

Chapter 11

Zappa and the Avant-Garde: Artifice/Absorption/Expression

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In an oft-quoted passage of his poem-essay ‘The Artifice of Absorption’,¹ former Language poet Charles Bernstein, one of the most influential representatives of the post-war American avant-garde, writes that ‘a poetic reading can be given to any piece of writing; a ‘poem’ may be understood as writing specifically designed to absorb, or inflate with, proactive-rather than reactive-styles of reading’.² ‘Artifice’, he adds, ‘is a measure of a poem’s intractability to being read as the sum of its devices and subject matters’.³ Bernstein’s target here is the so-called ‘voice’ poem, which he considers as ‘based on simplistic notions of absorption through unity, such/as those sometimes put forward by Ginsberg (who as his work shows/knows better, but who has made an ideological commitment to such simplicity)’.⁴ Bernstein’s attacks against the voice-based poem can be usefully extended to the study of popular music, which perhaps more than any other musical genre relies on the immediacy and transparency of voice as both the origin and the spontaneous vehicle of feeling and self-expression. More specifically, in the context of this essay, Bernstein’s definition of artifice also urges us to reconsider Zappa’s experimental poetics within the history of contemporary radical art, raising the issue of the relationship between alternative, underground pop culture and the avant-garde while simultaneously questioning the boundaries that allegedly separate experimental music from mainstream music. Zappa’s music and lyrics, far from committing themselves to simple notions of unmediated self-expression, rely on complex strategies of manipulation and disfigurement which include the use of various forms of collage, close-

¹ Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Harvard, 1992), p. 9.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 38–39.

miking, bruitism, sped-up cartoon-like voices, found spoken material, rehearsal and backstage conversations, etc. Such techniques of disfigurement are bound to make Zappa's songs sound foreign and, to extend Bernstein's metaphor, 'impermeable' not only to mainstream audiences but also to his most devoted fans. The latter's eagerness to follow the meanders of Zappa's cultural and intertextual labyrinths is often defeated by the sheer complexity and elusiveness of the composer's dense allusiveness and his private system of references. As Christophe Den Tandt recently argued, another, even more fundamental difficulty encountered in the consumption and study of popular lyrics is that they are 'expected to function in a way that can withstand, literally or figuratively, high levels of background noise: they are poems performed in material contexts characterised by sonic mayhem, audience distraction, mind-altering substances, uncontrolled commercial reappropriation-conditions that seem indeed highly constraining for lyrical poetry'.⁵ From this perspective, it would be tempting to conclude that rock lyrics can be consumed primarily as *gesture*, based on the assumption that most rock audiences do not understand (or misunderstand) many of the words that are being sung on record or during a performance. As Den Tandt rightly suggests, however, this does not mean that rock lyrics should not be considered outside their performative dimension: 'approaching rock lyrics as poetry is not a gesture exclusively tied to the necessities of the academia: song-books of Dylan's texts-in some cases, pirated, custom-made transcriptions-have been published on a regular basis from the 1960s'.⁶ This is clearly the case of Zappa's lyrics, which have been amply transcribed and disseminated on paper and on the web and have become the subject of endless speculations on the part of thousands of fans who are not

⁵ Christophe Den Tandt, 'Dylan Goes Electric: Inventing a Lyrical Idiom for the Postmodern Distraction Factory', in Michel Delville and Christine Pagnouille (eds), *Postwar American Poetry: The Mechanics of the Mirage* (Liège, 2000): pp. 213–216, at 214.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 214.

remotely associated with the academy and whose blogs reflect a genuine fascination with the diverse meanings that can be attributed to the songs in the context of Zappa's now famous concept of *Conceptual Continuity*.⁷

Now, what can a popular song or, say, a jazz-rock instrumental piece, absorb or be impermeable to? And to what extent do Zappa's music and lyrics subordinate subjectivity to 'composition' and, ultimately, makes use of 'absorptive means towards antiabsorptive ends'?⁸ This essay will attempt to answer some of these questions while examining Zappa's ambivalent position towards the historical avant-garde.

Zappa and the Avant-Garde

A quick look at the pantheon of influential figures listed in the original *Freak Out!*⁹ sleeve notes reveals only a few names associated with the historical avant-garde and its various 'isms'. Amongst the 179 figures listed by Zappa, the names of Maurice Ravel, Arnold Schoenberg, Silvestre Revueletas, Yves Tanguy, Roland Kirk, James Joyce, Mauricio Kagel, Luigi Nono, Igor Stravinsky, Charles Ives, Edgar Varese, Cecil Taylor, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Salvador Dali, emerge as the few names that can be considered as truly representative of contemporary artistic experimentalism. The importance of the *Freak Out* list is, of course, very relative, as Zappa himself acknowledged that he couldn't 'say that he'd ever read anything by Joyce all the way through'.¹⁰ In fact, there is no reason *not* to believe that Zappa's list wasn't first and foremost a prankish exercise in name-dropping, especially as regards the non-musical examples he cites. More generally, Zappa confessed not to read many

⁷ Please refer to the Introduction of this volume for a synopsis of this philosophy.

⁸ Bernstein, *A Poetics*, p. 30.

⁹ The Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out!*, Verve, V6-5005-2 (1966).

¹⁰ Ben Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (New York, 1993), p. 545.

books. In his short introduction to his public reading of William Burroughs's 'Talking Asshole' episode from *The Naked Lunch*¹¹ at the Nova Convention on December 2, 1978, Zappa sounds a bit defensive and feels the need to warn his audience that his position as an artist lies clearly outside the literary circles. He commented:

Hiya. How you doin' tonight? Alright, um, as you know, I'm not the kind of a person that reads books, I've said this before many times, I'm not fond of reading. But, I do, I have in the past made exceptions, and uh, one of these exceptions was this part of the, the book that, I'm sure you know, called Naked Lunch, and I've received permission to read the part about the Talking Asshole. So . . .¹²

Zappa's self-confessed reluctance to reading books-whether it is truthful or not-is part of a broader anti-intellectual stance, an attitude displayed not only in several statements pronounced against official college education and the academy but also expressed in songs such as 'Dummy Up',¹³ in which he sneeringly observes that 'the college degree is stuffed with absolutely nothing at all' shortly after commenting: 'Jeff Simmons tries to corrupt Napoleon Murphy Brock by showing him a lewd dance and suggesting that he'd smoke a high-school diploma'.¹⁴ As for his inclusion of a few Surrealist-related figures in the Freak Out list, one should probably not underestimate the influence of Dali's aesthetics on Zappa's work even though his most surrealistically free-associational lyrics, such as 'Ship Arriving too

¹¹ William Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch* (New York, 1962).

¹² Various Artists, *You're A Hook. The 15 Year Anniversary Of Dial-A-Poem (1968-1983)*, Giorno Poetry Systems, GPS 030 (1978).

¹³ Frank Zappa, *Roxy & Elsewhere*, DiscReet, DS2202 (1974).

¹⁴ Ibid.

Late to Save a Drowning Witch'¹⁵ or 'The Dangerous Kitchen'¹⁶ seem more indebted to Godzilla films and Pop Art, respectively, than to Dali's peculiar brand of pictorial freudianism.¹⁷ Barry Miles's biography relates an intriguing but failed encounter between the two artists who briefly met after Eve Babitz¹⁸ had arranged a meeting at the King Cole Bar at the St Regis restaurant:

They drank green chartreuse and Frank explained who the Mothers were. He was about to go to a rehearsal and Dali said he would like to watch. They arranged to meet at the Balloon Farm, but unfortunately Herb Cohen was having trouble with the club's management and the Mothers were locked out. When Dali and his wife Gala pulled up in a taxi, Frank, Eve and the Mothers were all sitting outside on the steps.¹⁹

Eve Babitz continues:

When it turned out positively that they weren't going to let us in [...] Dali and Gala dejectedly got another cab and went back to the St Regis [...] and Frank went back to the Hotel Albert or wherever he was staying to argue with the fucking management who had ruined something that was very delicate and could only happen once. Dali and Zappa alone together in a big empty room with musical instruments.²⁰

Whatever one makes of this anecdote, it is Dali's Dadaist allegiances, rather than his surrealist visual works, that would seem to ally him with Zappa, at least on a conceptual level.²¹

¹⁵ Frank Zappa, *Ship Arriving too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*, Barking Pumpkin, FW 38066 (1982).

¹⁶ Frank Zappa, *The Man from Utopia*, Barking Pumpkin, FW 8404 (1983).

¹⁷ For a discussion of Dali's and Zappa's food aesthetics, see Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 100–102.

¹⁸ Who is still remembered for her nude pose with a fully-dressed Marcel Duchamp for the famous 1963 Julian Wasser 'chess game' photograph.

¹⁹ Barry Miles, *Frank Zappa* (London, 2004), p. 138.

²⁰ Ibid.

Unlike the other, pseudo-avant-gardist connections mentioned above, the spirit of Dada seems to have had a significant influence on Zappa's work, one which was repeatedly acknowledged by the composer himself. One of the most memorable expressions of the anti-aesthetics of Dada in Zappa's career was the Duchampian disfiguring of Mona Lisa in a 1970 poster advertising a Mothers of Invention show in Boston. On a less superficial level, Zappa's production company *Intercontinental Absurdities* was originally 'dedicated to Dada in Action'²²: 'In the early days', Zappa recalls in *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 'I didn't even know what to call the stuff my life was made of. You can imagine my delight when I discovered that someone in a distant land had the same idea-AND a nice, short name for it'.²³ In his last published interview, Zappa's more forceful acknowledgment of the legacy of Dada on his work suggests that his relationship with the cultural avant-garde is characterised as a way of life rather than an (anti-)aesthetics per se:

I've always appreciated dada and I keep trying to get Ahmet to read about it, because that's him in the flesh, he's a genetic carrier of that particular gene that has been pretty much bred out of the species. It's like Stravinsky says, it's not enough to want, you have to be. There are people that wish they were dada but they'll never make it. He [Ahmet] doesn't even know what it means, but he exudes it.²⁴

Zappa's insistence that his son Ahmet is carrying the genes of Dada, that he 'is' Dada, is symptomatic of his instinctive approach to the historical avant-garde. His allegiance to Dada is above all an act of self-definition. It is also a way of paying tribute to a movement which

²¹ The same applies to Zappa's friendship with Eve Babitz, which indirectly connects him with Duchamp and the New York branch of Dada.

²² Frank Zappa with Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (London, 1989), p. 255.

²³ Ibid. For a full-length analysis of Zappa's dadaist connections, see Ben Watson, 'Frank Zappa as Dadaist: Recording Technology and the Power to Repeat', *Contemporary Music Review*, 15/1-2 (1996): pp. 109-137.

²⁴ Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, p. 547.

sought to integrate art into life, a tendency which is exemplified by his continued fascination with found text and sonic collage and which climaxed in the mixed-media, Cabaret Voltaire-like happenings and concerts performed during the Mothers of Invention's six-month residency at the Garrick Theater from March to September 1967.

Collages and Happenings

So what exactly is Zappa's connection to the avant-garde? And how can we make sense of the oeuvre of a musician whose production has straddled across many genres and registers while questioning the big pre-postmodern divide separating high and low culture?

If we go beyond the anecdotal and consider avant-garde art as the product of a collaborative process comprising groups of artists organised around manifestoes, Zappa can hardly be positioned within the legacy of a particular '-ism'. This obvious fact spares zappologists from the necessity to engage in a discussion of the controversies surrounding the various definitions and redefinitions of the historical and theoretical avant-gardes. More fundamentally, however, Zappa's ongoing commitment to a radical aesthetics which aims to reintegrate art into the praxis of life (which is entirely in tune with, say, Peter Bürger's definition of the historical avant-garde) and develop alternative forms of expression which address the complexities of the production and consumption of music places him in a long line of marginal figures whose lowest common denominator is a capacity to combat the illusion of an unproblematic, transparent and unmediated relationship to artistic expression.

While Zappa's neo-Dada happenings at the Garrick Theater celebrated the artist's penchant for anti-cultural, disjunctive, nonsensical and anarcho-theatrical forms of expression,²⁵ it is Zappa's many uses and appropriations of collage (whether or not of the

²⁵ Paul Carr and Richard J. Hand convincingly argue that 'not only was Zappa renowned for being a highly theatrical performer and artist but one of the key distinguishing features in his work is a preoccupation with narrative and it is through the consideration of narrative that we are most able to conceptualise his work as Musical Theatre'. See Paul Carr and Richard J. Hand, 'Frank Zappa and Musical Theatre: ugly ugly o'phan Annie and really deep, intense, thought-provoking Broadway

xenochronic variety), one of the main conceptual and practical tenets of Cubism, Surrealist and other historical isms, which stands out as his most powerful connection with vanguardist praxis. Examples of musical, textual and visual collages abound in Zappa's oeuvre, most notably during the Mothers of Invention period, a group Zappa disbanded in 1969 and whose official recordings take us from *Freak Out!*²⁶ (1966) to *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*²⁷ (1970). To various extents, the albums released by Zappa and the Mothers of Invention between 1966 and 1970 combine collage experiments with conventional pop songs, fragments of orchestral pieces, electronic noises and spoken word, often in the form of found poetry based on dialogues generated by members of the band although often prompted by instructions provided by Zappa himself. They also make use of sound manipulation techniques ranging from close miking (which was to become a trademark of Zappa's later lead vocals) to various forms of tape warping, splicing and editing which, all in all, contributed to countering (or exposing) the 'absorptive' seamlessness of melody, the horizontal dimension of music, which the composer was so fond of deconstructing and disfiguring while defeating his audience's aspiration toward plenitude, unity and self-containedness.

By developing a poetics of dislocation and fragmentation that undermines the conventions of what Bernstein identifies above as the simple, transparent lyrical idiom, Zappa inevitably draws attention to the parts rather than the whole, which can only be apprehended through various forms of conceptual continuity, foregrounding the basic structural units that make up a song or an album, the work-in-progress rather than the end-result of the symbolism', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 1/1 (2006): pp. 41–56, at 41. In the context of Zappa's relationship with the contemporary avant-garde, the composer's opposition to political and musical kitsch, added to the dominance of ugliness identified by Carr and Hand as a crucial feature of his subversive poetics places him in a tradition of self-consciously 'degenerate' artists.

²⁶ The Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out!*.

²⁷ Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*, Reprise, RSLP 6370 (1970).

composition. This process also draws attention to sound *as* sound rather the purveyor of emotions or something to be strummed or hammered into shape via instruments and notes. Zappa's music thus appears to be entirely consistent with the high modernist paradigm of the work-in-progress, which blurs the boundaries between artistic production and consumption by enacting a *mise-en-abyme* of the compositional process while foregrounding the materiality of sound and music. This notion can also be related to Zappa's ideas about composition itself, which he describes as 'a process of organization, in any medium you want'²⁸ while describing music as an assemblage of 'unsuspecting air molecules' resulting in the 'decoration of fragments in time':²⁹

Music, in performance, is sculpted into something. SOUND is 'ear-decoded data'. If you purposefully generate atmospheric perturbations, you are composing.³⁰

Following his description of music as a kind of 'air sculpture' Zappa likens his work as whole to a kind of sonic Calder-like mobile, a mechanical apparatus employing 'a system of weights, balances, measured tensions and releases-in some ways similar to Varèse's aesthetic'³¹ and liable to create 'Anything, Any Time, Anywhere—for NO reason at All':³²

A large mass of any material will 'balance' a smaller, denser mass of any material, according to the length of the gizmo it's dangling on, and the "balance point" chosen to facilitate the danglement. The material being balanced' includes stuff other than the notes on the paper. If you can conceive of any material as a 'weight' and any idea-over-time as a 'balance', you are ready for the next step: the 'entertainment objects' that derive from those concepts. [...]. If a musical point

²⁸ Zappa with Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 162.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

can be made in a more entertaining way by saying a word than by singing a word, the spoken word will win out in the arrangement—unless a nonword or a mouth noise gets the point across faster.³³

Spoken Words and Mouth Noises

Zappa's vindication of the irreducible physicality of the compositional process is thus indissociable from his fascination with the possibilities of spoken word, a fascination which also stresses the importance of the performing body in his sound experiments. And, indeed, his music has capitalised on the possibility that the spoken word, or even the *nonword* or the *mouth noise* may surpass the sung lyric in its capacity not only to be entertaining but also to become the focal point of the arrangement itself. As the signifier wins out over the signified, the speaking, whispering, screaming body itself becomes the site of endless manipulations, disfigurements, intoxications and disfiguration. This process is implicitly addressed in such songs as 'Your Mouth'³⁴, 'Baby Take Your Teeth Out'³⁵ and 'Charlie's Enormous Mouth',³⁶ all of which enact the de-contextualisation and (literal) disfigurement of the mouth as the organ of (self-)expression into a 'hole' whose functional uses include speaking, eating and providing sexual gratification:

Your mouth is your religion.

You put your faith in a hole like that?

You put your trust and your belief

Above your jaw, and no relief

Have I found.³⁷

³³ Ibid., p. 163.

³⁴ Frank Zappa, *Waka/Jawaka*, Bizarre/Reprise, K 44203 (1972).

³⁵ Frank Zappa, *Them or Us*, Barking Pumpkin, SVBO74200 (1984).

³⁶ Frank Zappa, *You Are What You Is*, Barking Pumpkin, PW2-37537 (1981).

³⁷ Zappa, *Waka/Jawaka*.

In addition to expressing Zappa's distrust of the transparent, expressive voice-based song, 'Your Mouth'³⁸ returns us to his conversion of words and mouth noises into so many compositional units destined to be balanced against each other in his air sculptures. Zappa's manipulation of vocal elements thus appears central to a discussion of his collage aesthetics and his work's 'intractability to being read as the sum of its devices & subject matters',³⁹ to return to Bernstein's definition of 'artifice'. In the *Civilization Phaze III* liner notes Zappa relates an episode from the following experiment involving a pair of Neumann microphones placed in a piano during the Mothers of Invention's 1967 recording sessions:

[...] we spent about four months recording various projects (*Uncle Meat, We're Only In It For The Money, Ruben and The Jets* and *Lumpy Gravy*) at APOSTOLIC STUDIOS, 53 E. 10th St. NYC.

One day I decided to stuff a pair of U-87's in the piano, cover it with heavy drape, put a sand bag on the sustain pedal and invite anybody in the vicinity to stick their head inside and ramble incoherently about the various topics I would suggest to them via talk-back system.⁴⁰

The dialogues later developed into 'a vague plot regarding pigs and ponies, threatening the lives of characters who inhabit a large piano'.⁴¹ Some of them found their way into the *Lumpy Gravy*⁴² album where they were laced with various sound effects, electronic noises and orchestral music. Others provided the basis for the plot of Zappa's posthumous Synclavier opera, *Civilization Phaze III*.⁴³ Zappa's unorthodox use of the prepared piano as a means of

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Bernstein, *A Poetics*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Frank Zappa, *Civilization Phaze III*, Barking Pumpkin Records, UMRK 01 (1994).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Frank Zappa, *Lumpy Gravy*, Verve, V6-8741 (1968).

⁴³ Zappa, *Civilization Phaze III*.

creating what he calls in ‘Evelyn, A Modified Dog’⁴⁴ a ‘highly ambient domain’ for the recording and transformation of semi-spontaneous dialogue⁴⁵ is only one example of the experimentation with spoken material which has characterised Zappa’s work, from the orgasmic screaming of ‘Help I’m a Rock’,⁴⁶ to the numerous close-miking performances that dominated Zappa’s singing style in the 1970s and early 1980s, or the sophisticated collage of sampled and electronically-processed quotes from the Parents Music Resource Centre Senate house hearing in ‘Porn Wars’.⁴⁷ More often than not, what these experiments have in common, besides the use of various cut-up-inspired method and technical treatments of sounds, is a desire to create a documentary narrative of life on the road that moves ‘beyond mere rock ‘n’ roll into the dangerous realm of social anthropology’ and offers listeners ‘the chance to participate vicariously in the touring world of the early 1970s’.⁴⁸ This is particularly true, of course, in such recordings as *200 Motels*,⁴⁹ *Uncle Meat*⁵⁰ and *Playground Psychotics*,⁵¹ in which members of the Mothers of Invention are responsible for generating their own dialogues around ideas provided by Zappa. The transformation of dialogue into ‘vocal noises’⁵² in such tunes as ‘Help I’m a Rock’⁵³ and ‘The Return of the Son of Monster

⁴⁴ Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, *One Size Fits All*, Discreet, DS 2216 (1975).

⁴⁵ The heightened resonance results from the vibrations of the strings reacting to the sound waves created by the speakers.

⁴⁶ The Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out!*.

⁴⁷ Frank Zappa, *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention*, Barking Pumpkin, ST-74203 (1985).

⁴⁸ Frank Zappa, *Playground Psychotics*, Rykodisc, RCD 10557/58 (1995).

⁴⁹ Frank Zappa, *200 Motels*, United Artists (1971).

⁵⁰ Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, *Uncle Meat*, Warner Bizarre Records, 2MS 2024 (1969).

⁵¹ Zappa, *Playground Psychotics*.

⁵² Zappa with Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 59

⁵³ The Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out!*

Magnet'⁵⁴ –with their revolutionary use of electronics, electric feedback, belching, animal noises, percussions and avant-garde vocals-blurs the institutional line that separates Zappa's freak music from the aesthetics of musique concrète, Schönbergian Sprechgesang, or the visceral sound poetry of Henri Chopin.

The Post-Mothers of Invention Years

Had Zappa given up on music after the Mothers of Invention were disbanded he would have been remembered primarily as a prankish continuator of the spirit of neo-dada collagist and saboteur. It is true that Zappa's post-Mothers of Invention productions, from 1969 onwards (*Hot Rats*⁵⁵ is clearly a major landmark in this development), and especially after the release of *Waka/Jawaka*,⁵⁶ was dominated by a desire to explore, develop and deconstruct – often in a satirical fashion – the structures and conventions of established jazz, blues and rock genres and subgenres. To a large extent, Zappa's subversive strategies were displaced from a structural level (the paratactic and disjuncted narratives and the truncated manipulations of sound sequences) to a more generic and thematic dimension largely dominated by musical and lyrical pastiche and parody. Clearly, Zappa's production from the mid-1970s onwards is generally marked by a gradual abandonment of technical experimentation to the benefit of a more humorous and ironic stance which earned him a reputation as a writer of humorous songs and a political satirist.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Frank Zappa, *Hot Rats*, Bizarre, RS6356 (1969).

⁵⁶ Zappa, *Waka/Jawaka*.

⁵⁷ After all, Zappa's only major hits were 'Valley Girl' (on Zappa, *Ship Arriving too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*) and 'Bobby Brown Goes Down' (on Frank Zappa, *Sheik Yerbouti*, Zappa, SRZ-2-1501 (1979). These are the songs that gave him some exposure to a wider and unsuspecting mainstream audience.

Zappa's post-Mothers of Invention career could be accused of departing from the radical aesthetics of the radical avant-garde and of veering away towards anti-modernist tonality and postmodern eclecticism while remaining ferociously rebellious and oppositional in his social commentary on a variety of issues: ranging from conservative politics, censorship and feminism to drug abuse, fashion and political correctness. However, nothing is further from the truth, and it would be a mistake to argue that Zappa abandoned or started to neglect sound and vocal manipulation techniques in the early 1970s. As outlined in the chapter by James Gardner in this publication, examples of 'grouting' can be found on albums such as *Sheik Yerbouti*⁵⁸ and *Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar*,⁵⁹ not to mention the *xenochrony* of *Joe's Garage*.⁶⁰ Other, no less prominent examples include 'the digital musique concrète of the aforementioned 'Porn Wars'⁶¹ and 'the compendium of dislocational devices in *Civilization Phaze III*'⁶² as examples of Zappa's continued interest in collage and tape/track-editing techniques.

From the perspective of the historical avant-garde, the bridging of popular and avant-gardist technique which continued to characterise Zappa's post-Mothers of Invention productions points to the importance of historical precedents of a *popular* avant-garde, from Italian Futurism to Dada, Charlie Chaplin and beyond. As the previous sections of this essay have shown, the resistance of Zappa's music to simple, transparent 'absorption' does not limit itself to the technological manipulation of sound and voice. Zappa's lyrics in themselves rank

⁵⁸ Zappa, *Sheik Yerbouti*.

⁵⁹ Frank Zappa, *Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar*, Barking Pumpkin, W3X 38289 (1981).

⁶⁰ Frank Zappa, *Joe's Garage: Act I*, Zappa, SRZ11603 (1979) and Frank Zappa, *Joe's Garage: Acts II & III*, Zappa, SRZ21502 (1979).

⁶¹ Zappa, *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention*.

⁶² Zappa, *Civilization Phaze III*.

amongst the most unusual experimental texts produced in the course of the 20th century. The wealth of Zappa forums and discussion blogs to be found on the web testifies to a desire to try and explain the unexplainable, speculating about the most obscure references contained in Zappa's songs as if his music was a musical *Finnegans Wake*,⁶³ a huge symphony *à clef* and a cornucopia of semantic ambivalence and ambiguities. Because of the sheer wealth of private references and in-jokes contained in his songs, many of Zappa's lyrics have so far proved rather resistant to critical analysis. The narrative and imagistic strategies displayed in Zappa's songs have generated a wealth of proactive references and impermeable materials that have created a need for hardcore fans to know everything about the furthest ramifications of Zappa's manifold conceptual continuities. In the last analysis, for Zappa, as for Bernstein, opacity and non-absorption are not ends in themselves, nor do they 'necessarily mean nonentertaining'.⁶⁴ Rather, they prepare the ground for 'a more powerful ('souped-up') absorption' characterized by 'opaque & nonabsorbable / elements, digressions & / interruptions'.⁶⁵

Thing-Fish and the Language of Elves and Mammy Nuns

In 1984, with the release of *Thing-Fish*,⁶⁶ Zappa's anti-illusionist fight against the 'transparent' lyric took the form of a brand new language which seemed to represent to him a synthesis of a Joycean and ... a Tolkienish Revolution of the Word. In his last interview,

⁶³ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber, 1939).

⁶⁴ Bernstein, *A Poetics*, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Frank Zappa, *Thing-Fish*, Barking Pumpkin, SKCO74201 (1984).

Zappa describes *Thing-Fish*⁶⁷ as ‘a major work’ and compares it to J.R.R. Tolkien’s invention of imaginary languages in *The Lord of the Rings*:⁶⁸

FZ: Well, you know it’s like Tolkien.

OTL: [*Horried*] Like Tolkien?

FZ: Yeah, to invent a whole language-Thing-Fish’s dialogue doesn’t grow on trees. Nobody of any species really talks that way.

OTL: Yeah. Yeah.

FZ: It’s not as good as Tolkien but ...

OTL: Ah, come on – it’s much better than Tolkien! Maybe I’m a bit too close to Tolkien, that literary tradition, it doesn’t excite me.

FZ: He suffered a lot – who’s that bastard who used to attack him all the time? He went to that private club and there used to be this one guy who’d be drunk all the time and lay on the couch, just ridicule and shit?⁶⁹

One can see why the thought of Zappa’s indebtedness to a Catholic ‘sub-creator’ of imaginary linguistic realms such as Tolkien horrified Ben Watson.⁷⁰ One can also see why Watson, as a Marxist-Leninist, dutifully dismisses *The Lord of the Rings* as one of the worst kinds of apolitical, conservative and escapist avatars of post-WWII fantasy literature. However antipodal the influences of Joyce and Tolkien may seem, however – from an aesthetic, political and a religious perspective – they can be usefully related to Zappa’s search for a musical and textual language which is not indebted to any specific vanguardist model but reveals, instead, one of the most basic, even candid aspects of Zappa’s commitment to

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954).

⁶⁹ Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, p. 550.

⁷⁰ In expressing his admiration for *The Lord of the Rings*, Zappa seems to have gone as far as reading Tolkien biographer Humphrey Carpenter’s accounts the Inklings group and their Oxford pub meetings.

conceptual continuity, which he saw as a way of building an autonomous world peopled by sonic and textual ‘creatures’ that had never been heard before on the face of the earth. Such a project exceeds all traditional categories surrounding the experimental and the mainstream, the absorptive and the non-absorptive, the theoretical and the practical, the conservative and the subversive. Whatever one makes of Zappa’s statement that the dialect ‘that doesn’t grow on trees’⁷¹ spoken by the characters in *Thing-Fish*⁷² owes more to Tolkien’s philological elvish languages than to Joyce’s verbi-voco-visual multilingualism, we know that its most direct source of inspiration was Tim Moore’s character Kingfish in the ‘Amos & Andy’ series.⁷³ But contrary to the original character of the TV show, which veered dangerously in the direction of the minstrel show tradition, Zappa’s uncompromising satire of mainstream white culture in *Thing Fish*⁷⁴ restores the dignity of a pseudo-negroic dialect that literally dis-figures the conventions of the popular song, generating a complex network of semantic disruptions and phonetic turbulences, as in the negro-spiritual spoof ‘Brown Moses’⁷⁵ – one of the album’s most successful songs:⁷⁶

⁷¹ Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, p. 550.

⁷² Zappa, *Thing-Fish*.

⁷³ For a book-length account of the history of the Amos & Andy radio series, see Elizabeth McLeod, *The Original ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928–1943 Radio Serial* (New York, 2005).

⁷⁴ Zappa, *Thing-Fish*.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Zappa, *Thing-Fish*. At the level of content, ‘Brown Moses’ deals with many different themes including child neglect, Eurocentrism (Brown Moses himself stands as a reminder to white Christians that the characters from the Bible were dark-skinned people) and the corruption of the Church (eventually Brown Moses’s own morality is questioned as he seems more interested in money and gin than in the baby’s fate).

Dey callin' me BROWN MOSES,
 Fo' dat id sho'ly what I am,
 Ancient an' re-lj-er-mus
 Solemn an' pres-tig-i-mus
 Wisdom reekin' outa me
 'Long wif summa dis baby pee
 'Minds me of dem River Weeds
 'N all dem ignint Bible deeds

*Thing Fish*⁷⁷ is Zappa's *Finnegans Wake* and his *Lord of the Rings*, an opera that takes us to the imaginary periphery of the English language, dissolving familiar words in uncanny combinations of sound and sense into a constructivist festival of words-in-freedom and zany micro-linguistic events. *Thing-Fish* sounds like nothing else in the history of contemporary music, an extraordinary achievement which transcends Zappa's previous attempts to create 'a new language', demands to be taken seriously and ... threatens to render any discussion of Zappa's connections to any particular form of artistic experimentalism practically irrelevant.

From the Synclavier to the Ensemble Modern

One major turn in the development of Zappa's collage aesthetics occurred with his discovery of the Synclavier in 1982. At the time when Zappa acquired it, the Synclavier was one of the first tape-less digital working stations combining the functions of synthesizer, samplers and a multitrack recording system. The possibilities afforded by digital editing provided Zappa with a cornucopia of ideas, resources and connections, all aimed at growing, linking and (re)discovering new ways of articulating the notion that composition is a process which is likely to produce 'Anything, Any Time, Anywhere—for NO reason at all'.⁷⁸ Before Zappa started to use the Synclavier, an earlier version of the working station had already appeared in

⁷⁷ Zappa, *Thing-Fish*.

⁷⁸ Zappa with Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 162.

1978 and the machine had already been used by other musicians and music producers such as Tony Banks of Genesis and film score composer Patrick Gleeson. Zappa, however, was one of the very few artists – outside of the circle of electronic music composers and performers – who produced whole pieces composed and performed on the Synclavier. In *Jazz from Hell*⁷⁹ the uncanny, poetic appearance of the repressed ‘gestural’ dimension of music on Zappa’s live solo ‘St Etienne’, the only song performed by Zappa’s band on the album, already adumbrated the later mixed experiments of *Civilization Phaze III*⁸⁰, in which Zappa’s electronic compositions are laced with recorded performances of the Ensemble Modern.

A similar mix of the spontaneous and the controlled, composition and improvisation (and another interesting avatar of the gestural aspects of his music), occurred when Zappa decided to use the Ensemble Modern ‘like an instrument’ as part of an experiment in what Todd Yvega terms ‘directed improvisation’.⁸¹ Zappa’s attempts to teach the members of the Ensemble Modern to respond to hand signals and gestures instead of relying on traditional notation amounted to confronting them with the paradoxical nature of a directed composition that incorporates the unpredictable and the accidental, a strategy that allies him with Stockhausen and other experimental orchestral composers making use of spatial notation and/or unorthodox conducting techniques. Zappa’s former bands were used to his idiosyncratic conducting style but they were mostly rock, blues and jazz improvisers who experienced no difficulty in responding spontaneously to his instructions. The challenge Zappa had to face while directing the Ensemble Modern was of course that they were all classically-trained musicians with little or no inclination towards and/or training in free improvisation. By urging classical musicians to respond off-the-cuff to his instructions—and

⁷⁹ Frank Zappa, *Jazz from Hell*, Barking Pumpkin, ST-74205 (1986).

⁸⁰ Zappa, *Civilization Phaze III*.

⁸¹ Frank Zappa, *Everything Is Healing Nicely*, Zappa, UMRK 03 (1999).

even though some of these conducting experiments were not always as successful as others in creating the impression that the pieces sound like written compositions,—Zappa must have felt that he was finally getting the best of both worlds: at last, he could work with excellent sight-reading musicians who could play his most complex electronic compositions and were willing to improvise ‘and play individual solos while the rest of the orchestra vamped, a strategy used rather successfully in ‘Roland’s Big Event/Strat Vindaloo’.⁸² It has to be noted that this idea strongly differs from the more customary collaborations between popular music bands and orchestras which more often than not used the classical orchestra as a means of fleshing out the music while the rock or jazz band members remain the sole improvisers.

Conclusion

If the avant-garde artist’s many postures can be said to include the figures of the revolutionary, the dandy, the anarchist, the aesthete, the technologist and the mystic,⁸³ Zappa’s art and public persona do not really seem to fit any of these models, except maybe for that of the ‘technologist’. More basically, Zappa never rejected past models or sought to live up to the cult of originality as an act of self-creation that characterises the modernist avant-garde. On the contrary, his music has not ceased to re-appropriate a wide range of existing styles and registers (ranging from blues-rock and gospel to orchestral music, jazz and doo-wop), an attitude which, on a superficial level, would seem to place him in the camp of postmodern eclecticism, a mode of composition whose powers of assimilation are themselves often associated with the death of the avant-garde. Richard Murphy has argued that:

Postmodernism has frequently been seen ... as a phenomenon which is neither totally new nor a movement constituting a radically innovative stylistic breakthrough, but rather as the attempt to

⁸² Zappa, *Everything Is Healing Nicely*.

⁸³ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (London, 1985), p. 157.

reconfigure in contemporary terms some of the questions already faced by modernism and the avant-garde.⁸⁴

When referring to other postmodernist theorists, such as Fredric Jameson, Zappa's compositions, which incorporate nearly all existing aesthetic genres and registers, cannot be credited with having developed a unique or *personal* style, a feature Jameson identifies with the high-modernist 'collective ideals of an artistic or political vanguard or avant-garde'.⁸⁵ Another, less conventional perspective could lead us to a reassessment of Zappa's achievements as a composer and a political agitator which would return us to the maximalist model developed elsewhere, a style which comes closer to baroque and grotesque modes of representation than to any theoretical models pertaining to modernism or postmodernism.⁸⁶ One of the features which distinguishes Zappa's genre-jumping eclecticism from Jameson's description of postmodernism as a conceptual space where subjectivity and originality dissolve into the all-neutralising powers of pastiche is precisely his resistance to depthless and neutral models of expressivity. Nowhere is this more striking than in his guitar solos, whose voices are immediately recognisable and, indeed, substantiate and actualise Jameson's notion of a pre-postmodern style, 'in the sense of the unique and the personal' and the foregrounding of 'the distinctive individual brush stroke'.⁸⁷ Such a resistance to the neutral, affectless realms of Jamesonian postmodernism is noticeable not only in Zappa's radical social, political and cultural critique. As we have seen, it is also salient in his extension of collage techniques to non-musical, non-artistic material, as well as in his use of the performing body as a platform

⁸⁴ Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 4.

⁸⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, 1991), p. 15.

⁸⁶ Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, and the Secret History of Maximalism*, pp. 1–21.

⁸⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 15.

for an investigation of the uncontrollable, the unpredictable and the excessive in art production and consumption.