Flat Disc Phonographs and the Injunction of the Second Master

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Abstract This article examines the mechanical phonograph from its invention as a business aid to its incorporation into the domestic space. While its insertion into the latter was certainly dependent on technical improvements, it was equally dependent upon soliciting the very fantasy space of the phonograph as an autonomous object capable of speaking on behalf of the individual. A central strategy to soliciting the domestic phonograph was to gradually remove its recording device, which simultaneously removed the consumer’s ability to engage with it as an interactive device. I use this as grounds to argue that the phonograph initially evidenced a term developed by Žižek called *primordial substitution*. Eventually, however, the decision to remove the recording device was an unconscious necessity in order for the phonograph to contribute to fantasy coordinates of democracy.

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Eternal Speech

The phonograph was an obscenely simple device, crude in design and leaden in character. Patented by Thomas Edison (yet attributed more broadly to a vast network of scientists and inventors), the “talking machine” required its operator to holler into a tube while cranking its protracted handle in order to record on a wax cylinder, into which a needle unit cut a fine spiral groove that could be re-read at any point in time. This was the phonograph’s only usefulness, to recast amidst a wave of scratches the barely audible traces of the voice whose exterior qualities were etched into it. Enthusiastically, however, Edison had penned in his notebook a list of uses for what he patented as the “phonograph principle”:  
- to make Dolls speak, sing, cry and make various sounds  
- & also apply it to all kinds of Toys such as Dogs, animals, fowls, reptiles, human figures; to cause them to make various sounds  
- to Steam Toy Engines exhausts and whistles  
- to reproduce from sheet music both orchestral instrumental & vocal, the idea being to use a plate machine with perfect registration & stamp the music out in a press from a die or punch previously prepared by cutting it in steel or from an electrolyte or cast from the original or tin foil

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a family may have one machine & 1,000 sheets of music thus giving endless amusement
- I also propose to make toy music boxes & toy talking boxes playing several tunes
- also to clocks and watches for calling out the time of day or waking a person
- for advertisements rotated continually by clockwork . . . (Conot 1979, 107).

While we tend to associate such a device as the phonograph with music, it seems clear that Edison had not designated the talking machine to such a use; indeed, the poor quality of early sound recordings was only powerful enough to render speech intelligible and so was not ideal for capturing a musical performance aside from hollering into it. In the next year, when his more official list for phonograph uses was published (1878), he listed music as fourth among a dozen or so detailed descriptions of its potentials including aid to business, pedagogy, and the preservation of the life of whomever spoke into it.

The phonograph, in other words, was a storage system for speech that transcended the limitations of the human body. As Edison’s own editorial introduction in *Scientific American* celebrated:

> Whoever has spoken into the mouthpiece of the phonograph, and whose words are recorded by it, has the assurance that his speech may be reproduced audibly in his own tones long after he himself has turned to dust. The possibility is simply startling . . . Speech has become, as it were, immortal (1877, 304).

The metaphysical spectacle of technology rested on its capacity to lift and sustain the surface of the voice. So great was the desire to attach the exterior qualities of a human being to the phonograph that one of many elaborate phonograph-related inventions was that of talking doll, the *Jumeau Bebe Phonographe*. While Edison first manufactured the doll in 1889 in Orange, New Jersey, Emile Jumeau manufactured a more successful version in 1893. The *Jumeau Bebe Phonographe* could recite up to 30 words and by 1894 was sold with three cylinders to speak in French, Spanish, or English. In department stores, the doll’s initial statement to potential consumers was:


*[Hello, my dear little Mommy. I am very well behaved and Daddy is so pleased. We will go to see Guignol [a puppet-show character] to hear him sing. Knock, knock.*

The phonograph was uncanny because it spoke for itself, it was capable of enacting speech, no matter how distorted its voice was. Such depictions of speaking dolls, for instance, suggest that the phonograph was praised for its ability to mimic the relative autonomy of a speaking subject. Indeed, on April 18 of 1888 the National Academy of Sciences in Washington witnessed the talking machine say: “The Speaking Phonograph has the honor of presenting itself to the Academy of Sciences!” (quoted in Mitchell 1991, 50, emphasis added). According to Laing, throughout this presentation people fainted at its sound, one witness claiming: “It sounds more like the devil every time” (quoted in Laing 1991, 7). The phonograph, more than speaking for others, spoke on behalf of its own technological abilities. The phonograph spoke for, heard for, and enjoyed for people, and thus serves as an example of primordial substitution.

**The Primordial Substitution of the Old Master’s Voice**

A surviving 1906 Edison wax cylinder boldly proclaims in a three-minute advertisement that the phonograph can complete a number of tasks for you, its potential buyer. Len Spencer, a famous vaudeville entertainer of the early 20th century whose voice would have been instantly recognizable to the ear, bellows:

I am the Edison phonograph, created by the great wizard of the New World to delight those who would have melody or be amused. I can sing you tender songs of love. I can give you merry tales and joyous laughter. I can transport you to the realms of music. I can cause you to join in the rhythmic dance. I can lull the babe to sweet repose, or waken in the aged heart soft memories of youthful days. No matter what may be your mood, I am always ready to entertain you. When your day’s work is done, I can bring the theater or the opera to your home. I can give you grand opera, comic opera or vaudeville. I can give you sacred or popular music, dance, orchestra or instrumental music. I can render solos, duets, trios, quartets. I can aid in entertaining your guests. When your wife is worried after the cares of the day, and the children are boisterous, I can rest the one and quiet the other. I never get tired and you will never tire of me, for I will always have something new to offer. I give pleasure to all, young and old. I will go wherever you want me, in the parlor, in the sickroom, on the porch, in the camp or to your summer home. If you sing or talk to me, I will retain your songs or words, and repeat them to you at your pleasure. I can enable you to always hear the voices of your loved ones, even though they are far away. I talk in every language. I can help you to learn other languages. I am made with the highest degree of mechanical skill. My voice is the clearest, smoothest and most natural of any talking machine. The name of my famous master is on my body, and tells you that I am a genuine Edison phonograph. The more you become acquainted with me, the better you will like me. Ask the dealer! (quoted in Wurtzler 2009, 77)

The listener is interpellated into the realm of music, vaudeville, dance, comedy, pleasure, and discipline, into the proximate grip of
the phonograph’s cone; he is only a listener once he has submitted to the routine that the phonograph recites. He is taken to his own soft memories of youthful days, into the comfort of his own domestic parlour, which can be instantly transformed into a concert hall, summon the presence of a quartet, evoke movement and dance. The benefits are thus countless for he who invests his perception in it, and he is made well aware of his changes – his wife is cared for, his children are calm.

Repetition plays a unique role in the advertisement. The phonograph guarantees that it can repeat whatever is spoken into it, yet it remains distant from the novelty of repetition. The phonograph here repeats for the consumer’s pleasure: it can repeat the owner’s songs and words, it can transmit the sounds of loved ones who are lost, and it can recite pedagogical lessons in other languages. This is a feature unique to the Edison’s cylinder phonograph, which was sold with blank cylinders onto which the consumer would record the events and experiences of their own lives. The cylinder, however, fell out of favor to the rise of the flat disc phonograph, adopted by Columbia and by RCA Victor, which was not possible to record onto; the winning phonograph mass produced and disseminated professional performances, disallowing the participation of its owner, thus barring him from engaging in a dialogue with his self as it was preserved in the external world, and discontinuing the tropes of fascination with death and repetition that the phonograph originally articulated.

To return to the spoken advertisement, by relentlessly interpellating its own autonomy as a self-sufficient object, its own capacity for repeating the event of elsewhere along with the historical certainty of its having happened, the Edison machine does not proclaim anything noteworthy regarding its ability to repeat other than an aside: “If you sing or talk to me, I will retain your songs or words, and repeat them to you at your pleasure.” But this precise illustration of repetition, drowned amongst dozens of other entertainment purposes, was the central constituent of mechanical phonography in its inception.

Simply, the phonograph, as much as it speaks to us, speaks for us. When the phonograph speaks on its own behalf, when it speaks for us, it primordially substitutes our own experience by hearing events before we do – not only does it screen professional performances and distribute them without interference, it screens our very enjoyment of them. In this sense, the phonograph is an extension of the plant in Tin Pan Alley, a music publishing company employee whose task was to shout along enthusiastically with public performances of his company’s latest songs to seduce the crowd into his “spontaneous” frenzy, just as Irving Berlin did for
Harry Von Tilzer’s songs after working as a singing waiter and before becoming the most prolific songwriter of the 20th century. The plant’s hype is the music industry’s example of primordial substitution, as a member of the crowd informs us of how we are supposed to feel about an event, offering permission to enjoy in excess what we suppose he feels. It is precisely this kind of primordial substitution which we find in the phonograph advertisement because it has already listened to the performances and has approved our own enjoyment of them.

Primordial substitution is what Žižek observes as the radical externalization of one’s innermost feelings, the Lacanian decentrement of the subject. Primordial substitution is the essential matter of the symbolic, the “object-thing which substitutes for me, acts in my place” (1997, 141), an externalized site towards which the subject directs their enjoyment. And in the phonograph’s own transition from a device with which its owner interacted towards standing in the space of the phonograph as a listener of professional performances, the phonograph’s move towards the flat disc device is a move towards an experience free from the responsibility to participate, that which decenters the subject and requires him to ethically give duty to an authority to make his decisions. We can think of this authority as the Big Other. The “symbolic order qua ‘big Other’,” as Žižek describes it, is “never simply a tool or means of communication, since it ‘decentres’ the subject from within, in the sense of accomplishing his act for him” (1997, 142).

But primordial substitution is not the hidden agenda of the advertisement in question here. It is much more obvious than that, and it comes as a confession in its last breath; despite you being its owner, you are not its master. There is someone else who is responsible for the experience: “The name of my master [Edison] is on my body! Ask the dealer!” At this moment the owner is thrust back into the situation in which the advertisement unfolded, is cut from the primordial substitution wherein the phonograph serves the desires of the potential owner, and is repelled from it back to the department store display floor. Truly, the kernel of democracy is that we each are allowed a share at being the master, but with momentary reminders that there is really something else coordinating the experience for all of us.

From the Office to the Arcades

In its original inception, the phonograph was at once a recording and playback technology. Although playback-only devices were making their first appearances as early as 1893, Columbia boasted in that year that in fact the recording/playback-enabled Grapho-
phone reigned superior over the former because it “does much more [than playback-only devices]; it repeats your voice; your friend’s voice; songs sung to it or stories told to it” (Laing 1991, 8). Simply, the recording/playback phonograph was embedded in and recorded the life experience of its potential user. The early mechanical phonograph was practical yet “marvelous” all at once. And it was especially heralded for its potential to accommodate businesses.

But the talking machine was relatively unsuccessful in the office due largely to the resistance enacted by stenographers concerned about their own employment. The reintroduction of the phonograph into consumer society was by way of its potential use as an entertainment device, and later through the advent of the flat disc and the preference for professional performances over and above blank cylinders. Although Edison had written elsewhere that a selling feature of the phonograph would be to sell music to “the family” for domestic enjoyment, the domestic environment was where the Edison phonograph ultimately failed, as pre-recorded discs would finally win the monopoly. And so the transition from public to private marked a migration from the ability to store one’s voice towards the unidirectional flow of professional performances, away from the cylinder and towards the disc.

Although Jesse Lippincott had invested $1 million in 1881 in Edison’s company, certainly enough to produce talking machines across the country, businesses simply weren’t interested in replacing stenography with phonography. Lippincott had “imagined a national industry and a national communication network” (Sterne 2003, 200), but even though he had the initiative to purchase Edison’s patent and create 33 subsidiaries in various regions across the country, the stenographers sabotaged any phonograph that made its way into the workplace. Further, according to Garofalo, not only were the phonographs unwelcome by stenographers but when “Lippincott fell victim to infantile paralysis in the early 1890s, the struggling company was thrown into further disarray” (2008, 17). Thus, according to Kenney, when “the office dictaphone business proved a major disappointment, those working in the regional affiliates cast about for some other profit-making venture and began to transform the phonograph into a vehicle of entertainment and diversion” (1999, 24). Fallen into despair over its failure, Edison renounced the phonograph business and turned his attention towards the other projects which would contribute to his legacy.

An associate of Edison’s who had managed his Pacific Phonograph Company, Louis T. Glass, found himself looking over a warehouse of obsolete machines and put them to a different use. He encased them into glass boxes with extended listening tubes and...
placed them in public spaces such as arcades and train stations for people to pay a nickel and hear a novelty song, comic monologue, or marching band. Chanan insists that inserting the phonograph into the public space for entertainment is what saved the business (1995, 25–6), which Kenney confirms by the fact that the machines made industry beyond $1,000 in nickels by 1890: Any “man who put a nickel in one machine was highly likely to try the other one and to repeat the pattern night after night” (1999, 25). According to Garofalo, they were so popular within a year that the machines were placed in 18 other locations, which “not only pointed the way for the North American Phonograph Company but also won Glass the title of ‘Father of the Jukebox’” (2008, 17).

By 1889, Edison’s talking machine offered an exciting diversion to people in their travels or at the carnival, and increasingly the wax cylinders were durable enough to sustain regular wear, so phonography became a profitable business for both entertainers and phonograph manufacturers alike. By the 1890s virtually every North American city boasted its own phonograph parlour. According to Kenney, for instance, these nickel-in-the-slot machines could be found “in train stations, ferry boats, landings, trolley waiting rooms, shopping districts, carnivals, circuses, amusement parks, hotels, lunch rooms, cafes, and saloons – semipublic places that did not collect an admission charge.” Phonographs in the public sphere became so popular that they were eventually designated to their very own “phonograph parlours”; the appeal of the room of machines lay in the variety of entertainment they offered, as “people tended to move from machine to machine enjoying a variety of short musical distractions” (1999, 25).

Before long, competing phonograph companies took notice of its public usage, and so the Columbia Phonograph Company stepped up to begin its climb to domination in the American market; in 1890 the Columbia catalogue held John Phillip Sousa marches but in the following year they’d expanded their catalogue to include more novelty and “whistling” tunes that were in public demand. The phonograph as a novelty machine or entertainment device had entered such common public usage in 1891 that The Phonogram periodical was published, devoted entirely to the phonograph and the recording industry. Two others followed: The Phonoscope (1896–1900), which focused exclusively on the public use of phonographs, and a subsequent Phonogram (1900–1902) which traced the entry of the phonograph into the domestic space. In the public space the phonograph offered listeners a private experience with the development of stethoscopic listening tubes.

The uses of the phonograph did not proceed as the science and business communities had predicted. Another revolutionary act of
phonographic repetition did occur, but this time in a network that was not under the approving gaze of the industry. Obscene phonograph recordings found their way behind trade show curtains, private rooms at the phonograph arcades, and in saloons. Because it was considered unlawful firstly to produce obscene material under the obscenity act, performers were forced to record under pseudonyms (at the time an illegal practice), but because part of what made obscene recordings so appealing was mimicking a public figure, many of the performers illegally enacted impersonations and were eventually brought to trial. Impersonation was, as discovered after the trials, so common place that the law was adjusted so that performers were not obliged to stay locked into themselves on recordings – the rise in coon songs as sung by white performers is attributed precisely to this legal adjustment.

From Obscenity to Testimony

The absurdity of a machine which could talk on its own behalf required the suppression of its obscenity. The phonograph was subject to the same rules as the people who spoke into it. Although Edison sang “Mary had a little lamb” into the phonograph as a demonstration of its playback potentials, Feaster & Giovannoni suggest that the object was just as likely to be a swearing as a talking machine: “Reliable earwitness accounts tell of Edison and his men repeatedly shouting ‘mad dog’ into the machine and then gleefully running it backwards to hear from the tinfoil one resounding ‘God damn’ after another” (2007, 5). Practical jokes, obscene songs, even simulated sexual activity were recorded on the machines, which offered a shock to those who bestowed the phonograph’s potentially disciplining virtues of delivering church sermons and preserving tasteful speeches. The phonograph was thus able to play anything and to record anything, to play the most discretely told joke and to record the most intimate moments of someone’s domestic life. According to Feaster & Giovannoni,

In its ability to capture what had previously been transitory, the phonograph was what we understand today as a ‘disruptive technology’ – one that prompted a mind-bending shift in the paradigms of what’s fleeting and what’s fast, what’s private and what’s public. Pictures, words, and musical notations had been inscribed for millennia. But unaided by any human scribe, the phonograph could miraculously ‘bottle’ actual sounds – conversations, performances, and inflections that neither dissipated into thin air nor stayed where they were made (2007, 5).

Just as the photograph and the motion picture seized gestures and facial expressions that were before fleeting, features Benjamin had designated as the “optical unconscious” (2006, 19), the phonograph
lifted sounds that were otherwise external to the domain of critical reflection and isolated them in the infinite potential to repeat. The phonograph generated the most profit in spaces where people in an ironic public privacy could drop a nickel into a machine for the latest discretion in sonic entertainment. The anonymity of recordings was central, and while consumers were eager to hear the sounds of celebrities and politicians bellow through the stethoscopic listening tubes, it encouraged professional performers to hone their skills in mimicry. Indeed, many recordings at the time said to be of famous politicians were of comedians and performers impersonating politicians – the listening audience simply trusted that what they heard was a faithful reenactment. This is what made obscene recordings so shocking. The sound of a couple engaged in the sex act was a somatic and corporeal proximity to a real sex act. If the industry could provide it and stay out of jail, they were sure to profit off of obscenity. But on June 26, 1896, the *New York Times* reported two arrests in connection with these recordings:

The arrests are the result, Comstock says, of a hunt for over two years. During all that time Comstock and [one of his detectives] Oram have been arresting various people for exhibiting phonographs that had cylinders containing vile songs and stories, but they had never been able to catch the person from whom these cylinders were purchased. They noticed that all of the cylinders gave forth exactly the same voice, and finally they learned, it is alleged, that it was from the voice of an actor traveling with Frohman’s ‘Shenandoah’ company. They were told that this actor’s name was Hunting, and that he was on the road with the show.

This initial crackdown sparked a series of mass arrests, the first of which occurred in 1897 in New York after the first legislative attacks against the exhibition of boxing films on the kinetoscope – this followed other minor charges against an 18-year old who ran a phonograph booth for his father, having recorded songs “of the most vulgar description.” According to *The New York Times*:

It is alleged that Comstock, while here on Sept. 25, discovered that improper songs were being produced in the phonograph gallery. The phonograph was seized and the two prisoners taken before Justice of the Peace Suter. The son admitted the charge, while the father denied it. Both were held in $1,000 bail to await the action of the Grand Jury." Further, “It is alleged that the man who sung into the phonographs the words composing the songs is in prison serving a term for doing so (*The New York Times*, October 14, 1897, 3).

Anthony Comstock, in his crusade against obscenity, indicted a man in 1895 for charging patrons of a saloon to listen to recordings “containing most obscene and filthy blasphemous matter.” In 1896 a saloon owner faced charges of a similar variety. The voice on the recordings belonged to a famous comedian of the day, Russell
Hunting, known more for his Irish-American character Michael Jeremiah Casey. In a sting operation, one of Comstock’s detectives, George Oram, on a visit to Casey asked him for some obscene recordings, and eventually Casey upon earning his trust demonstrated his skills in his own laboratory. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported:

He [Oram] told them [Hunting and his assistant Charles Carson] he wanted a certain cylinder containing a particularly obscene song. He claims in his affidavit, on which the warrant was issued, that Hunting sold this cylinder to him and then in his presence made him another equally objectionable record, and offered to provide still worse productions. The cylinders were sold for $1.50 each, and Hunting, it is declared, informed Oram that he had just sent fifty of them to Coney Island to be distributed among the saloons and other resorts there (quoted in Smith 2008, 166).

The Edison Phonographic News, while not naming the accused, still reprimanded their behavior in the following statement:

All phonograph users will unite in the verdict that this is one of the best things that could possibly have happened for the phonograph. To take a noble instrument like the phonograph and prostitute it to such base uses is indeed a sacrilege, and it is hoped that such an example will be made of these parties as will forever prevent the use of the phonograph again for any such purpose (quoted in Feaster & Giovannoni 2007, 9).

Obscene cylinders constituted a new target of the Comstock Law, which rendered illegal any act to send “obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious” material through the mail. Obscene cylinders were not found in Coney Island again. They knew where to look, and anyone recording or submitting obscene recordings were swiftly found and prosecuted under Comstock’s team of detectives. The problem was acknowledged and a policy set forward by The Phonoscope, which proclaimed in 1899 that:

Whoever in connection with any show or entertainment, whether public or private, either as owner, manager or director, or in any other capacity, uses or causes or permits to be used, a Phonograph or other contrivance, instrument or device, which utters or gives forth any profane, obscene or impure language, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars, or by imprisonment not exceeding one year, or by both such fine and imprisonment (reprinted in Morrill 1902, 901).

The phonograph itself was being used in court to report hearings and to testify. In 1898, the phonograph was brought into a court when a stenographer, Miss Leno Joyce, was unable to provide typed transcripts because of her upcoming marriage:

It was at this juncture that the phonograph was brought into use. The lawyers hurriedly bought one, and Miss Joyce read off the report of the trial into a tube.
wax cylinders were completed, and the work was found to be perfect. Miss Joyce’s voice made one of the best records imaginable, and if any witness attempts to go back on his former evidence at the forthcoming trial, all that will be necessary will be to put on the phonograph one of the fifty or more wax records the lawyers have obtained and start it going (New York Times, January 26, 1898, 3).

The scientific community and the law upheld the virtuous components of mechanical phonography, and did not condone lewd behavior. In phonographic repetition, the playful aspects of it, we see the slightest emergence of difference, but it is quickly snuffed out by the law. Under the rule of law, the recording industry could produce recordings which were regulated and protected under the guise of its first revolution. Part of the strategy in regulating mechanical phonography was to subject it to elaborate laws that ensured the voice which arose from it would not disturb the listener. People were thus protected from the potentially neurotic and erotic aspects of mechanical phonography. It had become rationalized.

“Metaphysical Melancholy” and Mechanical Phonography

The culture around the phonograph was obsessed with death and rituals of death and dying, reflected in poetry and Symbolist painting, and in particular a growing theme was that of the communication between the dead and the living, not only in religious or sentimental discourses but alongside a growing interest in psychic phenomena (Christie 2001, 8–9). Photography provided a technological metaphor for exploring existence after death, harkening to the “spirit” that the photograph was capable of capturing. Likewise, McLuhan wrote that the “undercurrent of mechanical music” was “strangely sad,” associated with “the metaphysical melancholy latent in the great industrial world of the metropolis” (1994, 87). Speech, more than music, without bodily presence reflected a culture which was already capable of imagining life after death, and, according to Christie, “the denial of death’s finality in many of its most highly acclaimed imaginative works” (2001, 9).

The phonograph, according to Gunning, called “on auditors to imagine a human being, or perhaps to notice with wonder the lack of a human body” (2001, 21). As playful as phonographic instances were, they revealed a fundamental ontological shift towards the objective externalization of the subject, a shift that explains the fascination phonography generated despite its impracticalities. The phonograph spoke, but it spoke an exteriority of the human subject without the authority of presence. As much as it was an entertaining object, then, the phonograph manifested for the general public the split of sensory perception from the presence of
another person to the hollowed exteriorization of their presence. The very devils detected in phonographic demonstrations were the markings of the machine’s madness. According to Gunning, this explains “why for many occultists the phonograph seemed further proof of a new scientific revelation in which the material and the spirit world would be revealed as one,” because phonographic recordings reflected a modern turn towards the storage and retrieval of lived human events in an archival format that was “the outcome of the separation of the senses and the disciplining of the modern body” (2001, 22). The phonograph thus contributed to the split senses (splitting event from source, splitting sound from vision, etc.)

Indeed, preserving the body after death was itself a scientific practice in a stage of infancy. According to Sterne the phonograph displayed a certain dialectic between the preservation of an event and its eventual mass reproduction. The product is a product of exteriority: “The voices of the dead,” according to Sterne, “is a striking feature of exteriority.” He continues:

Because it comes from within the body and extends out into the world, speech is traditionally considered as both interior and exterior, both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the limits of subjectivity. In contrast, the voices of the dead no longer emanate from bodies that serve as containers for self-awareness. The recording is, therefore, a resonant tomb, offering the exteriority of the voice with none of its interior self-awareness (2003, 290).

The signification of the mechanical phonograph was approaching the status of a language. It was becoming a closed circuit of professional recordings whose points of origin were unclear, the uses of which in the domestic space were relatively limited. They were idealized repetitions, promises that its uttered events had occurred in phenomenal life. But they were a far cry from a perceiving subject who engaged specifically with the tools of the machine in order to experiment with the dialectic of interiority/exteriority.

Idealized repetitions were related directly to beautifying the products of renunciation and preserving the voices of the dead. As Sterne writes: “The methods of preservation described and prescribed the cultural and technical possibilities of sound recording” (Sterne 2003, 292). Preserving the voices of the dead reflected broader concerns and practices concerning the preservation of food, which was being handled on a large scale for mass production. The canning industry grew from 5 million output in 1860 to 30 million output in 1870, and in general canned food was especially useful for feeding large military personnel. Alongside this, “taking care of oneself” was becoming a central disciplinary routine in everyday life in order to preserve one’s health. The emerging
modern subject in turn was one who engaged in the emerging practices of embalming and preservation (2003, 293–8).

Phonography represents an attitude towards the body of the dead, entwined in fantasies that rest between speaking to the not-yet-born and hearing the no-longer-with-us. Embalming was, so to speak, making sense of the no-longer-living body which could be presentable for a time being for a viewing by the grieving family. Embalming slowed the process of decay, beautified the face, made the exterior sustainable and presentable for open casket funerals. And so, as Sterne tells us, the body was not allowed to decompose until it was out of sight of the bereaved: “while competing methods were concerned with interiority, with preserving the body in its original form, chemical embalming was concerned only with exteriority, with the appearance of the body and its potential to perform its social function” (2003, 296–7). The body could be the commodified object of the person who could make that one final appearance at their own funeral.

Beautifying the product to preserve its social function found its way into recording industry practices, extracting the inner life of environment to reproduce their voice in detailed exteriority. So reactions to the phonograph were prescriptive and prognosticative instead of descriptive. According to Sterne, an 1877 article which praises the phonograph speaks to the fascination with death as a receding limit – to hear the voices of the dead and to send messages to the future. This is why we cannot accurately claim that sound recording radically altered the cultural status of speech. It would, therefore, be more accurate to effect an inversion of the usual wisdom on the voice and the phonograph: the cultural status of the voice transformed sound recording (2003, 299).

Why was the music industry reluctant to merge with recording in the 1890s? Aside from looming copyright legislation that would leave the recorded performances unprotected, Sterne notes that music sounded canned, and there was an emergence of a discourse on embalming and preservation which set apart music that simply sounded artificial versus music that sounded authentic. Laing argues as many have that the 20th century shift in music aesthetics removed vision from being grounded in the actions of performers, or “the replacement of an audio-visual event with a primarily audio one, sound without vision” (1991, 11). Accordingly, Edison had made very early attempts to ground the sounds of the voice with a human representation, an introduction of the subject in the form of dolls, animals, and at least manifesting some form of human presence. Laing argues in reference to Freud that the split between invocatory (listening) and scopic (looking) was the
necessity to somehow animate sound. Phonographic practices, according to Gunning, rehearses the desire “to preserve the human personality after death, to create a technological double possessed of an ersatz immortality through mechanical recording and reproduction.” He expands: “As an objective form of memory, these recording techniques represented man’s triumph over death, the ultimate goal of reproduction. Yet [. . .] technological immortality is always a fetish, an acknowledgment of the lack through a never fully successful attempt to deny it” (2001, 27).

To revisit the 1906 advertisement, “I am the Edison Phonograph!”: the machine on which the advertisement is spun is a cylinder phonograph, capable of recording and disseminating the voice of its owner. The phonograph persuaded consumers that it could bestow the virtues of modern independence by teaching listening subjects how to listen to music, how to learn languages, and how to preserve their own voices. What had not faded was the dominance of the brand. By the turn of the century, the phonograph was fully capable of transmitting into the domestic environment the sounds of the public world by repeating an event with which the listener was not familiar, and so the phonograph screened the listening experience for the listener. The phonograph thus allowed listeners to enjoy according to strict parameters of enjoyment, it displaced the listening experience into the external world as the listener was privy to their own first experience of an event, while simultaneously experiencing that event’s potential for repetition. What seems to be missing here is an appreciation of the social character of what was going on, and the huge capacity of the phonograph – again, once discs were introduced – to accelerate the circulation of new popular music. This offers a sense of accomplishment to the listener, that the object must possess some authority – its master, after all, is Thomas Edison, and who knows more than the master inventor of the modern age about being properly modern?

The Empty Seat of Power and the New Master

The phonograph was not intended to enjoy music through alone, though the dissemination of professional musical performances was certainly its terminus. The phonograph took flight from its conception as a scientific aid toward the domestic space as a technology of entertainment. Commended for speaking on its own behalf in a process described by R. Murray Schafer as scizho-phonía, the phonograph in many respects seems a suitable extension to the aesthetic philosophy of music which preceded its invention, because the disconnection of sound from the miseries of
phenomenal life was an aesthetic privilege of music already found in philosophical treatises from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche. On the other hand, the 20th century saw the restoration of sound for its own sake, including noise, to the realm of music, beginning very early in the century with the Italian futurists and their noise instruments. The phonograph at this historical stage appears to be in a pure state of becoming; it is no longer an instrument of science, and it is not yet a musical instrument in its own right. Repetition was central to phonography, and especially the ideals of precise and exact repetition – the concept of repetition was the kernel of the recording industry, and it arose through the patent of Thomas Edison’s phonograph, for it was the first phonograph which could repeat the sounds uttered into it. Edison had given the phonograph several destinations, mainly in the scientific community. It was hailed as the voice of the new age.

Originally the phonograph facilitated a recording and playback dialectic, which was a common point of sale for cylinders years before the flat disc was widely available and before professional recordings were protected under the 1909 copyright act. But the phonograph was not accepted by the business community because stenographers considered the phonograph a threat to its already well-established business. Those who invested in the phonograph as a business machine were first-hand witnesses to its failure. With the business phonographs in demise, Louis Glass, looking over a warehouse of defunct machines, decided that they would make ideal novelty devices, installed in public spaces such as train stations and arcades. By the 1890s the arcade devoted specifically to phonography was an especially popular social space. Phonograph companies climbed to dominate the entertainment industry, especially with novelty songs and marching band music. But with these popular songs there also arose an underground network of obscene recordings. The phonograph was indifferent to the sounds bellowed into it, and it was perhaps this detached indifference which made it so humorous to listen to. This drew attention to the anonymity of the recording and accentuated the autonomy of the mechanism. Anthony Comstock, the Gilded Age’s henchman of moral authority, sought out the perpetrators of anonymous obscene recordings and imprisoned them.

The scientific community was obsessed with the notion that their words would be repeated by something else in their own voice, but that equally listeners could hear jokes and songs whose points of origin were obscured. This type of repetition, the repetition of an event whose original articulation is unknown in its repeated experience, is similar to Freud’s (2006) discussion of repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he described the Fort-Da
game his grandson played as a symbolic mastery over the anxiety produced by abandonment. Moreover, repetition was the active reproduction of an unpleasant experience in order to gain mastery over it, and in his conception repetition was not a productive process, but an indication that something was terribly wrong, not yet worked out, yet too traumatic for the analysand to consciously work through their own memories – repetition was the unconscious somatic rupture of the repressed, tied more closely with the death drive than with the pleasure principle.

The coinciding phenomena of death, preservation, and the impossibility of repetition are encapsulated finally in His Master’s Voice. Little Nipper’s curious gaze into the cone of an RCA Victor gramophone became the pervasive emblem of sound recording in the 20th century, but it is curious that the image has very little to do with music. In actuality, Nipper isn’t peering into a gramophone in the original painting, but into the horn of a Thomas Edison Talking Machine. In the image we are more familiar with today, Nipper is looking into a gramophone from which the recording device is removed, a machine from which a unidirectional stream of information disseminated, on which it was impossible for the consumer to record their own voice.

Emile Berliner, one of the “big three” along with Bell and Edison, consolidated with Elridge R. Johnson to patent a gramophone that employed flat wax discs in place of the standard cylinders. Previously, cylinders could only duplicate a maximum of about 60 recordings, and so studios were equipped at times with over a dozen phonographs, each recording onto its maximum number of cylinders, in a pre-mass manufacturing attempt to distribute one performance nationally and internationally. Cylinders eventually fell out of favor, and the flat disc, which promised the precise repetition of a professional performance, eventually rose in popularity. The “master” stamp, as it came to be known, was for the flat disc what the negative already was for the photograph. Berliner, along with Elridge R. Johnson, formed the Victor Talking Machine Company and would use for its logo what is famously known today as His Master’s Voice by Francis Barraud in 1899. Barraud inherited both the dog and the phonograph from his recently deceased brother, who had recorded his own voice on cylinders. Whenever Barraud later placed one of these cylinders containing his brother’s voice in his machine Little Nipper became transfixed by the sounds of the recordings and peered into its cone, frozen by the sounds of his master’s voice no longer attached to the body of its source. It was a sound that summoned an imaginary presence. The voice with a new body, a technological assemblage of vibrations analogous to the grain of his master’s voice.
Barraud experienced difficulty in selling the painting to galleries or magazines, let alone the Edison company, because it was difficult to tell exactly what the dog was doing. But Berliner bought it on the condition that Barraud paint it again, this time with one of his machines in place of Edison’s. When Berliner bought the rights, RCA’s marketing campaign became: “Look for the Dog.” Embedded in a post-Gilded Age, a time that reflected on the previous decades of fervent technological fetishes, *His Master’s Voice* presents us with an impossible situation: the gramophone that captivates Nipper by is not a recordable device, and could not have possibly contained his master’s voice unless his master was an employee of RCA, which he was not. In short, the early phonograph rested on its ability to intertwine the original event and its repetition, which by virtue of fragile cylinders would eventually dissipate and disappear, much like the organic body it mimicked.

The enunciation of the phonograph implies a life between two deaths, then, a life stuck on the exteriority of its repetition – indeed, it is the word which lives on that guarantees the death of the thing which speaks it. As Lacan said, the enunciation of a word is a form of death because it “murders” the thing it signifies by affording it a disconnection from the world, its essence taking occupancy less in the world and more in the word. In the Lacanian schematic the word summons the absence of the that which it signifies. Even those things to which words refer must have a word in order to be designated symbolically, so even the very absence of named things implies the very absence of their essence. At this level, according to Žižek, the Lacanian cure of death anxiety was to approach the patient’s symptoms as otherwise not-yet symbolized histories in the their experience, the goal being to integrate them into the symbolic order. Thus a symptom has no initial meaning, it is perceived as the problem, containing the trace of meaning, and the analyst works to symbolize this meaningless gesture: “So the final moment of the analysis is reached when the subject is able to narrate to the Other his own history in its continuity; when his desire is integrated, recognized in ‘full speech’ ” (2009, 147).

Lacan later distanced himself from the above formulation wherein which the signifier killed the thing it signified to develop an approach to language as a system of differential elements with the death drive being “nothing but a mask of the symbolic order” (Žižek 2009, 132). The tension he was referring to was that between the harmony of the imaginary against its continuous interruption by and into the symbolic. At this point, Lacan envisioned the cure for death anxiety as the subject’s acceptance of the very loss which constitutes his subjectivity, the core of his essence which is in actuality a void, an incompleteness. To access desire, the subject
must come to terms with the symbolic cut which constituted the existence of the object he chases. The imaginary is, for Lacan, the realm of the pleasure principle while the symbolic rests “beyond the pleasure principle,” the realm of repetition.

The later Lacan said that the symbolic order rests beyond the pleasure principle as a system of metaphoric displacement, and what lies beyond the pleasure principle (beyond the symbolic order) is something too terrifying to come face to face with, the Thing (das ding, in Freudian terminology). So while the symbolic order strives for a sort of cosmic balance, there is something terribly wrong which cannot be symbolized itself, preventing the harmony of the imaginary from ever co-existing with the symbolic. The death drive here is that which ruptures the symbolic, but conceiving it is virtually impossible: “The very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement, of “symbolic death” – not the death of the so-called “real object in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself” (Žižek 2009, 147).

Lacan moves towards the Real here as that which acts according to its own laws and logic, indifferent to our perception of it, a terrifying acceptance that we have to reckon with. The Real contains its own knowledge. Phonographs, according to Lacanian logic, could not sustain their own recording devices because the speaking subject in the symbolic order who is both he-who-speaks and he-who-hears decenters him excessively to expose the fact that he is part of a world which is indifferent to his own subjectivity. Is it any wonder that people fainted? To hear the sound of one’s own voice cut from one’s own throat exposes subjectivity to the indifferent law of the Real. Early phonographs, pre-domestic ones, would have reminded their owners to die, reminded them that they are subject to the laws of the Real which are beyond symbolic reach, and as a result would have more therapeutically contributed to the humility of the ego. And so, really, the final line of the Thomas Edison phonograph advertisement should not have been reference to the master Edison, but should have been: “Remember! You are going to die!”

Recordings live on after the organic death of the event, and by doing so are awaiting their fully complete second death. Žižek reminds us that it is Marquis de Sade who provides insight into the second death, and the distinction between the two deaths is this: “natural death, which is a part of the natural cycle of generation and corruption, of nature’s continual transformation, and absolute death – the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of lie ex nihilo” (2009, 149). The modern body sustains multiple punishments in order to retain its beauty, as a
forever-preserved recording, and through routine punishment becomes even more beautiful to the victimizer. The symbolic is sustained through the routine punishment of the body, and it is out of the continuous death of the first body that the second sublime body attains its status, as if, although we are aware of the body which is decomposed at each encounter, another body takes its place. The difference the subject must make in order to overcome death anxieties must be some kind of reconciliation with the biological and the symbolic deaths . . . but what lies between the two is an uncertainty that requires historicization and symbolization.

As Žižek (2009) argues, we also find between the biological and symbolic death the personification and eternal presence of the Master. If in the classical sense the Master occupied two bodies, one biological and one which symbolically personified the state, the master was only so because he would be treated like one, and not because he possessed any innate value that would render his subjects as subordinate. But this service must remain hidden, making us the victims of the illusion that the master is already the ruler, which the Master reinforces with reference to an objective and perhaps omniscient reason for his power: i.e. Eternal law, God’s law. Remove the performative mechanism, and his power is unmasked.

The classical Master does apply to the Edison advertisement, but not to His Master’s Voice, because the Master in this latter case has admitted his dependence on us, just as the sound of His Master’s Voice (which is not there in the RCA Victor painting) depends on the recognition of its pet to be hailed into significance. So the new Master is not dependent on us, but on history, since the nation, the people, and the state do not exist. His cloak is gone. It only exists in its fetishistic manifestation such as the party or, in this case, the image: “the classical Master is Master only in so far as his subjects treat him as Master, but here, the People are the ‘real people’ only in so far as they are embodied in their representative, the Party and its Leader” (Žižek 2009, 164).

The kind of power that espouses from His Master’s Voice is a power that Lacan locates as an empty seat of power, a power of democracy. Here we do not have a “People” represented under a totalitarian leader (such as the Master Edison). The place of power in democracy is empty by its basic design, impossible to represent in a complete body, yet is a place within which any subject can enter into at any point and exercise an authority that is available to all. But, Žižek reminds us, in democracy there is a kernel of malfunction. The manipulation and corruption that democracy continually unearths is actually its necessary component to be a democracy. In an election, as Žižek (2009, 165–7) notes finally, the
whole of society crumbles into a collection of determinate and abstract numbers which suffer miscalculation and confusion, yet there is a kind of acceptance and submission to this irrational reification of the State into its representation of its rules. And we submit to it. Democracy is by its makeup a corrupted form, because its power is empty of will. For instance, screening candidates beforehand to ensure their ethics are consistent is not democratic, and so any true democracy is impossible. It is up to the people to detect problems in the Master themselves, to construct the fiction, whatever is embedded within the listening experience, themselves.

Works Cited


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Published online: 20 Jun 2012.

To cite this article: Mickey Vallee (2013) The Media Contingencies of Generation Mashup: A Žižekian Critique, Popular Music and Society, 36:1, 76-97, DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2011.627729

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2011.627729

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The Media Contingencies of Generation Mashup: A Žižekian Critique

Mickey Vallee

When the binary mashup was mainstreamed by way of DJ Danger Mouse’s The Grey Album, media scholars celebrated the emerging genre as an exemplary case of digital emancipation because it eluded copyright law and the ownership system through the collusion of unlikely historical texts freely distributed online. I hesitate to celebrate the mashup in the same tone, if, for one reason, the mashup perpetuates the very philosophy of professional dissemination that the popular music and recording industries were founded upon, along with another reason: that the dynamic problematic of stereotypes and symbolic violence that has plagued the music industry from its inception continues to prosper under the new genre—the ideological edifice of racially hierarchical differentiation underlies the logic of the binary mashup. I ultimately suggest that the binary mashup, in its ironic distanciation from the weight of history, unconsciously reinforces the terrifying weight of history. This is less a response to the mashup and more to its academic reception, generated from a highly selective sampling of professional production. As an alternative, by being highly selective and choosing alternative and obscene examples of the mashup, I suggest that a critical re-reading of their symbolic violence is necessary in order to elucidate the structural antagonisms that continue to haunt our mediascapes and reinforce the hegemony of binary oppositions. This is done through a reading of Žižek, the obscene superego, and the underlying structures of racism in the binary mashup.

The Grey Album

A mashup is an aesthetic convergence between otherwise unlikely digital texts, a premiere mainstream example of which was The Grey Album by DJ Danger Mouse, a binary intertextual amalgamation between what is commonly known as The White Album by the Beatles and The Black Album by Jay-Z. Currently the mashup is not confined to binary composition, as many artists use a more rhizomatic approach to the strategy. This much is understood, but I am interested primarily in the way that
the binary mashup was received and read by the academic community. Danger Mouse’s binary synthesis, which was initially distributed among some online friends but thereafter spread exponentially through multiple online sharing sites (McLeod 8), was acclaimed by numerous critics as nothing short of revolutionary. Media theorists more sympathetic to postmodern utopias have, since the appearance of The Grey Album, devoted special attention to the mashup in praise of its politically challenging format, heralding it as the exemplar sensible of shifting cultural patterns in the digital revolution, facilitating a necessary change in copyright law because it blurs the boundaries between producer and consumer while challenging the traditional notion of ownership. Some have taken the mashup as a virtual utopia, devoid of traditional authorship, an ironic pastiche that deflates narrative in favor of ironic distanciation (Gunkel; Serazio; Shiga). In the hands of the everyday consumer (as John Fiske would say, in the empowering domain beyond mass culture), the consumer is at once consumer and producer, and in the case of the mashup he distributes his craft online without expectation of monetary compensation. Thus, the mashup has served cultural populist scholarship as an example of building democracy while dismantling capitalism. Danger Mouse himself used the politically empowering language of deconstruction in his own reflection on the project:

A lot of people just assume I took some Beatles and, you know, threw some Jay-Z on top of it or mixed it up or looped it around, but it’s really a deconstruction. It’s not an easy thing to do. I was obsessed with the whole project, that’s all I was trying to do, see if I could do this. Once I got into it, I didn’t think about anything but finish it. I stuck to those two because I thought it would be more challenging and more fun and more of a statement to what you could do with sample alone. It is an art form. It is music. You can do different things, it doesn’t have to be just what some people call stealing. It can be a lot more than that. (qtd in Rimmer 132–33)

Certainly the aesthetic parameters of the mashup are nothing new, especially in the case of Danger Mouse, a hip-hop producer. The genre to which The Grey Album belongs (hip hop, for the sake of argument) has, after all, been cutting and pasting together prerecorded historical fragments for over three decades. But what makes the mashup unique is its persistent infiltration of a binary opposition into one flowing convergence, unfolding from within the creative space of the consumer who at once assumes the role of musician/producer/engineer/listener. The Grey Album, unlike other hip-hop recordings, very deliberately pushes historical texts into the listening space by relentlessly stacking the vocals of Jay-Z over fragmented bed tracks of the Beatles—it is indeed the latter which endure the cuts while the former maintains its flow. In regards to this analysis, I provide it because I do not think that the mashup is kitschy and easy. I am of the mind that it is a serious and interesting form of creative disjuncture, almost surrealist. Table 1 isolates the album’s sources.

And the following table demonstrates the manner in which the cuts from The White Album are the repetitive bedrock of the narrative flow of The Black Album (see Table 2 on the track “Encore”).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grey Album (’04, 12 tracks)</th>
<th>Black Album (’03, 14 tracks)</th>
<th>White Album (’68, 30 tracks)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Moment of Clarity</td>
<td>8. Moment of Clarity</td>
<td>8. Happiness is a Warm Gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10. I’m So Tired [Also samples “Ave, Lucifer” by Os Mutantes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28. Cry Baby Cry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Savoy Truffle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helter Skelter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 Analysis of DJ Danger Mouse’s remix of “Encore”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Grey Album (’04, 12 tracks)</th>
<th>Black Album (’03, 14 tracks)</th>
<th>White Album (’68, 30 tracks)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:00–0:07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Glass Onion: 1:00–1:07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:07</td>
<td>Vocals enter</td>
<td>Refrain</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:15</td>
<td>Refrain</td>
<td>Verse 1</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:34</td>
<td>A Section</td>
<td></td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:06</td>
<td>Refrain repeated.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:21</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Utterances, staccato, “uh, uh, uh”</td>
<td>Savoy Truffles, 0:28–0:36, repeated five times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:24</td>
<td>B Section</td>
<td>Middle 8 section</td>
<td>ibid., repeated four times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:05</td>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td>Verse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:31</td>
<td>Fadeout</td>
<td>Jay Z</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The producer/DJ assumes a full control of their universe, just as James Brown assumed control of his own live ensemble as its rhythmic conductor, an individual controlling his world by articulating an organization of the impulses that were otherwise strictly controlled by the iron cage of rationalism. Danielsen reminds us after all that “funk was almost irresistible as a way of identifying with anti-Western values and detaching oneself from the rationality and order of the official culture of the core territories of Western popular music, the Anglo-American world” (107). The DJ extended such a principle by re-contextualizing pre-recorded historical events into new and unlikely utterances, with such pioneering DJs as Grand Theodor Wizard isolating the “sweet spots” from such James Brown recordings, isolating in perpetual repetition their break beats, draining the historical weight that burdens technologies of sonic dissemination into passive repetition and enabling its metamorphosis into a musical instrument. Indeed, such a creative activity invites analysis from postmodern theory. The mashup, an intertextual collage that unearths new repetitions at a historical distance from the texts that it signifies, is celebrated from within the media discourses as the next revolutionary spectacle that challenges the property system that has been symbolically locked into such technologies of storage and dissemination.

The Empowerment of Postmodern Pastiche

The empowerment thesis rolls steadily when the topic of a mashup arises, and The Grey Album was received with open arms by the academic community when it was released in 2004 and used to demonstrate the taut relations between open-minded liberals who use the internet as a tool for digital democracy and evil EMI lawyers who issued a Cease & Desist order to sharers when Danger Mouse’s work first appeared online. Vaidhyanathan appears in the documentary Good Copy Bad Copy to argue that The Grey Album “was probably the most successful album of 2005” and “might have been the biggest hit of the year” had it been distributed through a legal framework, while Gunderson takes the mashup as a direct hegemonic negotiation against the mainstream industry by introducing a direct challenge to the traditional hierarchy of recording. Shiga celebrates the mashup’s move towards “illegal art” as a binary habitus between legality and illegality by appropriating pop charts from an ironic distance (what he calls “cool listening”), creating a communal infrastructure that “provides a relatively durable record of artifacts, interactions, and events, as well as a source of tools and materials for making mashups” between participants who “do not want to sever the ties among bodies, works, and words” where “a new kind of author is emerging—in the persistence of a name across message boards and the reorganized components of popular music” (114). McLeod adopts a deconstructionist perspective on the mashup, tracing its ancestry to the experimental works of John Cage and established university-driven methods of composition, designating the mashup artist as one composer in a long line of revolutionary deconstructionists “waging a civil war of words that pits differing philosophies against each other until ink is spilled” (84).
The Grey Album is taken as politically empowering because it offers insight into the site of polysemic cultural production/consumption as the reworking of “top-down” history. Serazio, for instance, proclaims that The Grey Album empowers its consumers because it demonstrates a “disdain or apathy toward music’s legal, material dimension” (86). Beginning with a much lauded Benjaminist approach, he argues that the tools with which mashups are made are the tools “by which audience-creators fend off and produce contentious counterpoints to the corporate and institutional power of today’s culture factories” (81). As the most recent example of a DIY aesthetic, mashup culture is one where “consumer becomes producer and formerly rigid lines demarcating more strict roles along the traditional culture continuum blur as reader re-authors digital music text” as an “exercise in irreverence” (82–83). Just as Walter Benjamin had predicted the decline of the aura in his own age of mechanical reproduction, the mashup, it appears, is here to lay to rest, finally, the aura of permanence typical of modernist cultural production, where, as Serazio maintains, the “original source is stripped of its sacredness and the music text goes from being etched in stone to being written on a dry-erase board,” and where an “[i]nfinite collage work is possible because infinitely available (and disposable) source material makes that experimentation possible” as (again) an “illegal art product,” a resonance of Duchamp’s moustache on the Mona Lisa (83–86). This purports the usual postmodern messages of cultural empowerment, of online users saturated in media and making sense of it, and law being broken inadvertently because of the technology which is allowing it to be done in the first place. The mashup is, Serazio concludes:

bricolage for its own sake; as a definitive generational statement, it hesitates to espouse anything more than detached, wry commentary, which actually may be apropos. The mashup can be considered the audio mashup complement to reading The Onion’s farcical news stories sporting a pseudo-thrift-store T-shirt slogan a la Urban Outfitters’ “Jesus is my homeboy.” (91)

So, at its most elementary, the mashup appears a worthy candidate of postmodern analysis: as a self-reflexive and digitally generated parody of the text(s) that it signifies, it reorganizes and re-codifies otherwise unrelated historical epochs with jocular and sardonic results, breaking through established modernist narratives to (re)place them in novel (anti)narrative contexts that launch political critiques against high culture’s claims for autonomy. This much is obvious. It disorients, it challenges the traditional categories of material property and ownership, and it is central in recent debates over copyright, ownership and authorship. That is a lot of deconstructive jargon, sure. But it is strangely convincing because it seems as if the mashup is just the kind of postmodern text that deconstruction could have a party with, in terms of how much the mashup is on a continuous course of differentiation. But such a position in the meantime takes an instance of a very good business (Girl Talk and Danger Mouse are among the most successful producers in the music industry) and, contributing towards a celebration of the fact that it is democratic without opening debate in regards to any harmful effects we can potentially witness in other examples, means that the effects of the mashup have not been comprehensively taken account of.
The mashup is univocally celebrated as a cultural process which puts to rest the dominant ideologies of modernist aesthetics and ownership. There is, perhaps surprisingly—or not—very little said regarding the potentially disempowering aspects of the mashup or its political consequences. What is especially interesting is the apparent imbalance between the mashup’s reception in academic circles and its reception in more colloquial ones. *The Grey Album* received a lukewarm reception from the music community at large, though academic studies give the impression that it was received as, again, “the best album of the year.” *Spin, Entertainment Weekly, New Musical Express, The Wire, Delusions of Adequacy,* and *Q Magazine* gave the album an excellent rating for being a “shockingly wonderful piece of pop art,” “one of the year’s best releases,” and accredited it with making “two known quantities thrillingly new.” But *Dusted Magazine, Stylus Magazine, ShakingThrough.net, Village Voice,* and *Dot Music* had the following to say: “Of course it’s a gimmick, but about half of it works anyway”; “*The Grey Album* isn’t much more than a well-executed novelty, nor does it illuminate some genius hidden deep within *The Black Album,*” and “There are certainly more fun moments than not, at the very least rendering *The Grey Album* enjoyable, but it’s hard to argue for any reason than its novelty.” Pitchfork.com stated, “While *The Grey Album* is truly one of the more interesting pirate mashups ever done, it ultimately fails at the hands of perfectionism with several pieces sounding rushed to beat some other knucklehead to his clever idea.” While a number of reviews favored Mouse’s original contribution, there are considerable reactions opposing it as anything novel or of musical interest. Perhaps it is appropriate then to balance the scale against the academic reception of the mashup, to question the ways in which it disempowers, before another voice speaks from within the crowd to say that we are witnessing yet another example of the ensuing revolution. I will therefore turn to Žižek’s critique of postmodernism as support for the continuing relevance of pessimism.

**Žižek/Lacan**

Žižek will strike any reader as a kind of mashup artist himself. He appears to condense the voices from the entire corpus of history and deliver them in one paragraph, juxtaposing Hegelian dialectics with opera and pornography without skipping a beat. And he is not always clear on his intentions. But his work remains useful especially when confronted with postmodern optimism.

With the exception of Middleton and Jagodzinsky, popular music studies have been slow in adopting Žižek’s radical paradigms for the study of culture and politics. Perhaps this is with good reason, given the dominant rhetoric of celebration discussed above. Žižek’s critique does not fit well in the conversation because he is cautious of celebrating freedoms to the point of irritating the postmodern thinkers he opposes. Also eccentric, Žižek, with all his references to popular culture, leaves popular music outside his extensive discussions. He discusses opera and romanticism at great length, as well as atonalism from time to time, but, with the exception of one essay, he is...
relatively quiet in regards to pop. Once Žižek’s system is absorbed, it is possible to position a cultural phenomenon such as the mashup into his critique. But the temptation with him is to quote him at length without delving into the substance of his philosophical edifice.

Žižek has a center of gravity through all of his work which is comprised of a synthesis of Hegelian dialectics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and critiques of ideology. Central to Žižekian critique is that enjoyment is political, whereas postmodernists argue that enjoyment consists of autonomous affects that evade the structures of dominant ideology. Žižek has a very different opinion. Enjoyment is whichever compulsion we indulge (drinking, dating married people, shoplifting, overeating) to transgress norms, but it is a transgression which inscribes self-condemnation—and its injunctions come from the same place as its prohibitions, the superego in its various contradictory manifestations. Part of the enjoyment is that we deny that we do it in the first place. It is a zone that is forever out of reach of what Lacan deemed the symbolic order, the predestined labyrinth of language that constitutes the individual in concurrence with the realm of the imaginary. Language penetrates and displaces the imaginary individual for a self-conscious subject of social structure regulated by elusive desires they are disallowed access to in order to deter such an established structure from entering into a traumatic encounter with “the real.” The desirous pursuit for objects which the subject perceives as potentially satisfying desire (but which would really be the subject’s undoing) is a mythic system that is played out in the mashups I have chosen to investigate.

Žižek's ideology critique is, on these grounds of the political factor of enjoyment as a domain which appears to elude the symbolic, based upon a Lacanian political critique. The usefulness of his Lacanian dialectic is that it allows us access to the political mechanisms of such contemporary phenomena (otherwise celebrated for their ironic distance) and opens onto their contradictions, cast in such a light that we can know how they keep us ideologically positioned. The central mechanism in Žižek is what he calls the “theft of enjoyment,” which publicizes a radical-democratic politic impossible to realize by way of the very fantasy structure of the mashup. The mashup is thought of as postmodern by appearing excessive, an irrational leftover of modernity, which acts as a sort of surplus that a capitalist system requires in order to expand. Modernity colonizes the irrational, so the more irrational there is, the more it will disrupt expansion. This is not the case with Žižek. He sees postmodernism as conservative, its supporters just radical enough for the new right to call them excessive, but not so far left that they would produce a radical alternative to the current political economic system. The postmodernist is habituated just enough to make it appear as though he believes in radical politics, but the structures of those things celebrated as radical are in and of themselves conservative.

So what is the ideological habit in The Grey Album? Is it not another elaborate example in a history of cross-cultural misrepresentations of multicultural openness from which the music industry has profited most, such as minstrelsy? Minstrelsy, for
instance, was taken, through such characters as the urban dandy Zip Coon and the freed slave Jim Crow, as the first internationally recognized form of American cultural expression: a white man, his face corked as a black man, dancing and singing in a pattern according to a black dance he witnessed which in actuality was a mimetic caricature of the black impersonation of white slave-owners dancing. What prohibits us from proclamationg *The Grey Album* as an extension of minstrelsy? Is it not celebrated for its cross-cultural negation of the differences between unrelated texts, made to relate on a common ground in an intersubjective fantasy? Lest we forget that the cakewalk was a white imitation of blacks who were themselves imitating whites, the music video for Danger Mouse’s “Encore” features a mashup of the final scene from *A Hard Day’s Night* with Jay-Z entering the stage, Ringo Starr operating a turntable, and Paul McCartney break-dancing. It is entertaining. This mashup is taken as revolutionary because of its intertextuality and its intersubjectivity. But is intersubjectivity not part of the groundwork upon which the industry of popular music was founded?

What kind of intersubjectivity is being exposed through the mashup? How exactly does the mashup provide us with an example of intersubjectivity? Is intersubjectivity a concept as simple as the “combination of disparate texts”? As much as the mashup would serve as an obvious example of intersubjectivity, what are the mechanics of such an ideological concept as the intersubjective? According to Žižek, intersubjectivity is not simply the space of interrogation between two unknowns nor is it the notion that somehow the desire belonging to the Other of the subject can be uncovered or understood at any distance facilitated by the merging of subjects. While intersubjectivity relates partially, in a phenomenological tenor, to that which gives the subject its struggle for recognition (such as the Lacanian mirror phase, where the object becomes a site which gives the subject its legitimate means of struggle), it is, in a much more sophisticated sense, that the object is the subject itself, the precious object embedded in the psyche—the agalma, that which sustains a fantasy in the subject’s very being. In other words, what Lacan later called the ‘objet petit a’ is that which I perceive in myself that is something more than myself, that which deserves the desire of the Other as manifest in the object whose materialization might lie outside me but whose impression determines my attitude towards it (Žižek, *Plague* 8–10).

What is the object being chased in this example but that of an idealized object of a racial harmony? The object being chased in the mashup is obviously the democratic utopia. But this is not necessarily the world of the mashup artist who locates cultural texts and reassembles them for the sake of deconstruction. Rather, this aspect of the mashup is the postmodern theorist’s fantasy. For the postmodern theorist this example rests as the prime example of a virtual democracy, because anonymity rules over singularity, multiplicity over metanarrative, etc. When the subject is gratified through recognition, it is the Other’s desire realized from within the subject’s constitution. Thus, a complex network of Othered recognition is at work within subjectivity. As Žižek explains:
A small child is embedded in a complex network of relations; he serves as a kind of catalyst and battlefield for the desires of those around him: his father, mother, brothers and sisters, and so on, fight their battles around him, the mother sending a message to the father through her care for the son. (Plague 9)

In other words, the mashup is used to prove a point that is predisposed to postmodern theory, a narrative that fits perfectly well with its own fantasies of the empowerment of consumption. We might think of the mashup result as being like a small child, its intertextual references battling a cry for recognition to be both texts at once; both are explicitly in a power struggle. Even if the binaries are arbitrary substitutions, they are still binaries, and they still imply a system of dominance and subordination; recall the subordination of the Beatles whose tracks lay in musematic fragments to the otherwise preserved consistency of Jay-Z in “Encore.” Intersubjectivity is the fantasy which informs me of my subject position according to what I perceive of the expectations placed on me by others. What we see in the fulfillment of our desires is the approving gaze of the Other upon us; that which fulfills, transforms us into the object of its desire, constructed internally and resonated internally, but manifest externally. The mashup gazes upon us as the promise of unity and coherence that is lacking within the symbolic order. It testifies to the promise of the digital age.

The mashup is the principal digital exemplar of fantasy. We liken the fantasy to the mirage and, because a fantasy is a mirage, it is not hiding something, it is free-standing, self-sufficient, and certain in its presence. What it masks is nothing, like the mirage of a swimming pool behind which lies an empty dry desert. Fantasy is that which bridges a subject and the lost object which the subject is constituted by, his primordial cut. The subject, as a linguistically produced subject, is entirely “phantasmatic.” This notion of intersubjectivity then is useful in understanding, because of the approval sought through the music industry for multicultural hybridity. Thus, the fantasy of multicultural hybridity is played out again in DJ Danger Mouse, as it was for the entire fantasy of popular music scholarship and its political preoccupations with race, class, and gender identity constructions. Danger Mouse’s work is prepared by the fantasy coordinates of postmodern hybridity.

And, indeed, The Grey Album has become the idealized object that has, as it always does, disappeared from view, by virtue of the fact that Danger Mouse’s subsequent career move was as producer for some of the most commercially successful and most copyright protected albums of recent times, for groups that are nothing if not profit-generating spectacles: Gorillaz, Gnarls Barkley, the Black Keys, Danger Doom, Beck, the Good, the Bad & the Queen, Underground Animals, Jemini, Sparklehorse, the Shortwave Set, Jokers Daughter, and (again) Jay-Z. Overall, while The Grey Album did very well, it did not sustain the revolutionary copyright-free breakthrough that was predicted, especially since PirateBay.org (whose owners wrote and directed Good Copy Bad Copy) were recently reprimanded for “sharing” (on April 17, 2009, each was sentenced to a year in jail for making thirty-three copyright protected files available for online file-sharing). Further, since Danger Mouse’s appearance, major industry
has found the mashup especially useful not only for selling new products, but also for regenerating interest in historical artifacts and profiting from an extensive back catalogue. This is most recently evidenced in the mashup of Bob Dylan’s “Forever Young” as seen in the 2009 Superbowl for Pepsi Co., a duet he “sings” with will.i.am.

Before harking back with wistful eyes to the days of Newport to boo Dylan for selling out once again, as he did with M-Banx and “The Times They Are A’ Changin’” years later, I prefer a move towards a more general question: what are the limitations inherent in celebrating privileged cultural texts as empowering when we are selective of the texts which empower only our own argument? Perhaps I will do the same. While it is tempting, then, to turn this article into a regurgitation of Hebdige’s *Subculture*, accounting for the ensuing commodification process the mashup launched, I will turn my attention instead towards a peripheral and perhaps less empowering example, a mashup between Adolf Hitler and Notorious B.I.G.

**Ventriloquist H.I.T.L.E.R.**

I remain more skeptical than to proclaim that any symbolic revolution is under way with the mashup. I certainly do not hold that online communities and digital mashups are going to give the aural world its proper democracy simply because some middle-class users who can afford computer software are mixing Dolly Parton with Britney Spears. The technique can, in other words, be useful for critiquing the very spectacle and simulacrum character of late capitalism. But what are the drawbacks in celebrating it in the same capacity that, say, Walter Benjamin celebrated film and photography in the early 20th century?

While preparing for a lecture on the 1934 Nuremberg Rally and Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Triumph of the Will*, I happened across a most unusual video on YouTube.com: a random mashup between the images of Adolf Hitler in the midst of his final speech and Notorious B.I.G. toasting West Coast rival Tupac at an MC battle, readily available for view on YouTube and other video sites. The film opens with the original soundtrack of the announcement of Hitler’s final speech: “Ich spreche den Führer!” followed by resounding applause. Hitler appears, but his lips are synced almost precisely, through editing software, to Biggie’s toast.

What unlikely sources to be conjoined with one another in such a diametrically opposed code of violence. And in certain ways the weight of fascist history is relieved in favor of Notorious B.I.G.’s dominance. The visual details of Nuremberg are well known in media circles, standing as the most famous piece of propaganda in film history, cited by the likes of Kracauer and Adorno as the pinnacle of historical errors, of what can go terribly wrong when the forces of media production uphold a dominant political ideology. Indeed, the rally had been organized as a spectacle to demonstrate that the entire nation supported Hitler when in actuality he was facing a significant challenge from the National Socialist Party (Sturken and Cartwright 162). Of course, in this recording his voice is absent as he is cast as the dummy to Notorious B.I.G.’s toast. By removing Hitler’s voice the mashup removes Hitler’s
somatic power. As Morris (368–78) argues, the sound of Hitler’s voice was more terrifying than what he said because its distinctive cadences disrupted any remote possibility for open dialogue—the sound of his voice infiltrated the private spheres of German culture through mass media as a force not to be reckoned with, the sonic bedrock of national solidarity.

But not anymore. Not only do we have a response, but an outright negation of Hitler’s power through his own re-contextualized gestures, and by none other than Notorious B.I.G., who refers to his own militaristic dominance (a common gangsta affect), to shooting Dread (a Jamaican rapper who in the character of a judge would sentence rappers to 40,000-year sentences) in the head, and taking the lamb spread (a type of sticky marijuana laced with PCP, found mainly in Manhattan). Indeed, rap, especially the freestyle rap as recited in MC battles, contains a violent imagery that has pervaded African-American forms of urban exchange since men gathered on urban street corners in the early 20th century to “play the dozens”; to hurl out insulting rhymes at one another as a means of transgressing physical violence and rectifying conflict in a respectful contained environment. To break down hip hop in this instance, Notorious B.I.G. is from the gangsta category, characterized by its noisiness and its persistent reference to street crime. In a freestyle MC battle such as this one, contenders are expected to fight for domination spontaneously through language in beats and rhymes. As Potter reminds us:

...Can linguistics provide a kind of model for the tactics and effectivity of the kind of cultural resistance staged by hip-hop? (64)

Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. were the two infamous victims of the East/West Coast hip-hop rivalry that culminated in the 1996 murder of each. The verbal attacks are vicious, quick-witted, and many of the references would be lost if you were not immersed in the scene or a serious student of the subject. In this case the mashup challenges authority: Hitler is “owned” by Notorious, his authority and his virtual paternal presence are challenged by the voice which explodes out of him, as Žižek writes (On Belief 61), like the Alien that makes a cocoon in his chest, and we are delighted to witness the real violence and horror of what lurks inside Hitler’s cavity: blackface.

We might think of this challenge to authority in terms of challenging the father, as Gunkel draws out in his cross-references between mashups and Greek philosophy. Socrates first taught Phaedrus that an author must be present for his own words in order for those words to bear any truth. As they walk in the countryside, Phaedrus agrees to recite for Socrates the speech of Lysias. Socrates, however, strongly suspects that Phaedrus has a copy of the speech on him. Socrates senses that the speech he is rehearsing belongs to someone else, and demands that he produce the speech as
written by someone else. He in fact disallows the reading aloud of the speech because, without Lysias present, the ideas he labored on the page cannot be explicated or expanded on. Such a speech, rehearsed verbatim, requires the author’s presence in order to elucidate the concepts properly instead of their being distorted through another’s voice. Copyright law, according to Gunkel, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, is informed by Platonic metaphysics and the Socratic assessment of writing. Because a recording, like a written document, cannot protect itself, there needs to be some way to ensure the rights of paternity and to recognize the authority of the author to protect his/her progeny from misuse and abuse (495).

To say that such an authority is displaced here by parody is obvious. Phaedrus speaks for Lysias as Hitler speaks for Notorious. Certainly, this is what invites our postmodern perspective, especially Baudrillard’s simulacrum, which is “no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (166). As that which stands in for reality instead of representing reality, such a simulation determines consciousness of reality. Gunkel writes that the mashup’s simulation throws the Platonic metaphysics of recording into a complete reversal:

Like the predominantly visual simulacra that are described by Baudrillard, the mashup participates in an overturning of the assumed causal and logical order that had been operative in the metaphysics of recording since the Phaedreus. The mashup, then, is nothing less than the sound of simulation (496).

According to the post-ideological formulations of postmodern theory, such a phenomenon as the mashup challenges ideology through its distance, just as Hitler is removed from his own authority by Notorious, a removal which marks the humor of the piece. But it is this very distance, according to the Zizekian edifice, that marks it as distinctly ideological. For instance, YouTube comments are rated poorly when they address Nazism, Hitler’s rule, racism, anything with which the Nazi party was connected. The comments are placed on a virtual train to the black hole of irrelevance. That Hitler is reduced to an entertainer, himself removed deliberately through the mashup, no longer identical to the rally he orchestrated so perfectly, is enough for postmodernism’s resonance to continue its triumphant echo.

Such a distance, as Žižek describes it, facilitates a belief that beneath all fundamentalist violence is a real human being, a core who just “turned to the left in the wrong direction.” Ideology, then, is the promise that beneath exteriority is an essence free of ideology. The notions of solidarity, brotherhood, community, and common goals are sublime objects, precisely the phantasmatic constructions of recognition that move ideology permissively towards destruction. As Žižek writes, Nazism was precisely the inner link that was perceived as being beyond Nazism:
In one of his speeches to the Nazi crowd in Nuremberg, Hitler made a self-referential remark about how this very reunion is to be perceived: an external observer, unable to experience the “inner greatness” of the Nazi movement, will see only the display of external military and political strength; while for us, members of the movement who live and breathe it, it is infinitely more: the assertion of the inner link connecting us . . . here again we encounter the reference to the extra-ideological kernel. (Plague 28)

On the YouTube comment postings we witness statements ranging from jokes to angered jabs to delusional racism: “I knew Hitler was from Brooklyn LOL”; “People think Obama had a good speech but no one has anything on Hitler! If Hitler lived there wouldn’t have been a 9/11 nor an Iraq war! The middle East would be more peaceful without Israel”; “Adolf is my hero,” and “Wonderful! I want to join the Nazi party too!”; “Enjoyment at its best.”

Mashups of this variety are plentiful on YouTube. One such example is a mashup between the children’s television show Lazytown and crunk rapper Lil’ Jon. In this example, Lil’ Jon interrupts the prohibitive superego of the television show with the injunction to enjoy sexual excess, and it is constructed in a way that underlies the structure of racism that has marked the music industry since its inception. To begin with the television show, Stephanie, the show’s star, moves to Lazytown to stay with her uncle, the mayor of the town. When she discovers that the town’s population is constituted entirely of lazy puppets, she makes the decision to teach them how to be active. Stephanie is, meanwhile, obsessed with exercise, suffers easily from boredom, is skinny, and craves constant external stimulation in order to maintain a balanced life. Underneath the town lives the show’s villain, Robbie Rotten, whose job is to ensure that citizens of Lazytown remain inert in order for himself to maintain his sloth. Stephanie is joined by a superhero, Sportacus, with a penchant for unremitting jubilant activity, surpassing any normative standard for physical or mental well-being by way of a highly accomplished series of acrobatics that only Stephanie appears able to keep up with. The excesses of normalcy here place puppets as the deviant fatties individually responsible for their own boredom and suffering. As LeBesco writes in regards to televisual representations of fatness, it remains a type of label that “differs from other more customarily recognized forms of disability in consequential ways” (45). The human cast of Lazytown are the moral entrepreneurs for guidance towards personal change, and, while they do exceed normalcy, it is in the way that is rewarded the usual positive sanctions (higher self-esteem, health benefits, position of moral superiority, etc.).

Lazytown has many musical numbers which serve as pauses for critical reflection on the day’s lessons. “Cooking by the Book” offers us insight into the moral entrepreneurialism of the show. The lyrics guide puppets into the regime of baking a pretty cake by properly following a recipe from a cookbook, and the spot remains uninterrupted by any human characters other than Stephanie throughout. Stephanie’s authority is enough. And, clearly, she knows her way around the kitchen, claiming that if one were to not follow the recipe (being “lazy”), the cake would end up “crazy”—it is
particularly effective that she sings “lazy” and “crazy” in the song’s only blue notes. The puppets are behind her, spilling this, wiping that, from a variety of racial backgrounds, as they absorb the norms of civilization through a thin obedient domestic obsessed with physical fitness. In the mashup, however, Lil’ Jon interrupts the domestic scene with an eruption of instructions to the cast, commanding “bitches” to back “their asses up on nigga dicks to watch them get bigger.” The interruption is so absurd, it reinforces the notion that mashups are surrealist (see Table 3).

Žižek is particularly useful in regards to this example, because his Lacanian dimension allows us the opportunity to reveal the racist stricture of this and other mashups. It is a particular insight which interests here, and it is central to a Žižekian critique, in regards to the theft of enjoyment. First of all, according to this critique, the superego is made up of antagonistic elements, most particularly the prohibitive and the injunctive superego. The task of the prohibitive superego is to reinforce the law through social institutions. The injunctive superego, however, is the excess of enjoyment that the prohibitive superego is all too well aware that it has access to. Such is the obvious and overtly simple problem with these particular mashups: the fantasy of white music is interrupted by the obscene and injunctive black music industry. My argument is that the figure of the black musician (Danger Mouse, Notorious, Lil Jon) serves as the injunctive superego which reinforces the normative strength of prohibition as instigated by the moral regulation of white supremacy. We will see that their interaction reveals some of the structure of racism from a Lacanian disposition. Indeed, the social world by which Lacan was fascinated was the internal one that regulated subjectivity. It is crucial that we understand the make-up of the Lacanian subject before proceeding to Žižek’s critique.

The Lacanian subject is a subject which lacks, because the socialization process requires the Name-of-the-Father (which Lacan also calls in French the “No-of-the-Father” as a prohibitive gesture) to move the subject away from his own imaginary desire to unite with the (m)Other as her object of desire and into the symbolic order of law and regulation. For Lacan, this is why civilization demands repression, as the Name-of-the-Father prohibits incest in a gesture that instigates universal symbolic law, which serves to substitute the desire-for-(m)Other. As the central organizing principle of the unconscious, the superego emerges in conjunction with the repression it creates. Thus, the formation of the unconscious is coterminous with the formation of superego.

The prohibitive superego coordinates the moral compass of the subject through the internalization of the incest taboo and the development of a conscience for the sake of exogamy. The strictly Freudian rule is that the universal of civilization remains built upon the prohibition of incest, or, in Lévi-Strauss’s words, “The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself” (25). So the law excludes incest, yet incest is the very activity that the law is based upon, resulting in a paradoxical relationship between the superego’s desire to transcend the law and its prohibitive function to constitutes the subject’s guilt for its attempts at trascendence

The subject does not know what it lacks although it certainly feels the lacking because the prohibitive superego emerges as the moral conscience at precisely the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time/Section</th>
<th>LazyJon</th>
<th>Lil Jon</th>
<th>Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:00–0:04 Intro</td>
<td>Basic $3 + 3 + 2$ rhythm (x4) at 110 BPM (nearest whole) – original BPM is 108</td>
<td>Original BPM is approximately 105</td>
<td>Arial shot of Lazytown, fast zoom to the external of the house (in the original the children are already inside the house, clumsily trying to make a cake), and we are also brought into the chorus of the song, the verses of which are in the place of the choruses (they are interruptions more than they are verses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:04– 0:21 Refrain</td>
<td>Refrain from the original song outlines a major chord in second position, only itself to be interrupted by “blue” notes on words that connote how “lazy” and “crazy” it would be not to follow directions (these blue notes are hit with about as much proximity and professionalism as Pat Boone hitting the blue note of “Shame” from “Ain’t that a Shame”) – blue notes stand as the deviant here; they deviate linguistically and musically from the norms of the process</td>
<td>At about 0:21 Lil jon enters with his verse from Step Yo Game Up into what I would call the superego injunction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time/Section</td>
<td>Lazytown</td>
<td>Lil Jon</td>
<td>Images</td>
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<tr>
<td>0:21 – 0:39 First Injunction</td>
<td>$3 + 3 + 2$ Beat continues, subordinate to the rhythmic logic of Lil Jon</td>
<td>A four-on-the-floor funk rhythm over a I-vi chord progression, Lil Jon from the first verse of “Step Yo Game Up” informs a female subject in the original (and I paraphrase) to back herself up onto him, grind his genitals to make them enlarge</td>
<td>At this point, the images are between Stephanie dancing with the hero in public settings, outside, happily continuing on in another setting, dancing without a book, silently obeying a law herself – he says break it down and she spreads her legs, and there are a lot of open legs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:39 – 0:56 Second refrain</td>
<td>Basic recapitulation of the basic lessons of the first refrain</td>
<td>Lil Jon makes new interjections, responses to Stephanie with his famous “WHAT” and “OKAYYYY”</td>
<td>Stephanie is indoors again, first appearing crosslegged (childlike) with the book on her lap, and Lil Jon appears now, through the window when he makes his interjections, inside the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:56 – 1:14 Second injunction</td>
<td></td>
<td>Injunction to fondle genitalia</td>
<td>At this point, the images are of a compliant and somewhat terrified Stephanie as she obeys commands to rub a nigga’s dick, which ejaculates icing over her uncle, the mayor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:14 – 1:17 Closing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A giant cake with lollipops sticking out of it, kind of lopsided, stands as a phallic triumph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
moment the incest taboo is established. The blind spot is built into the structural foundation of the subject, so no matter how hard the subject looks for it, it will remain elusive. The subject-of-lack is pushed through the superego to transgress the very boundaries of the law which it establishes, and so the superego and the unconscious are at odds with one another. The temptation to transgress the law to return to the pre-symbolic state from which the prohibitive superego removed the subject summons a guilt, because it habitually reinforces the immorality of taboo. However, the subject is enticed to transgress the law by the very force which established it: the superego. The superego, in its most deceptive scheme, steers the subject towards illegal forms of enjoyment as soon as the social laws fail the subject—one cannot be moral without being morality’s obscene opposite. The ultimate paradox is thus encapsulated in Žižek’s oft-quoted maxim: “The more we submit ourselves to the superego imperative, the greater its pressure, the more we feel guilty” (Žižek, Metastases 67). To eliminate guilt is not to engage in the practices that transcend the boundaries of the law and simply through some miracle not feel guilty for doing so: to eliminate guilt we must admit to ourselves that the imaginary union was never there in the first place.

The prohibitive superego thus intervenes in the harmonious relationship with (m)Other, denying the child’s access to the position as desire-object of the (m)Other. The father subordinates the child to the taboo. However, and this is where the superego is perceived as the most hypocritical, the father is also a subject and is also subject to the same laws as all other subjects. Unbeknownst to the child, the father himself has desire to reunite with his (m)Other. Thus, as the subject identifies with the prohibitive father, they identify with authority, law, and also must identify with desires to transgress the law and actions that would undermine its constitution. The father imposes the law, yet is curiously allowed to transgress it. As the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father is well beyond the very law that it assembles, the prohibitive superego becomes a punitive superego once the subject has crossed the laws that it teases the subject to transgress. The superego robs from the subject the very object that it compels the subject to enjoy.

But at no time did the superego enjoy it nor can the subject who is seduced into its assurance. Such a misrecognition is nothing but a vestige from the constitution of a subject which can only witness excessive perverse enjoyment at a distance—there is always someone else who enjoys it more than I do, a foundational sociological concept of relative deprivation. Exasperating as it is to come so close to enjoyment before the subject is consumed by the guilt of the prohibitive superego, convenient scapegoats are located within the social realm, occupying the role of the injunctive superego. Sean Homer extends the anomaly of the injunctive superego into the social imaginary of racism:

[W]hat holds communities together is the attribution of excessive enjoyment to other or alien groups; for instance, the stereotypical fantasy of sexual potency associated with black men. This attribution of excessive enjoyment to the other then comes to operate as a specific form of theft for the subject—the theft of one’s own enjoyment. (Homer 63)
At once, this is how the superego that compels the subject to desire is built into the structures of cultural difference and racism. For as much as racism is social it is manifest by the psychic domain of the superego injunction. Targets of racism are criticized for sucking the system dry or exhibiting laziness while stealing our own dependence on the system (“they take our jobs”). But how can they be doing both? How can one be both lazy and a model provider? In regards to the racist Other, how does a subject maintain a belief that they are at once lazy yet earning the pay that rightfully belongs to a “superior” race? So hatred in racism is a dual hatred, and it projects non-human qualities of superhuman superiority on the target as well as non-human qualities of subhuman inferiority. The target is in either case dehumanized and susceptible to the violence imposed on it. The dual fantasy is thus: they threaten us because they are subhuman, threatening our morality, but they are superhuman because we perceive them as posing a significant threat—enough to threaten the state of our morals, at least (Homer 61). Fantasy assists in the escape from drudgeries of life, but fantasy is accompanied by its own envy, irritation, malice, and so on. And a fantasy can realize its utopia only once it puts a stop to the horrible obstacles that threaten its potential harmony. The more harmonious the community, the more it has to repress the conflict which threatens its stability.

From this perspective, is it not possible that the black rapper in each mashup is the cultural manifestation of this obscene superego? In identifying with this superego, there is simultaneously an identification with the obscene primordial father who hoards all the prohibited incestuous relations for himself; and so we see the cloaked obscene component of society as having access to that which is prohibited, and we perceive it as the primordial father who denies us access to the excessive pleasures he enjoys so much. Excessive enjoyment is always attributed to the minority. The sexual bravado of a black man, for instance, comes as a stereotype because it is taken to be the enjoyment that the community does not have access to. Recorded rock and roll exemplified precisely this fact: although R&B was such a varied form of music, overt sexuality constituting only a part of it, in the white world the only form of it to be exploited was its overtly sexual nature, and then the white cover versions of it prohibited that access and therefore “punished” the subjects of those songs: the primordial fathers (rhythm and bluesmen) were punished by not receiving as much in royalties as the white singers who copied them, and eventually the gatekeepers (the DJs) were charged with payola (hoarding the riches) as the result of a moral panic. Enjoyment was stolen by the object which summoned it. So someone must pay. Sorry, Alan Freed.

We must pause before proclaiming these mashed-up comments as belonging to a common democratic spectacle, however, and we must not be led to think that posting comments gives us ultimate insight into the consciousness of the populous, that we can somehow gather from collecting them the right to speak on their behalf. This is accredited to the YouTube ratings system. If a comment is rated low enough by other users, it will not show up on the selected video’s page unless specifically requested (an option which is well hidden from the overall laminate of the screen). As a result,
comments for Notorious HITLER which are remotely addressing Nazism (whether in favor or against) are predominantly absent from view and comments which praise the aesthetic quality of the mashup are rated high and featured prominently. Those comments that bear the weight of history are thrown into its trash bin, so to speak. Positive reviews are displayed favorably while historical references are ignored or negated, rendering Notorious B.I.G. as a ventriloquist for his Hitler dummy as the sublime surplus; or, as one commenter described it, “Hahaha OMFL! I lol-ed so hard – Hitler’s the man :)

The Contingencies of Generation Mashup

The postmodern approach accounts for how mashups negate historical weight through the ironic displacement and alignment of digital texts. But the fact that the mashup automatically refers to an historical event reinforces its historical certitude—after all, to scope out the sources of samples is part of the fun. We have read overwhelmingly that we are in the post-ideological age and that the mashup would stand as a foremost example of post-ideological signifying. However, the irony is effective only when we have already absorbed the codes of modernist meta-narratives in order to grasp their (dis)placement. The discourse of postmodern irony is founded upon the weight of history. Indeed, irony, as Žižek explains in The Ticklish Subject, becomes the imaginative and fantastic form of surplus that unhinges the spectacle’s ideological power. It is encouraged through YouTube communities to be post-ideological, to be deliberately set apart from fascism as innocent.

This relates to the problems inherent in celebrating new media in fear of upsetting the people who are building a community—and so mashups are celebrated because, as Fiske would prefer, the people produce popular culture from the products mass culture provides them with (77–78). But all media formats privilege such a contingency effect, a degree of unlikelihood that is realized through the agency of the consumer, the mashup of unlikely phenomena; after all, the convergence of the music and recording industry was itself a contingency. As “spaces of action for constructed attempts to connect what is separated” (Zielinski 7), media converge into details that are unforeseen and incidental.

In general, in the age of digital communities, friends lists, like buttons, and an increased surplus of opportunities for every Internet-enabled citizen to comment (in 500 words or less) on world occurrences, it is indeed such a phenomenon as the mashup that many have located soothing, empowering and entertaining justification for the new digital democracy. Yet the surplus of benefits arrives in conjunction with another pervasive digital discourse: as Žižek argues, never have we been so globally concerned with the very destruction of our habitat at our own hand than in the age of digital democracy (Ticklish 8). While physically we spend more and more time alone building virtual communities online which lack physical contact, we protest the destruction of the very physicality that is left behind, the ecology of our tissue. What does the earth become in this case other than a metaphor for the squinted eyes and fat
depositories that have arisen from interaction with an online social network? I am curious regarding the whereabouts of these levels of irony. As Žižek writes, it is not a dissimilar situation to turning towards better technology in the green movement, when it is technology that is accused of taking this greenness away to begin with (Ticklish 9–11). A comparable paradox arises with the mashup. It allows us to deconstruct binary oppositions, but it is silent regarding the inner mechanics of the system it deconstructs, for even though users actively create multiple lines of flight, they are unidirectional: towards the social imaginary of pop cosmopolitanism. In other words, if the binary mashup truly alleviates the encumbrance of historical weight residing in contingent texts, why has so little been done to perturb the well established fantasy of crossing boundaries that has characterized the virtual cosmopolitanism of the popular music industry for over a century?

Works Cited


**Notes on Contributor**

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