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Dissent Within Dissent

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Preface: dissent within dissent

Jedediah sklower

When *Volume!*'s editorial team began considering what directions a critical collection of new texts on the relationships between popular music and the concept of counterculture should take, we imagined papers that would explore the movement's margins and ambiguities, and question elements concerning its social, gender and racial relations.¹ We also expected texts that would explore the movement's aftermath, or how elements of the minimal, essential definition of the concept as it was theorised back then by *roszak* – its anti-technocratic nature – and *reich* – the research for new levels of consciousness² – would later be appropriated by other musical subcultures whose values could eventually diverge from the original movement's left-wing ideology, while using similar strategies and discourses. interestingly, papers submitted by French scholars that were published in the original edition of this special issue (Whiteley 2012a and 2012b) did explore the movements' aftermath, with analyses of the skinhead movement (*Iescop*), do it yourself ethics (*hein*) and taqwacore Muslim punks (*Macke*), while those submitted by anglo-saxon scholars focused on the founding period.

The Counterculture as a set of antagonistic Fields

While theorists and *in situ* enthusiasts could see what – for a short period of time – bound the movement together in its opposition to mainstream society and the technocracy, what appears a novel theme in the contributions is how the 1960s counterculture fostered not only united resistance, but also multiple forms of inner dissent – a variety of contradictory facets of counterculture with different historical roots and various legacies beyond the 1960s. this, i believe, can at least partially account for what Andy Bennett identifies as a 'received, mediated memory' (introduction: 25), and maybe even a polemical one. as such, it would appear that the antagonistic dimension of this legacy was more than simply the sum of the usual retrospective evaluations made by former participants and later generations – the result of an epic duel between nostalgic memory³ and vengeful

¹ something sheila Whiteley explores in her recent article on Jimi hendrix (2012c).

² see sheila Whiteley's and andy Bennett's introductory chapters, as well as stanley spector's analysis of the Grateful dead's music (Chapter 9).

³ see hall (Chapter 12) on the Christiania community and arnold (Chapter 7) on Woodstock and altamont.

representations.⁴ There was also a cultural, ideological struggle going on within the movement from the start.

Explicitly or not, many of the chapters presented here analyse the counterculture in the wake of twentieth-century artistic modernism.⁵ Yet although the definition and delimitations of the concept diverge somewhat from one chapter to the next, three recurring elements seem to define it:

1. aesthetic vanguardism as an individualistic attack on formal tradition;
2. the belief in the capacity of art to change society and individual consciousness;
3. a specific relationship to modern life, whereby art either 1) flees from modern life to find aesthetic absolute in the absurd, madness, the unconscious, abstraction, other civilisations, or 2) on the contrary, in the postmodern phase beginning in the 1950s, ‘harnesses its creative energies in order to transcend its limits’ (Moore, Chapter 1: 32), greeting it ‘as a field of artistic experimentation’ (Den Tandt, Chapter 4: 85).

The current collection of chapters reveals how these trends were recycled by 1960s musicians and aesthetes. Be it via their artistic practices or their political goals – and the means they used to achieve these, such as psychedelic drugs, new interactions between musicians, amplification, or the recording studio, to name but a few – the minds behind the music of the 1960s indeed followed the steps laid down by this tradition. These, then, constituted the key medium through which seemingly diverse tools and goals were synchronised, so suggesting a certain homology between cultural and musical characteristics. This countercultural coalition depended greatly upon the power of rock to federate the youth. Yet, pursuing artistic autonomy via unrelenting experimentation and sonic anarchy, ‘even at the cost of alienating listeners with unlistenable noise’ (Keister, Chapter 8: 142), meant that at some point, the avant-gardist trends within 1960s rock would contradict the fundamental rock ethos – serious popular music, yes, but appreciated by the masses and legitimised by the charts (Keightley 2001).

Modernism, however, as useful as it might be to scholars as a retroactive concept, was not an underlying substance that would generate solidarity or homogeneity between the various artistic factions of the counterculture. The concrete, strategic applications of the modernist agenda – whether conscious or not – were extremely varied. The fact that the concept is used to characterise such politically opposed movements and figures as Dadaism and Futurism, Ezra Pound and André Breton already hints at this heterogeneity. Merged with other historical roots, situations,

⁴ see Halligan (Chapter 11) on Zappa’s consistent disdain for pop, throughout the 1970s and 80s, as well as Carlin and Jones’s “‘Helter Skelter’” and sixties ‘revisionism’ (Chapter 5).

⁵ Particularly Warner (Chapter 2), Den Tandt (Chapter 4), Moore (Chapter 1), Keister (Chapter 8), Spector (Chapter 9) and Brown (Chapter 10).

lifestyles, and ideological and aesthetic projects, the practices and discourses of the counterculture sent the movement's subcultures and leaders (beat-hip bohemians, hippies, freaks, Jesus freaks, avant-garde performers, radicals and new Left social critics...) in diverging directions that were then reflected within the music world.

Consider two signature series of events: Ken Kesey's acid tests and Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*. Both protagonists staged synaesthetic drug-infused psychedelic performances meant to 'derange the senses'. Yet Simon Warner's and Jay Keister's chapters reveal two opposing aesthetic and moral projects. The former 'was meant to be a kind of rite of passage in which the individual, provided with free LSD, would become immersed in an alternative environment of free expression, interaction and experience without boundaries, and could eventually return to everyday life a newly enlightened person' (Keister, Chapter 8: 146). Contrary to this, Warhol's stagings, using, significantly, speed and heroin rather than LSD, abandoned 'moral purpose, social conscience or political ethos' (Warner, Chapter 2: 46), and were meant to violently shock the senses, not to awaken the mind. As for the Velvet Underground, who 'immersed themselves in a dystopian downtown, evoking a scene through their words and music that was neurotic and hyperactive, numbed and anaesthetised', their music explored 'psychic disturbances', rejecting 'the simmering, summery optimism of psychedelia' (ibid.: 62) conveyed by the music of the Grateful Dead. Identical means can conceal opposite creeds, and vice versa.

Musicians even had to struggle with their own contradictions: Bob Dylan's more introspective texts clashed with folk music's allegiance to social realism; acid rock's use of typically modern, industrial and technological tools with the communal, anti-capitalist mythology it had recycled from folk; avant-garde experimentation in rock with the pop ideology it inherited from the rock and roll era; freak out's self-conscious amateurism with the cult of guitar-hero virtuosity; politically-committed jazzmen's free-form improvisations with their populist ambitions (Sklower 2006); the Velvet Underground's fascination with surface, camp, androgyny, deviant sex and depression with rock's happy, sentimental and macho posturing; and so on.

Of course, the point is not to demonstrate that the counterculture was breeding cultural civil war without knowing it. Things worked out harmoniously for a few years, in quite good spirit, it seems; besides which, individual contradictions or inconsistencies do not necessarily lead to torment. Nonetheless, the counterculture was not only a collaborative art world (Becker 1982), but also a cultural *field* (Bourdieu 1992), a space of tensions that was probably 'doomed' to crack under the centrifugal pressures of its contradictions. Gerald Carlin and Mark Jones's chapter clearly demonstrates this via the Beatles' and the Rolling Stones' duelling visions of popular violence and political change ('revolution' vs. 'street Fighting Man'), or the diverging representations of Charles Manson by hippies and radicals, as a demon or a 'victim', which 'catalysed the splintering of the decade's countercultural coalition' (Chapter 5: 99). As such the counterculture's experimental, freely creative, centrifugal drive, its libertarian, democratic impulse,

may account for its early fragmentation just as much as the political and economic factors traditionally summoned to explain the 'death of the 1960s'.

apocalypse, utopia and Beyond

as mentioned, the counterculture's representation of music's capacity to change the world was one of many symptoms of a modernist influence. Another of these undercurrents reveals itself in several of the chapters of this volume: apocalypticism. the cultural history of rock in the 1960s is not simply a continuation of/variation on a single trend in twentieth-century popular music history, but that of a multiplicity of strange, entangled roots. Modernism itself, as an 'annihilation of tradition and formal standards' (Moore, Chapter 1: 30), contains the proposal or provokes the perceived threat of aesthetic apocalypse.⁶ Contemporary reactions by fans or foes to Bob dylan going electric (ibid.: 31), rock music or free jazz (sklower 2008) further demonstrate this point. as Christophe den tandt writes, apocalypse considered as a time of revelation 'requires the annihilation of the present' (Chapter 4: 84), a creed held in common by many hippies, freaks and avant-garde musicians. the times were ripe for utopian or dystopian fantasies.

apocalypticism animated as much the optimistic revolutionary programme of rock as it did the Jesus Movement, the modernist ethos and the condemnation of society's moral decadence, utopian acid tests and the dystopian *Exploding Plastic inevitable*. utopia accomplished under a hippy rainbow is paradise lost for conservatives, and, obviously, the same is true in reverse. in the aftermath of music-related events such as the Manson Family murders, the violence at altamont, the Beatles' break-up, the death of many prominent rock icons, but also violence at the democratic national Convention in Chicago, the murder of Martin Luther king and Bobby kennedy in 1968 or the kent state shootings in 1970, countercultural enthusiasts started tasting their own brand of disenchantment. A significant number of members of the counterculture ended up rejecting the movement and its shortcomings, some abandoning the project altogether to reintegrate into mainstream society, others looking for political or spiritual alternatives. George harrison, for example, quit Isd after a disappointing trip to haight-ashbury, and decided to dig deeper into hinduism to further the pursuit of his ideals by other means (scorsese 2011). in Chapter 6, shawn david young shows how Christian millennialist themes started influencing former members of the counterculture and how many hippie freaks turned to evangelical Christianity. the radicalisation of left-wing students who resorted to terrorism (the Weathermen underground) can just as well be interpreted as an apocalyptic reaction to the failure of the

⁶ it is quite telling that the chapters that deal with modernism analyse apocalyptic influences within 1960s popular music: see Moore (Chapter 1), Warner (Chapter 2), Den tandt (Chapter 4), Carlin and Jones (Chapter 5), young (Chapter 6) and Keister (Chapter 8).

counterculture to overthrow capitalism and the technocracy. Lost utopia leaves one with so many options.

Analyses of how capitalism redefined itself by integrating the counterculture's principles into its ideology,⁷ organisation and management techniques are numerous (see, for example, Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). once again, however, there is also a lesson for cultural history, beyond the more classic political or economic historical narratives. the darker side of rock music, 'more obsessed with destruction than with the hopeful outcome of transfiguration' (ibid.), is something that Gerald Carlin and Mark Jones's research on the numerous cover versions of 'helter skelter' demonstrates best. they revealing the way many metal, post-punk, industrial and goth bands later interpreted the song to criticise the countercultural project by stressing Charles Manson's aura and thus shed light on the movement's sombre legacy. As they write, 'the "dark" 1960s – gore films, bad trips and satanism – were never entirely dispelled by the enlightenment ideals of the counterculture, and they would flourish in the 1970s mélange of paranoia and camp' (Chapter 5: 104), a mixture foreshadowed by freak explorations of madness, yoko ono's 'abject vocalisations' (Brown, Chapter 10) and the Velvet's and nico's play with gender identity (Warner, Chapter 2).⁸

the progressives among my generation have had to mourn two major political setbacks in the twentieth century: the failure both of classic Marxist avant-garde politics and the regimes they gave birth to and of pacific transformation of society by 'the masses'. despite what i mentioned above, the chapters in this volume do not leave us in utter despair. the 1960s counterculture represents an outstanding period of authentic democratic creativity – its music being one of its more fruitful legacies. As Christophe Den Tandt writes, 'utopian impulses only enjoy partial fulfilment in the field of practice. They must therefore be evaluated as a function of the residual accomplishments they leave in their wake – the practices, works and social changes their empowering momentum makes possible' (Chapter 4: 86). the music of the 1960s offered much in this regard for future generations to appropriate in new circumstances. a recent conference i co-organised in strasbourg⁹ on the relationships between popular music and politics in the twenty-first century showed how music, as a tool of political empowerment and democratic agency, remains a key component of political change. recent events in the Middle east, Chile and Canada, and the examples of the 'indignados' and #occupy movements across the Western world, all attest to popular music's

⁷ see Gina arnold's chapter in this volume (Chapter 7) on the paradoxical rhetorics of two iconic documentary films of the period, *Woodstock* (Wadleigh 1994 [1970]) and *Gimme Shelter* (Maysles and Maysles 1970).

⁸ see keister (Chapter 8), Brown (Chapter 10) and Warner (Chapter 2).

⁹ the international conference 'Changing the tune: Popular Music and Politics in the XXist Century' was co-organised by the asPM, the French-speaking branch of the iasPM and *Volume!* and took place on 7–8 June 2013 at the university of strasbourg. the programme and abstracts are available at: <http://volume.revues.org/3444>. the selected proceedings of the conference will be published in France in 2014, in the english-speaking world in 2015.

everlasting strength and necessity in popular struggles around the globe.¹⁰ This of course also means music can be hijacked by repressive states or advertising, and its efficiency can be as helpful to skinheads or Tea Partiers as it is to left-wing radicals. The counterculture may have been betrayed by some of its icons,¹¹ its history may have become a polemical legacy, and the chapters herein may demonstrate the frailty of the coalition it constituted, it nonetheless remains a significant creative and democratic moment in twentieth-century cultural and social history, a provocative promotion of aesthetic marginality and radicality, a set of ‘emancipatory gestures that redraw the social and cultural field’ (ibid.: 88) – the concrete inheritance of its utopian promises. New subcultures and political movements still feed on this to find new capacities, new agencies for political and cultural change. The counterculture: an apocalypse maybe, but a prolific one!

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¹⁰ Charles Mueller (Chapter 3) offers new perspectives on this link between musical subcultures and political emancipation, via Hardt and Negri’s work on the concept of Multitude.

¹¹ An ambivalent example of this could be Frank Zappa. Benjamin Halligan analyses Zappa’s disdain for disco music, gay sexuality and suburban cultures as ‘inevitably open[ing] up common ground between Zappa and reactionary, moralistic elements then ascendant in the public and political spheres’ (Chapter 11: 192), all of this while remaining faithful to his satire of Christian morals, probably thus opposing many former Jesus Freaks converted to conservative politics (young, Chapter 6). Giovanni Vacca’s analysis (Chapter 14) of the Neapolitan countercultural scene and its legacy also provides insight on such reversals.