

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Theodor W. Adorno, *Current of Music*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2009, 480 pp. \$35.95 paper (978-0-7456-4286-4), \$95.95 hardcover (978-0-7456-4285-7)

Long renowned by Adorno scholars despite its conspicuous absence in his published oeuvre, the chapter drafts and 150 pages of additional memoranda which constitute *Current of Music* document Theodor Adorno's inaugural project in the United States with Paul Lazarsfeld and the Princeton Radio Research Project from 1938 to 1941. These essays — three of which have appeared previously as truncated articles — also represent Adorno's first writings in English. With a dramatic reduction in the poetic and otherwise combative language for which Adorno is known, their tone reflects more than just the language of his new home. Prompted to put his theoretical ideas on music and mass culture to empirical test, while employed to answer the significantly different question, "Who listens?" Adorno ventures resentfully into the "middle range." Though he periodically maps empirical projects to match blocks of research questions which float about the text, Adorno's experimental islands never achieve the systematic continent of Lazarsfeld's survey method, and often appear patronizing and deliberately naïve, as though designed to highlight the limits of empirical methodology. Beyond these formalities, the inquiry remains squarely within the purview of Adorno's dialectical thought.

In his extensive introduction, Robert Hullot-Kentor sets the book in context as Adorno struggles less with his transition between national cultures than with his transplant from one academic bubble to another. In this story, Lazarsfeld represents the assimilating "academic tycoon" advancing into American intellectual grandeur. In addition to his managerial relation to Adorno, Lazarsfeld's aspirations for the democratic potential of radio render him an intellectual surrogate for Adorno's friend and foil, Walter Benjamin. Thus a dual intrigue of practical and theoretical conflict persists in these essays.

The first nearly 100 page chapter "Radio Physiognomics" contains the theoretical core of Adorno's radio theory. It is by the far the most comprehensive and elegantly written chapter. Offering a "feature-analysis" instead of the "listener research" he was charged to conduct, Adorno analytically paces about the radio object, observing its many dimensions as it

effects musical reproduction. Acknowledging the antiquation of a “physiognomy,” Adorno nevertheless insists on the concept in describing the interface animated by the broadcast “current” best understood in terms of a vital circulatory flow. In its physicality, the object of Adorno’s observation is the radio “set”: an immobile, ornate thing to be congregated about and watched as a *speaker*, drastically different from today’s wireless, digital devices. Regardless of advances in the state of the technology, we are provided with a compelling critique of mediation.

Adorno rejects the pragmatic parsimony that attributes to audiences a child-like fascination with technology, arguing instead that with radio, music is no longer a *sui generis* entity for liberation but another socio-psychological function for control (p. 315). The core conflict of radio is the pretense of “here and now,” despite the dubious “now” of reproduction and the ubiquitous “here” of broadcast. This deception is materialized in the authoritarian “radio voice.” Radio’s limits of frequency and dimension strip music of its compositional *synthesis* and offer only an “atomistic” listening experience by which listeners respond to isolated phenomena. Bombarded by popular culture and the practice of “plugging” wherein particular songs are played in excess to imply popularity (and by extension, goodness), the listener relates by song “recognition” and not musical knowledge. In a victory of style over substance, popular hit-makers respond by developing atomistic elements like “theme” (today’s “hook”) subject to a fashion without rational criterion of value.

Shaped by broadcasting into a “musical Babbitt,” — a reference to Sinclair Lewis’s epitomic philistine and a possible barb to the Princeton composer of serial music who ignored Adorno’s calls — quality broadcast reception becomes a fetish for the listener to “do good work” by capturing the best signal possible. The radio listener has no freedom of rejection, and given the vitality of radio in modern life, “switching off” is a “drive for destruction.” Unfortunately, such psychoanalytical maneuvers appear cursory and in most need of the empirical backing which Adorno failed to accomplish during the radio study.

In the end, Adorno does not deny the potential for praxis in radio. Despite cruel references to the masses of “youngsters, drunks or musically uncultured people” and “sob sisters,” and speculation that “all these people are sick,” the listener is not necessarily a cultural “dope.” Citing the “original form” of the symphony, Adorno claims “pre-radio music” ineligible for broadcast. Instead, we should “play on the radio itself” as an instrument, embracing the conditions of technology rather than denying them. Linking the studied “likes and dislikes” of hit songs to the multiple-choice questionnaire of the administrative researcher, Adorno returns the regression of listening to the very research program

into which he has been hired, incriminating positivist research, such as Lazarsfeld's, as servants of the culture industry. In the chapter on radio pedagogy, as exemplified by NBC's *Musical Appreciation Hour*, Adorno uses his extensive access to broadcaster's marketing data to reveal the contradiction of programs "serving the public interest" which are ultimately obligated to corporate sponsors. In an amusing interlude of fantasizing in the third person, Adorno responds with his own design for the logic and method of such programming, complete with syllabus and fully developed scripts written for himself to host.

However, Adorno's aspiration for a radio-in-itself is, by his negative process, only slightly less ambiguous and paradoxical than his later promotion of an "informal music" in *Vers une musique informelle* (1961). This has as much to do with the evasiveness of his theory of listening, which is thoroughly dodged in the present volume. Further, though regularly contrasting the practical differences between radio and phonograph, Adorno neglects to consider whether his observations on the musical current apply to the latter.

Abandoned by Adorno, *Current of Music* arrives less finished than the cover implies, and the reader is wise not to reify the text, even by Adorno standards. Not inaccessibly musicological in presentation, these analyses in many ways redeem Adorno's widely maligned prior readings of music, as they reveal the primacy of mediation in his thought. For all its incompleteness and insufficiencies, Adorno recognized the invaluable confrontations to which this research led, particularly *Philosophy of New Music* (1949) and eventually *Aesthetic Theory* (first published 1970). Perhaps not essential reading when considering the complete Adorno bibliography, within studies of mass culture and reception *Current of Music* offers the critical sociologist an invaluable aid in theoretical reconstruction, as well as a less-encumbered exposition for English readers and those arriving from the American mode of social science.

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