
**Concerning the Progress of Rock and Roll**

**Ice Ice, Baby**

Histories of popular music routinely employ a model derived from nineteenth-century physical science in order to describe the process of popularization. What semioticians call conventionalization is most often characterized as a cultural equivalent of the second law of thermodynamics. Energy tends toward a state of equilibrium; "innovative, unconventional codes gradually become adopted by the majority." John Fiske, in *Introduction to Communication Studies*, uses this entropy model to explain the "broad cultural acceptance" of jazz (presumably during the Swing Era). Dick Hebdige, in *Subculture the Meaning of Style*, a now classic study of "punk" culture, relies on it too. What Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin call a theory of "progress by attrition" is, perhaps, *the* foundational myth of popular music. It lies at the heart of all distinctions that attempt to delineate a boundary between the authentic and the commercial, in whatever guise that may take: rock vs. pop, black vs. white, modern vs. postmodern, art vs. commerce.

Conventionalization, though, like its counterpart in physics, is in itself neither negative nor positive, neither good nor bad. It just is--or so the discourse of communication theory would have us believe. A good description, this theory seems to at least tacitly argue, merely indicates; it does not seek to establish a norm. If we perceive conventionalization or popularization as a "lowering of quality because it involves appealing to the 'lowest common denominator,'" writes Fiske following Basil Bernstein, we should be aware that it [such a judgment] is made from within a particular value-system, one that values elaborated, narrowcast codes and the expression of individual differences. A value-system that rates highly the reinforcement of cultural ties and restricted, broadcast codes will find the metaphor of the lowest common denominator offensive, elitist and inaccurate.

All the same, descriptions of conventionalization typically, perhaps always, employ a rhetoric of degeneration. They chart it as a downward course, a semiotic diaspora, and rely on readers decoding such a journey Platonically, as a deviation from the Good. Hence, popularization receives a plot--tragedy--and thereby the very notion of an *authentic* (pure code) is erected as something opposed to the *conventional* (popularized code).
Any reader familiar with the literature of deconstruction will recognize this "logocentric" opposition (founded on a notion of "presence"). It is yet another version of the opposition that pits original against copy. But demonstrating the untenability of the authentic/conventional (pure/popular) opposition is not my desire. I do not care to recapitulate what has become the most standard sort of deconstructive reading. Instead, I want to reread (then misread) the rhetoric of degeneration that informs the history of popular music. My first example is a brief tragi-comic history of jazz, but it could be read allegorically as the "progress" of rock and roll. Hebdige writes:

As the music fed into mainstream popular culture during the 20s and 30s, it tended to become bowdlerized, drained of surplus eroticism, and any hint of anger or recrimination blown along the "hot" lines was delicately refined into inoffensive night club sound. White swing represents the climax of this process: innocuous, generally unobtrusive, possessing a broad appeal, it was a laundered product which contained none of the subversive connotations of its original black sources. These suppressed meanings were, however, triumphantly reaffirmed in be-bop, and by the mid-50s a new, younger white audience began to see itself reflected darkly in the dangerous, uneven surfaces of contemporary avant-garde, despite the fact that the musicians responsible for the New York sound deliberately sought to restrict white identification by producing a jazz which was difficult to listen to and even more difficult to imitate.

Hot jazz turns to swing, bop turns cool, eroticism becomes lassitude, black bleaches to white, the dirty gets laundered, and the uneven is worn smooth: the structure of this apocalyptic sequence reproduces itself any number of times in accounts of American popular music since World War II. To pick several examples, it is the story of how Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right" (a hit for Elvis Presley, 1956) became "Sugar Shack" (Jimmy Gilmer, 1963) and, then, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" (the Beatles, 1964), or how 1960s rock became 1970s disco before its fundamental values were reaffirmed in late-1970s punk (only to transform into the techno-dance music of the 1980s). It is also the structure of Elvis Presley's career: from 1956-1958 (hot as Memphis asphalt) to 1959-1968 (bland as grits) to 1968 (meanner than a hornet).

This model of conventionalization--an aesthetic version of entropy as heat death--adequately accounts for the degradation of a code imagined as original. It feels ontologically stable because it explains popularization: the process whereby "authentic" music (a narrowcast code) is translated into "commercial" music (a broadcast code) for the purpose of selling music to a wide audience. And it sounds (politically) correct because it explains what Andrew Ross calls "the everyday, plagiaristic, commerce between white ['commercial'] and black ['authentic'] musics"; it conceptualizes the history of American popular music as a series of unilateral,
commercially driven energy exchanges that everywhere bespeak "a racist history of exploitation exclusively weighted to dominant white interests." Like all received models, this one has its attractions.

It also has real failings. As Ross points out, the formula "commercialized music = whitened music" simply will not hold. Since "commercial and contractual relations enter into all realms of musical entertainment, or at least wherever music is performed in order to make a living," there can be "no tidy coincidence" between "discourse about color ('whitened' music)" and "discourse about commercialization ('alienated' music)." To subscribe to such an equation is to imagine a very mechanical process indeed, whereby a music, which is authentically black, constitutes an initial raw material which is then appropriated and reduced in cultural force and meaning by contact with a white industry. Accordingly, music is never 'made,' and only ever exploited, in this process of industrialization.

The biggest failure of the heat-death model of conventionalization is this: it cannot account for innovation. By picturing the history of popular music as a downward spiral of "progress" by attrition, it fails to explain how so-called authentic music arises. More specifically, it continues to rely on the thinly disguised metaphysical assumption that genius visits select musicians, or (the more contemporary view) that the rock-and-roll muse does not strike so much as she resides within a "tradition." Serious musicians, through searching (one's "soul" or one's "roots"), locate her; listeners, on the other hand, find "authenticity" when they tune in to the exotic (Delta blues or world music), the esoteric ("alternative" music), or the canonical ("classic" rock).

We need a better theory. I nominate one that extends the possibilities suggested by the old theory of conventionalization. It would exploit the potential energy of decay (decomposition), and in providing an account of innovation in rock and roll, it would suggest a paradigm of invention that could be generalized for every type of writing (for all fields of knowledge). In other words, I want to sketch out a theory that, without denying "degeneration," would insist that something is gained through conventionalization. Before initiating that project, however, I want to emphasize the overlap of "authentic" and "commercial" music. Only by unsettling this opposition can we begin to rethink a cultural model of conventionalization predicated on heat-death.
Expression vs. Commodity

Our experience of twentieth-century popular culture is defined by what Frith calls "the contrast between music-as-expression and music-as-commodity." He writes: "[H]owever 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." For me (a white, male, and, now, middle-aged music consumer), "music-as-expression" has always meant African-American music. It was "authentic," a genuine outpouring of real feeling (quality is a function of closeness to the blues). I have long regarded commercialization as corruption: an "essential human activity" colonized. I dote over artists such as Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Otis Redding, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Al Green, Sly and the Family Stone, and Parliament because, simply put, there "ain't nothing like the real thing, baby"; I love Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, the Velvet Underground, Talking Heads, Elvis Costello, and Roxy Music because they are--I tell myself--"ironic." But there are two problems with this belief:

1) It is romantic and, ultimately, racist. Like Rousseau's Confessions (and, later, L'vi-Strauss's Tristes Tropiques), it imagines non-European peoples "as the index to a hidden good Nature, as a native soil recovered, of a 'zero degree' with reference to which one could outline the structure, the growth, and above all the degradation of our society and our culture." It is, Jacques Derrida notes, enabled by remorse--the "remorse that produces anthropology."

2) It supposes, as Frith points out, "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." Certainly white people exploited, and continue to exploit, black people. That point needs to be admitted. But it is also important to realize that "authentic" African-American music was an effect of industrialization.

In its early years, radio fostered and relied upon live music, bands with members who could play endless variations of recognizable tunes (the Ellington and Basie orchestras), as well as bands with a staff of arrangers (the orchestras of Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey). Later, after the discovery of magnetic tape (one of the spoils of World War II), radio fostered and relied upon the recording industry. To oversimplify, the history of rock is a consequence of the development of recording technology (and, to some extent, television and video) just as the history of jazz is a consequence of radio (and, to some extent, a nightclub scene made possible by the invention of the electric light). Stated differently, radio was the prosthesis of jazz, just as magnetic tape was the prosthesis of rock and roll.
We must also remember that the music industry organizes itself around certain naturalized oppositions. It has a discourse. It speaks. Industrialization, through institutions such as radio, music publishing and licensing, and recording, sanctioned the antithesis that holds that "authentic" music is something distinct from "commercial" music. We consumers, in turn, inherit--organize our thinking by means of--this and other antitheses. When I state, with all sincerity, that "white people exploited, and continue to exploit, black people," I am articulating a central tenet of the music industry. It literally banks on--makes money off--my belief. The assumption that bad (commercial) things happen to "authentic" music is sufficient to generate the real/fake distinction that has become musical common sense. It creates a consumer who understands the history of rock as a series of authentic moments that deteriorated into conventionalized moments, transforming the music into a field of "commercial" imitations of some real thing, and it prompts histories organized around the proper names of acknowledged innovators.

Composting

There is, however, an alternative way of looking at the history of popular music and conceptualizing conventionalization that involves an investigation of decomposition as an image capable not only of organizing information, but of generating a formula for the discovery or invention process. Nathaniel Mackey opened up the possibilities of this image when, in his epistolary novel, Bedouin Hornbook, he wrote: "There must be some way, I'm convinced, to invest in the ever so slight suggestion of 'compost' I continue to get from the word compose." Brian Eno, a recording artist best known for his production work with David Bowie, U2, and Talking Heads, took it further when he responded to an interviewer's statement: "I would think you'd have mixed feelings about new artists doing something that really isn't new art." He said:

If you think of culture as a great big garden, it has to have its compost as well. And lots of people are doing things that are . . . not dramatic or radical or not even particularly interesting; they're just digestive processes. It's places where a number of little things are being combined and tried out. It's like members of a population. We're all little different turns of the same genetic dice. If you think about music in that way, it makes it much easier to accept that there might be lots of things you might not want to hear again. They happen and they pass and they become the compost for something else to grow from [laughs]. Gardening is such a good lesson for all sorts of things.

Even though he has claimed, "I now disagree with nearly everything he said," Eno must have been thinking about composer John Cage when he read gardening as an
analogy for musical production. During this interview, Cage--an expert on fungi (and founder of the New York Mycological Society)--was seated in the room with Eno.

In *Silence*, Cage wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that much can be learned about music by devoting oneself to the mushroom." But, one might ask, why mushrooms? Cage remarks, with a wink, that it is because the secondhand bookshops in which he purchases "'field companions' on fungi" are "in some rare cases next door to shops selling dog-eared sheets of music." His "logic" alerts us to the obvious conclusion that anything mushrooms have to teach us about music is the result of a fortuitous allegory (an accident of signification). Whether mushrooms speak the truth about rock and roll, tell the *real story* of the way pop music progresses, is completely beside the point. What, then, is the lesson of mushrooms? Simply this, all the Baptist ministers I heard pontificating against pop music while I was growing up were right. Rock and roll is a mushroom, a fungus in the garden of culture ("My records are parasites on the music business," says Eno.) But given my conception of fungi--greatly influenced by deconstruction, the "parasitical economy" of grammatology, and the "logic of disintegration" advanced by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin--the ministers' accusations were not nearly as damaging as they were intended to be. In practice, I responded to ministerial admonitions much as David Arora, author of *Mushrooms Demystified*, responded to his parents' admonitions to "stay away from mushrooms." They "inspired me to get closer." As Gregory Ulmer notes, the lesson taught by mushrooms or, more properly, fungi, since a mushroom is the reproductive structure (fruiting body) of a fungus, *isymbiosis*. The kind of fungi hunted and eaten by Cage ("the fleshy, fruity, 'higher' fungi, Boletus, Morels, and the like") are "not parasites, but saprophytes (any organism that lives on dead organic matter)." They exist in a "mutually beneficial relationship with their hosts (the green plants and trees which supply the organic 'food')." Writes Arora: "They are nature's recyclers." In feeding on dead matter, they "reduce complex organic compounds to simpler building blocks, thereby enabling plants to re-use them." The saprophyte--which is to say, rock and roll--feeds off the decay of tradition. It treats culture as a compost pile.

To understand what this means we need only note that "something becomes an object of knowledge . . . only as it . . . is made to disintegrate." Popularization does to ideas what decay does to organic materials. It turns them into compost so that they can be transformed into something new. What makes Eno especially interesting is that he has turned this process into a compositional methodology. In the liner notes to *Ambient 4/On Land*, he describes his interest in treating "found sound"--"pieces of chain and sticks and stones," "recordings of rooks, frogs and insects," and also the "complete body" of his "earlier work"--as a "completely plastic and malleable material":

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As a result, some earlier pieces I worked on became digested by later ones, which in turn became digested again. This technique is like composting: converting what would otherwise have been waste into nourishment.

Although it is difficult to hear any relationship between his static soundscapes and, say, the music of Madonna or Bruce Springsteen, much less bands such as Sonic Youth, the Mekons, or Hüsker Dü, Eno's method makes explicit the normal functioning of rock and roll.

Conventionalization is the compost from which innovation grows. which is to say, it not only enables popularization, it fosters artistic renewal by generating conditions that allow for aberrant readings. To show how this happens, I want to rewrite, in a highly schematic form, Hebdige's history of jazz which I cited early in this essay. Like him, I begin with "white swing."

**Conventionalization.** Restricted (broadcast) codes seek to become elaborated (narrowcast) codes. White swing was less a monolithic style of music, than a variety of "popular" musics vying for a "cut" of the market, each seeking to promote itself as a privileged mode of expression.

**Aberration.** Attempts to sell music to a mass audience --to make it fit a variety of conventions or cultural experiences--promote homogeneity (replication of conventions) as well as heterogeneity (aberrant readings of conventions). On the levels of production and distribution, conventionalization prompts both experimentation and standardization; on the level of consumption, it allows aberrant decodings ("the rule, not the exception, with mass media messages," writes Fiske recalling Umberto Eco). Musical innovators are aberrant readers; Charlie Parker ("Bird") "misinterpreted" the basic materials of swing.

**Disputation.** Boppers (followers of Bird) vs. Moldy Figs (followers of Bunk Johnson-traditional jazz). Conflicts between groups (competing systems of discourse) arise over which musics are and are not innovative, legitimate, authentic, original, etc. They most often take the form of contests or disputes which, as Jean-Francois Lyotard puts it, cannot "be resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments."

**Ratification.** Bebop, modern jazz, wins the day. A perceived innovation gains legitimacy by soliciting, gaining, or, in some cases, inventing institutional support. It is retroactively read back as "genuinely" innovative (canonized as a "pure code") by the institution that brings it into language. That, however, does not mean that other (suppressed) musical forms cease to exist; they have merely lost their position of power.
This process repeats itself (with a difference) when the validated "pure code," motivated by an institution's attempt to maintain preeminence or hegemony, gets conventionalized (turned into a broadcast code) and, subsequently, read aberrantly. In jazz, this happened when bebop was conventionalized as hard-bop (a style almost as diverse as "white swing"), then read aberrantly by Ornette Coleman.

The origins of rock also followed this pattern. In one version of its story, black rhythm and blues (a heteroglot style that had secularized black gospel) was aberrantly read by Little Richard and Elvis Presley, and, following a dispute with what, for lack of a better term, might be called "classic pop" (recall Frank Sinatra and Mitch Miller's denunciations of the new style), it was institutionalized as rock and roll. But because it is, like film, a "technologically dependent, capital-intensive, commercial, collaborative medium regulated by the government and financially linked to mass audiences," rock subsequently progressed in a more complicated fashion than jazz (which was performance dependent). In elevating recording above performance, rock created a condition of perpetual conventionalization and, thus, a condition where aberrant readings are always, at least theoretically, the rule for both players and listeners (since practicing amateurs are still numerous in rock, these roles remain scarcely differentiated). That is why, to choose but one example, Prince was rock's exemplary artist of the 1980s. By treating rock history as a compost pile--one suspects that he heard George Clinton before he heard Jimi Hendrix or Little Richard--Prince signified that rock history, as a linear succession of styles supplanting one another, had ceased to exist (which is far from saying that rock is dead). He alerted everyone listening to the fact that rock's past was now always available in synchronic form. "Eventually," John Cage had written in 1954, "everything will be happening at once."

**Parable**

*Scene: Tower Records, South Street, Philadelphia. Mr X walks up to the sales counter and presents a clerk with a major credit card and a compact disc--Elvis's The Sun Sessions.*

*Clerk:* Elvis Presley, huh?

*Mr. X:* Yeah.

*Clerk:* I don't know, man. If I wanted to hear good Dean Martin, I think I'd just buy the real thing.
Inventory

In every case, the rock musician perceived as innovative is one who has creatively misread the popularized or conventionalized version of the compost pile produced by a previously recognized innovation. Steering a course between repetition (redundancy) and incomprehensibility (entropy), he or she has parlayed an aberrant or perverse reading of the past into an authorized reading for the present. Elvis Presley's "misreading" of Dean Martin (a conventionalized version of the saloon singer) makes a good example of this. Marion Keisker, the office manager of Sam Phillips's Sun Records studio in Memphis, remembers that Elvis, during his first audition, relied so heavily on Dean Martin material that she thought "Elvis had decided . . . if he was going to sound like anybody, it was going to be Dean Martin." Guitarist Chris Spedding, picking up on this clue (left unexplored in Jerry Hopkins's biography, Elvis), argues that many of Elvis's "actions previously dismissed (or considered perverse when they could not be ignored)" are explained by his admiration for the actor-singer who was, during the mid-1950s, "the most bankable of matinee idols." Comparing Martin's big hit of 1955, "Memories Are Made of This," with "the song Elvis always said was his favorite cut, 'Don't Be Cruel,' a hit in the summer of the following year," Spedding notes:

Now, apart from the fact that Elvis borrowed that descending-bass-run-followed-by-guitar-chord ending from Martin's arrangement, other common elements are that sexy, wobbly, almost hiccuping baritone vocal--not yet identifiably "rock" until Elvis made it so--and Martin's novel use of a four-piece gospel-type vocal group which we may now assume inspired Elvis to introduce the Jordanaires on his cut, effectively integrating them into a unique blend with his own lead vocal, thus establishing another rock archetype.

The joke is, Elvis's music was a poor imitation of Dean Martin's, and that, strangely enough, has something--maybe everything--to do with why his music is so much better than Martin's ("fifty million Elvis fans can't be wrong"). Elvis's method (whether conscious or not makes absolutely no difference), not just the noise he made, is the essence of rock and roll. Simply notice that one can organize the entire history of rock and roll as a series of four revolutionary moments when something new grew out of critical misreadings of available materials: musical compost. Elvis and Little Richard (mid-1950s) perversely read rhythm and blues and country and western music; Bob Dylan and the Beatles (mid-1960s) perversely read early rock and roll and American folk music; the Sex Pistols and the Clash (mid-1970s) perversely read art-pop and reggae; Public Enemy and De La Soul (late-1980s) perversely read pop's basic material object--the record.
Four Means To Rock

A French professor of mine once informed me that Barthes's *S/Z* was grossly overrated. He said, "If you want to read good criticism on Balzac, don't read Roland Barthes." He was, of course, correct, but he had missed the whole point of contemporary experimental criticism. He not only failed to see that what counts as "good" criticism is now up for grabs, but that innovation (or what rhetoricians call invention) means learning how to read aberrantly, how to generate imminently co-optable misreadings. In *S/Z*, Barthes treated Balzac's novella "Sarrasine" as a compost pile, something from which he could fashion another text of his own. Like a rock musician, he treated his basic materials--and surely you thought of this well before I wrote it--like *shit*. Manure is etymologically linked to maneuver: *manouvrer*, Old French for working with the hands, cultivating.

What some people find objectionable about both contemporary theory and contemporary music is a supposed lack of respect for the very institutions that make intellectual and musical labor possible (entrepreneurial capitalism, the university, the technology of the book or record). Undoubtedly, many are mystified by the "provocative manner, attention to surfaces, aestheticized disposition, and oppositional hedonism" that characterize much theory and music. What, they must wonder, accounts for such rampant questioning of authority, such suspiciousness of things settled long ago? One possibility is that we are seeing what Robert Ray labels "a later manifestation of dandyism." Barthes writes: "In a given historical situation--of pessimism and rejection--it is the intellectual class as a whole which, if it does not become militant, is virtually a dandy."

The dandy, Baudelaire observed, "appears above all in periods of transition," which makes me suspect that the nearly simultaneous rise of rock and roll and poststructuralism (an umbrella term designating semiotic, psychoanalytic, feminist, and ideological methodologies) is symptomatic of a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in the way we approach the materials of the past (the object of study). I shall not elaborate upon this claim except to underscore what others have already said. Criticism and popular culture are now being "transformed in the same way that literature and the arts were transformed by the avant-garde movements in the early decades of this century. The break with mimesis, with the values and assumptions of realism, which revolutionized the modernist arts, is now underway."

This is what differentiates rock and roll and poststructuralism from classical music and formalism (close readings of texts): they entail a shift from *reading* (an interpretive method or "hermeneutics" founded, paradoxically, on replicating the ineffable) to *writing* (an inventive method or "euretics," playing upon surfaces).
stated differently and, perhaps, hyperbolically, teaching people to analyze means teaching them to reread; teaching people to invent means teaching them to misread. Misreading is the essence of creativity, a skill which our educational institutions have, for the most part, neglected to teach. Most students know how to reread poorly, how to misread not at all.

And that is why poststructuralism and rock and roll are important. Both have taken responsibility for exploring means of invention. Both have discovered a few powerful, transferrable ways to misread. I should warn you that what follows is--in the manner of much rock and theory--a bit self-indulgent. In addition to listing and briefly describing four means of misreading, I have taken the opportunity to recommend four exemplary experimental essays and four great records.

(1) Doin' It To Death: the lesson of repetition. Cage wrote: "We know two ways to unfocus attention: symmetry is one of them; the other is the over-all where each small part is a sample of what you find elsewhere." Mechanical reproduction, notes Walter Benjamin in his landmark essay, repudiates the values invested in words such as "art" and "authenticity."

Read: Jacques Derrida, "Dissemination," Dissemination.

(2) If I Were a Black Man: the lesson of simulation. The "rapp" was "a counterfeit coin, worth about half a farthing, which passed current for a halfpenny in Ireland in the 18th century, owing to the scarcity of genuine money" (OED). When Malcolm McLaren, the situationist who packaged the Sex Pistols, was sued for "appropriating" others' music to make his own album, Duck Rock, he said: "All I can say is that accusations of plagiarism don't bother me. As far as I'm concerned it's all I'm useful for."

Listen: Gang of Four, A Brief History of the Twentieth Century (Warner Bros. 1980).

(3) Cut 'n' Mix: the lesson of bricolage. "The process of bricolage involves carefully and precisely ordering, classifying and arranging into structures the minutiae, the detritus, of the physical world. It is a 'science of the concrete' (as opposed to our 'civilised' science of the 'abstract')."
**Read:** Gregory Ulmer, "Derrida at the Little Bighorn," in *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video.*
**Listen:** Beastie Boys, *Paul's Boutique* (Capitol, 1989).

(4) Bring the noise: the lesson of the *parasite*. In French, "parasite" means (a) to inhabit another (as a demon possesses a body), (b) to make noise or static, and (c) to take without giving. Writes Simon Reynolds: "The power of pop lies not in its meaning but its noise, not in its import but its force."

**Read:** Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible . . .," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.*
**Listen:** Sonic Youth, *Daydream Nation* (Geffen, 1990).