

FESTIVE CRITIQUE AND AGENCY IN FELIX LABAND'S *4/4 DOWN THE STAIRS*

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Abstract — Résumé

This article presents an analysis of Cape Town-based electronic artist Felix Laband's album, *4/4 Down the Stairs* (African Dope Records: 2002). The discussion comprises three sections. The first theorises, through the contested lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque, Laband's use of the 'low-other' as festive critique. It unravels the aesthetico-ideological discourse in which the cover design and the music participate. The second discussion, which sounds an additional cautionary note in counterpoint to celebrating festive critique, turns to the work of the French economist and philosopher, Jacques Attali, to consider his distinction between 'mass music' and what he defines rather idiosyncratically as 'composition.' Attali's theory of musical production, which juxtaposes the multivalent tropes of Carnival and Lent,

presents a persuasive critique of the popular music industry. We consider, in our description of Attali's representation of the trap of commercial circulation, the extent to which Laband's work registers as the 'background noise' of 'consumer integration, interclass levelling, cultural homogenization' (1985: 111). The third and final section of the argument is rather more optimistic. It seeks to develop, through the ideas of Michel de Certeau, a theory of (muted and conditional) subversive agency that applauds Laband's creativity as the capture of musical possibility in a mode that de Certeau describes as 'pedestrian' combinational and relational practice.

Key Words: cultural theory; carnival; festive critique; mass culture; Bakhtin; Attali; de Certeau.

This article represents, at different levels, a dialogical analysis of Cape Town-based electronic artist Felix Laband's *4/4 Down the Stairs* (African Dope Records: 2002). It emerged in the first instance as a conversation between its two authors and intentionally retains traces of different perspectives, which at times intersect and at others diverge. Perhaps more important, though, is that it is dialogical in

bringing various theoretical possibilities and inflections to bear on a musical work while seeking neither monological clarity, nor intellectual authority. In other words, it keeps different interpretive and evaluative possibilities in play without settling on or for any single meaning or significance. It is relevant in this respect that we have chosen a work that risks being written off by musicologists and cultural theorists alike (as trivial, as banal pastiche, as commercial, as incoherent, as derivative or as etiolated minimalism). In addressing why and how we might take *4/4 Down the Stairs* seriously, we hope to both exemplify and challenge some of the range of practices and protocols that are considered acceptable, even normative, within the South African musicological and cultural theory institution. Given that this edition of *IRASM* seeks to explore a range of interpretive and evaluative theories, we thought it worthwhile to present such a dialogue, making explicit our theoretical terms of reference as we proceed. In tracing this process of self-reflexive thought, the argument suggests at least one way in which a theoretical argument might be both constructed and manipulated.¹

The discussion comprises three sections. The first theorises, through the contested lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque, Laband's use of the 'low-other' as festive critique. It unravels the aesthetico-ideological discourse in which the cover design and the music itself participate, approaching the latter through a descriptive analysis of one of the tracks on the album, 'Blue Crack Twos.' This section should be read as a sceptical staging of Bakhtin's theoretical apparatus that draws attention to its limitations even as it outlines the potential of the carnival — as a weapon against the pretence and hypocrisy of the powerful. Despite its scepticism, this discussion is guardedly optimistic regarding the extent to which popular cultural practices like Laband's potentially unsettle and challenge entrenched social relations.

The second discussion complicates the matter. It turns to the work of the French economist and philosopher, Jacques Attali, to consider his distinction between 'mass music' and what he defines rather idiosyncratically as 'composition.' Attali's political-economic theory of musical production, which juxtaposes the multivalent tropes of Carnival and Lent, presents a persuasive critique of the popular music industry. It is, he claims, an industry in which 'the mode of power implied by repetition' (1985: 88) silences the potentially disruptive impact of carnivalesque revelry in the service of the commodity system of capitalism. In suggesting this, Attali reiterates Adorno's critique of mass culture in which the 'culture industry' is held to lull consumers into a 'dreamless-realistic world' in which they are deprived of individuality. They become 'less and less themselves' as they are ab-

¹ At times, given this intention, it will seem as if theoretical discussions are in excess of their application. This is, first, because theory and analysis cannot be juxtaposed in this simple way and, second, because we hope to elucidate a series of interpretive possibilities while using their instantiation only by way of clarification. Obviously a lot more needs to be said about the music of Felix Laband.

sorbed into a community of unfree equals' (1989: 204—7). We will contemplate, in our description of Attali's representation of this trap of commercial circulation, the extent to which Laband's work registers as the 'background noise' of 'consumer integration, interclass levelling, cultural homogenization' (1985: 111). This section, then, sounds an additional cautionary note in counterpoint to celebrating festive critique. It suggests that seemingly carnivalesque subversion, when it is inextricably integrated into the circuits of production and reproduction, often does nothing other than fetishise repetition and consumption. Our comments in this regard might be read as a general warning against flaunting the political impact of hybrid or synthesised forms of popular cultural production.

The third and final section is rather more optimistic. It seeks to develop, through the ideas of Michel de Certeau, a theory of (muted and conditional) agency that

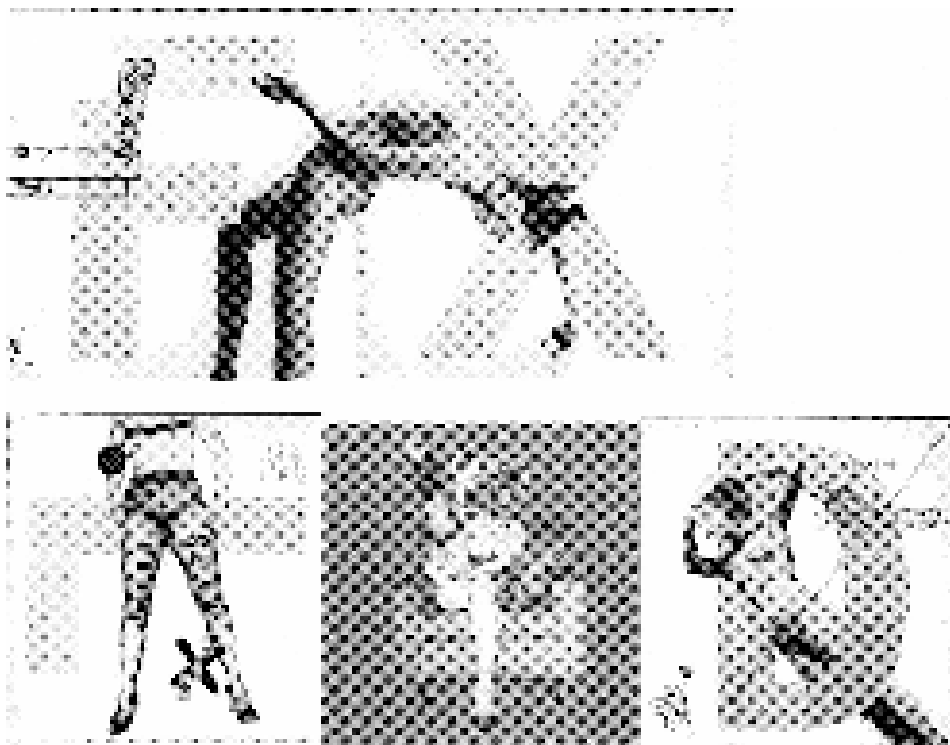


Figure 1. Imagery from the Sleeve of African Dope Records ADOPECD005
Felix Laband: *4/4 Down The Stairs* (Courtesy of OFF BY HEART)

applauds Laband's creativity as the capture of musical possibility in a mode that de Certeau describes as 'pedestrian' combinational and relational practice. In this section we argue that Attali's high-modernist critique of 'mass music' is inadequate to the task of recognising the ways in which individual musicians insert themselves, through ruses of appropriation and manipulation, into prevailing acoustic orders and, in doing so, introduce both novelty and instability into those orders. Our transverse analytical journey from Bakhtin, through Attali to de Certeau, then, brings us back to the question with which we began: how might we understand the significance of the Dionysian turn in systems of meaning that seem conclusively to deprive individuals of the space to act meaningfully? Stated differently, how — in the face of such cogent critique of the carnivalesque — can we make even guarded claims for the subversive impact of Laband's musical 'masquerade'?²

1. The 'Low-Other' as Festive Critique

In recent critical thought an increasing body of writing deals with carnival as a specific mode of cultural understanding. A particularly influential impetus has been lent to this theoretical position by Mikhail Bakhtin's (1968) seminal study *Rabelais and his World*, suggesting that low discourses such as those of the urban poor, subcultures, marginals, and colonised people are closely linked to carnivalesque parody, travesty, and crude mockery. Bakhtin presents carnival as a world of topsy-turvy, heteroglot exuberance, and of ceaseless effusion and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, and ritually degraded and defiled.

Low discourses are therefore juxtaposed with the inherently dominating mode of higher discourses that are normally associated with powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of cultural power (cf. STALLYBRASS & WHITE 1986: 4ff). Bakhtin (1986: 109) attempts to impose an alternative view of the world through hierarchy inversion where low entertainment and the carnivalesque are seen as being both a populist utopian vision of the world 'observed from below' as it were and as a festive critique. As opposed to any official feast, carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing dictum of the established order. It marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival is therefore an authentic celebration of the march of time, that is, of becoming, change and renewal. Thus, it is hostile to all that is static and complete.

² There is, it must be added, something like rhetorical sleight of hand in harnessing de Certeau to the carnivalesque as we do in our final comments. It will become apparent, though, that the notion 'symbolic revolution,' introduced in de Certeau's political writing, also concerns a populist utopian inversion of hegemonic meaning through a ludic signifying at its borders. In this his rebellious students in the streets of Paris in 1968 resemble, in salient theoretical respects at least, Bakhtin's revellers.

In Bakhtin's writing, carnival is approached from an almost lyrical, utopian perspective, ascribing a positive force to all its grotesque qualities.³ Bakhtin views grotesque realism as a continuous process; it being always mobile and hybrid, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing its limits, obscenely decentred, a figural and symbolic resource for exaggeration and inversion.

Within the field of South African popular music, traces of a carnivalesque, parodic art present themselves unabashedly in the work of, among others, Felix Laband. Characterised by an obscurantism and a duality of clashing images and sounds, Laband's music constructs in a figurative sense the contours of a subversively inverted imaginary world. In terms of his musical idiom, Laband's extensive experimentation with contemporary commercial genres results in a profoundly eclectic stylistic extravagance. Greg Bowes (felixmain.htm) cites a bewildering array of global influences present in *Thin Shoes in June* (2001). Besides a complex mix of Detroit and Sheffield techno, Viennese dub'n' bass, Bristol trip hop, Cologne minimalism, and Parisian hip hop and jazz, the influence of avant-garde 'Africana' such as Fela Kuti or Pops Mohamed can be detected.

Suggestive as it is of a nostalgic carnivalesque 'dress parade', Laband's most recent album *4/4 Down the Stairs* (2002) advocates a politics of hierarchy inversion through soft-porn female images and textual innuendo. In this album 'Blue Crack Twos', in particular, manifests the deeply ambiguous nature of Laband's music and its complex intermingling of the festive cum demonised.

Felix Laband explains the title of his album *4/4 Down the Stairs* by stating that it is a comment on the whole 4/4 nature of contemporary music: 'It's more of a joke, just playing around with the 4/4 rhythm. There aren't really any serious 4/4 beats, but I was just playing with that concept. I don't know, I'm thinking of my relation to the world and everything in South Africa it's quite based around 4/4 things.'⁴

Laband's remark reveals that the album focuses its critique primarily on the stereotyped, standardised nature of contemporary commercialised music — especially on that of the so-called 'dance floor' culture. However, *Down the Stairs* also alludes to the seductive urban world of nightlife and jazz clubs frequented by the cultural elite. By placing this somewhat unusual title within the realm of critical discourse, Laband's clarification insinuates that *Down the Stairs* is suggestive of a

³ Various analysts have been critical of this one-sided focus of Bakhtin's project; cf. BALANDIER 1970, EAGLETON 1981: 184, GLUCKMAN 1963 & 1965, SALES 1983: 169, as well as STALLYBRASS & WHITE 1986: 11ff. In more recent literature, Bakhtinian theory facilitates readings that acknowledge the double-sided nature of the carnivalesque (GASH 1993). Mireya Folch-Serra's (1998) study of narrative art applies Bakhtinian theory to questions of ethnicity, while Lili Berko (1992) explores Bakhtinian thought in relation to the social impact of technology. Within a specifically South African context, Bakhtinian theory has examined imprisonment as a carnivalesque 'space of reversal'; cf. DIMITRU (1995) and MONDRY (1992).

⁴ In an interview with Stephen Timm (2002: 1).

subversive 'world upside down', of an 'underground' critical comment on the vulgar ordinariness of conventional everyday life, and of a rigid, institutionalised exercise of power.

The ascendancy of absolute music has led critics and scholars to look for the meaning of music in the notes, viewing words, gestures, and pictures in associated multimedia art forms as tangential to its meaning, or even a distraction from it (COOK 1998: 105ff). Popular music studies have deconstructed this formalistic hierarchy, recognising — among other influences — the role played by record or CD sleeve imagery both in constructing the music's meaning, and in creating a star's identity.⁵

Felix Laband's training in the fine arts ([bio_felixlaband.html](#)) explains the slightly disordered yet powerful aesthetico-ideological discourse of his self-designed CD cover for the album *4/4 Down the Stairs*. Reminiscent of mythological and iconic female representations, Laband's quasi-pornographic imagery flaunts the stereotyped erotic symbolism of black underwear, high-heeled shoes, and provocative stocking suspenders. These images, however, do not simply serve any ideological manifestations of male identity and sexuality. In suggesting the 'world-upside-down', they subvert male power through uninhibited tango poses and animal masks with sinister, sardonic sneers.⁶

1. 'Blue Crack Twos': A Discourse of Transgressive Extremity

As is the case with Laband's album title, the feigned simplicity of the title 'Blue Crack Twos' masks semantic complexity and covert parody. While 'blueness' signifies the track's nostalgic mood, 'crack twos' simultaneously refers to the cracking of a code (the music's duple/triple metric structure) and, as a slang synonym, the drug cocaine. The semantic ambivalence of the title may therefore also include the idea of a drug-induced 'trip', a meaning that is affirmed by the subtle surrealist atmosphere created by verbal interjections and artificial sound effects, including the hooting of a train.

The construction of meaning in 'Blue Crack Twos' is not solely dependent, however, on the performative interaction between verbal text and image. The syntactical and semantic obscurity of Laband's music marks it as a powerful signifying system that communicates through ambiguity and multiple levels of meaning characterised by symbolic extremities.

Laband transgresses the 'rules' of hierarchy and order through rhythmic means, resulting in the distinctive down-tempo style of 'Blue Crack Twos' being continuously disrupted by two metric constructs crudely superimposed on each

⁵ See, in particular, BUXTON (1990) and GOODWIN (1992).

⁶ Our thanks to Suzanne Human for sharing with us her interpretation of Laband's imagery.

other. While the basic metric structure is in triple meter, it is constantly dislocated by a prominent ride rhythm in 2/4 time. Apart from this distortive effect, out-of-sync two-note melodic motives further emphasise the 2/4 3/4 dualism.

The ambiguity of Laband's musical rhetoric is given an added dimension through his prominent use of the diminished seventh chord. From a tonal perspective, this chord represents complete symmetry in that all intervals are spaced at an even distance. Simultaneously, however, because it contains the tritone, the chord is deprived of all tonal stability.

Despite these disruptive rhythmic and tonal elements, 'Blue Crack Twos' is a pervasively nostalgic and even melancholic instrumental track. Laband creates this atmosphere by a melodic citation from 'September Song' (1938), an evocative romantic cabaret song by Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson:

September Song

Oh, it's a long, long while from May to December,
But the days grow short, when you reach September.
When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame
One hasn't got time for the waiting game.
Oh, the days dwindle down to a precious few, September,
November! And these few precious days I'll spend with you,
These precious days I'll spend with you.

Different guises of the ambiguous diminished seventh chord appear throughout the track. Laband constantly employs the original pitches C, E-flat, F-sharp and A from 'September Song' in different permutations and arrangements. At the point in the music where everything seems to be suspended, the two rhythmic patterns merge, and a virtuoso drum solo in 2/4 time is featured. Here, Laband brings in an odd three-note figure that mimics the hooting of a train.

It is not only this motive that is suggestive of a 'journey' or a 'trip'. An artful manipulation of vibraphones and other synthesized effects creates a flow of different colours, moods, and atmospheres. Simultaneously, not only the somewhat detached atmosphere of cool jazz is evoked, but also the sophisticated artificial world of Kurt Weill's songs. This effect is further enhanced by fragmented verbal interjections lending the already complex soundscape a subtle surrealist aura. Laband intensifies the musical tension by emphasising the dissonance of an incomplete dominant thirteenth jazz chord without resolving it.

Commentators describe Laband's multi-layered soundscapes as 'tranquil' ([felixmain.htm](#)), 'abstract' ([felixlaband.shtml](#)), and as music that will 'calm, collect, and chill you' ([archivescd.4htm](#)). Beneath the ostensibly tranquil and reflective surface of this experimental electronica, however, subversive possibilities lurk. The many 'faces' of *4/4 Down The Stairs* mark the album as a source of special interest for the study of symbolic practice suggestive of the carnivalesque and of a

festive critique. Ultimately, Laband's off-beat body-images and unusual musical rhetoric unsettle and challenge social relations and values with a particular eloquence. As a symbolic inversion and cultural negation, Laband's musical 'masquerade' inverts, contradicts, or abolishes commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms. Here is a symbolic transgression and inversion that is at once counter-hegemonic and utopian — in Terry Eagleton's (1981: 149) view, it represents a kind of 'fiction' that rewrites the ideological constructs of dominance through 'a temporary retextualizing of the social formation that exposes its 'fictive' foundations.'

Seen from this perspective, the carnivalesque becomes a source of actions, images and social role-play which, as Robert Stamm (1982: 47) has observed, may be invoked both 'to model and legitimate desire and to degrade all that is spiritual and abstract.' The festive vulgarity of the powerless then becomes a weapon against the pretence and hypocrisy of the powerful:

On the positive side, carnival suggests the joyful affirmation of becoming. It is ecstatic collectivity, the superseding of the individuating principle in what Nietzsche called 'the glowing life of Dionysian revellers'... On the negative, critical side, the carnivalesque suggests a demystificatory instrument for everything in the social formation which renders such collectivity difficult of access: class hierarchy, political manipulation, sexual repression, dogmatism and paranoia. Carnival in this sense implies an attitude of creative disrespect, a radical opposition to the illegitimately powerful, to the morose and monological.

(STAMM 1982: 47)

2. Attali: Repetition and the Limits of the Popular

In his seminal work, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), Jacques Attali casts doubt on the notion that popular music, implicated as it is in networks of repetition, is potentially carnivalesque critique of the social and economic order. He considers, what he calls, 'mass music' to be

a factor in centralisation, cultural normalisation, and the disappearance of distinctive cultures. [...] It slips [he claims] into the growing spaces of activity void of meaning and relations, into the organisation of our everyday life: in all of the world's hotels, all of the elevators, all the factories and offices, all of the airplanes, all of the cars, everywhere, it signifies the presence of a power that needs no flag or symbol: musical repetition confirms the presence of repetitive consumption, of noises as ersatz sociality. (1985: 111)

In such a context of production, the musician 'is paid to perfect the sound form of today's technical knowledge' (1985: 112); he or she participates in the van-

guard of the contemporary social order by performing a frenzied search for the acoustic expression and elaboration of an order of *things* based in repetition. This elaboration, in Attali's view, consists in a particular version of synthesis.

The only freedom left is that of the synthesiser: to combine preestablished programs. [...] The mutation of the combinatory field, the opening of great sound spaces, and the control exerted over performers do not, however, give the composer unlimited power. Instead of toying with the limited nomenclature of the harmonic grid, he outlines processes of composition, experiments with the arrangement of free sounds. An acoustician, a cybernetician, he is transcended by his own tools. [...] Music escapes from musicians. (1985: 114–115)

The contemporary musician, then, accomplishes nothing other than a synthetic pastiche combining existing acoustic materials. This is neither a modernist Hegelian dialectic in which a transcendent synthesis is accomplished from within an oppositional binary, nor is it Adorno's negative dialectic in which the tension between two terms is meaningfully or aesthetically maintained. Rather, sounds, each defined by its potential repetition, are simply placed in parallel, in combination with, or in contrast to one another with the intention, stated at its most cynical, to incite the consumer to buy. Further, what is vaunted in this synthetic acoustemology is the *means* of repetitive production itself (which Attali calls 'the mold'). The technology of repetition, the very instrument of commodity power, is fetishised and the individual creative musician occluded by the signs ('symptoms' even) of hyperindustrialisation. In the case of electronic dance-trance music we might go as far as to speak of a 'post-industrial' digitalisation.

The ordering trope of Attali's work is Breughel's painting *Carnival's Quarrel with Lent*. It represents, in his retelling, 'a battle between two fundamental political strategies, two antagonistic cultural and ideological organizations' (1985: 21). The tradition of the excess of festival, recalling our previous discussion, faces austerity, deprivation and discipline or, in Attali's acoustical epistemology, noise faces silence. The interests of authority are served in silencing disruptive noise or accomplishing its repressive codification as either sense (signification) or musicality. Perceiving the threat of the carnivalesque at its margins, the socio-economic order seeks, in other words, either to exclude (to Other) noise or to subdue its effects through various recuperative tactics and strategies.⁷ Sound, in Attali's historical narrative, is, though, less constrained than other social productions by the material organisation of production. There is, given this, a historical delay between the advent of noise and its codification that affords sound a relative autonomy that Attali describes as its prophetic capacity. Since sound *foreshadows* crises in the po-

⁷ The cases of Nazi and Soviet bans on various forms of musical practice are paradigmatic, but the history of the surveillance and policing of sound extends, of course, from ancient times to the present.

litical economy (1985: 31), the politics of its production and suppression precede and herald an emergent social order and its accompanying ideological scaffolding.

What has happened to the carnivalesque and prophetic role of music in the network of repetition that emerged with the advent of recording? Attali suggests that the subversive impact of carnival is tamed by repetition in at least three distinct ways. First, since each listener has 'a solitary relation with a material object,' the consumption of music is individualised (1985: 32). Capitalism, through this atomisation of ownership, achieves the mass production of social relations (1985: 32) while depriving music of its relational or aggregating power. The private stockpile of commodified music, it can be argued, wards off its political threat: it reinforces the existing social-economic order by affirming the individual's role as an isolated consumer. Carnival, in Bakhtin's view, exists in any consequence only to the extent that it recalls, and hence summons the disruptive power of the embodied process of communal Dionysian revelry. The record (that disembodied trace of an irruptive intervention) simply archives a past moment or process of production. At its heart, then, the project of recording seeks a passive and manageable listener enraptured by the illusion of the march of time.

Second, Attali argues that replication is 'at the origin of a strange festival, where all masks are identical' (1985: 119). The festive ebullience imagined by Bakhtin depends, as we saw, on exorbitant and disproportionate meaning. Obviously excess is stunted by repetition in that revellers' masks come to comprise only a codified, circulating, and commodified deviance from the prevailing social order. Deviance in a repetitive economy is reduced to a recognisable *style* of transgression. While Bakhtin, Nietzsche and Attali all have in mind a spectacular and unpredictable irruption of the repressed into the fabric of sociality (the Dionysian celebrants tore their god apart at culmination of their orgiastic festival), postmodern ironic quotation is based in the detached or ironic recognition of the familiar fragment. This suggests that transgression has been reduced to an intertextual device denuded of any apocalyptic capacity to tear through the veil of the mundane.

Third, mass repetition means that music, because it occurs and arises everywhere, 'has become an element in the normalized reproduction of the labor force and of social regulation' (1985: 120). Since markets are becoming uniform and consumption undifferentiated, the power of music to respond locally is dissipated. In its economic global diffusion, music 'can no longer affirm that society is possible' (1985: 120), precisely because it can no longer sound out a *specific* border at which Carnival once faced Lent. Repetition, the monotony of global consumerism, constructs homogeneity to the point that local (tactical) dissonance can no longer make itself heard. In other words, in their capacity to level (tastes, experience, and even meaning), global flows of musical production and consumption accomplish a regulative and normative levelling of the possibility of dissent.

Before we return to Laband's music, we need to establish where Attali's hope lies. He distils from the creative practice of free jazz and other improvising musicians something he — rather idiosyncratically — calls 'composition.' Composition heralds, in his view, 'the only utopia that is not a mask for pessimism, the only Carnival that is not a Lenten ruse'⁸ (1985: 147). It is beyond our scope here to consider in any detail the intricately textured meaning of composition that Attali develops or all the reasons for the political claims he makes in its name. Let it suffice to say that he bases his argument on the notion that 'knowledge molds itself to the network within which it is inscribed.' In composition, this network is 'cartography, local knowledge, the insertion of culture into production and the general availability of new tools and instruments.' Since composition is not constrained to replication and reproduction, it leads in his view to 'a staggering conception of history, a history that is open, unstable, in which labour no longer advances accumulation, in which the object is no longer a stockpiling of lack, in which music effects a reappropriation of time and space.' Premised thus on denying both symbolic and economic repetition, composition also resists representation; it announces the 'permanent fragility of meaning after the disappearance of usage and exchange' (1985: 147).

It is perhaps ironic that composition, in this sense, both derives from and expresses a thoroughly modernist and elitist aesthetic. In Attali's view, the musical work that avoids the trap of repetitive mass culture simultaneously resists representation. Yet a carnivalesque utopia, given its (necessary) basis in popular culture, can only be imagined as collective and hence as communicable and shared. Art, presumably, cannot reform society if it is not a part of it. Attali's version of 'carnivalesque composition' would seem, then, to be (at this level) contradictory. He joins the already swollen ranks of those theorists of popular culture who view the genuinely popular with distaste.

But that aside, how would Attali most probably characterise Laband's *4/4 Down the Stairs*? He would, we imagine, locate it in various networks of repetition. As we saw in the discussion of both the cover artwork and 'Blue Crack Twos,' Laband's work depends on allusive pastiche, on recycling and recombining existing elements to create against the grain of hegemonic codes of meaning. This friction, though, falls short of anything that Attali would consider the utopian promise of composition. While he might well celebrate the fragmented surface of the music and the playfully dissonant imagery of the cover — his refusal, in other words, to reconcile either the complex soundscapes of the music or the quasi-pornographic images — Attali would indict Laband's attempt at cultural critique as tainted by a Lenten consumerism that drags human subjects towards a conformity that serves the imperatives of capitalist consumption.

⁸ Attali's use of 'Lenten' bears little relation to the use of this term in Christian history and theology. Rather, he uses it to develop a secular notion of disciplined restraint and self-denial for which the religious practice is only emblematic.

Given his commitment to the radically different protocols of composition, Attali would probably interpret Laband's apparently carnivalesque practice as nothing other than 'a Lenten ruse.' The festive vulgarity of the cover and the music recycle elements we would identify in the first instance with the imposed and imposing silence of mass production. The music is, heard through Attali's theoretical grid, programmed, anonymous and depersonalised. It foregrounds the electronic 'mold' of repetition above all else, with — at best — an occasional alienated irruption into the structures of homogeneity. These irruptions create at times (among others, the initial prayer, various found-sounds, verbal interjections, footsteps, and the narrative of the hidden track) a sense of embodiment, of human presence, that is progressively unravelled as the various tracks proceed. The initial track, 'Jesus at the Table,' is emblematic of this. It morphs a young girl's prayer⁹ into a gothic de-gendered and sinister drone. The means of reproduction, then, displace the voice: the human presence giving way to the (electronic) mold, to manipulability. It might be overstepping the mark to discern in this receding human presence 'the domination of men by organization' (ATTALI 1985: 121). There is, though, an identifiable turn in many of Laband's compositions in which natural sounds are disassembled or disarticulated in ways that draw explicit attention to the means of electronic manipulation. In denaturing sound through a refined apparatus of repetition, it could be argued, Laband prefigures the ascendance of a synthesised Lenten (cyber-) homogeneity at the cost of the meaningfully carnivalesque. He stages, in other words, the allegory of disintegration that marks an economy based in repetition and repeatability. He is, however, not immune to its anodyne and homogenising effects. The blandness of the commodity (and the ever-present lack that accompanies accumulation) casts its pall over the music even as, at one level at least, it seeks to warn us against the deleterious effects of commodity fetishism. Ironic pastiche is, here as in other instances of postmodern critique, a double bind. Being aware of the recursive nature of one's aesthetic practice (in this case, drawing attention to the taint of repetition through a relentless foregrounding) does not liberate the music from the politico-economic consequences of its mode of production.

It is perhaps surprising, in the light of Laband's self-reflexive engagement with commodity culture, that passages from *4/4 Down the Stairs* should have found their way into various television commercials (Cell-C mobile phone network, Bonaqua mineral water, an underage drinking and drug abuse campaign, and so on). This links the music to the mall-mindedness of South African consumerism in ways that belie its seemingly carnivalesque surface. It incites people to buy, to comply. Music cannot maintain an ironic or critical distance from the practices and circulations that define the economics of repetition while being instrumental within that configuration. As various musicians and other artists have been well aware,

⁹ 'Jesus, dankie vir die kossies en kleerkies en dankie, Jesus, vir a wonderlike Mamma en Pappa, en dankie Jesus dat ek kos op die tafel het en my Mama en my Pappa, my Sussie. Amen'

the one cancels out the other. Further, the album, bearing as it does the African Dope label, is part of an increasingly commercial network of products and events. This is not to assume a self evident 'global plot of money against sociality' (ATTALI 1985: 90). We cannot, though, deduce the carnivalesque potential of a cultural production such as Laband's album without considering the economic context of its production and circulation, as well as the various commercial uses to which it has been harnessed. There is no *music itself* sealed off from either economics or cultural meaning.

We have, then, more than enough reason to be sceptical of the claim that Laband's music presents a meaningful critique of the hegemonic social order. Attali's argument against the all too common exoneration of popular culture in the name of the carnivalesque, given the politico-economic taint of repetition, is a sobering reminder that seemingly subversive projects need to be approached with a caution that verges on radical scepticism. Even acknowledging this, though, we would argue that there are ways in which one can interpret Laband's work that acknowledge the significance of its aesthetico-ideological critique. The remainder of this article seeks, through the work of Michel de Certeau, to theorise the existence of creative agency despite the seemingly insurmountable structures (economic, historical, discursive, musical) in which musicians like Laband participate. This involves elaborating a theory of significant action, of meaningful individual agency, in contexts that most theorists of politics, culture, economics or discourse describe as fundamentally deterministic. We need, in short, a less systemic version of revelry, one not based in a socio-cultural cartography. To do this, we need to descend, *4/4 Down the Stairs*, to ground level.

3. De Certeau: pedestrians and agency

'Walking the City' begins with de Certeau gazing down on Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center.¹⁰ The sweep of the eye, this overview, reduces this 'most immoderate of human texts' (1984: 92) to a 'panorama-city,' a 'visual simulacrum' (1984: 93). In the mind's eye, Manhattan is transformed into a plan of itself. This perspective is an effect of disentangling oneself from 'the ordinary practitioners of the city' (1984: 93), of overlooking the countless ways in which the city is inhabited. It consists in extrication and distance. To thus surmount and arrest a plenitude of shifting possibilities is, it seems to de Certeau, to literalize a move that inheres in 'rationalism' or 'scientific discourse.' This move is never incidental. Rather it arises in the 'ecstasy' of reading the world in this way (1984: 92), from a certain 'erotics of knowledge' that leads individuals to seek the 'pleasure of

¹⁰ This explication of de Certeau's theory is adapted from the theoretical scaffolding of Titlestad (2004) *Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage*.

seeing the whole' (1984: 92). Knowledge constituted at this ecstatic remove is, according to de Certeau, a function of a will to mastery; it resides in the power to control contingent and mobile processes through surveying, categorizing and representing a 'terrain.' It manifests what he calls the 'scopic or gnostic drive' (1984: 92).

The immobilising view of the observer-theorist overlooks those 'whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of the urban *text*' (1984: 92). To challenge the hegemony of the map (that consists in this oversight), de Certeau's analysis descends from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. It engages 'the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay' (1984: 96). For, according to de Certeau, within, yet despite, the panoptical gaze that seeks to regulate knowledge, a 'swarming activity [thrives] in a proliferating illegitimacy' (1984: 22). Through considering how the city's practitioners 'insinuate themselves into the networks of surveillance' (1984: 96), we might be able to discern the ways in which they *use* the observable organisation while resisting reduction to its categories.

The peripatetic epistemology that is the contrary of the cartographic imagination is embodied by de Certeau's 'walkers' and it is with their story that we are now concerned. It is a story told, at ground level, in terms of *practices, operations* and *tactics*, all three of which might be gathered as 'productive consumption.' In de Certeau's terms, walkers are consumers who produce, 'through their signifying practices [...] »errant« trajectories obeying their own logic' (1984: xviii). Even while their meanings derive from the established vocabularies of their context (in the sense that they embedded in, to use Foucault's formulation, the prevailing *episteme*), 'they trace out the ruses of other interests and desires' (1984: xviii). The capacity to rearrange the vocabulary at one's disposal implies that meanings are not 'determined or captured by the systems in which they develop' (1984: xviii). Rather, by using the available elements in an almost parasitic relation (through appropriation, rearrangement, manipulation, substitution, diversion, superimposition etc.), individuals leave what Jeremy Ahearn calls, 'the irreducible mark of the human subject within [the] order [in which they operate]' (1995: 159). This use is, then, an intricate form of parasitism on the 'order of things' in that the trajectories of meaning contrived by practitioners are, in the marks they leave, 'essential to what life the host may possess' (1995: 159). This seeming contradiction (a parasitic symbiosis) is most meaningfully explored in the context of de Certeau's distinction between 'strategies' and 'tactics.'

The 'strategy' correlates with the act of mapping. It assumes the isolation of an 'area' as a *proper* theatre of reflection as well as the possibility of generating relations with an exterior distinct from it. Strategies, then, depend on the will and power to extricate oneself from a context and to launch a campaign assured of appropriate 'targets,' 'adversaries' and 'aims.' 'Political, economic, and scientific

rationality has been constructed in this strategic model' (de CERTEAU 1984: xix). The 'tactic,' on the other hand, is a technique of the weak and signally belongs to the Other of a constructed order. '[It] insinuates oneself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance' (1984: xix). Here there is no victory over space and time such as that entailed in cartography, rather the practitioner (the tactician, operator, or player) watches for opportunities that have to be 'seized *on the wing*' (1984: xix). Since there is neither a secure place to stand and reflect, nor time to inscribe one's acts for posterity, the practitioner's gains are fleeting: 'whatever [she] wins, [she] does not keep' (1984: xix). Despite this evanescence, though, tactics do entail mutations that make the 'text' 'habitable, like a rented apartment' (1984: xxii). De Certeau's phrasing here is significant. Tactics are marked by errantry; rather than any proprietary relationship to meaning, the practitioner borrows a place and, through the ruses of appropriation, diverts it to different purposes. In a sense, the panoptic order is *tricked* into meaning something other than that ordained in the '*epic of the eye*' (1984: xxi). These tricks aggregate and are disseminated; they leave behind them traces of possibility that slowly and incrementally alter the *tonality* of the system within which they occur.

De Certeau's walkers inhabit the city by organising an 'ensemble of possibilities' (1984: 14).

Their story begins on ground level with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of those »real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.« They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize. (1984: 97)

Let us consider this 'chorus of idle footsteps' (1984: 97). Walkers inhabit, albeit transiently, a succession of places. Irrespective of the criteria applied or the nature of mindfulness entailed, they select a '*here* and a '*there*' (1984: 99) and establish a syntax (a sequence of place-events) along that trajectory. Some possibilities are actualised; others are bypassed. In de Certeau's formulation, the 'crossing, drifting away from, or improvisation of walking *privilege*, *transform* or *abandon* spatial elements' [emphasis added] (1984: 98). Setting aside momentarily the notion of 'transformation,' walks can be understood as the 'spatial acting-out of [...] place' and the simultaneous assertion of 'relations among differentiated positions' (1984: 98). At each juncture the pedestrian is orientated along a self-world axis; that is, in a move we might encapsulate in terms of the *deictic* function of language, she establishes a relationship to a particular place, time and person (both herself and the

'other'). Thus, places take on a temporal dimension, time is expressed as spatial vectors and selfhood emerges as a set of relational 'contracts,' a mobile, contextual evanescence resembling, if anything, the trace of a particle travelling through a cloud chamber. These paths do not, though, exist as isolated singularities. Each path 'affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it *speaks*' (1984: 99). Not only are city streets, bridges, malls, arcades, subways and buildings the context of paths, but previous traversals become a repertoire of elements available for appropriation, manipulation and (re)combination. Walks, then, organise possibilities at two distinct, but related, levels: the spaces comprising the terrain they traverse and the history of other itineraries. They have, it follows, both a synchronic and a diachronic aspect. The pedestrian who secures temporary habitation does so by insinuating possibilities into both the spatial order of the city and the legacy of its use. At each juncture she faces the geography of her context and the history of its meanings.

We return now to the idea that walkers can *transform* the elements of the system they organise. This suggests a potentially contentious version of individual agency in excess of that rendered in, what we might call, 'orthodox' postmodernism. Buchanan points out in his rigorous critique of de Certeau that his interest was 'in the impersonal, the non-individual, that which spoke through the individual subject, rather than what he or she thought or had to say' (2000: 98). This manifests in his devaluing of intention and eschewing the rhetoric of humanist subjectivity. The transformations his pedestrians effect derive, not from a conscious strategic agenda, but from the shifting relationship between individual ruses of manipulation and the system they occupy. For de Certeau, then, practice *itself* is the site of transformation. In this regard, his theory exists in the space of the verb, not in the context of categories and hierarchies. Walkers effect transformation by *performing* 'turns' that may be likened to Charlie Chaplin's use of a cane: 'he does other things with the same thing and he goes beyond the limits that the determinants of the object set on its utilization' (1984: 98). By placing the elements of meaning in different (unforeseen and unsanctioned) combinations or relationships, their possibilities proliferate. Meanings are fractured and dispersed, references disseminated and new opportunities initiated, all without the 'benefit' of either a blueprint or an overview.

We need to ask two questions. In what ways might we take Laband's *4/4 Down the Stairs* to instantiate a pedestrian mode of musical composition? Second, if it does, how might this relate to, or even qualify, the idea of carnivalesque critique?

We begin with the first matter. Laband's compositional technique seems thoroughly pedestrian in the sense that de Certeau defines that term. As emerged in the earlier analysis of 'Blue Crack Twos,' he insinuates himself into musical texts and codes, but rearranges the vocabulary they comprise. This rearrangement, rather than a cartographic strategy prizing reinvention of an aesthetic, social or cultural domain, might be heard as the parasitic appropriation, rearrangement, manipula-

tion, substitution, diversion, superimposition, and so on, of countless musical possibilities. An acoustic city, a constructed order — comprising, in the instance of 'Blue Crack Twos', harmonic, melodic, modal and rhythmic conventions, the sophisticated world of Kurt Weill and the history of its citation, the language and associations of cool jazz, the aural textures and spatiality of 'tripping' and various found sounds with their own connotations — is traversed and, using the techniques of errantry and evasiveness, ordered into trajectories of (musical and acoustic) meaning. It is, then, music of tactical relational possibilities approximating to a walk through a city of historically and culturally embedded sounds. One might, of course, make this claim for all music. It is, though, a matter of degree. Laband's music is, as various commentators have suggested, a richly allusive pastiche inflected by a variety of musical styles and performance traditions. Unlike other compositional techniques, it both draws attention to and celebrates the jester's mufti of its making.

Since each 'journey' on *4/4 Down the Stairs* depends on its historical embedding, it has a diachronic aspect even as its combinational logic seems so obviously synchronic. This is not, for all of its surface play, music without history or memory. Rather it is music that, with an aphoristic evanescence, captures historical elements of social and musical significance and combines them with a pedestrian's disregard for a social and political overview. It has no strategic agenda, but exists entirely within the domain of the tactician, the operator, the player.

At one level, Laband's compositions might be held simply to entail repetitive sampling. At another, though, we might return to de Certeau's mention of Charlie Chaplin's cane: 'he does other things with the same thing' (1984: 98). Laband seems, to us, to **embody** (we use the word under erasure) a combinational logic of an unsanctioned peripatetic epistemology. In 'doing other things with the same things,' he inaugurates, albeit fleetingly, a music of dissonant surrealism in which countless imaginative and affective possibilities lurk. These possibilities, like the incomplete dominant thirteenth jazz chord in 'Blue Crack Twos', are never resolved into a cartography of meaning: they remain the acoustics of the journey, the walk, the trip. While this irresolution strikes commentators as abstraction, it is also an acoustics of making do, of 'productive consumption', in a terrain in which, for whatever reason, one cannot presume to survey, to occupy the platform of a Cartesian observer-theorist.

At the risk of both reintroducing a cartographic turn and of purely conjectural analysis, we might suggest reasons for Laband's eschewal of anything other than a pedestrian musical practice. The first, and most obvious, is a postmodern scepticism regarding general systems of meaning and value. In the face of proliferating hermeneutic tactics and the decline of humanist assumptions, we live in a community of meaning that has largely forgone grand-narratives of meaning in favour of provisional and contingent interpretations. Something of this general epistemological crisis can be discerned in various postmodern musical practices. In the case of Laband's *4/4 Down the Stairs*, it is expressed as a refusal to accept wholesale any

existing or abiding order of musical meaning and a consequent itinerant participation in, or ironic citation of, a variety of soundscapes and codes. In this, Laband's music instantiates the contemporary anti-Cartesian version of the creative subject who is condemned to tactical, or ground level, operations of meaning.

The second reason we might deduce for Laband's pedestrian engagement is both local and historical. The ironic manipulation of the opening prayer, citing an Afrikaans children's programme, the sound of a rope flicking against a flagpole and various other acoustic references suggest that the album engages the shifting topography of South African whiteness. This is only an impression, but there seems an incremental sense as we listen to *4/4 Down the Stairs* that it stages the loss of a strategically organised white South African identity. The social demotion of white South Africa has been experienced as a crisis of meaning: forgoing the complacency of social planners (of observer-theorists gazing down on a mastered terrain), white South Africans have had to assemble pedestrian trajectories from the relics of the old order and the possibilities of the new. The country's liberation, many instances of white aesthetic exploration suggest, has meant giving up the historical map. What remains is to be a pedestrian in a shifting cityscape.

We suggest a third and final reason for Laband's compositional practice only in passing, and with some hesitation. The narcotic logic of the album has been mentioned. There is little doubt that *4/4 Down the Stairs* and the club subculture in which it emerged is infused with a drug-induced relativism. Nothing unravels Cartesian clarity as completely as the cognitive and emotional disorientation experienced during tripping. Drug use, it can be argued, is about seizing possibilities of meaning or feeling momentarily, about tricking our cognitive and affective worlds into meaning something different even when this 'difference' cannot be kept beyond the duration of the trip. We are not implying anything about Laband's lifestyle. His compositions, though, are often marked as trips (train whistles, foot-steps, flight and so on) that suggest being transported into a surreal realm in which a different logic, or more exactly a lack of logic, prevails.

It remains, finally, to consider whether Laband's pedestrian 'turn', understood through de Certeau's notion of practice, might be held to be meaningfully carnivalesque. De Certeau does not use the carnival as a category of practice, nor is there anything intrinsically carnivalesque about itinerant meaning or epistemology. As was mentioned, though, he is concerned to demonstrate that tactical practices *can* transform the system in which they operate. In his analysis of the student uprising in Paris in 1968, for instance, de Certeau holds that

[revolutionary or popular] movements can only make use of terms belonging to an established order, and yet already evince its overthrow. A displacement is effected, but it is illegible as such in its expression since it uses the vocabulary and even the syntax of a known idiom: but it »transposes« the idiom in the way the organist changes the score by giving it a *different* tonality. (1997[1]:21)

Rather than destroying the paradigm of the 'city,' pedestrians, like the Parisian students and workers, subvert its terms by inducing slippages and indeterminacy. They displace the vocabulary and syntax of its abiding logic by performing turns and detours, taking shortcuts, multiplying the uses of public spaces, and by actively discovering unintended meanings in the chance juxtapositions along the routes they construct. In short, individual walks transpose the city into a different register (or 'tonality') by diverting it from its seemingly immobile order. Through their appropriation of spaces (i.e., occupying them by diverse tactics), pedestrians gradually destabilise the panoptical 'order of things.' Steadily, yet in seemingly unpredictable ways, the elements of that order begin to aggregate different possibilities. As de Certeau argues elsewhere, 'the *styles or ways of practising space* flee the control of the city planners [who] concoct and map out an empty city; leaving it when the inhabitants come, as if they are savages who will, without their consent, turn topsy-turvy the designs they have made' (1997[2]: 133).

This is a modest politics of subversion that, committed as it is to the tactical, is both difficult to discern and impossible to describe. It represents, in our view, a trenchant characterisation, at an altogether less cartographic level, of how something resembling carnivalesque subversion might manifest. Bakhtin's revellers are excessive and ebullient celebrants of instability and indeterminacy. Their inverted world engages all that presents itself as static and complete, sounding off at the margins of the sanctioned orthodoxy. De Certeau's pedestrians, on the other hand, introduce slippage and indeterminacy through countless 'small' (or local) acts of intervention, recombination, and manipulation that gradually leave a trace; that incrementally change the parameters of what is possible within a given system of meaning. At once less apocalyptic and less individual than the Dionysian celebrants, these pedestrians seem to avoid the panoptical gaze of the regulatory system and to alter the world almost despite themselves — not because they have an overview or a theory of engagement, but because, step-by-step, what was once illegitimate or excluded enters the prevailing symbolic order. It is only in retrospect that we can grasp that new things can now be said.

If Laband accomplishes subversion in his urbane electronica, it is of this pedestrian order. His is not the noise of carnival in which Attali (rather perversely, we have argued) hears the revolutionary promise of 'composition,' nor is it Bakhtin's utopian grotesquery. It is another order of practice altogether, but one that, with some rhetorical sleight of hand, we might still consider carnivalesque. For the music *practices* space liberated from the sanctioned acoustic order, just as the album's cover imagery celebrates a world of subversive and disruptive erotic masking. It destabilises, in its playfully combinational poetics, settled or residual associations and, in doing so, subverts the designs that others have made. Of course it lacks 'vision,' coherence and cogency and is endlessly prey to the deleterious effects of repetition. That is because it resists the erotics of the overview and the power that consists in extrication. Returning to Stamm's description that we cited earlier (1982:

47), Laband adopts an attitude of meaningful (significant) disrespect that, each step of the way, unravels the pretensions of the 'morose and monological.' Even though his pedestrian tactics are virtually impossible to map, even though their effects will be understood only some way down the line and even if our analytical repertoire is unsuited to their subtleties, we cannot afford to write them off.

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*Sažetak*SVEČARSKA KRITIKA I DJELOVANJE U DJELU *4/4 DOWN THE STAIRS* FELIXA LABANDA

Ovaj članak predstavlja, na različitim razinama, dijalošku analizu djela *4/4 Down the Stairs* (kao trivijalno, kao banalni pastiš, kao komercijalno, nekoherentno, sekundarno ili kao izbljedjeli minimalizam).

Rasprava se sastoji od triju odlomaka. U prvome se teoretizira, kroz osporavanu prizmu formulacije o karnevalesknom Mihaila Bahtina, o Labandovoj uporabi 'niskog drugog' ('low-other') kao svečarske kritike. U njemu se rješava estetičko-ideološki diskurs, uključujući dizajn omota i sâmu glazbu, približavajući se glazbi opisnom analizom 'Blue Crack Twos', jedne od traka na albumu. Ovaj odlomak valja čitati kao skeptično uprizorenje Bahtinova teorijskog aparata koje privlači pozornost na svoja ograničenja čak i kada ocrtava mogućnosti karnevala kao oružja protiv pretvaranja i hipokrizije moćnih.

Druga rasprava komplicira cijelu stvar. obraća se djelu francuskog ekonomista i filozofa Jacquesa Attalija da bi razmotrila njegovo razlikovanje između 'masovne glazbe' i onoga što definira prilično idiosinkretički kao 'kompoziciju'. Attalijeva političko-ekonomska teorija glazbene produkcije, koja supostavlja polivalentne trope karnevala i korizme, predstavlja uvjerljivu kritiku industrije popularne glazbe. Potom se u ovom odlomku unosi dodatna opominjuća nota kao protuteža slavljenoj 'veseloj' kritici. Njome se sugerira da prividno karnevaleskna subverzija, kada je nerazmrsivo integrirana u produkcijske i reproduksijske krugove, često ne čini ništa drugo nego fetišizira ponavljanje i potrošnju.

Treći i završni odlomak je optimističniji. U njemu se nastoji razviti, putem ideja Michela de Certeaua, teorija nijemog i uvjetovanog djelovanja koja povlađuje Labandovoj kreativnosti kao hvatanje glazbene mogućnosti na način koji de Certeau opisuje kao 'pješačku' kombinatornu i odnosnu praksu. U ovom se odlomku pokazuje da Attalijeva krajnje modernistička kritika 'masovne glazbe' ne odgovara zadatku prepoznavanja puteva kojima se glazbenici pojedinci, s pomoću lukavstava prilagođavanja i manipulacije, uključuju u prevladavajuće akustičke poretke te čineći tako uvode u te poretke i novinu i nepostojanost.