 218

⁴⁸ Virilio, P. “The Overexposed City” in S. Redhead (ed.) *The Paul Virilio Reader* (New York, 2004) p. 86

⁴⁹ Virilio, P. (2004) p. 87

And, just as the ‘boundaries’ or ‘facade’ of the city are said to have become ‘porous’ and dissolute, defined less as actual ‘places’ than as ‘junctions’ within a vast and complexly interwoven network of information and communications technologies, so too ideas of ‘space’ and ‘distance’, ‘near’ and ‘far’, ‘micro’ and ‘macro’, begin to blur and fluctuate. Urban centres are realigned according to the ‘flows’ of information and money; a shifting matrix which has been implicated in the transition from “physical reality to virtual reality.”⁵⁰ This is what Julian Murphet refers to as “the invisible truth of postmodern urbanism”:

What Manuel Castells calls the ‘informational city’ is one whose economy is predicated not only on the inrush and concrete investment of multinational capital, but on the flows through it of that capital and of those ‘knowledges’ that ensure the growth and maintenance of the global money market.⁵¹

Indeed, it is precisely in this respect that the postmodern city appears to mark a significant evolution, if not revolution, in ideas of urbanism as they have developed throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. As Iain Chambers argues:

This particular metro-network does not simply imply an extension of the previous urban culture of the mercantile and industrial city and its form of nation state; for it no longer necessarily represents a fixed point or unique referent... Towns and cities are themselves increasingly transformed into points of intersection, stations, junctions, in an intensive metropolitan network whose economic and cultural rhythms, together with their flexible sense of centre, are no longer even necessarily derived from North America or Europe.⁵²

What I would like to turn to now is the way in which these ideas of the postmodern city may be reinterpreted through the framework of sound, music and lyrics as they are used on *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. I believe that the album itself helps to engender a critical engagement with some of the issues which have been raised here, in particular with regard to the supposed dissolution of concepts of ‘space’ and ‘distance’. Indeed, I wish to argue that on *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, space and distance, whether psychological, geographical or technological, continue to matter as a force to be overcome in order to successfully communicate. Before I do so, however, I will first be attending to the role

⁵⁰ Shaviro, S. (2002) p. 21

⁵¹ Murphet, J. ‘ (2004) p. 124

⁵² Chambers quoted in Soja, E. (2000) p. 149

of the album artwork and packaging in setting up some of the themes and ideas which recur throughout the album.

Setting the Scene: Album Artwork:

The album cover artwork for *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* is sleek and minimalistic, depicting two buildings, one slightly taller than the other, against a vast backdrop of faded yellow sky. The band name and album title are printed in an unobtrusive, lower-case, black ‘aerial’ type-face in the top left-hand corner. The perspective that is created for the viewer is situated from below, looking upwards, and from this perspective, the two buildings appear completely identical in every way: there are no entrances to be seen, nor any distinguishing characteristics to speak of, just twin columns extending skywards, their facades utterly blank, impenetrable and anonymous. The buildings take up only about a third of the picture, as the rest is given over to a vast expanse of off-white sky which, like the structure of the skyscrapers themselves, appears largely blank and impassive, the emptiness of its surface blotted only by the presence of two birds circling overhead. Indeed, in much the same way as the skyscrapers dwarf the viewer, so too the sky dwarves the buildings – its blankness filtering through gaps in the buildings’ design, lending the inert structures a curious quality of weightlessness and impermanence, as though at any moment they might suddenly vaporise and disappear into the yellow ether. This strange coupling of weightlessness and inertia is further enhanced by the faint presence of the birds above, which seem at once ‘there’ and ‘not-there’, their outline already faded, like shadows. It is as though the sky is the only thing that is permanent – everything else is fleeting, transitory.

Images of skyscrapers and city skylines recur throughout *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*’s artwork and publicity, shown mostly in black-and-white or sepia, and captured in a way which foregrounds the interplay between shadow and light, surface and reflection – the uniformity and squareness of its angles and densely packed forms. On the immediate inside-cover of the CD booklet there is an image similar to that shown in the cover artwork, although this time it is a sepia-tinted photograph in which the building, shown mid-section, dominates the entire visual space. The sun’s glare obliterates one section of

it, and the rest of the photo appears slightly over-exposed and fuzzy, with its rows upon rows of blank windows reflecting nothing but light. The last image in the booklet shows a cross-section of what appears to be a downtown business district; office-blocks built one on top of the other in uniform rows, mazes of windows. The urban scenes depicted in these images appear impressive, even beautiful in their sleek, geometric silhouettes and structures, but also impersonal and cold: the city as “dehumanised geometry”, in which people are “invisible” or “insignificant”.⁵³ There are no human beings, nor indeed any signs of animate life (unless of course you count the buildings themselves).

Interspersed between these images are two others of an entirely different ‘nature’: one a shimmering expanse of moving water – an ocean or river – and the other a hazy sky the colour of burnt umber. These images of the natural world – depicted in warm, bright colours and ‘widescreen’ scope – stand out against the sharp lines and rigid uniformity of the buildings and cityscapes with which they are juxtaposed in the CD booklet. And yet, like the vast backdrop of sky shown in the cover artwork, they too appear somewhat impassive and impersonal. There is no horizon or frame of reference in these images – nothing that would allow the viewer to secure their bearings or gain a sense of perspective: just seemingly endless expanses of sky and water. The image of the sky is one that also features prominently in one of Wilco’s later albums, fittingly titled *Sky Blue Sky*, in which the cover artwork depicts a flock of starlings pursued by a falcon – the flock parting into two halves as the falcon dives inward. In an interview, Tweedy stated that, for him, the image invoked a sense of “kinetic energy and violence... a life-or-death moment”, which were pertinent to his conception of the album.⁵⁴ However, it is his description of the sky *behind* the birds which resonates most strongly here; as Tweedy continues: “But right behind that is this serene, peaceful sky – and it’s always there, throughout all the moments that are bad in our lives.”⁵⁵ While Tweedy’s comments here are focused specifically on *Sky Blue Sky*, I would argue that something similar can be said of the way the images of sky and water work within *YHF*’s artwork – in that they serve as a visual reminder of the vastness of space, which throws the claustrophobic, closed-in cityscapes and buildings of the other images into sharp relief.

⁵³ Donald, J. ‘The City, The Cinema: Modern Spaces’ in C. Jenks (ed.) *Visual Culture* (London, New York, 1995) p. 75

⁵⁴ Tweedy quoted in McKay, A. “Happy...me?” in *Uncut* Jun:121 (2007) p. 75

⁵⁵ McKay, A. (2007) p. 75

Indeed, there is something both comforting and unsettling about these images of the natural world – something which seems to dwarf the buildings and skyscrapers, and make them appear ‘smaller’ and more insignificant.

This is made especially apparent in the image which appears at the centre of the CD booklet, in which all the different ‘views’ or ‘perspectives’ explored throughout the rest of the album packaging are pulled together into a single panorama. This picture depicts a black-and-white silhouette of a city skyline, foregrounded by a vast body of water and set against an equally vast background of sky. The sky overhead is grey, overcast, and the water below flickers with the last rays of light, while the urban skyline in-between, shown from a great distance, is reduced to a series of shadowy, indiscriminate rectangular blocks perched along the horizon like a row of chimneys. In this image, the vast, intimidating structures of buildings and skyscrapers shown throughout the other pictures are put into a different perspective: its impressive skyline is literally reduced, such that the city appears engulfed or overwhelmed by the vastness of space and water surrounding it. This difference in perspective is also reinforced by the formatting of the picture, in that unlike the other images distributed throughout the booklet, this one is positioned length-ways across one-and-a-half pages, such that the viewer/listener needs to turn the booklet at a right angle to the lyrics in order to put the image itself into perspective. Indeed, when one first comes across the image, interspersed amongst the others (which are all shown right-side-up), it initially appears as though the sky and water are side by side, with the skyline in-between representing a narrow vertical strip down the middle, effectively dividing the two.

There is something ominous, foreboding, about the image – a sense of isolation and vulnerability which is registered both through the overcast sky and the seeming fragility of the city, cloaked in shadow as night closes in. There are no lights flickering on the horizon, and the immobility of the scene, shown from such a distance that it appears uninhabited, makes the city appear eerie, dwarfed. Imprinted against the dark sky above are a series of faint white lines which radiate outwards in a circular pattern – similar to the whorls made by finger prints or the swirling constellations depicted throughout Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, except that here the wisps appear less as a dizzy extension of the night sky itself than as the transmissions sent out by radio signals. The signals appear

faint, barely discernible in parts, yet visible nonetheless, radiating out above the silhouetted skyline like lost voices of its inhabitants somewhere down below. They are the only signs of human activity evident throughout any of the pictures in the album artwork, and yet here they serve only to reinforce the sense of isolation and fragility of the city scene – anonymous transmissions flickering against the darkening sky.

This same image also appears in the Sam Jones documentary, *I Am Trying to Break Your Heart*, which details the making of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. However, in this instance, while the image of the city remains completely static – there is no alteration in camera angle or focus – the scene itself undergoes constant subtle transformations through the use of time-lapse photography, which sends the day rapidly disintegrating into night: clouds flattening themselves across the sky, the light quickly fading, before the entire image is swamped in blackness, with just the lights in the distance showing any trace of the city skyline. Played against this backdrop is the coda to the penultimate track from the album, “Poor Places”, in which an anonymous female voice repeats the phrase (and album title) “Yankee...Hotel...Foxtrot” over and over against a backdrop of squalling feedback and droning white noise. With each repetition of the coded signal, the image on-screen flickers and pulsates in time with the music like a radar screen – almost as if both sound and image are drawing on the same power-source. It is as though the city itself is the conduit for the message, as well as the distance it must cross in order to be received. Against this blackening backdrop, the image of the city morphing from the bright light of day to the flickering onset of night in front of our eyes, the sound of the coded message being repeated over and over becomes ever more disconcerting. As the city is gradually subsumed in darkness, its lights fading one by one, the signal continues – a single ‘voice’ resounding against a black screen. Despite the odd persistence of this voice, repeating its coded message over and over again, it increasingly appears that the message may not, in fact, be received.

The voice itself is not ‘human’, but rather an electronically-generated radio transmission; the coded message one of many intercepted short-wave radio signals captured on the *Conet* box-set which, as I will discuss further below, Tweedy revealed had inspired *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. As is consistent with the robotic nature of the transmission, the delivery is disjointed – there is not the slightest emotional cadence or

‘flow’ to its speech. And yet, at the same time, it *is* emotional – as the track continues, the voice’s volume is raised, taking on a quality of insistence, as though determined to be heard amidst the escalating din. There is a moment when the cold, yet seemingly persistent voice and the flurry of white noise and static surrounding it seem like they will reach breaking point, and then it all ends abruptly.

While the narrator throughout the song “Poor Places”, which the coda is taken from, appears detached, deadened, closed-off (taunting his audience – or his lover – with the lyrics: “there’s bourbon on the breath/of the singer you love so much/he takes all his lines from the books/you don’t read anyway”), in this instance it is, as Joseph Auner suggests, “precisely the machine voice that becomes the most expressive and communicative.”⁵⁶ Although the subject of Auner’s discussion is the use of an electronically-generated voice on Radiohead’s “Fitter, Happier”, taken from their 1997 album *OK Computer*, his comments here perfectly capture the paradoxical ‘emotion’ which is seemingly voiced in the closing sections of “Poor Places”. Tweedy himself apparently “heard something strangely moving in [the] vaguely forlorn voices” recorded on the *Conet* box-set – a “forlorn quality” which Auner contends may be understood as characteristic of “androids and cyborgs in general, an integral aspect of their hybrid condition.”⁵⁷ Part of what makes the electronically-generated voice appear so ‘emotional’ in this context, in contrast with the narrator throughout the song itself, is the use of repetition – the way in which the voice continues to repeat the phrase over and over again. That this should render the voice more and not less ‘expressive’ is interesting, given that repetition is often associated with the ‘mechanical’ – in dance music, for instance, the use of looped vocal samples as repetitive rhythm tracks often serves to empty the phrase of meaning and expression. As I will discuss further in the third chapter on Bjork’s *Medulla*, the voice is customarily the focal point in many genres of popular music, serving as a sign of ‘authenticity’ and ‘subjectivity’; however, Auner argues that: “when the recording of the voice repeats, when it is looping system we associate with the mechanical, all this is lost – just as a record getting stuck was always a traumatic moment, shattering the sense of immediacy and authenticity

⁵⁶ Auner, J. (2003) p. 102

⁵⁷ Auner, J. (2003) p. 113

promised by the recording.”⁵⁸ And yet, here the repetition of the coded voice has the opposite effect – if anything, it makes the message appear more poignant and meaningful. The repetition is what makes the voice sound ‘sad’; as John Schacht suggests: “the effect is like listening to the computer Hal wind down at the end of Kubrick’s *2001*, and the ominous sentiment of inconsolable loss is much the same: What the hell has become of us?”⁵⁹ It is a question that resounds throughout *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*.

Yankee Hotel Foxtrot:

Wilco frontman and primary songwriter Jeff Tweedy has suggested that his initial thoughts for the album came from listening to a collection of recordings of short-wave radio transmissions intercepted by worldwide intelligence agencies, in which electronically-generated voices recite numeric sequences and morse-code. Whilst promoting the band’s previous album, *Summerteeth*, Tweedy first began discussing his “radio fixation”, stating:

I got this record of all Morse code last year and I swear to God I listened to it more than any other record... Well, it’s actually number stations on short wave radio that have existed since World War II. There are still hundreds of them owned and run by intelligence agencies and they for some reason transfer code... and lots of it is people reading out numbers.⁶⁰

Indeed, the album’s title, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, is itself military code – “a phonetic alphabet used by NATO to transmit coded messages to spies via shortwave radio.”⁶¹ (It is also, incidentally, the name of a “high-traffic station on the network of short-wave radio stations operated by Mossad, Israel’s intelligence agency.”)⁶² The significance of the album’s title, and its relationship to both the intercepted radio transmissions which inspired the album, and the album’s thematic concerns with ideas of communication, are accentuated on the song, “Poor Places”, as discussed above, in which an

⁵⁸ Auner, J. (2003) p. 112

⁵⁹ Schacht, J. (2003) p. 418 While Schacht is specifically referring here to the conclusion of the album as a ‘whole’, his comments here apply most directly to the song “Poor Places”. Auner also uses the example from Kubrick’s film to open his discussion of “posthuman ventriloquism”...

⁶⁰ Tweedy quoted in Dechert, R. (2002) paragraph 29

⁶¹ Schacht, J. (2003) p. 416

⁶² Dechert, R. (2002) paragraph 28

electronically-generated voice – taken from the *Conet* box-set – repeats the album title against a backdrop of squalling feedback.

Tweedy’s “radio fixation” led him to begin thinking about ideas of communication within the contemporary urban landscape; as Tweedy continues:

These solitudes exist so apart from each other in this sea of white noise and information. And the beautiful thing is they keep transmitting to each other in the hope that somebody is going to find them. And the beauty is that people still do, still find some meaning in another person, in a relationship, find some way to communicate, even though more often than not it’s in a way that’s not what they intended. Because some communication is better than not communicating at all.⁶³

Tweedy’s statement here seems to me to articulate many of the uncertainties – as well as the ‘hope’ – regarding the questions of love and communication which recur throughout the album. As I discussed earlier, many of the songs on the album are, in their own way, love songs: songs addressed to a loved one and presented in the “I/you” format which is common to the conventions of both the love song and the love letter. These songs present an ongoing dialogue or exchange throughout the album – whether ‘real’ or ‘imagined’ – between the “I” of the singer and the “you” of a loved one, in which the voice of another is often implied without ever actually being present. This, in turn, creates a paradoxical situation, whereby the object of the singer’s discourse – the “you” invoked by the “I” of the singer – appears at once to be both absent yet present; incredibly far away yet somehow close by. Indeed, it is this distance which the love song itself attempts to bridge, serving as a vehicle for the act of communication and the desire for connection expressed throughout the lyrics. The love song is a message sent out into the ether, one amongst many hundreds of thousands in the “sea of white noise and information”, calling out to be heard.

At the same time, however, this desire for “human connection” is framed within a sonic context which appears to serve as a formidable obstruction to the act of communication, and there is a continual tension or conflict, throughout the album, between the love lyrics, on the one hand, and the sonic accompaniment and background ‘noise’, on the other, whereby the latter frequently threatens to subsume and overwhelm the former.

⁶³ Kot, G. (2004) p. 194

Electronic sound effects, radio static, murmuring voices and all manner of bleeps and buzzes, provide a recurring motif throughout the album, creating a perpetual backdrop of noise and distortion, which occasionally creeps into the foreground, submerging the songs in a wave of white noise. Crackling webs of feedback and static-encrusted voices cut in and out intermittently, as if caught in a crossed-line. The songs appear to move through patches of interference similar to those picked up on headphones when a mobile phone rings or one intercepts a radio signal. Indeed, at times it is hard to make out the songs – let alone the words – for all the ‘noise’.

Discussing the relationship between the ‘visual’ and the ‘sonic’ in shaping perceptions and experiences of the modern city, Fran Tonkiss suggests that if “the visual” constitutes the city’s “action and spectacle”, then “sound is [its] atmosphere”, concluding: “Cities provide the soundstage for the drama of modern life.”⁶⁴ Tonkiss is primarily concerned here with the way sounds in the modern city were interpreted and represented in the work of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century writers and theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel – an urban context which is, in many ways, vastly different from that which I am considering here (as I will address further later). Whilst acknowledging these differences, however, I believe that Tonkiss’ discussion of sound in the city provides a useful entry point into thinking about the ways in which music might register ideas of the contemporary urban landscape. In particular, her elision of ‘sound’ and ‘atmosphere’ in the city, on the one hand, and ‘vision’ with ‘action’/‘spectacle’ on the other, is especially suggestive in relation to the way *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* uses sound and music to create an ‘atmosphere’ or ‘soundstage’ for the ‘drama’ of the songs.

The urban landscape is registered on *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* as an ‘atmosphere’ of ‘white noise’ and interference – a mellifluous construct which is perpetually in the process of being arranged and rearranged; “a network whose shape changes relentlessly in response to the messages of unseen signals and unknown codes.”⁶⁵ And yet, at the same time, it is also obstructive, a barrier – which threatens to overwhelm the singer entirely (thus precluding contact). *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* can be understood as exploring the idea that, despite the influx of information and globalized communication networks,

⁶⁴ Tonkiss, F. (AU) p. 304

⁶⁵ Castells quoted in Soja, E. (2000) p. 214

and despite the ostensible dissolution of geographical boundaries, the postmodern city can still be seen as one where genuine two-way communication or interaction is fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. It is an urban environment similar to that invoked by Patrizia Lombardo, when she writes:

[W]e find ourselves bombarded by images, voices, computerized instructions, by technical glow and murmuring, and have become indifferent to the lack of human presence that the impersonal media carry within themselves... [I]n the world of mass communication, in the glimmering metropolis of computers, TV screens, electronic devices, we act without surprise, without missing a type of exchange that implies the presence of interlocutors.⁶⁶

The postmodern cityscape as it is registered throughout the album is an environment in which one is supposedly able to instantly access every imaginable kind of information, where one is able to contact someone on the other side of the planet at the touch of a button, and yet the protagonists throughout *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* remain isolated and alienated, struggling to communicate or touch the people they care most about. As Raymond Williams writes: “Much of what we call communication is, necessarily, no more in itself than transmission: that is to say, a one-way sending.”⁶⁷ Williams’ quote here seems to me to sum up the sentiment *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* explores, the love songs floating in the ether, in which there is no guarantee that the message will be received. And yet, as Tweedy’s quote above suggests, the important thing is the act of communication itself – sending the message out there, calling out to be heard.

“I Am Trying to Break Your Heart”

“I Am Trying to Break Your Heart” serves as a highly effective introduction to the album: from the eerie, metallic buzz and woozy false-start which opens the track, to the surreal imagery and syncopated rhythm marked out by the alliteration in the first lines, the song immediately ‘sets the scene’ whilst scrambling the listener’s bearings. Indeed, reviews and discussions of the album almost invariably begin by looking at the way this opening track serves to establish the album’s lyrical themes and sonic ‘atmosphere’. S. Renee Dechert, for example, suggests that from the first few seconds of the song’s

⁶⁶ Lombardo, P. *Cities, Words, and Images: From Poe to Scorsese* (Basingstoke, New York, 2003) p. 153

⁶⁷ Williams quoted in Lombardo, P. (2003) p. 152

introduction: “It is immediately clear that this isn’t a typical pop album, and much of the disc’s thematic tension is established.”⁶⁸ John Schacht similarly describes the “65 seconds of synthesized layers” which opens the album as bearing “the insistent ring of a wake-up alarm”, arguing: “one thing is for sure with *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*: we’re not in Kansas, or Creedville [a reference to Creed, a popular MOR band at the time], anymore.”⁶⁹ The song introduces much of the lyrical and sonic imagery which recurs throughout the rest of the album.

It opens with a soft mechanical humming sound accompanied by a high-pitched, metallic resonance, like the buzz of fluorescent lights – a sound which immediately conjures an atmosphere reminiscent of the “permanent hum” and “continued sonic presence” which Simon Frith attributes to late-twentieth-century technology.⁷⁰ Through these opening few seconds, this soft humming sound cuts in and out of one speaker, creating an unbalanced effect – as if the still in the process of adjusting the levels in the mix. As other unidentifiable noises – a wash of keyboards, rattles, bells and digital effects – sift in and out of the mix, slowly, almost imperceptibly, a rhythm begins to emerge. All the sounds momentarily ‘gel’, each instrument coming together in synchrony, with purpose, before the rhythm falters and the various sounds lose their momentum, dispersing back into fragmentary, tuneless noises/cacophony. There are a few seconds of disorientation, as all the instruments and whirring noises become woozy and flat, accompanied by an intermittent rattling, like the sound of a machine winding down. Combined with the dissonant chimes and bells, the effect is vaguely eerie and unnatural, like slowed-down carnival music or the slurred notes and off-kilter springs of a wound-down music box (an effect which is also evident in the opening humming sound, which, by way of its eerie metallic ring, manages to sound both utterly unnatural and strangely celestial at once).

And then, out of the midst of the clanking and humming comes the rising strains of a keyboard combined with a strummed acoustic guitar, creating a warm, full sound which is spread across both speakers to create a rich, resonant backdrop. All the ramshackle rattling and whirring noises begin to blur and fade into the background, and another

⁶⁸ Dechert, R. (2002) paragraph 33

⁶⁹ Schacht, J. (2003) p. 416-417

⁷⁰ Frith, S. (1996) p. 100

rhythm begins to emerge – stronger this time, and less congested, with a more even distribution of sounds across the mix. The bass and drums enter simultaneously, locking into a tight, surprisingly funky rhythm section seemingly pulled from nowhere, with the bass casually strolling through before being bowled over by a drum-fill that seems to trip up over itself, like a drum-fill played backwards. At this juncture most of the other sounds drop abruptly out of the mix, leaving just Tweedy’s voice, backed by a distant organ, acoustic guitar and bass:

I am an American aquarium drinker
I assassin down the avenue
I’m hiding out in the big city blinking
what was I thinking when I let go of you

The image of the singer “hiding out in the big city blinking” is given a vivid sonic context through the use of background sounds and percussion, the latter of which resemble the faltering footsteps of someone stumbling through city streets, while the fleeting sonic bleeps and buzzes suggest the blurred movement of passing traffic and fellow pedestrians. While the rest of the instrumentation – particularly the organ and acoustic guitar – is often bathed in reverb, giving it a warm, enveloping sound which makes it difficult to tell exactly where in the mix the various sounds are coming from, the recorded percussion emphasises the higher frequencies of the drum sound, thus giving it a ‘hollow’, ‘tinny’ sound which appears to rebound throughout the stereo image like footsteps on concrete. This interplay between voice and percussion creates a sense of movement which seems to suggest multiple, divergent paths.

Lyrical, the song establishes the sense of uncertainty and confusion which recurs throughout the tracks that follow – particularly the following track, in which the chorus lyrics read “phone my family tell them I’m lost on the / sidewalk / no it’s not ok”. However, in this case, the tone is playful, if delirious, rather than anxious – for the time being at least, the experience of being “lost on the sidewalk” *is* “ok”. The lyrical language throughout is often abstract and evasive, and there is a surreal, dream-like quality to the song – the cryptic wordplay and increasingly nonsensical detours of the lyrics, combined with the constant fluctuation of sounds and noises going on around the

singer's voice, creates a woozy, disoriented atmosphere, as though the world is spinning.

Structurally, the song consists of five verses, all using the same simple chord progression throughout, before arriving at what might be called a 'chorus' (although this also uses the same chord progression), followed by a three minute 'coda', during which 'fragments' of a final verse can, only just, be heard within the escalating din. The song was apparently the first that Jim O'Rourke was invited to mix, and he is widely credited with helping to define the structure of the final version of the track we hear on record, creating a constantly fluctuating soundscape which, as Greg Kot writes, gives "the song a sense of motion that the three-chord, chorus-free narrative couldn't have sustained on its own. Once [O'Rourke] got done, the song had morphed from an unfocused sound-effects display into a coherent musical journey."⁷¹ While I am not sure that "coherent" is necessarily the best word to describe the frequently bewildering movement of the song, the analogy with a "journey" is apt, conveying the sense of an urban landscape unfolding as the song progresses.

This sense of a landscape unfolding is achieved, firstly, through the arrangement of sounds within the mix, whereby each new verse of lyrics appears to create its own 're-mix' of the existing soundscape, re-shuffling the instrumental parts and noises to create a perpetually evolving tapestry of sound. Thus for example, the first part of the song constructs a dialogue between Tweedy's voice and Kotche's percussion – a kind of call-and-response, in which the drummer appears to respond to the rhythms and movements of the singer's voice, rather than the other way around.⁷² In the second verse, all the other sounds are stripped back and the acoustic guitar is moved into the foreground, its strumming bathed in reverb to create a 'warm', 'resonant' sound, and spread across both speakers, so that it seems to bathe the lead vocals. The effect is such that each verse

⁷¹ Kot, G. (2004) p. 198

⁷² Glen Kotche's particular style of percussion has been noted for its versatility – its ability to adapt to different acoustic environments in a way which enhances the subtleties and nuances of the song rather than sticking to a straight 'beat' (a trait which marks him out from straight 'rock' drummers). In his biography of Wilco, Greg Kot describes the process by which Kotche apparently conceived multiple percussion parts for the song by: "devising two separate but complementary rhythm lines on a trap kit and a set of hubcaps, and then embellishing them by running handheld electric fans across piano strings, tapping away on the floor tiles, and pounding crotales (tuned metal discs with a distinctive bell-like sound). It offered myriad options for the final mix of the song, a tapestry of percussion that could be woven in and out of the arrangement." Kot, G. (2004) p. 193

appears to create its own distinct ‘scene’, juxtaposing alternate ways of seeing, or rather *hearing* the postmodern cityscape.

This sense of a landscape unfolding is also achieved through the interplay between ‘foreground’ and ‘background’ – a relationship which is characterised throughout the song in terms of continual flux and movement, as instruments which were previously situated in the ‘background’ are shifted into the ‘foreground’, and vice-versa. The song makes use of dramatic or “radical” stereo imaging and multi-tracking whereby, rather than assigning instruments and sounds to a fixed location within the mix, as is the norm within many pop recordings, here they are scattered and rearranged throughout. Thus sounds appear to move from one speaker to the next, or a rhythm heard in one speaker will be picked up and echoed by the percussion in the next, as if rebounding throughout the stereo ‘field’. Fleeting noises and electronic sound effects filter in and out of each speaker, flickering and fading like shadows – or the coloured dots which besiege the protagonist from Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* – at the peripheries of one’s field of vision, giving the impression that there is a lot more going on ‘behind the scenes’. It creates a constantly shifting scale of space and distance, such that the soundscape appears to be perpetually fluctuating, arranging and rearranging itself – as sounds move from the ‘background’ into the ‘foreground’ and recede back again.

The effect is similar to the “mobile listening” described by Jean-Paul Thibaud in his discussion of walkman listeners in the city, in which he argues that “listening with headphones on is like a wonderful decoding instrument of the urban sonic environment”, enabling the listener to ‘filter’ and ‘select’ the sounds of the city in a manner which destabilises the relationship between foreground and background.⁷³ As Thibaud writes:

Depending upon the places and what is happening in them, the sound volume of the Walkman is used in order to be able to listen to or to mask conversations, bells ringing, children’s screams, traffic noises, and so forth. What comes out of the urban noise are the sounds that signify the

⁷³ Thibaud, J. P. ‘The Sonic Composition of the City’ in M. Bull, & L. Back (ed.) *Auditory Culture Reader*. (Oxford, 2003) p. 330

place, those that qualify the space with a singular voice. Thus, the selective listening enables a hierachization of everyday sounds and a decomposition of the urban soundscape.⁷⁴

As Thibaud's comments here suggest, the "sonic decomposition" of the urban environment practiced by the walkman listener may be a source of empowerment, allowing him or her to mitigate and, to a certain extent, control the constant flow of sounds and noises which are said to characterise the urban environment. As Steven Connor writes: "In giving sounds a structure, we attempt to fix and spatialize, perhaps by borrowing the visual power to segment and synthesize, what is in its nature transient. We attempt to create a picture of what does not dispose itself as such."⁷⁵ At the same time, however, this "picture", within the context of the song, consistently resists focus – as soon as it assumes a particular form or shape, the momentum will shift and framework collapses, only to reform in different ways.

Connecting each verse is an instrumental bridge, in which all the various sounds and instruments cohere before being stripped back and rearranged for the following verse. I will discuss the significance of the musical 'bridge' in more detail in the next chapter; here it is important to recognise that the 'bridge' in this song is crucial in allowing the listener to get some sense of their 'bearings'. That is, while the soundscape throughout the song is constantly shifting and moving, the use of the instrumental 'bridge' between each verse serves as a point of continuity – without it, the song would appear largely as so much flux and transition. In a sense, this is the exact opposite to the conventional lay-out of a pop song, where the verses are usually structurally and melodically quite similar to one another, and the bridge is the transitional movement which throws a change of key or tempo into the mix. While no one bridge in the song is exactly the same as another (like the verses, these are also 're-mixed'), by making the rhythm and melody central to the structure of each bridge – usually by foregrounding the bass, percussion, and keyboard – they represent a point of stability and continuity between the verses, as well as serving to mark the transition from the end of one verse to the

⁷⁴ Thibaud, J. P. (2003) p. 330-331

⁷⁵ Connor, S. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford, 2000) p. 17

beginning of the next. The bridge thus serves as an intermediary passage – a form of “sonic continuity” which enables the transition from one sonic ‘space’ to another.⁷⁶

This fluctuating interplay between ‘foreground’ and ‘background’ is focused around Tweedy’s voice which, for most of the song, provides the focal point, around which the other sounds merge and re-emerge intermittently. Indeed, everything else seems to happen *around* his voice, the other instruments taking their cue from his vocal rhythms, slipping in behind or counterpointing the melody of his voice. While the other sounds and instrumental parts around his voice are constantly shifting and rearranging, continually threatening to overwhelm the singer, his voice remains mostly isolated and untouched throughout, as though protected by some kind of invisible force-field. This privileging of the singer’s voice, combined with the consistent use of the first person/present tense in the lyrics, helps to create a sense of perspective for the listener which is directly allied with that of the singer, as though we are seeing/hearing the city through his eyes/ears, as he provides a running commentary from the street.⁷⁷ It also establishes a point of continuity within a sonic landscape which is primarily characterised by flux and movement – Tweedy’s voice is what takes the listener through these different ‘scenes’, leading the way, as it were, through the urban environment.

Thus the urban landscape is experienced in this song as a kind of sonic ‘diorama’ – a three dimensional ‘scene’, through which the singer seems to move, taking the listener with him. With its perambulating rhythms and unfolding ‘scenery’, it would be possible to hear the song as enacting something akin to the aural equivalent of the ‘*flaneur*’ – that urban ‘*voyeur*’ and “modern metropolitan man” *par excellence*.⁷⁸ Commonly associated with the poetry and philosophy of Baudelaire, Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, among other prominent theories of the modern city, the figure of the flaneur, as Chris Jenks writes, emerges “as the spectator and depicter of modern life, most specifically in relation to contemporary art and the sights of the city.”⁷⁹ The *flaneur* is, famously, “the man in, but not of, the crowd”; as Deena and Michael Weinstein write:

⁷⁶ Thibaud, J. P. (2003) p. 333

⁷⁷ In this respect, I am reminded of the music video for the Verve’s “Bittersweet Symphony”, in which the singer, Richard Ashcroft, walks through busy urban streets bumping into people, whilst staring straight ahead, singing to camera (although I am not sure Tweedy would appreciate the comparison).

⁷⁸ Donald, J. (1995) p. 81

⁷⁹ Jenks, C. ‘Watching Your Step. The History and Practice of the *Flâneur*’ in C. Jenks (ed.) *Visual Culture*. (London, New York, 1995) p. 146

“The *flâneur* is an observer, a spectator, a gazer”; he “takes the urban scene as a spectacle, strolling through it as though it were a diorama... breaking [the city] apart into a shower of events, primarily sights.”⁸⁰ As this suggests, the *flâneur* is predominantly identified as a visual/literary figure – a figure who is suggestive of ways of ‘seeing’ or ‘reading’ the city. Arguing the case for the continuing relevance of the ‘*flâneur*’ within the contemporary urban milieu, Jenks describes the ‘*flâneur*’ as “an analytic form, a narrative device, [and] an attitude towards knowledge and its social context” – and this “attitude” is primarily visual, as Jenks states: “The flâneur moves through space and among the people with a viscosity that both enables and privileges *vision*.”⁸¹ Thus the *flâneur* becomes a model for particular ways of negotiating the urban landscape.

While Jenks’ argument seeks to reclaim the figure of the ‘flâneur’ from within a postmodern cultural context, others, such as Deena and Michael Weinstein, have challenged its validity on the grounds that: “the metropolis is the site of postmodernity, and the intellectual character most appropriate for describing it is developed in postmodernist discourse, not in the gallery of human types received from the first half of the nineteenth century.”⁸² While I agree that it is imperative to recognise the way in which the postmodern city has rendered older modes of aesthetic representation obsolete, my own resistance to the model of the flâneur derives less from its supposed obsolescence within a contemporary cultural context than the visual/literary model which is implicit to conceptions of the flâneur. There is, as yet, no ‘aural’ equivalent of the flâneur – although Jean-Paul Thibaud suggests, in his discussion of walkman listeners in the city cited earlier, that inherent in the kinds of urban tactics deployed by such listeners as they move through the urban environment, “[a] new figure of the city dweller may be in the process of being born. Instead of the eye-oriented flâneur dear to Walter Benjamin, mustn’t we substitute the discriminating listening of the musicalized passer-by?”⁸³ Indeed, this idea of the ‘musicalized passer-by’ seems to provide one way in which the *flâneur* model might be reappropriated in relation to sound and music within the urban landscape.

⁸⁰ Weinstein, D. & Weinstein, M. *Postmodern(ized) Simmel* (London, New York, 1993) p. 59-60

⁸¹ Jenks, C. (1995) p. 146

⁸² Weinstein, D. & Weinstein, M. (1993) p. 54

⁸³ Thibaud, J.P. (AU) p. 331

Thus, like the *flaneur*, Tweedy's delivery remains deadpan and detached throughout, and yet, unlike the *flaneur*, his journey is that of the 'musicalized passer-by', negotiating the urban environment through sound and music, taking the listener through a series of detours and tangents before arriving, finally, four minutes and five verses into the track, at the 'chorus'. It is as though all the preceding verses leading up to this moment were simply a way of stalling before reaching the inevitable punchline:

I am trying to break your heart
I am trying to break your heart
but still I'd be lying if I said it wasn't easy
I am trying to break your heart

There is a brief pause and then, right on cue, the rest of the instruments kick in and the song suddenly takes off – what Greg Kot describes as “a majestic anthem pulled from chaos.”⁸⁴ After less than a minute, however, the music breaks down again, stuttering, the momentum that had held everything in place suddenly collapsing, with sounds scattering and clattering as though the screws had come loose. The last two minutes of the song are given over to the noise and confusion which had been held at bay throughout the rest of the song, and within which Tweedy's voice reappears – this time submerged from deep within the mix.

Tweedy's voice in this closing passage is no longer privileged in the mix, but rather appears to be swimming as the noises and sounds around him merge together in a “delirious spinning” – a whirlpool of chaos and confusion.⁸⁵ His cool, detached delivery loses its grip, as his voice rises in pitch and volume, struggling to be heard against the barrage of noises. The swirling interplay of voice and noise is suggestive of the state of 'psychasthenia', described by Celeste Olalquiaga, wherein the distinction between 'background' and 'foreground', 'inside' or 'outside', 'body' and 'environment' collapses. The term psychasthenia bears similarities with 'neurasthenia' – a term which is often associated with modernist conceptions of the urban landscape, particularly the model of the *flaneur*, discussed above, whereby “reality is not touched with direct confidence but with fingertips that are immediately withdrawn.”⁸⁶ Both psychasthenia

⁸⁴ Kot, G. (2004) p. 199

⁸⁵ Olalquiaga, C. (1992) p. 3

⁸⁶ Georg Simmel quoted in Weinstein, D. & M. (????) p. 58

and neurasthenia are often understood to be psychological responses to the hectic pace and constant influx of sensory information characteristic of the urban landscape. However, where neurasthenia sets up a distance and detachment between self and environment, psychasthenia describes a dissolution or “disturbance in the relation between self and surrounding territory”.⁸⁷ Olalquiaga defines psychasthenia as:

[A] state in which the space defined by the co-ordinates of the organism’s own body is confused with represented space. Incapable of demarcating the limits of its own body, lost in the immense area that circumscribes it, the psychasthenic organism proceeds to abandon its own identity to embrace the space beyond.⁸⁸

Olalquiaga’s use of the word “embrace” demonstrates that psychasthenia is not an entirely passive process, but rather may be employed as a means of survival within an urban landscape where images proliferate and fragment, time is marked by repetition and multiplication, and space is flattened and transparent. Indeed, Olalquiaga suggests that it is possible to make a choice:

It [“contemporary identity”] can opt for a psychasthenic dissolution into space, merging into the multilayered cityscape like so many other images, floating in the complete freedom of unrootedness; lacking a body, identity then affixes itself to any scenario like a transitory and discardable costume. Or it can profit from the crossing of boundaries, turning the psychasthenic process around before its final thrust into emptiness, benefiting from its expanded boundaries.⁸⁹

Where Olalquiaga, as with many other theorists, is referring here primarily to “images”, “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart” demonstrates what this psychasthenic dissolution might sound like, were it be rendered musically. Moreover, where Olalquiaga foresees a potentially liberating outcome to the psychasthenic dilemma, the singer in “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart” appears to remain stuck in the psychasthenic warp, unable to dissociate itself from the dizzying whirlpool of sounds, and disappearing into a cacophony of noise.

Soja argues that: “It is precisely this *breaking down and reconstitution* of spatial scales, from the most intimate spaces of the body, household, and home to the metropolitan

⁸⁷ Olalquiaga, C. (1992) p. 2

⁸⁸ Olalquiaga, C. (1992) p. 2

⁸⁹ Olalquiaga, C. (1992) p. 17

region and the territorial nation-state, that is so deeply involved in the contemporary intensification of globalization.”⁹⁰ That is, just as the boundaries and material limits of the postmodern city have become increasingly fluid and permeable, so too the ways in which humans conceive of their relationship to their environments and indeed their own bodies (what Soja, following Adrienne Rich, refers to as “the geography closest in”) have become similarly fluid and permeable. Soja argues:

The process of producing spatiality or “making geographies” begins with the body, with construction and performance of the self, the human subject, as a distinctively spatial entity involved in a complex relation with our surroundings. On the one hand, our actions and thoughts shape the spaces around us, but at the same time the larger collectively or socially produced spaces and places within which we live also shape our actions and thoughts in ways that we are only beginning to understand.⁹¹

Frederic Jameson also discusses this transformation in relation to the urban landscape, arguing that the “mutation in built space” encapsulated by postmodern architecture has rendered “our older systems of perception of the city somehow archaic and aimless, without offering another in their place”.⁹² Jameson argues that “[t]his latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world.” Focusing specifically on the *Bonaventure Hotel* in Los Angeles, Jameson suggests that:

we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject; we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace...⁹³

Thus Jameson argues that the sensory disjunction created by such architecture seems to stand as “a call to evolutionary mutation”: “something like an imperative to grow new organs to expand our sensoria and our bodies to some new, as yet unimaginable,

⁹⁰ Soja, E. (2000) p. 200

⁹¹ Soja, E. (2000) p. 6.

⁹² Jameson, F. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (London, New York, 1991) p. 14

⁹³ Jameson, F. *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London, New York, 1998) p. 10-11

perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions.”⁹⁴ Moreover, this disjunction “between the body and its built environment” is, Jameson argues, itself “an analogue of that even sharper dilemma, which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global, multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subject.”⁹⁵ The breaking down of distinctions in the way individuals relate to their environments – the ‘psychasthenia’ discussed by Olalquiaga above – may then be understood as symptomatic of the kinds of issues and complexities raised by the precarious status of the city within a globalised context.

And yet, it is also in this way that ideas of ‘space’ and ‘distance’ arguably begin to reassert themselves, if only insofar as the individual struggles to make sense of themselves and their relationship to the broader cultural context. Indeed, Manuel Castells suggests that “[i]t is this distinctive feature of being globally connected and locally disconnected, physically and socially, that makes megacities a new urban form”.⁹⁶ I would now like to turn to discuss the ways in which *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* can be understood as refocusing these ideas of space and distance in relation to the question of communication.

“Radio Cure”:

Discussing the impact of globalization in realigning the various cities of the world according to the ‘flows’ of ‘finance capital’, Julian Murphet writes:

[T]he world does not so much ‘ground’ itself in this ethereal and abstract element as raise itself up to it; so that, in the new spatiality of this economy, London is ‘closer’ to Tokyo than it is to Hull; Miami is meshed more with Sydney and Seoul than it is with Havana. This unheard-of transcendence of old spatial barriers in a new system of simultaneities may have been prepared for in the modern (by telegraphy, radio, telephony); but its perfection today, the flawless circulation, via satellite and cable, of funds and information between urban concentrations of

⁹⁴ Jameson, F. (1991) p. 13-14 & Jameson, F. (1998) p. 11

⁹⁵ Jameson, F. (1998) p. 15-16

⁹⁶ Castells, M. quoted in Soja, E. (2000) p. 235

technology and capital renders the nonurban and physical geography *per se* irrelevant as never before, and impacts with extraordinary abstraction on the spatial form of the cities themselves.⁹⁷

In a passage which seems to capture the kind of ‘limbo’ that this “invisible truth of postmodern urbanism” creates, Paul Virilio writes:

Deprived of objective boundaries, the architectonic element begins to drift and float in an electronic ether, devoid of spatial dimensions, but inscribed in the singular temporality of an instantaneous diffusion. From here on, people can’t be separated by physical obstacles or temporal distances. With the interfacing of computer terminals and video monitors, distinctions of *here* and *there* no longer mean anything.⁹⁸

On “Radio Cure” this “electronic ether” is evoked sonically, as a perpetual backdrop of noise and interference. Tweedy’s voice seems to swim in this “electronic ether” – neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’, but lost somewhere in-between.

Contrasting sharply with the tight rhythmic structure and sing-along delivery of the songs before and after (“Kamera” and “War on War”), “Radio Cure” appears as a point of stasis on the album – unlike “I am Trying to Break Your Heart” and “Poor Places”, on this song there is little sense of movement or progression. Indeed, there is nothing remotely ‘up-beat’ about the song at all; on the contrary, the sonic accompaniment and melody remains the same for most of the song, with little variation – a constant drone accompanied by crackling feedback, leavened occasionally by the soft flickers of a pedal steel guitar or keyboard. Through this sonic backdrop Tweedy’s vocals emerge and fade, sounding cracked and exhausted, delivering lyrics which are, at once, both intimate and surreal:

Cheer up
honey I hope you can
there is something wrong with me
my mind is filled with silvery stuff
honey kisses clouds of fluff
shoulders shrugging off...

⁹⁷ Murphet, J. (2004) p. 125

⁹⁸ Virilio, P. (2004) p. 87

The musical backdrop is oppressive, dense, and Tweedy's voice, despite its clarity within the overall mix, has a kind of dullness to it – as if it is taking all his energy simply to get the words out. The lethargy is palpable – one can almost *hear* the “shoulders shrugging off”. It sounds muffled, submerged, like the way music sounds when you are underwater.

There is a steady pulse throughout the song which reverberates through the speakers, and each chord change (of which there are few) seems a long time coming. And yet, there are the faint glimmers, where a strain of melody will seep through, briefly, before disappearing back into the fog. The sonic accompaniment appears to be directly attuned with the singer's state of mind, evoking the “clouds of fluff” and ‘cotton-wool’ effect described in the lyrics. Thus for example, when Tweedy delivers the line “my mind is filled with silvery stuff”, there is a sudden softening of the sound and a pedal steel emerges from the mix, like sunlight breaking through storm clouds; and then in the lines that follow – “shoulders shrugging off” – the chord change descends as though it, too, is shrugging.

As with many of the tracks on the album, the lyrics are written in the “I”/“you” format – albeit in this case with the singer performing both parts – and they are structured in such a way as to suggest a conversation or dialogue, whereby each verse begins with the phrase “cheer up/honey I hope you can”, after which the following lines would appear to be a response to this prompt. This other ‘voice’ introduces each verse like a call or a plea to the singer – the repetition seeming to serve as a reminder to the singer, as if calling the singer back from wherever he is, or as though this is the voice that the singer is trying to find his way back to. The intimacy of the dialogue – signalled firstly by the word “honey”, and then followed by the seemingly self-revealing nature of the singer's response – suggests closeness, what one might reasonably assume to be a personal communication between lovers. Moreover, the repetition of this line, coupled with the fact that the phrasing itself does not alter or vary throughout the song (while the singer's response does), suggests a kind of constant, and loving, ‘presence’ – someone who evidently cares enough to “hope” the singer can “cheer up.”

At the same time, however, there is a contrast set up within the song between the seeming closeness and presence of this other ‘voice’, and a sense of distance which is

created through the sonic backdrop, whereby at the same time as this other ‘voice’ appears to be ‘right there’, prompting the singer, they also appear to be far away. Moreover, while the fact that the phrasing of this other voice does not change could suggest constancy, as mentioned above, it could also imply stasis – as if the same conversation is being played on repeat, stuck in the nowhere-zone between ‘here’ and ‘there’, unable to move forward. Washes of white noise and radio static seem to serve throughout the song as a continual reminder of the vastness of space – whether psychological or geographical – across which communication and information travels. Indeed, the voice itself seems to be saying ‘come back to me’, as if they are a long way away. Each time, it is as though this other ‘voice’ cuts through the haze and the fog, reaching out to the singer from somewhere far away – and then, as the verse continues, drifts further and further away.

It is not clear whether the song itself enacts an ‘actual’ conversation – in which both parts are performed by the singer – or a conversation which is playing itself out in the singer’s mind. It would be possible to hear the song as enacting something like a long-distance phone conversation – an interpretation which is invited by the lyrics to the ‘chorus’: “distance has no way of making love/understandable”. Of course, the ‘distance’ between the two need not be literal – in the sense of a physical or geographic barrier – but rather a psychological or emotional distance, a product of the singer’s state of mind (an interpretation invited by the lines: “my mind is filled with silvery stuff / honey kisses clouds of fluff”). Either way, it appears that the song itself is an attempt to bridge this distance, to close the gulf, and yet the singer remains in limbo – caught in the nowhere-zone between ‘here’ and ‘there’, a space filled with white noise and distortion. Thus, contrary to the supposed dissolution of boundaries and geographic location which are said to characterise the postmodern urban context, within this song, and indeed throughout the album as a ‘whole’, space and distance not only continue to matter, but are that which provides the impetus for the act of communication itself, across which the love song travels. The love song is what traverses this distance in-between – the ‘limbo’ between ‘here’ and ‘there’, an “electronic ether” of noise and interference – and in doing so, marks the passage from “I” to “you”.

Hence the album can be understood as offering a more complex idea of space and distance within the contemporary urban milieu than some postmodern theorists would seem to suggest; a complexity that is registered by Soja when he writes:

Now, it is often proclaimed, we have ‘conquered’ space. We can not only now/here be two places at the same time, we can be everywhere... and no/where too. Space and place, distance and relative location... seem therefore to no longer be as important as they have been in human history, portending what some have called the “end of geography.” In the more critical cyberspace discourse, however, these literally and figuratively utopian... claims are literally and figuratively challenged by a persistent grounding in urban and, most characteristically, postmetropolitan milieux... Location continues to matter, and geographically uneven development continues to make a difference. Even when “surfing the Net” or “cruising the Web,” we remain in a persistent urban nexus (restructured, to be sure) of space, knowledge, and power.⁹⁹

On “Radio Cure”, space and distance, whether psychological, geographical or technological, are opened up at the same time as they are moved across.

Significantly, on “Radio Cure” it is the other ‘voice’ which both opens and closes the song, and in the way the song trails off after the last line – “honey I hope you can...” – one can almost *hear* the ellipsis that follows, leaving the question of communication open. There is no sense of resolution or closure, and yet, the simple fact that this is the last voice we hear suggests a kind of ‘hope’ – an idea which is also raised on the album’s closing track, “Reservations”.

“Reservations”:

I would like to conclude my discussion of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* by looking at the closing song on the album, “Reservations” – a song which is itself a conclusion, of sorts. The song consists largely of swirling keyboards and crackling feedback – like “Radio Cure”, there is little sense of movement or progression, in the sense of a landscape unfolding, and yet within this murmuring ‘sea of white noise and interference’ the song creates a sense of the vastness of space. Coming as it does at the end of an album which is filled with doubt and uncertainty, “Reservations” seems to

⁹⁹ Soja, E. (2000) p. 336

suggest a kind of ‘closure’ – albeit one which is also an opening, an ellipsis in which the song itself is left to resound. Indeed, the title itself can be understood as playing with these ideas, suggesting at once both a sense of uncertainty and doubt, as well as invoking the vastness of space.

It begins as an acoustic ballad against a distant backdrop of noise, and gradually dissolves into a four minute coda consisting entirely of washes of feedback and fuzzed-out keyboards. Lyrically, the song is one of the most direct tracks on the album – in a voice that sounds as cracked and forlorn as it does for much of the CD, Tweedy gives voice to the uncertainties and doubts which have recurred within the songs before, and seems to make a kind of peace with it:

I know this isn't what you were wanting me
to say
how can I get closer and be further away...

And yet, as the lyrics to the chorus gently insist:

O I've got reservations
about
so many things
but
not about you

It is almost like a kind of faith – which is, in a sense, what ‘communication’ in popular music, and perhaps in everyday life within the contemporary urban landscape, is all about: the faith that someone will not only hear you within all the ‘noise’, but also find something meaningful in it. The chorus fades out with the repetition of the lines “not about you”, although the song continues for another four minutes with slow pulses of synthesised distortion that wash in out of the mix. The placing of this song at the end of the CD is, according to Tweedy, deliberate: “The song wasn’t a contender for a single or anything, I knew that... But I’d never felt so certain about anything. To me, that last section exposes what the rest of the record has been about.”¹⁰⁰ The gentle swirling

¹⁰⁰ Kot, G. (2004) p. 200

sounds that close “Reservations” leave a literal space at the end of CD, a space in which the music has finished but the noise continues. As Greg Kot summarises, the album is not simply an exercise in overlaying “indiscriminate noise” over acoustic guitars:

That is never so apparent than on the concluding track, “Reservations”, where sound actually takes over from lyrics to act as a kind of summary statement for the album. For all the sonic machinations, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* is about finding one’s way through a world glutted with impersonal distractions, and finding one thing that matters.¹⁰¹

Yankee Hotel Foxtrot concludes, then, with an idea of hopefulness, resounding through an ocean of white noise and interference.

¹⁰¹ Kot, G. (2004) p. 200

‘MUSICAL APOCALYPSE’: TOM WAITS’ *BONE MACHINE*

Apocalypse derives from the Greek *apocalypsis*, meaning the act of uncovering, unveiling, or revelation.¹ It has been suggested that originally Apocalypse did not embody the concepts of violence and destruction, which we now come to associate with it;² however, at least since its inception as a distinctive genre, it has also come to entail an “end-of-history scenario” which involves not only revelation but catastrophe, destruction, and disaster.³ While the apocalyptic theme or genre continues to inform and inspire a number of different media and discourses into the twenty-first century, the relationship of apocalypse to popular music remains a largely overlooked field of enquiry. Therefore in this chapter I would like to discuss Tom Waits’ 1992 CD, *Bone Machine*, as a popular musical rendition of the apocalyptic theme, in order to explore what the apocalyptic might *sound* like, were it to be rendered musically. To do so, I will be drawing on Jacques Derrida’s essay “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” in which he formulates an idea of the apocalyptic as “*tone*”: the “revelator of some unveiling in process.” This idea of an apocalyptic tone destabilizes and undermines some of the dominant assumptions central to narrative-based understandings of Apocalypse; and indeed, my analysis aims to foreground the ways in which *Bone Machine* enables an original and, at times, subversive musical perspective on what has proven to be a remarkably resilient cultural theme.

Tom Waits: Background

By the time *Bone Machine* was released in 1992, Tom Waits had been a professional recording artist for nineteen years, releasing albums under his own name as well as working with directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Jim Jarmusch on film soundtracks, collaborating with artists as diverse as Primus, Keith Richards and

¹ Frye, N. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London, 1982) p. 135; Derrida, J. “Of An Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” *Semeia* 23 (1984) p. 64 (Derrida writes the Greek word “apokalupsis.”)

² Derrida cites the argument forwarded by Andre Chouraqui that: “nowhere does the word apocalypse... have the sense it finally takes in French and other languages, of fearsome catastrophe. Thus the Apocalypse is essentially a contemplation... or an inspiration... at the sight, the uncovering or disclosure of YHWH and, here, of Yeshoua’ the Messiah.”

³ Jonathon Boyarin writes the work of John J. Collins – “one who has spent decades working on the Jewish apocalyptic texts and their early Christian heirs and contemporaries” – into an argument in which he suggests, firstly, that: “As to the name apocalypse itself, the “genre label is not attested to in the period before Christianity,” and the first book designated as such is Revelation.” Boyarin, J. “At Last, All the Goyim: Notes on a Greek Word Applied to Jews” (Philadelphia, 1995) p. 42.

William S. Burroughs, and acting in films and theatre.⁴ While Waits' early work – an off-kilter take on 1950s-style lounge acts filtered through his 'maudlin-romantic' stage persona and Beat-influenced lyrics – was certainly an eclectic and unusual musical stance in the 1970s, especially compared to the dominant popular music trends at the time (acid-rock, early heavy metal, stadium rock and surf-pop), the "trilogy" of albums Waits released in the eighties – beginning with *Swordfishtrombones* in 1983, *Rain Dogs* in 1985, and *Frank's Wild Years* in 1987 – saw his music become even more experimental, fusing the above influences with a newfound 'punk' sensibility which saw him eschewing the lush piano-and-string arrangements of his earlier albums in favour of what some now refer to as his "junkyard orchestrations", consisting largely of obscure "pawn-shop" sounds and "found" instruments.⁵ This shift in his music practices was also played out in both his lyrical subject matter and singing style, which evolved away from the barroom balladry and seemingly 'autobiographical' vignettes – or what Waits referred to as "improvisational travelogues" – of his earlier work, to a more 'surreal' lyrical approach in which words were used as much for their qualities as sounds as for their semantic meaning.⁶ In doing so he not only avoided becoming a 'caricature' of his earlier persona (which was apparently his intention at one point),⁷ but also created a working process in which autobiography became but one part of the Waits' 'mythology' through which he represented and marketed himself to the public.

Surprisingly, given the high critical esteem and cultural capital which is arguably invested in Waits' work as a popular musician, his music has received remarkably little in the way of academic attention. There have been a number of biographies and an extraordinary number of journalistic articles and interviews, along with reviews

⁴ He had, however, been performing solo and in bands since 1965; Montandon, M. "Timeline and Discography" in M. Montandon, (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 385 For an overview of Waits career, see Montandon, M. (2005) p. 385-388

⁵ Oney, S. "20 Questions" in M. Montandon (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 150; in this interview Waits discusses the influence of American composer Harry Partch, who worked with "built and found instruments"; a method which Waits appropriates in his own work, for example by "dragging a chair across the floor or hitting the side of a locker real hard with a two-by four, a freedom bell, a brake drum with a major imperfection, a police bullhorn."

⁶ This reference to Waits' lyrical style as an "improvisational travelogue" is taken from the title of an article in which Waits himself attempted to distinguish his writing from 'poetry', stating: "I don't like the stigma that comes with being called a poet – so I call what I'm doing an improvisational adventure or an inebriational travelogue, and all of a sudden it takes on a whole new form and meaning." See Everett, T. "Not So Much a Poet, More a Purveyor of Improvisational Travelogue" in M. Montandon (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 44

⁷ As Waits stated in one interview: "I want to be able to go up and be a caricature of myself on stage." Everett, T. (2005) p. 45

of his live performances and discussions of his song lyrics, but thus far there has been no comprehensive analysis of his *music*.⁸ While this is something that I hope the present chapter will go some small way towards addressing, I would also argue that the interest which has been shown in these other aspects of his ‘life’ and ‘work’ (his persona, his lyrics, his interview technique and so on) demonstrates the extent to which it becomes extremely difficult with an artist such as Waits to isolate the ‘music’ from those other ‘non-musical’ features of his work. Perhaps more than any of the artists considered throughout this thesis, there is a ‘mythology’ that surrounds the music of Tom Waits which blurs the lines between ‘autobiography’ and ‘art’, ‘reality’ and ‘representation’ – hence the frequent (and frequently frustrated) attempts by biographers eager to uncover the ‘man’ *behind* the ‘myth’.⁹ Indeed, in an essay entitled “In the Words of Waits”, Steve Packer goes so far as to suggest that, when all is said and done, Waits “may well be remembered less as a musician and songwriter than as a wit and raconteur whose life and art were a seamless, larger-than-life creation, in the fashion of those other demon quotemeisters Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward.”¹⁰ Packer continues: “Like Wilde and Coward, Waits’s lines flow from both his public conversation and a variety of creative output, and the division is blurring as it becomes irrelevant with time.”¹¹ While only time will tell if Packer’s prediction proves correct, it is not Waits’ ‘words’, his ‘myth’ or his ‘life’ that I would like to focus on here, but rather his music – specifically, the album *Bone Machine*, which I will turn to now.

Bone Machine:

Bone Machine was the first ‘official’ Tom Waits album to follow on from his ‘eighties ‘trilogy’,¹² and represented yet another, albeit less marked, shift in both

⁸ For an early analysis of Waits’ song lyrics see Scott, J. “On the Way to Burma Shave: Tom Waits & Ballad Form” *Popular Music and Society* 7:2 (1980) p. 103-113 For a comprehensive overview of articles, interviews and essays on Waits see M. Montandon (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005)

⁹ For his own part, Waits has not only consistently refused cooperation but presented a formidable obstruction to those who seek to undertake such excavation expeditions, preferring rather to let the ‘myth’ – and of course the music – speak for itself.

¹⁰ Packer, S. “In the Words of Waits” in M. Montandon (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 283-284

¹¹ Packer, S. (2005) p. 284

¹² In the meantime there was a live album, *Big Time* (1988), and the soundtrack he provided for Jarmusch’s *Night on Earth* (1992), as well as two unauthorized collections of unreleased material *The Early Years I* and *II* (in 1991 and ’92 respectively). He had also collaborated with Robert Wilson and William S. Burroughs on *The Black Rider*, which would be released in 1993, and acted in films such as *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, and *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, directed by Hector Babenco.

music and production, as well as lyrical content; leaving behind the gritty urban settings and carnivalesque soundscapes of his previous albums to create a more dissonant and, at times, dystopian vision of a world gone to ruin. As the title suggests, ‘bones’ are a recurring lyrical image throughout the CD, along with repeated references to ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’, ‘earth’ and ‘wind’ – ‘elemental’ images which sit alongside those of industrial machinery and mechanical gadgetry to create ‘monstrous’ hybrids (as, for example, the demon envisioned in “Such a Scream”: “She just goes clank and boom and steam/A halo, wings, horn and a tail/Shovelling coal inside my dreams”). Such hybridized images also recur throughout reviews of the album, in which *Bone Machine* is variously described as “stone age blues”; “a cross between an even more avant-garde Captain Beefheart... and a hip caveman banging out a song on a row of upturned skulls”; and the sound of a man “pounding on brake drums with Howlin’ Wolf’s bones”, amongst other things.¹³ These descriptions not only point to the difficulty of categorising an album such as *Bone Machine*, but are also suggestive of the reasons behind this difficulty: the way in which the album fuses multiple rhythms, textures, genres – whereby biblical references, ‘found’ instruments, ‘primitive’ rhythms and Blues and Gospel are all thrown into the mix, to create an album which sounds, at once, like none and all of these things.

If Waits’ musical output throughout the ‘eighties represented an attempt “to find and stake the cardinal points of his personal terrain, in the process collecting and scrambling together what seems like every sort of music ever played in a bar in the twentieth century”, then *Bone Machine*, in contrast, appeared to enact a kind of ‘back-to-basics’ approach, with minimalist production, sparse electric instrumentation, ‘hollow-sounding’ acoustic spaces, and an emphasis on rhythm and percussion.¹⁴ A cursory glance at the album’s liner notes reveals a far more limited or restrained instrumental palette than those of his previous albums, with most songs built around the staple of vocals, percussion, and up-right bass, occasionally augmented by saxophone and electric and/or steel guitar. Waits’ pre-‘eighties

¹³ Lloyd, R. “Gone North: Tom Waits, Upcountry” in Montandon, M. (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 226; Anon review “Tom Waits Bone Machine CD” [Online] available at

<http://www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/1055369/a/Bone+Machine.htm> (accessed 15 Feb 2010); Wilonsky, R. “The Variations of Tom Waits; or: What do Liberace, Rodney Dangerfield, and a One-Armed Pianist Have in Common” in M. Montandon (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 214

¹⁴ Sante, L. “Sewers of Budapest” in M. Montandon, (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 248

musical accompaniment of choice, the piano, is only used on two tracks, and on the whole there is far less evidence of the weird and wonderful array of ‘pawn shop’ instrumentation which had informed the albums he made since then. Moreover, with the exception of Les Claypool’s guest appearance playing electric bass on the opening track, “Earth Died Screaming”, the only electric instrumentation used throughout is the electric guitar.¹⁵

References to breaking things, nailing things together, and “[t]rying to do things with just the essential elements of music”,¹⁶ recur throughout interviews at the time of *Bone Machine*’s release, with Waits stating in one interview: “It’s like making ashtrays: just put three grooves in it and call it an ashtray. I found a great room to work in, it’s just a cement floor and a hot water heater. ‘Okay, we’ll do it here.’ It’s got some good echo.”¹⁷ Elsewhere he makes a similar point, stressing a desire to capture, on-record, the ‘immediacy’ of the performances, which he suggests is a direct response to recent developments in digital recording technologies which effectively enabled ‘performances’ to be reconstructed during the post-production stages of the recording process. In contrast, Waits says:

I like to hear things real crude, cruder. I think if I pursue it, I don’t know where it’ll take me, but y’know, it’s getting more and more like that. I just like to hear it dirty. It’s a natural relationship to where we are in technology, because things swing in and swing back. That’s normal. And I like to step on it, scratch it up, break it. I wanna go further into that world of texture.¹⁸

This emphasis on immediacy is carried through into the album’s production aesthetic, much of which sounds as though it is in the process of falling apart as it is being built.

¹⁵ Of course a microphone is an electric instrument, and the entire recording and production process itself is dependent on electronics and technology, with the final ‘product’ – a record or compact disc – a piece of software dependent on the requisite hardware in order to be listened to at all. Nonetheless, for the purposes of the discussion above, I am more interested in the *sound* of the album rather than the recorded music object itself.

¹⁶ Brannon, B. “Tom Waits” in M. Montandon, (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 146

¹⁷ Brannon, B. (2005) p. 146; in another interview, Waits makes a similar point, stating: “They’re three-legged chairs, and you make ‘em very fast. You provide just enough for them to be able to stand up... You paint ‘em, let ‘em dry, and move on to the next one. I mean the songs on *Bone Machine* are all really simple songs, ‘Murder in the Red Barn,’ ‘That Feel,’ ‘In the Coliseum,’ ‘Earth Died Screaming,’ mostly written with just a drum in a room, and my voice, just hollering it out”. Jarmusch, J. “Tom Waits Meets Jim Jarmusch in Montandon, M. (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 176

¹⁸ Jarmusch, J. (2005) p. 173

The album won Waits his first Grammy for ‘Best Alternative Music Album’ (he won a second, ‘Best Contemporary Folk Album’, for *Mule Variations* in 1999) – an accolade which arguably says more about the extent to which Waits’ stock had risen during the ‘eighties than it does about the album itself, but which nonetheless suggests that, with *Bone Machine*, Waits had finally shifted from the outskirts of popular music culture into the ‘mainstream’ – or at least, the mainstream ‘alternative’.¹⁹ Certainly, two of the singles from *Bone Machine*, “Goin Out West” and “I Don’t Wanna Grow Up”, with their distorted guitars and anthemic choruses, sound utterly unlike anything on Waits’ previous albums – but more than that, they sound much more ‘contemporary’, and, dare I say, even ‘youthful’, than many of his earlier songs. The former, in particular, is the closest that I can think of that Waits has come to a conventional ‘rock’ song (although the hilariously tongue-in-cheek machismo of its lyrics – “I got real scars/hair on my chest/I look good without a shirt” – all delivered with a comic’s flair for timing, suggests otherwise); while the latter’s fuzzed out, jangly guitars and lyrical rejection of adulthood (“When I see the 5 o’clock news/I don’t wanna grow up/Comb their hair and shine their shoes/I don’t wanna grow up”) would not have sounded entirely out of place within the ‘lo-fi’, so-called ‘slacker’ aesthetic of a Pavement or Dinosaur Jr. record in the early ‘nineties (and indeed, would go on to be covered, not by such AOR favourites as Springsteen or Rod Stewart, who had previously covered Waits’ songs, but by the Ramones).

For the most part, however, the album is typically unclassifiable, and while its ‘dry’, ‘stripped back’ production bears certain (superficial) commonalities with the early nineties ‘grunge’ aesthetic, overall the album bears little obvious correlation with either the contemporary music ‘scene’ (whether ‘mainstream’ or ‘alternative’), or Waits’ previous musical output (whether his ‘eighties albums or the work he made prior to that). Indeed, with its emphasis on distorted rhythms and vocals, and its weird hybridised music styles, *Bone Machine* arguably shared more in common with the burgeoning rap and hip-hop music ‘scene’ in the ‘eighties and early-‘nineties – a genre with which Waits himself had expressed an odd affinity around the time of *Bone Machine*’s release, in much the same way as he had embraced aspects of the ‘punk’ aesthetic (if not the music) in the work he produced during the ‘eighties –

¹⁹ According to Waits’ friend and sometime-collaborator, Jim Jarmusch, Waits himself was apparently “mad as hell” about winning the award, his response being: “Alternative to what?! What the hell does that mean?!” Jarmusch, quoted in Valania, J. “The Man Who Howled Wolf” in M. Montandon, (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 295

than it did with the ‘alternative’ music ‘scene’ of the same era.²⁰ The comparison with rap music is especially resonant in relation to the apocalyptic theme which recurs throughout the album, if only because during this time, rap music – like punk, before it – was often thought to herald the ‘death’ of rock – or rather, in Lawrence Grossberg’s formulation, the death of a particular version of the “rock formation”.²¹ Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to be able to explore the association between ‘rap’ and apocalyptic rhetoric in further detail – although the subject has been raised by others, in particular by Robert Miklistch and Darren Wershler-Henry.²² However, it is worth noting that, as Grossberg himself suggests, invocations of the ‘death’ of rock are not particularly ‘new’, and indeed, that discourses of rock music have their own distinct version of an ‘apocalyptic tone’.

In an interview shortly following *Bone Machine*’s release, Waits described the album as a collection of songs that “deal with violence and death and suicide and the end of the world, and they’re all strung together like old vertebrae” – a description which serves not only to summarise the album’s lyrical themes but also to capture something of the way it *sounds*.²³ That is, while the album might present difficulties to categorisation, and eschews the kind of overarching narrative arc and central protagonist which characterised his previous album, *Frank’s Wild Years* (in which the songs were written, according to Waits, to form part of a “story”),²⁴ there is nonetheless a rambling, rattling continuity to the album as a ‘whole’ – a familiar *tone* which works its way through the sixteen tracks, linking one song to the next, whilst constantly threatening to come unhinged. It is this tone which invests the album with a sense of coherence and continuity, unfurling and unfolding as the album progresses, like an “unveiling in process”. At the same time, however, this

²⁰ In interviews around the time of *Bone Machine*’s release Waits frequently refers to being influenced by rap music – “because it’s real, immediate. Generally I like things as they begin, because the industry tears at you. Most artists come out the other end like a dead carp.” Oney, S. (2005) p. 151

²¹ See in particular “‘Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care?’ On ‘The State of Rock’” in Grossberg, L. *Dancing In Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham & London, 1997) p. 102-121

²² For a discussion of apocalyptic rhetoric within rap music, see Wershler-Henry, D. “O.G. Style: Ice-T/Jacques Derrida. A Carousel CD Recording Remixed by Darren Wershler-Henry for *Postmodern Apocalypse*” in Dellamora, R. (ed.) *Postmodern Apocalypse. Theory and Practice at the End* (Philadelphia, 1995) p. 241-261; for a discussion of the way in which rap has been taken up in terms of apocalyptic rhetoric within popular music theory, see Miklistch, R. “Rock ‘N’ Theory: Autobiography, Cultural Studies, and the ‘Death of Rock’” in *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism* 9:2 (1999) [Online] <http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu> (accessed 06/01/06)

²³ Sweeting, A. “A Mellow Prince of Melancholy” in M. Montandon, (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 163

²⁴ Rowland, M. “Tom Waits is Flying Upside Down (On Purpose)” in M. Montandon, (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 101

tone also provides the album's unstable element, constantly threatening to come unhinged – as though the nuts and bolts responsible for holding the machinery together might come loose at any moment, and send the whole thing unravelling into chaos and confusion.

It is this tone, this “unveiling in process”, which I believe, even more than the recurrent apocalyptic imagery of the lyrics, makes *Bone Machine* unique as a popular musical rendition of Apocalypse. In order to discuss the ways in which *Bone Machine* can be heard as a musical registration of the apocalyptic theme, I would first like to look at some of the ways Apocalypse has been conceived – and reconceived – throughout the twentieth century, focusing on discussions by Frank Kermode and Jacques Derrida. In particular, I would like to foreground the ways in which Derrida's essay, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy”, plays on the revelatory aspect of Apocalypse to develop an idea of the apocalyptic as a gesture, a *tone* which signifies that it is “the revelator of some unveiling in process.”²⁵ However, this apocalyptic tone is deconstructive as well as revelatory, unravelling and disrupting ostensibly straightforward transmissions to reveal the sites at which they break down, and moving in the in-between spaces where clear-cut distinctions intersect and collide. Indeed, what Derrida is effectively arguing for in his essay is not some idea of a preordained Truth or God that will be uncovered at the end of this revelatory process, but rather that the process *is* the revelation, the unveiling gesture itself is apocalyptic.

I will come back to discuss Derrida's essay in more depth throughout the following section; what I would like to foreground here is that what makes Derrida's essay so compelling for a ‘reading’ of *Bone Machine* as a musical re-presentation of Apocalypse is the way it serves to disrupt understandings of the apocalyptic genre which are dependent on genre-specific imagery or a familiar narrative trajectory – wherein the apocalypse is equated with ‘The End’ – in order to focus on the apocalyptic as a distinctive mode of delivery or tone. This, in turn, allows for a discussion of *Bone Machine* which does not simply engage with the (admittedly abundant) eschatological imagery of the lyrics, but rather with how the sound of the album and Waits' vocal delivery might be heard as apocalyptic.

²⁵ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

Apocalyptic Theory in the Late-Twentieth Century

As a distinctive genre, the Apocalypse has a range of genre-specific imagery, narrative elements and thematic concerns that continue to resound throughout a variety of different media and discourses into the twenty-first century. To provide a comprehensive overview of all the various incarnations and appropriations of the apocalyptic genre, however, is entirely beyond the scope of the present analysis and, besides, has recently been navigated by others.²⁶ Nonetheless, in order to understand how a contemporary popular musical reading of the Apocalyptic theme or genre may be unique or distinctive, I would like to begin by contrasting the way in which the idea of the Apocalypse is used in the work of two influential twentieth-century theorists: Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*²⁷ (1967) and Jacques Derrida's "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy"²⁸ (1982). My reason for selecting these two theorists is largely because in their discussions of Apocalypse they are both concerned with looking at the form and the medium that the apocalyptic genre takes – a 'paradigm' for Kermode, and a 'tone' for Derrida – and how this form or medium impacts on our understanding of Apocalypse. In particular, I believe Derrida's conception of an 'apocalyptic tone' provides an illuminating vantage point from which to examine the transposition of the apocalyptic genre within a contemporary popular musical context, and this will set up my reading of *Bone Machine* as a popular musical rendition of the Apocalypse in the following section.

Frank Kermode begins his influential 1967 book, *The Sense of an Ending*, by describing the late-twentieth century as a "moment in history when it may be harder than ever to accept the precedents of sense-making – to believe that any earlier ways of satisfying one's need to know the shape of life in relation to the perspectives of time will suffice."²⁹ Nonetheless, as his book aims to demonstrate, he maintains that

²⁶ For an overview of some of the ways in which specifically postmodern ideas of apocalypse have developed see the essays collected in Dellamora, R. (ed.) *Postmodern Apocalypse. Theory and Practice at the End* (Philadelphia, 1995); for a detailed examination of how ideas of apocalypse and millennium were re-worked by the Romantic poets, see Paley, M. D. *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*. (Oxford, 1999); for a beautiful study of the ways the Apocalyptic genre has been appropriated in the visual arts, see the essays collected in Carey, F. (ed.) *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* (London, 1999); and for a more general contemporary overview of how ideas of apocalypse have developed into the twentieth century, see the essays collected Seed, D.(ed.) *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis* (Great Britain, 2000)

²⁷ Kermode, F. *The Sense of an Ending* (New York, 1967)

²⁸ Derrida, J. (1982)

²⁹ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 3

“there is still a need to speak humanly of a life’s importance in relation to it [eternity] – a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end.”³⁰ Thus, from the outset Kermode aims to “begin by discussing fictions of the End – about the ways in which, under varying existential pressures, we have imagined the ends of the world.”³¹ Apocalypse, for Kermode, works as a paradigmatic imagining of the End, not only the end of the world and earthly history as literally described in *Revelation*, but also as an imagining of the end of the individual human life span: the “common death.”³² As James Berger has suggested, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Apocalypse functions within Kermode’s analysis as “an existential expression of a universal wish for narrative closure.”³³ Kermode identifies a “deep need” in humans “for intelligible Ends,” because otherwise all that we experience would only be apprehended as so much flux and change, wherein the individual life and death is essentially meaningless: “merely an item in change, having no continuous relationship to the past or the future, no trace of perpetuity.”³⁴ He contends that the apocalyptic paradigm enables the individual to connect his/her³⁵ own origins and ends, and those of their loved ones, to a larger, self-contained narrative structure which endows their lives “in the midst” with significance:

Men, like poets, rush ‘into the midst,’ *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths.³⁶

Thus, by constructing fictions based on the blueprint established by the apocalyptic paradigm – in which beginning, middle and end all form part of a concordant, totalized system – and projecting them onto both life and history, we are able, according to Kermode, to *imaginatively* step outside our own historically and

³⁰ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 4

³¹ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 5

³² Kermode, F. (1967) p. 7

³³ It is important to note that Berger makes this interpretation in the act of refuting it: “Apocalypse is not, then, as Kermode describes it, primarily an existential expression of a universal wish for narrative closure. The wish to end the world, or to represent the end of the world, arises in each case from more particular social and political discomforts and aspirations.” Berger, J. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. (Minneapolis, London, 1999) p. 34-35

³⁴ Kermode, F. in F. Carey, (ed.) *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* (London, 1999) p. 5

³⁵ *The Sense of an Ending* is written entirely for “mankind;” however, by 1999 he had updated his ideas to include the feminine gender also; see Kermode, F. (1999)

³⁶ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 7

existentially-determined position “in the midst” and apprehend life and history in terms of intelligible, structural wholes.³⁷

By speaking of Apocalypse as a paradigm, a “type and source” of fictions about the End, I believe Kermode means to strip it back of superfluities – all the “inexplicable set[s] of myths that have been overlaid by later topical applications” – and restore Apocalypse to (what he sees as) its basic structural function: as providing a much needed “sense of an ending” which, in turn, endows life and history with narrative coherence.³⁸ Evidently, for the apocalyptic paradigm to ‘make sense’ one must first share Kermode’s understanding of fiction and narrative, as well as his belief in such fiction’s ability to satisfy a cultural ‘need’. Put extremely simply, the fiction under discussion describes narrative that is “end-determined,” wherein the ending endows all preceding events with meaning and import – giving “each moment its fullness”³⁹ – and all the parts add up to a self-contained “unitary system.”⁴⁰ The beginning makes sense in relation to the end and vice-versa: a neat symmetrical (but not cyclical) narrative. It is also very important to Kermode that we recognise that “life” is not like this: life is not symmetrical, concordant, or ordered, and the ending – epitomised for Kermode by the individual human death – does not in itself endow the events of one’s life with significance or meaning. Likewise history is not in itself segmented into different epochs, “mutually significant phases and transitions”, defined by neat endings and beginnings.⁴¹ This, then, is why we “*need* fictive concords with origins and ends”: such fictions “project” an idealised narrative structure onto life and history, and the coherence and closure this brings essentially makes life and history more manageable and meaningful.⁴²

Throughout *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode remains emphatic that the apocalyptic paradigm continues to underscore our fictions, and hence our way of making sense of life, in the late-twentieth century, perhaps up-dated a little but still fundamentally the same:

In their general character our fictions have certainly moved away from the simplicity of the paradigm; they have become more ‘open.’ But they still have, and so far as one is capable of

³⁷ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 8

³⁸ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 6&7

³⁹ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 6

⁴⁰ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 5

⁴¹ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 14

⁴² Kermode, F. (1967) p. 7 [italics added]

prediction must continue to have, a real relation to simpler fictions about the world. Apocalypse is a radical instance of such fictions and a source of others.⁴³

In the context of Kermode's argument, it seems that the challenge confronting artists within the latter-half of the twentieth century is much the same as it has always been: to find new and interesting ways of updating this paradigm to accommodate changing cultural contexts, so that it can continue to fulfil its sense-making role and value. For it to achieve this it must tap into a shared reservoir of understandings, forms and language – a tradition – and, in a classic modernist manoeuvre,⁴⁴ handle this tradition in such a way that the resulting work is both 'new' (hence satisfying 'our' sophisticated expectations of fiction and understandings of the world), and at the same time an extension of 'our' shared tradition and history (hence providing a sense of continuity and community):

The forms of art – its language – are in their nature a continuous extension or modification of conventions entered into by maker and reader, and this is true even of very original artists so long as they communicate at all. Consequently, novelty in the arts is either communication or noise. If it is noise there is no more to say about it. If it is communication it is inescapably related to something older than itself.⁴⁵

He uses his belief in the continuing authority of the paradigm to launch an attack on certain "anti-traditionalist", or what might now be called early-postmodernist, writers such as William S. Burroughs, because Burroughs ostensibly "sought a self-abolishing structure, and tried to defeat our codes of continuity, cultural and temporal, by shuffling his prose into random order."⁴⁶ In one swift manoeuvre Kermode dismisses both Burroughs' writing practices *and* the cultural value of his work, because he believes that such writing practices do not adhere to the structural rules and conventions necessary for the regeneration the paradigm, and so do not fulfil the cultural function and value he holds for art. Kermode opposes "anti-traditionalist" or early-postmodernist writers such as the Beats⁴⁷ to the "traditionalist" modernism of Yeats or Joyce (a categorization one might wish to

⁴³ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 6

⁴⁴ See Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in Lodge, D. (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* (London, New York, 1972) p. 71-77

⁴⁵ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 102

⁴⁶ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 117

⁴⁷ Richard Dellamora has argued that Kermode's condemnation of the Beat writers may also be based on homophobia and a resistance to "American incursions into British culture"; see Dellamora, R. "Queer Apocalypse: Framing William Burroughs" in Dellamora, R. (ed.) *Postmodern Apocalypse. Theory and Practice at the End* (Philadelphia, 1995) p. 144-145

question, but it is not the place to do so here), stating that both respond “to a ‘painful transitional situation,’ but one in terms of continuity and the other in terms of schism. The common topics are transition and eschatological anxiety; but one reconstructs, the other abolishes, one decreates and the other destroys the indispensable and relevant past.”⁴⁸ It is apparent that this “indispensable and relevant past” is not open for discussion – it is assumed that we all share the same reading of this monolithic story-shaped past, and recognise its integral value and meaning.

Fast-forward fifteen years, and the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida has published an essay entitled “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy”, in which he develops an idea of Apocalypse as a ‘tone’, which is “indeed a social disorder and a derangement, an out-of-tuneness... of cords... and voices in the head.”⁴⁹ Not only does the apocalyptic tone not contain a ‘beginning’, ‘ending’, or anything remotely resembling a narrative structure, but it serves to actively destabilise and subvert precisely the kind of definitive narrative closure that was so crucial to Kermode’s entire argument as to how the apocalyptic paradigm works to ‘make sense’ of ‘reality’. Indeed, Derrida explicitly disputes the idea that “there is just *one* fundamental *scene*, *one* great paradigm on which, except for some gaps or deviations, all the eschatological strategies would model themselves.”⁵⁰ On the contrary, as I will discuss further in a moment, his idea of an apocalyptic tone actually enacts a disruption or “generalized derailment, of a *Verstimmung* multiplying the voices and making the tones shift.”⁵¹ Whilst Derrida’s essay foregrounds the tone’s resistance to a totalizing description, for the sake of illustrating what he means Derrida allows us to “imagine” that there is such a thing as “*an* apocalyptic tone, a unity of the apocalyptic tone.”⁵² In this (impossible) case, he contends:

Whosoever takes on the apocalyptic tone comes to signify to, if not tell, you something. What? The truth, of course, and to signify to you that it reveals the truth to you; the tone is the revelator of some unveiling in process. Not only truth as the revealed truth of a secret on

⁴⁸ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 122-123

⁴⁹ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 72

⁵⁰ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 83

⁵¹ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 83

⁵² Derrida, J. (1982) p. 83

the end or of the secret of the end. Truth itself is the destination, and that truth unveils itself as the advent of the end.⁵³

This unveiling, however, is a process that is endless; the end never comes, or rather, is always, already coming. The apocalyptic tone promises that it reveals the Truth and the End, but it is “a drift” without origin or destination, “a recitative and a song whose singularity remains at once absolute and absolutely divisible.”⁵⁴ Far from revealing *the* truth or *the* end, the apocalyptic tone constantly defers and obfuscates, and by its very mode or structure actually prohibits a conclusive ending.

This is not to say that the apocalyptic tone is not end-dominated, or that it could not be translated (with difficulty) into a narrative discourse. It is profoundly end-dominated, it is the “tone of the vigil at the moment of the end”; however, this ending, the ending that is being promised, is impossible.⁵⁵ The apocalyptic tone invokes the end whilst continually deferring it in an ongoing play of calls and responses, creating what Derrida refers to as a continual:

going-one-better in eschatological eloquence, each newcomer, more lucid than the other, more vigilant and more prodigal too than the other coming to add more to it... And whoever would come to refine, to tell the extreme of the extreme [*le fin du fin*], namely the end of the end, the end of ends, that the end has always already begun, that we must still distinguish between closure and end, that person would, whether wanting to or not, participate in the concert.⁵⁶

As for translating the tone into discourse, narrative or otherwise, that is exactly what Derrida is attempting to do here, albeit “at the risk of essentially deforming it.”⁵⁷ For reasons that will hopefully become clearer throughout my discussion of apocalyptic tone and *Bone Machine*, the apocalyptic tone cannot be formulated in terms of the known or the same, for it is precisely that which interrupts coherent, self-contained discourses, to create delirium, disorder, “*Verstimmung*”.⁵⁸ It is certainly not reducible to a paradigm, which, in Kermode’s formulation, consists of ‘reading’ our relationship to past, present and future in terms of narratives we are already familiar with: “We make sense of the past as of a book or a psalm we have read or recited,

⁵³ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

⁵⁴ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 93

⁵⁵ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 85

⁵⁶ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 80-81

⁵⁷ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 93

⁵⁸ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 83

and of the present as a book the seals of which we shall see opened; the only way to do this is to project fears and guesses and inferences from the past onto the future.”⁵⁹ If we follow Kermode’s logic, the unknown is domesticated, made coherent by being rendered in terms of a “predelineated horizon of anticipation” and, in turn, the paradigm is strengthened and its authority is secured.⁶⁰ But apocalypse, for Derrida, is not like this; indeed, it is not *like* anything we already know: it is “monstrous”, and this is precisely what makes it such a potentially radical, if obscure and unstable, force or vibration.⁶¹

Taken to its limits, this idea of apocalypse is ultimately an apocalypse “*sans*” apocalypse: “an apocalypse without apocalypse, an apocalypse without vision, without truth, without revelation... without last judgement, without any eschatology than the tone of the “Come” itself... an apocalypse beyond good or evil.”⁶² Those looking to Derrida’s apocalyptic tone for resolution or the kind of ‘closure’ described by Kermode will inevitably be left frustrated and unfulfilled, particularly if one subscribes to Kermode’s theory that endings are what make life “in the midst” bearable and coherent. Derrida himself does not downplay the repercussions of his argument, suggesting that this “apocalypse without apocalypse” may well be *the* apocalyptic “catastrophe”, quite apart from whatever specific catastrophe is “announced or described in the apocalyptic writings” (although it is not “foreign to them”).⁶³ For Derrida, this catastrophe “*of* the apocalypse itself” is nothing short of an “overturning of sense.”⁶⁴ However, as John D. Caputo explains,

⁵⁹ Kermode, F. (1967) p. 96

⁶⁰ In discussing “Derrida’s distinction between the invention of the same and the invention of the other” Caputo makes an interesting corollary with scientific practices, citing the “Kuhnian distinction between “normal” and “revolutionary” scientific change.” Where the former anticipates only what is already expected, thus “verifying and strengthening the rule of the same,” the latter presents itself as an “anomaly,” refusing “assimilation,” and hence prompting “holistic, revolutionary reconfiguration, one that the present paradigm... can neither foresee nor absorb.” (Caputo then goes on to delineate where Derrida’s and Kuhn’s theories diverge.) This analogy could serve well to illuminate the differences between Kermode and Derrida’s alternate ideas of apocalypse. Caputo, J. D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1997) p. 74

⁶¹ Here Caputo is referring to Derrida’s conceptualization of the future outlined in *Points de suspension: Entretien*, which again is the antithesis of Kermode’s theory: “To prepare for the future, were that possible, would be to prepare for a coming species of monster, “to welcome the monstrous *arrivant*, to welcome it, that is, to accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange.” Interestingly, Scruton uses “monsters” as the derogative term for the popular musicians he condemns for corrupting our shared musical heritage. Caputo, J. D. (1997) p. 74

⁶² Derrida, J. (1982) p. 94

⁶³ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 95

⁶⁴ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 95

the “catastrophic overturning”⁶⁵ proposed by Derrida can be read in a way that sees it as both critical and potentially liberating:

By a catastrophe Derrida has in mind a certain textualist turning around. *Strophein* means to move; a *strophe* is what the chorus sings as it moves from right to left across the stage; hence, a *kata-strophe* means a reversal of movement, to get the chorus moving in the opposite direction, to sing a new song and strike up a change of tone. By this Derrida means reversing the strong sense of *destination* in the apocalyptic tone, which is the note that biblical commissions and institutional authoritarians strike. Deconstruction would disturb this scene of assured destination, un-veiling or exposing the structure of a system of relays in which we do not know who is saying what to whom, thereby stirring up *la passion du non-savoir*.⁶⁶

Apocalypse is no longer that which fixes everything in its place, securing a familiar narrative trajectory as in Kermode’s apocalyptic paradigm, but rather that which enables the possibility for the unfamiliar to intrude or interrupt. Indeed, here Apocalypse is precisely that which interrupts the familiar, upsetting the equilibrium and allowing for the voice of an ‘other’ to be recognised and heard.

It is this idea of an “apocalypse without apocalypse” that leads Jonathon Boyarin to describe Derrida’s apocalyptic tone as indicative of a “postmodern turn” in the construction of ideas of apocalypse, “revealing both its Jewish and Christian roots in the vision of an endtime and how much of a break with the modern transformation of traditional hope it represents, since Jewish and Christian apocalypse both entail final judgement.”⁶⁷ It would be possible to construct a reading of Derrida’s apocalyptic tone which sees it as having lost hope in the kind of apocalyptic paradigm articulated by Kermode, or in which specific historical, economic, theoretical and technological events and developments have transpired to render such ideas of apocalypse – as a source of ‘meaning’, ‘sense’ or ‘order’ – unfeasible or redundant. What is left in its place, then, would be nothing but “emptiness” and “ceaseless transition”, the mere “noise” which Kermode attributes to a culture obsessed with “novelty” rather than “communication”.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 87

⁶⁶ Caputo, J. D. (1997) p. 92

⁶⁷ Boyarin, J. “At Last, All the Goyim: Notes on a Greek Word Applied to Jews” in R. Dellamora, (ed.) *Postmodern Apocalypse. Theory and Practice at the End* (Philadelphia, 1995) p. 43

⁶⁸ Kermode, F. (1999) p. 24

Rather than conceiving Derrida's apocalyptic tone as championing emptiness or nihilism, my reading sees it as opening up the possibilities for an actively critical engagement with the kinds of fictions that Kermode takes for granted, as well as the values and assumptions he holds for such narratives. Derrida's "apocalypse now" is not simply a nihilistic motto for an age of "ceaseless transition", in which there is "nothing on the temporal horizon but more of the same, more transition."⁶⁹ On the contrary, while Derrida's essay is hardly prescriptive, I nonetheless believe that his emphasis on Apocalypse as ongoing revelation and process, as well as enabling a potentially radical mode of resistance from, and engagement with, "the dominant contract or concordant", allows a way of 'seeing' or 'hearing' the apocalyptic which foregrounds the sites at which boundaries and separations intersect and break-down. As Caputo argues, the "without" or "*sans*" of Derrida's "apocalypse without apocalypse" need not be read as a proclamation of hopelessness, but rather of faith and liberation: "the *sans* is not the scene of a loss but of an opening that lets something new come."⁷⁰ More significantly to my argument here, I believe that Derrida's apocalyptic tone not only disrupts a certain narrative-based understanding of Apocalypse, but through the musicality of his descriptions positively enables a discussion of how the apocalyptic genre might *sound* were it to be rendered musically. And this is what I will be moving on to discuss now.

Apocalyptic Tone and *Bone Machine*

Francis Carey has suggested that, in the late-twentieth century: "the real meaning of Apocalypse as 'unveiling' has been virtually extinguished by its contemporary usage as a synonym for catastrophe."⁷¹ Consequently, he argues: "In a largely secular society, perhaps it is by listening to music that we can recapture some of the original purpose of the revelations ascribed to St John, which were intended to provide solace to the believer as well as to inspire terror."⁷² It is worth noting that Carey's comment is made in the preface to a book (of which he is the editor) entitled *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*, which is centred around different interpretations of Apocalypse within the visual and cinematic arts. The book focuses

⁶⁹ Kermode, F. (1999) p. 24

⁷⁰ Caputo, J. D. (1997) p. 71

⁷¹ Carey, F. (1999) p. 9

⁷² Carey, F. (1999) p. 9

on the relationship between *Revelation* and the visual arts, a particularly ripe field of enquiry given that the potent and often obscure imagery and symbolism of *Revelation* does seem to have provided a great source of insight and inspiration for artists, writers, theorists over the centuries. However, while Carey does mention the few examples of classical musical texts inspired by *Revelation*, the relationship of Apocalypse to popular song and music remains a largely overlooked field of inquiry. This is no doubt exacerbated by the fact that, as discussed in the introduction, popular music itself seems to be a contested area of critical study, proving to be particularly resistant to the kind of close textual analysis that might otherwise be applied to a study of Apocalypse and literature or the visual arts. Nonetheless, I intend to take my cue from Kathleen Norris, who, in her introduction to *Revelation* in the ‘Pocket Size’ canon editions of the Biblical books, argues that amidst all the crazed imagery and heavy-handed denunciations, at its heart lies a promise of hope and faith intricately bound up with the power of song: “In fact, it proclaims that when all is said and done, of the considerable noises human beings are capable of, it is singing that will endure. A new song – if you can imagine – and light will be all that remains.”⁷³ On that note, then, using Derrida’s formulation of an apocalyptic tone, I will now look at the ways in which Tom Waits’ *Bone Machine* can be heard as registering a popular musical rendition of Apocalypse.

Setting the Scene: Cover Artwork

Bone Machine’s cover artwork features a blurry, black-and-white close-up of Waits’ face frozen into a contorted howl, surrounded by a background entirely filled with varying shades of darkness and light.⁷⁴ The sense of shadows and depth created by the interplay of darkness and light, combined with the blurriness of the shot, makes it appear as though he is momentarily suspended in a deep, dark passage or tunnel, before being sucked down into a vortex of glaring white light. He is wearing a skull-cap with horns, his eyes covered by protective goggles like the kind one would wear when operating a blow torch, and his facial expression is of an unreadable intensity – what could be either ecstasy or pain. The goggles reflect nothing but more light, like that of the light behind and below him, contrasting with the black pit of his mouth, framed like a smaller, blacker tunnel version of the one surrounding him.

⁷³ Norris, K. “Introduction to The Revelation of St John the Divine” in Byng, J. (pub.) *Revelations: Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible* (Melbourne, 2005) p. 367

⁷⁴ This image – along with those of Waits throughout the CD booklet – is taken from the music video for “Goin Out West”, directed by Jim Jarmusch.

The soundless howl and blank goggles suggest a kind of ‘void’; unlike Edward Munch’s famous painting, *The Scream* – which Frederic Jameson describes as “a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety” – the surrounding space around Waits is not buckling and warping through the intensity of the screamer’s anguish.⁷⁵ There is none of the technicolour brilliance of Munch’s painting here either; on the contrary, the ‘world’ depicted in *Bone Machine*’s cover artwork is one which is reduced to murky gradations of black and white, darkness and light – one imagines that here, as in that famous movie tagline, “no one can hear you scream.”⁷⁶

Across the upper and lower right-hand corners the words “Tom Waits” and “Bone Machine” are scrawled in spiky white letters; the scratchy, almost child-like lettering, occasionally mixing upper and lower case, printed in a brilliant white against a black background. The letters are smudged and blurry at the edges, glowing like a faint satellite transmission or an SOS; you can almost *hear* the words crackling and hissing. Indeed, from the back-cover image of Waits wearing protective goggles and gloves, his profile blurring, smoke-like, into a white background, wielding his guitar like a weapon or a tool; to the images of industrial machinery, engines and smoke that recur throughout the CD booklet; to the cranking, dilapidated rhythm of the album, sounding like a motor running in fits and bursts; the album can be understood as evoking an aura of white-heat, sheet metal and crackling electricity: a *machine*. And yet, as the title suggests, it is an animalistic machine, a *bone* machine, and I wish to argue that in fusing the ‘animalistic’ and the ‘mechanical’, the ‘natural’ and the ‘technological’, *Bone Machine*, like Derrida’s apocalyptic tone, can be heard as “the revelator of some unveiling in process.”⁷⁷

While my argument throughout this chapter suggests that the significance of *Bone Machine* as a popular musical rendition of Apocalypse cannot be attributed solely to the eschatological imagery of its lyrics, I do not necessarily wish to discount the

⁷⁵ Jameson, F. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, New York, 1991) p. 11; Steven Connor describes *The Scream* as a depiction of “intersensory transposition”, “in which the power of utterance is represented by its very capacity to bend and buckle visual and spatial forms.” Connor, S. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford, 2000) p. 11

⁷⁶ The tagline itself was “in space, no one can hear you scream”, and is, of course, taken from the promotional media for *Alien* (1979).

⁷⁷ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

lyrics altogether, partly because they are what most obviously announce the apocalyptic themes in various songs, and also because they can be heard as drawing attention to the ideas of revelation explored throughout the album. As one reviewer described it: “*Bone Machine* is full of end-of-the-world imagery, with fires and floods and constant rain, with angels and devils popping up in people’s lives, with the impossibility of beating forces we can’t control or even understand.”⁷⁸ From the first track, “Earth Died Screaming”, which, as the title suggests, depicts an end-of-the-world scenario with typical apocalyptic gusto, many of the songs that follow tease out the questions that eschatological themes often raise – questions concerning the distinction between good and evil, heaven and hell, mortality and immortality, body and soul, salvation and damnation. However, in exploring these distinctions, *Bone Machine* is often less concerned with their demarcation than the points at which they intersect and break down – the ‘limitations’ or ‘extremities’ where words and discourse fail (“I want to know, am I the sky or the bird?”); the site at which different forces work away at each other, wearing each other down: the point at which the ‘elemental’ hits up against the ‘ethereal’, the ‘organic’ against the ‘synthetic’, ‘animalistic’ against the ‘mechanical’.

Given that there is arguably much within late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century culture that could be – and has been – conceived as ‘apocalyptic’, it is interesting to note that the album itself rarely makes direct reference, either musically or lyrically, to its immediate historical context. Released in 1992, *Bone Machine* appeared at a time when, as one cultural commentator put it: “Lyrically and musically the cries and gnashings of damnation have become ever more prevalent.”⁷⁹ Or, as Steven Hamelman suggests, it was a decade in popular music in which “morbid romanticism turned feverish” – a term that Hamelman derives from Henri Peyre’s diagnosis of “‘*mal du siecle*’ sickness”, and updates to a current rock context to refer to the kind of music that is “recorded and staged when rock musicians go to waste and drag their music down with them.”⁸⁰ While I am not entirely sure I agree with

⁷⁸ Pick, S. “The Fire (and Flood) This Time” in Montandon, M. (ed.) *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (New York, 2005) p. 160

⁷⁹ Cristaudo, W. “The Truth and Divinity of Sickness and Rage in the Karaoke of Despair” in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (Vol. III Spring 2003) [Online] www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art-karaoke.html accessed 25/06/05 Paragraph 1

⁸⁰ Hamelman, S. *But is it Garbage? On Rock and Trash* (Georgia, 2004) p. 150; According to this definition, Hamelman traces an extremely varied group of musicians from a range of musical genres and periods as belonging to the “morbid-romantic” tradition, including Nick Drake, Patti Smith, Jim Morrison, Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Mazzy Star, Lush, Joy Division, and so on. See Hamelman, S. (2004) 141-178.

Hamelman's argument here, his is but one of many variations on the kinds of apocalyptic rhetoric which thread throughout discussions of rock music – and popular culture generally – at the turn of the twenty-first-century.⁸¹ And yet, I would argue that *Bone Machine* appears somewhat removed from this context, in that there is little about the album which would, superficially at least, tie it to a specific time and place. On the contrary, the lyrical imagery which is used throughout the album is often abstract and non-historically-specific: there are no references to consumerism or advertising, drugs or violence, technology or politics – unless, of course, you count the sordid political dealings envisaged in “In the Coliseum”.

On the other hand, a song like “In the Coliseum” provides a particularly illuminating vantage point from which to consider the way in which the apocalyptic trope which is featured throughout *Bone Machine* becomes a way of dealing, indirectly, with what might be interpreted as contemporary themes and issues. One of the verses of the song reads:

Now it's raining and it's pouring
On the pillaging and the goading
The constable is swinging
From the chains
For the dead there is no story
No memory no blame
Their families shout blue murder
But tomorrow it's the same
In the coliseum...

Set against a stark backdrop of double bass, drums and percussion – including a contraption known only as the “conundrum”, which apparently consists of a metal frame with other pieces of metal attached to it – Waits' voice remains wizened and detached throughout, playing the role of ‘reporter’ rather than that of a protagonist situated within the ‘action’ of the song as such.⁸² The acts of barbarism described throughout the song are delivered without explicit judgment or empathy; on the contrary, if anything, the singer appears to take a kind of perverse pleasure in the

⁸¹ See also Cristaudo, W. (2003) and Wright, R. “‘I’d Sell You Suicide’: Pop Music and Moral Panic in the Age of Marilyn Manson” in *Popular Music* 19:3 (2000) p. 365-385

⁸² Jarmusch, J. (2005) p. 203; in the interview between Waits and Jarmusch, the ‘conundrum’ is attributed to someone called Serge Etienne, although in reviews it is attributed to Waits himself – given Waits’ predilection for ‘inventing’ obscure secondary sources, it is quite likely to be the latter.

spectacle he describes, chewing over the words with a theatrical relish, as if savouring every sordid detail. “No justice here, No liberty/No reason, No blame”, he sings in the closing verse, without sadness or anger, simply stating the ‘facts’. And yet, it is precisely by adopting such a persona that the song itself can be understood as providing a critical commentary on the events unfolding – allowing the irony to speak for itself in lines such as “It’s always much more sporting/When there’s families in the pit/And the madness of the crowd/Is an epileptic fit/In the colosseum...” Moreover, given that the album was released in the same year as the L.A. Riots (which Waits himself appeared at a benefit concert in aid of), I think it would certainly be possible to read some contemporary meaning and significance into the imagery which is used.

It is in this way that *Bone Machine* constructs an idea of an apocalyptic process which is ‘ancient’ and ‘ongoing’, corrosively eating away at those things that connect us to a specific time and place to ‘reveal’ the skeletal framework that lies beneath. It is identified only as something that *cannot* be identified – something that cannot be articulated or labelled: it does not belong to the perceived dualisms of rational, scientific ‘Western’ thought, nor can it be explained by discourses of religion or law. Indeed, lyrically *Bone Machine* could be interpreted as drawing attention to the failure of words or language to explain these “forces we can’t control or even understand” – whilst suggesting, perhaps, that music can.⁸³

Sonically, the album registers this idea of an ongoing, simultaneously corrosive and revelatory process by constructing and dismantling dialogues between multiple discourses and genres, playing with the intersection at which noise coheres into recognisable musical structures, and music dissolves back into the noise from whence it came. Much of the album is produced in such a way that it sounds as if it is in the process of falling apart while its being built: tracks “bleed” into one another, lyrical and melodic motifs recur throughout the album, and songs are recorded so that they seem to be growing out the remnants of the last, making it difficult to tell where one track ends and the next begins. One review at the time of *Bone Machine*’s release described this effect:

Many of the songs begin with rough sounds of instruments struggling to find their place before locking in step to play together, and just as many end with the instruments collapsing

⁸³ Pick, S. (2005) p. 160

separately. The percussion, often played by Waits himself, is (to put it mildly) loose, though oddly compelling. The effect is similar to listening to street recordings of parade music, where the sounds build slowly, come together, and then pass by.⁸⁴

The album *sounds* as if it is self-reflexively stripping itself back and exposing its own processes: a skeletal framework that is registered through an emphasis on rhythm and hollow-sounding acoustics. The shambling percussive backbone of the songs is pushed up in the mix, turning the songs inside-out and making rhythm the ‘raw’ focal point. Indeed, there is one track on the album in which this unstable skeletal structure is all that remains: the penultimate ‘song’ on *Bone Machine*, “Let Me Get Up On It”. Lasting less than a minute in total, the ‘song’ consists entirely of the clattering and whirring sounds which thread throughout the album. There are no verses or choruses, nor any discernible lyrics to speak of, just Waits’ voice gargling and bellowing in the background, his voice distorted by what sounds like a police bullhorn. This song perhaps best exemplifies Waits’ preferred working method which he discussed in interviews around the time of *Bone Machine*’s release, in which the songs were “written with just a drum in a room, and my voice, hollering it out”.⁸⁵ The nature of the recording itself, which is extremely fuzzy and distorted, gives the listener the impression that they are, in a sense, listening in through a keyhole or a crack in the wall; one imagines that what one is hearing is not a ‘song’ as such, but a ‘snippet’, a ‘fragment’ – as is further exemplified by the way the track fades in and then out at the beginning and end. Waits has stated that he often leaves the tape recorder running in the studio, even when they are not recording anything in particular, in order to capture what he describes as “ghosts” – something that is not audible to the ear within the immediate confines of the recording studio, but which, when played back later, ‘reveals’ the ‘traces’ (which I do not mean in the Derridean sense) of songs.⁸⁶ In any case, on this ‘song’, the skeletal framework is all we hear – not quite ‘music’, but not exactly ‘noise’ either, it exists in the in-between space at which ‘noise’ and ‘music’ intersect. Thus, as with Derrida’s analysis of the apocalyptic tone, I would argue that the emphasis here is less on the ‘end’ result of this ‘unveiling’ process, than with exploring the mechanisms of the process itself: an unstable structure which is constantly in the process of being built up and stripped away.

⁸⁴ Pick, S. (2005) p. 160

⁸⁵ Jarmusch, J. (2005) p. 176

⁸⁶ “Recording for me is like photographing ghosts.” Waits quoted in Valania, R. (2005) p. 317

However, there is no clear definition for what exactly an ‘apocalyptic tone’ is. To begin with, there are no generic conventions for a tone, apocalyptic or otherwise, because tone is not a genre. (After all: “It is just a tone, a certain inflection socially coded to say such and such a thing.”)⁸⁷ And this means that when we are discussing an apocalyptic tone we are not talking about the apocalyptic genre as such, but about something that informs the genre without being reducible to it. I mentioned in the section above that Derrida dismisses the notion that there is a “fundamental *scene*” or “*one* great paradigm on which except for some gaps or deviations, all the eschatological strategies would model themselves.”⁸⁸ Such a “fundamental scene” or “paradigm” would, as Kermode’s argument demonstrated, necessarily determine the structure of the resulting artwork – as well as serving to reinforce a range of cultural values – and Kermode suggests that the great comfort and consolation we take from such narratives derive from this. The apocalyptic tone, in contrast, cannot be ‘contained’ or ‘explained’ in terms of a set of generic conventions, nor does it serve to solidify cultural values. Indeed, one imagines that as soon as any conventions were established, this tone would be precisely that which undermines and destabilizes them. For the apocalyptic tone is only so many interruptions and fluctuations – a *Verstimmung* that is not only irreducible to such things as lyrics, discourse or genre, but is also that which actively disrupts them.

As I discussed earlier, the closest that Derrida comes to providing a description of the apocalyptic tone is: “Whosoever takes on the apocalyptic tone comes to signify to, if not tell, you something. What? The truth, of course, and to signify to you that it reveals the truth to you; the tone is the revelator of some unveiling in process.”⁸⁹ The tone is that which signifies that it reveals the truth – whatever that truth might be. That is, the tone reveals that it reveals; it signifies that it is in the act of unveiling and that this unveiling is the ‘truth’. However, what the tone actually tells you – in terms of discursive content or, in the case of *Bone Machine*, the lyrics – is not necessarily the same as what it signifies; what is revealed is less important here than the act of revelation: the “unveiling in process”. Thus when Derrida talks about truth, he does not (only) mean “truth as the revealed truth of a secret on the end or of the secret of the end”⁹⁰ – although this is evidently what eschatological discourse is

⁸⁷ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 67

⁸⁸ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 83

⁸⁹ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

⁹⁰ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

concerned with; as Morton D. Paley writes: “the whole conception of apocalypse has to do with a revelation of ultimate truths. There may be colossal disasters without any revelation preceding or ensuing, but an apocalypse involves, as the *OED*’s primary definition states, uncovering or disclosure.”⁹¹ However, in Derrida’s hands it is the act of revelation itself which is apocalyptic: “Truth itself is the end, the destination.”⁹² Truth *is* the unveiling, and therefore truth is apocalyptic: “The structure of truth here would be apocalyptic. And that is why there would not be any truth of the apocalypse that is not the truth of truth.”⁹³ Thus, what is apocalyptic here is not something that that will be uncovered at the very end, and which the revelatory gesture seeks to disclose through its unveiling, but rather the tone itself, the tone that signifies that it is in the act of revealing. *The tone is a gesture in terms of delivery, and this gesture is apocalyptic.*

This apocalyptic gesture culminates for Derrida in the word “come” or “*viens*,” which is both the ultimate limitation and the site of an opening – an issue I will return to in my discussion of *Bone Machine*’s fourth track, “All Stripped Down”. First, however, I would like to look at how this idea of an apocalyptic tone is registered on the album’s opening track, “Earth Died Screaming”.

Earth Died Screaming

This emphasis on rhythm as an unstable ‘skeletal structure’ is set up with the album’s opening track: “Earth Died Screaming”. The track is recorded in such a way that the percussion fades in gradually, so that the sound appears to be moving from the background into the foreground – as though a small procession, rattling cans and tapping sticks, is emerging from a distance and rapidly moving in on the listener.⁹⁴ This impression of a small band is reinforced by the fact that the diverse array of clapping and tapping could not be played by a single pair of hands – at least not in “real time” – and in these initial few seconds the percussion does not appear to hold a regular rhythmic pattern. As the percussion reaches its maximum volume the auditory impression is that “The Boners” – the name given to the percussionists in the liner notes – are upon the listener, surrounding him or her, and it is at this point

⁹¹ Paley, M. D. (1999) p. 2

⁹² Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

⁹³ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

⁹⁴ This effect is particularly strong if you listen to the track on headphones.

that a bass and electric guitar are added to the mix and a rhythmic structure ‘emerges’ from the initially random percussion.⁹⁵ Thus while the percussion itself does not noticeably alter, the other instruments, by emphasising one beat or another, appear to give the percussion a recognisable, synchronous shape. The sound fills out, and the lyrics begin:

Rudy’s on the midway
And Jacob’s in the hole
The monkey’s on the ladder
The devil shovels coal.
With crows as big as airplanes
The lion has three heads
And someone will eat the skin that he sheds

As the title suggests, “Earth Died Screaming” lyrically sets up the apocalyptic theme in fairly unambiguous terms, alluding directly to *Revelation* and other Biblical prophecies in its evocation of the end of the world – hence, the cataclysmic floods and storms, mutants and beasts, forecasts of doom and devastation, all piled up on top of one another to create a hysterical picture of a world gone to ruin. Although these images appear as somewhat random collocations, I believe it would nonetheless be possible to construct a reading of the significance of these opening images and allusions arranged in this way (for example, the significance of inserting a monkey onto Jacob’s Ladder [Gen. 28:10-17] in place of the ascending and descending angels, and the hierarchy that is created by the words “midway”, “hole”, and “ladder”).⁹⁶ In an interview with the film director Jim Jarmusch, Waits even

⁹⁵ In an interview with film director Jim Jarmusch (with whom Waits has collaborated both as an actor and musician), Waits claimed that he recorded the percussion outside the studio in the parking lot, using “two-by-fours, anything we could find, logs from the firewood. About nine people. Just different people walking by. We’d say, “Come on, play some sticks!”” Jarmusch, J. (2005) p. 189

⁹⁶ In Genesis the ladder appears to Jacob in a dream, in which he saw “the angels of God ascending and descending on it” (Gen. 28:12). The ladder has often been conceptualised as a link between heaven and earth, or the carnal and the spiritual. Some interpretations see the ladder as representing the stages of spiritual enlightenment, so that each rung of the ladder is seen as a stage in the soul’s progress towards its final ‘union’ with God. Elsewhere the ladder may also be seen as a link not only between earth and heaven, but also hell and heaven [Hughes, R. *Heaven and Hell in Western Art*. (London, 1968) p. 170]; an idea the song alludes to in its subsequent reference to the devil. By inserting a monkey onto the ladder, “Earth Died Screaming” can be seen as playing with idea of evolution, juxtaposing the Christian idea of spiritual evolution, configured in terms of the soul’s ascent towards union with God by metaphorically climbing the ladder’s rungs, with a Darwinian theory in which there is, potentially, no such things as heaven, hell or the soul, and where “[h]uman beings are simply animals with a number of distinctive attributes, who have evolved by a process of natural selection.” [West, D. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1996) p. 128] In such a view, ideas of an eternal soul could quite easily be written out of the picture, and, indeed, could paint a picture of the world and human existence in which

went so far as to cite secondary sources for the character of “Rudy” who appears “on the midway” in the opening line, claiming that it belongs to one of “the lost books of Bible”: “the Book of Rudy” which, he argues, is “still being held in a library somewhere in Russia.”⁹⁷

However, I am less concerned here with the significance and authority of these allusions, than with their use within a contemporary popular musical context. And this pop musical context is brought to the foreground in the transition from verse to chorus, wherein the song shifts gears without actually changing key or timing, as a second bass guitar is introduced and the instruments lock together cementing a steady, 4/4 beat. Waits voice rises into a higher register and bellows over the top:

Well the earth died screaming
While I lay dreaming
Well the earth died screaming
While I lay dreaming, dreaming of you

Compared with the raspy vocal delivery and the rambling percussion and instrumentation of the verses, the chorus is a veritable ‘sing-along’, its catchy tune and repetitive lyrics reminiscent of the kind of chant one might sing at a sporting event. Indeed, there is almost a joyfulness or playfulness to the chorus which is exemplified by the line: “While I lay dreaming of you.” Waits’ voice hangs on this last line (“dreaming of you”), converting it into a croon, and occasionally doubles up as a *soto* backing vocal, further cementing the rather sentimental twist this final line adds to the song.

“The earth died screaming while I lay dreaming of you”? In what context could this be taken as anything other than a startlingly flippant – not to mention somewhat ‘cheesy’ – response to the end of the world? The most obvious answer is: within a popular musical context, and it could no doubt work to cement the antiquated belief that popular music is “narcissistic”,⁹⁸ “standardized”, “sentimental”, and utterly incapable of dealing with the kinds of “real” issues raised in other, more serious art-

human beings are, in the end, reduced to little more than “Dirt in the Ground” (the title of the second track).

⁹⁷ Jarmusch, J. (2005) p. 182

⁹⁸ Scruton, R. *The Aesthetics of Music*. (Oxford, 1997) p. 499

forms.⁹⁹ Or perhaps this ‘standardized’ lyric is being held up or ‘framed’ for ridicule, quoted in an act of ‘postmodernist irony’; a step-up from standardized lyrics only insofar as it represents “a more sophisticated way of avoiding the question of modern life”, but narcissistic and sentimental all the same.¹⁰⁰ Or, finally, it could be an instance of what Frederic Jameson refers to as “pastiche” or “blank irony,” in which the “satirical impulse” has been lost;¹⁰¹ no longer “avoiding the question of modern life” so much as missing the question altogether.

To begin with, I do think the line “While I lay dreaming of you” is being framed and distanced from the rest of the lyrics, but not in terms of its semantic meaning. Rather, the framing is enacted in the *delivery*, and this is essential to understanding how popular music, and hence a popular musical rendition of Apocalypse, is unique or different from other kinds of textual imaginings of the apocalyptic theme. When listening to the song, the line does not obviously ‘jar’ or sound ‘false’, and I do not find it to be delivered ironically or playfully. In fact, where Waits’ delivery through the verses is wizardly and dramatic, as if hamming up the role of apocalyptic prophet, in the chorus his voice rises into a higher register, delivering the lines in a pained, guttural bellow, which suggests a shift in emphasis: the apocalyptic imagery he relays does not rattle him so much as the realisation that the “earth died screaming, while I lay dreaming of you.” And the way Waits croons this final line, holding the “you”, not only suggests sincerity (according to the conventions of certain pop music genres) but also indicates that this line is different or special – that this may, indeed, be *the* dominant sentiment to the song.¹⁰² Moreover, in the midst

⁹⁹ For a discussion of these kinds of accusations leveled at popular music see Frith, S. *Performance Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. (Oxford, 1996) p. 160-163

¹⁰⁰ Scruton, R. (1997) p. 493

¹⁰¹ Jameson, F. *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London & New York, 1998) p. 5

¹⁰² In order to understand how ideas of sincerity relate to pop lyrics, it is necessary to recognise that such ideas rarely attach themselves to song lyrics alone, and nor do they represent strictly musical properties – sincerity is not a musical sound; one cannot *hear* sincerity in the sound of a particular note or chord, although it may be interpreted as such. Rather, ideas of sincerity have to do with the way words are used within a performative context in which both audience and singer play an active role, and where framing and delivery can have just as much effect on the understanding of a song’s lyrics as the words themselves. Indeed, Simon Frith suggests that one way in which sincerity is expressed in pop music is through emphasising the tension between lyrics and delivery:

In popular cultural terms, good talkers are mistrusted as well as admired: people who have a “way with words” – the seducer, the salesman, the demagogue, the preacher – are people with power, and the power to use words is a power to deceive and manipulate. Sincerity may then be best indicated by an inability to speak (as in soul convention) or through an aural contradiction between the glibness of the lyric and the uncertainty of the voice (as in much male country music).

of all the other excessively dramatic apocalyptic images, delivered as they are without apparent remorse or surprise, I would also contend that this line – particularly delivered in this seemingly ‘pained’ manner – is the first hint of the ambiguity that pervades the rest of the tracks, especially the following song (which I will come back to).

The point I wish to make here is that, in moving from one ‘language’ to another – from the ‘apocalyptic’ language of the verses to the ‘love’ lyrics in the chorus – Waits’ vocal performance could be interpreted as drawing attention to his own delivery, and to the tension between the meaning of words when spoken/written and their meaning when delivered musically. In order to understand how this works, it is necessary to recognise how *sung* language is different from the same language when used in other kinds of contexts. As popular music theorist Simon Frith argues: “to sing words is to elevate them in some way, to make them special, to give them a new form of intensity”.¹⁰³ That is, to sing words is already to have framed them, to hold them up and use them in an unusual way. In putting words to music we are taking them out of their ‘everyday’ context and putting them in a performative, musical context in which meaning is not just semantic but sonic, determined not only by what the words ‘say’ but also by how they are delivered. Thus, what a word signifies in a book, on a billboard, or in ‘everyday’ speech, may take on an entirely different meaning when sung. According to Frith it follows that: “There is... an inevitable tension in the popular lyric between its colloquial vernacular language and its use in a “heightened,” elevated way, framed by music. A pop song is ordinary language put to extraordinary use”.¹⁰⁴ This ‘tension’ would not be possible unless there was a disjunction between words as spoken or written, and words as sung or performed, and what they signify in these different contexts. The ‘tension’ is what bridges this disjunction, and it is possible for singers or songwriters to make this tension more or less noticeable by drawing attention to their own delivery –

As Frith suggests, interpretations and expressions of sincerity within popular music are genre-specific, their meanings negotiated within the particular communicative framework set up between audience and singer. What remains paramount (perhaps irrespective of genre) is the idea of a *tension* between words and delivery; and, as I discuss above, this tension (which may be made more or less explicit) is in fact what will be identified as *tone*. Frith, S. (1996) p. 168

¹⁰³ Frith, S. (1996) p. 172

¹⁰⁴ Frith, S. (1996) p. 168

foregrounding the way in which the tone of an utterance frames and impacts on the meaning of the lyrics.¹⁰⁵

This idea of ‘tension’ is also important to Derrida’s explication of an apocalyptic tone. Indeed, as Derrida suggests, the tone of an utterance (whether written or spoken) is itself a form of tension: it is that which ‘bonds’ one thing to another, the signifier to its “original *reference*”.¹⁰⁶ Derrida continues: “The tone’s pitch is tied to tension; it has a bond to the bond, to the bond’s more or less tight tension”.¹⁰⁷ This pitch signifies how tight or loose the tonal bond is which secures a name to its thing. Thus it is apparent that tone can be ‘disguised’ – it can be rendered more or less inaudible or ‘neutralized’, in order to secure the tension between sign and thing, and so guarantee the ‘straightforward’ transmission [or objectivity] of an utterance. On the other hand, by being made explicit – through a slackening of tension, for example, or a feverish jump in pitch – tone can also get in the way of a transmission, hence increasing the possibility for miscommunication and interference.

Derrida contends that tone must be considered “distinguishable from all articulated discursive content”, which is not to say that content need be discarded altogether, but that in isolating a tone for analysis we are talking about something other than the “articulated” subject matter – whether “discursive content” or lyrics.¹⁰⁸ He argues further that “[t]he attention to tone, which is not just style, seems rather rare to me.”¹⁰⁹ On the contrary, I would argue that Derrida’s formulation of tone, and his insistence on tone as distinct from, and potentially disruptive of, “discursive content” is not particularly foreign or strange to those popular music studies which have attempted to move beyond the strict analysis of pop lyrics. As Frith has consistently argued, while pop lyrics are certainly an important part of the meaning-making process for audiences, critics, and the musicians themselves (and therefore deserving of critical analysis),¹¹⁰ it is nonetheless imperative to recognise that in popular music the words are only one part of the way a song communicates, and

¹⁰⁵ See footnote 102 above, for the way in which ‘sincerity’ in popular music is registered through emphasising the tension between lyrics and delivery

¹⁰⁶ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 68

¹⁰⁷ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 69

¹⁰⁸ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

¹⁰⁹ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 66

¹¹⁰ A brilliant and exhaustive recent instance of this kind of critical analysis is Christopher Ricks’ study of Bob Dylan’s lyrics: Ricks, C. *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*. (New York, 2003)

their meaning depends very much on the way in which they are used: how they are sung or delivered.¹¹¹ Frith writes:

in listening to the lyrics of pop songs we actually hear three things at once: *words*, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning; *rhetoric*, words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech; and *voices*, words being spoken or sung in human tones which are themselves “meaningful,” signs of persons and personality.¹¹²

And, as Derrida suggests in his essay, any one of these things – words, rhetoric or voice – “can always contradict, deny, make drift, derive, or derail the other”.¹¹³ Thus the idea of tone as a more or less audible gesture in terms of delivery, capable of impacting on the meaning of a lyric as much as what the lyric itself says, and potentially destabilising what that lyric might mean when written or spoken, is not at all unfamiliar to popular music. Indeed, many of the qualities Derrida ascribes to an “apocalyptic tone” – the multiple, inter-cutting voices, the splicing-together of different discourses and genres, the “jump” in tone signifying delirium and exaltation,¹¹⁴ and the “slackening” of tone signifying a subversion or perversion of reason and order¹¹⁵ – are the same phenomena which are ‘naturalized’ within many genres of popular music, and have made it so difficult to write about. It is also worth noting that they are the very same phenomena which have incited, and continue to incite, such alarm among censorship groups since rock n roll’s inception as a dominant popular cultural art-form in the 1950s to rap music in the late-twentieth century – and this issue of censorship is one which is also raised by Derrida in relation to the apocalyptic tone.¹¹⁶

Therefore, in arguing the case for *Bone Machine* as a popular musical transposition of the apocalyptic genre, I am not only talking about the lyrics, although “Earth Died Screaming”’s lyrics certainly fit the characteristics commonly ascribed to the apocalyptic genre:

¹¹¹ Frith, S. (1996) p. 163-164

¹¹² Frith, S. (1996) p. 159

¹¹³ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 84

¹¹⁴ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 71-72

¹¹⁵ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 68-69

¹¹⁶ As Derrida writes: “Nothing is less conservative than the apocalyptic genre. And seeing that it is an apocryptic, apocryphal, masked, coded genre, it can give some detours in order to mislead another vigilance, that of censorship. We know that apocalyptic writings have increased the moment State censorship was very strong in the Roman Empire, and precisely to catch the censorship unawares.” Derrida, J. (1982) p. 89

There was thunder
There was lightning
Then the stars went out
And the moon fell from the sky
It rained mackerel
It rained trout
And the great day of wrath has come
And here's mud in your big red eye
The poker's in the fire
And the locusts take the sky

Indeed, in terms of the conventions of the apocalyptic genre “Earth Died Screaming” does everything ‘right’: the eschatological imagery is all there, the end of the world is announced, there are explicit allusions to the opening of the Seven Seals in *Revelation* – even ostensibly ‘obscure’ secondary sources are cited (the Book of Rudy). But this in itself does not make “Earth Died Screaming,” or *Bone Machine* as a whole, any different from other art-forms’ renditions of Apocalypse. Rather, what makes “Earth Died Screaming” unique as a popular musical rendition of apocalypse is its delivery, which draws attention to the tension between tone and content and, in doing so, intercepts and scrambles a semantic reading of the song’s lyrics.

The Bridge – “Dirt in the Ground”

“Earth Died Screaming” closes in the same way that it begins, with the “Boners” fading out into the ‘distance’, while a melancholic Chamberlin arrangement rises out of the fading percussion and provides a bridge introducing the next, “Dirt in the Ground.” Lyrically, the two tracks deal with similar themes, but the tone of each track is markedly different: “Earth Died Screaming” is driven by percussion, and sonically it is almost playful. Waits’ delivery sounds wizened and conspiratorial, as if divulging secret codes or personal visions; however, there is a quality of showman-like caricature to it, as he dramatically muses his way through the words and pauses in all the right places, as if marvelling at his own use of language. In contrast, “Dirt in the Ground” sounds stark and confronting, consisting of the same austere minor key progression played throughout, and there is no levity or detachment in the delivery to soften the lyrics. Waits’ delivery here is utterly forlorn

– he hangs on the phrases, as if pleading with them to make sense. His voice sounds pained, never more so than in the aching delivery of these lines in the second verse:

The quill from a buzzard
The blood writes the word
I want to know am I the sky
Or a bird

He delivers it as a question, with his voice rising on the last words, and yet there is a sense of finality to it, as if he knows that it is a question that will remain unanswered. It also raises the question of limitations – the point at which one thing ends and another begins – and this idea of limitations is crucial to apocalyptic discourse, for after all that is precisely where eschatology aims to take us: to the end, “the extreme limit, the imminence of the last.”¹¹⁷

These opening tracks are linked by way of a lyrical couplet, which, in each song, is placed in roughly the same place, somewhere in the second verse. On the first track it is heard as:

Well hell doesn't want you
And heaven is full

And in the second it becomes:

'Cause hell is boiling over
And heaven is full

The distinction between heaven and hell, so crucial to the ideas of judgement and salvation epitomised by the Apocalypse of *Revelation* – and its many interpretations and appropriations – is here emptied of all meaning. As Hughes argues, heaven and hell work as “two master images of a system of moral organisation built on the idea of punishment and reward.”¹¹⁸ This system of morality – of which heaven and hell are the “master images” – is one which stipulates that the question of what happens to our souls after we die is in direct proportion to how we live our lives on earth. Thus to empty these images of meaning – implying that they are no longer accessible even as images or symbols – is to call that entire system of morality into crisis, and to suggest that what happens after we die and how we live our earthly

¹¹⁷ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 80

¹¹⁸ Hughes, R. (1968) p. 7

lives have no bearing on one another. Moreover, the repetition of this couplet is not a call-and-response – one does not question or answer the other – it is an echo, faint and ridiculous. This is an apocalypse “without last judgement, without any eschatology than the tone of the “Come” itself, its very difference, an apocalypse beyond good and evil.”¹¹⁹ The distinction between the two – ‘good’/‘evil’, ‘life’/‘death’ – collapse as they are each ‘revealed’ to be part of one and the same process.

In this context, it is interesting that despite the vast tonal differences in the delivery of the two songs – “Earth Died Screaming” and “Dirt in the Ground” – they are linked, as suggested above, by way of a musical bridge. The term ‘bridge’, when used in its musical sense, means much the same thing as when it is used in a non-musical context: it refers to a transitional phase, often set in a slightly different key, that serves to link, or provide a passage across, two sections of a song, for example the verse and chorus. However, given *Bone Machine*’s apocalyptic themes, and the allusions to Jacob’s Ladder in the lyrics of “Earth Died Screaming”, it is also worth noting that within religious contexts the ‘bridge’ (or ladder) has a significant role as that which divides and passes between heaven, hell and earth. In his extremely comprehensive study, *Heaven and Hell in Western Art*, the art critic Robert Hughes examines the ways in which symbols and metaphors have been developed by artists and societies as a visual means of expressing and exploring eschatological themes and issues. According to Hughes “The Bridge of Judgement” can be found in ancient Persian and Mahommedan mythologies and, “[n]ot surprisingly, this dramatic image passed intact into Christian visions of Hell.”¹²⁰ As an aside Hughes also points out that this bridge image has no Biblical correlative (although it is related to Jacob’s Ladder),¹²¹ but rather is one way in which societies have attempted to symbolically reconstruct the relationship between heaven and hell. Needless to say, this bridge serves as a rite of passage, littered with obstacles and temptations that might distract the weak and cause them to fall – both literally and metaphorically.¹²²

To the best of my knowledge the only reference that has been made to the potential symbolic meaning of the bridge in music is by Christopher Ricks in a lyrical

¹¹⁹ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 94

¹²⁰ Hughes, R. (1968) p. 164-165

¹²¹ Hughes, R. (1968) p. 165

¹²² For a further examination of the bridge image in conjunction with Jacob’s Ladder see footnote 96

analysis of Bob Dylan, and even then it is only in passing: “But just remember that the song has not only four verses but a bridge, and that the bridge (*a bridge to the next world*) is variously at a great remove from the sound of that particular rhyming or assonance on *end*”.¹²³ However, the idea of the bridge has also been taken up in different ways – albeit once again in passing – by two theorists, Steven Connor and Jean-Paul Thibaud, each of whom puts forward an idea of the bridge which may be useful for my purposes here. In his discussion of the various ways in which ‘walkman listeners’ navigate urban spaces, Thibaud argues that “[u]sing a Walkman is part of a process of derealisation of urban space that depends on the technical mediation of spatio-phonic behaviours”, producing what Thibaud describes as “thresholds, knots, and configurations”, all of which, Thibaud argues, serve as a “constant reminder of in-between practices.”¹²⁴ In order to explore these ideas, Thibaud creates three categories which each identify a kind of “in-between” space which is opened up by the Walkman listener – one of which is the “sonic bridge”. In contrast with the “sonic door”, which marks a more “radical” point of departure from one space to another, and the “sonic interchange”, in which ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘foreground’ and ‘background’ exist in a kind of interplay, the “bridge” serves as a form of “sonic continuity” enabling “the passage from one place to another” – for example, from the ‘private’ sphere of the home, to the ‘public’ sphere of the street.¹²⁵ Thibaud argues that by “establishing a continuing listening between the two spaces”, the walkman serves to create “a sonic bridge between the interior and the exterior. A sonic bridge is the listening device that encourages the reaching of a material limit without requalifying the sonic space of the listener.”¹²⁶ Thus, to extrapolate from Thibaud’s argument to mine concerning the bridge between “Earth Died Screaming” and “Dirt in the Ground”, it would be possible to conceive this passage as literally implying a point of continuity between the two songs – a kind of “neutralization” of the limitation marking one track from the next, disrupting a sense of closure and thus making it impossible for the listener to establish a “sonic place marker.”¹²⁷ There is no ‘beginning’, no ‘ending’, just ‘transition’ – the ‘limitation’ is simply the site in-between (“What does it matter/A dream of love/Or a dream of lies/We’re all gonna be the same place when we die”).

¹²³ Ricks, C. (2003) p. 32; italics on “a bridge to the next world” added

¹²⁴ Thibaud, J. “The Sonic Composition of the City” in M. Bull & L. Back (ed.) *Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2003) p. 330 & 332

¹²⁵ Thibaud, J. (2003) p. 333

¹²⁶ Thibaud, J. (2003) p. 333

¹²⁷ Thibaud, J. (2003) p. 334

Steven Connor also explores the idea of the bridge within the context of his discussion of “The Strains of the Voice” – an essay I will return to in the following chapter. Of particular interest here is the way in which he links the idea of the bridge to that of ‘tenor’, arguing that “the tenor of an utterance is that which, diffused through it, holds it together through time.”¹²⁸ Earlier I discussed the correspondence between the musical and non-musical use of the term ‘bridge’ – the way in which each represent a point of transition, a passage across. While Connor does not directly address the musical bridge, his discussion raises yet another point of similarity between the two: namely the way it serves as a form of ‘suspension’. For the bridge, as both a musical and architectural structure, only holds intact by virtue of the strains and stresses which keep it in place; as Connor writes: “a bridge thrown between two banks can only continue to occupy its space, allowing traffic and communication, because of the patterns of internal stresses that hold it together.”¹²⁹ Each one of these “internal stresses” – however insignificant it may be in itself – is responsible for holding the bridge in a coherent form, and if any one of them were to fail, this form would more than likely collapse. Tension and suspension are precisely what enables a bridge to hold up; this is as true of a musical bridge as it is of its architectural counterpart. A bridge is, literally, a form of suspension. The reason why this is so interesting in relation to my discussion of *Bone Machine* is because Connor suggests a direct connection between this tension and the tenor – or tone – of the voice, arguing: “What is true of architecture in general – that only that which can support itself, or hold itself together by internal stresses can stand up – is true of a voice. A voice is a structure of stresses and strains, and is pitched against itself, as well as standing out against the surrounding silence or noise.”¹³⁰ And, in comments later Connor discusses the idea of ‘tone’ in relation to that of ‘tenor’ writing: “The tenor of an utterance is that which, diffused through it, holds it together in time.”¹³¹ Thus the tone of an utterance is, like the bridge, a form of continuity and structure – that which serves to work its way through an utterance whilst marking the passage in-between.

¹²⁸ Connor, S. (2004) “The Strains of the Voice” [Online] available at <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/strains/> (accessed 02 Feb 2007) paragraph 5

¹²⁹ Connor, S. (2004) paragraph 4

¹³⁰ Connor, S. (2004) paragraph 4

¹³¹ Connor, S. (2004) paragraph 6

“All Stripped Down”:

Like many of the songs on *Bone Machine*, the fourth track, “All Stripped Down”, emerges out of the clanking and banging which threads throughout the entire album, gathering momentum gradually so that it is uncertain precisely where the song actually begins. My own understanding of where the song begins is based on watching and listening to where the CD player switches from track three to four, and on that basis it seems that the track commences with a final rat-a-tat drumbeat from the previous track, played on a tinny-sounding snare, reminiscent of a marching band. A bass plucks a handful of notes, like an abbreviated scale, and then stops. Waits’ voice, distorted like he’s singing “Yeah yeah yeah,” and a bunch of other indiscernible lyrics (they could be lyrics from the previous track) repeatedly through a megaphone, is faded in, along with the quick, hissing rattle of a shaker. Other bits of percussion are added in, occasional notes are plucked, and as the momentum picks up, it is possible to hear Waits’ voice singing into the megaphone (or whatever it is that he is using to distort his voice), as well as the distorted voice which comes out the other end, the effect being that you can hear both voices at once. Every now and then another of Waits’ voices is mixed in – a funky falsetto croon – so that at times there are actually *three* of Waits’ voices audible at once. It sounds like a jam session where everyone is warming up and haphazardly messing around with different instruments and percussion – and despite the fact that there are only three players listed in the liner notes, it sounds like a full-blown ‘party’.

The shaker gives a prolonged rattle and then, virtually unnoticeably, the noises become less congested and scatter out into a fairly coherent pattern; Waits’ voices are cut back to a single un-distorted voice scat-crooning over the top – what I will be referring to as the “first” voice (see below) – while an electric guitar picks up the same basic melody a couple of steps behind. The effect is such that it seems as if Waits’ phrasing is just a fraction too quick, jumping in anticipation to meet the next line (Derrida discusses the “impatience” of Kant’s “overlordly tone” – the precursor to the apocalyptic tone – which “leaps and is raised higher when the voice of the oracle takes you aside, speaks to you in a private code, and whispers secrets to you”¹³²), with his delivery a high-pitched, hyperactive take on James Brown or Prince-style funk-soul:

¹³² Derrida, J. (1982) p. 72

Well the time will come
When the wind will shout...
And all the sinners know
What I'm talking about...
When all the creatures of the world
Are gonna line up at the gate...
And you better be on time
And you better not be late

After each couplet, Waits' distorted voice – the “second” voice – pitched in a low, leery, growl repeats the lines: “All stripped down/All stripped down.” The voices continue this ‘call-and-response’ routine throughout the song, with one voice singing about judgement and salvation, and the other repeating the motto: “All stripped down/All stripped down.” Moreover, as I will argue, the tonal difference between the two voices – the ‘first’ voice being the higher pitched voice, and the ‘second’, growling voice being that which repeats the lines “all stripped down” – complicates a reading of the song’s ‘meaning’ via its lyrics, as what appears, ‘on the page’, as a seemingly unambiguous call for revelation becomes increasingly fraught with innuendo, and the idea of revelation itself is infused with a sexual dimension.

This call-and-response pattern sets up a funky momentum that continues throughout the song; the “second” voice anchoring the melody, its phrasing neatly in time with the electric guitar carrying the same melody, while the “first” voice, the falsetto, “riffs” over the top,¹³³ playing with the phrasing and timing, sometimes ahead of the beat, sometimes a fraction behind. The momentum halts after every second-verse, when the deeper voice and electric guitar pull the song to a momentary standstill and repeats the lines: “I want you all stripped [pause]/All stripped [pause]/All stripped [pause]/All stripped down.” By the third pause it is almost as if you can hear the song tugging, ready to pick it back up again, and with the final “All stripped down” the song has pulled itself back into gear. The two voices combined create their own rhythm, their own spacing, with each complimenting the other, as if the song has a momentum all its own, with the two voices pulling each other along.

¹³³ Eleanor W. Taylor discusses the “riffin’ method” in African-American music: “After the melody has... been established [by all musicians playing it through together], each instrumentalist takes a solo. The solo becomes his improvisation of the melodic line.” Taylor, E. W. “A Blues View of Life (Literature and the Blues Vision)” in Powell, R. J. (ed.) *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington DC, 1989) p. 44

Like many songs on *Bone Machine*, “All Stripped Down” lyrically takes up the theme of salvation, the overall message of which was summarized by Waits in an interview as “you can’t get into heaven until you’re all stripped down.”¹³⁴ And in terms of the lyrics, this is certainly what the song is about. It constructs a fairly straightforward oratory on salvation and redemption, urging “sinners” to put away their lust for all things sensual (Well take off your paint/Take of your rouge”), earthly and material (“Well you know in your heat/What you gotta bring...No big mink coat/No diamond ring”) and instead “Let your backbone flip/And let your spirit shine through.” The ‘first’ voice delivers these lyrics, while the ‘second’ voice repeats the mantra: “All stripped down/All stripped down.”

In terms of delivery, however, the song is not quite so straightforward – while the ‘first’ voice delivers his lines of love and devotion with religious ecstasie, the ‘leery’ tone of the ‘second’ voice provides a sexual undercurrent, imbuing the line “All stripped down” with a somewhat different meaning that is not altogether chaste or spiritual. Thus the act of revelation, of ‘stripping down’ and unveiling, takes on a meaning here which is both sexual and spiritual, creating a tension between the two which continues throughout the song, becoming most explicit in the delivery of the final verse:

Ain’t nothin’ in my heart
But fire for you
All stripped down
All stripped down
With my rainy hammer
And a heart that’s true
I want you all stripped
All stripped
All stripped down

As I have already argued, according to Derrida it is the *act* of unveiling that is apocalyptic, the *gesture* “that lets be seen what up to then remained enveloped, secluded, held back,” and the example he provides here is of “the body when the clothes are removed or the glans when the foreskin is removed in circumcision.”¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Jarmusch, J. (2005) p. 182

¹³⁵ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 65

Indeed, Derrida implies that this interconnection between sexual and spiritual revelation is built into the ancient Apocalypses, writing that: “*apokalupsis*, disclosure, discovery, uncovering, unveiling, the thing lifted from, the truth revealed about the thing: first of all, if we can say this, men’s or women’s genitals, but also their eyes or ears.”¹³⁶ On “All Stripped Down” this dual meaning of revelation as both sexual and spiritual unveiling is played out in the tension between tone and lyrics; however, this tension is not framed as a simple opposition – between ‘sexual’ and ‘sacred’ – but rather as a continuation, as if the limit or extreme of one is where the other begins. Thus what the act of revelation reveals, in this instance, is its own limitations, the point at which something else intrudes or breaks in.

This idea of limitations is crucial to Derrida’s explication of an apocalyptic tone, and culminates in his analysis of the seductive “come” or “*viens*” of the tone. Like “revelation” or “unveiling”, this “come” is imbued with both a sexual and spiritual meaning within Derrida’s reading which is framed less in terms of an opposition – between the ‘sexual’ and the ‘spiritual’ – and more as alternate dimensions of the same word, and which can be read as apocalyptic in both senses. As a euphemism for orgasm it denotes “a site where language stops, both for reasons of internal logic and of social prohibition.”¹³⁷ James Berger traces the ways in which the orgasmic can be read as apocalyptic:

merely the self-shattering experience of orgasm is apocalyptic, and, as *jouissance*, it has assumed an important role in critical terminology as a trope of radical inexpressibility... When we come, our personalities disperse, our autobiographies are suspended, we are over, are coming, have come. What is revealed or unveiled in orgasm? Exactly what is revealed in any apocalypse: nothing, or nothing that can be said.¹³⁸

Derrida plays on this sexual meaning of “come” in much the same way as he does with “revelation”, without being overt, but making his inspired reading of “Come” in the Biblical *Revelation* quite astonishing nonetheless. As in its sexual sense, the spiritual meaning of “come” or “*viens*” designates the ultimate limitation: that which cannot be spoken, which does not belong to discourse, to the realm of the familiar, or to ordinary, lived time. However, like the “*sans*” of the “apocalypse *sans* apocalypse”, this limitation is also an opening. Caputo argues that it signifies the

¹³⁶ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 64

¹³⁷ Berger, J. (1999) p. 14

¹³⁸ Berger, J. (1999) p. 14

opening or “coming” of “messianic time” – the time of the to-come (although of course within Derrida’s hands it “is messianic time *sans* a Messiah”).¹³⁹ Caputo explains that: “The structure of the *viens* [come] is to disturb the horizon of the present with the call of the impossible, to disturb the flow of ontological time with promise and expectation. *Viens* is not the last word but the first, the call that proclaims that the last word is never spoken and the Messiah has not at last come.”¹⁴⁰ Thus ‘come’ is both a limitation and an opening – an end and a beginning.

‘Jouissance’ is a term that has already been used in association with music – its usefulness as “a trope of radical inexpressibility” as suggested by Berger above, serving to articulate the inarticulate pleasures and movements of music, its capacity to disrupt language and ‘rational’ discourse. As I will discuss further below, in Roland Barthes’ essay, “The Grain of the Voice”, he suggests this idea of ‘jouissance’ is the source of music’s resistance to language – as well as that which language attempts to reconstitute through the use of ‘adjective’.¹⁴¹ It is also important to recognise that the blurring of the boundary or ‘limit’ between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘sexual’, the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘fleshly’, as it is played out on “All Stripped Down” is also an aspect of many African-American music traditions, ‘soul’, ‘funk’, ‘RnB’, most of which are Gospel and Blues derived, and which I think Waits is paying homage to in his performance throughout the song. Indeed, many African-American music traditions, with the Blues in particular, are built on double-meanings and innuendo – as a female, it is often startling to read some of the lyrics that black women were singing in the early-twentieth century.¹⁴²

“Come,” or “*viens*” forms the crux of Derrida’s argument; it is the limitation of both his own demystification of the apocalyptic tone and of the apocalyptic tone itself. As Caputo suggests, for Derrida “*viens*” is “the apocalyptic word *par excellence*, if it is a word at all.”¹⁴³ “Come” is the site of an intersection, an in-between space, but it is an unstable site which defies an absolute location or definition. “Come” eludes analysis; it cannot be explained in terms of existing paradigms or discourses of

¹³⁹ Caputo, J. D. (1997) p. 70-71

¹⁴⁰ Caputo, J. D. (1997) p. 96

¹⁴¹ Barthes, R. “The Grain of the Voice” in S. Frith & A. Goodwin (ed.) *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London, New York 1990) p. 293-300

¹⁴² As Frith argues: “For obvious historical reasons the expressive African-American use of the English language, originating in slaves’ talk, has always been metaphorical, has always been dependent on double meanings, on allusion, indirection, and puns, on symbolism, and on the surrealism of language organised as *sound*.” Frith, S. (1996) p. 172

¹⁴³ Caputo, D. (1997) p. 95

“philosophy, metaphysics, onto-eschato-theology.”¹⁴⁴ Derrida argues: ““Come,” opening the scene, could not become an object, a theme, a representation, or even a citation in the current sense, and subsumable under a category, whether that of the coming or of the event.”¹⁴⁵ Rather, “Come” crosses from one to another, whilst not being determined by either. Like music, it designates a space of movement, belonging to neither addresser nor addressee, and hence complicating the notion of a secure, identifiable origin or destination.

And this is why I find Derrida’s essay on apocalyptic tone so compelling when it comes to an analysis of Apocalypse and music; because it allows for an understanding of Apocalypse as process and movement, wherein revelation is conceived a continual, often turbulent and confusing, unveiling. Although Derrida tends to refer to written discourses when discussing the discourses the tone may be translated into (perhaps belying a more conservative stance than may otherwise appear), whenever he is not being specific about discourse and is rather illustrating the effects of the apocalyptic tone, his allusions and descriptions are frequently musical. Thus, for example, to evoke the quality of the apocalyptic tone’s delirium or derailing, he speaks of “stringed instruments,” “out-of-tune-ness,” “polytonality,” “voices” and “pitch,”¹⁴⁶ and, indeed, the term *Verstimmen*, translated, means “first of all to put out of tune..., when we speak of a stringed instrument..., or yet, for example, a voice. This is currently said of a piano.”¹⁴⁷ Derrida evokes the “metalanguage” of eschatological discourse as a concert, a discordant symphony, in which another (or a multitude of others) is always implied, invoked even to complete it.

Michael Bull and Les Back have suggested that: “Confronted by music there is a poverty of language; we simply don’t have the words to transpose the alchemy of sound.”¹⁴⁸ And yet, it appears that what limited words we do possess to “transpose the alchemy of sound” have found their way into Derrida’s apocalyptic tone. In a beautiful passage where he discusses the seductive “Come,” its precarious ontological status and the way in which it traverses space and time, it is as a choir of calls-and-responses, infinitely deferred:

¹⁴⁴ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 93

¹⁴⁵ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 93

¹⁴⁶ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 67, 72 & 83

¹⁴⁷ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 72

¹⁴⁸ Bull, M. & Back, L. “Introduction: Into Sound” in M. Bull, & L. Back, (ed.) *Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2003) p. 12

And above all at the ends of ends, “Come” launches into or has repercussions in an exchange of appeals and responses that precisely is no longer an exchange. The voices, the places, the journeys of “Come” traverse the partition [paroi] of a song, a book of citational and recitative echoes, as if it [ca] began by responding. And in this traversal or this transfer(ence), the voices find their spacing, the space of their movement, but they nullify it with one stroke [d’un trait: with one brilliant melodic passage, run, or virtuosic passage]; they no longer give it the time, the beat.¹⁴⁹

It is in his explication of “come” that the musicality of Derrida’s apocalyptic tone becomes most pronounced. After all, where does music “live”? It “lives” in the between-spaces, it moves, crossing from one to another whilst being identifiable with neither. It might be possible to associate music with a specific form, such as a CD or a record (and I will come back to this in a moment), but as Jon Stratton suggests, it “does not have one single medium with which it may be identified.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, many of the peculiarities Derrida attributes to the apocalyptic tone: the ways in which it must be translated into discourse, its elusive ontological status, its resistance to categorization or classification, and its fluid, unstable boundaries and “polytonality;” all of these qualities are the very same as those which have made, and continue to make, analysis of music such a difficult task. Consider, for example, Derrida’s explication of the difficulties he had when attempting to subject the tone to philosophical discourse:

What I had then tried to expose to an analysis that would be, among other things, a spectography of the tone and of the changing of tone, by definition could not keep itself at the disposal of or confine itself to the measure, to the tempo, of philosophical, pedagogic, or teaching demonstration. First, because “Come,” opening the scene, could not become an object, a theme, a representation, or even a citation in the current sense, and subsumable under a category, whether that of coming or of the event. For the same reason, that bends itself difficultly to the rhetoric required by the present scene. Nonetheless I am trying to extract from this, at the risk of essentially deforming it, the demonstrative function in terms of philosophical discourse.¹⁵¹

Now, here is Roland Barthes’ own discussion of the problems of trying to interpret music through another discourse:

¹⁴⁹ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 92

¹⁵⁰ Stratton, J. “Capitalism and Romantic Ideology in the Record Business” in *Popular Music* 3 (1983) p. 143

¹⁵¹ Derrida, J. (1982) p. 93

Language, according to Benveniste, is the only semiotic system capable of *interpreting* another semiotic system... How, then, does language manage when it has to interpret music? Alas, it seems, very badly. If one looks at the normal practice of music criticism,... it can readily be seen that a work (or its performance) is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective. Music, by natural bent, is that which at once receives an adjective. The adjective is inevitable: this music is *this*, this execution is *that*. No doubt the moment we turn an art into a subject (for an article, for a conversation) there is nothing left but to give it predicates; in the case of music, however, such predication unfailingly takes the most facile and trivial form, that of the epithet.¹⁵²

Barthes' essay on "The Grain of the Voice" aims to overcome this problem of the "adjective" by seeking to "displace the fringe of contact between music and language."¹⁵³ Barthes chose to focus his analysis on the very site of resistance and friction that is created in the displacement of song into "another semiotic system;" in this case the point at which the singing voice – "the body in the voice as it sings"¹⁵⁴ – hits up against the rules and conventions of language (or genre): the "grain of the voice."¹⁵⁵ In "Of an Apocalyptic Tone" it appears that Derrida is trying to do something similar for the apocalyptic tone; he demonstrates the impotence of language to explain the apocalyptic tone by making "Come" the ultimate limit of both the apocalyptic tone *and* his own argument (which is not so different from the apocalyptic tone after all). And like the "*sans*" in the "apocalypse *sans* apocalypse," this limit is a particularly *open* limit, yet another site of possibility and hope.

"That Feel"

And so, to return, once again, to *Bone Machine*. While my argument throughout this chapter has suggested that the significance of *Bone Machine* as a musical registration of the apocalyptic theme cannot be 'read' from the meaning of its lyrics, I would nonetheless like to conclude my discussion here by quoting from the lyrics of the album's closing track, "That Feel". Within this song, the singer declares that, when all is said and done – at the 'end', and, perhaps, the beginning – "There's one thing you can't lose/And it's that feel". On this song, as with the album as a whole, an idea of the Apocalypse is registered as an ongoing process, corrosively eating

¹⁵² Barthes, R. (1990) p. 293

¹⁵³ Barthes, R. (1990) p. 294

¹⁵⁴ Barthes, R. (1990) p. 299

¹⁵⁵ Barthes, R. (1990) p. 295

away at those things that connect us to a specific time and place to ‘reveal’ the skeletal framework that lies beneath. It is identified only as something that *cannot* be identified – something that cannot be articulated or labelled: it does not belong to the perceived dualisms of rational, scientific ‘Western’ thought, nor can it be explained by discourses of religion or law. It is, finally, “that feel”.

‘THE INNER OR DEEP PART’: BJORK’S *MEDULLA*

Bjork’s 2004 CD, *Medulla*, is an album constructed almost entirely using the human voice: male and female a cappella voices producing all manner of vocal sounds, “voiced” and “unvoiced,” “grained” and “ungrained”; voices manipulated, multiplied, layered, fused and dissolved. As Bjork stated in an interview:

The album is about voices... I want to get away from instruments and electronics, which was the world of my last album, ‘Vespertine.’ I want to see what can be done with the entire emotional range of the human voice – a single voice, a chorus, trained voices, pop voices, folk voices, strange voices. Not just melodies but everything else, every noise that a throat makes.¹

Thus, for the recording of the album, Bjork gathered together a host of guest vocalists from a diverse range of musical and ethnic backgrounds, including Inuit throat singer and long term Bjork-collaborator Tanya ‘Tagaq’ Gillis, American “avant-rock renaissance man” Mike Patton, African-American “human beat-box” Rahzel, Japanese ventriloquist Dokaka, English jazz/avant-garde vocalist Robert Wyatt, and a professional Icelandic choir.² The result – if ‘result’ is the right word, given the album’s frequently embryonic collages of sounds – is a multicultural melange of voices producing some of the most intimate, seemingly uncensored vocal sounds possibly ever committed to tape (or CD) (at least insofar as major label pop records go).

Throughout this thesis I have continually returned to grapple with issues of interpretation and popular music: how CDs can be heard as registering broader cultural ideas or themes; what makes a sonic registration of a particular idea unique or different to those produced in other art-forms; and, the overarching question, how to translate an interpretation of musical sound into other discourses, namely academic writing. In the case of Bjork’s 2004 album, *Medulla*, however, I have found these issues compounded; if, as Michael Bull and Les Back suggest (following Barthes): “The best one can hope for in writing about music is better kinds of failure,” then, for me, *Medulla* – more than any of the other CDs discussed herein – seems to be the album which has forced me to confront this failure

¹ Ross, A. “Bjork’s Saga” *The New Yorker*. 80:23 (2004) [Online] <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=682473821&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=20923&RQT=309&VName=PQD> (accessed 08/03/07) paragraph 8

² The quote about Mike Patton comes from a review of his work with Fantomas. See Stannard, J. ‘Fantoman.’ *Uncut* 79 (Dec. 2003) p. 126

directly.³ *Medulla* resists/defies generic classification and subverts many of the distinctions and tropes common to both popular music and the analytical traditions surrounding its study: there are few of the familiar signposts – conventional rhythm tracks or song structures, ‘hooks’, chord progressions and so forth – that might otherwise serve to give the listener a sense of their bearings and thus help to enable a detached or objective standpoint from which to engage in analytical investigation. The ‘songs’ – such as they are – often appear less as a collection of discrete, individual ‘tracks’ than as outgrowths of a continuing undercurrent of wordless vocalising which recurs throughout the album, gradually building up and fading away.

And then, of course, there is the album’s treatment of the ‘human voice’: a medium which has long assumed a central (if recently contested) position within many Western cultural traditions – as “a sign of interiority, authority, and authenticity”, amongst other things – and which is here magnified, multiplied, and rebounded endlessly against itself. In this chapter, I wish to discuss the ways in which *Medulla* can be understood as calling attention to the voice as a site of intersection and exchange – as that which both articulates and displaces the threshold between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘presence’ and ‘absence’. Far from serving as a secure, stable sign of “authentic human presence”, *Medulla* uses the voice to amplify the fluidity of boundaries – opening up the space in-between as a distance that is traversed through the actions of the voice. In doing so, I believe *Medulla* serves as an interesting, and timely, counterpoint to a range of contemporary debates which seek to challenge the continuing validity of the voice.

Bjork’s work in the context of academic theory

Of all the artists considered in this thesis, Bjork is the one whose work has attracted the most attention in terms of academic theory. Indeed, aside from the sheer amount of attention her work has received within critical discourses – which is quite out of proportion with that given to most popular musicians (with the exception of Dylan, Madonna, Bowie and Bruce Springsteen, all much more high-profile ‘stars’ than Bjork) – what I find most striking about the academic and critical reception of

³ Bull, M. & Back, L. ‘Introduction: Into Sound’ in M. Bull, & L. Back (ed.) *Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2003) p. 12

Bjork's music is the number of different theoretical 'agendas' to which her work has been harnessed. At times it is difficult to tell whether they are all talking about the same artist, such is the variety of readings on offer and the range of ideas and issues with which her work has been associated. Thus for example in his essay "'Where It's At?': Postmodern Theory and the Contemporary Musical Field", David Brackett uses Bjork's first three albums (*Debut*, *Post* and *Homogenic*) – along with albums by Beck Hansen – as an exemplary instance of the way in which postmodern stylistic traits and aesthetic practices have infiltrated discourses of popular music.⁴ Steven Shaviro's essay "The Erotic Life of Machines" focuses on Bjork's music video for "All is Full of Love" (taken from *Homogenic*), directed by Chris Cunningham, in relation to "[q]uestions of virtuality, and of posthumanity" which, he suggests, "are much in the air today."⁵ Although he does not specifically refer to 'posthumanism', Rick Poyner, in an essay titled "Cyborg Bjork", which was written for a book officially commissioned by Bjork in conjunction with the design company M/M in 2001, takes a similar approach to that of Shaviro, discussing the technologically-assisted image "mutations" enacted in Bjork's visual artwork and music videos in relation to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto".⁶ Marion Leonard, in a chapter entitled "Meaning Making in the Press" from her book *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power*, takes a slightly different angle, interpreting Bjork's work through a feminist framework which focuses on the way public perception of Bjork's 'quirky' star persona and Icelandic nationality is informed by media representations of her 'otherness' – in particular, the way in which "press reports have constructed singer-songwriter Bjork as mentally unstable", and how gender and racial stereotypes are drawn on to reinforce this sense of supposed mental instability.⁷

With the exception of Leonard, whose discussion of Bjork is designed, as Leonard herself acknowledges, more as a counterpoint to the chapter's main focal point, Courtney Love, and as such is rather brief, I will come back to these other analyses of Bjork's work throughout the course of this chapter. The academic discussion I would like to focus on here, however, is that put forward by Nicola Dibben in her

⁴ Brackett, D. "'Where It's At': Postmodern Theory and the Contemporary Musical Field" in J. Lochhead & J. Auner (eds.) *Postmodern Music Postmodern Thought* (New York, London, 2002) p. 219-220

⁵ Shaviro, S. "The Erotic Life of Machines" *Parallax*. 8:2 (2002) p. 21

⁶ Poyner, R. 'Cyber Bjork' in *Bjork*. (New York, London, 2001) p. 113-116

⁷ Leonard, M. *Gender in the Music Industry. Rock, Discourse and Girl Power*. (Aldershot, Burlington, 2007) p. 82

recent book *Bjork*, published as part of the “Icons of Pop Music” series (edited by Dave Laing and Jill Halstead for the Indiana University Press).⁸ Dibben’s study is the most extensive and detailed theoretical analysis of Bjork’s career thus far, covering not only her solo career (from *Debut*, in 1993, to *Volta*, in 2008), but also her formative years spent singing with bands such as Kukl and the Sugarcubes, as well as her numerous collaborations with different artists (both ‘musical’ and otherwise). As Dibben suggests in the introduction, her book is designed “partly in response” to the latter conception of Bjork mentioned above – as “Icelandic pixie” and “exotic other” – in contrast to which Dibben foregrounds an idea of Bjork as a “‘whole artist’: that is, an artist who communicates her ideas through the integrated use of all media at her disposal.”⁹ Moreover, as Dibben also states in the introduction, the timing of *Bjork*’s publication was precipitated by a period in which Bjork appeared to be ‘taking stock’ of her career to date – releasing a *Greatest Hits* compilation, along with the *Family Tree* box-set and a retrospective documentary on her career thus far, *Inside Bjork* (all of which were released in 2002) – which not only enabled Dibben to ascertain a more ‘stable’ vantage point from which to analyse Bjork’s back catalogue, but also allowed her to take advantage of Bjork’s own statements about her work until that time.¹⁰

Rather than presenting a ‘chronological’ or ‘biographical’ account of Bjork’s career to date, Dibben’s approach is concerned more with the development of particular ideas and themes throughout Bjork’s work as a ‘whole’ – including the visual and filmic arts as well as her musical output – using “examples from across her career to illustrate different themes in her work”.¹¹ Central to Dibben’s reading of Bjork’s work is the idea of ‘unity’ – an idea which, Dibben suggests, has underpinned all of Bjork’s solo work, regardless of the particular thematic or stylistic shifts represented on each album. As Dibben argues:

A central component in understanding the character of Bjork’s music is the recognition that, while her style has undergone many transformations over her career, the idea articulated by

⁸ Dibben, N. *Bjork* (Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2009)

⁹ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 23 As Dibben writes of her own decision to foreground “the cultural significance of Bjork’s artistic output, its creation, and mediation”: “This is partly in response to her exoticization by the print and broadcast media, which arguably underplays her achievements.” Dibben, N. (2009) p. 2

¹⁰ As Dibben suggests in the introduction: “Writing an account of Bjork’s artistic output after this time [following the release of the career retrospectives] allows us to engage with Bjork’s own perspective on her output, as well as assess its development since then.” Dibben, N. (2009) p. 2

¹¹ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 3

that sound has remained remarkably consistent: as I will show, just as Bjork's thematic tropes merge apparent opposites, so Bjork's sonic world is all about creating unity.¹²

Dibben argues that while each of Bjork's albums articulates this quest for 'unity' differently, depending on the specific nature of the 'project', such differences are more akin to variations on a theme, rather than significant alterations in their own right. Moreover, Dibben suggests that Bjork's quest for 'unity' is very much bound up with Bjork's Icelandic background, whereby her entire solo career can be understood as an attempt to "unify" the tensions and oppositions presented by "contemporary Icelandic identity"; as Dibben argues: "Bjork's statements and compositional decisions articulate the musical solution she found in her solo career to the tensions embodied in Iceland's contemporary national identity: sonic, visual and conceptual unification of the technological with the natural."¹³ It is generalisations like this which, I believe, make Dibben's reading of Bjork's work problematic, as I will come back to shortly.

It is not difficult to see how the *Greatest Hits* and *Family Tree* compilations have influenced Dibben's approach, in that the perspective which Dibben adopts towards Bjork's musical output is closely aligned with that which Bjork herself puts forward in these career retrospectives – particularly that which is set out in the "statement of artistic aesthetic" issued in the liner notes to the *Family Tree* box-set, from which Dibben quotes extensively throughout the book. Indeed, Dibben's critical method is pretty much the analytical equivalent of Bjork's "greatest hits" formula: it works in terms of re-presenting Bjork's artistic 'vision' as it is articulated throughout her career as a 'whole', in a manner which is consistent with the 'overarching' perspective which Bjork establishes – retrospectively – in *Family Tree*. Dibben herself acknowledges that part of the appeal of such 'greatest hits' compilations and career retrospectives is that they enable a more 'coherent' conception of Bjork's artistic identity and 'vision' than would be possible if one were to try and explore all the different projects which Bjork has been involved with. Discussing the complexity of Bjork's artistic output to date and the difficulties this presents to categorisation, she writes:

If the resulting collage is a confusing one, then a vision of the artistic identity that Bjork would like us to see can be found in those aspects of her artistic output which are explicitly

¹² Dibben, N. (2009) p. 101

¹³ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 97

self-defining, such as the Bjork-chosen *Greatest Hits* released in 2002, other releases within the *Family Tree* box set, and the work she refused to release, requested be deleted, or otherwise suppressed... By limiting access to some of her past work Bjork attempted to shape public perception of her artistic identity and to project a coherent vision of the world.¹⁴

As this suggests, Dibben is well aware of the way in which Bjork's artistic 'vision' and 'identity' are constructions – her 'body of work' defined as much by the things she chooses to omit as by those which she embraces. However, whilst recognising this, Dibben nonetheless elects to study Bjork's work in the terms which are set out by Bjork herself, using the *Greatest Hits* and *Family Tree* compilations as a career milestone, enabling Dibben to survey Bjork's back catalogue from a kind of 'bird's eye' (or author's eye) view, much as Bjork herself intended for them to be conceived.

There are benefits to such an approach: by drawing on themes and stylistic practices as they have developed over the course Bjork's entire career, using the career retrospectives as her point of departure, Dibben is not only able to provide a comprehensive overview of Bjork's oeuvre, but also to create a more holistic conception of Bjork's identity as an artist than might otherwise be possible if one were to approach each of her albums or 'projects' individually. In doing so, Dibben arguably avoids what could be conceived as the 'pitfalls' presented by earlier discussions of Bjork's work, such as those presented by Brackett, Poynor and Shaviro mentioned earlier – in that it would be possible to argue that Bjork's work has since moved away from the kinds of 'postmodern' aesthetic traits which characterised her early albums. Most importantly, in her conception of Bjork as a 'whole artist' – “an artist who communicates her ideas through the integrated use of all media at her disposal” – Dibben's analysis is the first to accurately recognise (if not fully address) the extent to which Bjork's work incorporates a number of discourses and media other than the strictly 'musical', as well as the kinds of questions and issues this poses for notions of 'authorship' and 'authenticity'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 155

¹⁵ This is not entirely true – the fact that both Poynor and Shaviro discuss Bjork's use of promotional images and music videos suggests an awareness of the way in which her work participates in media and discourses other than the strictly 'musical'; however, in neither instance do the writers address the way Bjork's music operates in relation to these other art-forms (no doubt owing more to the constraints of the essay format rather than any particular negligence on the writers' parts), which is where Dibben's analysis takes such discussions a step forward.

There are, however, problems with such an approach – problems which are, I think, less a product of the actual analyses Dibben conducts, than they are limitations inherent in the approach she adopts to Bjork’s work and artistic identity as a ‘whole’. Earlier I discussed the way in which Dibben’s analysis appears to take a similar line of approach to Bjork’s work as that which is set out in the singer’s ‘Greatest Hits’ packages and the *Family Tree* box-set. The issues raised by ‘greatest hits’ formula and career retrospectives generally – and this is not restricted to Bjork (although I think the difficulties it poses are particularly relevant to her, as I will suggest) – is that they not only tend to privilege individual songs over albums, but that they present what could be conceived as a fairly restricted view of an artist’s career, foregrounding those aspects which are relevant to the aims of the ‘greatest hits’ package itself. These aims might differ depending on who is responsible for issuing the package in the first place – for example, record companies might choose to capitalise on the artist’s commercial success by including only the ‘hits’, whereas the artist him/herself might choose rather to present a selection which best ‘sums up’ their career to date. (And in this respect it is interesting that Bjork elected to release *two Greatest Hits* albums – one of which was chosen by fans and included all of Bjork’s ‘singles’; the other of which was selected by Bjork herself and included as part of the *Family Tree* box-set.)

In Bjork’s case, as Dibben concedes, these career retrospectives helped to create a more ‘unified’, ‘holistic’ conception of both Bjork’s artistic identity and her musical output to date, foregrounding in particular those aspects of Bjork’s work which serve to reinforce her ‘artistic vision’. However, whilst recognising that the perspective on Bjork’s work which is enabled by these career retrospectives is necessarily limited by the way the artist herself would like her work to be perceived, Dibben still elects to work from within the parameters established within these career retrospectives, to forge a conception of both Bjork’s artistic identity and her work which is more or less consistent with that which Bjork herself outlines therein. As Dibben states in the conclusion to her study, the aim of her analyses has been to examine “the detail of Bjork’s *self-perceived* artistic vision, and the extent to which it is *manifested* in her artistic output. The central theme revealed by my analysis, which has achieved increasing definition throughout her solo career, is the enactment of unity.”¹⁶ I will come back to discuss this idea of ‘unity’ shortly; first,

¹⁶ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 156; italics added

though, I would like to point out that I do not think that Dibben's decision to foreground such a conception of Bjork's work is problematic in itself. Any analysis needs parameters, and if those parameters are ones which are explicitly sanctioned by the artist herself (which is to say, the aspects she would like us to focus on as part of her 'body of work'), then these are as good as any others. (For the record, I actually think it would be quite boring to read an analysis which chose to focus exclusively on those aspects of Bjork's work that she has tried to exclude from her oeuvre – although it might, perhaps, provide an interesting counterpoint to Dibben's analysis here.) And, to be fair, in working within these parameters, Dibben achieves exactly what she set out to achieve: to demonstrate the way Bjork's artistic output conforms to the "self-perceived artistic vision" articulated in the liner notes to *Family Tree*. To put it simply: Dibben demonstrates exactly what she aimed to demonstrate.

And yet, the overall effect of reading Dibben's study is often akin to being told in advance the ending of a film one is about to watch– the only substance comes in the particular means it takes to get there. Moreover, I would argue that there is a certain circular logic at work, whereby Dibben seems to know in advance what the outcome of her analysis will be. That is, in exploring the way Bjork's artistic output conforms to the aims expressed in the career retrospectives, Dibben's analysis aims to demonstrate or 'uncover' exactly what it wants to find – indeed, what it already knew to be there. Thus it is, perhaps, unsurprising that every chapter in Dibben's book arrives at the exact same conclusion – albeit by using different means each time – namely, that Bjork's work articulates this idea of 'unity'.

More crucial, however, is the fact that the 'reading' of Bjork's work which is enabled by the release of these 'career-defining' retrospectives, is the only 'reading' Dibben seems to consider. While she recognises the extent to which Bjork's "self-perceived artistic vision" is a limited construct – defined as much by what she chooses to include as by what she elects to ignore – Dibben herself is in danger of uncritically adopting a similar stance towards Bjork's body of work. That is, in her effort to foreground a 'unified', 'holistic' conception of Bjork's artistic output and artistic identity which is consistent with that presented by Bjork herself in the career retrospectives, Dibben's analysis seems to me to downplay – if not outright ignore – those aspects of Bjork's work which do not 'fit' within the general thesis outlined in the introduction: namely, that Bjork's work aims to "communicate a vision of unity

with and in the world”.¹⁷ Thus Dibben herself helps to create an idea of Bjork’s work which appears ‘unified’ and ‘whole’.

This means that Dibben’s analysis (crucially) overlooks the significance of the album format within Bjork’s oeuvre, choosing rather to see each album as indicative of more ‘superficial’ stylistic shifts, rather than distinct ‘projects’ in their own right. For example, while Dibben mentions “the extreme contrasts in thematic, sonic and visual identity between successive solo albums, which are conceived as distinct ‘projects’”, this is cited only as a less “obvious” instance of the stylistic developments which have characterised Bjork’s musical output as a ‘whole’ (as compared to the more dramatic “stylistic shift” enacted in her move from the last Sugarcubes album, *Here Today, Tomorrow Next Week*, to her first solo work, *Debut*).¹⁸ Similarly, while Dibben acknowledges elsewhere that “Bjork’s style seems to have changed radically with each new recording project”, she nonetheless maintains that these ‘seeming changes’ are only secondary to the way “her work articulates a number of recurrent themes, which together communicate a vision of unity with and in the world.”¹⁹ Thus while Bjork’s musical style and lyrical content might vary significantly from one album or ‘project’ to another, the overarching conceptual theme to Bjork’s career thus far can be summed up in one word: ‘unity’.

This idea of ‘unity’ is also integral to Dibben’s conception of Bjork’s identity as a “‘whole artist’: “an artist who communicates her ideas through the integrated use of all media at her disposal.”²⁰ In the conclusion, Dibben returns to this idea, arguing:

Bjork’s vision of unity is embodied in her visual persona and communicated through all the artistic media at her disposal: music, cover art, promotional photographs, videos, concert sets, her clothing, and even titles articulate her ideas to an extent that goes beyond the practices of many other artists. This unity of media embodies the very fusion her work expresses.²¹

While Dibben’s conception of Bjork as a “whole artist” certainly recognises the way in which Bjork’s work draws on a range of discourses and media other than the strictly musical, she does not explore how this might also serve to complicate the singer’s ‘unified’ identity. Moreover, whilst recognising that ‘unity’, for Dibben, has

¹⁷ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 3

¹⁸ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 22

¹⁹ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 3

²⁰ Dibben N. (2009) p. 23

²¹ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 158-159

several layers of meaning within the context of Bjork's work, it simply does not do her work justice. To be blunt, Bjork's work is just not that simplistic: while her statements about her work may sometimes appear to operate in terms of broad generalisations (something that Bjork herself has addressed), her music itself is contradictory and complex in a way that words like 'unity' don't really begin to cover.²²

While I am not necessarily disputing the notion that 'unity' is a recurring theme in Bjork's work (although I would argue that it is but one of many), what I find more problematic is the way in which this idea of 'unity' functions within Dibben's own appraisal of Bjork's identity and career to date. I would argue that if we take Bjork's albums as the starting point for an analysis, rather than the overarching artistic 'vision' represented in her career retrospectives, then a significantly different idea of Bjork emerges – one which is not so easily assimilated into a 'holistic' perspective or an idea of 'unity'.

The significance of the album format within Bjork's oeuvre:

While there have been a number of diverse academic interpretations of Bjork's 'star' persona, musical practices, and visual iconography, thus far there has been little attention to what I consider to be one of the defining features of her work to date: namely, the way in which she explicitly organises each of her musical releases around a central 'theme' or 'narrative concept'. Indeed, the significance of the album format within Bjork's oeuvre is something that has not yet been fully explored in any of the critical literature surrounding the singer – which seems somewhat odd, given its centrality within many of Bjork's own statements about her work, as well as those of her collaborators and fans. Therefore, before I move on to focus specifically on *Medulla*, I would like to spend a little time looking at the role of the album within Bjork's music to date.

Since the beginning of her 'solo' career, and certainly since the release of *Homogenic* in 1997, Bjork has explicitly organised each of her albums according to a central 'theme' or 'story', which is not only played out in the music, lyrics and track-listing of each album, but also in its title, CD artwork and packaging (which

²² As Bjork states in an interview: "I use words like 'pagan' sometimes... But these are things I say just to get something across, not because I have a picture in my head." [Ross, A. (2004) paragraph 56]

has become ever more elaborate with each new album), and in promotional discourses (such as music videos, tours, documentaries and interviews). In keeping with this particular ‘theme’ or ‘story’, Bjork devises a specific musical and visual palette for each album, which is always significantly different from that of her previous album, thereby enabling each musical release to appear as a distinct entity.²³ Thus for example, *Homogenic*’s musical instrumentation – restricted to distorted “volcanic beats and... over-romantic, patriotic strings” – was complicit with that album’s concern with creating “an auditory representation of Iceland’s geology”: “It should sound the way Iceland looks”.²⁴ This idea was also played out in the music videos for the album – particularly the single ‘Joga’, the images of which consisted almost entirely of the Icelandic landscape and scenery. In contrast, the musical and visual aesthetic for her following album, *Vespertine* (not including the soundtrack for *Dancer in the Dark: Selmasongs*), was designed in accordance with a more ‘introverted’, ‘domestic’ theme; as Bjork states:

It’s more about what happens inside me. It’s just, sort of what happens underneath my skin, or my interior, or in the place... the things that travel outside my nose and inside my mouth, and outside my... inside my eyes, and so it’s about how I deal with me in my body.²⁵

In order to replicate these ideas sonically, Bjork used acoustic instruments with what she thought of as “sounds that are short and percussive”: for example, celestes, harps and music-boxes. For the beats and other sounds she enlisted the help of Matmos, a Canadian duo who specialise in avant-garde electronic music using ‘found’ instruments, to create a soundscape of “micro-beats”, and “insecty,” “whispery” noises.²⁶ (The tours for *Vespertine* were conducted exclusively in concert halls and opera houses, in order to recreate ‘live’ the album’s central thematic preoccupation with domesticity, intimacy and introversion.)

Concomitant with this is the creation of a distinct persona or ‘character’ for each album, which is first ‘introduced’ to the audience through the album’s cover artwork – as though it is *their* ‘world’ we are about to enter into. As Bjork states:

²³ As if to reinforce this, there are several instances of songs which were written as part of earlier recording sessions appearing on later albums because they did not ‘fit’ within the ‘concept’ of the original. For example, the track ‘Who Is It’, from *Medulla*, was originally written during *Vespertine*, but was “too frenetic for the record’s gentle feel”; likewise the songs “Army of Me” and “Modern Things” were recorded with Graham Massey prior to *Debut*, but again were considered out of synch with that album’s ‘rootsy’ musical palette and were not released until the following album, *Post*.

²⁴ *Inside Bjork DVD* (2003); Pytlik, M. *Bjork Wow and Flutter*. (London, 2003) p. 119 & 120

²⁵ *Inside Bjork DVD* (2003)

²⁶ *Inside Bjork DVD* (2003); Pytlik, M. (2003) p. 159

For every album that I've done, there's been one character that does the album, and then there'll be separate, other little characters that are the songs. The *Debut* character, from the photograph on the cover, [is] sort of a shy, slightly polite kind of newcomer. And I think that's how I felt. The character that represents *Post* is kind of that wide-eyed girl from the country still, but she's been in the city for a while at that point and is *consuming* the city, and the city is *consuming* her.²⁷

As this perhaps suggests, while these 'characters' are always based on Bjork herself – both literally, in the sense that they all use Bjork's visual image as their common point of reference (or departure), and figuratively, in that they may be understood as dramatizations of aspects of Bjork's personality – they are nonetheless very much conceived here as '*characters*': as fictional constructs, visual embodiments of each album's musical and lyrical content. Indeed, Bjork often discusses these 'characters' as if they generate a 'life' and a momentum all their own – which, in a sense, they do: as fictional constructs (and 'images') specifically designed for commercial consumption, these 'characters' cease to 'belong' to Bjork and become part of the public domain; their narratives becoming part of the fabric of the listener's own lives and stories.²⁸

The album titles are also an important part of this process, serving to designate the particular 'mood' or 'theme' of each album's musical, lyrical and visual aesthetic. Thus far, they have all been one-word titles (*Debut*, *Post*, *Telegram*, *Homogenic*, *Selmasongs*, *Vespertine*, *Medulla*, *Volta*), and their relationship to the album's musical and lyrical content generally appears to be more suggestive or evocative than prescriptive, with Bjork preferring to use "invented or obscure words with connotations relevant to the main theme of that project."²⁹ "Homogenic", for instance, was suggestive of that album's "single flavour" of instrumentation, whilst also having connotations of the 'organic' – the still-developing, which correlates with Bjork's intention to create an "auditory representation of Iceland's geology": "it's still in the making, so the sounds would be still in the making".³⁰ Likewise "Vespertine" was used to evoke the sense of twilight, romance and "hushed intimacy" – "music to make love to" – explored on the album (the Latin "*vesperas*"

²⁷ *Inside Bjork* DVD (2003)

²⁸ As Frith writes: "if all songs are narratives, if they work as mini-musicals, then their plots are a matter of interpretation both by performers attaching them to their own star stories and by listeners, putting ourselves in the picture, or rather, placing their emotions – or expressions of emotion – in our own stories". Frith, S. *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. (Oxford, 1996) p. 211

²⁹ Dibben, N. (2009) note 2, p. 194

³⁰ Pytlik, M. (2004) p. 120

means “evensong”). While this “naming convention” only became a self-conscious aspect of Bjork’s work from *Homogenic* onwards – as something she has explicitly outlined and discussed in interviews and documentaries – Bjork has since gone back to include *Debut* and *Post* within this chronology, each of which are said to represent something like the ‘before’ and ‘after’ chapters of her early career, enabling her to wipe the slate clean, and start afresh with *Homogenic*.³¹

Thus the packaging of Bjork’s albums – their title, visual graphics, sleeve design, booklets and so forth – far from being incidental or secondary to the album itself, become rather an integral part of the musical ‘event’, helping to establish a specific narrative or performative context for the album’s listening experience. As Bjork stated in one documentary: “Every song I do there is a story behind it... The song ends up just being the tip of the iceberg. I think with most of my collaborators – if it’s music-makers, or photographers, or video-directors – I would tell them the whole story.”³² And yet, this “whole story” “*behind*” each of her songs and albums, necessarily fails to cohere into a ‘unified’, integrated ‘whole’ or to remain in the ‘background’. Indeed, one would not even be aware that *was* a “story” “behind” her songs and albums, unless one watched the documentaries, read the interviews, and so on, to begin with. Thus, contrary to Bjork’s slightly misleading phrasing, I would argue that the “whole story” which is referred to here does not constitute some kind of underlying meta-narrative which exists independently of its representation in the music videos, artwork, publicity photographs and so on, and which is ‘revealed’ to the audience through these various modes of representation. Rather, the audience is privy to the *event* of that story, as it is told or enacted *through* the music videos, artwork, lyrics and so on. That is, the “whole story” must be understood as a performance – as ““an *emergent* structure”; it comes into being only as it is being performed”.³³ It is in this way that each of Bjork’s albums come to appear as

³¹ As Mark Pytlik writes in his biography of Bjork: “Implicit in the album titles *Debut*, *Post*, and *Telegram* was a trajectory with a built-in finish line, a chronology of travel that Bjork had tacitly charted and conquered. She may not have been cognizant of it while in its midst, but, as evidenced by her naming convention, Bjork had been quietly preparing for regeneration all along.” [Pytlik, M. (2003) p. 125] Even her first album, *Bjork*, which was released when she was eleven years old and which she otherwise tends to disown – because it was not her ‘own’ work, just her voice – has since been implicated within this chronology, if only by virtue of the fact that it is explicitly situated as prior to her ‘debut’ proper (with *Debut*, as the title suggests, representing what she thinks of as her ‘first’ solo album). As Bjork states: “It had my name on it, but I only sang on it”; and again: “I felt funny about having an album out that said ‘Bjork’ on it and it wasn’t my work”. Bjork quoted in Aston, M. “The Mojo Interview: Bjork” in *Mojo*. 132 (Nov: 2004) p. 46 and Dibben, N. (2009) note 6, p. 191

³² *Inside Bjork* DVD (2003)

³³ Frith, citing Richard Bauman, in Frith, S. (1996) p. 208; italics added

distinct musical entities or ‘worlds’, complete with their own central ‘character’, and ‘back-story’, which is embellished through the use of music videos, album artwork, publicity images and so on.

Setting the Scene: *Medulla*’s Artwork:

As with all Bjork’s solo albums, the singer’s name does not appear on *Medulla*’s CD cover, just an image of the singer’s face and upper-body. Framed against a non-descript white background and spot-lit from above – a harsh white light, the kind that seems to reduce everything it touches to sharp variations of shadow and light – Bjork’s body is naked from the chest up; her pale skin stained a greyish tinge around the underarms and throat, and pink at the centre of her chest. Her long dark hair is woven into an intricate headdress, which obscures the upper-half of her face like a mask, and strung from a silver hoop around her neck is a necklace bearing the album’s title, with the letters moulded out of a shiny, dark, plastic substance, the colour and consistency of clotted blood. She is posed in such a way that her body not only fills but exceeds the frame of the photograph, conveying a sense of physical largesse, and she rises out of the backdrop like a spectre, her arms upraised and eyes glazed, her skin glowing soft and luminous in the spotlight. Sunken in shadow and rimmed with thick layers of black lashes, Bjork’s eyes are feral, transfixed – she looks possessed, or as if she is about to take possession. Her mouth is slightly parted to reveal a shadowy opening within, and one imagines that in the next moment she might throw back her head and start speaking in tongues, or simply *roar*.

With its muted white background and stark, surgical lighting, its smooth expanses of bare pink flesh and weird juxtapositions of hair and skin, blood and metal, there is something cold, severe, yet oddly sensual about *Medulla*’s cover artwork: the sense of something extreme and elemental – warm-blooded and fleshly/animalistic, but not, perhaps, entirely ‘human’. The same image is also used in the booklet accompanying the two-disc *Medulla* DVD package. Here, enlarged and spread over two pages, the image is even more arresting – there is a slight blurriness to its focus, less noticeable perhaps in the smaller version, which suggests movement, as if Bjork is actively coming in towards the viewer. This image has also been graphically-embellished so that, along with the strands of black hair which escape from the edge of the headpiece, there are additional black thread-like wisps which swirl chaotically

around her body and face, adding to the sense of movement like the quiver marks inserted into cartoons, to suggest trembling and frenzied motion.

The most 'intense' version of the image, however, is that which appears on the homepage for *Medulla* from Bjork's official web-site – and, one assumes, was possibly occluded from other publicity media and album artwork for the reason that it is far more confronting than those which appear elsewhere. In this version the image is not cropped, so that it shows Bjork from the torso upwards, her bare white breasts spilling out over the top of a bodice which also appears to be woven out of hair, black strands of which billow outwards around her like those from the head-piece. With her head bowed and her face largely concealed behind the mask of woven hair, her upper-body naked and deathly white with trails of black ink dripping from the necklace down her chest like blood, there is something unreadable about Bjork's facial expression and body language – a naked intensity, void of inhibition or self-consciousness. It is confronting, to say the least, but also strangely seductive; less a gesture of open invitation to a prospective audience than a provocation – a *dare* – as if to say: "enter at your own risk."

With all the CDs discussed in this thesis, I have examined the way in which the album cover-artwork forms part of the overall CD package – how it 'sets the stage', so to speak, for the album's listening experience. With Bjork this is practically obligatory, in that, as I discussed earlier, she uses the packaging of her albums to establish a performative context for the CD's listening experience – with the cover artwork in particular serving to 'introduce' the audience to the central 'character' of that album, as though it is *their* 'world' that we are about to enter into. On *Medulla*, however, the CD artwork and packaging is arguably more notable for what it does *not* show – or rather, what it appears to deliberately obscure: Bjork's face virtually hidden behind a mask of hair; the CD title in an almost indecipherable script; the song titles, track listing and lyrics all printed in dark ink on a black background. Indeed, most of the album packaging is black – both the disc itself and the inner pages of the CD booklet are matte black, with any writing embossed in black-on-black, making it almost impossible to read. At first glance it would be easy to mistake the CD booklet as being entirely filled with blank pages; it is only under closer scrutiny that the song titles and lyrics reveal themselves, almost indecipherable against the black background. Everything about the album artwork and packaging seems to suggest that this will not be an 'easy' listening experience.

In much the same way that the infamous ‘swan dress’ from *Vespertine*’s cover artwork became a fixture of that album’s visual aesthetic (symbolic, for Bjork, of its ‘wintery’, ‘romantic’ feel/aesthetic),³⁴ variations on the hair-woven headdress recur throughout *Medulla*’s packaging and publicity – from the music videos for ‘Who Is It’ and ‘Oceania’, and the cover artwork for the limited edition DVD packaging of the album, to Bjork’s appearance at the 2004 Athens Olympics Opening Ceremony. None of these incarnations is identical to that which is shown on the cover, and nor would that be possible, given that each one appears distinctly handcrafted and individualised – like a one-of-a-kind designer dress, where you can see that each sequin has been individually hand-sewn. Some, like that shown on the back-cover of the CD booklet, are ornate and intricately detailed, resembling the plumage of birds, while others, such as that worn in the music video for “Who Is It”, are rougher, coarser, like a form of medieval ‘armour’ – tough and fibrous, as though designed to withstand harsher temperaments. Some are more easily recognisable as ‘hairstyles’: restricted, contained, less outlandish (for example, that worn for the performance of ‘Oceania’); while others, such as that on the CD and DVD covers, are vaguely freakish: the mask of tightly-woven black hair against the softness of Bjork’s facial features – plush pink lips and rosy cheeks, transfixed eyes thickly laced with lashes – bringing to mind a kind of rampant femininity, crude and furry.

Perhaps the most interesting of these various incarnations, however, are those which are presented in the sketches framed within the CD’s plastic casing: on the anterior side of the CD case, in the space where the track-listing is printed, and on the inside of the CD case, where the CD is inserted into its plastic container. In these sketches both the headpiece and necklace appear much simpler and less elaborate than those shown in other pictures – more akin to ‘folk art’ than individualised fashion accessories. The headpiece in particular is crudely-woven at the top and back, and gathered into two scruffy pigtails on either side – the only embellishment taking the form of a child-like bow on one side. This ‘folk art’ quality is reinforced by the rudimentary nature of the sketches themselves, which appear worn and faded, like drawings from a historical textbook. These graphics reproduce similar front and

³⁴ When responding to the supposed travesty of wearing the dress to the Oscars, Bjork explained: “I don’t really know why I’m obsessed with swans but... everything about my new album is about winter and they’re a white, sort of winter bird... And obviously very romantic, being monogamous. It’s one of those things that maybe I’m too much in the middle of to describe. When you’re obsessed with something, you can explain it five years later, but in the moment, you don’t exactly know why. Right now, swans seem to sort of stand for a lot of things...” Quoted in Pytlik, M. (2003) p. 153

back profiles to those depicted on the front and back covers of the CD booklet – the cover showing Bjork’s face and upper-body, and the latter depicting the back of Bjork’s head and neck – albeit in this instance, the colour scheme of the previous images has been inverted, with the effect similar to that of a photographic ‘negative’, whereby instead of appearing as black objects against a white background, here the hair-mask and necklace are sketched in white against a black background.

Even more intriguing, however, is the fact that, in these images, Bjork herself – the visible face and body of the artist and ‘star’ – is absent. That is, all we see is the necklace and headpiece, superimposed against a black backdrop. This absence of Bjork’s visual image is made even more conspicuous by the way the items are arranged as though she was still present, with the necklace bearing the album’s title strung around an empty space, the space where her face and body once were but are no longer. Thus Bjork’s absence is very much registered here as a ‘gap’: *an empty space*. It is as though the singer herself – her face, her skin, her eyes, lips, shoulders and hair – has evaporated, disappeared into ‘thin air’, as it were; and the hair-mask and necklace – both of which are the only form of costuming in the previous images – are all that remain.

Given the strong sense of physicality conveyed by the previous images (through the interplay of hair and skin, metal and blood), as well as the ‘folk-art’ nature of the sketches here, which seem to ‘hark back’ to a time already past, it is difficult not to think of Bjork’s disappearance in these sketches as being, in some way, suggestive of a more profound or substantial loss or absence. That is, more than simply a ‘trick’ of ‘appearances’ – the ‘miracle’ of contemporary image-rendering techniques such as airbrushing (now you see it, now you don’t) – these sketches seem to me to register something of the profound absence described by Christopher Allen in a recent article in *The Australian* broadsheet when he writes of death’s “greatest and most awful mystery: how the infinitely complex tissue of processes we call life can actually have stopped. The person we knew seems to have departed and left a shell behind.”³⁵ I mention this here because in these sketches, the hair-mask and necklace do appear as ‘empty shells’ – the adornments from the previous images are all that remain (in the same way, perhaps, that bones and teeth remain after death). The negative inversion of the colour scheme also seems to convey something of the “mystery” of this passage – from ‘presence’ to ‘absence’, from ‘here’ to ‘not-here’.

³⁵ Allen, C. “Larger Than Life” in *The Weekend Australian Review* (Feb 20-21, 2010) p. 11

That this ‘absence/presence dialectic’ should be played out through the use of Bjork’s visual image – and particularly her face – is not insignificant; as Bjork biographer Mark Pytlik suggests: “Arguably more than any artist of her generation, Bjork’s face had been her brand”.³⁶ Discussing the way in which “the photographic image” functions within discourses of ‘stardom’ as a ‘token’ of ‘star presence’, Rick Poynor writes:

These narcissistic images, lovingly created by stylists and lensmen, are the essential currency of fame. For fans, they function fetishistically as objects of adoration, envy, fantasy, longing and lust. They may be constructs, but they show the star’s real skin, her eyes, her lips, her facial expressions and gestures; if you were there when the pictures were taken, you might even touch actual flesh.³⁷

In the case of *Medulla*’s album artwork and packaging, however, we are presented with both an image of Bjork’s face – one which explicitly foregrounds the physical ‘presence’ of the singer (her “skin, her eyes, her lips” and so on) – and the equally explicit ‘absence’ of her face: a ‘gap’ or ‘empty space’ where we assume her face should have been or once was. Of course, one of these images is concealed or obscured by the recorded music object itself – the CD – and so is only made visible, *as* an empty space, when the listener is compelled to remove the CD from its case, presumably in order to play it. Thus, when the CD has been removed from the case, and the empty space (where the artist should have been) is revealed, the CD itself will be in the stereo, playing, and the absent image of the performer is filled, albeit in a different way, by the sound of Bjork’s voice(s).

This, in turn, raises a number of questions concerning what Simon Frith refers to as “the relationship of aural and visual pleasures”, as well as those regarding the way ideas of ‘presence’ are registered in recorded music, which I will turn to shortly. However, first it is worth pointing out that this interplay between ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ is something that Bjork has previously explored in her work with visual artists – for example, in the cover artwork for *Homogenic*, of which Bjork biographer Mark Pytlik writes:

Although originally based on photos, the end result was drastically retouched and exaggerated so as to simultaneously imply Bjork’s presence and also to negate it. There –

³⁶ Pytlik, M. (2003) p. 130

³⁷ Poynor, R. (2001) p. 114

draped in a motley assortment of traditional garb that borrowed liberally from Ethiopia to Japan – was not Bjork, but someone we understood to be her.³⁸

Another brilliantly perceptive and self-reflexive example of this play between ‘absence’ and ‘presence’ with regard to the photographic image is provided by a coffee-table book, which was published in 2001, titled simply *Bjork*. Officially credited as “a project by Bjork”, the book consists of numerous different visual interpretations of Bjork’s ‘image’ by a diverse range of artists, graphic designers, photographers and fashion designers, as well as a handful of Bjork-related essays, stories and interviews. Whether understood as an exemplary piece of pop narcissism (a quality which has been associated with other aspects of her work),³⁹ or as a testament to Bjork’s willingness to allow other artists to (re)interpret her visual ‘image’, *Bjork* is undoubtedly a book about, well, Bjork. But it is also a book in which Bjork herself is very much absent, as is evidenced by the fact that, aside from an excerpt taken from an interview between Bjork and David Attenborough, her own ‘voice’ is nowhere to be found in the pages therein. This is further foregrounded by the fact that, in the latter half of the book, the endless streams of beautiful photographic images give way to a series of essays, stories, portraits and collages which, in many cases, bear no obvious relationship to the ‘star’ herself. In these instances, the act of interpretation ceases to be solely ‘about’ Bjork, and becomes something else – ‘fantasy’, a vehicle for the writer or artist’s own imagined perception of the singer. Bjork is both ‘there’ and ‘not-there’, ‘present’ and ‘absent’ at the same time.

The Inner or Deep Part:

To the best of my knowledge, Bjork has not discussed the ‘character’ for *Medulla* in the same way she has discussed those of her other albums and songs, and in most of the comments she has made about *Medulla*, there is often the suggestion that, where her other albums were made according to a particular ‘theme’ or ‘story’, for *Medulla* the primary emphasis was on the voice itself – as though, by focusing exclusively on the ‘human voice’, *Medulla* somehow bypasses the constructed notions of ‘character’ or ‘narrative’ which had informed her previous albums, in favour of

³⁸ Pytlik, M. (2003) p. 130

³⁹ Shaviro, S. (2002) p. 29

something ‘deeper’ and more ‘innate’.⁴⁰ Hence the album’s title of *Medulla*, which refers to both the ‘lower’ or ‘reptilian’ part of the human brain (so named after the species of animal in which it was said to have first developed), as well as “the inner or deep part of an animal or plant structure” – with the latter definition itself forming the title of a making-of documentary about the album. Such seeming attention to the synchronicity of details across a range of media and discourses – whereby the title of the making-of documentary also provides a definition for the album’s title, both of which were made available together as part of a two-disc multi-media ‘package’ – is not an uncommon feature of Bjork’s work, and is but one of the many ways in which the singer can be interpreted as alerting her audience to the significance of certain features of her work and the way they relate to one another.⁴¹

As the ‘lower’ or ‘reptilian’ part of the brain, the ‘medulla oblongata’ – or simply ‘medulla’ – is “the most inferior part of the brain stem”, located at the base of the brain (where it “blends imperceptibly into the spinal cord”), and is responsible for “the rigidly programmed, automatic behaviours necessary for our survival” – the heartbeat, digestion, vomiting – as well as triggering what might be thought of as ‘reflexive’ or ‘instinctual’ emotional responses, such as ‘hunger’, ‘fear’, and the ‘fight or flight’ mechanism.⁴² The medulla is the ‘oldest’ part of the human brain (in that it pre-dates the ‘limbic’ and ‘human’ brain), on which all subsequent evolutionary developments have been built, as well as being one of the first parts of

⁴⁰ Indeed, in interviews following *Medulla*’s release Bjork frequently reiterates the idea that *Medulla*’s focus on the voice was not “planned”, suggesting that where her previous albums had been organised according to “certain goals and objectives... with this album the only plan was to do what I wanted and have total freedom. I started laying down some beats and melodies with Matmos, but for some reason they just sounded flat and one dimensional. It wasn’t until I stripped the songs down to the raw vocals that I realised they worked better without the instruments. After that, I decided ‘Fuck the strings and synthesizers and sixty piece orchestras, I’m going to make an album that’s made entirely from voices’.” Bjork quoted in about&about ‘using voices’... This idea that *Medulla* was not made according to a particular theme is also made explicit in the article which is shown on the *Medulla* homepage, from Bjork’s official website, bjork.com, which states: “For a while she’d known that 1997’s *Homogenic* was going to be an overtly extroverted record, and that 2001’s *Vespertine* would be much more introverted volte-face, this album was supposed to dispense with any blueprint or rules.” It returns to make this point again, following Bjork’s discussion of her reasons for using “Medulla” as the album’s title, stating that “*Medulla* was supposed to be an album without provisos. So even if the quotes above might suggest that it has some kind of political dimension, it is important to reiterate that Bjork made it without any overarching theme in mind.” Anon. ‘Medulla’ at [bjork.com](http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla) <http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla> (accessed 05/03/10)

⁴¹ For example, the title of the documentary detailing the *Vespertine* tour was *Miniscule* – as was consistent with that album’s ‘obsession’ with miniaturisation: “The concept behind the use of micro-beats on *Vespertine* was that they should give the impression of something small which had been magnified.” Dibben, N. (2009) p. 80

⁴² Marieb, E. N. *Human Anatomy and Physiology*. (San Francisco, Boston, New York, 2001)

the brain to develop in the foetus, being present from thirteen weeks (and on which all subsequent developments are built).

While the ‘medulla’ evidently has biological and scientific connotations – connotations which I think Bjork may be playing on within the context of the album, and which are relevant here for that reason – in most of the album’s publicity materials it is the latter conception of medulla, as “the inner or deep part of an animal or plant structure”, which is foregrounded. Bjork states of her reasons for using ‘medulla’ as the album title: “Basically, it means ‘marrow’ in medical language, in Latin. Not just your bone marrow, but marrow in the kidneys and marrow in your hair, too. It’s about getting to the essence of something, and with this album being all vocals, that made sense.” Elsewhere in the same interview she continues: “I was going to call the album Ink, because I wanted it to be that black, 5,000-year-old blood that’s inside us all; an ancient spirit that’s passionate and dark and survives.”⁴³ This idea of the medulla is one which foregrounds a sense of impenetrability – ‘the inner or deep part’.

Whilst writing this chapter on *Medulla*, I have frequently felt compelled to discuss the album in terms of a vague quality of ‘darkness’, a sense of obscurity or inscrutability, which I find all but impossible to qualify or explain – whether through practical examples from the album itself or by recourse to academic theorisation. Nonetheless, after over a year of multiple drafts and re-drafts, of blank pages and dead-ends, this inexplicable sense of ‘darkness’ not only remains, but has become ever-more persistent; the only uncertainty of which I can be certain! It is there, I think, in the album’s packaging and art-work, which is almost entirely black: the image of Bjork’s profile on the back of the CD casing erased by blackness; the inner-pages of the CD booklet entirely black, with the barely-discernible lyrics printed in a similarly dark ink. It is there in some of the music videos for the album: the darkest depths of the ocean for “Oceania”, and a velvety night sky lit by a handful of stars for “Desired Constellation.” It is referenced in reviews at the time – “‘Medulla’ means the innermost being of a creature or plant, and much of this record goes even more intimately deep than *Vespertine*’s electronic nocturnes” – and is alluded to in Bjork’s own comments concerning her preferred aesthetic approach for

⁴³ Taken from ‘About & About: Medulla’ at [bjork.com](http://bjork.com/facts/abouts/) <http://bjork.com/facts/abouts/> (accessed 05/03/10)

the album: “I like music that’s a bit like Japanese things, where you have a big black space and there’s an intense pink lily in the middle.”⁴⁴

Medulla:

In interviews and publicity at the time of the album’s release, Bjork frequently positions her use of the voice on *Medulla* as a ‘return’ to an idealised ‘natural’, with the voice invoked as a “primal force” and a “force of nature” – pre-technology, pre-language, pre-identity, pre-nationality and so on. As Bjork states: “By playing with the whole raw thing [on *Medulla*] it was an attempt to come up with music that exists outside of all that, that isn’t linked to any culture, religion or ideology.”⁴⁵ Thus, *Medulla*’s focus on the voice is explicitly positioned in terms of an aesthetic of ‘stripping back’, a way of simplifying her musical approach and getting back to the ‘roots’ of music-making.

It is important to recognise that, within popular musical contexts – and many others besides – this ‘stripping back’ process is frequently implicated in the construction of ideas of ‘authenticity’ and aligned with a certain brand of musical ‘purism’: “a return to the ‘roots’ of music-making”, producing music with just the ‘basic essentials’, which is conceived to be a ‘purer’ form of musical communication.⁴⁶ As Simon Frith suggests, this particular model of authenticity is based on an opposition between the ‘natural’ and the ‘technological’, and derives from the belief “that raw sounds are more authentic than cooked sounds” – as “is reflected in the routine contrast of ‘live’ performance and ‘dead’ studio activity”.⁴⁷ Thus, by explicitly aligning her use of the voice on *Medulla* with an aesthetic of ‘stripping back’, Bjork could be conceived as invoking a fairly straightforward model of ‘authenticity’ – one which is positioned in direct opposition to technology. Indeed, it is a very “folk” conception of the voice which Bjork puts forward – the voice as the ‘purest’ and most direct form of self-expression – the voice as “music’s most ‘authentic’ sound” (grounded on the basis that it is “present in ‘traditional’ musics of most cultures”).⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Young, R. ‘Full Glottal’ in *Uncut* 89 (Oct: 2004) p. 100; Aston, M. (2004) p. 44

⁴⁵ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 170

⁴⁶ Frith, S. “Art Versus Technology: The Strange Case of Pop” in *Media, Culture and Society* 8:3 (1985) p. 266

⁴⁷ Frith, S. (1985) p. 266 & 268

⁴⁸ Goodwin, A. “Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction” in S. Frith & A. Goodwin, (eds.) *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London, New York, 1990) p. 265-266

This is underscored by the fact that Bjork's conception of the "voice" as put forward in the publicity for *Medulla* (in which she likens the voice to "primitive elements" and "an individual before entering society" – "when you have no tools" except "the voice") is analogous to that which Frith refers to as the "folk" stage of music technology, wherein "music is stored in the body (and in musical instruments) and can only be retrieved through performance."⁴⁹ This 'folk' conception of the voice recurs throughout *Medulla*'s publicity.

The voice has often been conceived in this way – as 'intrinsic', 'innate', and so on. Witness, for instance, the familiar expression from music, literature and film reviews of novelists or songwriters 'finding their voice', as though there was only ever one – a 'voice of one's own' – and it was there all along, just waiting to be found. As Joseph Auner suggests: "If Walter Benjamin simultaneously celebrated and lamented that mechanically reproduced art works had lost their unique location in time, it would seem at first glance that the human voice would escape this fate"; for "[o]ur voices would seem to be the one thing that is our own, inborn, authentic and uniquely human".⁵⁰ Thus the voice, in this instance, is symbolic of the 'natural' and the 'human' and situated in opposition to ideas of 'technology' and the 'mechanical'.

It is this particular conception of *Medulla* which Dibben foregrounds in her study of Bjork. Dibben argues that Bjork's work has consistently brought "together two common ideas of nature: nature as the natural world (of landscapes and animals), and nature as 'the natural' and instinctual, constructed in opposition to technology and training."⁵¹ She also suggests that Bjork's voice has always been heard in this way – as a signifier of the 'natural' and 'primal', and opposed to the 'technological' and 'artificial' – and that "the album *Medulla*, made almost exclusively from vocal materials", provides "[t]he clearest articulation of this view of the voice as 'primal nature'".⁵² Thus, in Dibben's reading, *Medulla*'s focus on the voice enacts a 'symbolic' rejection of the technological and 'non-organic', as well as its associated ideals of 'modernity' and 'progress'; as Dibben writes:

⁴⁹ *The Inner or Deep Part of an Animal or Plant Structure* DVD (2004) Frith, S. (1996) p. 226

⁵⁰ Auner, J. "'Sing it for Me': Posthuman Ventriloquism in Recent Popular Music" in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 128:1 (2001) p. 111

⁵¹ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 54

⁵² Dibben, N. (2009) p. 54

In *Medulla*, the naturalization of beats was achieved by using vocal materials: the majority of sounds, even those mimicking instruments, are created by the human voice, partly to encapsulate an idea of the primal and pre-technological, according to Bjork... The use of voices only (symbolic of the ‘natural’), and the absence of beats from seven of the fourteen tracks indicates that Bjork’s compositional aesthetic was shaped in reaction to an idea of technology as non-organic, and as a marker of ideas of modernity and technological progress.⁵³

As is the case with many of the analyses which Dibben constructs throughout her book, her reading of *Medulla* is more or less consistent with Bjork’s own statements about the album, many of which, as suggested above, foreground an idea of the voice as a ‘return’ to an idealised ‘natural’, before ‘culture’, ‘identity’, ‘language’, and ‘religion’.

My resistance to such an interpretation derives partly from the fact that I just think Bjork is too savvy and self-aware a performer and composer to invoke such a seemingly straightforward biological essentialism. After all, this is an artist who has enthusiastically explored the possibilities opened up by technological developments, often in direct opposition to prevailing ideologies and trends within popular music, and, more importantly, without positioning such technologies in opposition to ideas of the ‘natural’. Moreover, I would argue that such a reading of *Medulla*’s focus on the voice – as ‘symbolic’ of the ‘primal’ and the ‘natural’, and constructed in opposition to “an idea of technology as non-organic” – draws on a range of assumptions concerning ideas of the ‘human voice’ which have, by the turn of the twenty-first century, already been subject to much revision and contestation, not only within the more avant-garde or academic outreaches of cultural enterprise, but across numerous mainstream discourse/genres as well. Indeed, by the time of *Medulla*’s release, such seeming subversions of the voice have become so ubiquitous as to have become more or less ‘conventional’ themselves; as Auner writes, in 2003: “In many areas of recent music, the unaltered human voice has become an endangered species. Manipulations and simulations of the voice appear in several different forms of popular music, paralleling the introduction of new technologies or new ways of using old technologies.”⁵⁴ Even the term ‘*human voice*’ is one which is ideologically loaded and, some might argue, fundamentally outdated within a contemporary cultural context in which ideas of an intrinsic ‘humanity’ or

⁵³ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 78

⁵⁴ Auner, J. (2003) p. 100

‘essential biological body’ – along with ‘hierarchical’ or ‘depth model’ conceptions of the self – have been called into question.

Finally, what such an interpretation ultimately fails to illuminate is, quite simply, the *strangeness* of these voices – if the voice, on *Medulla*, is symbolic of the ‘natural’, it is also, simultaneously, profoundly *unnatural*. Indeed, while the voice may be *Medulla*’s primary chosen medium, it rarely appears to occupy the central, unified position in the mix which it conventionally holds on most pop recordings, whereby the singer – as a locus of ‘star’ identity and lyrical or melodic authority – is typically made a focal point, allowed “to dominate other instruments whatever else is going on.”⁵⁵ On the contrary, here it is as if, by virtue of its very hegemony within the context of the album – in subsuming the places traditionally occupied by other instruments – the voice is rendered decentralised and unhinged. Like a mirror smashed into a million pieces and then reassembled into strange new forms, the voice on *Medulla* comes to appear as something familiar yet alien, intimate yet anonymous, a sign of both ‘presence’ and ‘absence’.

Something of this ‘strange’ quality of the voice is signalled – albeit perhaps unintentionally – in a passage by Steven Shaviro when he writes:

In Western culture, as the deconstructionists have taught us, the voice is generally taken to be a sign of interiority, authority, and authenticity. It is supposed to come from deep within, or from on high. Think of the voice of God, or the authority we unreflectively grant to voice-overs in film; as well as the usual cinematic emphasis on the speaker or singer.⁵⁶

Shaviro is explaining here the centrality of the voice within Western cultural art-forms – its taken-for-granted status as a sign of ‘authentic human presence’. But on *Medulla*, this is turned inside out/upside down – it is as though the compass has been thrown out of whack. Thus voices swoop in as if from great heights, or skim along seemingly shallow surfaces like schools of fish, darting and weaving, abruptly switching direction. Choirs are flattened into low rumbling backdrops, or sent tumbling in shimmering, frothy cascades. The smallest, most personal of vocal gestures are magnified and made to ebb and throb around the listener in gentle wave-like crescendos, or sent skittering from one stereo speaker to the next, as if whispering to the listener from just below the surface of one’s consciousness.

⁵⁵ Frith, S. (1996) p. 188

⁵⁶ Shaviro, S. (2002) p. 27

There are voices directly suggestive of the various singers' sex and ethnicity – in their vocal range and pitch, rhythms, accents and intonations – while others are rendered androgynous and alien. Likewise, while many voices bear an audible imprint of their bodily production, still others are erased of any trace of their physicality and appear rather as ghostly apparitions, insubstantial and diffuse as air. Several of the voices are recognisable as '*vocal personalities*' – most obviously Bjork's, but also Rahzel's, Tagaq's, Wyatt's, Patten's and Dokaka's – and yet, overall, there is arguably little sense of the singers themselves as individual identities. On the contrary, I would suggest that despite the impressive roll-call of guest vocalists (and the vast array of cultural groups which such vocalists may be seen to represent), the pervading impression that *Medulla* leaves on the listener is primarily one of anonymity – as if magnifying the point at which the individual differences and idiosyncrasies of these different singers blurs and merges into something larger and more impersonal.

This blurring and reconfiguring of boundaries is also, in a sense, what much of the album is about. Lyrical images of 'elasticity', 'flexibility' and 'generosity' recur throughout *Medulla*, often delivered from a 'perspective' which appears at once highly personalised yet impersonal, intimate yet anonymous, blurring the boundary between self and other, inner and outer, speaker and listener. It is as if, both lyrically and musically, the album adopts or constructs a 'perspective' which obviates such distinctions. The lyrical and musical trajectory of the first three tracks, in particular, can be understood as exploring the erection and transgression of boundaries in a manner which self-reflexively dramatises the relationship between self and other, speaker and listener, audience and performer. The opening track, "Pleasure is all Mine", is a song which celebrates the virtues of 'generosity' and 'letting go', and this blurring of boundaries is also enacted in the song's lyrical voice, which shifts, in the second part of the song, from a first-person perspective to the feminized plural, thereby suggesting a more inclusive stance in which the listener is also implicated. The following track, "Show Me Forgiveness," depicts the singer asking an unnamed source – herself? her audience? a higher being? – for forgiveness "for having lost faith in myself/and let my own interior up/to inferior forces." And as the title to the third track suggests, "Where is the Line" is explicitly concerned with the issue of boundaries, as the singer admonishes someone who has taken advantage of her patience and generosity.

Steven Connor is one theorist who has explored some of these questions and complications with regard to the voice. Indeed, in his book *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Connor suggests that these questions and complications are ones which have *always* been provoked by the “dissociated voice”. As he writes in the introduction: “My voice comes and goes. For you, it comes from me. For me, it goes out from me. Between this coming from and going towards lie all the problems and astonishments of the dissociated voice.”⁵⁷ As this suggests, from the outset, Connor takes the uncertainty and instability of the voice – rather than its ‘a priori’ status as a sign of personal identity – as his point of departure. I think Connor’s conception of the “coming” and “going” of the voice provides a useful entry point into thinking the kinds of issues and ideas raised by *Medulla*’s treatment of the voice.

Album Overview:

Many of the tracks on the album resist the conventional song structures of popular music in favour of arrangements based around the ‘live’ nature of the vocal performances and the tension which is created through the interplay *between* voices – in particular, that between Bjork’s lead vocals and those of the ‘backing’ singers. Thus, for example, on “Pleasure...”, which I will discuss further below, the first part of the song initially appears to enact a typical intro/verse/chorus/bridge arrangement. However, in the second part of the song, this structure dissolves in a manner which suggests that it never really existed in the first place, but was rather part of one continuous movement or passage – what I will refer to throughout my analysis of the song, as a kind of ‘push-and-pull’ motion between the voices, wherein the voices seem to pull in and away from one another to form a smooth, sensual rocking motion. Having said this, though, for the sake of intelligibility I will occasionally make recourse to conventional pop music terminology – ‘verse’, ‘chorus’, ‘bridge’ and so forth – if only to call attention to their apparent ‘failure’ within this context.

Of the lyrics themselves, one track is sung in Icelandic (“Vokuro”), three are constructed entirely out of wordless vocalising (“Oll Birtan,” “Ancestors” and “Midvikidago”), and at least two can be interpreted as self-reflexively commenting on the act of vocalizing itself (“Triumph of a Heart” and “Mouth’s Cradle”). Bjork’s vocals, which have often played on her being a foreigner to the English language –

⁵⁷ Connor, S. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. (Oxford, 2000) p. 3

subject to mutant rhythms, unfamiliar phrasings and sudden unaccountable switches in accent and pronunciation – succeed in mangling it here into altogether new hybrids and contortions, to such an extent that it is all but impossible to tell the ‘real’ words (in *any* language) from those that are made-up, nonsense sounds, gibberish. This is not aided by the virtually indecipherable lyrics as printed in the accompanying CD booklet, their dark typeset embossed against a black background, making them practically redundant as written cues to the lyrics as sung on the album. Bjork has suggested that for the period of *Medulla*’s gestation, she “decided to give the lyrics no thought, just let them happen by themselves... [and] maybe let them be a bit organic”.⁵⁸ Whether intentionally or not, within the context of the album, most of the lyrics do *sound* more or less like extensions or outgrowths of whatever is going on musically – not just formally, in the sense that the lyrics are framed in such a way that they appear to be ‘evolving’ out of the play of voices, rather than something which has been ‘added’ on top; but also semantically, in that the lyrics often appear to be used to self-reflexively ‘comment’ on what is happening, vocally. Indeed, the lyrics are not privileged in any way – hence the difficulty, mentioned above, in distinguishing the non-lyrical from the lyrical tracks. When combined with the way in which the lyric-booklet resists easy ‘viewing/reading’, it would be possible to argue that the album is designed to draw attention back to the voice as *sung* rather than written (the voice as heard rather than ‘read’).

Perhaps as a result of this, the lyrical voice on *Medulla* is both more ‘direct’ and more ‘evasive’ than on Bjork’s previous albums. While the lyrics often appear to be delivered from a first-person perspective and discuss the kinds of subjective emotional states for which Bjork’s work has become renowned (and which, in Dibben’s reading, accounts for the belief in Bjork’s ‘emotional authenticity’: “[t]he idea that Bjork’s music communicates her [own] emotional experience” directly),⁵⁹ there is often a quality of ‘vagueness’ or ‘abstraction’ to the lyrical imagery which serves to off-set or undermine what might otherwise appear to be a highly personalised, even ‘confessional’, mode of address, and which arguably makes it more difficult to directly attribute to Bjork ‘herself’.⁶⁰ Bjork has stated that where

⁵⁸ *The Inner or Deep Part of Animal or Plant Structure* DVD (2004)

⁵⁹ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 132

⁶⁰ This is also a quality which has been noted in Bjork’s work – for example, Alex Ross notes the recurrence throughout Bjork’s songs of a “visceral or elusive ‘it’: ‘I can’t sense it... it’s coming up’; ‘One

songs on her other albums have been much more direct and explicit in setting up a ‘character’, ‘situation’ or ‘story’ – “lyrics that were like: ‘I am HERE, and I’m walking down THIS street’” – on *Medulla* there were “no rules... Some of the time, I’m just following a train of thought. There are no flashing neon signs.”⁶¹ Thus many of the lyrics eschew ‘narrative’ or ‘story-telling’ devices in favour of what sometimes seems to be a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ wordplay, and the absence of specific details or background information makes it difficult to tell exactly *what* the song is about, or *who* the singer is. For example, the song “Who Is It (Carry my Joy on the Left Carry my Pain on the Right)” – the lyrics of which Bjork suggested were “self-explanatory” – might initially appear to be a love song, with lyrics that begin: “His embrace, a fortress / it fuels me / and places / a skeleton of trust / right beneath us...”. And yet, it shifts, towards the end of the verse and in the transition to the chorus, to describing something which appears far more abstract – as though the singer could be talking about something, or someone, almost ‘mystical’ or ‘god-like’, or even addressing an aspect of herself:

if you ask yourself patiently and carefully
who is it?
that never lets you down?
who is it that gave you back your crown
and the ornaments are going around
now they’re handing it over
handing it over...

Thus the lyrics never actually provide an answer to the question that the song itself seems to asks, placing the emphasis back on the listener to come up with their own answer: “who is it?” A similar thing is set up on “Mouth’s Cradle”, the lyrics of which again allude to a mysterious ‘other’:

there is yet another one
that follows me
where ever I go
and supports me...

day, one day, it will all come true’; ‘When she does it, she means to’; ‘But it hasn’t happened yet’; ‘I’ve seen it all’; ‘It’s not up to you.’” Ross, A. (2004) paragraph 32

⁶¹ Bjork quoted in <http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla/> (accessed 05/03/10)

As in “Who Is It”, the song uses the masculine pronoun when referring to this ‘other one’ (“he always has a hope for me”), suggesting, perhaps, a lover. And yet, once again, the song complicates such a reading through the vagueness and seemingly nonsensical twists and turns of its phrasing:

the simplicity of the ghost-like beast
the purity of what it wants and where it goes
always love, always loves you, always loves you
infrared love...

In both these songs – and indeed, most of the tracks on *Medulla* – it is the very ‘directness’ of the lyrics which, somewhat paradoxically, renders them inscrutable. It is as though the more ‘intimate’ and ‘personal’ the lyrics appear, the more abstract and generalised they effectively become – like the difference between hearing someone recount an incident or story they have already rehearsed, and hearing the thought-processes involved at the moment the incident occurs.

On the other hand, however, it is this strange combination of directness and vagueness which gives the lyrical voice on *Medulla* a more generalised appeal – allowing audiences to take on these voices as our own, to suit them to our own ‘narratives’ and ‘situations’. As Simon Frith suggests: “If the singer’s voice makes public (makes manifest, makes available) the supposed sounds of private (personal, individual) feeling, then these gestures are consumed privately, fitted into our own narratives, our own expressive repertoires.”⁶² Thus the lyrical voice on *Medulla*, through its seeming directness and personalised mode of address serves to blur the boundary between self and other, speaker and listener, performer and audience. I would now like to move on to consider this in more detail within the framework of the album’s opening track, “Pleasure is All Mine”.

“Pleasure is All Mine”:

“Pleasure is all Mine” is a song *about* “letting go” – this is what the lyrics in the song are about, and as I will discuss further throughout my analysis, this is also what the song enacts, musically, both through its lyrical voice and through the interplay between vocal parts.

⁶² Frith, S. (1996) p. 211

The introduction to the song constructs a cocoon of voices all framed in different motions of inhalation and exhalation, like springs uncoiling at unsynchronised intervals to form a sensual, rhythmic pulse. These voices – soft panting, the single deep beat of a man’s breath, a woman’s gasp and groan – are each layered around the distinctive sound of Bjork’s own voice, double-tracked and repeating a brief, wordless refrain which acts as a kind of anchor around which the other voices ebb and flow. Their arrangement is such that each voice is given a distinct space to “move” in: there is no blurring or submerging of voices; one can hear with perfect clarity the points at which one voice ends and the next begins, as well as the moments at which they intersect and fuse. Amplified to such an extent that one can almost *feel* as well as hear the quick rush of breath, the movement of the tongue slackening, the sound escaping as if “beyond conscious control”, the voices unfurl and recoil in upon themselves in fluid, undulating motions, and are arranged in such a way that they seem to surround the listener, moving in and around, even *through* her.⁶³ The result is a sense of space which appears to expand and contract with each inhalation and exhalation. Moreover, the use of panning and stereo imaging help to establish a sense of perspective for the listener that is directly *within* this space, a listening space carved out within the passage between the voices, as if enveloped within a deep tunnel or passage – perhaps inside the very oesophagus itself – of which the walls are gently throbbing.

As the track progresses through these opening few seconds, Bjork’s vocals – which precede the other voices and mark out the time into steady intervals – begins to split apart from itself, fracturing, parts of it reaching higher as a note of yearning enters the pitch. A soft, slow climax is building: a last severed groan heralds the opening of the verse, at which point all the voices unravel and spread out into a deep choral backdrop, leaving Bjork’s vocals suspended out front, alone:

The pleasure is all mine
to get to be the generous one
is the strongest stance
the pleasure is all mine
to finally let go
and evenly flow
(the harvest is here)

⁶³ Frith, S. (1996) p. 192

Bjork delivers these lines against a vast choral backdrop – the intimate ‘cocoon’ of voices constructed in the introduction giving way to smooth vista of choral voices, leaving Bjork’s vocals suspended out front, alone. As the ‘chorus’ approaches the choir rises in a crescendo, while Bjork’s lead vocal slides higher in pitch and melds into the choral backdrop, collapsing against the others so that all voices merge in unison with the delivery of the final word, “flows.” The word is held for a brief moment, with the voices hanging as if in mid-flight – effecting a beautiful sonic illustration of the word’s semantic meaning – before the choir once again subsides into the background and the ‘chorus’ begins.

The lyrics to the chorus consist entirely of variations on the line: “who gives most.../who gets to give most...” Even the phrasing of this line is pointed: it positions the act of ‘giving’ as a privilege rather than as an obligation or chore. As with the ‘verse’, during the ‘chorus’ Bjork’s lead vocal is once again positioned front-and-centre in the mix with the choir behind her flattened into a low, caressing tide, as her voice, sensual yet aloof, hovers in suspension far above them. She repeats the lines “Who gives most/Who gets to give most...”, hanging on the words so that they run into each other, giving the phrasing a sensual elasticity. There is only a brief pause to signal the end of each line (thus secure the emphasis on “most”); otherwise, each word melds into the next. At the same time, there is something delicate in the phrasing, as though each word is being experienced – tasted – for the first time, the texture of each syllable savoured rather than hurried over; the vowels elongated and the consonants softened so that the words are not articulated so much as caressed, rolled over. It is an extraordinarily intimate sound, heightened by the extreme amplification of Bjork’s vocals: one can hear (or imagine one hears) the interplay of lips, teeth and tongue as the sound-words form and develop, before they even appear to have left her mouth. This sensual edge to Bjork’s vocals is accentuated by the soft, rhythmic current of male and female voices, pulsating in soft groans and gasps around Bjork’s lead vocals, drawing in and out to form a kind of throbbing sonic cushion – a “sonorous envelope” or cocoon – through which her seemingly effortless vocals glide.

As the ‘chorus’ draws to a close, all the voices once again meld in momentary unison – the choir rising to a key that harmonically supports Bjork’s vocals which, in turn, slide down to meet them half-way. In a sense, this joint manoeuvre of mutual support between Bjork’s voice and that of the choir, effectively bridging the

distance and dissolving the tension between them, seems almost anti-climactic – a ‘compromise’ rather than ‘climax’. This sense of an anti-climax is further enhanced by the way the voices simply taper off into an almost complete silence, during which all vocal activity is suspended except that of Tagaq, who continues to burrow away hungrily at its very edges. Lasting four beats (exactly the same time as the interval between this song and the next), the silence becomes a site of renewed suspension – a ‘bridge’ – which simultaneously cuts the song into two parts and marks the transition between them.

When the music resumes, the entire tone of the voices and vocal arrangements has changed – no longer a gentle wash but a *surge* of voices, with Bjork’s vocals taking the lead, both lyrically and sonically. Bjork’s voice is audibly stronger and more forthright in delivering these lines, suggesting a more authoritative stance that is bolstered by the choir behind her, whose sound is filled out and rendered more robust and prominent. The vocal sound they produce is still that of a collective singing as one, but they are no longer flattened into a low, rumbling backdrop (producing the tight-mouthed “hoo” sound), but rather sound reinforced, like an army gathering behind Bjork, matching her word for word in demonstrations of increasing fervour and strength (producing the more expansive, wide-mouthed “aah” sound). Bjork’s vocals, whilst still positioned front-and-centre in the mix, are buttressed by this rising choral wave, which does not subside as the chorus begins (as it did in the first part), but rather continues to escalate into a threatening roar.

The transition from ‘verse’ to ‘chorus’ in the first part of the song is here replaced by a continuing escalation of voices, creating a momentum that reaches its crescendo with the repetition of Bjork’s final line, “when in doubt give”. Her delivery is still delicate, but in a different way, playing on the nuances of each word so that the phrase, “when in doubt give”, evolves with each repetition from a plea, to a command, to a gesture of surrender; her voice growing higher and more forceful each time before finally – with the loosening of the word ‘give’ – surrendering in a frenzied climax to the choral wave behind her. This last word is like a release, embodying at once the culmination and disintegration, fulfilment and surrender, of the tension that has been building throughout the entire song, unleashing an overwhelming cascade of voices that fills the entire stereo like an eruption or a wave breaking, before being punctuated by a gong crash which cuts through the frenzy of voices, sending them scattering like shards of glass.

“Pleasure...” is a song about ‘surrendering’ and ‘letting go’: it uses the lyrics to explore the idea that there is strength and power in unconditional generosity and giving. As with the songs discussed above, the lyrics to “Pleasure...” eschew ‘narrative’ or ‘story-telling’ conventions, in favour of a series of statements or pronouncements which proclaim, in fairly unequivocal terms, the value and importance of ‘generosity’ and ‘giving’ – the idea that there is power and strength in “giving” and “letting go”, culminating in the repetition of the final line: “when in doubt give...”. The song can be read from the perspective of a mother singing to her daughter, or a mother singing to other mothers – an interpretation which is supported by some of Bjork’s own statements about the song, as well as the closing scene from Alex Ross’ article on *Medulla* in the *New York Times*, in which he describes Bjork singing the song whilst “dancing around the room with Isadora [her daughter] in her arms.”⁶⁴ However, the song could also be understood – and this reading is not antithetical to the first – within the context of Bjork’s statements about the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the war in Iraq; its emphasis on ‘surrender’ and ‘letting go’ representing an ‘alternative’ to the patriotic fervour and the War on Terror which Bjork said she felt “repulsed by” during the album’s production and which she deliberately countered by adopting a stance of non-engagement – refusing “to be drawn into the fight”.⁶⁵ It is also an idea that Bjork has explored on previous albums – for example, the song “Undo” on *Vespertine*, in which she sings: “You’re trying too hard/Surrender/Give yourself in/ You’re trying too hard... It’s warmer now/Lean into it/Unfold in a generous way/Surrender”. What I am most interested in here, however, is the way in which the song enacts these ideas of ‘selflessness’, ‘giving’ and ‘letting go’, not only in its lyrical content, but also through the song’s performance and its vocal arrangements. That is, I am interested in the way in which the song uses the voice and its vocal arrangements to blur the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, in a manner which serves to reinforce the song’s lyrical themes of ‘generosity’ and ‘selflessness’.

It is not just that the lyrical themes of ‘generosity’ and ‘selflessness’ are given an added resonance by being situated within the context created through the interplay of voices, or that the voices are being used to enact the meaning of the words, but

⁶⁴ Ross, A. (2004) paragraph 59 Bjork has also stated of the song: “When I made this track, it was the first time I left my little baby girl.” ‘About & About: Medulla’ *bjork.com* [Online] available at <http://bjork.com/facts/abouts/> (accessed 05/03/10)

⁶⁵ Bjork quoted in Dibben, N. (2009) p. 170

rather that the words themselves can be understood as serving to ‘articulate’ what is happening, in the vocal performances and arrangements. The lyrics ‘give voice’, so to speak, to the ‘process’ enacted through the push-and-pull motion created through the interplay of voices. As Frith suggests: “From this perspective, a song does not exist to convey the meaning of the words; rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song.”⁶⁶ Or, as Michel Poizat argues:

[O]ne might even say that it is not the vocal expression of a particular passage that reveals the underlying motives of the character at a given moment, rather it is what takes place in and what gets said by the character at that moment that can shed light on the underlying truth of what is vocally at stake there.⁶⁷

That is, it is not just that the voices within the song are being used to ‘demonstrate’ the meaning of the lyrics, but that the lyrics can be understood, as Poizat suggests, as serving to “shed light on the underlying truth of what is vocally at stake there.”⁶⁸ Poizat is talking here about the tension between words and music within the actions of the singing voice, but I think the idea can be extended to explore the way in which the threshold/distinction between inside and outside, self and other, speaker and listener is rendered “vocally at stake” through the act of giving voice. That is, the voice itself can be understood as rendering such distinctions tenuous and unstable; as Steven Connor writes:

A voice also establishes me as an inside capable of recognising and being recognised by an outside. My voice comes from the inside of a body and radiates through a space which is exterior to and extends beyond that body. In moving from an interior to an exterior, and therefore marking out the relations of interior and exterior, a voice also announces and verifies the co-operation of bodies and the environments in which they have their being.⁶⁹

Connor extends this even further, arguing that the voice produces the distinction between speaker and listener – a distinction which need not require the actual physical act of vocalising in order to be made, but also applies to thoughts which are articulated:

Perhaps all vocalized thoughts are in a sense ‘out loud’, too, since they require an internal spacing and division between what is inside and outside. If I hear my thoughts as a voice,

⁶⁶ Frith, S. (1996) p. 166

⁶⁷ Poizat, M. *The Angel’s Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (Ithaca, London, 1991) p. 144-145

⁶⁸ Poizat, (1991) p. 144-145

⁶⁹ Connor, S. (2000) p. 6

then I divide myself between the one who speaks, from the inside out, and the one hears the one who speaks, from the outside in.⁷⁰

He argues that this need not be conceived in terms of a “disabling ‘splitting of the self’”, because “[t]here would be no self to split unless the self were already at least in principle distinguishable in terms of what it says, and what it hears, or imagines it hears itself saying.” Thus Connor concludes: “To say we produce ourselves in voice is to say that we stage within ourselves the very distinction between speaking and hearing which provides the setting in which the voice can resound.”⁷¹ In this respect, then, what is at stake in the act of giving voice is not only the tension between language and music, as discussed by Poizat above, but also that between self and other, inner and outer – a relationship which is staged and negotiated within the actions of the singing/speaking voice.

These ideas of ‘surrender’ and ‘letting go’ are also enacted in the song’s lyrical voice, which begins from a first-person perspective (“the pleasure is all *mine*”), and then shifts, in the second part of the song, to a feminized plural (“women like *us*”), thereby suggesting a more inclusive stance in which the listener is also implicated. Alex Ross has previously noted this trait in Bjork’s work, suggesting that “Bjork often uses the second person to close the distance between herself and others” – and while Ross is referring here specifically to Bjork’s interview technique, the same can be said of her lyrical delivery as well.⁷² Within the context of “Pleasure”, the effect of this use of the feminized plural is two-fold: firstly, it serves to close the distance between speaker and listener in the manner suggested by Ross, above, allowing for a more ‘communal’ relationship between the two. Secondly, the use of the *gendered* term – “women like us” – implicates the listener within a community of *women*, specifically a community of mothers or care-givers, regardless of the listener’s actual sex or gender.

On the one hand, such a gesture could be conceived as subversive – in the same way that feminists (both male and female) will sometimes use the ‘feminine’ rather than ‘masculine’ gender pronoun as a means of disrupting the normative patriarchal bias.

⁷⁰ Connor, S. (2000) p. 6

⁷¹ Connor, S. (2000) p. 6

⁷² Ross, A. (2004) paragraph 7; Ross also makes this point later in his article with regard to Bjork’s lyrical voice, discussing the opening line from Bjork’s first single, ‘Human Behaviour’: “It was a career-defining move: Bjork positioned herself as a figure outside convention – as a member of another species, even – while using the second person to implicate the listener in the conspiracy.” Ross, A. (2004) paragraph 30

On the other hand, perhaps, one could interpret the singer as literally addressing an implied ‘community’ of women – with the song intended for a female, rather than male, audience, in which case the use of the gendered term serves as an exclusionary as well as inclusive tactic. Without necessarily wishing to discount either of these interpretations, I would argue that, rather than interpreting the gesture either literally or subversively, the song can be understood as playing with both these possibilities, by calling attention to the voice as a gesture – a gesture which serves at once to both mark out and define the relationship between self and other, speaker and listener, as well to call this relationship into question. As Connor writes:

If it is true of human beings that language enables us to be where we are not, and prevents us from ever being anywhere but beside ourselves, then it is the voice that stretches us out between here and elsewhere. One cannot be fully ‘here’ unless one is silent; one cannot vocalise without being ‘there’ as well as here, without being drawn out into the ambivalence of being here and there at once.⁷³

I believe that the use of the ‘sweeping gesture’ which is articulated within the lyrical voice on “Pleasure” – “women like us” – can be understood as calling attention to the way the voice itself articulates this movement, a gesture which moves from one to another and in doing so reaches out to and enfolds an ‘other’.

These lyrical themes of ‘surrender’ and ‘giving’ are also enacted in the song’s musical action or ‘carriage’, which consists in a kind of ‘push-and-pull’ motion between the voices, wherein the voices seem to pull in and away from one another to form a smooth, sensual rocking motion which propels the song both forward and backward. For most of the song these rocking motions are steady and sensual, maintaining an uneasy equilibrium. Several seeming movements towards ‘rupture’ or ‘climax’ earlier in the song are deflated, with the voices dissipating and subsiding before bubbling forth anew. Within the vocal arrangement, the collective voice of the choir acts as a kind of swelling current, sometimes moving in to support Bjork’s lead vocals, but more often playing the part of a low, ominous rumbling, rising and falling beneath her. Throughout the song, it is Bjork’s voice which provides the ‘unstable’ element: it is, at once, the anchor or focal point on which all the other voices hinge (and from which the other voices appear to take their cue), but also that

⁷³ Connor, S. “The Strains of the Voice” accessed online (02/02/07)
<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/strains/> paragraph 11

which could tear right through them like a knife through silk, rupturing the entire vocal arrangement.

While the song builds to several moments of seeming ‘climax’, it is only in the closing moments of the song that the moment actually occurs – a moment which has been pre-empted or ‘foreshadowed’ at various passages throughout the song, and which is signalled by Bjork’s final delivery of the word ‘give’ – whereby the tension between the various vocal parts escalates before it finally culminates in a dizzying cascade of voices. With each repetition it is the word “*give*” which pulls upwards, towards the moment of ‘climax’, thus foreshadowing the final gesture of surrender – at which moment the words themselves become meaningless, as exemplified by the final gong crash. That this moment of rupture and ‘climax’ should centre upon the word ‘give’, within the context of the song and its lyrical preoccupation with ideas of selflessness and generosity, is not insignificant; however, I would argue that rather than interpreting the voice here as being used to enact the semantic meaning of the words, it is the words themselves which are being pulled towards their own obliteration, rendered senseless in an action that ultimately remains beyond verbalisation. And I would argue further that the entire movement of the song – from the push-and-pull tension between lead and backing vocals, to the ‘false’ or ‘anti-climax’ of the first ‘chorus’, to the silence that bridges the two parts, and the increasingly frenzied choral wave rising throughout the second part of the song – is complicit in creating the ‘tug’ towards this final ‘event’, at which point the words are (literally) rendered senseless, dissolving with the voices.

The tension which had sustained the song until this point evaporates almost instantly; however, the dying voices are not met by silence, but rather by a mutant reincarnation of the opening ‘scene’: the soft panting and groaning, layered into a sensual rhythm track, which provided a ‘cocoon’ for Bjork’s lead vocals throughout the song. Here, the vocal gestures are accelerated and unevenly paced, no longer drawing in and out in fluid, undulating motions, but spasmodically rising and collapsing onto one another in weird, jerky movements. It creates a jarring, urgent effect – not exactly anti-climactic, but leaving the song with an ‘unbalanced’ quality. There is the sense of an equilibrium having been surpassed – like a jar of water filled over the brim and the ripples fading out into silence.

“Show Me Forgiveness”:

Lasting less than a minute and a half in total, “Show Me Forgiveness” is the shortest ‘song’ on *Medulla*, and yet it is also one of the most striking – owing largely to Bjork’s highly idiosyncratic *a cappella* performance, which from the moment it begins, is like a vocal ‘tour de force’, following no ‘obvious’ tempo or melody, but sustaining a momentum and tunefulness that takes its time unfolding, as if savouring every syllable, every note. The song commences without preamble – unlike many of the other tracks on *Medulla*, there are no ‘intros’ or ‘warm-ups’, no gradual building-up or falling-away of wordless voices, just Bjork’s voice against a backdrop of silence:

show me forgiveness
for having lost faith in myself
and let my own interior up
to inferior forces
the shame is endless
but if soon starts forgiveness
the girl might live

There are no ‘verses’, ‘choruses’, ‘hooks’ or ‘chord progressions’, just Bjork’s unaccompanied voice ricocheting through the surrounding silence, her blunt, irregular phrasing carving great echoing chunks. The vocal part appears to have been recorded in a single take, and is heard ‘close-up’, with all the small vocal ‘imperfections’ which would often be deleted out of recorded music – gasps for breath, bumps against the microphone, errors in pitch and so on (you can even hear her lick her lips at one stage) – left intact. One imagines that if her singing were to be represented visually, it might resemble something like a heart-rate monitor – with Bjork’s voice starting from the lower end of the scale and working her way upwards incrementally, before peaking sharply and beginning the downward descent, all the while subject to subtle variations in pitch and timing. After less than a minute the lyrics dissolve into a stream of wordless vocalise, before finishing as abruptly as it began.

All of this is played out against a backdrop of pristine digital silence – a silence so completely soundless in the stark, surgical vacuums it creates for the voice to rebound through that it seems almost endless. It is the kind of silence that is

characteristic of digital recording technologies; as Aden Evens writes: “One of the most touted features of the CD was its increased signal-to-noise ratio, the nearly complete silence between notes that contrasted sharply with the crackles on the surface of an LP.”⁷⁴ Bjork’s voice appears to move *through* the silence, rather than being superimposed onto it, giving the song a sense of space and depth which belies its actual brevity in time. This interplay is particularly accentuated by the slight touch of reverb that has been applied to Bjork’s voice, which catches the vibrations at the edges of her notes like a trail of light tracing the movement of a flare through a night-sky, and makes the silence around her voice appear less as a fixed, immutable background than as a dynamic space. This foregrounding of the malleable, dynamic relations between the voice and silence, and the kinds of spaces they articulate and occupy between them, remains central to *Medulla*’s sonic aesthetic – as Bjork explained in an interview:

People say to me, “Hey, Phil Spector’s Wall of Sound”, but to me, it sounds like a bad mistake in equipment. I really like spaces. And silences. I like music that’s a bit like Japanese things, when you have a big black space and there’s an intense pink lily in the middle. Even though the lily is small and humble, it has so much power. Rather than a wall of lilies. It’s just a taste thing. Engineers always want to compress everything and slap reverb everywhere, like whoosh, you sound like new age Enya.⁷⁵

Ignoring for a moment that reverb is one of the primary techniques for producing space in recorded music, I find that Bjork’s analogy of “an intense pink lily” in the midst of “a big black space” could serve perfectly as a visual description of the interplay between voice and silence on “Show Me Forgiveness.”

Bjork has suggested that the song was integral to her conception of the album and her desire to showcase “the entire emotional range of the human voice” – for example, recording “one song with a choir and a beatboxer and a throatsinger and a heavy metal guy, and the next song with just you and a throatsinger, and in the next song you’re just doing lots of backing vocals. Just to try to get all the colours.”⁷⁶ Turning to “Show Me Forgiveness”, she continues:

So I always knew that one song had to be just one voice, and that’s it – with all the uncomfortableness of that too. Almost like when you are at a party and somebody stands up

⁷⁴ Evens, A. *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience* (Minneapolis, 2005) p. 14

⁷⁵ Aston, M. (2004) p. 44

⁷⁶ Bjork quoted in ‘About & About: Medulla’ *bjork.com* [Online] available at <http://bjork.com/facts/abouts/> (accessed 05/03/10)

to do a speech and everybody is like ‘oh my god’. You just say your bit, and then you sit down. So it has that feeling. At least I tried to do it.⁷⁷

There is a sense of vulnerability about the song – the sense of putting oneself ‘out there’, with nothing to hide behind. This sense of vulnerability is further enhanced by the ‘immediacy’ of the song’s performance – the way in which it appears to have been recorded ‘live’, in a single take, with no overdubs or edits, thus giving the song an ‘impromptu’ or ‘spontaneous’ character (regardless of how many times the song may have actually been rehearsed or even recorded prior to the version we hear on record). It is also foregrounded through the ‘close-up’ nature of the recording itself, which not only suggests close physical proximity, but also serves to ‘magnify’ the small, bodily sounds involved in vocal productions (the interplay of lips, teeth, saliva and tongue) which are often heard to be more ‘directly’, because more ‘bodily’, self-revealing.

The lyrics, much like the performance itself, are direct and to-the-point – there is little in the way of establishing characterisation or setting the scene, just the “I” of the singer’s voice, asking for ‘forgiveness’. The song is not a ‘conversation’, nor a ‘story’, but something more akin to a soliloquy or ‘inner monologue’. The lyrical references to ‘faith’, ‘shame’ and ‘forgiveness’ give the song the quality of a ‘confessional’ – not just in the sense that is often implied within certain styles of singer-songwriting (such as James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Carole King – singers who are often referred to as belonging to the ‘confessional school’ of singer-songwriting), but also in its religious sense, as a ‘private’ moment of self-reflection or communion with God. This idea of the song as a ‘confessional’ – in both senses – is also reinforced through the performance itself: through the ‘immediacy’ of the performance and the ‘close-up’ quality of the recording, as discussed above, but also through the ‘unaccompanied’ nature of Bjork’s singing. Indeed, within discourses of popular music – and possibly in many other contexts as well – ‘unaccompanied’ singing is often taken to be the most ‘direct’ and ‘revealing’ mode of self-expression. The reason for this, as Frith suggests, is because the voice “stands for the person more directly than any other musical device” – ““She accompanied herself on the piano,” we observe; not ‘she accompanied herself on vocals.’”⁷⁸ And part of the ‘logic’ of this argument – and I am not suggesting that there is necessarily

⁷⁷ Bjork quoted in ‘About & About: Medulla’ *bjork.com* [Online] available at <http://bjork.com/facts/abouts/> (accessed 05/03/10)

⁷⁸ Frith, S. (1996) p. 191 & 190

any ‘logic’ to it – is that instrumental or technological mediation somehow gets in the way, creating a barrier between performer and audience which potentially ‘falsifies’ the act of self-expression. I will come back to discuss this further shortly.

This idea of ‘self-revelation’ is something that Bjork has explored in her previous work – most pointedly on *Vespertine*, with its explicit lyrical themes of ‘intimacy’ and ‘love-making’, but also on her earlier albums. She has frequently discussed her song lyrics in terms of excerpts from a ‘diary’ – for example, contrasting the lyrics on *Post* with those of her first album, *Debut*, she suggested that where the former (as the title suggests) were akin to letters written home to family and friends in Iceland describing her new experiences in London, the latter drew on experiences gathered over a much longer period of time – what she described as “pieces from my diary or my photo album. They were all about the past”.⁷⁹ Similarly, when asked about the seemingly ‘revealing’ and ‘intimate’ nature of the song ‘Cocoon’, from *Vespertine*, she stated: “The lyric to ‘Cocoon’ was a whole diary, then I had to edit 90 percent of it out. It’s very hard to explain, but when I read it and the other person it’s about reads it, we don’t feel violated or anything.”⁸⁰ Dibben argues that it matters less whether the ‘diary’ is being used as a metaphor for the process of the lyric-writing, or whether Bjork literally keeps a diary which then becomes the source of her song lyrics (Dibben says that both are true), than that the *idea* of the ‘diary’ serves to articulate a perception of Bjork’s work as ‘self-revealing’.⁸¹ Indeed, Dibben suggests that it is this conception of Bjork’s music as ‘self-revealing’ that is the source of her perceived “emotional authenticity” – the idea that the ‘emotions’ depicted in Bjork’s voice, lyrics and music are “the authentic expression of Bjork’s own emotional life.”⁸²

It would be possible to hear “Show Me Forgiveness” in this way – as an “authentic expression of Bjork’s emotional life”. Bjork has suggested that the lyrics for the song were written as far back as 1999 (although the ‘melody’ was not composed until much later), and could therefore be interpreted in relation to her experiences filming Lars Von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark* (which commenced filming in 1998 and was released in cinemas in 2000). The events surrounding the film’s production have been publicised often enough that I do not think they require extensive

⁷⁹ Bjork quoted in Dibben, N. (2009) p. 139

⁸⁰ Bjork quoted in Pytlik, M. (2003) p. 160

⁸¹ Dibben, N. (2009) p. 139

⁸² Dibben, N. (2009) p. 131

coverage here, other than to say that the relationship between Bjork and Von Trier was ‘strained’, to say the least, with one ‘anonymous’ report circulating from the film set suggesting that during one particular incident Bjork apparently began ‘eating’ her costume. Whatever the actual reasons for the complications between Bjork and Von Trier, as soon as the film was complete Bjork publically vowed that she would never act again, despite winning a Palm D’Or for ‘Best Leading Actress’ at the Cannes film festival, and stated of the experience working with Von Trier: “Lars doesn’t consider it his responsibility to make sure people are psychologically stable after he’s worked with them in such an intense way... As far as he’s concerned, they can be ruined emotionally, but that’s just not his responsibility.”⁸³ While Bjork rarely speaks so openly about her working relationship with Von Trier, references to “feeling delicate and broken” recur throughout her descriptions of *Vespertine* – the album that she began recording whilst still filming for *Dancer in the Dark*.⁸⁴

Given this information – information which, it must be said, is not referenced in any way within the song itself, but derives rather from knowledge of biographical details – it would be possible to hear “Show Me Forgiveness”, with its lyrical ‘confession’ of letting her “own interior up to inferior forces”, as a response to Bjork’s reported experiences filming *Dancer in the Dark*. And while this information must be considered peripheral, at best, to one’s understanding of the song itself, it nonetheless raises an important issue which *is* pertinent to my understanding of the song: namely, that at the same time as the song enacts a ‘confession’, of sorts (although the details remain obscure), it is also a song *about* the act of opening oneself up – or rather, the possible dangers in doing so. And this works both ways: that is, at the same time as the song is about opening oneself up – or the dangers in doing so – the song itself is simultaneously a ‘confession’. And while this can obviously be read in relation to the circumstances surrounding *Dancer in the Dark* it could also be read in terms of the audience/performer relationship which is articulated through the song itself. That is, the song itself *is* an act of self-revelation – what is happening in the lyrics is also what is happening in the song: right now, as I listen, the singer is opening herself up (for my benefit?). And the impact of this is something that does not diminish on repeated listens: regardless of how many times

⁸³ Bjork quoted in Pytlik, M. (2003) p. 142

⁸⁴ Aston, M. “The Mojo Interview: Bjork.” *Mojo*. (Nov: 132) p. 44

I have heard it before, every time I listen to the song it is as though it is happening right here and now. The question remains, however, as to who she is opening herself up to.

On the one hand, we can listen to the song as a ‘private’ moment of self-reflection – in which case, the audience chooses to pretend that they are not there. We are, in a sense, ‘listening in’ – and part of the intimacy of the song, I think, derives from this possibility: it is not just that she is sharing a ‘secret’ moment, but that it is an inner-monologue, which we simply happen to ‘overhear’. Even in this instance, though, an ‘other’ is implied – even if that ‘other’ is only the singer herself. As Connor writes:

The voice goes out into space, but also always, in its calling for a hearing, or the necessity of being heard, opens a space for itself to go out into, resound in, and return from. Even the unspoken voice clears an internal space equivalent to the actual differentiation of positions in space necessary to the speaker.⁸⁵

This is true of all vocalising, but it is especially true in the context of the song, since the singer’s quest for ‘forgiveness’ necessarily implies a ‘confessor’. In this case, the voice itself articulates the threshold between self and other, speaker and listener. Part of the intimacy of the song derives from this interplay created through the voice itself – an interplay which is enhanced, I think, by the stark backdrop of silence and the reverb applied to Bjork’s voice, which foregrounds the voice’s own ‘self-relation’, the way it seems to spin out and back in upon itself.

On the other hand, however, the listener *is* there, and if the singer is singing to anyone, then surely that must include her (implied) audience. The ‘vulnerability’ of the performance owes, in part, to this interpretation – to the knowledge that the singer is opening herself up to us, *for* us. (And of course, the same applies for the interpretation above – since Bjork the artist has chosen to include the song on an album made available for public consumption.) But if we recognise that the singer is, at least in part, opening herself up for our benefit – whether ‘knowingly’ (in the sense that we are there, she is addressing us), or ‘unknowingly’ (in the sense that we ‘overhear’, and thus bear witness to, what is essentially a private moment of self-reflection) – then that, in turn, begs the question: are *we* the “inferior forces” she is referring to?

⁸⁵ Connor, S. (2000) p. 6

While I do not necessarily think the listener would need to assume this role (and it would certainly diminish the pleasure one takes in the song if we did), it is worth considering here since, after all, that is exactly what a singer does: they let their “interior up” to outside forces – whether ‘live’, on-stage or, in this case, on-record, where the audience remains, at most, an unknown quantity. And this need not be restricted to professional singers, or even to singing generally. That is, to give voice is to put one’s self ‘out there’; as Connor writes: “Nothing else about me defines me so intimately as my voice, precisely because there is no other feature of my self whose nature it is thus to move from me to the world, and to move me into the world.”⁸⁶ As such, one could argue that there is always an element of vulnerability involved in the act of speaking, or vocalizing; a vulnerability that is directly connected to the way in which the voice moves from an “interior” to an “exterior”, moving ‘myself’ into the world as it does so.

Singing, as Frith suggests, compounds this sense of vulnerability: firstly, because singing is not ‘naturalised’ in the way that speaking is (most of us do not ‘sing’ in ordinary, everyday conversations); and secondly, because “[s]inging seems to be self-revealing in a way that speaking is not” – it “draws a different sort of attention to the singer, hence the embarrassment.”⁸⁷ To sing words is to “subject them to a control they’re not used to: they have to take their part in a rhythmic and melodic frame; how and where they are pitched is suddenly an open question.”⁸⁸ This creates what Frith refers to as the ‘paradox’ of singing, whereby “[s]inging seems both less natural than speaking (involves a different, less familiar sort of self-consciousness) and at the same time more natural – more bodily, more exposing, more revealing of who we ‘really’ – naturally – are.”⁸⁹ That is, on the one hand, to sing is to turn one’s voice into an object – the voice as “interpreted from the outside” (hence the loss of control, and potential for embarrassment); and, on the other hand, singing is also heard to be more ‘self-expressive’ – the voice as “directed from the inside” (hence the enjoyment which many, if not all, people experience in singing).⁹⁰ The singing voice holds this tension – between inside and outside, subject and object – within itself.

⁸⁶ Connor, S. (2000) p. 7

⁸⁷ Frith, S. (1996) p. 172

⁸⁸ Frith, S. (1996) p. 173

⁸⁹ Frith, S. (1996) p. 173

⁹⁰ Frith, S. (1996) p. 206

Indeed, Frith suggests that it is precisely this ‘tension’, between inside and outside, subject and object, which makes the “sung note” the “central pop gesture”:

The central pop gesture, a sung note, rests on the same inner/outer tension as performance art: it uses the voice as the most taken for granted indicator of the person, the guarantor of the coherent subject; and it uses the voice as something artificial, posed, its sound determined by the music. The star voice (and, indeed, the star body) thus acts as a mark of both subjectivity and objectivity, freedom and constraint, control and lack of control. And technology, electrical recording, has exaggerated this effect by making the vocal performance more intimate, more self-revealing, and more (technologically) determined.⁹¹

Thus, to return to “Show Me Forgiveness”, I would argue that the song dramatizes this tension between inside and outside, private and public, self and other, through its use of the singing voice. That is, it uses the voice, as Frith suggests, as something ‘self-revealing’ and ‘self-expressive’, and it uses the voice as something ‘posed’ or ‘staged’ – and I think that part of the beauty of the song lies in the fact that it is not an ‘either/or’ distinction, but rather in the way we are able to listen to the song in both ways at once. This tension is further enhanced by the way in which what is happening in the lyrics is also what is happening in the song, as we listen. This knowingness does not diffuse the tension by creating a kind of distance or detachment, but rather simply adds to the complexity and the manifold layers of meanings which are articulated by this one voice, against a backdrop of silence, within a song that plays out in less than two minutes.

It is in this way that *Medulla* can be understood as calling attention to the voice as a gesture – as that which both articulates and displaces the threshold between self and other, inner and outer, the natural and the artificial. Far from serving as a stable, secure sign of an ‘authentic human presence’, the voice on *Medulla* is registered as a site of intersection and exchange, capable of dancing out manifold meanings, calling upon itself as a gesture, at the same time as it calls out to be heard. Indeed, I would argue that it is this between-space which is opened up by the ‘coming’ and the ‘going’ of the voice that constitutes the album’s ‘inner or deep part’ – a space which belongs to neither speaker nor listener, inside nor outside, but rather the passage that marks out one from the other.

⁹¹ Frith, S. (1996) p. 210

CONCLUSION

When I commenced work on this thesis in 2005, my aim was simple: to study a few albums in the same way that one might study other kinds of cultural ‘texts’ – in terms of composition, thematic development, historical context and so forth. In doing so, my intention was to forge a study of the album format as a ‘whole’, attending not only to the use of recorded music and lyrics, but also to the artwork and packaging, as well as ‘extra-musical’ discourses and media such as documentaries, interviews, publicity images and so on.

I soon realised that such an approach was largely without academic precedent – a good thing, in the sense that originality and innovativeness set the benchmark for doctoral theses; but also a little discouraging nonetheless. None of the academic studies I read seemed to suggest that the project I envisaged was even possible, let alone desirable. I read entire books on popular music which made no mention whatsoever of the music or musicians, and those that did were often so obtuse as to be practically unreadable.

On the other hand, in the five years that have elapsed since I first began work on this thesis – and throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century generally – there have been an increasing number of studies which suggest that the aims of this project are ones which are shared, in spirit if not in content, by others.

While there is still no such discipline as ‘Album Studies’ – and albums remain a peripheral concern, at best, within the critical literature on popular music – I would nonetheless argue that there is a growing recognition of its centrality within popular music cultures. Keir Keightley’s 2004 essay on the role of the album in the evolution of rock music throughout the latter-half of the twentieth-century: “Long-Play: Adult-Oriented Popular Music and the Temporal Logics of the Post-War Sound Recording Industry in the USA”, is an excellent example of this.¹ In this essay Keightley not only explores the technological, commercial and cultural factors responsible for the album’s rise as the “core commodity” of the music industry, she also persuasively argues that it is the album which has enabled rock music to ascertain a cultural status for itself as a ‘serious’ art-form. Carys Wyn Jones’ 2008 book, *The Rock Canon: Canonic Values in the Reception of Rock Albums*, also explores the album’s role in the creation of a

¹ Keightley, K. “Long-Play: Adult-Oriented Popular Music and the Temporal Logics of the Post-War Sound Recording Industry in the USA.” *Media Culture & Society* 26:3 (2004) p. 375-391

distinct ‘rock’ aesthetic, albeit in this instance focusing less on the technological and economic factors involved than the way ‘high’ cultural ideas and values have attached themselves to particular albums, thereby enabling the formation of a ‘rock canon’.²

A slightly different take on the album, but one which is very much pertinent to any discussion of the album within the contemporary context, is provided by Will Straw in his 2009 essay “In Memoriam: The Music CD and its Ends.”³ As the title suggests, Straw takes the CD’s demise as his premise, and sets about from there teasing out the reasons for its cultural and commercial decline, as well as the implications for the album in an era of online music. Straw’s essay here builds on work he has conducted previously, which foregrounds the album as commodity and artefact: “Music as Commodity and Material Culture” (2002)⁴; and “Exhausted Commodities: The Material Culture of Music” (2000).⁵

Added to this is the Continuum Press 33 1/3 series, which began circulation in 2000[*], and which is still going strong today. As I discussed in the introduction, the series is notable for the way each book provides an in-depth discussion of one particular album – from the obviously ‘canonic’ (for instance, the Rolling Stones *Exile on Main Street*, the Beatles *Sgt Peppers*), to the more obscure and contemporary (PJ Harvey’s *Rid of Me*, the Beastie Boys’ *Paul’s Boutique*). This series is not the kind normally associated with academic literature, although it does feature work by academics, along with musicians, critics, and other kinds of music writers. I have no idea how popular the series is – one assumes it would be more likely to appeal to the specialist or collector than the average rock fan – although in an era often characterised as the ‘death’ of the album as a material artefact, the 33 1/3 series provides one way for rock audiences to continue to invest in the visual and material paraphernalia traditionally associated with the album.

While the discussions provided by Straw, Keightley and Jones, mentioned above, have been invaluable beacons throughout the writing of this thesis – suggesting instances of contemporary scholarship which are interested in some of the same kinds of ideas as I aimed to explore here – none of them deals specifically with either the music or the musicians. This is not a criticism in itself, since obviously it is impossible to deal with

² Jones, C. W. *The Rock Canon: Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Albums*. (Aldershot, Burlington, 2008)

³ Straw, W. “In Memoriam: The Music CD and its Ends” in *Design and Culture*. 1:1 (2009) p. 79-92

⁴ Straw, W. “Music as Commodity and Material Culture” in *Repercussions* 7:8 (2002) p. 147-172

⁵ Straw, W. “Exhausted Commodities: The Material Culture of Music” in *Canadian Journal of Communication*. 25:1 (2000) [Online] available at <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/1148/1067> (accessed 05/02/10)

all the different facets of popular music in one text, and the contributions offered by these writers far outweighs anything they neglect to discuss. However, I think there is a danger here of perpetuating an idea that the music and the musicians are unimportant to the analysis of popular music – little more than the hapless by-products of external forces of commerce, technology and the like.

Therefore it was with some relief that I discovered other studies which aimed to take both popular music *and* popular musicians ‘seriously’ as objects of academic analysis. Nicola Dibben’s book-length study of Bjork, entitled *Bjork*, and published in 2009, is a positive indication of the kind of direction future studies of popular music might take – an extensive analysis of a single artist which deals in great detail with all the various facets of her work, from her music and lyrics to her elaborate stage performances and music videos, as well as the way she presents herself in interviews and documentaries.⁶ Dibben’s book was issued as part of the Indiana University Press *Icons of Pop Music* series, edited by Dave Laing and Jill Halstead – a series in which each book, as the publishers’ note suggests, “offer[s] a critical profile of a key figure or group in twentieth-century pop music”. The series is also important for the way it “focus[es] on the work rather than on biography, and emphasize[s] critical interpretation”.⁷ To put it another way, it foregrounds an approach to popular music and musicians which is not dissimilar to the kinds of studies one might encounter in literary or film theory, whilst also attending to those aspects of the music which make it distinctive as ‘music’.

Joseph Tate’s edited volume of essays on Radiohead, *The Music and Art of Radiohead* in 2005, issued as part of the *Ashgate Popular Music and Folk Series*, similarly takes an expansive and in-depth approach to the work of a single band – albeit here in the form of a collection of wide-ranging essays, discussing everything from the band’s innovative music videos to particular songs and lyrics.⁸ Joseph Auner’s 2003 essay on Radiohead and Moby, “‘Sing it for Me’: Posthuman Ventriloquism in Recent Popular Music”,⁹ and Steven Shaviro’s 2002 essay on Bjork, “The Erotic Life of Machines”, are also important instances of contemporary scholarship which analyze the music in

⁶ Dibben, N. *Bjork* (Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2009)

⁷ Publisher’s note in Dibben, N. (2009)

⁸ Tate, J. (ed.) *The Music and Art of Radiohead*. (Aldershot, Burlington, 2005)

⁹ Auner, J. “‘Sing it for Me’: Posthuman Ventriloquism in Recent Popular Music.” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 128:1 (2003) p. 98-122

relation to broader cultural themes and ideas.¹⁰ These essays suggest that it is possible to take popular music ‘seriously’ without ignoring the ‘popular’ part of the equation.

Of course, by singling out these particular texts I am effectively occluding a number of other significant contributions to the study of popular music (with Michael Talbot’s 2002 edited volume *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?* being one of the more unusual, yet fascinating examples of recent scholarship in this area). Furthermore, the texts which I have singled out here are ones which have, for different reasons, fallen into the immediate vicinity of the project outlined here. As such, they are not intended to serve as a definitive compendium of the current and future strands of academic research in the field of popular music. However, what I feel is important about these works – especially in relation to the arguments developed throughout this thesis – is that they explore *all* the different facets of popular music at the turn of the millennium: not just the music or the lyrics, but the visual and textual media, the accompanying documentaries and interviews.

With these examples in mind, the initial discouragement I experienced on first surveying the academic literature on popular music has been well and truly superseded by the excitement and enthusiasm which each of the writers cited above has brought to the subject. I do not agree with the views put forward in all of these works, but that in itself is part of the challenge, and a sense of healthy competition is a vital component of any academic field.

The idea that popular music and musicians can only be studied in terms of their ‘popularity’ has been an extremely limiting one, yet it is also very resilient. What I have tried to demonstrate throughout this thesis is that it *is* possible to broaden the cultural framework through which popular music is interpreted and understood – to explore popular music, in Greil Marcus’ words, not as ‘youth culture’ or ‘subculture’ but as ‘culture, full stop.’ And as the examples of current academic scholarship above suggest, it appears that the scope of such an approach extends well beyond the parameters of my thesis here. I look forward to seeing the future directions that such scholarship will take.

¹⁰ Shaviro, S. “The Erotic Life of Machines” *Parallax*. 8:2 (2002) p. 21-31

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