



## Systems of articulation, logics of change: Communities and scenes in popular music

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SYSTEMS OF ARTICULATION,  
LOGICS OF CHANGE:  
COMMUNITIES AND SCENES IN  
POPULAR MUSIC

'The Music Industry in a Changing World':  
concluding remarks<sup>1</sup>

**T**he most welcome feature of the conference on which this *Cultural Studies* is based was the sense that issues perpetually on the agenda at meetings of popular-music scholars were being held up for re-examination. In large measure, this was dictated by the 'Changing World' of the conference's title, and in the autumn of 1990 that phrase was more resonant than usual. Global ownership trends within the cultural industries and the emergence of a unified and enlarged European market had cast doubts on the continued usefulness of such long-entrenched unities as 'Anglo-American rock', as Simon Frith's presentation suggested. A panel dealing with the relationship between popular music and the state revealed a divergence of interests between European and United States scholars, most notably around censorship and record labelling controversies and the degree to which these should be seen as central to the contemporary politics of popular music.<sup>2</sup>

Almost as striking, given the long-standing preoccupation of popular-music scholars with the concept of community, was the growing influence of certain tendencies within cultural theory, in particular those marked by an engagement with concepts of space and nation. The caution which has accompanied discussions of musical authenticity within popular-music studies has only recently come to be directed at notions of a regional or national musical space.<sup>3</sup> This is reflected, in part, in a new interest in the diversity of musical practices unfolding within particular urban centres, one of whose effects has been to undermine claims as to the uniformity of local musical cultures. Within Canadian and Québécois discussions of popular music, this same caution has been evident in critical responses to (or crises in) the politics of cultural nationalism, echoes of which were heard in conference debates over the link between music and cultural identity.

The long-standing concern of popular-music scholars with the disruption and fragmentation of cultural communities has often masked – in part through its nobility of purpose – the investment in imaginary unities which underlies it. Those encountering ethnomusicological studies for the first time after an apprenticeship in the hermeneutics of suspicion may, like myself, be struck by the prominence within them of notions of cultural totality or claims asserting the expressive unity of musical practices. Many of these premises have been maintained, albeit in a much less coherent form, in the sociology and criticism of rock music. Here, the articulatory force of specific musical practices has often displaced the integrity of cultural communities as the guarantee of music's meaningfulness, but one may still find a privileging of the geographically local as guarantee of the historical continuity of musical styles.

If the status of the local has been transformed within contemporary societies, this is in part through the workings of what Edward Said has called an 'increasingly universal system of articulation' (Said, 1990: 8). This 'system' is, obviously, shaped by economic and institutional globalization, and it is the task of a critical political economy to account for its effects. (Paul Rutten's paper, pages 292–303 in this issue, offers useful tools for doing so.) The risk remains that an emphasis on the disruptive effects of economic reordering will result in the valorization of musical practices perceived to be rooted in geographical, historical and cultural unities which are stable and conflated. Popular-music scholars and analysts of the cultural industries have generally been less attentive to ways in which this same system of articulation is produced by migrations of populations and the formation of cultural diaspora which have transformed the global circulation of cultural forms, creating lines of influence and solidarity different from, but no less meaningful than those observable within geographically circumscribed communities.<sup>4</sup>

These transformations require, of those studying popular music, more than well-intended gestures in the direction of multicultural diversity. They invite an attention to the distinctive logics of change and forms of valorization characteristic of different musical practices, as these are disseminated through their respective cultural communities and institutional sites. Two specific examples of this system of articulation – those characteristic of the cultures of alternative rock and dance music – will be discussed in detail later in this essay. In each case, and perhaps unsurprisingly, one may find distinctive relationships between localism as a musical value and the articulatory system of which Said speaks.

Canadian academics who are engaged in speaking and writing about popular music, like myself, sometimes express our growing scepticism at the way in which intermittent returns to older musical traditions by popular musicians within Canada and Quebec have been enshrined as moments of disengagement from the functioning of the international music industries. The Québécois folk-rock of the early 1970s and country-rock of English-Canadian post-punk cultures offer rich and valued examples of successful national traditions, and their place within historical accounts is well deserved. At the same time, however, each emerged within international

industrial and cultural contexts which shaped the conditions of existence and certain of the 'meanings' of musical localism throughout Western countries. This interlocking of local tendencies and cyclical transformations within the international music industries is particularly striking in the case of contemporary Quebec, whose recording industry has been revitalized by an ongoing series of dance-pop stars passing from music-video networks to Top 40 radio and television talk shows.

At the same time, the criteria of public support for popular recordings within Canada frequently presume patterns of career development, forms of collaboration and a relationship between domestic and international popularity which implicitly privilege the rock group over the dance-music production team, the album over the single, and the gradual building of an audience base over the rapid circulation of recordings through a dispersed group of metropolitan centres. While at least five British music-oriented magazines have run recent cover stories on a Toronto rap group – The Dream Warriors – and the local contexts of its emergence, there is a striking absence of media coverage of this activity within Canada. One finds, at the same time, little sense that such activity corresponds to the objectives of domestic music-oriented policy or the concerns of those engaged in defining a national musical culture. Basing a politics of local or Canadian music on the search for musical forms whose relationship to musical communities is that of a long-term and evolving expressivity will lead us to overlook ways in which the making and remaking of alliances between communities are the crucial political processes within popular music.

The Carleton conference appeared to signal a relative decline in the importance of the United States as a privileged point of reference in discussions of popular music. There were obvious reasons for this: a reduction in the number of US-owned major recording firms, the much-diagnosed 'crisis' of rock music and its mythico-ideological bases, and the recent interest of popular-music scholars in public policies intended to achieve economic growth (a concern relatively rare within US research). Jody Berland's paper was, nevertheless, a useful reminder that the new globalization of the cultural industries is unlikely to alter regional or hemispheric patterns of economic subordination. Less certain, in the Canadian context, is the extent to which arguments for national economic self-determination in the music industries must necessarily be backed by claims of diminishing diversity or the isolation of national musical forms for protection. Amidst the observable busyness of metropolitan music scenes – and given the noticeable fragmentation of musical tastes among academics, their students, and music policy-makers – arguments in defence of domestic record manufacturing and distribution facilities posed in the language of economic viability have increasingly displaced debates over the sorts of music to be protected.

### **The heartland as collapsing centre**

In November 1990, *Billboard* magazine published a front-page 'Special

Report' entitled 'Rock losing grip as other genres gain' (DiMartino and Duffy, 1990). The story which unfolded therein followed the familiar contours of accounts of centres which can no longer hold. What is declining, the report suggested, was mainstream rock of the so-called US 'heartland', of the sort associated with such artists as Tom Petty or John Cougar Mellencamp. More generally, it was claimed, the contemporary youth audience for popular music is being polarized between the 'extremes' of dance-based pop and heavy metal. As *Billboard's* reporters made the rounds of record-company personnel seeking out reasons for this decline, a number of explanations were offered. This slump in mainstream rock was either cyclical, the result of popular music's political edge having moved, temporarily, into rap music; or it was a sign of the absence of new performers working this particular musical terrain. Some of those interviewed suggested simply sitting out what they called the era of 'fads' and disposable pop 'sound bites' until the durable values of Midwestern rock made their return.

The most revealing of these interviews was with Hugo Burnham, described as 'A & R director at Island Records and a punk survivor who once played drums with Gang of Four'. Burnham suggested that:

[R]ock music is losing ground because there's not an awful lot new that's happened to rock music since punk. . . . Since then, what is generally seen as rock music has been so regenerative stylistically and musically to the point where it's generic [*sic*]. The whole pop metal scene is all form over content. (DiMartino and Duffy, 1990: 100)

One need not share Burnham's judgement of these events to see within his diagnosis a recognition of important transformations within the culture of Western popular music. The decline of heartland rock as a specific form is less significant than is the more general waning of a distinctive sense (however fantasmatic) of rock music's centre – as involving the articulation of regional, authorial visions with a presumed affective appeal across the broad international culture of Western popular music. A view of rock music's history as an ongoing succession of such visions – questionable, in any case – is less and less appropriate when the 'regions' from which performers emerge are most often relatively insular (but geographically dispersed) generic traditions, or particular positions within the social relations of the Western city.

If, at one level, these changes are rooted in processes of internationalization and the diminished importance of the US market, then a comparison with the film industry suggests itself. Press coverage of that industry throughout 1990 and the early months of 1991 pointed repeatedly to a growing gulf between the domestic and international markets for US-made feature films. Most often, this gulf was described in terms of a difference between the small budgets deemed necessary to long-term industry health and the need, in order to achieve international success, for high production values and expensive stars. More elaborate readings of this situation offered

versions of a no-more-*Driving-Miss-Daisies* scenario: the disappearance of unspectacular, dramatically complex and culturally specific low-budget films as a result of producers catering to the perceived needs of the international market (e.g., Turner, 1991; Landro, 1990).

This comparison is convincing if one accepts that the quasi-monopoly of the big-budget action film grows out of similar conditions to those which have brought about Hugo Burnham's triumph of form over content, and that the effects of these changes are identical. This is a correspondence, nevertheless, which I would wish to dispute. In the case of the film industry one does have, perhaps, evidence of the domination of what Michael Dorland has labelled films from 'the modern nowhere', texts partaking of a set of international generic shorthands (Dorland, 1987: 4).<sup>5</sup> If the condition of contemporary popular music is quite distinct, however, this is because processes of internationalization within it have served to reproduce a complex diversity – rather than a coherent uniformity – from one urban centre to another. While the consumption practices of film audiences are far from homogeneous, popular music is, nevertheless, marked to a much greater extent by its importance within processes of social differentiation and interaction. The drawing and enforcing of boundaries between musical forms, the marking of racial, class-based and gender differences, and the maintenance of lines of communication between dispersed cultural communities are all central to the elaboration of musical meaning and value. What the analyst may reconstruct in the case of the cinema – the correlation of tastes and consumption patterns with categories of social identity – is a much more explicit and resonant component of the sense music fans make of their own involvement in the culture of popular music.

In this respect, there is a certain clumsy aptness in Burnham's argument that rock has become 'generic', or that pop metal embodies the triumph of 'form over content'. In a very real sense, the social and cultural spaces within which dance-pop music or heavy metal flourish are likely to remain stable for the foreseeable future. Like virtually all those forms which have emerged in the last fifteen years, they are less likely to recede with cyclical change than continue to develop within the cultural spaces appropriate to them. The coherence of these spaces is rooted in such characteristics as their rates of change and turnover, the sorts of values attached, within them, to performer personae, and the forms and degrees of involvement in musical culture which they presume. While these characteristics may crystallize around particular musical forms, such as heavy metal, they are more usefully seen as defining musical terrains within which a variety of forms may be integrated.

Within this complex of cultural spaces, heartland rock will be seen as no more central and no less ethnically or racially specific than any other form. Its decline is due less to an internal ideological crisis of the rock project than to the ethnicization of white popular musical forms more generally. This ethnicization may be seen as the long-delayed recognition, in the case of forms often regarded as historically privileged or central, that their positioning (and that of their audiences) within a set of social and cultural relations is more determinant of their meanings than their genealogical

heritage or capacity to evoke myths of community. Even within audiences which are predominantly white, the cultural terrain normally associated with mainstream, heartland rock has been fractured along the lines of age and taste: firstly, by the seemingly permanent institution of the alternative rock scene as the locus of musical activity for audiences involved in a connoisseurist fashion in rock music; secondly, by the continued importance of the young adolescent market to the turnover of successful records, and the alliance of this market with dance music and heavy metal; and, finally, by the hazy buying patterns of older adolescents and young adults, who are distributing their purchasing power across a wide array of catalogue or speciality materials newly available on compact disc.

#### TERMS OF ANALYSIS

In a suggestive paper, Barry Shanks has pointed to the usefulness of a notion of 'scene' in accounting for the relationship between different musical practices unfolding within a given geographical space (Shanks, 1988). As a point of departure, one may posit a musical scene as distinct, in significant ways, from older notions of a musical community. The latter presumes a population group whose composition is relatively stable – according to a wide range of sociological variables – and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage. A musical scene, in contrast, is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization. The sense of purpose articulated within a musical community normally depends on an affective link between two terms: contemporary musical practices, on the one hand, and the musical heritage which is seen to render this contemporary activity appropriate to a given context, on the other. Within a musical scene, that same sense of purpose is articulated within those forms of communication through which the building of musical alliances and the drawing of musical boundaries take place. The manner in which musical practices within a scene tie themselves to processes of historical change occurring within a larger international musical culture will also be a significant basis of the way in which such forms are positioned within that scene at the local level.

At one level, this distinction simply concretizes two countervailing pressures within spaces of musical activity: one towards the stabilization of local historical continuities, and another which works to disrupt such continuities, to cosmopolitanize and relativize them. Clearly, the point is not that of designating particular cultural spaces as one or the other, but of examining the ways in which particular musical practices 'work' to produce a sense of community within the conditions of metropolitan music scenes. This move – recasting powerful unities as ideological effects – is obviously a familiar and rather conventional one within cultural theory, and my intention is not that of exposing the relative status of notions of musical

community (in what my friend Don Wallace calls the now-it-can-be-told! rhetoric of anticlimatic revelation). Nevertheless, as subsequent sections of this essay will argue, the cosmopolitan character of certain kinds of musical activity – their attentiveness to change occurring elsewhere – may endow them with a unity of purpose and sense of participating in ‘affective alliances’ (Grossberg, 1984) just as powerful as those normally observed within practices which appear to be more organically grounded in local circumstances.

The ongoing debate within popular-music studies over the relative primacy of production and consumption has often precluded the analysis of what might be called the ‘logics’ of particular musical terrains.<sup>6</sup> I hope, in the sections which follow, to leave entangled three relevant prior uses of the term ‘logic’. The first, drawn from Pierre Bourdieu’s (e.g., 1979) notion of the ‘field’ of cultural practices, is meant to suggest those procedures through which principles of validation and means of accommodating change operate within particular cultural spaces so as to perpetuate their boundaries. It may be argued that the complex and contradictory quality of cultural texts – to which cultural studies research has been so attentive – has prevented neither their circulation within societies nor their alignment with particular population groups and cultural spaces from following regularized and relatively stable patterns. If this predictability is the result of semantic or ideological contradictions within these texts usually being resolved in favour of one set of meanings over others, then an analysis of these more general patterns, rather than of the conflicts which unfailingly produce them, may have a provisional usefulness at least.

The specificity of these ‘fields’, nevertheless, is shaped in part by the ‘regions’ they occupy, as markets and contexts of production, relative to a given set of cultural institutions. Bernard Miège’s (1986: 94) elaboration of a ‘social logic’ of cultural commodities, while concerned principally with processes of production, may be extended to an examination of the ways in which cultural commodities circulate within their appropriate markets and cultural terrains. If there is a specificity to cultural commodities, it has much to do with the ways in which their circulation through the social world is organized as a lifecycle, in the course of which both the degree and basis of their appeal is likely to change.<sup>7</sup> Different cultural spaces are marked by the sorts of temporalities to be found within them – by the prominence of activities of canonization, or by the values accruing to novelty and currency, longevity and ‘timelessness’. In this respect, the ‘logic’ of particular musical culture is a function of the way in which value is constructed within them relative to the passing of time. Similarly, cultural commodities may themselves pass through a number of distinct markets and populations in the course of their lifecycles. Throughout this passage, the markers of their distinctiveness and the bases of their value may undergo significant shifts.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, and in what is admittedly an act of trivialization and infidelity, I would take from the writings of Michel de Certeau (1990) the sense of a logic of circumstantial moves. The preoccupation of music sociologists with the expressive substance of musical forms has often obscured the extent to



which particular instances of change might best be explained in terms of an as-yet elusive microsociology of backlashes or of failed and successful attempts at redirection within a given cultural terrain. This is particularly true in the case of contemporary dance-music culture, where, one might argue, there is little rationality to certain 'moves' (such as the 'Gregorian House' moment of early 1991) beyond the retrospective sense of appropriateness produced by their success. The risk of an analysis pursued along these lines is that it will result in little more than a formalism of cyclical change. One may nevertheless see the logic of these moves as grounded in the variable interaction between two social processes: (a) the struggles for prestige and status engaged in by professionals and others (such as disc jockeys) serving as 'intellectuals' within a given musical terrain; and (b) the ongoing transformation of social and cultural relations – and of alliances between particular musical communities – occurring within the context of the contemporary Western city. An attentiveness to the interaction between these two processes is necessary if one is to avoid either of two traps: on the one hand, privileging the processes within popular musical culture which most resemble those of an 'art world' and overstating the directive or transformative force of particular agents within them; on the other, reading each instance of musical change or synthesis as unproblematic evidence of a reordering of social relations.

### **Localizing the cosmopolitan: the culture of alternative rock**

By the early or mid-1980s, a terrain of musical activity commonly described as 'alternative' was a feature of virtually all US and Canadian urban centres. In one version of its history, the space of alternative rock is seen to have resulted from the perpetuation of punk music within US and Canadian youth culture, a phenomena most evident in the relatively durable hardcore and skinhead cultures of Los Angeles and elsewhere. As local punk scenes stabilized, they developed the infrastructures (record labels, performance venues, lines of communication, etc.) within which a variety of other musical activities unfolded. These practices, most often involving the eclectic revival and transformation of older musical forms, collectively fell under the sign of the term 'alternative'. As the centrality of punk within local musical cultures declined, the unity of alternative rock no longer resided in the stylistic qualities of the music embraced within it. Rather, as I shall argue, that unity has come to be grounded more fundamentally in the way in which such spaces of musical activity have come to establish a distinctive relationship to historical time and geographical location.

Arguably, the most notable feature of alternative-rock culture over the last decade or so has been the absence within it of mechanisms through which particular musical practices come to be designated as obsolete. By the middle of the 1980s, the pluralism of alternative-rock culture was such that the emergence of new stylistic forms within it would rarely be accompanied by the claim that such forms represented a trajectory of movement for that culture as a whole. On the contrary, those processes by which musical forms

become central poles of attraction and are subsequently rendered obsolete had largely disappeared. One may contrast this condition with that of the period immediately following the emergence of punk in Great Britain. There, one finds a preoccupation with finding pre-existent forms which might sustain the cultural space of punk, and a sense that these forms – whether revived, like the Mod sound of the 1960s, or borrowed laterally, from funk or reggae – might serve as poles of collective attraction for post-punk culture as a whole. This retrieval of earlier forms or appropriation of adjacent forms participated in a more general enterprise of finding the form appropriate to the next collective move in an ongoing transformation of rock-music culture and its values.

Within the US and Canada, the relationship between the different musical practices undertaken within the terrain of alternative rock would become one of lateral expansion. Within this terrain, different musical practices came to map out a range of increasingly specific stylistic combinations within an ongoing process of differentiation and complexification. Change within the culture of alternative rock, to the extent that it was observable at all, more and more took the form of new relationships between generic styles constitutive of the canon which had sedimented within alternative-rock culture since the late 1970s. It was no longer the case, as it had been in the period immediately following punk, that change would involve the regular displacement of styles as the historical resonance of each emerged and faded. The stabilization of this distinct temporality has had its most profound effects on the relationship between alternative culture and African-American musical forms, with the latter standing implicitly for a relationship to technological innovation and stylistic change against which the former has come to define itself.

To understand this condition, we may examine the role still played within the terrain of alternative rock by musical cross-fertilization and hybridization. Here, the exercise of combining styles or genres will rarely produce the sense of a synthesis whose constituent elements are displaced, or through which musical communities are brought into new alliances, as has been the case at particular transitional points within rock history. Rather, one sees the emergence of a wide variety of stylistic or generic exercises, in which no style begins as privileged or as more organically expressive of a cultural point of departure. One effect of this has been to install the individual career, rather than the culture of alternative rock as a whole, as the principal context within which change is meaningful. Moves within this culture – from punk to country, psychedelia to boogie blues, and so on – represent idiosyncratic passages across the space of alternative rock rather than attempts at collective redirection.

This characteristic of the terrain of alternative rock has both shaped and responded to the commodity forms which circulate within it. In its reliance on the institutional infrastructures of campus radio stations, independent record stores, and live performance tours, alternative rock has been allied with institutions engaged in the valorization of their exhaustivity and diversity, and in maintaining the accessibility of a wide range of musical

practices. The slowness of turnover which this produces is linked to the growth in importance of performer careers, inasmuch as the value of a particular recording is not dependent upon its capacity to register collective change within the larger cultural space in which it circulates. In this respect, the much-discussed 'co-optation' of punk and post-punk musics by major recording firms represents, in part, a paradoxical convergence of operational logics. Of the various forms of appropriation of these musics attempted by major firms, the most successful has been the ongoing monitoring of alternative-rock culture (often through the setting-up or affiliation of specialty labels) so as to discover careers susceptible to further development.

One effect of these processes has been an intermittently observed sense of crisis within the culture of alternative rock music. As suggested, the capacity of this culture to cater to the most specific of taste formations is accompanied by the sense that no particular stylistic exercise may be held up as emblematic of a collective, forward movement on the part of this terrain as a whole. Simon Reynolds has described the ways in which the self-valorization of alternative rock had come, by the early 1980s, to take the form of gestures towards the busyness and pluralistic health of small-scale musical activity rather than of claims to a collective and transgressive assault (however imaginary) on the dominant forms or institutions of popular musical culture.<sup>9</sup> The organization of alternative rock culture in these terms has had two significant – and generally overlooked – consequences which any political diagnosis of that culture must confront. These extend beyond the more general (and not necessarily negative) waning of collective purpose and criteria of judgement common within cultural spaces marked by high levels of pluralism and eclecticism.

The first of these is the enshrining of specific forms of connoisseurship as central to an involvement in alternative musical culture. Here, an alternative reading of the stabilization of post-punk culture within the US and Canada suggests itself. Despite the difficulty of reconstructing this historical context, I would point to the important interaction, in the mid and late 1970s, between the terrain of punk and 'New Wave' and pre-existing connoisseurist tendencies within the culture of rock music. To a considerable extent, the institutions of New Wave within the United States and Canada came to overlap with those constitutive of a network of enterprises catering to an interest in the history of rock-based forms of recorded music – an infrastructure which had existed at least since the early 1970s. These institutions were active in the historical documentation and revival of a variety of older rock-based musical movements (such as 'surf' music or the 'garage-band' movement of the mid-1960s.)<sup>10</sup> From the mid-1970s through to the present, a variety of small enterprises have involved themselves simultaneously in projects of historical revival (reissuing recordings from the 1960s and publishing fan magazines devoted to older musical forms) and in the production, distribution and sale of recordings associated with punk and those tendencies which succeeded it.<sup>11</sup>

This overlapping of alternative-rock culture and the cultural space of records collectors and historical archivism should scarcely be surprising,

given the predictable settling of both within the sociological limits of a largely white bohemia. Part of the implicit work of alternative-rock culture over the past decade has been the construction of a relatively stable canon of earlier musical forms – 1960s trash psychedelia, early 1970s metal, the dissident rock tradition of the Velvet Underground and others – which serves as a collective reference point. The substance of this canon is less significant, at this point in my account, than is the fact that the cultivation of connoisseurship in rock culture – tracking down old albums, learning genealogical links between bands, and so on – has traditionally been one rite of passage through which the masculinism of rock-music culture has been perpetuated. Many of the temporary and transversal moves common in the early days of New Wave – moving from theatre or performance art into bands, or playing around with the forms of earlier, pre-rock musics – came to seem less and less appropriate or frequent as the 1980s wore on, and as the association of entry into alternative-rock culture with an activity of apprenticeship became entrenched. With these developments, the profile of women as performers within post-punk culture has diminished, and, just as the culture of alternative rock within the United States and Canada has become almost exclusively white, it has become overwhelmingly male as well.

A second consequence of the logic of development of alternative-music culture within Canada and the US is the paradoxical status of localism within it. In their reliance on small-scale infrastructures of production and dissemination, these spaces are rooted deeply within local circumstances, a feature commonly invoked in claims as to their political significance. Nevertheless, the degree to which localism remains an important component of musical meaning within the culture of alternative rock requires close examination. The aesthetic values which dominate local alternative terrains are for the most part those of a musical cosmopolitanism wherein the points of musical reference are likely to remain stable from one community to another. The development of alternative-rock culture may be said to follow a logic in which a particular pluralism of musical languages repeats itself from one community to another. Each local space has evolved, to varying degrees, the range of musical vernaculars emergent within others, and the global culture of alternative rock music is one in which localism has been reproduced, in relatively uniform ways, on a continental and international level.

One consequence of this condition is that the relationship of different local or regional scenes to each other is no longer one in which specific communities emerge to enact a forward movement to which others are drawn. What has declined is the sense, important at different moments within rock music's history, that a regional or local style offers the direction for change deemed appropriate to a given historical moment and provides a particular trajectory of progress which others will follow. Rather, the relationship of different local spaces of activity to each other takes the form of circuits, overlaid upon each other, through which particular styles of alternative music circulate in the form of recordings or live performances.

The ability of groups and records to circulate from one local scene to another, in a manner that requires little in the way of adaptation to local circumstances, is an index of the way in which a particularly stable set of musical languages and relationships between them has been reproduced within a variety of local circumstances.

### **Drawing lines, making centres: the culture of dance music**

Out on the dancefloor there are plenty more tell-tale signs to let you know if you're in the wrong sort of club. The music is always a giveaway, especially if the DJ still thinks it's a good idea to play 'French Kiss' or other similar rubbish. DJ's who prefer to show off their mixing skills rather than play good music are always worth avoiding, as are most of those who decide to adopt silly names (Crysell, 1990).

Several years ago, at the end of a conference held at Carleton University, I went with a number of academic colleagues to Hull, Quebec to dance. We ended up at the most explicitly 'underground' of the many clubs along Hull's main street (one whose recent history has been marred by door-admittance policies and changes in musical style widely regarded as racist). As members of our group began to dance – with, in some cases, unexpected abandon – it was clear that the space of this club, like the act of dancing itself, evoked within many of them a sense of the eternal. The club, its clientèle and the music being played all signified the transhistoricity of a youth culture which one might visit intermittently and find unchanged, and the act of dancing itself was intimately bound up with a generalized sense of diminished inhibition. It occurred to me that the principal differences between our group and the rest of those in attendance were not the expected ones of age and temperament. Rather, they seemed rooted in the unity academics were quick to ascribe to a cultural space which was characterized, more than most others, by the marking of distinction and drawing of boundaries.<sup>12</sup>

As list of the levels on which this marking is carried out would be virtually without end. Dance clubs are positioned relative to others, not only along the predictable lines of musical style, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity, but in terms of a variety of less frequently acknowledged criteria: the explicitness of sexual interaction within them, the manner in which their DJ handles the tension between playing requests and retaining prestige within his peer community, the level of tolerance of deviations from expected behavioural norms and so on. Among a club's clientèle, further distinctions take shape around the degree to which people dance within disciplined parameters (as opposed to cutting loose), or such minor clues as whether or not one remains on or leaves the dance floor when a new and as-yet unpopular song is played. Most importantly, the composition of audiences at dance clubs is likely to reflect and actualize a particular state of relations between various populations and social groups, as these coalesce around specific coalitions of musical style.

The significance invested in these differences obviously works against one familiar reading of the experience of dance: as a transcendent experience of

the body in motion. The difficulty of writing about dance music is very much rooted in what Jane K. Cowan, speaking of a very different context, has called 'the paradoxically double sense of engrossment and reflexivity that characterize the experience of the dancer' (Cowan, 1990: xi). Discussions of dance are often able to privilege its engrossing qualities through an implicit sliding from the subjective and corporal sense of release to a notion of collective transcendence, such that the personal and the social are united under the sign of the term 'youth'. Clearly, however, few cultural practices are marked so strongly by the intervention of differences which fracture that unity and render unavoidable the reflexivity of which Cowan writes. Bringing together the activities of dance and musical consumption, the dance club articulates the sense of social identity as embodied to the conspicuous and differential display of taste. As such, it serves to render explicit the distribution of knowledges and forms of cultural capital across the vectors of gender, race and class.

It is at this point that we may begin to outline certain divergences between the cultures of alternative rock and dance music. The most significant of these, arguably, has to do with the manner in which each has responded to the hierarchies and tensions produced by the aforementioned differences. The ongoing development of dance-music culture is shaped by the relationship between certain relatively stable social spaces (whether these be geographical regions or racial and ethnic communities) and the temporal processes produced and observable within that culture's infrastructures (record labels, dance-music magazines, disc-jockey playlists, and so on). As suggested earlier, this relationship is not one of direct mirroring. The lines of fracture which run through the audiences of dance music are normally turned into the bases of that music's own ongoing development, but in this process they are often transformed. Typically, they are restated in the language of aesthetic choice and invoked as the pretexts for moves of redirection. In the culture of alternative rock, in contrast, the most consistent development has been the drawing of lines around that culture as a whole, such that certain forms (classically soulful voices, for example) are permanently banished, or, like some uses of electronics, tolerated as part of a circumscribed pluralism. (In neither instance do they serve as the basis of a tension inviting a collective response.)

These differences may be expressed in more schematic terms. The terrain of alternative rock is one in which a variety of different temporalities have come to coexist within a bounded cultural space. There is often a distinctive density of historical time within the performance styles of alternative groups: most noticeably, an inflection of older, residual styles with a contemporary irony which itself evokes a bohemian heritage in which that combination has its antecedents. Similarly, as moves within alternative rock produce more and more detailed syntheses of style and form, they fill in the range of options between canonical styles, the latter serving (to disinter a once-prominent theoretical concept) as 'points de capiton' (Lacan, 1966: 503), markers of privileged antecedents from which eclectic stylistic exercises develop outwards. This process as a whole might be

described as one in which temporal movement is transformed into cartographic density.

The culture of dance music, in contrast, is one in which spatial diversity is perpetually reworked as temporal sequence. At one level, dance-music culture is highly polycentric, in that it is characterized by the simultaneous existence of large numbers of local or regional styles – Detroit ‘techno’ music, Miami ‘bass’ styles, Los Angeles ‘swingbeat’, etc. Other regional centres – like New York or London – will be significant, less as places of emergence of styles one could call indigenous, than because they occupy positions of centrality as sites for the reworking and transformation of styles originating elsewhere. Dance-music culture is characterized by two sorts of directionality: one which draws local musical activity into the production styles of one or more dominant, indigenous producers or sounds; and another which articulates these styles elsewhere, into centres and processes of change monitored closely by the international dance-music community as a whole. One effect of these sorts of movement is that coexisting regional and local styles within dance music are almost always at different stages within their cycles of rising and declining influence. A comfortable, stable international diversity may rarely be observed.<sup>13</sup>

Further evidence of these differences may be found in the sorts of publications which circulate within each terrain. *Maximum Rock and Roll* or *Rock Around The World: The Alternative Live Music Guide* manifest the preoccupation of alternative culture with cataloguing diversity, offering dozens of ‘scene’ reports or touring schedules in each issue. Those publications which serve the dance-music community, in contrast, are striking for their concern with registering movement, ranking records and judging styles in terms of their place within ascendant or downward trajectories of popularity.<sup>14</sup> This distinction is hardly surprising – given, on the one hand, the self-definition of alternative rock as the locus of a rock classicism, and, on the other, the observable overlap of dance-music culture with both the turbulent space of Top 40 radio and a more subcultural terrain resembling (and interacting with) the world of vestimentary fashion. More interesting, for my purposes, are the ways in which both cultures have responded to the musical diversity found in each, endowing that diversity with distinctive values and relationships to change.

The intermittent sense of crisis within the culture of North American alternative rock, to which I referred earlier, is arguably rooted in the loss of a teleology of historical purpose of the sort which has often organized accounts of rock music’s history. In its place, we find enshrined a pluralism evoked as a sign of health and vitality. Within the culture of dance music, in contrast, a condition of pluralism is commonly cited as the sign of imminent troubles or divisions, rather than of that culture’s richness or stability.<sup>15</sup> One finds, within the dance community, an investment in historical movement based almost exclusively on the ability of that movement to suggest collective purpose. Processes of historical change within dance music, as suggested, respond to shifting relationships between different (primarily urban) communities, but there is little sense that the convergences or

alliances produced are permanent or constitutive steps in a movement towards a final dissolution of boundaries. Well-known moments held to be emblematic of a new unity of black and white youth cultures, like the punk-reggae moment of the late 1970s, either produce their own backlashes or appear in retrospect as temporary acts of rejuvenation undertaken by one of the communities involved.

The discursive labour of dance music's infrastructures operates implicitly to prevent the fractures and lines of difference which run through the culture of metropolitan dance music from either fragmenting that culture into autonomous, parallel traditions, or producing a final unity which will permanently paper over those lines. Like the worlds of fashion and painting, the dance music community accomplishes this by restating ongoing disagreements over cultural purpose and value as calculations about the imminent decay or emergent appropriateness of specific generic styles. One revealing example, within the recent history of dance music, is the ongoing controversy over the comparative appeal of synthesized sounds and 'real' human voices. The highly electronic acid house of 1987 and 1988 gave way, in influential corners of dance-music culture, to the 'garage' house of 1988–9, a form which valorized classic, soulful and identifiable voices. In 1990, and in the context of an increased rapidity of cyclical change, synthesized and sample-dominated Italian house emerged as central, accompanied by defences which underscored its knowing cleverness. Italian house was then displaced by the slowed-down, more obviously 'classical' Soul II Soul sound, which briefly, but spectacularly, attained international success. Predictably, a backlash followed, and Italian house was newly valorized at the beginning of 1991 – the 'tackiness' with which it had been marked during its brief banishment now regarded as a creative eclecticism.<sup>16</sup> These shifts, while obviously trivial and localized, nevertheless revolve at a fundamental level around the appropriate centrality to be accorded the traditions of African-American vocal music relative to those of a primarily white, European studio wizardry. Most often, however, they are given the form of oppositions of taste susceptible to regular revision: high- versus low-end sonic ranges, 'live' versus creatively manufactured sounds, the purist versus the novel, and so on.

At the same time, these oppositions represent implicit tensions over the appropriate status of creativity within dance-music culture: should that culture produce durable performer careers, most often those of (predominantly female) vocalists, or should its continuing development be driven by a turnover of rapidly obsolete (and almost exclusively male) record producers and small labels? Within the context of the multinational recording industry, of course, these tensions are resolved in ways that have little to do with the temporary prominence of certain values within the more insular culture of the dance community. Albums by the studio-based Italian house group Black Box and the white English soul singer Lisa Stanfield have each circulated in similar fashion within the international recording industry, producing a succession of singles and building their success through the sequence of dance clubs, Top 40 radio and music-video networks. If the



implicit objects of investment in each case are different – a package of successive hits in the first case, a hopefully durable performer persona in the second – it is important to note that both presume different temporal logics than those currently typical of the dance community.

The circulation of records out of that community and cultural space relocates them in new contexts wherein the bases of their individual value and historical intelligibility are transformed.<sup>17</sup> The effort to realign these temporalities is evident in the recent move towards installing the compilation album (bringing together several extended dance cuts) as the principal medium through which major record companies will market dance music. With their coherence based on little more than the capacity to encapsulate a brief period in the ongoing history of dance music, compilation albums absolve major firms of the task of redefining the value of dance records in terms (most often those of performer careers or coherent works) which are familiar to them but incompatible with the forms of valorization common within the dance-music community.<sup>18</sup>

The condition of dance music described here – in particular, its rates and logics of change – has been intensified in recent years by the rise to prominence of house music. House music emerged (from Chicago) as a set of distinct styles in the mid-1980s, but its larger importance comes from its recentring of the historical movement of dance-music culture as a whole. As was the case prior to the rise of house, dance-music within the Western world has continued to be marked by opposed tendencies towards unity/coherence and diversity/differentiation, but the logics through which these processes unfold have become much more integrated. On the one hand, house music has drawn most dance-based musical forms into various sorts of accommodation to it. Currents within rap were compelled to adapt, most notably through an increased tempo, giving rise to forms known as hip-house and swingbeat. The Hi-NRG music associated during the previous decade with gay discos was revitalized as high-house, ‘high’ signalling a greater number of beats-per-minute than was the average within house music (Ferguson, 1991). Older or more eclectic forms, like industrial dance music and versions of jazz, have often been drawn into a sequence of transformations within house music, as influences defining those transformations. Those dance forms which did not lend themselves to this integration, for a variety of reasons – Go-Go music from Washington, or the Minneapolis sound associated with Prince and his collaborators – have been marked with relative obsolescence, at least as far as international success is concerned.

At the same time, however, the durability and expansiveness of appeal of house music are such that these variations have come to be positioned laterally within a division of tastes running across dance-music culture. The techno-pop and Hi-NRG associated with producers like Stock-Aitken-Waterman would, by the late 1980s, come to be positioned at one point within a continuum running through all forms of house music and overlapping with the terrain of international Top 40 pop. Much of Latin-based, English-language pop within the United States is now part of a

complex of forms known as 'freestyle', in which one finds articulated elements of rap, house, and mainstream pop. More telling examples are those involving forms of dance music perpetuated within the space of a rock-based avant-garde. So-called New Beat music, associated principally with record labels based in Belgium, pulled elements of industrial dance rock into the overall culture of dance music, but simultaneously compelled industrial dance music to define itself in part through the vigilant maintenance of narrow boundaries between its own perceived transgressiveness and the lure of accessible, popular forms of house. One can see here the dilemma confronting tendencies within a post-punk avant-garde whose terrain has long bordered that of dance music. On the one hand, their project has derived much of its credibility from the consistent and avowedly purist exploration of a limited set of stylistic and formal figures overlapping those found within currents of alternative rock (stark instrumentation, the use of 'found' voices from television, etc.). On the other hand, the culture of British dance music has so successfully redefined the terms of credibility as accruing from participation in an unfolding sequence of musical styles that their resistance to this history risks casting them as irrelevant.<sup>19</sup>

My emphasis, here, on the logics of change typical of different musical terrains is not intended to suggest that the value of such terrains is a function of their collective historical purpose. What these logics invite, however, is a reading of the politics of popular music that locates the crucial site of these politics neither in the transgressive or oppositional quality of musical practices and their consumption, nor uniformly within the modes of operation of the international music industries. The important processes, I would argue, are those through which particular social differences (most notably those of gender and race) are articulated within the building of audiences around particular coalitions of musical form. These processes are not inevitably positive or disruptive of existing social divisions, nor are they shaped to any significant extent by solitary, wilful acts of realignment. (Attempts to transform them into the bases of artistic strategy have generally failed, one notable recent exception being that of the group *Living Colour*). Typically, the character of particular audiences is determined by the interlocking operation of the various institutions and sites within which musics are disseminated: the schoolyard, the urban dance club, the radio format. These sites, themselves shaped by their place within the contemporary metropolis and aligned with populations along the lines of class and taste, provide the conditions of possibility of alliances between musical styles and affective links between dispersed geographical places.

There are any number of examples of this in the recent history of Canadian, US and Western European popular music: the coalescing of the original audience for disco around Hispanic, black and gay communities in the mid-1970s, or the unexpected alignment of country music and its traditional audiences with urban-based, adult-oriented radio stations in the early 1980s. The particular condition of alternative rock music culture, which I have described at length, has been shaped in part by the way in which coalitions of black teenagers, young girls listening to Top 40 radio, and

urban club-goers have coalesced around a dance-music mainstream and its margins and thus heightened the insularity of white, bohemian musical culture. What interests me, as someone who studies musical institutions, is the way in which these alliances are produced, in part, through the overlapping logics of development of different forms. One reason why coalitions of musical taste which run from British dance culture through black communities in Toronto and significant portions of the young female market are possible is that these constituencies are all ones which value the redirective and the novel over the stable and canonical, or international circuits of influence over the mining of a locally stable heritage. The substance of these values is less important than are the alliances produced by their circulation within musical culture. One need neither embrace the creation of such alliances as a force for social harmony or condemn them as politically distracting to recognize their primacy in the ongoing politics of popular musical culture.

## Notes

- 1 This section of my article includes remarks written especially for this issue of *Cultural Studies* and intended to supplement John Shepherd's introduction. Subsequent sections are made up of a substantially revised version of my own presentation at the conference.
- 2 This panel, which opened the conference and was repeated at Concordia University in Montreal the following week, was not based on written presentations and is not reproduced in this issue.
- 3 The work of Jody Berland represents, perhaps, the most sustained attempt to date to investigate the status of locality in popular music. See, for example, Berland (1990).
- 4 See, for a lengthy discussion of the conditions of an Atlantic African cultural diaspora, Gilroy (1987).
- 5 It should be noted that Dorland uses this phrase to describe a Québécois 'art' film, and that the sense of placelessness described is one typical of the elliptical, wilfully transgressive and auteurist neo-*film noir* produced in any number of countries in the late 1980s. I have adapted Dorland's phrase to describe the popular, blockbuster films said by press accounts to result from Hollywood's new reliance on the international market.
- 6 Having sacrificed the terms 'community' and 'scene' to other conceptual unities, 'terrain' is one of the few remaining options for designating the spaces I want to discuss. 'Field', with which it is virtually synonymous, suggests more of an exclusive reliance on the work of Pierre Bourdieu than I wish to convey.
- 7 This is, of course, partially a function of the extent to which cultural commodities participate in the processes of 'fashion', processes described with great insight in Wark (1991).
- 8 Disco records of the late 1970s, for example, circulated within: (a) connoisseurist sub-cultures attentive to minor moves within the ongoing history of disco music as generic form; (b) 'urban' radio station playlists wherein differences between records were effaced within the creation of a consistent sound signifying currency and sophistication; and (c) Top 40 radio programming which, by the end of the decade, had produced a sense of disco as a musical form deployed by a succession of distinct celebrity personalities.

- 9 'Fanzines: the lost moment', *Monitor* (no date or page numbers).
- 10 So-called 'garage' psychedelia was a transitional form between the music of small rock quartets of the early 1960s and the more elaborate psychedelic or 'acid' rock of the late 1960s. In 1972, Elektra Records released *Nuggets*, an influential retrospective anthology of this music.
- 11 The most important of these, arguably, were Bomp Records and Rhino Records, both based in California. Bomp Records was associated with a record store, a fan magazine (*Who Put The Bomb?*) devoted to rock music of the 1960s, a mail-order record sales service, and a record label which specialized in recordings by contemporary groups performing older musical styles. Rhino Records, similarly, began as a retail store and expanded to include a record company specializing in both contemporary, New Wave-oriented recordings and reissues of repertory from the 1960s. My discussion of these enterprises, and of this tendency within New Wave in a more general sense, is based on my sporadic reading, throughout the 1970s, of magazines published within this subculture, most notably *Who Put The Bomb?* See, as well, for detailed reports on this phenomena, the following: 'Punk rock store pulls big in L.A.', *Billboard*, 30 April 1977: 6; 'New Wave label: Bomp Records adds LP line', *Billboard*, 11 August 1979: 74; 'Despite hard times: indie rock labels survive', *Billboard*, 15 January 1983: 1; 'Capitol distribution pact opens new fields for Rhino', *Billboard*, 2 November 1985: 82.
- 12 I should add that my own posture here – as detached cataloguer of minute differences – is obviously no more appealing or less stereotypically academic than the one I am ascribing to others.
- 13 The example, already cited, of electronic 'techno' music from Detroit is a useful one here. Techno has developed over several years now, but its articulation within the international culture of dance music has been intermittent and often dependent on an alliance with other, more obviously novel and emergent forms (such as the electronic 'bleep' or ambient music of the last year) (see Cheeseman, 1991).
- 14 Examples of these magazines include the Canadian *Streetsounds*, the British *Jocks* and the American *Dance Music Report*. The analysis presented in this section is based on my regular reading of these and several other magazines, conversations with dance-record store staff and the buying of several hundred dance records over the last decade.
- 15 Throughout the latter part of 1990 and early months of 1991, the observable pluralism and fragmentation of dance-music culture was cited as proof that a collapse of the economic bases of dance music was coming. See, for example, Cheeseman (1991), Jones (1991a), Russell (1991).
- 16 See, for one account of this re-emergence, Jones (1991b). The rapidity of these cycles of change has much to do with the international dance community having turned towards British dance culture as the primary site in which moves of redirection are enacted. This turn itself represents the convergence of a number of events: the decline in vinyl production in the US and Canada, and consequent reliance of the dance community on imported 12-inch singles; the related integration of much African-American music (most notably rap) within the market for albums and resulting decline of the single within certain genres; the smallness and relative insularity of British musical culture, which has obviously quickened the pace of change; and the growing tendency for British club disc jockeys (many of them now stars in their own right) to tour the Western world, in the process picking up local records – from Italy, New York,

Germany, etc. – which are drawn into the turnover of dance music within Britain itself.

- 17 This has produced much-commented-upon difficulties in the trans-Atlantic passage of certain recent dance records: Candy Flip's 'Strawberry Fields Forever' was a success as an import within US and Canadian dance clubs months before being released domestically in those countries. DJs here, for whom that record's Soul II Soul-ish rhythms (and the more general enterprise of covering older songs within those rhythms) had ceased to hold much interest, were unwilling to give it the level of renewed club play needed to cross it over to Top 40 radio. See, for one account, the 'Dance Trax' column in *Billboard*, 27 October 1990: 33.
- 18 See, for discussions of the rise of compilation albums, Jones (1991a) and Flick (1991).
- 19 At the moment, industrial dance music functions as both the continuing refuge for 'masculinist' tendencies within dance culture resisting those forms designated as frivolous and co-opted, and as a style newly embraced by politicized segments of the gay community for whom it serves as a sign of the new militancy produced by the AIDS crisis. See, for one account of the turn away from Hi-NRG within gay dance culture, the article 'Queer bashes' (no author) in *The Face*, February 1991: 79.

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