"We Can Bring It Back"
Revisiting Cateforis in 2018

Theo Cateforis’s 1993 JPMS essay “Total Trash: Analysis and Post Punk Music” used the sound and the critical reception of a Sonic Youth song to envision a new approach to popular music analysis. Just as the present series reconsiders this journal’s early issues, Cateforis opened his piece retrospectively. Its epigraph comes from a moment in a 1983 Popular Music article, where Paul Clarke critiqued the rock analyst’s habit of reducing recordings to written texts. Either transcribed lyrics are subjected to literary analysis, or a transcribed score becomes the object of musical analysis. Such approaches necessarily fixate on aspects of popular song that can be most precisely represented in a text: words and pitch material. As an antidote, Clarke advocated analyses that explore multiple aspects of popular song and their interrelationships. Cateforis’s preamble examined the degree to which academic literature on popular music writing had answered his predecessor’s challenges in the intervening decade: “Ten years have passed since Clarke issued these statements, and in that time many changes have occurred in popular music analysis.”

Twenty-five years have passed since Cateforis issued these statements in the JPMS, and in that time many changes have occurred in popular music analysis. Cateforis’s work anticipated a raft of publications on rock within the discipline of music theory. Essay collections demonstrate how one might use harmonic analysis, Schenkerian analysis, music cognition, and countless other tools to understand rock. Monographs and articles summarize its idioms and distinctiveness from tonal classical music. Representative artists are subjected

to article-, or even book-length treatments. Popular music analysts have infiltrated the most venerable music theory journals. Overseeing a 2000 special issue of the *Indiana Theory Review* devoted to popular music, Mark Butler wrote that “music-theoretical work in this area has become increasingly common during the past decade, and interest continues to grow.” Content analyses of major theory journals confirm Butler’s statement. Ben Duinker and Hubert Léveillé Gauvin recently surveyed article abstracts published between 1979 and 2014 in the *Journal of Music Theory, Music Theory Spectrum, Music Analysis*, and *Music Theory Online*, and found that popular music genres saw “the sharpest increase over time” of any of the other repertoires represented in these flagship theory publications. Undergraduate music theory teachers increasingly incorporate popular music into their lessons alongside Western art music. The Society for Music Theory’s Popular Music Interest Group, founded in 1998, continues to thrive. In short, the discipline of music theory has seemed to whole-heartedly embrace popular music as an analytical object and pedagogical tool. (Whether popular music studies will embrace music-theoretical analysis with equal fervor remains to be seen.)

Changes have also occurred for Sonic Youth, the band Cateforis selected as a laboratory for the challenges of analyzing post-punk music. After a decade of working with independent labels, Sonic Youth had released two albums on Geffen by 1993: *Goo* (1990) and *Dirty* (1992). These were intended to propel the band into the mainstream, but their commercial success never equaled their positive critical reception. Though mass appeal eluded them, Sonic Youth retained their contract with Geffen after drawing Nirvana to the label, which hoped they would continue to act as a kind of magnet for other more lucrative Alternative acts. They remained in Geffen’s stable until their final release, *The Eternal* (2009), which appeared on Matador Records. The impending divorce of two of the group’s co-founders, Kim Gordon and Thurston

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Moore, led to the entire ensemble’s “indefinite hiatus,” and Sonic Youth played their final show in 2011.9

“Total Trash,” the song that served as Cateforis’s test case for post-punk analysis, comes from Sonic Youth’s 1988 release Daydream Nation. Perhaps their most ambitious effort before or since, it was the final album in the band’s catalog to be recorded and distributed on an independent label. The acclaim that greeted its release helped the group secure its contract with Geffen. (The album came in at No. 2 on the Village Voice’s Pazz and Jop critics poll that year, bested only by Public Enemy’s It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back.) Daydream has since become regarded as a “classic” alternative album and regularly appears on “greatest” or “essential” lists. The band performed it live in its entirety as part of All Tomorrow’s Parties’ “Don’t Look Back” Series in 2007 and continued to revisit it in their performances on tour. The same year, Daydream was re-released as a “Deluxe Edition” boxed set and became the subject of a book in Continuum’s 33 1/3 series. Author Matthew Stearns gushes that the album is “resoundingly canonized as a breakthrough landmark in the chronicles of avant-rock expression.”10

But when Cateforis wrote and published his analysis of “Total Trash,” Daydream Nation, Sonic Youth’s catalog, and post-punk in general had yet to be examined by academic authors.11 Cateforis speculated that Sonic Youth’s cryptic lyrics, formal ambiguity, unconventional guitar tunings, and “extended” playing techniques frustrated attempts at transcription and analysis. In the absence of scholarly attention, discussion of the band’s music was left entirely to rock critics. Just as “Total Trash” became his exemplar of post-punk music, Cateforis used passages from Simon Reynolds’s Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock to represent critical writing on the genre. Reynolds’s approach to Daydream Nation’s occasionally bewildering music, Cateforis explained, was to create a parallel text of poetic musical description. “The journalist’s function is to mirror the musical text in language; the goal is to communicate the music’s affective qualities to a reading audience” (41). Using the language of formal analysis, Cateforis effectively added another addendum to Reynolds’s poetic treatment of Sonic Youth’s music, using the critic’s language to inform the theorist’s. His methodological innovation was to bring the two genres of writing together.

Cateforis chose “Total Trash” for its departure from generic convention. As his analysis demonstrates, it is a conventional punk song that gradually unravels. It begins predictably enough with a cycle of three interrelated riffs that serve as introduction, verse, and chorus. But after the third repetition of this trio, the first two riffs are replaced by an instrumental of equal duration in which the rhythm is abstracted and the melody transformed into

monotone repetition. Gordon’s bassline, by contrast, becomes more melodic and varied in its pitch material, and emerges to become more prominent in the texture. The original “chorus” accompanied by the third riff is briefly reinstated, but the song devolves and deviates further. As Cateforis describes, the opening riff “mutates” and is gradually mis-tuned up a semitone until a new pattern is established. This riff further “dissolves” and fragments. After a period of confusion, the opening three-riff cycle reemerges at a slower tempo. Despite the chaotic middle section, the song is revealed to be made of familiar elements (riffs, drum patterns, verses and choruses) arranged in a challenging and unfamiliar way. Cateforis likens Sonic Youth’s unexpected deconstructions and rearrangements of the rock song’s basic units to poetry’s fragmentation of the building blocks of language. The resulting “estrangement” (after Viktor Shklovsky) prods us out of complacent listening. The band “invites the listener to participate actively in the creation of musical form. . . . We might better understand Sonic Youth’s concepts of form as a new way of hearing as opposed to only recognizing punk rock music” (44).

In a sense, the analysis is as much a translation of Reynolds’s “mirror [of] the musical text in language” as it is an explanation of “Total Trash.” Reynolds’s discussion revels in the song’s confusion; reading his description approximates the experience of listening to the song. Cateforis reduces the confusion of that experience through explanation. What Reynolds describes as “suspension,” “halation” (46) and “an after image lost in a dubscape of unhunged resonances” (41) Cateforis explains through motivic analysis. What Reynolds describes as a “mirage” (46) Cateforis explains formally as an altered return of the opening cycle, albeit at a slackened tempo. Cateforis defuses Reynolds’s insistence that the song is confusing and unexplainable by “choos[ing] to bear continuity in Sonic Youth’s defamiliarized musical constructions . . . to understand the music’s complicated estrangement” (46). By tracing the riffs through the recording as “connectives,” he accomplishes a traditional goal of music analysis: to reveal the coherence and unity underneath a complex surface. Though difficult to fit into any existing formal template, “Total Trash” is certainly more intelligible than Reynolds’s descriptions suggest. But Cateforis’s demystification of the song adds to the questions already posed about analysis of (post-punk, popular) music: is hearing continuity the essential function of analysis? Is there pleasure in preserving estrangement where it exists, or even creating it in cases where music seems familiar? Does music theory’s technical language constitute a more neutral description than rock criticism’s quasi-poetic language? Or does written analysis “ultimately function as a separate form of referential notation” (45)?

Cateforis notes that Sonic Youth seem more concerned with creating a complex atmosphere of guitar tunings and textures than conveying a clear message (42). As a result, he leaves Moore’s lyrics unexamined: “I have not included a discussion of the song’s lyrical content for I feel, as Reynolds seems to, more connected to the band’s use of instrumental sound” (46). To be sure, several of the song’s lines (e.g., “magic monkey friend”) are “audibly ambiguous, inconclusive or indecipherable” (40). In re-visiting both the essay and recording, however, I am struck by how the song’s opening lyrics seem to describe the formal structure Cateforis outlines. The opening riffs, which “start at the top” seem to “spiral down” and become “lost,” buried “under the ground” of the chaotic middle section. But
the first lyric of the chorus, “We can bring it back,” seems to reassure listeners that the familiar riffs that hooked us in at the opening will eventually return. When they finally do, however, they are transformed through a tempo change: “it’s never the same.” One also wonders about the dual meaning of the words “heavy rock,” which initiate the first moments of deviation from the conventional punk idiom. The phrase represents both a physical object (the literal meaning in the lyric in context) and a generic label that could characterize the song itself.

Cateforis’s essay explores perennial questions of popular music analysis. The burgeoning literature that has emerged in this field since the early 1990s is impressive, and certainly a welcome change from the notion that only art music could be worthy of such sustained and detailed attention. But the question Cateforis posed at the essay’s outset (itself an echo of an earlier publication), remains relevant: can music-theoretical analysis, a tool honed on Western art music, be adapted for use on popular music? Surveying the literature in 2000, Susan Fast warned against the particular dangers of purely formal analysis when applied to popular music.

Music that does not conform to the analytical models is left aside (funk, rap, electronica, among other genres); or, perhaps worse, music that fits the model badly is poured into it anyway, either showing up its “deficiencies” in the process, or placing emphasis on an element of the music (usually pitch) that is relatively inconsequential for the song’s impact. Such disciplining of popular music is problematical and unnecessary; analytical paradigms are best left fluid, shaped to account for particular songs, artists, and repertories.

Cateforis’s essay maintained analytical rigor while avoiding these pitfalls. A “problem” genre, post-punk, is met head-on rather than ignored. Models are adapted to fit the song rather than the other way around, and are revealed to be malleable, comprising interchangeable parts. His framework emerges from the individual song in question, which is allowed to dictate its own analytical approach.

Another quality to be emulated in Cateforis’s essay is his direct, thoughtful engagement with rock criticism. Despite the growing bibliography of music-theoretical literature on popular music, Cateforis has few rivals in this regard. His essay might be compared to Sonic Youth’s own reciprocal relationship with rock writing, which dates back to their earliest releases. In her recent memoir, Kim Gordon discusses how rock critics informed the band’s first recordings and performances. She recalls how Greil Marcus praised her vocal on their cover of the Stooges song “I Wanna Be Your Dog” ([Confusion is Sex])

“Greil was one of the earliest witnesses to understand what we were trying to do—maybe the only one. It was the first time anyone had paid any real attention to us, and in Artforum no less... Later, Greil and I got to be friends.” Gordon goes on to write that Marcus’s Mystery Train inspired her lyrics to the song “Brother James” from the 1983 release Kill Yr Idols. The title track of that EP opens with a reference to the other major critic of the time, Robert Christgau:

I don’t know why
You wanna impress Christgau
Ah, let that shit die
And find out the new goal

After Christgau’s dismissive reviews of their earliest efforts, the band appears to have adopted a somewhat adversarial relationship with critics that manifested itself in live performance as well as songwriting. As Christgau wrote in 1990: “early on I thought (correctly) that they sucked, after which they discouraged my attendance by calling for my assassination at gigs.” Gordon recalls that “the one night he came to one of our shows, someone in the audience tried to light him on fire. Playfully, though.” Christgau’s opinion of the group improved as they moved away from their No Wave beginnings. He praised nearly all of their Geffen releases, beginning with 1987’s Sister, and spoke movingly about depictions of conjugality in the 1998 record A Thousand Leaves at the most recent Pop Conference. Thurston Moore, for his part, seems to have grown impervious to critiques of his music in print. He was the only artist who agreed to speak with Slate contributor Amos Barshad for a recent piece on “landmark 0.0 ratings” from the early days of Pitchfork. (Sonic Youth’s NYC Ghosts & Flowers [2000] earned this dubious honor.) But instead of calling for the reviewer’s head at shows, Moore took the public disgrace as a sign of the group’s stature: “We were certainly critical darlings through the ‘80s. It was like ‘That’s the sacred cow—let’s put a spear through it.’ I understood it on that level.” Throughout their careers, Sonic Youth’s members appear to have read their own critical reception with interest, using it to gauge their own cultural significance and inform their songwriting.

The goal Cateforis outlined in 1993 remains a worthy one for those of us who analyze popular music: “to reach a qualified meeting ground hovering between the band’s creative ideas and the analyst’s interpretive interests. In this manner we may witness the ways that different communities’ interpretations of sound actually coalesce in the perceptible shape of one song” (45). As Sonic Youth’s rapprochements with Christgau and Pitchfork suggest, it is possible for musicians to find a meeting ground with the critics who write about them. Likewise, the “different communities” of rock critics, scholars, and theorists grow increasingly intertwined, with overlap between the categories of popular music scholar and critic. Music theorists have certainly answered Cateforis’s call for analyses of popular

music. But the invitation to engage with rock criticism as a source of insight into the sound of popular music seems largely unanswered. Music theorists and rock critics appear to be engaged in separate conversations about the same topic. Perhaps bringing this essay back will inspire them to talk to one another.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


