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## Sounding desire: On tricky

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## does art still have a critical function? several theses

The question whether art should still be critical, is the same question as whether art still has an *emancipatory intent*. Is art concerned with liberation understood in the broadest terms, that is, emancipation understood as an affective, cognitive and, most importantly, social process? What I mean is that the critical function of art is a critique of praxis, of actually existing praxis (say, the pragmatics of capitalist globalisation), as varieties of more or less unfree or systemically distorted praxis, with a view to how a critique of praxis might allow us to become emancipated from a condition of unfreedom. Thus, critical art asks us to look at the world from a utopian standpoint. Critical aesthetic praxis, in its intention and action, traces the outline of a utopian praxis, of the world otherwise imagined, otherwise seen, "a completely new set of objects" (Wallace Stevens). I understand utopia simply as the demand to look at things from how they might appear otherwise, from that hair's breadth that separates things as they are from things as they might otherwise be. This is what Adorno, in the final fragment of *Minima Moralia*, calls adopting the standpoint of redemption. For Adorno, we have to adopt this standpoint precisely because there is no guarantee of redemption – hence it is not at all a question of religion. Thus, in this minimal sense, art is utopian not because it might be seeking to articulate a direct social or political content (although it might well also be doing that), but because it is engaging the spectator, reader or auditor in some sort of transfigured relation to the world they inhabit. In other words, critical art describes the common features of our *being-in-the-world* by pulling us out of that world – for a moment, an instant, an epiphany. *The mundanisation of art is its demundanisation*. To anticipate a little, this will be one of my claims about music. To summarise, the critical function of art is indistinguishable from its utopian moment, however minimal and thin that utopia might prove to be. To put this in a formula, *critique without utopia is empty, but utopia without critique is blind*.

2. But if the critical function of art is the critique of praxis with a view to the emancipation from or transformation of that praxis, then this is hardly a simple matter. That is, the business of critique must

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also be based upon a description, a more or less accurate description, at least a description that *resonates* with us (and maybe the resonance of the art work is its truth content – I will come back to this), of the structural features of contemporary praxis that block emancipation. I want to call these structural features, following Axel Honneth, *social pathologies*.<sup>2</sup> That is, critique must proceed from a description of social pathologies, from a certain *diagnosis of the time* (*Zeitdiagnose*), a grasping of the present in thought. This *zeitdiagnostisch* linking of critique and emancipation to the social pathologies that block emancipation explains, in my view, the significance of the philosophical critique of modernity, a critique that arguably begins in Rousseau's Second Discourse and continues in Hegel, the early Marx and Nietzsche. The philosophical critique of modernity begins from a descriptive diagnosis of what blocks emancipation in the modern world. It is this philosophical critique of modernity that passes over into the classical sociological critique of modernity in Weber and Durkheim, and into the aesthetic critique of moder-

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nity that arguably defines the whole logic of the avant-garde from Jena Romanticism to the Situationist International, from 1798 to 1968.

3. Without an account of the social pathologies that block emancipation and thwart human freedom, the question of the critical function of art remains so much empty posturing, the formal vapidness and abstraction of good conscience. I am not suggesting for one minute that art or artists have, or should have, or should provide, a good conscience. I would rather encourage artists to be as wicked as possible, in Tricky's words "to fight evil with evil." Art is not like Guinness – it is not necessarily good for you. Much of the critical power of art consists in the fact that it offers a critical description or exaggerated elaboration of the social pathologies, structural features, of what passes for life at the present time. If the description of the pathology resonates, then the subject might begin to be afforded a glimpse into the modes of representation and subject-construction within which we move and have our being. For an example here, I think of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series that begins in the late 1970s, where something like the pathologies of femininity are critically redescribed. The question of the critical function of art, to refine it once more, is whether and to what extent art provides some sort of redescription or exaggerated elaboration of the social pathologies of contemporary praxis, with a view to an emancipation or transformation of that praxis.

4. It seems to me that there is a moment of clarification in art, a clarification which often simply sets us before *the obscure as obscure*. The obscure in what passes for our life, the sheer intricacy, density and banality of the everyday routines within which we move and have our being, is clarified in being set before us – by looking, by reading, by listening. I am not saying that this clarification is clarifying; on the contrary, the moment of clarification in art presents us with the thickness and opacity of experience. If anything, it has the quality of an enigma. But a confrontation with the obscure as obscure is still liberating, that is, it still permits what Wittgenstein would call aspect-change with respect to the forms of life that we inhabit.

5. Does what I have said so far amount to a defence of aesthetic modernism? Certain of the claims that I have been making about critique, praxis and utopia were advanced by the first gener-

ation of the Frankfurt School. The exemplary case here is Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, where the question of emancipation is perhaps all too obscurely linked to the various social pathologies being described that block it; but it is still decisively there. Elements of this Frankfurt School approach were obviously influential in classic statements of aesthetic modernism, such as in Greenberg. But let me stay with Adorno and put my cards on the table: I want what Adorno wanted. That is, an emancipation from domination towards forms of social, economic and political organisation that would be more free, more equitable, more just, etc. However, as is also well known, Adorno was – to put it mildly – rather pessimistic about the possibilities of emancipation after Auschwitz, and in particular the resources of rationality that would bring about emancipation (incipit Habermas's reformulation of the theme of rationality in terms of communicative action). It seems to me that this pessimism has to be respected, at least initially and strategically, particularly if one wants to avoid the rather easy optimism of some representatives of contemporary critical theory which makes their position difficult to distinguish from mainstream political liberalism. This I have described elsewhere as "Left Rawlsianism."<sup>3</sup>

6. But if we stay with Adorno's and Horkheimer's description of the social pathologies of modernity, I would want to take issue with a couple of important matters. Firstly, I would take issue with the unmitigated bleakness and darkness of their social diagnosis, particularly in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which risks leading into a philosophical and political cul-de-sac, sparsely populated by a few *précieux* delighting in the endless negativity of a free-floating jargon. Although the account of the inversions of Enlightenment into ideology proceeds with an understandably hyperbolic gusto which is not without a certain admirable *jouissance* – even a comic brio – the sociological descriptions are empirically highly questionable. After Auschwitz, the *Lebenswelt* is not completely evacuated in the way described by Adorno, and on this point I would tend to side with Habermas against Adorno. But, more specifically, the bleakness of the social description is linked to the notion of the culture industry as the compromised aesthetic experience of an unfree society – bread and circuses. Or as Adorno puts it in his essay on Beckett, in a

typical and delightful exaggeration, the dream of social reconciliation is reduced to "pap and pralines."<sup>4</sup>

7. Aesthetic modernism in Adorno, but also in Greenberg, goes hand in hand with an elevation of certain forms of high modernist aesthetic production (Schoenberg, Beckett, Abstract Expressionism) and a denigration of mass art in all its forms. The easy accessibility and technological availability of mass art is understood as compliance with domination or, at best, kitsch. The battle lines of the now strangely *démodé* conflict between modernism and postmodernism were often drawn in terms of how one evaluated the phenomena of mass art (cinema, television, pop music, etc.). Now, I like mass art. Despite its perplexingly mixed metaphors, I even cried when Elton John sang "Candle in the Wind 97" at the funeral of our glorious princess. So, how can I reconcile what I want to claim about the critical and emancipatory function of art with an evaluation of mass art that avoids both the inexcusable ignorance and elitism of an Adorno without collapsing into some sort of vapid postmodernist inversion of the high into the low?

8. In response, I am tempted simply to ignore the distinction between high and low culture in the same way as I would like to sidestep the modernism/postmodernism debate. What I mean, following Simon Frith in his important book *Performing Rites*, is that it is not so much a question of accepting a priori a distinction between high and low culture, but rather of investigating this distinction as a social fact, of dismantling it a posteriori as a social construction.<sup>5</sup> It is then a question of using and analysing the particular experience of aesthetic evaluation (of what you like) as a way of disrupting the distinction between high and low culture. For example, I can read Milton and listen to Massive Attack in the same evening, and undergo similar or at least analogous aesthetic experiences and experiences of evaluation. How different – affectively and cognitively – is the experience of reading Satan's seduction of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, from listening to Massive Attack's "Unfinished Sympathy"?

9. A general question is at least beginning to take shape: namely, *what are the critical and emancipatory possibilities of mass art, that is, of art intentionally aimed at a mass audience, employing the technologies of the modern media?* The issues of

critique and emancipation in relation to the phenomena of mass art can be bracketed out in a number of ways. For example, one might follow Baudrillard's depoliticised extension of the work of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord and view the phenomena of mass art as simulacra in the general play of simulation that defines the alleged hyperreality of the contemporary world. Alternatively, one might assess mass art in terms of the endless mirror-plays of ideology and subjection, which carries the risk of a certain cynicism that I see in the cultural Lacanianism of Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl. In distinction from such approaches, my claim would be that the phenomena of mass art, or at least certain examples of them, might serve the vocations of critique and emancipation more powerfully than the advocates of high modernism would ever have dreamt possible. Obviously, this is a large claim which I cannot hope to substantiate in a single talk. In order to begin to address it fully, it would be necessary to look to what Noel Carroll, in a helpful recent book, has termed "celebrations of mass art"<sup>6</sup> – namely, Walter Benjamin's meditation on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction and Marshall McLuhan's peculiarly optimistic evaluations of the transformations in aesthetic experience offered by the mass media.

10. How to proceed, then? Rather than continuing to make these rather abstract theoretical generalisations, I want to look at a specific example of mass art and exercise judgement in relation to that example. In this way, I hope to give some sort of performative elaboration of the more general claims I have been advancing. The choice of example in such discussions strikes me as absolutely essential, but also essentially contingent. It is a question of trying to find an example that *resonates* and there is no guarantee of that – there is no accounting for taste. However, I want to focus on an example of contemporary popular music – Tricky – and explore the ways in which such music can illuminate questions of cultural identity and sexual identity.

11. The choice of an example and its evaluation are essential to the claims I want to advance. Let me insert a final caveat. It is not my intention to provide either a general description or overall defence of mass art. Thus, I am not in the business of providing an ontology of mass art, in the manner of Noel Carroll. Incidentally, the real weakness of

his book is his unwillingness to evaluate mass art, which for him is a critical rather than a philosophical task. I simply do not accept this distinction, particularly keeping in mind what I said above about the function of critique. Although the claims I have advanced so far aspire to a certain generality, what it comes down to in the end is an experience of critical evaluation, of judgement in relation to a singular example, and the peculiarly local character of what that example illuminates. I simply want to show what *an* example of mass art *can* do when thinking through the issues related to the critical potential of art. What I would see myself calling for from you is analogous experiences of evaluation, which will also have a local character and will therefore not coincide with mine. As I will emphasise presently, music *places* us, *locates* us, within time and within a culture. But – and this is both the pleasure and the paradox of the experience – it does this by momentarily *displacing* us, by *dislocating* us, by dislocating our experience of the “us.” Music roots us by uprooting us and by uprooting the “us.”

12. I want to make two claims about Tricky. Firstly, I want to claim that Tricky’s music, in Simon Frith’s words, gives “cultural confusion a social voice.”<sup>7</sup> That is, it offers some sort of idealised picture of the cultural mongrelism or bastardy that defines and will hopefully more and more come to define “Britishness.” It gives us one profile of a *post-colonial acoustic*. In this sense, Tricky’s music has a certain utopian function in so far as it enables us to imaginatively inhabit an emergent form of cultural identity, of ways in which culture is being made and remade. Through the utopian displacement of musical expression we come to inhabit what we are, or what we have come to be on our curious little island, what the “we” has come to be and might come to be. This will be the easier claim to advance. The second claim is more problematic, but probably for that reason also more interesting. For what I think is going on in Tricky is something rather strange, what I see as an articulation of the demundanising workings of sexual desire, something like the contradictions and complexities at its heart. To speculate, perhaps what is being made and remade in Tricky’s music is the terrifying solitude of our being, a solitude opened by the ever-obscure workings of sexual desire. This is what Freud would call the life of the drives, a life

which is culturally mediated and ultimately orientated towards something deathly. In my recent work, I have tried to give voice to this deathly desire with Lacan’s Freudian notion of the Thing (*la Chose, das Ding*), and Levinas’s and Blanchot’s notions of the *il y a*, the neutral murmuring of existence stripped of all diurnal comfort.<sup>8</sup> But to put things more plainly, I think there is something like an experience of transcendence in relation to desire taking place in Tricky’s sounds and words, or rather *transcendence as desire*. Such transcendence gives us a different experience of the social forces that make up our desire, that code it as gender. So, to avoid one possible confusion, I don’t at all want to say that rock and roll is about getting your rocks off, which is not really as self-evident as one might imagine and ultimately ends up replaying certain racist identifications of black music with sexuality. Rather, I want to try and show that what is being voiced and *sounded* – sounded in the way in which a ship sounds the sea for submarines – in Tricky is something like the beautiful destructiveness of sexual desire, the suffocating physicality of eros, a suffocation where the frontiers identifying what we think of as our gender identity begin to blur, to decode and re-code in new ways. There is something like a musical description of the pathology of desire being articulated in Tricky’s music, and the imagined tracing of what desire might come to be.

## culture

Let me now turn towards the music and begin with a few biographical and bibliographical details which most of you might know, but which might serve as enlightenment to the musically challenged. To date, Tricky has released three albums under his own name. *Maxinquaye*, which came out in early 1995, *Pre-Millennium Tension*, which came in autumn 1996, and *Angels with Dirty Faces*, from May 1998.<sup>9</sup> I shall only be dealing with the first two of them. *Maxinquaye* is not some gnomic, new age neologism, but is simply the name of his mother, Maxine Quaye. As you might know, Tricky is part of the Quaye family, and Finley Quaye is Tricky’s uncle. *Maxinquaye* is, I think, perhaps the most significant piece of musical innovation to come out of the UK in the last few years. It is a stunning piece of work, which had an overwhelmingly positive critical recep-

tion and sold surprisingly well. After making an album that everyone liked, it seemed that Tricky was determined to record something that no one could listen to. Such is *Pre-Millennium Tension*, whose title is a wordplay of rather questionable taste. This album is hard listening. It is extraordinarily intense, and wicked in all senses of the word; at times rhythmically recalcitrant, lyrically counter-intuitive and deliberately difficult to access and assess. But I think it is nearly the equal of *Maxinquaye*, which is really saying something. *Angels with Dirty Faces* is a much more mixed bag. The main innovation is that Tricky drops his synthetic cocktail of noises, sampling and drum programming and uses acoustic instruments, natural drums, and far too much tinny, unconvincing, electric guitar. As a result, the wonderful claustrophobic unity of sound and voice on the first two albums begins to sound like Tricky singing with a band. There are some undoubted highlights, such as the duet with P.J. Harvey, "Broken Homes," and two fine and sparsely arranged concluding tracks, "Taxi" and "Peyote Kills." But I don't really think the experiment works, the production is too clean and certain of the lyrics – witness "Analyze me" – are monomaniacal and vapidly narcissistic. In places, sadly, the whole thing actually sounds quite tired.

Tricky began his career guesting and rapping with the glorious Massive Attack. You can find his first pieces on *Blue Lines* from 1991, itself a real watershed album in contemporary British music. If you have that album, then listen to the title track, "Blue Lines," "Five Man Army" and "Daydreaming," where Tricky is rapping with 3d and Horace Andy. You can also find two pieces with Tricky on Massive Attack's second album, *Protection* from 1994: "Karmacoma," which is then remixed and reworked as "Overcome," the first track on *Maxinquaye*, and "Eurochild," which is wonderful. Snatches of lyrics from the latter appear on "Hell Is round the Corner" from *Maxinquaye*. Tricky came out of that rich Bristol musical tradition that goes back to Rip, Rig and Panic, and the Pop Group in the 1970s and which has also produced Portishead and made Nellee Hooper one of the most sought-after producers in the world. To see the link between Portishead and Tricky, listen to "Glory Box," the final cut on Portishead's *Dummy*, which is the same backing track as Tricky's "Hell Is round the Corner." But although the Portishead

album came out before *Maxinquaye*, the backing track and the Isaac Hayes string sample were Tricky's before they were Portishead's. Tricky's track is much better and rougher, particularly for the scratched-record effect that he uses with the sample, an effect that has been widely imitated, recently by R. Kelly and Lauren Hill.<sup>10</sup>

However, although Tricky belongs to this Massive Attack/Portishead/Bristol Sound constellation, what takes place with *Maxinquaye*, I think, goes beyond this tradition, transposing, extending and deepening it. This has something to do with the mysterious, aethereal voice that Tricky uses as a foil and cover on his albums, namely Martina Topley-Bird – but we will come back to her. Let me venture a few words, in passing, on Portishead. Simon Frith concludes his *Performing Rites*, by claiming about *Dummy* that "no record better captures the pop aesthetic at this time, at this place."<sup>11</sup> Although we should put emphasis on "at this time, at this place," which is Frith's way of signalling the fundamentally evanescent character of popular music – the joy of its instant – the strength of the evaluation is clear and the judgement persuasive. However, I think what is going on in Tricky, at least in the first two albums, is stronger, deeper, darker, more original, innovative and experimental than Portishead. This is a point that can be reinforced by listening to Portishead's eponymous second album released last year, which although excellent, simply doesn't extend aesthetically beyond their earlier work, and Beth Gibbon's whining feminine melancholia begins to wear a little thin after a while. In May 1998, Massive Attack released *Mezzanine*, only their third album in seven years, where Tricky doesn't appear at all. However, many of the tracks – "Risingson," "Inertia Creeps" and the wonderful title track – show a more than passing resemblance with Tricky, although Massive Attack's use of soaring, grinding electric guitars is much more successful than anything achieved on *Angels with Dirty Faces*. The tracks "Teardrop," "The Man Next Door" and in particular the wonderfully minimal "Exchange" – which also features an Isaac Hayes sample – are outstanding. I wish we could play all these tracks right now, and of course this is the point. If God loveth adverbs, then music requireth adjectives. As Frith writes, music is *adjectival experience*.<sup>12</sup> The experience of music is bound up with the need for evaluation and for such evalu-

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ation to be intersubjectively shared. How often do you simply want simply to sit someone down and say "Now listen to this, it's really good."

To complete the bibliography, a collection by Tricky, modestly entitled *Nearly God*, came out in summer 1996, and features some nice guest vocal pieces from Terry Hall, Alison Moyet, Neneh Cherry and Björk. Of particular interest on this album are the tracks "Poems," "I Be the Prophet," "Bubbles" and "I Sing for You." Apparently for some obscure legal reason which restricts Tricky to releasing one album a year, Island Records did not allow him to release *Nearly God* under his own name.

Having done a little sleeve note scholarship, I would like to let Tricky introduce himself. The first track I want to discuss is "Tricky Kid" from *Pre-Millennium Tension*, which I will now imagine you have just listened to: "They used to call me Tricky Kid, I live the life they wish they did, I live the life don't own a car, and now they call me superstar." Of course, this is a massively self-ironical presentation – "Everyone wants a record deal, everyone wants to be naked and famous, everyone wants to be just like you Tricky Kid, naked and famous." This self-lacerating irony also explains the use of religious imagery – "Here comes the Nazarene, look good in that magazine, Haile Selassie I, they look after I, god will receive us, got me like Jesus, Mary Magdalene that'd be my first sin, in with this temptress." An acute little *Selbstdarstellung*, then. But what is really important is the movement of the bass in this track, the way it comes in and hits you after about twenty seconds and whips around in a two-second loop.

"Look deep into my mongrel eyes," Tricky says. The whole question of mongrelism is fascinating in Tricky. Picking up on an argument I made a few years ago with regard to the question of race and the philosophical tradition, I would want to describe cultural identity as a *mongrel assemblage*, a patchwork of diverse historical threads.<sup>13</sup> The British are bastards. They always have been and are now more than ever. British cultural identity has always been a series of interpolations from other regions and other shores, most recently from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent.

My thesis here would be that contemporary British music is the aesthetic expression of this radical impurity, this cultural mongrelism. A post-colonial acoustic, then. You can see this in Tricky both

through his biography, but best of all by simply tracing the influences on his sound: Jamaican sound-system dub reggae, punk, R & B and hip-hop. There is something culturally absolutely specific about Tricky, and that is very important for the following reason. For me, the real danger of the interest in techno, particularly somewhere like Germany, is that this music can create the illusion of some sort of contact and immediacy with an international culture. Think of the German outfit Sash, who began as a passably interesting DJ project, but quickly degenerated into stale, predictable, dance pap. They emphasise this sham internationality, by featuring a different language on each of their hits, from the rather good "Encore une fois" to the depressingly awful "La primavera." In this music, one's own past, tradition and identity are erased in some fantasy of identification with an international scene. The desire here is to use music as a means not to be where one is, but to be where it is really happening, whether that is London, New York or wherever. For me, on the contrary, the great virtue of contemporary popular music is its local character, its particularity, which emerges out of a specific cultural assemblage. In Britain, this is a post-colonial assemblage; in Germany, struggling as it is with multiculturalism, there is a fascinating Turkish-German hip-hop scene; in France the dance scene has taken a slightly different, extremely interesting route, where one can detect strong Maghreb influences. It is only through this conscious assumption of particularity that music can hope to be a little utopian and engage in some sort of critical engagement with one's local culture. In this sense, music can lead to a decoding and recoding of cultural identity. The very mongrelism of contemporary music is itself some sort of description of social pathologies, a description that already presupposes a refutation of all forms of ethnic essentialism. My point here is that such musical mongrelism or bastardy is at its most powerful when it is at its most local. Therefore, it is not a question of imitating it in other contexts, of producing a German or Norwegian Tricky, say, but of *transposing* that mongrelism to meet and resonate with local conditions.

Music places you, socially, temporally, spatially. It dates you in relation to a specific place. Hence one's tastes in popular music can easily be dated and – therefore – outdated. Even dance styles amongst those who no longer regularly dance can date you

(think of the saddening phenomenon of post-conference academic dancing as an illustration, where – their hips loosened by a little alcohol – one can determine an academic's date of graduation by their more or less antiquated dance style). I can remember literally hundreds of dated and placed musical experiences: listening to Bowie's "Suffragette City" on my mother's stereo in 1972 and not understanding my excitement; in a friend's bedroom in Letchworth Garden City in 1976, listening to the first Ramones album with a sense of joyful disbelief; hearing Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* on a walkman at 6 a.m. travelling on a train in Tuscany; hearing the first Tricky single on a portable CD player in a hotel on the Leidseplein in Amsterdam; listening to R. Kelly's "When a Woman's Fed Up" driving north through Louisiana, etc., etc., etc. And it is the et cetera that is the point. One's sense of cultural and even personal identity can be literally assembled, or composed, from a bundle of tunes. Memory is a record collection and you can learn who you are from sleeve notes. For most of us mere mortals, narrative identity is much more deeply rooted in a record collection than in a reading of Proust, Joyce and Musil. The unanswerable question is: what is it about song, about words and rhythm, that is able to do this, to connect together the pieces of a life?

## sex

Let me now turn to my second claim and talk about sexual identity, and in particular the sounding of sexual desire in Tricky. For this purpose, I would like to look closely at another track from *Maxinquaye*, the best track on the album, called "Suffocated Love," which I will once again imagine that you have just heard.

Here is a first theoretical approximation. We are all Freudians now. And if this is true then it means the following: that human consciousness, this strange awareness taking place between our ears, is the effect, the aftershock, the deferred resonance, of unconscious desire, a desire that is fundamentally sexual, and which is culturally and discursively coded as gender and gender differentiation. This desire is undoubtedly and obdurately social or discursive, but it keeps bumping its head against the reality of something that resists the discursive, however it is thematised and approximated: the Real

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in Lacan, the Semiotic in Kristeva, Wild or Savage Being in Merleau-Ponty, natural history in Adorno, or whatever. It is that obscure limit between the social and a real that seems to resist it that Freud names with his limit-concept of the drive, *der Trieb*.

Of course, to recognise the operation of unconscious sexual desire is also to acknowledge that we cannot recognise this recognition – for that we require some sort of intersubjective mediation, for example that offered by psychoanalysis itself in the pact of transference. Some sort of mediation is required to bring about what Hegel would call "self-recognition in absolute otherness," a self-recognition that does not annul or assimilate otherness into self-consciousness, but which struggles with an other that resists the self. If Socratic wisdom is viewed through a Lacanian lens, then psychoanalytic knowledge consists in the fact that we do not know who we are, it consists in the deposing of *le sujet supposé savoir*. Psychoanalysis recalls us to this sheer cognitive modesty. That which permits us to acknowledge this modesty is what Freud calls the work of sublimation, letting the drive become displaced onto a new object. This is the place of art in psychoanalysis – it sublimates. We might say that *art traces the obscure limit between what we can know and the working of unconscious desire*. Art traces that limit and allows us to transgress it, just for a moment, in the sheer elongation of instant. From time to time, here and there, in depressed boredom and in manic joy, we are turned around to face the Thing that flickers and burns at the heart of desire.

Maybe, as Schopenhauer thought, and Nietzsche after him in crucially different ways, *music* traces this limit more powerfully than any other art form. For Schopenhauer, as is well known, music is the direct objectification or representation (*Vorstellung*) of the Will, the world understood as the expression of Will. That is, music is a mimesis of the will. For Nietzsche, rightly, without music life would be an error. However, for him, and this is the thought that I would like to retain, music is not mimetic, that is, it is not a symbol of the symbolised, or a representation of the ultimate reality. Such is the Schopenhauerian position that Nietzsche criticises in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is the position that Nietzsche calls, in his attempted self-critique in the 1886 preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, an "artists' metaphysics" (section 7). Music, then, in all the



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complexity of this formulation, is a *phenomenon of the Dionysian*, a phenomenon of the *unphenomenologisable*, a redemptive *Schein* for the pain and contradiction of what he calls the *Ur-Ein*, the primal unity from which we are torn by that detour we all too easily call "life."<sup>14</sup> Thus, beyond the mimetic theory of the relation of the will to music, music permits us to glimpse the springs of desire in a moment and movement of Dionysian excess, and music saves us from contact with that excess, because contact would destroy us, suffocate us. Otherwise said, *music is a work of sublimation that leaves the sublime sublime*, something that it somehow does through the work of rhythm, through drum and bass rather than through Apollinian melody and harmony, what Nietzsche calls "the architecture of sound." Rhythm: the resounding, pounding throb of drum and bass, breaking through the floorboards in the house of being. Had Nietzsche had the good fortune to live to hear James Brown's invention of funk in the 1969 classic "Cold Sweat," rather than the empty teasing of Bizet's *Carmen*, I think he would have been forced to agree, despite all the undoubtedly silly remarks he would have made about black music, slave morality and slave culture. I dream of seeing Nietzsche getting down in the Apollo Theater in Harlem on one of those enormous nights in the 1960s when James Brown was screaming his divine heresies over the sliding, percolating bass of Bootsy Collins.

Let me return to Tricky. My suggestion is that music traces the obscure limit between what we can know and the working of unconscious desire – it is a work of sublimation that leaves the sublime sublime. In Tricky, this is something achieved through the compulsive fusion of rhythm and voice. However, as rhythm is spectacularly difficult to talk about with any precision, let me look at how this effect is achieved in the lyrics to "Suffocated Love." The first thing to note is the careful and disorienting use of antithesis to both familiarise and estrange the sexual scene being described: "she's so good, she so bad ... is it love, no not love ... she says she's mine, I know she's lying ... you understand, I can't stand..." What these antitheses, whispered like heresies, evoke is a suffocating picture of sexual passion, of the playful destructiveness of eros – "She suffocates me ... I think ahead of you, I think instead of you, will you spend your life with me and stifle me, I know why

the caged bird sings, I know why." The picture of sexual desire here is described in terms of suffocation, stifling, containment and imprisonment. As if to overstate his point, the last line in the above-cited lyric contains an allusion to Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, itself a tragic picture of rape and sexual abuse in childhood, an abuse also sublimated into a work of art.

What is sex? Here is another approximation: sex is skin, nerve endings, the laying down of memory traces whose recollection is a physical reverberation, a resonance which is olfactory and tactile before being visual and auditory. Sex is a series of distensions of the instant somehow invisibly tattooed on the surface of the body, where the body surface is the membrane of memory. In sex, the privilege of eye and ear gives way to nose and body surface. Sex is a smell: sweat, dirt, latex, sperm, mucus, sundry products. Becoming, if not an animal, then some sort of subtle variant of humanity. There is a struggle for recognition here, a sheer physical suffocating play of and for recognition. And love, oh yes, love...

But on this point Tricky is – well – tricky, for the suffocating vision of eros that is being expressed is not nice, not nice at all. It is menacing and dark. As Tricky says on "You Don't" from *Maxinquaye*, "I fight evil with evil." In this connection, let's also imagine you have listened to "Abbaon Fat Tracks" from the same album. This piece is an example of extraordinary and ambivalent sexual intensity. It is the coupling of Tricky's and Martina's voices here that is so powerful – "fuck you in, tuck you in, suck you in with me." "I am she," say both voices simultaneously. But who is "she"? Martina says, "I fuck you in the ass, just for a laugh, with the quickspeed, I'll make your nose bleed." But who fucks who in the ass? It is, as we philosophers say, not at all clear. It is a kind of suffocated and suffocating love, then. Bodies pressed close together to the point of asphyxiation, stifling each other – "I think ahead of you, I think instead of you, will you spend your life with me and stifle me." One imagines bodies pressing together in the half-light, their frontiers vague, their contours indistinct. One imagines – and the point here is to let the obscure but overwhelming affect of the music induce imagination – a certain freezing and stretching of time, taking up a space withdrawn from the world, the epiphany of a transgression that leaves you speechless, language becoming beauti-

fully profane, becoming incantation, gossip becoming truth, truth leaving you speechless, and still you speak, often in adjectives. As I said, this is not nice... "Hell is round the corner, where I shelter."

To go back to "Suffocated Love," the line I always keep thinking about is "she cuts my slender wrists." "Slender wrists" is such an odd formulation – it is spoken by Tricky, and this is strange because in English a man would rarely, if ever, describe his wrists as slender. There is a continual blurring and transgression of gender divisions in Tricky, which is enacted through the way the words are swapped between Tricky and Martina. They continually seem to exchange gender roles, which adds to the completely disorientating sexual intensity of the music. This swapping can be seen in the cross-dressing that Martina and Tricky engage in on the sleeve to their first single "Overcome," with Martina dressed like Charlie Chaplin and Tricky in a wedding dress, smeared red lipstick, a baseball cap and Adidas trainers. But this is no mere Bowie-esque gender-bending, but something altogether more macabre.

A particularly clear example of this staged sexual ambivalence is a track called "Black Steel" from *Maxinquaye*. This track is a cover of Public Enemy's "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" from their seminal 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Once again, let me imagine that you have listened to both versions of this track. What should be noted here is the curiously direct feminisation of Chuck D's particularly macho rap about an African-American draft dodger locked up in the state penitentiary. Martina mumbles, almost indifferently, "cos I'm a black man and I could never be a veteran." More subtly, this gender ambivalence can be seen in a quite beautiful song from *Pre-Millennium Tension*, the best track on the album, "She Makes Me Wanna Die." It is sung by Martina as a woman or a man or something in between. The pronouns flip and slip back and forth between masculine and feminine. She makes me wanna die; but who wants who to die exactly? The way the voices play together here is fascinating, Tricky's voice anticipating and rumbling beneath Martina's, like a series of obscene whispers – "who do you think you are, you're insignificant, a small piece, an 'ism.'" The effect is extraordinary and all the more stunning because of its utter musical simplicity, just a guitar and a rhythm track.

...

Let me try and pull together the various strands of what I have said and conclude. Music roots us in uprooting us, places us in displacing us, locates us in dislocating us. It dislocates the "us" of our cultural identity and lets us imagine another way of being "us," another way of inhabiting these roots, not as roots that tie us to the earth, or back to some pregiven ethnic essence, but rather as routes that open over a vast geographical surface and reactivate previously sedimented strata of history. The utopian dimension to music offers other, imagined and yet to be imagined, ways of inhabiting these strata. It is what Paul Gilroy calls "a changing same."<sup>15</sup>

In a more Heideggerian register, with Béatrice Han, it can be said that music lights up our being-in-the-world through affect and mood, through *Stimmung*. But there is an essentially reflexive movement at work here: the *Stimmung* of music lights up the way in which being-in-the-world is always already understood affectively, that is, pre-reflectively and pre-cognitively. Yet, music calls for – demands even – cognition, reflection and judgement. Music is no simple lapse back into the pre-discursive, or the supposed authenticity of silence – it rather produces an endless effort of evaluation, cognition and judgement, what I have called "adjectival experience." Musical experience is both pre- and post-reflective.

But this is not the whole story. For it seems to me that there is, at least in relation to the figuring of sexual desire in music, not so much a recalling of *Dasein* to the pre-established harmony of *In-der-Welt-sein*, but rather a *deworlding* of the world through eros. In eros, the world somehow withdraws, and the lovers withdraw from the world into a mute or whispered privacy. Perhaps this is music's *Grund-Stimmung*, its basic or fundamental mood, where the destructive play of eros shows that all in the world *stimmt nicht*, where eros achieves a certain *de-mundanisisation*, a withdrawal from the world that allows a certain abyssal, pre-linguistic Thing to flicker and burn within us, something like the vibration of a guitar's soundbox after the chord has faded, like a ship sounding the sea for submarines... but at this point the similes and the approximations have to stop.



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### notes

1 This is the text of a talk presented at the Momentum conference on contemporary art and the function of critique in Moss, Norway, May 1998. I would like to thank Tarjei Mandt Larsen, Birgit Bærøe, Lars Svendsen and Ståle Finke. Conversations with Sarat Maharaj in Norway were also clarifying and hugely entertaining. However, the idea behind this text is a little older, and goes back to some radio shows on contemporary British music that I gave in Germany on Frankfurt City-Radio X in March 1997. Many thanks to Felicia Herrschaft and to the responses from some listeners. In both cases, the lecture was accompanied by extensive musical excerpts, which can – sadly – only be imagined in written form.

2 See Honneth's "Pathologien des Sozialen. Tradition und Aktualität der Sozialphilosophie."

3 See Critchley and Honneth, "Philosophy in Germany."

4 "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," *Notes to Literature* 275.

5 *Performing Rites. Evaluating Popular Music* 18-19.

6 *A Philosophy of Mass Art*.

7 *Performing Rites* 278.

8 See chapters 8, 9 and 10 of my *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, and Lecture 1 of my *Very Little...Almost Nothing*.

9 All released by Island Records.

10 "Everything Is Everything," from *The Miseducation of Lauren Hill*. "When a Woman's Fed Up," "Don't Put Me Out" and "Suicide," from *R*.

11 *Performing Rites* 277-78.

12 *Ibid.* 263.

13 "Black Socrates. Questioning the Philosophical Tradition," reprinted in *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 122-42.

14 I owe these formulations to my colleague Béatrice Han, in her excellent essay "Au delà de la métaphysique et de la subjectivité : musique et *Stimmung*."

15 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

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