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Revolution, Revelation, & Rock'n'Roll: Re-Viewing Writing through a Musical Idiom

Abstract:

Think of "Revolution, Revelation, & Rock'n'Roll: Re-Viewing Writing through a Musical Idiom" as a concept album with three tracks: theoretical, autobiographical, and pedagogical. The first, "Revolution," argues that literature in the second half of the twentieth century has to a certain extent been rethought in terms of content and form because of the advent of rock'n'roll; the second, "Revelation," talks a little about some of the ways rock music influenced my own conception of fiction; and the third, "Rock'n'Roll," will suggest how we as creative writing teachers might introduce some of these insights into the classroom through a series of exercises designed to jump-start and/or rev our students' fictional and poetical engines.

I. REVOLUTION

Just as modern painters had to reinvent painting because of the discovery of photography (Donald Barthelme once mentioned parenthetically), so modern and postmodern writers have had to reinvent writing because of the discovery of film. (1)

I take Barthelme to mean that many modern painters from, say, the Impressionists forward felt the sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious urge to reevaluate their aesthetic relationship to external reality in the face of a new technology that captured that external reality flawlessly. Their reevaluation took the form of an increasing turn inward that no longer emphasized the "accurate" portrayal of the world out there, but rather initially an "accurate" portrayal of the world out there filtered through a subjective consciousness, and then an accurate portrayal of the world in here. For confirmation, we need only think of the hypothetical trajectory that tracks from the realism of Courbet or Manet to the dissolution of the lines of certainty in the work of Monet or Degas, and on again to the investigation of incrementally more internal landscapes in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century paintings of Van Gogh, Dali, and Picasso. Because of the advent of photography, then, among myriad other sociohistorical phenomena, the movement from mid-nineteenth-century to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century painting is the movement from the snapshot to the x-ray.

In a similar unfolding, many modern and postmodern poets and fiction writers have felt the sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious urge to reevaluate their relationship to form and perspective in response to a more recent technology-film-(and its often fragmentary)-scene-intensive, fast-paced, surface-oriented structure that by its very nature privileges action over contemplation, show over language. One reading of Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), for example, might underscore its cinematic congruences with Eisenstein's use of montage in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a movie which appeared only three years after the poem's publication, and that film's stress on striking juxtaposition and an expressive metalogic rather than conventional linear progression. Dos Passos exploited innovative cinematic formats in the "Newsreels" and "The Camera Eye" sections in his (1930, 1932, 1936) to reflect the public voice of the media and popular culture, while Pynchon continuously explored the ontology of r-e-a-l versus r-e-e-l time in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). In his later fiction, Barthelme himself eschewed dialogue tags, descriptions, and other traditional techniques in favor of short exchanges between characters that read more like screenplays than what we normally think of as short stories. Gaddis and at times David Foster Wallace do much the same in their novels, while writers as diverse as Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Ted Mooney, and Bret Easton Ellis have featured abbreviated scenes shot, as it were, from the relentlessly external point of view of a camera lens that refuses depth psychology except through inference.

Something along the same lines seems to me to hold true in the second half of the twentieth century with respect to rock'n'roll. Several generations of postmodern writers - including the Beats, the Cyberpunks, and those associated with the Avant-Pop - have sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously responded to rock's ubiquitous presence in our culture by reinventing poetry and fiction. I don't mean to suggest a direct line of influence between rock and literature, of course, but rather a gradually tighter and more rapid feedback loop where the latter comes to condition the former as much as the former comes to permeate the latter.

At its most obvious, this reinvention is a reply to rock's transgressive attitude - an attitude, as critic Larry McCaffery argues,

of defiance toward cultural and aesthetic norms; an attitude of distrust towards rationalist language and all other forms of discourse required by legal, political, and consumer capitalism . . . an attitude that artists need not only to disrupt the usual modes of communication but to find a means of self-expression that is more "authentic," less tied to abstractions, more tied to the senses and emotions; an attitude that extremities of content and aesthetics are valuable and interesting in and of themselves . . . and valuable, too, because such art fundamentally questions the assumptions of "normative art." (2)

In the fall of 1956 - two years after Elvis Presley lay down "That's All Right" at Sam Phillips's Memphis Recording Service - City Lights published Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* appeared the following year, and William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* in 1959. From one angle, this literary troika becomes emblematic of the first generation to internalize rock's benzedrined, incantational rhythms, its emotional intensity and grittiness, its sexual and pharmaceutical excess, and its revolutionary political awareness. Tracing back through an avant-garde lineage to Baudelaire's bleak urban studies of fringe dwellers and an aesthetics of the shocking - even of the ugly - both rock (think of Jim Morrison, Patti Smith, and David Bowie) and the Beats highlighted the role of the artist as alien, criminal, and prophet, while underwriting a creative act that championed honesty, spontaneity, and radical formal innovation. Such a transgressive attitude evinces itself throughout fiction and poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, from the dystopic cityscapes and the outsiders that people them in William Gibson's cybernoir novels to the body-modified punks and enraged anarchists that frequent Kathy Acker's heavily pirated works.

If thematically this reinvention of poetry and fiction is in some measure a reply to rock's transgressive attitude, then structurally it is a reply to this idea of aesthetic piracy - of what Raymond Federman calls pla(y)giarism. After all, rock is nothing if not a radically appropriative artform. Its roots commingle country and western, blues, jazz, and Southern gospel, literally enacting Roland Barthes's poststructuralist contention that every text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash," "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture." (3) Rock is a music without borders or autonomy. Theorist Stephen Connor talks about its "congenital impurity of means and nature," (4) and a potent icon of this is Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," whose first ten seconds contain no fewer than seventeen samples; or the proliferation in the nineties of cover albums that retell earlier tellings; or the yield of a group like the Beatles in *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), an album that blends early rock'n'roll amalgams with full orchestral compositions, Indian instruments and rhythms, circus and beer-hall motifs, and even the aural equivalent of Burroughsian cut-ups via snippets of barnyard-animal squawks and snorts and segments of backtracking human voices and instrumental riffs. Such appropriative moves find analogs in postmodern fiction, not only in the wildly purloined texts of Acker, who quotes everything from Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850) to Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) almost verbatim in order to reveal their cultural and gender biases, but also, much more subtly, in Stephen Wright's recent rewriting of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) in the Borneo section of his *Going Native* (1994), or Cyberpunk's more general appropriation and reconfiguration of the science fiction genre into a forum capable of discussing the ecological, ethical, and social implications of such current technologies as virtual reality, genetic engineering, and computerized data storage and control.

II. REVELATION

I'm going to go out on a limb now and suggest that the first rock album you buy as a kid functions at some deep-structure level as an act of spiritual autobiography, revealing certain aesthetic and psychological predilections that not infrequently shadow you in one guise or another for the rest of your life.

At least that's certainly been the case for me. I remember going over to my best friend's house one sunny late-summer suburban-New-Jersey day after school in 1967 and rifling through his big sister's record collection with amoral abandon. She was out on a date (she was always out on a date) and my friend's name was Bruce Encke and I was ten and Bruce was eleven and he wanted me to hear an album he thought was just the coolest thing in the world. After listening to it on Ginny's stereo - Ginny was Bruce's siste - I decided it was the coolest thing in the world, too. It was called *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

What absolutely blew me away about that record - besides its incredibly self-reflexive cover littered with simulacra of Dylan, Poe, Brando, and innumerable other cultural icons, including a tidy grey-suited 1964 version of the Beatles standing directly to the left of a hip 1967 version wearing lime-green, electric pink, sky-blue, and redcoat-red pop military-marching-band regalia - what absolutely blew me away about that record was that is was all about aesthetic possibility. Not only did it do something I'd never heard done before - create a theme album about a non-existent group that seemed to be playing live before an audience but was in fact simply generated with producer George Martin's help in a London studio - but it also took chance after chance with form and content: in Lennon's surreal lyrics for "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," in the warped carnival sounds on "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," in George Harrison's dream-time sitar on "Within You Without You," in the sonic equivalent of chocolate New York

cheese cake in the complex development of "A Day in the Life," and in that awe-inspiringly resonant final chord thrumming what seemed like forever at the song's conclusion.

I went right home and asked for that record for my upcoming birthday and got it and played it again and again on this chintzy black-plastic stereo with built-in speakers I also got for my birthday that basically scratched the grooves in the record right down to barely bumpy vinyl within a year. The message that that music kept sending me was this: be more extreme. Of course, I didn't begin to get seriously interested in writing until high school, and it took twenty years beyond that bright autumn afternoon among Ginny Encke's records until my first novel, *Live from Earth* (1991), appeared, a magical realist love story which had almost nothing to do with innovation or the Beatles, though it did, interestingly enough, paraphrase one post-Beatles Lennon song in passing. Yet that album stayed with me, became part of my genetic coding. In many ways, it still stands in my mind - along with William Burroughs's prose and Andy Warhol's silkscreens - as the launch site for what would come to be referred to in the early nineties as the Avant-Pop: that loose collection of creators (Mark Leyner to Laurie Anderson, Quentin Tarantino to Harold Jaffe) who evince both the avant-garde's drive to push the aesthetic envelope and a deeply ambivalent relationship with pop culture.

A few months after meeting Sgt. Pepper, I had another musical revelation. I met the music of Monkees. The Monkees, it didn't take anyone long to figure out, were a kind of corporate merchandising machine designed to look, sound, and act like the Beatles. And they soon taught me something much less sanguine about rock'n'roll's heart: that hyperconsumer capitalism is all about absorbing the innovative like some pod monster from a bad fifties SF film, commodifying it, and recirculating it as the radical-made-safe flavor of the month. Hence the dark emblem of the fairly recent northwest Grunge phenomenon, itself a late outrider of Punk (itself a quickly repacked and redistributed musical fashion from the seventies), which became media-fied and spawned a slew of corporate-generated clones seemingly within seconds of its appearance. In other words, the whole idea of extremity in rock'n'roll easily tips over into marketing gimmick. Or, as Stephen Connor suggests: "what seems to have happened is that the cycle of inclusion, in which new forms and energies are incorporated, tamed, and recycled as commodities, has accelerated unimaginably, to the point where authentic 'originality' and commercial 'exploitation' are hard to distinguish." (5)

This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in rock'n'roll's televisual sibling, MTV, which masquerades as an edgy musical celebration but is really a twenty-four-hour commercial for rock albums. Here an extremist aesthetics has given way to an aesthetics of exhibitionism where fashion replaces revolutionary political awareness, spectacle replaces emotional intensity, and the simulacra of sexual and pharmaceutical excess replaces the real thing. If cultural pluralism or sex or gun control or baggy pants or saving the whales sells, you'll see it on MTV, and if it doesn't, you won't. In a passing strange paratactic gesture, cute women with monstrous hair, short skirts, and surreally considerable breasts dance in an AC/DC video next to an angrily engaged one about Northern Ireland by the Cranberries next to one by the cross-dressing members of U2 designed to challenge gender roles (or perhaps just look fetching; it's hard to tell which) next to one by Bare Naked Ladies that good-humoredly [taunts culture] and one by Dr. Dre that bad-humoredly flaunts explosions, car chases, and terminally hip (or maybe just terminally ironic; it's hard to tell which) rockers.

The consequence is a kind of flattening out, a heterogeneous neutralization of serious intent in the face of commodified desire. Suddenly the Beatles's anthem "Revolution" becomes the score for a Nike commercial and Fleetwood Mac morph into cheerleaders for President Clinton. Charlie Manson tries out for the Monkees, Marilyn Manson names himself after Charlie, and Neo-Nazi bands appropriate rock'n'roll conventions for their own creepy ends. It's increasingly difficult to tell, that is, what exists within quotation marks and what doesn't, where self-aware irony stops and unconscious self-parody begins - which leads us into the theoretical geography of Jean Baudrillard, who argues that in the late twentieth century reality has dissolved into the simulation of reality, one media-generated image mirroring only other media-generated images, infinitely.

And this leads us into the deeply conflicted space of rock'n'roll that has obsessed me for the last half decade or so and that has helped reconstitute my own fiction in the three novels I wrote after *Live from Earth*. The first, *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* (1994), pirates science fiction protocols - particularly Cyberpunk protocols - to defamiliarize our present so that we might see it anew. The dominant theme concerns the commodification of the arts and the plot a young rockstar wannabe who cuts a Faustian deal with a music corporation that agrees to rebuild him from the ground up, reshaping his body, gender, and voice to make him saleable. My next novel, *Time Famine* (1996), which also utilizes Cyberpunk tropes, centers around a new type of theme park that makes entertainment out of various historical atrocities. The nuclear reactor powering one of these, BelsenLand, melts down during an earthquake, releasing a cloud of radiation that causes those who come into contact with it to experience intense memories that aren't their own. While rock'n'roll only forms the backbeat of this novel, plotwise, its structure, like that of *Tonguing the Zeitgeist*, is dramatically influenced by MTV's speed, and both novels attempt to capture on the page a number of MTV's signature effects, including its use of nonlinear hypertextual narrative, split screen, unusual angles and cropping, rapid cuts, stop action, slo-mo, hypnotic repetition, breakneck point-of-view switches, information density, and massive genre conflation.

The most recent of my post-Live-from-Earth novels, *Burnt* (1996), a literary mystery of sorts about a professor of popular culture who kills one of his students because of that student's bad prose style, again doesn't foreground

rock'n'roll in its plot, but rock and Baudrillardian theory are very much on the mind of its protagonist, as in this passage which I'll quote to conclude this section. Talking to a friend about the loss of reality at the fin de millennium, he cites an allegedly "live" album by Twisted Sister:

The band performs in a stadium packed with eighty-thousand fans. But the fans don't see the real band. Instead they see the video image of the "band" playing on a gigantic screen behind the band, which itself is a compilation of carefully designed media images of what a heavy metal group should be. In other words the fans see an edited aestheticized experience of a replica of a rock'n'roll band. Nor do they hear the real band. They hear noises produced by a complicated series of sound mixes, samplings and lip syncs. . . Only it turns out they like the unreal so much . . . that they run out to buy the album of this replicated event - a gesture which is itself a replica of a gesture generated by advertising to create the replica of desire where it didn't exist in the first place. But the album isn't a recording of the replicated event the fans attended in, say, Philadelphia, but of a "live" replicated performance they didn't attend in, say, Atlanta, which nonetheless is enough like the replicated event they attended in Philadelphia to convince them it isn't replicated. Only it isn't really a recording of the replicated event in Atlanta either, since the band went back into the studio after the fact and dubbed over the "original" songs, themselves not original, in order to make them sound better than the originals, which, of course, weren't original to begin with.

III. ROCK'N'ROLL

Rather than concluding with the simulation of rhetorical flourish and insight, I'd like to move out of ludic theoretical discourse about the contradictory nature of rock'n'roll and into the classroom for a moment by asking how we as creative writing teachers might use rock to jump-start and/or rev our students' fictional and poetical engines, and perhaps even aid us and them begin to contemplate the complexities of this musical form. (6) To do so, I'll simply list half a dozen exercises that I've tried and found successful.

1. Bring three to five kinds of rock music to class. Ask students to free-write for the length of each piece. Then discuss how atmosphere affects writing and, more specifically, how different kinds of music within one genre can alter moods and, thus, writing styles. (7) Then use some image or phrase produced during one of these free-writes as the first line of a poem or story.
2. Bring in crayons and paper to class and play several pieces by the same rock group for your students, asking them to free-draw while listening. At the end of the period, ask them to exchange their drawings, take home one of their fellow students' creations, and invent a sudden fiction based on it. During the next period, ask several students to read their sudden fictions, and then discuss the translation that occurs as a creative idea moves from music to drawing to words. (8)
3. Ask your students to bring to class a pair of scissors and lyrics from their favorite seven or ten songs. Explain Federman's notion of pla(y)giarism, Williams Burroughs' cut-up technique, and the appropriative instinct of rock'n'roll, then ask them to cut up those lyrics into component parts (a line, a phrase, even an engrossing word) and use them to create a collage poem with a completely different meaning from the originals. Next, use the resulting collage poem as the basis for a sudden fiction.
4. Bring to class a video comprised of fifteen or twenty minutes of music clips from MTV, watch it with your students, and then discuss what you've seen, not from the point of view of theme or content, but from the point of view of form. List all the film techniques employed, then ask your students to use those techniques to compose their next story, or, better, to reframe a story they have already written.
5. Read Janice Eidus's story "Elvis, Axl, and Me," which appears in her collection *The Celibacy Club* (1997), and which involves the protagonist's imaginative meeting with a rock'n'roll icon, and ask your students to write a story or poem based on a meeting between a protagonist who is nothing like them and their own rock'n'roll icon.
6. Spend part of class discussing both the importance and the fallibility of memory in shaping who we are, and memory as a generating principle in many rock'n'roll songs, and then ask them to begin a story with the line: "When I first heard X, I was Y," where X stands for the first album they ever bought and Y for what they were doing when they first heard it. (9)

Endnotes

- (1) In "Symposium on Fiction." *Shenandoah* 27.2 (1976): 3-31. Return to article.
- (2) "Cutting Up: Cyberpunk, Punk Music, and Urban Decontextualization." *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991): 286-307. Return to article.
- (3) "Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. Tr. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977: 146. Return to

article.

(4) *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997: 207. Return to article.

(5) *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997: 206. Return to article.

(6) Kevin J. H. Dettmar discusses how to use rock as a pedagogical tool to understand many of postmodernism's central concerns in "An Introduction to Postmodernism: Just Let Them Hear Some of That Rock'n'Roll Music," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* XLV.5 (September 25, 1998): B4-B5. I've yet to discover an essay, however, that discusses the uses of rock in a creative-writing classroom. Return to article.

(7) This idea comes from Deb Hieronymous, a graduate student in our M.F.A. program at the University of Idaho. Return to article.

(8) Again this is based on a suggestion from Deb Hieronymus, a graduate student in the M.F.A. program at the University of Idaho. She has used both of these ideas to great effect in the freshman comp classroom. Return to article.

(9) This is based on an exercise I heard Ron Carlson assign his workshop during a visit to the University of Idaho several years ago. Return to article.

Lance Olsen's *Rebel Yell: A Short Guide to Fiction Writing* is reviewed in this issue.

TEXT

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