

NEVERMIND NIRVANA: A POST-ADORNIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract — Résumé

Popular musicology and cultural studies have mainly directed their critical attention towards Adorno's theory of mass-culture. Theorists working within the German tradition — such as Jürgen Habermas or Axel Honneth for example — have mainly directed their critical attention towards Adorno's philosophy of history, epistemology and aesthetics. This article argues that the perspectives developed by this latter 'second-generation' of critical theorists may prove particularly useful in (re)assessing the relevance of Adorno's philosophical framework for an understanding of contemporary popular music. At the same, I want to argue that, despite his often generalising, empirically inaccurate and

historically conditioned evaluation of popular culture, it is possible to rehabilitate Adorno's theory of social truth content in such a way as to allow one to identify in at least some popular music precisely that critical potential he denies it is capable of expressing; and, moreover, to do so in such a way as to salvage a moment for the 'aesthetic' dimension, over and above the more communicative concerns of later theorists. This theoretical argument is furnished with a more concrete working-out by its being applied to a number of tracks by the alternative rock group, Nirvana.

Key words: Nirvana; Adorno; Habermas; Honneth; Alienation; Culture Industry

Adorno's writings occupy a paradoxical position in the contemporary study of popular music. For some, his assessments are of little value, at best historically obsolete and at worst simply wrong. For others, his thought retains a stubborn actuality, presenting a persistent challenge to those who seek to negotiate a path through it, if only in order to get beyond it, and returning with a vengeance to

haunt those who believe they can simply ignore it. For some, Adorno is little more than an elitist mandarin whose writings on popular music serve only to reveal his ignorance of it. For others, his incisive analysis of cultural production under the conditions of late capitalism has, especially given the systemic intensification of the latter, actually gained in prescience, whatever the shortcomings or blind-spots one might discern in the surface detail. The weary observation that the debate has grown tired runs up against a contemporary discourse more than happy to continue it. While this is not to suggest that one might blithely ignore the need to justify the continuing relevance of Adorno's thought, the summary judgement that Adorno is no longer 'in' scarcely merits a rejoinder beyond noting that it exemplifies precisely that reifying reduction of thought to the cyclical fashions of commodity production against which Adorno's entire philosophical corpus continually railed.

If the Anglo-American criticisms of Adorno's theory of 'mass-culture' are reasonably familiar from within the realms of popular musicology and cultural studies, and in many cases apposite, less recognition has been afforded the potential relevance of that predominantly German scholarship which can be seen as operating within, or at least out of, the original Frankfurt School tradition.¹ On the one hand, popular musicology and cultural studies have, in the main, directed their critical attention more narrowly towards Adorno's theory of mass-culture — focussing on writings such as 'The Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', 'On Popular Music' and 'The Culture Industry' — and have measured the continuing relevance of his theory against developments in their respective fields. On the other hand, theorists working in the German tradition — for example, Jürgen Habermas or Axel Honneth — have, in the main, directed their critical attention more towards Adorno's philosophy of history, epistemology and aesthetics — focussing on writings such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Negative Dialectic* and *Aesthetic Theory*. Although the more abstract argument pursued by this 'second-generation' of theorists might appear several steps removed from more concrete engagements with Adorno's theory of (mass) cultural production, the former may yet prove particularly useful in re-assessing the philosophical and aesthetic framework that nevertheless provides the foundation for the latter.² In other words, if scholars working in popular musicology and cultural studies have proven effective both in identifying a number of lacunae that are clearly visible at the 'surface'

¹ One notable exception is Deborah COOKE, *The Culture Industry Revisited* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

² While not dealing with popular music, Alastair WILLIAMS's *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) provides a clear precedent for such an approach. It should also be noted that some authors also distinguish between a 'second' and 'third' generation of critical theorists, putting Habermas in the former and Honneth in the latter. For the sake of simplicity and the argument being pursued here, 'second-generation' will suffice to distinguish later theorists from the early Frankfurt School.

of Adorno's theory of mass-culture and also in demonstrating empirically the inaccuracy of many of his analytical observations, it may still prove useful to evaluate, at a more 'subterranean' level, the continuing utility (or not) of the general philosophical system underlying them. Needless to say, such a strategy will entail a delicate form of discursive 'triangulation', which not only seeks out productive encounters between more internal (or systematic) and more external (or empirical) modes of critique, but which also acknowledges the resilience of Adorno's thinking in the face of both.

My principal aim in this article is therefore twofold: firstly, to show that while the empirical inaccuracy, historical obsolescence, occasional haughty elitism and general ignorance of the popular repertoire, when taken together, undoubtedly compromise Adorno's analysis of popular music, recognising this does not require that one automatically jettison his underlying conception of a radical or critical 'truth content' that is mediated through the material specificity of particular musical works and utterances; and, secondly, to show that, with that latter point in mind, one can productively draw on second-generation critical theory in order to correct Adorno's one-sided model of the modern subject, while nevertheless retaining the latter's emphatic notion of a non-discursive 'truth content'.

Adorno's theory of mass culture and his critique of popular music is well documented.³ It should suffice here simply to review the key points. Adorno employs the term 'culture industry' in order to challenge the idea that popular music is, literally, a music 'by and for the people'. Instead, he argues that it is something (mass-)produced, marketed and consumed as a commodity. This distinguishes popular music from 'art' music, whose partial, if dialectical, autonomy grants it a critical potential over and above the dominating reason of an 'administered society'. At the time he was writing, Adorno believed such a potential found its most authentic articulation in the music of the modernist avant-garde of the Second Viennese School. However, popular music is not only a commodity, whose primary function is the *ersatz*-satisfaction of manipulated, retro-active needs. It also plays an ideological role both in diverting listeners (or consumers) from critically reflecting on their 'true objective interests' and also in promoting a passive or acquiescent acceptance of the status-quo: »To escape boredom and avoid effort are incompatible ... They seek novelty, but the strain and boredom associated with actual work leads to avoidance of effort in that leisure-time which offers the only

³ Key texts by Theodor W. ADORNO include: 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' and 'On Popular Music', both in *Essays on Music*, edited by Richard Leppert (California: University of California Press, 2002); and 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997). See also Th.W. ADORNO, *The Culture Industry*. Useful secondary works include: D. COOKE, *The Culture Industry Revisited*; Max PADDISON, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1996); and Robert WITKIN, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003).

chance for really new experience. As a substitute, they crave a stimulant. Popular music comes to offer it.«⁴ This means that popular music must perform two, superficially contradictory, functions: on the one hand, it must not promote too active an engagement with the music, it must not challenge convention; and yet, on the other hand, it must be distracting enough that people will continue to listen to it and appear sufficiently 'different' from that which has gone before that people will continue to consume it. This is the paradox of false pleasure and the satisfaction of false needs. The (false) pleasure afforded by the consumption of cultural products depends upon a suspension of effort by those too weary to invest in them; yet pleasure therefore becomes monotonous and dependent upon the easy consumption of the already familiar. The theory of 'pseudo-individualisation' is Adorno's solution to this problem. It argues that, at base, all popular music is the same; it is 'standardised'. Superficial 'pseudo-individualistic' differences only serve to give the impression of difference, while simultaneously disguising, and ultimately consolidating, underlying sameness: »By pseudo-individualisation we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardisation itself. Standardisation of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualisation, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or 'pre-digested'.«⁵ It barely needs repeating that Adorno's theory of mass culture is rather more complex than could ever be suggested by any abbreviated list of its principal contentions, not least because Adorno's writing is notoriously resistant to paraphrase and summary. It is also worth noting that Adorno, ever the dialectical thinker, does occasionally grant even popular music a minimum of critical potential.⁶ Nevertheless, by common consent, his theory of mass culture in general and his account of popular music in particular remain two of the least convincing and under-developed moments in his ambitiously holistic account of contemporary society and forms of cultural production.

While there have been numerous and varied reactions to Adorno's critique of mass culture and his account of popular music, these can be divided into a smaller number of general strategies. Of the more critical rejoinders, a first response simply dismisses Adorno's theory of the 'culture industry' as inaccurate and challenges his description of 'popular music' as a caricature based on ignorance. This is certainly fair where the theory of pseudo-individualisation is concerned. Even if it were partially true of the kind of music Adorno had in mind and even if it were still partially true of some contemporary musical production, the critical point is that, by definition, it is supposed to apply to *all* popular music. Moreover, Adorno

⁴ Th.W. ADORNO, 'On Popular Music', 459.

⁵ Th.W. ADORNO, 'On Popular Music', 445.

⁶ Richard Leppert makes this point in his commentary on Adorno 'On Popular Music'. See R. LEPPERT, 'Commentary', in Th.W. ADORNO, *Essays on Music*, 343.

does not succeed in establishing a necessary connection between formal standardisation and mass cultural production — not least because he fails adequately to distinguish between mechanisms of production, distribution and consumption.⁷ Fordist mass production techniques require considerable standardisation, yet mass distribution can be utilised to disseminate genuinely unique and ‘artisan’ products. A second response is more sympathetic to Adorno’s analysis, but only in so far as it understands it as a more or less accurate account of the cultural production with which Adorno was actually familiar at the time he was writing. A correlative and reconstructive variant of this position agrees that the ‘popular music’ with which he was familiar — big-band jazz, swing, and Tin-Pan-Alley — is far removed from most contemporary forms and asserts that had Adorno remained more alert to developments in popular music, and especially the blues-oriented rock tradition, then he himself would have felt it necessary significantly to revise his theoretical model. While it remains a diverting ‘thought-experiment’ imaginatively to reconstruct how we think Adorno *might* have analysed contemporary popular music, this tends to miss the opportunity imaginatively to reconstruct the latent potential inherent in his underlying philosophy of music, taken as a whole. In other words, the superficially more sympathetic attempt to historicise Adorno’s theory of mass cultural production may ultimately condemn it to obsolescence, where as the superficially more critical strategy of exposing the gap between his underlying model of artistic truth content and his analysis of popular music may actually salvage the former as a viable framework within which to interpret the latter. A third strategy is to challenge the fundamental model of ‘passive consumption’, ‘regressive listening’ and ‘commodity fetishism’ on which Adorno’s theory of the culture industry ultimately depends. Whether drawing on less determinist post-Marxist accounts of cultural production, on cultural theoretical notions of identity and appropriation, or on more or less post-modern theories of signification, scholars and critics working in disparate fields all highlight what they see as Adorno’s untenable dependence on a flawed model of ‘passive reception’. Finally, of course, there are also those who argue more directly for the continuing relevance or *Aktualität* of his thought. For example, J.M. Bernstein argues that, »If the surface logic of the culture industry is significantly different from the time of Adorno’s writing, its effects are uncannily the same.«⁸ This particular argument appears too general. It is more accurate to say that, in some respects, the culture industry has seen an intensification of those phenomena identified by Adorno as defining of it, where as, in other respects, it has actually witnessed developments that specifically countermand Adorno’s monolithic portrayal.

⁷ See for example Chapter 2 in Richard MIDDLETON, *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990).

⁸ J.M. BERNSTEIN, ‘Introduction’ in Th.W. ADORNO, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991). Frederic JAMESON presents one of the more developed and sophisticated versions of this argument in his *Late Marxism* (London: Verso, 1990).

It is perhaps not surprising that Adorno's depiction of (his) contemporary society is also subject to sustained critique by a number of second generation theorists. As is well known, in addition to a relatively unorthodox interpretation of Marxist theory, Freudian psychoanalysis was the second key component in Frankfurt Critical Theory. Whatever the theoretical differences, the leading proponents of the early Frankfurt School shared the belief that the socially mediated process of 'ego-formation' was key to understanding the subject's repressed or deformed condition in late capitalist society. For Adorno, culture, mediated through the products of the 'culture industry', played a key role in 'de-individualising' individual subjects, in rendering them suitably passive and all the more ready to accept their assigned role within the instrumental and bureaucratic totality of late monopoly capitalism. We have already noted how Adorno interprets popular music as fulfilling precisely this function. I have also suggested that while popular musicologists, sociologists of music and post-modern cultural theorists all tend to focus on the 'subject' as implicated in the moment of musical reception or in the process of symbolic appropriation, second-generation critical theorists, as one might expect, typically focus on Adorno's 'depth-account' of the subject as a historical and psychological phenomenon.

In *The Critique of Power*, Axel Honneth highlights what he sees as Adorno's untenably reductionist philosophy of history and concomitantly one-sided model of subjective agency — a model that receives its most complete articulation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Operating within a restricted and restrictive Subject-Object paradigm, Adorno conceives the individual subject, and its development or dysfunction, as an object of instrumental control, as an individual, or ego, which is (de)formed by and through its encounter with the 'objective' intransigence of both internal and external nature.⁹ However, on Honneth's reading, Adorno implausibly attributes the provisional unity of the 'bourgeois' ego to its function within the market exchange mechanism of early liberal capitalism and to the authority of the father associated with the nuclear family unit. Hence, in an era of totally administered monopoly capitalism — an era of mass alienated labour and the dissolution of the traditional family structure — the means by which an autonomous self would normally develop are curtailed and, consequently, the individual is left ripe for manipulation: »The mass media can develop as an effective means for controlling instincts, of course, only if individuals themselves have lost the capacity for autonomous regulation of their drives.«¹⁰

⁹ Pieter Duvenage succinctly identifies two central premises underlying Adorno's philosophy of history: »that human reason stands in an instrumental relation to natural objects; and that history is a process that progressively enables humankind to control natural objects.« See P. DUVENAGE, *Habermas and Aesthetics* (London: Polity, 2003), 37.

¹⁰ Axel HONNETH, *The Critique of Power*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 92.

It is this fit between a mass of 'atomised' individuals who are unable to control themselves, from below, and a mass media (or totalitarian political order) with a vested interest in controlling them, from above, which accounts for Adorno's exaggerated pessimism; and it is this seemingly intransigent deadlock which second-generation theorists have attempted to overcome. The underlying flaw in Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophy of history, social theory, and corresponding Critical Theory — so far as second-generation theorists are concerned — is usefully captured by Honneth when he asks »How is critical theory still possible under the premises of a philosophical-historical construction that always immediately discovers in each act of conceptual knowledge the sign of a powerful human domination of nature, one by means of which humanity is also alienated?« This is, of course, Honneth's own allusion to that same fundamental problematic which Habermas diagnoses in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer as a 'performative contradiction'.¹¹ In short, the diagnosis of an all-pervasive instrumental rationality becomes so extreme that it infects the very attempt to reflect upon it and cancels out any hope that one might step beyond it. Adorno's emphasis, especially in his later works, on the 'other' of conceptual reason and his notion of aesthetic mimesis are seen by Habermas as the logical end-point of a mode of thought that is aware of the problem, yet unable to escape the one-sided philosophy of history on which it depends — in effect, it is seen as a commendably consistent response to a question wrongly-conceived.

Despite the evolving nature of his thought, a fundamental concern for Habermas has remained the delineation and theoretical reconstruction of what amount to different forms of rationalities or modes of action as they manifest themselves within the course of the socio-anthropological development of the species as a whole. While different models have been proposed at various times, one can discern, at least in his work prior to and including *The Theory of Communicative Action*,¹² a fundamental distinction between two unique spheres: labour and interaction; or instrumental action and communicative action; or, ultimately, *system* and *life-world*. It was the latter pole in each of these pairs which Habermas believed had been neglected by Adorno and early Frankfurt School theory. It is true that this binary model has itself been criticised and Habermas has since modified certain aspects. In particular, it would seem that the model effectively reifies two distinct spheres, which can only really serve as regulative or idealising abstractions from a totality into which the phenomena they describe are empirically interwoven. However, it may offer a useful first-step in exploring the relationship be-

¹¹ See especially Jürgen HABERMAS, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederic Lawrence (London: Polity, 1987).

¹² J. HABERMAS, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1-2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1984/1987).

tween music *qua* commodity — that is, music as a function of exchange-value within the *system* of capitalist production, distribution and consumption — and music *qua* means of cultural expression — that is, music as a symbolic construct within the horizon of a specific *life-world* context of meaning. This is especially the case where Adorno is concerned, since it is precisely his stark equation of the commodity form with a false affirmation of the status-quo that leads him to seek social truth-content only in the most abstract, autonomous modes of artistic expression. Just as Adorno tends to view the conceptual rationality of abstract reason as symptomatic of, mediated by, or identical with, the principle of abstract equivalence fundamental to capitalist exchange,¹³ so the aporetic end-point of his negative dialectic at the level of epistemology, finds its counterpart in the autonomous work of modernist art at the level of aesthetic theory. Hence, if second-generation theorists are right in arguing that the move away from the Subject-Object model, typical of the 'philosophy of consciousness', towards a more communicative paradigm — mirroring the so-called 'linguistic turn' in philosophy in general — might overcome Adorno's one-sided interpretation of the (bad) instrumentality which he viewed as intrinsic to conceptual reason itself, then perhaps there are correlative gains to be had in the areas of social and aesthetic theory; gains which might salvage a critical or communicative function for artistic and cultural expressions inevitably bound to their commodity form. In short, such a model might provide the developed theoretical means for an interrogation of the manner in which popular music can negotiate the tension between what remain its two functional modalities under the conditions of late capitalism.

This is where post-Adornian work in popular musicology and cultural studies can be seen to resonate with post-Adornian second-generation Critical Theory. As we have seen, both draw attention, in their own way, to what one might term a 'communicative or symbolic deficit' in Adorno's work. The former tends to focus, in particular, on the manner in which audiences and listeners can appropriate cultural products in unexpected ways; on the manner in which meaning is actively created as well as passively consumed; on the internal workings of the 'industry'; and on the complex nature of commodity production and the unpredictability of consumption. In short, it has examined the extent to which, whether in spite of, or because of, its commodity status, (some) popular music might actually provide a resource for challenging existing social relations, rather than simply reinforcing them, and for articulating emerging forms of cultural identity, rather than simply suppressing them. Second-generation theory has developed its response at a 'deeper' level. It has argued that, despite the subtlety of his dialectical apparatus, Adorno ultimately remained locked within an instrumental (Subject-Object) conception of human action which resulted in a social theory unable adequately to grasp the significance of communicative or symbolic (Subject-Subject) *inter*-action.

¹³ See especially F. JAMESON, *Late Marxism*.

At the same time, while accepting the validity of, and absorbing the lessons from, these two post-Adornian perspectives, both of which have served as the locus for my discussion so far, in the final section I want nevertheless to argue both that a suitably transfigured appropriation of Adorno's dialectical conception of a socially-mediated musical material represents an important check on those theories which (over)emphasise either the process of symbolic appropriation or the role of the audience in the active construction of meaning, and also that Adorno's notion of an emphatic, non-discursive truth content provides an important corrective to later critical theory's concern with the discursive redemption of norm-oriented truth-claims. If Honneth is right in claiming that, due to the socio-philosophical theory of instrumental domination developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, »[Adorno and Horkheimer] are prevented in principle from acknowledging the cultural activities and the interpretive accomplishments of the oppressed groups in a social system,«¹⁴ then one might nevertheless contend that the communicative discourse theory underlying the work of Habermas and other second-generation scholars may itself struggle to account for the critical potential embodied in those forms of cultural expression whose efficacy would appear to depend more on the dialectical negation of socially mediated material than on the consensus-oriented disclosure typical of rational discourse. To be sure, Adorno does seem to imply that »the procedures of control shape individuals without running into attempts at social resistance and cultural opposition.«¹⁵ In other words, Adorno's model is too 'top-down', too uni-directional, too suffocating in its portrayal of individual subjects (or listeners) as the passive dupes of over-arching manipulative and administrative powers. Both popular musicology and cultural studies have landed some of their most telling blows in revealing the evident weakness in this aspect of his theory. However, if Adorno was wrong in his exaggerated depiction of the deleterious effects of a dominating instrumental reason and misguided in adopting a strategy of hibernation where only the alienated, autonomous, and socially ineffectual art-works of the modernist avant-garde were able to offer the faintest glimmer of a negative hope, this does not imply that one need necessarily jettison his sophisticated dialectical apparatus in favour of a post-modern celebration of the signifying surface — in the belief that this is all there is — or invest one's hopes entirely in the power of localised symbolic appropriation. The latter may be fundamental to a contemporary understanding of the 'cultural production of meaning', and the significant work being pursued in this area is undoubtedly justified. However, an interpretive methodology which fails to relate forms of cultural expression to the political and economic systems with which they are inextricably enmeshed or which abandons the material specificity of cultural production within given social and historical trajectories surely risks becoming as flawed as the flaw it is seeking to overcome.

¹⁴ A. HONNETH, *The Critique of Power*, 55.

¹⁵ A. HONNETH, *ibid.*

It should be clear from those elements of Adorno's theory already discussed why he often displayed sympathy for the socially excluded, the down-trodden, and the ridiculed (Berg's *Wozzeck*); for those whose manner of expression did not conform to conventional models (the symphonies of Mahler); for those who exploded the normative boundaries of expression from within (the Schoenberg of *Erwartung* or the Op. 11 Piano Pieces) or who folded expression back upon itself from without (Webern at his most aphoristic). It should also be clear why Adorno, constrained by a self-imposed conception of the dialectical unfolding of musical material within the Austro-Germanic tradition, would never have lent credence to the possibility that 'popular music' might somehow give authentic voice to an alienated condition from within the bounds of precisely that commodity form which, following Marx and Lukács, he considered to be its determining source. At this point I want to explore more closely and concretely the possibility that (at least some) 'popular music' does possess precisely that potential that Adorno denied it. More importantly, and contrary to those arguments which emphasise reception, appropriation and context of use, I want to suggest that (at least some) popular music is capable of articulating a critical social content, and that it can do so in the genuinely Adornian sense — that is, by virtue of its formal material constitution. To this end, and given the limitations of space, I will focus on one group, and on one track in particular.

Given their cultural and historical significance, it is as much to be expected that a considerable popular literature has developed around Nirvana as it is perhaps surprising they have received so little academic attention. This may, in part, be due to nothing more than 'generational lag' — musicologists tend to deal with the popular music with which they are most immediately familiar; or it may have something to do with a perceived difficulty in appropriating Nirvana's music by means of an appropriately expedient discursive framework. The academic industry which has developed around Madonna, for example, is surely due, at least in part, to a happy confluence of elements that are susceptible to that broad range of post-modern or post-feminist strategies dealing with issues of gender construction, voice, identity, media, inter-textuality and image. There are not so many obvious routes into Nirvana's music.

Nirvana's first album, *Bleach* (1989), a raw and unpolished fusion of hardcore punk and heavy rock, achieved some modest success within the US underground punk scene. However, it was with the album *Nevermind* (1991) and, in particular, the anthemic track 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', that Nirvana suddenly achieved significant commercial success. *Nevermind* sold more than three million copies in the first six months after release. In part, this was due to Butch Vig's studio production values, an obviously more 'pop'-oriented sound, and the extensive exposure enjoyed by 'Teen Spirit' on MTV — an arrangement that proved mutually beneficial for both parties. At the same time, Nirvana's music, whether by accident or design, managed to strike a propitious balance between, on the one hand, alternative

idiosyncrasy — heavy music, weighty content — and, on the other hand, popular appeal — melodic hooks and anthemic ‘sing-a-long’ choruses. This allowed their music to ‘speak’ for and to the *individual* while simultaneously forging a tangible sense of *collective* identity and shared experience. Associated with the so-called ‘grunge’ scene, they were also often portrayed by certain sections of the media as the ‘voice of a generation’. However, despite their impact and continuing significance, if Nirvana are mentioned in academic writing it is usually in passing and typically with regard to the relationship between the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘underground’, between ‘major labels’ and ‘independent labels’; or they are cited in arguments about the ‘ideology of authenticity’ or ‘selling out’. Yet, and this is where they distinguish themselves from many artists, Nirvana appeared more than aware of such tensions themselves. Tracks such as ‘In Bloom’ (*Nevermind*), ‘Serve the Servants’ (*In Utero*) and ‘Radio Friendly Unit Shifter’ (*In Utero*) suggest as much. In fact, their third and final album proper, *In Utero* (1993), is in many respects a testament to those same contradictory forces. Although it still incorporates the three principal song-types that define Nirvana’s output — hardcore punk, ‘stop-start’ rock anthems, and softer ballads — this is their darkest, most intimate and yet simultaneously most ironically aware album. It is a work that does not seek to conceal the fissures wrought by commercial success, but, in something approaching the Adornian sense, incorporates them into its own musical-lyrical fabric.

Although such contextual circumstances are important, my primary aim here is to interpret the significance of the music *as music* in that more genuinely Adornian sense. In other words, I want to understand the music as a socially-mediated phenomenon whose critical moment is ‘sedimented’ within, or inextricably bound-up with, its very material properties. In light of this strategy, some will no doubt object that most of Nirvana’s, or more precisely Cobain’s, music is fundamentally auto-biographical; it is not an attempt to ‘speak for a generation’, nor is it a caustic commentary on dystopic consumer capitalism at the close of the twentieth century. One can find much to support this argument in biographical detail, in lyrical content and even in comments made by Cobain himself. Nevertheless, putting to one side arguments about the so-called ‘intentional fallacy’ — the mistaken belief that one can only understand the ‘true’ meaning of a work of art by reconstructing the intention of those who created it — I here follow Adorno, who always argued that the significance of a work of art may be quite separate from both the explicit intentions of those who created it and also the derived meaning of those who perceive or consume it. As Max Paddison puts it: »[Adorno] considers that, because musical reception is itself socially mediated, it cannot as an area of study be a substitute for the analysis of the specificity of the work itself. It is in the musical work and in the dialectic of the musical material that the social significance of music is to be deciphered, in terms of socially sedimented traces within the material, not through focusing exclusively on the conditions of music’s reception/

consumption.«¹⁶ Indeed, works of art may well succeed *in spite of* authorial intent. Adorno said as much of Schoenberg and, conversely, it is well documented that Schoenberg rejected Adorno's interpretation of his music. For Adorno, all music represented a dialectic interaction between (compositional) subject and musical material — albeit that, on the one hand, the 'subject' was already the individual manifestation of supervening social and psychological structures and, on the other hand, the musical material was already a kind of objectified subjectivity, since it bore within it the sedimented traces of past compositional intervention. It is this model which allows Adorno to argue that at least some music is able to articulate a critical 'truth content' over and above the intention of those who create it. In fact, he typically argues that it is precisely those who attend to their music *as music* who are most likely to produce works capable of articulating a critical truth content; where as those who set out explicitly to do so are bound to fail, since, whatever their actual intent, their mode of expression is necessarily tainted from the outset by the inherent and systemic distortions of the falsely affirmative whole to which they appeal. It is for this reason that the auto-biographical interpretation of Cobain's music is not strictly required for, nor is it necessarily incompatible with, the attempt to grasp objectively its wider social and cultural significance.

While many of Nirvana's tracks appear to deal with the condition of the contemporary 'subject', and often the female subject (as in 'Polly', 'Rape Me' or 'Penny Royal Tea'), the penultimate track from *In Utero*, 'Tourettes', presents a notably extreme case.¹⁷ The track itself is no more than a minute and a half in length. It opens with sparse distorted guitar attacks and induced feedback, over which Cobain ironically intones the phrase, 'moderate rock'. A cycling four chord sequence on bass and lead guitar is soon accompanied by a heavy drum pattern typical of hardcore punk. The main body of the track divides into five recognisable sections: two 'verse' sections, a final section which functions as a kind of coda, and two 'bridge' sections (in standard musicological terms, A B A B C). The bridge sections involve the repetition of a single riff, overlaid by a series of interjections and extended screams. The track concludes, rather as it began, with a confusion of fractured attacks and induced feedback, while Cobain's final utterance modulates into a series of moans, before fading out. The vocal utterances remain (almost) indecipherable throughout, although those of the 'verse' sections are clearly distinct from the repeated utterance of the final section.

The title itself refers to a particular form of behavioural 'disorder' in which the 'sufferer' involuntarily exhibits compulsive bodily movements or verbal exclamations which often take the form of obscene utterances or gestures. On the basis

¹⁶ M. PADDISON, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 123.

¹⁷ Nirvana, *In Utero*, Geffen Records, 1993, GED 24536 (Track 11).

of the title alone — which was, in fact, attached *post-facto* — some would no doubt castigate the track as a particularly distasteful, perhaps insensitive, exercise in adolescent puerility. However, if the aim had been simple ‘shock-value’, then Cobain would surely have adopted the more obvious strategy of interjecting a series of clearly audible obscenities — a relatively commonplace tactic in certain contemporary popular genres. Or, perhaps, he would have resorted to some other form of genuinely amorphous vocality. However, as opposed to straightforward determinate vulgarity or caustically indeterminate ‘noise’, Cobain’s utterances, despite their coarse articulation and apparent randomness, seem nevertheless carefully calculated to give the impression that at least *something* is being said — an attempt to express the inexpressible — and it remains unclear whether their incomprehensibility is due to the inability of the speaker to communicate, to that of the listener to comprehend, or to some other source of interference. In fact, it is interesting to note that one can find numerous conflicting ‘interpretations’ of the ‘lyrics’ both in the popular literature and also on amateur internet sites. There is clearly a need to decipher the utterances and render them semantically meaningful.

On one level it would be relatively easy to view ‘Tourettes’ as a standard punk thrash and to interpret the inarticulate screaming as little more than a cathartic release of pent-up frustration; and on one level perhaps that is precisely what is happening. However, simply to dismiss the track as an exercise in nihilism, albeit a rather engaging one, would be to capitulate to precisely that neutralising mode of discursive appropriation identified and criticised by Neil Nehring.¹⁸ He argues that to describe such music as little more than random, unfocussed anger is to empty it of, or to deny it, its real and tangible force. With particular reference to Nirvana and Kurt Cobain, Nehring also suggests that academic post-modern theory can find itself in an unholy alliance with those conservative political and media interests which typically seek to dismiss or denude such music in exactly this way. This is because the post-modern emphasis on the supremacy of the signifying surface and the implicit separation of affect and meaning resonates sympathetically with, or plays into the hands of, precisely those conservative commentators who dismiss ‘angry music’ as little more than adolescent nihilism. Nehring’s argument is that (Left-leaning) post-modern academics and (Right-leaning) conservative critics both ultimately deny ‘angry-music’ its concrete transformative potential and instead reduce it to a kind of commodified ‘pseudo-rage’.

Hence, if one is to avoid ‘collaborating with the oppressors’, as Nehring puts it, if one is plausibly to argue that its anger is more than empty gesture, then one may need to locate an alternative ‘way in’. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer make the following claim:

¹⁸ See Neil NEHRING, *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism* (California: Sage, 1997), especially Chapters 3 & 4.

»Men had to do fearful things to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, and virile nature of man, was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood. The strain of holding the I together adheres to the I in all stages; *and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it.*«¹⁹

Although, as we have already seen, second-generation theorists, among others, argue that Adorno's 'synthesis' of Hegelian-Marxist social theory and Freudian psychology fails entirely to convince, it is reasonable to view this more obviously orthodox Freudian claim as unaffected by some of their more trenchant criticisms. This is because rather than identifying the subject of mass society with an under-developed, or even forcibly retarded, ego function, it more plausibly models the tension between instinctive (Id) drives and contingent socio-cultural (Super-ego) norms, conventions and strictures. In light of this claim, 'Tourettes' can be seen to represent just such a 'giving in to temptation', a sudden and violent release of those instinctual drives ordinarily suppressed by the explicitly 'civilised' norms of an implicitly antagonistic society. As such, the 'empty' anger of adolescent pseudo-rage, so easily ridiculed by conservative media interests or tamed by post-modern indifference, can better be reconfigured as a more critically authentic expression of alienated being. Moreover, Cobain's delivery, the inaudibly audible, the expression of the inexpressible, resonates with, and captures the tension inherent in, precisely this condition. To say nothing would be passively to fall in with the status-quo, effectively by default. Indeed it would be to adopt the strategy of 'hibernation' to which Adorno seemed increasingly drawn in his later writings — one thinks, for example, of the famous opening to *Aesthetic Theory*. To articulate explicitly and positively such transformative ideals would be — in Adornian terms — actively to risk cynical co-option. Instead, 'Tourettes' gives 'voice' to alienation by, in effect, voicing its very inability to do so.

That said, the precise nature of this purported 'alienation' remains uncertain — there is an underlying ambivalence that matches the dual intent in Adorno and Horkheimer's original claim. Is this the alienation of the modern self, or is it instead an alienation borne of adolescent introspection and that peculiar variety of youthful 'rebellion' against perceived parental or societal 'oppression' that is itself the dialectical counterpart to a life where real material needs are mostly met? Is it more a desire to 'escape from suburbia' than a reflective articulation of the need for real political-economic transformation? Is it the alienation of distorted or unfulfilled individuality, or, on the contrary, a moment of entirely necessary alienation integral to the successful formation of an autonomous self? Adorno and Horkheimer's claim alludes to both phylo- and onto-genetic developmental trajectories — that is to say, the collective evolution of 'mankind' is mirrored in the

¹⁹ Th.W. ADORNO & Max HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1991), 33 [my emphasis].

individual transition to 'manhood'. For Adorno, both developments are marked by the tension between self-expression and self-repression; both can, and have, become reciprocally responsible for their own systemic distortion. This dual conception lends credence to the possibility that Nirvana's 'Tourettes' may stem *from* the (ontogenetic) alienation of adolescent transition (in Western late-capitalist society), but yet speak *to* or *of* that wider (phylogenetic) alienation characteristic of the modern subject of mass society — what one might term the 'loneliness of the crowd'.

If Adorno's theory of the emasculated subject remains less than fully convincing, then his emphatic notion of truth as an index of subjective suffering remains a usefully provocative thorn in the side of a post-modern theory which too often appears embarrassed by the notion of truth and unconcerned with the concept of suffering. As Adorno puts it, in *Negative Dialectics*, »The need to lend suffering a voice is a precondition of all truth. For suffering is the objectivity that weighs the subject down; what it experiences as its most subjective capacity, expression, is objectively mediated.«²⁰ It is here that Adorno's world-disclosing or redemptive concept of truth — clearly indebted to Walter Benjamin and, although he would have denied it, not unrelated to one side of Heidegger's ontology of art²¹ — acquires a validity over and against both post-modern theories of symbolic appropriation and also Habermasian-type models of discursively secured consensus. For Habermas, moral norms are the result of consensus achieved through undistorted communicative process; for post-modernism, moral norms are, ultimately, without absolute ground. For Adorno, suffering, the denial of authentic subject-hood, is the historical index of truth — and the aesthetic is its medium.

A number of commentators have noted points of contact between Adorno and Foucault — indeed, the latter once observed that he wished he had encountered the former's writings earlier in his life. 'Tourettes', in particular, resonates with Foucault's analysis of the way in which certain objects are (re)configured, or 'disciplined', by particular discursive strategies — the discourse of medical science features heavily in his writings; and this has an obvious affinity with Adorno's insistence on a non-objectifying relationship to the 'other', with his emphasis on a mimetic alternative to an instrumental form of conceptual reason which seeks to control or expunge that which cannot be rationally conceptualised.²² In other words, just as Foucault sought to reveal the way in which notions of (ab)normality were relative to particular practices, oriented towards control, so Adorno maintained

²⁰ Quoting F. JAMESON's translation of this passage from *Late Marxism* (London: Verso, 1990), 66, cf. Th.W. ADORNO, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), 29.

²¹ On the similarity between Adorno and Heidegger on this point see P. DUVENAGE, *Habermas and Aesthetics*, esp. 40-45 and 121-26.

²² Cf. A. HONNETH, *The Critique of Power*, 198-202. Duvenage alludes to a similar convergence — see P. DUVENAGE, *Habermas and Aesthetics*, 38.

that it was in the expressive acts of the dispossessed, the ridiculed and the alienated, that one might encounter a truth-content apart from the positivist conception of truth that remained central to a technocratic, objectifying reason. To put it another way, the explicit 'madness' of 'Tourettes' doubles back and draws attention to the implicit normality on which (contingent) notions of madness depend. This is not to ignore the obvious differences that exist between Foucault's systems-theoretic 'genealogy of power' and Adorno's psycho-anthropological 'dialectic of enlightenment' — despite various defensive apologetics, there is an underlying relativism to Foucault's thought that distinguishes it from the emphatic notion of truth central to Adorno's thought — but it is to suggest that, against the portrayal of a suffocating mesh of ubiquitous domination to which both were driven, 'Tourettes' can be seen not only as reflective of that condition, but also, and crucially, as articulating an (unrealised) emancipatory potential that remains its dialectical counterpart. In short, it is a musical 'return of the repressed' and there is an inherent sense to the apparent *non*-sense. If 'Tourettes' succumbs to the temptation to 'lose it', as both Adorno and the vernacular would have it, then it does so within a structure of expression far more effective than simple anarchic senselessness.

Robert Witkin has observed that, »If alienation from man describes the condition of music in the modern world, the task facing serious music, and all serious culture, in Adorno's view, is both to reflect the truth of this condition and to use that reflection as a vehicle for the self-expression of the subject.«²³ If one suspends the reference to 'serious' music then this is precisely what I have argued is accomplished by 'Tourettes'. Of course, any attempt to find in popular music precisely that which Adorno argued it was by definition incapable of expressing exposes itself to accusations of simplification, arbitrary appropriation or even straightforward category error. Yet this would be to confuse critical rehabilitation with an unnecessary and reifying fidelity to the original. The more telling rejoinder to the strategy adopted here would be to argue that Adorno's dialectical conception of truth content is absolutely dependent upon a defining split between that music which affirms its commodity status and that which remains committed to its own autonomous laws of formal development. However, as Bruce Baugh argues, »It is not as if there is on the one hand, then, difficulty, arcane art, and resistance to commodity capitalism, and, on the other, complacency, popular art, and the reign of mass marketing. The difference is between art which could be challenging and liberating for everyone and art which favouring the freedom of the few affirms the subjugation of the many.«²⁴ In a telling reversal, Baugh effectively argues that by championing the music of the advanced, autonomous avant-garde Adorno cements the practical subjugation of those whose interests he proclaims to serve. In other

²³ Robert WITKIN, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge: 2003), 85.

²⁴ Bruce BAUGH, 'Left-wing Elitism: Adorno on Popular Culture', *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 14/2, 1990, 75.

words, Adorno's error, borne of his Lukácsian heritage, is to identify the commodity form, *qua* agent of mass distribution, with the reifying effects of the logic of capital and abstract exchange value — in other words, to identify it with un-truth *per se*. Yet, just as Adorno argues that composers often create authentic music in spite of themselves, so 'popular music' can serve a critical function in spite of its commodity status. Indeed, from a post-Adornian perspective, tracks like 'Tourettes' can be seen to represent an authentic response, from within the commodity form, to the neurosis of a contemporary society convulsed by its reifying effects.

Sažetak

POSTADORNOVSKA PERSPEKTIVA NIRVANINA ALBUMA NEVERMIND

Popularna muzikologija i kulturni studiji usmjerili su svoju kritičku pozornost prema Adornovoj teoriji masovne kulture. Adorno je tvrdio da je sva popularna glazba standardizirani i komercijalizirani proizvod jedne sveobuhvatne kulturne industrije i da funkcionira samo nešto malo bolje nego mehanizam masovne manipulacije. Kritičari su napali empiričku netočnost Adornova prikaza popularne glazbe, optuživši ga za elitizam i ustvrdili da je njegovo djelo danas povijesno zastarjelo. Istodobno su teoretičari koji su radili u okvirima njemačke kritičke tradicije — poput Jürgena Habermasa ili Axela Honnetha — svoju pozornost usmjerili uglavnom na Adornovu filozofiju povijesti, epistemologiju i estetiku. Dok su prihvaćali elemente njegove sistematske analize zapadnog društva i kulture, tražili su alternativne izlaze iz pesimističke slijepe ulice u koju je Adorno često izgledao stjeran. Oni su pobijali njegov pojam sveprožimajuće 'dijalektike prosvjetiteljstva', njegov freudovski model 'subjekta' i njegovo oslanjanje na estetiku avangarde kao negativnog izvora istine. Upravo bi se perspektive koje je razvila ova 'druga generacija' kritičkih teoretičara mogle pokazati osobito korisnima u ponovnom procjenjivanju relevantnosti Adornova filozofijskog okvira za razumijevanje suvremene popularne glazbe. Istodobno, unatoč njegovoj često poopćavajućoj, empirički netočnoj i povijesno uvjetovanoj procjeni popularne kulture, moguće je rehabilitirati Adornovu teoriju sadržaja društvene istine na taj način da se barem u dijelu popularne glazbe može identificirati upravo onaj kritički potencijal za koji je on smatrao da je nesposoban za izražavanje; štoviše, valjalo bi to učiniti na način koji spašava važnost za 'estetičku' dimenziju ponad i s onu stranu komunikativnijih preokupacija kasnijih teoretičara.

Glazba skupine Nirvana pruža konkretni kontekst u kojemu se to može pokazati. Glazba te skupine, osobito njihov treći album (*In Utero*, 1993), ne traži prikrivanje napetosti koje je izazvao komercijalni uspjeh, nego ih gotovo u adornovskom stilu pripaja vlastitom glazbenom tkivu. Snimka *Tourettes* može se shvatiti kao glazbeni 'povratak potlačenih'. Njezin gnjev i početnički zvuk predstavljaju više od jednostavnog adolescentskog nihilizma i posuđuju glas otuđenju suvremenog 'subjekta'. Može se zaključiti da je Adornova greška bila u tome što je izravno identificirao robni oblik kao sredstvo masovne distribucije s logikom kapitala i apstraktne vrijednosti razmjene. Međutim, iz post-adornovskoga gledišta snimke poput *Tourettes* mogu se shvatiti kao pojava autentičnog odgovora iz samog robnog oblika na neurozu suvremenog društva potresanog posljedicama vlastitog postvarenja.