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Chapter 6

Zappa and Resistance: The Pleasure Principle

Claude Chastagner

Artists are in a privileged position to voice the grievances of the silent, helpless, anonymous citizen. They can articulate the disapproval of objectionable legislation, obnoxious leaders, insufferable social policies, or ruthless economic plans. They can testify in court against censorship, write paeans to the rainforests, organise concerts to fight famine, or persuade people to register to vote. I am obviously alluding to the much publicised actions of artists like Sting, Bob Geldof, Peter Gabriel, Bruce Springsteen, George Harrison, R.E.M., and many others, including Franz Zappa. There are so many ways to disagree with one's contemporaries, and so many reasons to do it. However, Sting's or Bob Geldof's agendas were probably different from Frank Zappa's when he testified against censorship in popular music at the Parents Music Resource Centre (PMRC) Senate hearing in 1985, or when he wrote 'don't forget to register to vote' on the sleeve of his *Fillmore East, June 71* album.¹ As a rule, rock musicians have opted for two main strategies, which have by now become quite familiar. One is overt protest, in the form of rebellious anthems, crowd-arousing slogans, angry riffs, or defiant postures. This has been the case with some late 1960s bands (from Country Joe and the Fish to Jefferson Airplane), numerous punk bands, among them, most prominently, The Clash, and more recently groups such as Rage Against the Machine, The Agitator, or Lethal Bizzle. The other has been to devote oneself to a cause, organise and federate fellow artists, and raise money and consciousness by staging worldwide events. Frank Zappa is a stranger to both, with few of his songs relying on straightforward rebellious riffs, save in a tongue-in-cheek manner, and lyrics rather meant to make people think, laugh, or frown, than yell slogans. Likewise, Zappa was never concerned by charity rock, though he

¹ Frank Zappa, *The Mothers – Fillmore East, June 1971*, Bizarre, MS2042 (1971).

often opposed the advocates of censorship. Zappa, however, could easily stand as protest incarnate. His pedigree is indeed irreproachable: 10 days in jail in 1964 for what was considered pornographic recordings, the patronage of Václav Havel, his public indictment of the PMRC agenda, etc. His lyrics often read as violent satires of Middle America,² scathing attacks on all kinds of religious bigotry,³ rednecks,⁴ and televangelists,⁵ while his compositions have consistently challenged moral and musical norms, including those of rock music.⁶ Hence his iconic rebellious status, which in the seventies and eighties stretched behind the Iron Curtain.

At the same time, Zappa, who defined himself as a ‘practical conservative’,⁷ was a staunch opponent of drug consumption,⁸ a ferocious critic of Flower Power and the New Left,⁹ a fully fledged entrepreneur, fighting against copyright piracy, and a ruthless, almost tyrannical bandleader, collaborating with the most established representatives of classical music and the avant-garde, such as the London Symphony Orchestra, Pierre Boulez’s Ensemble InterContemporain, or Frankfurt’s Ensemble Modern.

So, what can be made of Frank Zappa? Was he an *artiste engagé*, fighting for a cause? Or should we write him off as a non-achiever in terms of political and social commitment, an egocentric whose main ambition was the recognition of his talent as a composer? And if so,

² ‘Concentration Moon’, on The Mothers of Invention, *We’re Only in It for the Money*, Verve, V6-5045 (1967).

³ ‘Jewish Princess’, on Frank Zappa, *Sheik Yerbouti*, SRZ-2-1501 (1979) or ‘Catholic Girls’, on Frank Zappa, *Joe’s Garage Acts II & III*, SRZ21502 (1979).

⁴ ‘Harder Than Your Husband’, on Frank Zappa, *You Are What You Is*, Barking Pumpkin, PW2 37537 (1981).

⁵ ‘Jesus Think You’re a Jerk’, on Frank Zappa, *Broadway the Hard Way*, Barking Pumpkin, D1-74218 (1988).

⁶ Suffice it to mention songs like ‘Bobby Brown’ (Zappa, *Sheik Yerbouti*), for their gross sexual allusions, or Frank Zappa, *Boulez Conducts Zappa: The Perfect Stranger*, Emi, DS-38170 (1984) for one of his most extreme incursions outside the realm of rock music.

⁷ Frank Zappa with Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (London, 1989), p. 315.

⁸ ‘Cosmik Debris’, on Frank Zappa, *Apostrophe (’)*, DiscReet, DS2175 (1974).

⁹ ‘We’re Turning Again’, on Frank Zappa, *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention*, Barking Pumpkin, ST-74203 (1985).

how come so many fans have been able to see in him a leader, a role model, a figurehead in their fight against the Establishment, and in their attempt to disengage themselves from the expectations of consumer society?

Neither openly rebellious, nor compliant, Frank Zappa's ambiguous attitude could best be defined as resistance. Indeed, ambiguity is at the heart of resistance. As Yves-Charles Grandjeat writes:

Even artists who have adopted indisputable attitudes of resistance, also display strands of conformity. Even those whose targets are conspicuous evince a considerable degree of ambiguity ... For if the resisting individual refuses to be dragged onto his opponent's field, and be absorbed by his logic, he must nevertheless be heard by him, and those who support him, in order to obfuscate his message and subvert his power ... Such ambiguity is eventually the main difficulty, but also, the main interest of adopting a posture of resistance.¹⁰

This chapter aims to probe the nature of Frank Zappa's resistance, its objective, and its potential effectiveness. For, ultimately, an essential, nagging question has to be addressed: what is the point of resisting?

The Specifics of Resistance

In a theoretical chapter that opens *Resistance Through Rituals*, John Clarke et al. note: 'Negotiation, resistance, struggle: the relations between a subordinate and a dominant culture, wherever they fall within this spectrum, are always intensely active, always oppositional ...'¹¹ Unfortunately, and despite the presence of the word in the title of their opus, there is remarkably no clear definition of what the authors mean by *resistance*. They rather seem to use the term interchangeably with *struggle*, or *opposition*. Similarly, Paul Corrigan and

¹⁰ Yves-Charles Grandjeat (ed.), *Le Travail de la résistance dans les sociétés, les littératures et les arts en Amérique du Nord*. (Bordeaux, 2009), pp. 17–21 (Translated by author).

¹¹ Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London, 1993), p. 43.

Simon Frith outline how to transform ‘resistance into rebellion’,¹² but little distinction is made between the various forms the relations between subordinate and dominant social groups take. Likewise, other authors indiscriminately resort to *resistance* or various concepts such as *protest*, *rebellion*, *confrontation*, *contestation*, or even *revolution*, without clarifying the specificity of each of these closely related, yet distinct terms. Thus Simon Frith claims that ‘part of the resistance displayed by consumers of popular culture has been seen in their reinterpretation and creative appropriation of mass-marketed products’,¹³ while John Fiske reminds us that the culture of everyday life has often been described ‘through metaphors of struggle or antagonism: strategies opposed by tactics, the bourgeoisie by the proletariat; hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded’,¹⁴ and in her preface to Alex Edelstein’s *Total Propaganda*, Katharine E. Heintz-Knowles writes that ‘consumers make their own meanings from texts presented in the mass media, regardless of the intent of the producer. So the audience has always had the power of resistance’.¹⁵ Resistance is thus a much used, or misused concept, with little attention paid to its specifics, or worse, to the difference between strategies of resistance implemented by artists, and what is usually understood by ‘resisting consumers’.

Resistance, however, holds a specific position between strategies of negotiation on the one hand, and the various forms of overt disagreement on the other. Neither violent rebellion nor collaboration, resistance explores a third possibility, and strives for an intermediary position, in the interstices between these more familiar, but less subtle, responses. Resisting individuals, from Henry David Thoreau to Barry Lopez¹⁶ or Mark Hollis,¹⁷ may try to change

¹² Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals*, p. 238.

¹³ Simon Frith, *Sociology of Rock* (London, 1978), p. 189.

¹⁴ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston, 1989), p. 47.

¹⁵ Alex Edelstein, *Total Propaganda: From Mass Culture to Popular Culture* (Mahwah, 1997), p. xiii.

¹⁶ See for instance Barry Lopez, *Resistance* (New York, 2005).

¹⁷ A member of the British band Talk Talk. His positions were made particularly visible after he withdrew from the music business in the 2000s.

their worlds, but not necessarily by putting up a fight, or resorting to confrontational tactics. Their resistance rather implies withstanding pressure, and refusing to comply. Such practices though, have led to misunderstandings because of their ambiguity, and as a result have been differently appraised. Contrary to the impeccably militant The Clash, Crass, or Chumbawamba, more ambiguously resisting individuals such as Pete Townshend or Damon Albarn have been criticised both by the advocates of overt opposition, for being compromised or co-opted, and by the proponents of more conciliatory stances, for being futilely, and unnecessarily zealous.

Yves-Charles Grandjeat claims that the artists:

whose names history retains are those who have been able to imagine and communicate their vision of alternative worlds, by being off-centre, against the grain, in a space of radical difference ... Their resistance, precisely, cultivates uncertainty. They do not affirm so much as they destabilise and question.¹⁸

Zappa, along with Bob Dylan or Neil Young, is one in a not-so-long line of musicians who have broken through established modes of representation and subverted them, have destroyed a few moulds, and untangled themselves from constraining traditions. But radical difference can indeed be disconcerting. By asserting their independence, they risk estranging themselves from their public. Audiences may consequently find it difficult to grasp their message, and engage in their universe. They may even denounce their radical difference and their questioning as a form of violence. For difference generates as much repulsion as fascination. It challenges our assumptions and convictions in ways we may find unbearable. Hence the misapprehension these artists have fallen prey to: though carefully avoiding in-your-face criticism, they have been indicted for being bad examples, misguided gurus, or dangerous ringleaders.¹⁹ However, it is proposed that resistance really has nothing to do with being a guru, or an example to follow. True resistance results from personal positions, which

¹⁸ Grandjeat, *Le Travail de la résistance*, p. 16 (Translated by author).

¹⁹ See for instance Seth Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet* (New York, 2009).

were never intended as behavioural models. It is generated by the decisions of individuals who never had but themselves in mind when they spoke out and never conceived themselves as ringleaders: it is only by accident, against his will, that the resisting artist becomes a figurehead. To return to an artist already mentioned, Bono, precisely because of his eagerness to become a symbol of resistance, and to lead his fans/followers onto the path of moral righteousness and political correctness, can hardly be taken as a paragon of resistance, being often dismissed, on the contrary, as a fraud, or an immature ‘eager beaver’, whose rash actions could even worsen the situation in Africa.²⁰ At the risk of incurring the wrath of many readers, one could add quite a few names to a list of genuinely committed, but overacting artists, from John Lennon and Michael Stipe, to Bob Geldof and Zach de la Rocha. On the other hand, the politically involved, but more discreet Robert Wyatt is probably closer to establishing a ‘cult’ following, and becoming an example of genuine resistance. True resistance does not imply enticing anyone to do anything (seize power, take arms, screw the system); true resistance is first and foremost the affirmation of an irreducible autonomy. Artists cannot be held responsible if someone in the audience chooses to emulate their quest for freedom and elects them as their role models.

Joseph Tabbi, in his afterword to William Gaddis’ *Agapē, Agape*, writes that ‘the single voice that emerges out of competing voices and constraining media’ expresses much more than a hopeless and vain struggle ‘against commodification by the capitalist machine’.²¹ Tabbi makes it clear that an artist like Gaddis ‘does not fool himself into imagining that he can oppose his art’s power to the power of the material world’.²² Rather, the artist can articulate and coordinate his singularity ‘with the vast systems and structures that ... shape our world’.²³ Resisting, i.e., living in the interstices between open rebellion and co-optation, is one of the manifestations of such articulation. It implies expressing a personal representation of the

²⁰ See for instance Paul Theroux, ‘The Rock Star’s Burden’, *The New York Times* (15 December 2005).

²¹ Joseph Taddi, Afterword, in William Gaddis, *Agapē Agape* (New York, 2003), p. 107.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

world, which may, in turn, prompt us to ‘fashion new images of ourselves within that world’,²⁴ and lead us onto the path of resistance.

Resistance Through Humour

To explore Frank Zappa’s strategy of resistance, we shall paradoxically turn to what may seem at first like one of his less ‘resisting’ pieces, a gross, sexually incorrect sketch, ‘Do You Like My New Car/Happy Together’,²⁵ sometimes called ‘the groupie routine’, that Zappa performed on stage from the early 1970s to December 1977. The term ‘groupie’ applies to those young girls who offer sexual gratification to whatever rock musician happens to be playing in their town, and groupie folklore is a recurrent feature in Zappa’s work. According to Paul Carr, it is ‘one of the most pervasive themes that Zappa revisited’,²⁶ as if he was trying to ‘encapsulat[e] the zeitgeist’²⁷ of the late 1960s–early 1970s, the years of the groupies. More than songs, ‘Do You Like My New Car/Happy Together’ are in fact a partly improvised playlet, with singer Howard Kaylan in his own role, and the rest of the band incarnating provincial groupies. Unashamedly pandering to the most vulgar forms of pleasure by resorting to crude, vulgar jokes on sexual matters, it fits beautifully the Supreme Court’s definition of obscenity by appealing to our prurient interests. In choosing these songs, we entertain the hope that such apparently vulgar pieces of entertainment may, better than more obviously committed tracks, contain and reveal the essence of Zappa’s resistance.

‘Do You Like My New Car’ relies on several concurrent techniques, as outlined below:

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The two interlinked tracks were recorded live in New York’s Fillmore East on 5 and 6 June 1971 and appear on Zappa, *The Mothers – Fillmore East, June 1971*. Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to either of these songs refer to this recording.

²⁶ Paul Carr, “‘Make a Sex Noise Here’: Frank Zappa, Sex and Popular Music”, in Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phelps (eds), *Thema Nr. 1: Sex und Populäre Musik* (Bielefeld, 2011): pp. 135–49, at 142, an article which provides a thorough analysis of Zappa’s dealings with sexual topics. Carr highlights to what extent Zappa had an almost anthropological perspective on rock musicians’ sexual behaviour.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

1. The use of vulgar and sexual terms that position the song on the verge of pornography: For example, ‘hole’, ‘rock off’, ‘clit’, ‘dick’, ‘shoved up and down a donkey’s ass until he can’t come’, ‘bend over and spread ’em’, etc.²⁸ One should also note a few attempts at a Rabelaisian confluence of food and sex,²⁹ complemented by a couple of sonorous eructations.³⁰
2. The inversion of sexual identities, with male musicians (here Howard Kaylan) playing the part of young women. However, they do it without altering their voices, and trying to sound more feminine by adopting a higher pitch. This in itself is a breach of the conventions followed by female impersonators,³¹ and is a measure of the extent to which Zappa departs from traditional forms and does not pay heed to verisimilitude.
3. Lack of adherence to conventional musical codes: rock concerts do not usually include such long, spoken passages during which the musical accompaniment is reduced to a few muted, repetitive chords, and a discreet rhythmic pattern on the drums. In fact, the piece sounds more like cabaret or vaudeville, though the rest of the show is more in line with traditional rock music.
4. Blurring of genre distinctions: the musical accompaniment of both tracks blends two theoretically incompatible musical forms. On the one hand, atonal or dissonant sounds that accompany passages in ‘Do You Like My New Car’ such as the ‘bullet’, the ‘monster’, and ‘I can’t stand it’, all of which portray Frank Zappa’s lifelong interest in Edgard Varèse and ‘serious’ contemporary music. On the other, closing the sketch, an innocuous and vapid (though catchy) pop tune,

²⁸ As of today, however, the record is still sold without the infamous RIAA ‘parental advisory/explicit lyrics’ sticker Zappa devoted so much time and energy to fight.

²⁹ As exemplified by Volman’s line ‘the enchilada with a pickle sauce shoved up a donkey’s ass’.

³⁰ Presumably by Frank Zappa himself.

³¹ Think, for instance, of the shrill-sounding ladies played by the cast of Monty Python in their *Flying Circus* programmes, or Jack Lemmon in Billy Wilder, *Some Like it Hot*, Ashton Productions (1959).

‘Happy Together’, a worldwide hit by The Turtles in 1967,³² performed here by the two former singers of The Turtles, Howard Kaylan and Mark Volman, now members of Frank Zappa’s band under the pseudonyms of Flo and Eddie (for contractual reasons). Besides, not only are the two genres juxtaposed and offered consecutively to the same audience, which is in itself unusual, but the conventionally romantic lyrics of ‘Happy Together’ are also collocated seamlessly with the obscene words mentioned above, to the effect of creating a jarring, but arresting contrast.

5. Irony and satire. Zappa’s targets include not only, as could be expected, middle-class tastes and values, but also the idiosyncrasies of the rock world:
 - a. Middle America is the most obvious butt of Zappa’s irony, with its tedious suburbs and undistinguished farmlands, and its bored, teenage girls, desperate for any kind of action, be it with second-rate rock stars. The question that gives the song its title, ‘do you like my new car?’, refers to the hideous Gremlins³³ their dads offer them for graduation, which fail to alleviate the dullness of their lives. There is a plastic, superficial, and provincial America, both fascinated and repelled by the City, Hollywood, its rock stars, and their hits (or better still, their ‘bullets’, with the obvious sexual connotation attached to the term).
 - b. The verbal mannerisms used by teenagers are also satirised by Zappa, something he pursued in 1982 with the hit ‘Valley Girl’³⁴ co-written with his daughter Moon Unit, in which they lampooned the spoiled,

³² The Turtles, ‘Happy Together’, London Records, 7L-6030-A (1967).

³³ A trendy, but rather ridiculous model of cars manufactured in the 1970s by the American Motors Corporation.

³⁴ Frank Zappa, *Ship Arriving To Late To Save A Drowning Witch*, Barking Pumpkin, FW 38066 (1982).

upper-middle-class San Fernando Valley teenagers, and their *Valspeak*.

- c. Eventually, the rock industry gets its share: endless touring, life on the road, fast, noncommittal, sexual gratifications, the quest for the monster hit rather than meaningful music, as well as the hypocrisy of both rock musicians ('would I lie to you just to get into your pants?'), and their groupies ('we are not groupies!'). The satirical impact is all the stronger since Zappa creates an *effet de réel*³⁵ by referring to actual musicians such as Bobby Sherman, Jimmy Greenspoon (of Three Dog Night), Robert Planet [sic], Elton John, and Roger Daltrey.

However, all of these practices raise a major question: to what extent are they really satirical? Should we not take them at face value, as an example of Zappa's grossness and lack of political correctness? Irony and satire reveal a sense of purpose, the intent to criticise follies and vices, and reform people. True, some of Zappa's comments are so scathing as to amount to sarcasm, with the sacrificial undertones implied by the Greek roots of 'sarcasm': to tear flesh. But the song is so indiscriminate in its targets that it is difficult to consider it as a regular piece of satire, with its concomitant denunciatory and moralistic tenor (regardless of the fact that even if we did, satire, as an unambiguous, univocal strategy would not fall into the definition of resistance previously given in this chapter). Taken together with the use of transgressive techniques, Zappa's reformist streak rather amounts to a prank, the pure pleasure of making fun, of going as far as possible, of showing an utter lack of respect, and building one's own, complex mix of strategies no one else would or could emulate.

Indeed, Zappa's ultimate, overarching strategy seems to be humour: Frank and his musicians have decided to have a good laugh. The tracks sound like pure entertainment, a

³⁵ A concept developed by Roland Barthes roughly translated as 'reality effect'.

comic routine based on sexual, misogynistic clichés, as is often the case with stand-up comedians for instance. The intended purpose seems to be easy, immediate, unclean fun. However, humour is an elusive quality. Its impact depends on the audience's response: something is humorous to the extent that someone finds it so. This is even truer of the various forms of transgression Zappa uses: sexual incorrectness, vulgarity, or downright meanness³⁶ more than laughter, may provoke disapproval or castigation. Humour is a most personal thing. Contrary to the postures of protest and rebellion used by Zappa's contemporaries in a rather interchangeable fashion, humour was (and still is), a rather infrequent commodity in rock music. Most songs resorting to humour are novelty ones aiming at purely comical effects. As early as the Forties, Spike Jones and his City Slickers established a tradition whose influence can clearly be heard in The Chipmunks, with, for example, 'The Chipmunk Song',³⁷ or in later songs such as 'They're Coming to Take Me Away, Ha-Haaa!' by Napoleon XIV,³⁸ and of course in Frank Zappa. Another source of inspiration closer to surrealism and the nonsensical mood of nursery rhymes can be traced in the work of The Beach Boys, on *Smiley Smile* particularly,³⁹ or on Pink Floyd's first album,⁴⁰ or even in The Beatles' 'Yellow Submarine',⁴¹ and 'You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)'.⁴² Being one of the very few to use humour on a regular basis may already be an indication of the nature of Zappa's resistance, of the interstice he has chosen to proffer a personal representation of the world. One frequent ingredient of Zappa's humour is his unexpected musical (less frequently verbal) quotes, such as, in our case, the 'Happy Together' snippet. Paul Carr, in a recent clever paper

³⁶ As for instance when Howard Kaylan says 'Roger Daltrey [the often derided lead singer of The Who] never laid a hand on me' to which Mark Volman retorts 'It's obvious to see why'. Zappa, *The Mothers – Fillmore East, June 1971*.

³⁷ The Chipmunks, 'The Chipmunk Song', Liberty, F-55168 (1958).

³⁸ Napoleon XIV, 'They're Coming to Take Me Away, Ha-haaa!', Eric Records, AR 195 (1966).

³⁹ The Beach Boys, *Smiley Smile*, Capitol, ST-09001 (1967).

⁴⁰ Pink Floyd, *The Piper At the Gates of Dawn*, Tower, ST 5093 (1967).

⁴¹ The Beatles, 'Yellow Submarine', Capitol Records, 5715 (1966).

⁴² The Beatles, 'You Know My Name', Apple Records, 2764 (1970).

on tribute bands covering Zappa's music, details some of these (not always legal) borrowings, and to what extent they stand as 'examples of Zappa implementing his First Amendment rights'.⁴³ Indeed, from this unusual perspective, the practice of humour can also be construed as a form of resistance, and a claim to free speech.

For Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, Zappa rejects 'the "no pain, no gain" theory of aesthetic pleasure'.⁴⁴ Obviously, quite a few members of the audience do not need any kind of pain to enjoy themselves as much as Zappa does, and relish both his crude, unbridled jokes, and the catchy little ditty ('Happy Together') that closes the passage. Could we conclude then, that all pain set apart, this sketch is pure pleasure, deprived of any strictly satirical intent, that it must be taken as immediate, first degree entertainment? That the distance between the satirical text and the behaviours it targets has vanished, which is a common predicament with satire? That it is impossible to identify clearly Zappa's attitude, and distinguish between revelling in vulgarity and using it as a weapon, or a target?

Admittedly, Frank Zappa's positions regarding American society and its figures of authority are clear. On numerous occasions, in interviews as well as on stage, in courtrooms as on records, he has vilified his contemporaries' practices, opinions, and tastes. However, by integrating into his music the behaviours that he denounces elsewhere and adopting them himself (declaring for example that 'the single most important development in modern music is making a business out of it'⁴⁵), he introduces a degree of ambiguity. As David Wragg put it, 'by labelling all his whole work as "entertainment", Zappa appears ... to have identified

⁴³ Paul Carr, 'An Autocratic Approach to Music Copyright?: The Potential Negative Impacts of Restrictive Rights on a Composer's Legacy: The Case of the Zappa Family Trust', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21/3 (2011): pp. 302–16, at 304. Incidentally, Carr's article reveals how, in a blatant case of dramatic irony, the Zappa Family Trust, by trying to prevent tribute bands from performing, contradicts one of Zappa's lifelong practices.

⁴⁴ Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, and the Secret History of Maximalism* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 146.

⁴⁵ Florindo Volpacchio, 'The Mother of All Interviews: Zappa on Music and Society', *Telos*, 87 (1991): pp.124–36, at 125.

himself with the operations of the culture industry'.⁴⁶ He adds: 'It is thus difficult to see how he can be both the object of the culture industry and the agent of its potential transformation'.⁴⁷ Pleasure being, according to Fredric Jameson, inextricably connected to entertainment, it cannot lead to a critical attitude. Endorsing Adorno's positions, Jameson further claims: 'Pleasure [amounts to a] flight from any last thought of resistance'.⁴⁸ So, is that it? Is there too much pleasure and fun in Zappa's music to make it an act of resistance? Is this yet another case of the intellectuals' rejection of the sensuous Susan Sontag bemoaned when she famously called for 'an erotics of art'?⁴⁹ Must we choose between 'thought' and 'pleasure', the former including the possibility of politically mature positions, the latter being understood by its detractors as either childish escapism into socially inert forms of sensuality, or a typically feminine withdrawal from commitment?⁵⁰

A Personal Space

But what if it were precisely the quest for immediate, easy pleasure that gave Zappa's music all its meaning, all its density? Could not pleasure be in itself a form of resistance? Do we have to decide where and who is the real Zappa, the good Zappa? Must we eschew the entertainer, the ribald, the scatologist? Is there room only for a politically, socially, and musically committed Frank? There are several levels of response to these inquiries. In the first place, one could question the effectiveness of puritanical and sententious radical dissent and utopias in their opposition to easy-going, sensual entertainment. Individuals' lives may have been changed by radical militancy, but whatever global impact it may have had has yet to be assessed. Why not try alternative strategies, the disenchanted (or the lucid) may

⁴⁶ David Wragg, "'Or any art at all?'" Frank Zappa meets critical theory' *Popular Music*, 20/2 (2001): pp. 205–22, at 208.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno: Or, the Persistence of Dialectic* (New York, 1990), p. 146.

⁴⁹ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, 1966), p. 14.

⁵⁰ Neil Nehring has written a beautiful defence of anger and emotion as politically effective tools. See Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy* (New York, 1997).

suggest? Why not experiment with other forms of *détournement* and sabotage? Why not fight back by means of an enormous, farcical roar of laughter, along with Tzara or Jarry? Why not have pleasure?

Further, the notion of *Conceptual Continuity* developed by Zappa gives a changing perspective to his buffooneries. If, as indicated in the introduction of this book, its basic meaning refers to Zappa's compositional approach, and the fact that all his albums and concerts are interconnected and parts of a global *œuvre*, *Conceptual Continuity* also includes extra-musical elements. Zappa's comments, attitudes, and various involvements outside the realm of music are also part of the overall picture. 'It was all one', claims Barry Miles.⁵¹ His philosophy has thus to be interpreted through the lens of his histrionics, but they, in turn, must be juxtaposed with his politics for a better understanding and appraisal. Zappa has positioned himself in the interstice between pleasure and commitment, comedy and satire. Or rather, he has carved a place for himself in both. And it is precisely the pleasure he derives from being simultaneously serious and entertaining, an erudite and a buffoon, that signals his resistance. Zappa's resistance consists in being as much in the avant-garde as in pop music, in articulate, social criticism as in vulgarity. His resistance consists in unfettering himself from any kind of codes, be it those of show business, the Moral Majority, or the New Left, and in avoiding the pitfalls of elitism and populism by belonging to both. Zappa's resistance could thus be defined as a form of subversion and infiltration, with the risks it implies: when asked 'Suppose I try and infiltrate, what is there to prevent me from being corrupted?', Zappa answered: 'There is nothing'.⁵² So that ultimately, his line of resistance suggests that a song like 'Do You Like My New Car' should not be dismissed as a coarse, contemptible piece of trash, but on the contrary should be appreciated for its potent, satirical content.

But is this still too narrow and priggish a perspective, giving too much emphasis on a hidden content, crediting the song with a message that would have to be decoded? After all,

⁵¹ Barry Miles, *Zappa: A Biography* (New York, 2004), p. 383.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

'Do You Like My New Car' is not a cipher. It *is* a contemptible piece of trash, and coarse fun, a moment of politically incorrect entertainment, with the potential of inducing gross pleasure. We should not put too much sense and meaning into it. 'Do You Like My New Car' should be appreciated for what it is, not for what it could be; we should enjoy whatever pleasure we may derive from it, taking in our stride its coarseness, while trying, though not too hard, to understand how, in the process, the song has become an example of Zappa's (but also our) resistance.

For, up to now, we have considered resistance only from the perspective of the artist, the production end of the communication process. What happens at the other end, at the level of reception? How efficient are Zappa's strategies? What power lies in the laughter they induce? And ultimately, what is the point of resisting? These questions imply that we reconsider and question how we see ourselves as members of an audience, and users of cultural products. A simplified version of the issue would yield two main possibilities: we can either see ourselves as the passive, manipulated objects of the mass marketed popular culture identified and decried by the Frankfurt School, or as the relatively autonomous consumers depicted by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, capable of withstanding the onslaught of the entertainment industry, and diverting its products to our own benefit. The first possibility embraces a rather pessimistic postmodern stance denying any possibility to transform life, and escape the hegemonic forces that shape and constrain it, while the second settles on a more optimistic approach, underscoring the potential empowerment of popular culture's audiences.

If we examine our reactions to the various strategies of resistance Zappa has employed, from gross humour to the blending of genres, the issues become much more concrete. Must we shun an innocuous ditty such as 'Happy Together', and the many songs in the same vein he wrote or covered, because they are too compromised, too commercial, too much aligned with the entertainment industry? Or should we endorse only his most elite, avant-garde productions, his incursions into musique concrète, jazz, or experimental electronica? Which

would work best as a piece of resistance? And what are we to make of the fact that in a single work like ‘Do You Like My New Car’ he is offering both simultaneously? In other words, as David Wragg phrased it: ‘How can a genuinely popular music stave off the machinations of the culture industry? How could a genuinely avant-garde music “reach down” to commodified listeners?’⁵³ The same Wragg, incidentally, reminds us that ‘Zappa’s identification of the realities of the capitalist markets puts into question ... the affirmative accounts of popular music by fashionable radicals’.⁵⁴

Despite their ambiguities and limitations, the Brechtian strategies (obvious, in-your-face, constantly reminding the listener of their artificiality) implemented by Zappa in ‘Do You Like My New Car’ make the task easier for the audience. Through exaggeration, amplification, excess, they deconstruct the mimetic illusion, and prevent the listener from erring, either by condemning Zappa for sexism or vulgarity, or by reading too much meaning into his pranks. Zappa does seem to adhere to the pleasure principle he displays, he does seem to enjoy his misogynistic, sexual, demeaning jokes, he does seem to relish titillating his masculine (and, so it seems, feminine) public.⁵⁵

However, from the perspective of the listener, it is ultimately indifferent whether Zappa believes or likes what he is doing on stage, whether he is being satirical, poking fun at us, or revelling in his crudeness. For what we defined as an act of resistance consists first and all in taking possession of a personal space, and defining an individualised relation to the world, regardless of the nature of the said space and relation. And the space Zappa grabs for himself, even if we utterly dislike it, or precisely because we may utterly dislike it, is the most powerful, the most subversive, the most joyous enticement to seize our own. ‘Do You Like My New Car’ spells out his politics, which could read like: I do not need you to endorse, nor

⁵³ Wragg, ““Or any art at all?” Franz Zappa meets critical theory’, p. 220.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵⁵ See for instance the response to ‘Titties and Beer’, a similar song, also recorded live, on Frank Zappa, *Zappa in New York*, DiscReet Records, 2D 2290 (1978).

imitate what I do; I will even do my best not to be endorsable; but start working on your own space too.

Resistance thus raises the issue of mimetic behaviours, on which so much of rock music is based, and requires an explicit rejection of mimetic patterns, whether it be following the model (the artist) or its subjects (the audience). Resistance is not a collective movement, nor a class or an age group statement. It has nothing to do with shouting slogans, or raising fists. Resisting is an individual action, the acquisition for oneself of actual or symbolic time and space. It is the choice to act according to one's own tastes, whatever they are. The only role model Zappa can play is to prompt an active, personal appreciation of music, be it only because his musical tastes may challenge ours, because his cultural eclecticism and his questioning of aesthetic norms constitute a reaction against the uniformity and standardisation required by the entertainment industry.⁵⁶ The more puzzled or outraged we are by his pranks, the closer we get to setting our own agenda, and delineating a personal space.

Conclusion

'Resisting norms', claims Marc-André Gagnon, 'does not mean toppling a given norm to replace it with a "better" one; it means ensuring the greatest possible creative freedom'.⁵⁷ Zappa's politics, as exemplified in a musical production such as 'Do You Like My New Car', does not offer any specific agenda, any explicit suggestions of what new norms should replace defective ones. His resistance is built on flexible, practical strategies that not only shun overt opposition, but do not offer any alternative, or any advice.⁵⁸ They just display a

⁵⁶ Rémi Raemackers claims that thanks to Frank Zappa, '20th century music threw away norms'. As such, he adds, 'he incarnates the ultimate form of resistance'. See Rémi Raemackers, *One Side Fits All. Clés pour une écoute de Frank Zappa* (Monaco, 2003), p. 166 (Translated by author).

⁵⁷ Marc-André Gagnon, 'Frank Zappa, un intellectuel spécifique' *Conjonctures*, 29 (Spring-Summer 1999): pp. 119–44, at 140 (Translated by author).

⁵⁸ One needs to qualify this assertion though by reminding the reader that throughout the 80s, Frank Zappa was sufficiently irked by President Reagan's government to give political advice to his fans, suggesting that they should vote, and making it easier for them by setting up registration booths at the door of his concerts.

personal relationship to the world. In a 1990 documentary, Zappa declared what can be considered as the clearest manifesto of his aesthetic resistance:

The whole body of my work is one composition and that's what music should be. You should be able to organize any kind of sound and put it into your music, so I wound up with a style of music that has snorks, burps, and dissonant chords, and nice tunes and triads, and straight rhythms and complicated rhythms, and just about anything in any order ... And the easiest way to sum up this aesthetic would be: anything, anytime, anyplace, for no reason at all.⁵⁹

Gilles Deleuze, as Nathalie Gatti underscores,⁶⁰ provides an apt model to appraise Zappa's form of resistance. Indeed, nibbling at different genres, simultaneously entertaining and challenging his audience, and rolling back the limits of good taste and propriety, Frank Zappa can be seen as performing the 'modest events' which for Deleuze define resistance and renew our belief in the world:

To believe in the world is what we want most; we have completely lost the world, we have been deprived of it. To believe in the world consists in fostering events, however modest, that elude control, as well as generating new spaces, however limited in size or volume ... It is at the level of each of these attempts that the capacity to resist or, on the contrary, to submit to authority can be assessed.⁶¹

With modest events like 'Do You Like My New Car', Frank Zappa generates new spaces. Does he renew our belief in the world? The point is not to 'like' or 'dislike' his pranks, his humour, his musical challenges; it is not to hail them as a call to arms, denounce them for their vulgarity, or dismiss them as a vain provocation. It is not even to enjoy them, though, of course, they have to be enjoyed, and their entertaining, diverting nature is at the heart of Zappa's politics. The point is to use his music to define a personal space: change the course of our daily lives, alter our relationship to our environment and other people, and

⁵⁹ Henning Lohner, *Frank Zappa – Peeefeeyatko*, WDR 3 (1991).

⁶⁰ Nathalie Gatti, 'Frank Zappa, l'esthétique d'un nomade', *Circuit: musiques contemporaines*, 14/3 (2004).

⁶¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972–1990* (Paris, 1990), p. 239.

determine our response to authority and power. We have been led to believe that revolt requires clearly identified postures, that rebellion implies indisputable political commitments, that social struggles must be based on unambiguous moral principles. Zappa breaks the norm. He offers ambiguity. He offers resistance: pornography and humour, transgression and pleasure.

In 1970, Zappa declared to the Dutch filmmaker Roelof Kiers: 'I think we inspired some of the people who like what we do to get a little bit looser, a little bit more devious, as I said before about progress not being possible without some sort of deviation. We need a few deviants'.⁶² Songs like 'Do You Like My New Car' may very well be the kind of deviation we need to become a little bit more devious.

⁶² Roelof Kiers, *Frank Zappa*, VPRO TV (1970).