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And No Birds Do Sing

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And No Birds Do Sing¹

This could be heaven
Shallow spreads of ordered lawns
I like the illusion
Illusion of privacy
The careful trees blending so perfectly
Bland planned idle luxury
A caviar of silent dignity
Life in lovely allotted slots
A token nice
A nice constitution
A layered mass of subtle props
This could be heaven
Mild mannered mews
Well intentioned rules
To dignify a daily code
Lawful order standard views
This could be heaven

This could be describing an ordered milieu – a territory bound and constructed and in which life and how to live has been forgotten. The title of the paper, taken from the Public Image Limited track of 1981, accords comfortably it seems with assertions in relation to territory, birdsong and the refrain as set out in *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: pp 342 386). And it is from here that the paper will proceed to develop the argument that music contains certain territorial characteristics that are immanent and part of wider discourse and a strategy of resistance.

In Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, bird calls are largely milieu components, fixed to specific functions, whereas birdsongs are territorial elements, sonic components of milieus that have been unfixed and reconfigured in a more autonomous fashion.

Sonic milieu components consist of sounds that perform a specific function – marking out the availability of food, warning of danger etc... They are the noises our world makes. The refrain on the other hand organises sounds together bringing order to chaos. It can be but is not always sonic. It consists of organised rhythms and patterns; daily routines and habits, the justification for which has long been forgotten. It marks out the territories that we recognise as our own or as belonging to others. It creates a sense of familiarity and belonging yet can also bring about alienation and a sense of detachment. It is our local neighbourhood, our political system and our state. Music according to Deleuze and Guattari can deterritorialize this ordered terrain – disrupt the rhythm creating a momentary energy field that distorts the dominant order of things. Of course not all music does this. So it is up to us to develop arguments drawing on the theoretical concepts mentioned thus far to justify classifying a particular musical moment as disruptive and resistant.

Having underscored the title the intention is to develop a spatialised sense of music and its political significance. Based on the concept of the refrain, but also drawing on Heidegger, Foucault, Lefebvre, Winner.²

1 This paper was originally presented as part of a panel session entitled *Disruption, Resistance and Spatial Metaphor*.

2 Music can be seen as a statement that coheres with other statements to create a discourse (Foucault), the intention of which is to enframe (Heidegger) within a specific space. A space that has been

I want to talk about music/art as resistance strategy and as an act of legitimate rebellion that at its best serves to unsettle the territorial familiarity and ‘bland planned idle luxury’ of the dominant political order. Not just a distraction from more so-called serious issues.

The revolutionary spirit, born of total negation, instinctively feels that besides refusal, there was also in art a tendency to acquiescence; that there was a risk of contemplation counterbalancing action and beauty counteracting injustice, and that in certain cases, beauty itself was a form of injustice from which there was no appeal. (Camus 1965: 223-4)

Within this context, music is often seen as something transcendent; a thing of beauty created almost without thinking. Something inexplicable that has the ability to affect beyond explanation. To counter this view it is suggested here that the choices we make (and specific choices have been made here to reflect a political position) can be and mostly are about image, movements, cliques, aspirations, within the context of certain places which in turn reflect the Heideggerian struggle between wanting to assert individuality as well as wanting to belong. Either way it is immanent rather than transcendent. Immanent not *to* something, but only to itself. It occurs in time and space but then slips its moorings (an analogy which I will return to) taking a line of flight as it ebbs in and out of time with the conditions of its existence.

Music then is embedded in both theory and practice, so much so that I include here listening to music and talking about it, and not just making it, as creative practice at the political level.

...talk of creativity is not bought at the cost of further creativity on the part of the person who talks about it. (Diffey, 93)

This sentiment is echoed here.

Rather than protecting music as a sublimely meaningless activity that has managed to escape social signification, I insist on treating it as a medium that participates in social formation by influencing the ways we perceive our feelings, our bodies, our desires, our very subjectivities – even if it does so surreptitiously, without most of us knowing how. It is too important a cultural force to be shrouded by mystified notions of romantic transcendence. (Susan McLary, *Queering the Pitch* 1994: 205-235)

And it is a significant cultural force as well as an economic, and a political one. Hansard recorded on the 13 March 2007 the Conservative MP Mr Edward Vaizey as having said:

It is interesting that tonight in New York Malcom McLaren will promote the British music industry under the DTI’s auspices. Our cultural institutions need a one stop shop, as demonstrated by the Demos pamphlet, whereby if they have a proposal and want to do something abroad they can walk through one door and have the expertise of all four departments available. (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070313/halltext/70>).

Music in this instance can be seen a milieu concept, enframed as standing reserve and ready for export. Exported as part of a broader refrain that serves to echo and promote Britain’s cultural self confidence (aka imperialism) – referred to in the Demos pamphlet mentioned

created rather than being the consequence of other more dominant forces (Lefebvre). An example of this is the Harlem River Drive (Winner)

above as ‘cultural diplomacy’ (<http://www.demos.co.uk/projects/culturaldiplomacy/overview>).

So music can operate as commodified fixing agent or as an aspect of deterritorialisation. This brings us back to the title of the paper which emphasises the sterility of certain environments whilst also drawing our focus to other seemingly fertile ones.

Two examples of territorial musical movements are The Specials and Underground Resistance. They can be connected in terms of their efforts to resist dominant modes of thought and action within specific contexts characterised by the importance of motor production, economic decline, and racial tension in both cases. Coventry in the late 70’s and Detroit in 1990’s represent specific spatialised contexts out of which musical movements developed to disrupt and resist the dominant political order of the day. They are also both examples where music external to the territories in question entered the milieu, colliding with rising discontent and political unrest. In the case of Coventry it was Ska music escaping the milieu/territory of Kingston as a line of flight – slipping its moorings literally as ships brought immigrants to the UK bound to make contact with a disenfranchised and largely unemployed section of Coventry’s community. In the case of the techno collective UR, it was the computerised music of Kraftwerk which slipped its moorings in Germany to connect with a similarly disenfranchised groups in Detroit. Both movements took (and in the case of UR continue to take) milieu components and organized them into refrains that served to create new territories and communities with particular political agendas. With music at their core both were able to disrupt the *dominant* refrain, serving to deterritorialize and challenge prevailing political wisdom.

To Conclude Music here is viewed as a media environment. What does this mean? Environments and territories can be actual spaces where activity takes place and also mindsets or rules of engagements. Hence a media environment will always have a discourse, or a soundtrack. Media environments as specific discursive formations give bounds to the world in the Heideggerian sense. The ordered formation of an environment might become either enshrined or unsettled through music. ‘Music’ as opposed to the ‘refrain’ can be seen as inherently political therefore – always deterritorializing; rooted in the traditions of poiesis rather than enframing, thereby bridging the awkward gap that exists between an artform that appears to rely so heavily on soul, impulse and feeling – transcendental concepts which incline it away from serious consideration in political terms, and its material significance.

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