

“Our Cellophane Sounds”: Suede and the Concept of Trash

*Dr. Steve Sweeney-Turner, Research Fellow in Music, University of Leeds
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Beethoven represents the undiminished experience of external life, returning internally; just as time, the medium of music, is also the inner meaning of it. Popular music... on the other hand does not achieve such a sublimation but is a somatic stimulus and therefore regressive in comparison with aesthetic autonomy.¹

- *Theodor Adorno.*

I don't think there's any place for intelligence in music. I can't see the point. Music's instinctive and it's natural and it's dumb. It's real dumb.²

- *Brett Anderson.*

These two statements initially appear to concur on the nature of popular music - for Adorno, it is a “somatic” and “regressive” artform, while for Anderson, it is on the one hand “instinctive”, and on the other, “real dumb”. However, consideration of the contexts in which these two statements were made allows us to see a wide ideological distance between them.

Adorno, of course, is the most significant philosopher/theorist in the C20th (with the exception of Gilles Deleuze) to have written on music from an informed position. Anderson, of course, is the lead singer of the English Britpop group, Suede - a musician, rather than a musicologist. Adorno, as a champion of the line of musical development from the Viennese Classicists through to the Viennese Modernists, became heavily involved with the strain of Germanophone philosophy stretching from Hegel through Marx. As such, his work deals at length with the concepts of aesthetic autonomy, historical progress, modernity, and so forth. In the above quotation, we see Adorno contrasting Beethoven as the symbol of the classical with popular music in general. The contrast between an identifiable, named individual on the one hand, and a whole series of intricately connected genres subsumed under a single, generalised heading in itself demonstrates Adorno's position rhetorically, implying that in classical music, originality and individuality are to the fore, while in popular music, a bland anonymity precludes any truly progressive discourse.

For Adorno, the popular is a cynically-constructed tool of the capitalist system, a medium incapable of being anything other than regressive - worse than that, it is somatic, it induces indolence, lethargy, acquiescence. In other words, popular music is *trash*.

¹ Theodor Adorno, trans. C. Lenhardt, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 1986), p.170.

² Brett Anderson, quoted in Jeremy Dean, *Suede* (London: Carlton Books, 1997), p.77.

Such attitudes have, it seems, hardly helped in encouraging the academic or intellectual study of popular music. And yet for us, here, today, in this conference, after all of the academic justifications for the serious study of popular music have been put forward *ad nauseam* throughout the historical development of popular musicology during the last few decades, including various justifications which have been made in the past by the speakers who have been and will stand on this stage today, the question of popular music's triviality still lingers, not least in the discourse of the media circus which (unusually for an academic event) has surrounded this symposium. As Tim Power's feature for the *Yorkshire Evening Post* began, "Are Blur as good as Beethoven?" - the short answer to which is another question: why should we compare them at all? - the answer to this question, no doubt, lies in the pervasiveness of the idea of popular music's inherent inferiority to the classical. It is an answer which points towards Adorno and Anderson, who tell us in turn that this artform is "regressive" and "real dumb".

This view of popular music has been pervasive throughout much of its history - amongst its critics, consumers, and practitioners alike, popular music is often characterised as an inherently trivial artform. As Mick Jagger once sang, "It's only rock 'n' roll, but I like it", the qualifier here being the term "only" - it's *only* rock 'n' roll. Nevertheless, the secondary - and ultimately more significant - qualifier is "but I like it". And in the space between these two qualifiers (the "only" and the "like it"), as we will see, there is the possibility of an ironic aesthetic which goes quite against the grain of the Adornian position.

Britpop in particular consciously flirts with the idea of its own trashiness - almost all of the bands which come under this heading hook themselves into discourses of musical triviality. Of course, this triviality comes in many forms - kitsch and camp being the two most prominent. Yet the trashiness of Britpop comes not from an aesthetic or technical ignorance, but from a deliberate strategy of ironic self-critique. For journalist and pop historian Jon Savage, Britpop inscribes itself within what he terms "a willed stupidity".³ And it is in Britpop's postmodern moments of irony, camp, ambiguity, androgyny, and intertextuality, that the real difference between the Adornian concept of the regressive and the Andersonian concept of the real dumb emerge most forcefully. Such moments can be found a-plenty in the work of Blur, Pulp, Elastica, and Suede, to name only four bands.

A fine example of the "real dumb" in Suede's repertoire is, of course, the song entitled "Trash", the first track on, and single from, Suede's 1996 album, *Coming Up*.⁴ In "Trash", Anderson glorifies (but not without a certain ambiguity) the fashion, music, and lifestyle of the band and their fanbase. Above all, the idea of bad taste comes forward in the lyrics, if not also in Anderson's highly, if not overly-stylised delivery of them.

Formally, there is nothing particularly remarkable about this piece - it's a simple, standard, sectional pop song which pulls no formal tricks and no metrical jumps. Both verse and chorus are based on eight-bar progressions, and share similar drum figures at the end of each eight bars. What this basic, functional frame allows, however, is for the sonic material it contains to become the focus of attention. Of

³ Savage, p.396.

⁴ Suede, *Coming Up* (London: Nude, 1996).

course, there is nothing new in such an observation on popular music, ever since Andrew Chester elaborated his theory in 1970 that, unlike classical music, popular music is *intensional*, rather than *extensional* - that is, its affectivity is primarily in the sonic moment, rather than the elaboration of extended or developing forms. In other words, it's the qualities of the sound as such which signify. As Gilles Deleuze would have said, the affectivity of popular music is based on intensities, intensities within the moment of audition.

With Suede's "Trash", it is undoubtedly the case that the lush production quality of the piece catches the ear - particularly that of the guitar. However, the timbral character of Anderson's voice is also a prime feature of all of Suede's songs, and in "Trash", Anderson explores some of the higher register of his vocal range, a strategy which here forces a great deal of tension and timbral harshness into the voice, which is suggestive, perhaps, of a certain form of bliss. And this bliss is intimately connected to the androgyny of Anderson's voice, famously replete as it is with its neo-David Bowie cum neo-Pete Murphy overtones. But not only is this bliss inscribed within a certain androgyny, simultaneously at the level of voice and lyric: it also partakes of the figure of a bisexuality which Bowie in particular (or at least the early Bowie) also flirted with. As the now infamous quote from Anderson goes: "I *feel* like a bisexual who'd never had a homosexual experience. I was talking about low-life songs, about quite a spiritual thing."⁵ Within this, of course, we can discern both an unfulfilled desire, a desire which has informed much of Anderson's controversial lyrics, as well as his heavily-stylised vocal technique. A couple of quick lyrical examples are as follows (and it isn't hard to find them in Anderson's work). In the second verse of "Animal Nitate" (from Suede's first album, *Suede* 1993), Anderson sings of the use of amyl nitrate in male gay sex:

Well he said he'd show you his bed
And the delights of the chemical smile,
So in your broken home he broke all your bones
Now you're taking it time after time

And in the second verse of "Breakdown" from the same album, Anderson hints specifically at the lack which underpins this bisexual desire, when he sings "you can only go so far for womankind". Both of these lyrics work at the level of innuendo, vaguely coded references which are screamingly obvious to those who are, as one might put it, in the know - almost a kind of Carry-On film form of nudge-nudge, wink-wink.

Of course, as any Suede fan knows, this aspect of Anderson's work has caused a fair amount of controversy within the media, not to mention endlessly fruitless speculation on the meaning of his lyrics and the precise nature of his sexuality. As Britpop precursor Morrissey once commented on Anderson, in an interview with *Vox* magazine, "He'll never forgive God for not making him Angie Bowie." Within this acerbic comment, however, Morrissey places Anderson squarely within a queer tradition which cuts a deep gash in the side of English popular music since the late

⁵ Savage, p.346.

'60's, a tradition which hooks into the older traditions of English camp and homoeroticism.

And it is precisely the unfulfilled homoerotic desire of Anderson's vocals, lyrics, and stage presence which fuels their androgyny. Indeed, androgyny is one of the key features of Suede as a whole - a blurring of gender-boundaries which also hints at a certain sexuality. As the line in verse three of "Introducing the Band" (*Suede*) goes: "I want the style of a woman, the kiss of a man", and in the song "Moving" (*Suede*), we find the ambiguous line: "so we are a boy, we are a girl".

These examples of a double gender and sexual transgression operate through desires based in lack, a kind of post-A.I.D.S. homoeroticism - a desire at once expressed and displaced, an expression of an androgyny and a sexuality, the implementation of which is kept at a distance; as Björk might say, a "sex without touching". An inscription of gender and sexuality which is inscribed through ambiguity, role play, surface, distance, and spacing.

Of course, the androgynous voice is a common signifier within pop, but this in itself points to a further level of kitschiness within Suede's referentiality. In this sense, Suede - as do many other Britpop bands - pick up on the kitsch of the androgynous voice precisely because of its utter lack of authenticity.

The androgynous male voice has a long history dating back to the figure of the castrato, but is also particularly prevalent throughout post-war popular music, from the oft-sampled James Brown to the ostensibly bisexual early David Bowie, through the angelically soprano voice of Jimmy Somerville. However, within Britpop, perhaps the most prevalent appearance of this voice is in those extracts which utilise typically Britpop "la's", "ah's" and "ooh's". In other words, sections which are based on non-signifying vocables, as if this androgeneity is a signification that dare not *speak* its name, even if its meaning can be clearly *sung*. Indeed, within Britpop, particularly bands such as Suede, Blur, and Pulp, such non-signifying vocables are almost a trademark of trashily ambiguous masculinity (although Elastica also find a feminine campness within them).

In this kind of use of the androgynous voice, it could easily be argued that Suede engage with the contemporary crisis in masculinity - further, that they are partially responsible for setting its current manifestations in motion. Equally, one might begin to discern a space within reading Suede which would allow us to use the concept of camp quite globally. For Susan Sontag, writing in 1964, camp can be defined as follows:

the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration... [It is] a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous... Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman". To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role... It incarnates a victory of "style" over "content," "aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy... The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility.⁶

⁶ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp.103, 103-4, 109, 115, 108.

Here, it is as if Sontag is writing specifically of a postmodern sensibility, although it is worth noting that, in 1964, Parisian postmodernity, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, had yet to fully emerge. Nevertheless, it is significant that Sontag manages to identify so many of what we would now understand as postmodern tropes even at that date. Equally, much of what she says on the subject of camp hooks directly into the field of thought which I have been placing Suede within. Firstly, there is the question of a lack of the modern category of authenticity - in its place, we have the concepts of artifice and exaggeration. And within the lack of authenticity of Anderson's vocals and lyrics, the oft-cited postmodern concept of play emerges - a masquerade which plays within the structure of ambiguity. Further, surface and style are very much to the fore - the content of the voice is often there specifically as a reference to the content of another, strictly absent style, another unfulfilled desire. This leads to a situation where irony takes over from the tragedy of a lost authenticity - the absence of authenticity is not perceived negatively, tragically, but as the very condition within which the play of multiple and often mutually contradictory identities becomes possible. As Jon Savage has commented on Britpop in general, "When in doubt, the English retreat into formalized poses, sardonic irony, childlike surrealism".⁷ And there are few more formalised, poised voices within masculine Britpop than Anderson's.

Yet the specific modes of inscription of these codes within Anderson's voice, lyrics, and stage persona, are always made within the idea of a trashy form of sex - every time such codes appear within Suede's work, the idea of low-life trashiness as a code for living, as well as musical style, is to the fore. As the infamous Anderson quote about a bisexual, yet homoerotically incomplete desire goes, the sexual trashiness to be found within his "low-life songs [is] about quite a spiritual thing". In this, we come to the crux of Suede's postmodern approach to the idea of trash - unlike modernist theorists such as Adorno, for whom authenticity equals profundity, Suede (and much else of Britpop) constitute the valorisation of trash, the acceleration of this concept onto a highly profound level. For Suede, trash is not a negative concept, or rather, its negativity is utterly positive in its utilisation and effects.

In this, we find a pertinent connection with one of the first great critics of modernity whose work informs so much of the postmodern field. In 1888, Nietzsche wrote *Der Fall Wagner (The Case of Wagner)*, and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, which represent not only a polemic against the heavy philosophical pretensions of Wagnerian opera, but of German classical music in general. For Nietzsche (the later Nietzsche, that is), Wagner represented modernity at its worst - a form of Hegelian Idealism which denies the truly corporeal affectivity of music, an Apollonian, rather than Dionysian, perversion of the artform. And as an antidote to Wagner's Hegelianism, Nietzsche, of course, prescribed Bizet's *Carmen* to his readership. Not because of its profundity, its loftiness, but because of its carnality, its direct, erotic cathexis with the body of the listener. Yet within this, Nietzsche also claimed that the Dionysian corporeality of *Carmen* was due to the opera's triviality, its connection with popular music genres, its lack of extended formal development in the German classical sense. In other words, for Nietzsche, Wagner was bad for you because his

⁷ Savage, p.414.

music demanded too much. On the other hand, Bizet was good for you, because, effectively, it was stupid music, trivial music. Most significantly, Nietzsche claimed that the “real dumb” aspect of Bizet made him a better, more joyful philosopher. Effectively, his argument presupposes that trivial music has a higher philosophical power than ostensibly profound music - to hook into Brett Anderson’s terms, the corporeal “dumbness” of music, its “instinctive”, Dionysian nature, its triviality, its intense transivities, are precisely what constitute its conceptual, philosophical, affective power.

And there are few musical genres which so overtly, ironically, campily, amusingly, hook into the notion of the trivial, the notion of trashiness, than Britpop. As Anderson sings in Suede’s song “Trash”:

...maybe , maybe it’s our nowhere towns,
Our nothing places and our cellophane sounds,
Maybe it’s our looseness,
But we’re trash, you and me,
We’re the litter on the breeze,
We’re the lovers on the streets...

And this erotic encoding of the concept of trash, its falseness, its lack of authenticity, its playfulness, its romance, its inscription within the “cellophane sounds” of Suede, is, it seems, central to the Britpop ethos.