

# Disciplined Excess: The Minimalist / Maximalist Interface in Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart

Michel Delville and Andrew Norris

---

There are the minimalist pleasures of Emily Dickinson—“Zero at the Bone”—and the maximalist ones of Walt Whitman.

John Barth

There's no single ideal listener out there who likes my orchestral music, my guitar albums and songs like “Dyna-Moe-Humm.” It's all one big note. Ladies and gentlemen . . .

Frank Zappa

Like Mozart's “Marriage of Figaro,” Zappa's music has often been accused of being far too noisy and of containing too many notes. Because of their density and complexity, his sound sculptures have alternately enthused and alienated several generations of critics and listeners. With more than sixty albums (including no less than twenty-one double albums and two triple albums) released over a period of twenty-eight years, and fifteen “official bootlegs,” Zappa stands out as one of the most prolific artists of the 20th century, a composer whose sheer musical output could stand accused of maximalist excess. His attempts to embrace different genres and creative practices (rock, jazz, blues, orchestral music, film, opera,...) have often been interpreted as a bulimic desire to explore the totality of past and present modes and styles in order to create strongly contrasting musical collages and establish his reputation as an outsider in both the rock and the art music communities.

Certainly one of the difficulties in dealing with Frank Zappa's (or anybody else's) maximalist art arises from the lack of serious attention to the development of maximalist aesthetics itself. That the history of maximalism in the arts is the *parent pauvre* of contemporary criticism is already indicated by the fact that the term is systematically absent from all lexicons of literary terms and, indeed, most discussions of contemporary music except when it refers to Milton Babbitt's “maximal” extension of Schoenberg's ideas of serial composition or, more rarely and even more loosely, to the “New Complexity” school of Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy. One of the rare exceptions to the rule comes from the American novelist John Barth, who in an article first published in the *New York Times* in 1986, offers the following definition of literary maximalism :

The medieval Roman Catholic Church recognized two opposite roads to grace: the *via negativa* of the monk's cell and the hermit's cave, and the *via affirmativa* of immersion in human affairs, of being in the world whether or not one is of it. Critics have aptly borrowed those terms to characterize the difference between Mr. Beckett, for example, and his erstwhile master James Joyce, himself a maximalist except in his early works. Other than bone-deep disposition, which is no doubt the great determinant, what inclines a writer—sometimes almost a cultural generation of writers—to the Negational Path? (1)

For Barth, the distance that separates Joyce from Beckett (or Whitman from Dickinson, or Faulkner from Hemingway), cannot be reduced to an aesthetic option (the desire to embrace richness and completeness, on the one hand, or aim for a narrative of precision and brevity, on the other), but is immediately translated into social terms. Barth opposes maximalist fiction to the so-called “New American Short Story” of the early 1980s, a tendency represented by Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason and others who are “both praised and damned under such labels as ‘K-Mart realism,’ ‘hick chic,’ ‘Diet-Pepsi minimalism’ and ‘post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism’.” The collusion of style and politics in minimalist fiction echoes a number of similar accusations made against

postmodern art in general, whose success story has been linked with the expansion of capitalist hegemony. For Fredric Jameson, for example, this tendency reaches a climax in Andy Warhol's work which, far from parodying commercial culture in a "modernist" (e.g., Joycean) fashion, incorporates it into its very substance, thereby abolishing the critical distance that separates artists from their socio-economic environment. The total interpenetration of aesthetic and commodity production is indeed the logical result of the gradual process of "immersion in human affairs" brought about by Barth's *via affirmativa*. Another critic of postmodernism, Takayoshi Ishiwari, believes that the "style which is broadly called maximalism" is characterized not only by a tendency to embrace the time's modes and conventions but also by a typically pomo attitude to the notion of the "authentic":

Under this label come such writers as, among others, Thomas Pynchon and Barth himself, whose bulky books are in marked contrast with Barthelme's relatively thin novels and collections of short stories. These maximalists are called by such an epithet because they, situated in the age of epistemological uncertainty and therefore knowing that they can never know what is authentic and inauthentic, attempt to include in their fiction everything belonging to that age, to take these authentic and inauthentic things as they are with all their uncertainty and inauthenticity included; their work intends to contain the maximum of the age, in other words, to be the age itself, and because of this their novels are often encyclopedic. As Tom LeClair argues in *The Art of Excess*, the authors of these "masterworks" even "gather, represent, and reform the time's excesses into fictions that exceed the time's literary conventions and thereby master the time, the methods of fiction, and the reader" (1).

Zappa's ambition "to be the age itself" clearly manifests itself in his penchant for works that seek to incorporate – albeit in a frequently ironical fashion – nearly all existing musical genres and modes, from straight blues-rock and doo-wop to *musique concrète*, free jazz and symphonic orchestral works. And Tom LeClair's definition of maximalism as an art that exceeds its own historical context and represents more than the sum of all past and present compositional styles would seem perfectly suited to the development of Zappa's aesthetics. But we will see that the impact of maximalism on contemporary art cannot be reduced to the decision of what to include or exclude in a literary text or musical score or even the rather dubious notion that such a decision should be dictated by a Baudrillardian sense of "epistemological uncertainty." For Zappa's disdain for accepted distinctions between the "authentic" and the "inauthentic," high and low art, as well as other aesthetic and generic hierarchies, is only one aspect of his commitment to the *via affirmativa* of contemporary music, one which allies him with other musical eccentrics such as Charles Ives – who was among the first to integrate elements of low music (gospel hymns, jazz, fanfare) into classical/orchestral music – and Zappa's self-confessed master Edgar Varèse, with whom he shares not only an interest in bruitism, tape music and percussion-based orchestral pieces but also a penchant for gigantic compositional structures that exceed traditional performance formats.<sup>1</sup>

According to David Jaffe, one of the very few composers to address the development of a "maximalist" *musical* style, the maximalist approach in contemporary music "embraces heterogeneity and allows for complex systems of juxtapositions and collisions, in which all outside influences are viewed as potential raw material." The example of Charles Ives once again comes to mind and Zappa's tribute to Ives in the fifth box set of the *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore* series confirms his early interest in his predecessor's use of "multiple colliding themes" (*Real* 167) and fragments of (sometimes distorted) melodies, a technique emulated in Zappa's "Call Any Vegetable" which, like many of Ives' compositions, seeks to convey "the musical illusion of several marching bands marching through each other":

<sup>1</sup> Varèse used 400 speakers to perform his "Poème électronique" at the 1958 Brussels World's fair.

In our low-rent version, the band splits into three parts, playing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “God Bless America” and “America the Beautiful” all at the same time, yielding an amateur version of an Ives collision. (*Real* 167)

Ben Watson rightly underlines the historical significance of Ives’s “simultaneous music” as probably one of the first instances of pre-digital “xenochnony” (a term coined by Zappa to describe the art of connecting apparently unrelated musical objects and live idiosyncrasies which are liable to be fitted together and synchronized into further studio constructions) and points out that “while a boy [Ives] would sing one hymn while his father played the accompaniment to a different one” (358). For readers familiar with the aural collages of Zappa’s *Freak Out* and *Absolutely Free*, Zappa’s delight in merging fundamentally incompatible materials and rhythms cannot be considered as a simple manifestation of the modernist cult of irony or its hypothetical extension into postmodern eclecticism, quotation and pastiche. Rather, the satirical spirit of Zappa’s xenochronic experiments originates in what Amiri Baraka describes as Coltrane’s decision to “murder the popular song” and “do away with weak Western forms” (quoted in Harris 174). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the doowop sendups collected in *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets* (1968), which Zappa claimed to have conceived “along the same lines as Stravinsky’s neoclassical period” (“If he could take the forms and clichés of the classical era and pervert them, why not do the same thing with the rules and regulations that applied to doowop in the fifties?” [*Real* 88]).

As indicated by both Baraka’s comments on Coltrane and Barth’s description of the K-Mart aesthetics of the New American Short Story, the maximalist vs. minimalist axis inevitably invites a political reading. In another chapter of his *Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, Ben Watson discusses the work of the feminist critic Susan McClary, for whom Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique is the expression of an “asexual” musical language that puts an end to the binarisms (major/minor, masculine/feminine) around which sexism articulates itself. McClary claims that minimalist music, being based on repetition-with-variation and therefore deprived of the sexual climaxes of, say, Beethoven’s Ninth or Bizet’s *Carmen*, simultaneously undermines the supremacy of the male models of phallic telos and verticality that characterizes a sexist culture. Compared with the soothing sounds of Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports*, Zappa’s “The Torture Never Stops” would no doubt be condemned by McClary as too sensual and orgasmic to qualify as anything other than an expression of the male libidinal self. Whatever one makes of McClary’s suggestion that female sexuality is fundamentally anti-climactic, it would be pointless to try and defend Zappa from accusations of sexism or even deny that his music and lyrics derive much of their energy from either the representation (or shameless endorsement) of popular archetypes of masculine domination, rawness and obscenity. But Zappa’s own remarks about minimalism indicate his desire to shift the debate from the domain of sexual politics to largely political and economic matters. Reflecting on the popularity of minimalist music with established critics and foundations, Zappa suggests that minimalism arose out of the necessity of being cost-effective (in the same way as, for instance, the success story of the “theater of the absurd” format is at least in part due to the fact that it lends itself to low-budget productions requiring only two or three actors and very few additional staging costs):

. . . it used to be that they would fund only boob-beep stuff (serial and/or electronic composition). Now they’re funding only minimalism (simplistic, repetitive composition, easy to rehearse and, therefore, cost-effective). So what gets taught in school? *Minimalism*. Why? Because it can be FUNDED. Net cultural result? **Monochromotony**. (*Real* 189)

## Maximalism and the Baroque Fold

“Matter that reveals its texture becomes raw material, just as form that reveals its folds becomes force. In the Baroque, the coupling of material-force is what replaced matter and form.”

Gilles Deleuze

“La vie dans les plis”

Henri Michaux

As suggested at the beginning of this essay, one of the most visible contemporary avatars of musical maximalism is the “new complexity” school of contemporary British music (a term which was itself coined against the “new simplicity” of the minimalists), a style shared by composers who sought to push the limits of instrumental virtuosity, rhythmic structure and polyphonic models. To some extent, Zappa’s taste for extremes of register, his penchant for density and abstraction and his increased performance demands (as well as his constant search for methodological and technological procedures devised to cope with problems traditional performance could not fulfill) ally his work with that of Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy, to name but two of the godfathers of the new complexity style. There is no reason to believe, however, that Zappa had any specific interest in the works of these composers. By contrast, his admiration for Pierre Boulez, which culminated in his collaboration with the French composer on *The Perfect Stranger* (1984), points to his affinities with an art which would be more aptly described as neo-Baroque rather than as merely promoting various forms of “density” and “complexity.” In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Gilles Deleuze cites Boulez, the author of the Mallarmé-inspired *Pli selon pli*, as a continuator of the Baroque style, with its emphasis on virtuosity and eccentricity and its tendency to create a mass of curves, convolutions, and folds that, according to Deleuze, “[unfurl] all the way to infinity” (*Fold* 5).<sup>2</sup> By citing Boulez as an example of a neo-baroque tendency in modern music—one which signals the birth of an “extended chromatism” and a “polyphony of polyphonies” (112)—Deleuze invokes a major interface between Zappa and the realm of “official culture.” But perhaps the best way to do justice to the infinite compositional foldings of Zappa’s works is to resort to an architectural model. According to Yago Conde, the effect produced in architecture by folding is “the ability to integrate unrelated elements within a new continuous mixture” (253).<sup>3</sup> While it would be a mistake to reduce the maximalist quality of Zappa’s oeuvre to his penchant for density and exuberance, it is the fluid, seamless character of his later transgeneric experiments (which began after the merz-inspired, “collagist” period that ended more or less with *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* in 1970) that allies him with the efforts of other neo-Baroque artists who attempt to discover “new ways of folding, akin to new envelopments” (Deleuze 189) that reflect the composer’s desire to privilege process and mobility over juxtaposition and rupture.

This tendency is most apparent in the Synclavier compositions, whose entry into the Zappa catalog was marked by the publication of *The Perfect Stranger*, in 1984. The album contains three orchestral pieces conducted by Pierre Boulez and four electronic pieces including “The Girl in the Magnesium Dress,” a piece adapted eight years later by Ali N. Askin for the Ensemble Modern’s *Yellow Shark* concert and which was originally based on the rhythms indicated by the “dust particles” resulting from guitar notes recorded by the Synclavier, which Zappa subsequently converted into pitched sounds (Menn 60). (In the mid-1980s, Zappa discovered that the Synclavier’s G page, which contains the machine’s inaudible inner codes and num-

<sup>2</sup> Like its famous cousin, the rhizome (a seemingly endless series of nodes and intersections which, in contrast with an arborescence, has no main trunk from which the branches and roots grow), Deleuze’s baroque has no actual or conceptual center.

<sup>3</sup> We are grateful to Karen Mac Cormack for drawing our attention to Conde’s writings.

bers, could be used to generate “G numbers” that never surface at the level of the “user-friendly” part of the machine.) On a more thematic level, the sleeve notes to the album suggest that the light, ductile, silver-white metal dress is only the prelude to a bizarre *dance fatale* whose outcome will be the death of the lover, who is destined to be impaled upon the lethal spike that adorns the girl’s plate armor:

“The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” is about a girl who hates men and kills them with her special dress. Its lightweight metal construction features a lethally pointed sort of micro-Wagnerian breastplate. When they die from dancing with her, she laughs at them and wipes it off. (sleeve notes to *The Perfect Stranger*; unpag.)

But if we dare to look up the girl’s deadly dress and try to make sense of the inner dynamics of the piece, the conversion of digital “dust” into audible pitched rhythms appears as yet another manifestation of Zappa’s maximalist fold, one which delights in blurring the boundaries between matter and sound, the literal and the figurative, the real and the virtual. The seemingly infinite polyphonies of the piece, the irregular rhythmic groupings and the overall absence of symmetry, combined with the strange phrasing of the lead melody all help to blur the outer limits of the piece as well as those of the girl’s body. Typically, the function of the Baroque fold—in Zappa’s music, Bernini’s sculptures and elsewhere—is to relay and prolong traditional mimesis when the latter has reached its limits. Here, Zappa’s maximalist dress once again returns us to the body (and to the folds and circonvolutions of the skin) only to disrupt our most ingrained assumptions about how to deal with the opposition of inside and outside, both of which are subsumed into a reversible plication which comprises an “inside as the operation of the outside” (Deleuze 112).

In the same way as the true subject of Zappa’s piece becomes not the girl itself but the dress she is wearing, the unfinished body, eventually confronted with its own absence of limits, gives way to the aesthetics of the baroque garment, which detaches itself from its instrumental destiny and is no longer subordinated to the body that wears it.<sup>4</sup> The baroque costume ceases to translate or even prolong the shapes and movements of the body and becomes its own movement, “wrapping the body with its autonomous, always multipliable folds” (164). The baroque fold and its sculptural extension in, say, Bernini’s Saint Theresa is in turn interpreted as a body of infinite folds, curved lines and surfaces that twist and weave through the changing conditions of time and space. Whereas Bernini’s goal was to give three-dimensional expression to the body possessed by religious ecstasy (and in a state of abandonment often interpreted as a form of eroticized suffering), Zappa’s “Girl in the Magnesium Dress” is an example of a secular baroque art that seeks to conquer formlessness by allowing a profusion of matter to overflow the frame (166).

For Deleuze, the baroque embodies “the law of extremum of matter, i.e. a maximum of matter for a minimum of space.” In a footnote to the closing chapter of his study, he claims that there are therefore a lot of affinities between the baroque and certain kinds of minimal art where “form no longer limits itself to volume, but embraces an unlimited space in all directions” (168). Deleuze cites Robert Morris’s felt folds and Christo’s wrapped buildings as examples of minimalism’s “constant confrontation with the baroque.” The complex and often paradoxical dialectics of minimalism and maximalism in their relationship to time are beyond the scope of this essay; one must nonetheless point out that Zappa’s Dionysian aesthetics, which constantly returns us to the carnivalesque body, remains radically opposed to the more austere, Appolonian landscapes of architectural minimalism. Zappa’s performance of John Cage’s “4’33’,” in which he let the composition sheets fall from the piano, once again allows the body to interrupt the illusion of absolute silence and timelessness created by Cage’s blank intervals.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, however, as Yves Bonne-

<sup>4</sup> See also Barthes’s definition of the baroque as “a progressive contradiction between the unit and the whole, an art in which the extension is not added but multiplied, in short, the width of an acceleration” (*Essais* 108).

<sup>5</sup> *A Chance Operation – The John Cage Tribute* (Various artists, 2CD, KOCH International, 1993).

foy remarks, the Baroque is “neither illusion nor insight”; instead, it “puts illusion to the service of being” where illusion is converted into “a space of hallucinatory presence” (quoted in Deleuze 170), a tendency reflected in Zappa’s interest in the physicality of sound and the creation of material musical objects. Like Bonnefoy’s baroque, which exists at the paradoxical conjunction of maximum presence and extreme absence, Zappa’s magnesium dress can be seen as so many interacting prototonal microevents that signify both the absence of matter and the essence of immateriality. They are, to quote Deleuze on Leibniz, very similar to the musical monad, “an eternal object of pure Virtuality which actualizes itself in the [sound] sources . . . pure Possibilities which realize themselves in vibrations and fluxes” (109).

Zappa’s eagerness, in “The Girl with the Magnesium Dress,” to let the hardware of the computer generate the basic parameters of his compositions, in particular, is as typical of the contemporary avant-garde’s attention to the material conditions of art production as it is characteristic of the baroque’s tendency to “foreground matter” (166) to the detriment of (traditional) form. But the technological fold effected by Zappa’s electronic compositions also raises the question of the contributions the Synclavier made to Zappa’s maximalist art. Was Zappa using the Synclavier as a maximalist “desiring machine” liable to multiply the conceptual vectors of his oeuvre *ad infinitum* by combining “various elements and forces of all types” (Deleuze and Guattari xxiii)?<sup>6</sup> And should Zappa’s work then be regarded as a late modernist collage or a postmodern “rhizomatic” assemblage of heterogeneous genres and styles (which would therefore exemplify what Deleuze and Guattari have described as a reworking of traditional notions of subjectivity into a network of multiplicities, a heterogeneous aggregate of parts functioning in “social and natural machines”)? These considerations seem less important than the suggestion that Zappa’s investment in Synclavier technology was a necessary stage in the folding and unfolding trajectories of a transomorphic art which has confounded several generations of listeners and left them speculating about the origins, influences and limits of his work. The next logical stage in the construction of the Project/Object (a formulation meant to describe “the overall concept of [his] work in various mediums” [*Real* 139]) was the creation of music that coalesced the technical infallibility of the machine and the personalities of live musicians. In this respect, the coexistence of Synclavier pieces and works written and executed by Boulez’s Ensemble InterContemporain on *The Perfect Stranger* (1984) anticipates Zappa’s later mixed experiments which typically hesitate between the gestural and the mechanical, the “authenticity” of “organic” execution and the necessities of accurate performance (in the sleeve notes, Zappa thanks Boulez for “having the patience to demand accurate performance of the *killer triplets* on page eight”).

An example of Zappa’s commitment to the materiality of sound and the physicality of performance, Zappa’s “Girl with the Magnesium Dress” also establishes the body as the supreme maximalist receiver and generator of meaning, rhythm and being.<sup>7</sup> The profusion of grotesque and abstract(ed) bodies and body parts in the works of Frank Zappa and his old friend and occasional collaborator Don Van Vliet (aka Captain Beefheart) – from the latter’s *Trout Mask Replica* with its horrific fishy pros-

<sup>6</sup> Opposed to the (negative) Lacanian dialectic of lack and desire, Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* proposes a theory of “desiring-production,” which they define as a “pure multiplicity, that is to say, an affirmation that is irreducible to any sort of unity” (46).

<sup>7</sup> This, incidentally, is by no means a contemporary, or even a modern, phenomenon. The best-known maximalist artist of the Renaissance, François Rabelais, had already understood that only an aesthetics of corpo-reality is liable to multiply the vectors of perception while allowing the body to become its own food for conceptual thought and artistic experimentation. For Rabelais, maximalism allies itself with the grotesque as it is essentially linked with bodily excesses. As Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us, the carnivalesque insistence on bodily functions and the liberation of instinct, far from being degrading, is meant to express the vital energies of mankind. Indeed, Rabelais’s “grotesque realism” has a regenerative effect as the reduction of all aspects of human life to primary bodily functions “digs a bodily grave for a new birth,” conceiving of new possibilities arising from the body’s nether regions.

thesis to the exaggerated, phallic noses that appear on the cover of Zappa's *Ruben and the Jets*—represents what Bakhtin described as “the epitome of incompleteness” (Bakhtin 26), an unfinished unit transgressing its own limits, often through eating, excretion and sexuality, as exemplified by Zappa's penchant for sexually- and scatologically-charged lyrics. The stress, therefore, is on the excesses and potentialities of the body's folds and orifices, “on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose.” This “unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born),” Bakhtin adds, “is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (26-27). Zappa's and Beefheart's lyrics are full of similar images of bodies coming out of themselves to meet the world of animal and objectist reality. The point where body and things enter each other (literally or figuratively) is where the unfinished chain of growth, proliferation and metamorphosis comes to represent the whole potential of the integrated body, the body emptying itself to become like nothing and preparing itself to go out and m-eat the world again, devouring the universe and being devoured by it.

### Subject, Meaning, Pleasure, Body

Like the human body, criticism is pervious to its objects, and just as maximalist art develops out of and contributes to a sense of the body as a point at which subject and object interpenetrate and reconfigure each other, so any bid to write about maximalism can only accept a similar suspension of its traditional limits and certitudes. The maximalist body-in-progress, then, in its occupation of the libidinalised liminalities of the edge (between discourses, ideas, styles, genres, bodies, objects, bodies and objects, genres and styles, ideas and discourses), opens a space in which the neglected (and sometimes repressed) question of pleasure may again be asked of poetics.

When in 1977 Roland Barthes announced the death of the author, the basis for his extrapolation was a sentence in a short story by Balzac. Writing, for Barthes, is “That neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.” (“Death” 168). Neutral, bodiless, oblique, emptied of subject and identity, the death of the author would seem to render moribund the entire textual scene. Before Barthes resurrects the body of the author in that of the reader at the very end of his text, it is impossible to see in his vision how the literary exchange could be a source of pleasure, or of anything else for that matter. Critical premises are never innocent, of course, and the panache with which Barthes deconstructs the authorial subject seems in retrospect directly proportional to the crassly ideological sentence he cites from Balzac:

This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility. (“Death” 167)

If ever there was an attempt to write determinately, this must be it; and one can only sympathise with the desire to save this sentence as writing by expunging any traces it may harbour of an authorial subject. Suitably dehistoricised by the time Barthes has finished with it, the sentence-formerly-written-by-Balzac is ripe for repossession by the newly nascent reader. Now, if such a procedure makes satisfying sense in relation to a particularly strident example of nineteenth century “realism,” how would it fare in the maximalist context, when confronted for example with something from *Finnegans Wake* or, to skip media, something from Zappa? And how would the transference of agency from author to reader work in such a context to impinge on the problem of pleasure? We have been arguing that, as a maximalist paradigm, the body is immanent (and sometimes exorbitant) in maximalism. Without trying to say *whose* body is present *where*, such an assumption immediately seems to put us at odds with Barthes' vision of writing as disincarnate. Conversely, to ac-

cept the death of the author as implicitly true of maximalism would, we suggest, imply an inconceivable mastery of such art on the part of its audience. Or it would simply imply a neutrality of non-response equally difficult to conceive of in relation to the sublime irritant of maximalism. In the face of its excess, the reader of the maximalist text (whether literary or musical) *needs* a body, and this is the short explanation for why Zappa as author is ever-present in his work, while Joyce the author, with his bad eyes and perforating ulcer, is a cult amongst readers of Joyce.<sup>8</sup> This need, of course is a double bind: while the presence of the body in maximalist art may help the audience to take pleasure in the work, creating at the same time a sense of political agency, it may also contribute to the deferral of such pleasure. There is sometimes a feeling that our pleasure must wait until the body in the work has finished taking its own; that the work is a tireless body determined to pleasure itself endlessly. For Barthes, the death of the author would seem to precipitate a deferral of meaning and the pleasure which is traditionally contingent on it:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, "run" (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. (171)

This sounds suspiciously like the postmodern sprawl which may offer us a mild and strangely technical amusement even as it teaches us indifference. Maximalism is a much more confused and urgent situation, where it is no longer certain whether pleasure is contingent on meaning or the other way around. Under such conditions, nothing is exempted, everything accumulates. It is as if maximalism had taken root during the interval between the death of the author and the birth of the reader as Barthes conceives of them; the body of maximalism is heavily pregnant with a meaningful pleasure that is also a pleasurable meaning, and it is with this unwieldy body that the audience must grapple.

Barthes attacks the author as a final signifier which caps meaning, the demise of this authorial subject, however, does not in the first instance produce a wild expansion of sense; rather it unravels meaning to its degree zero, the point at which it has been rendered "systematically exempt." While one formulation of this particular emptiness might be the depthless surface of the postmodernist text, another might be something much closer to classical minimalism as articulated in the the 1960s by figures such as Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Steve Reich or Terry Riley, where unravelling is to be viewed as reduction, and the author is just one more element to be forced out of the text (once again, to be understood as literary, musical or visual). One of the fascinations of minimalism is its determination, against all the philosophical odds, to make nothing, an aesthetic strategy which pits art against death. And one of the key discoveries of minimalism is that dead art doesn't exist: one can only reduce up to a point. If we think of this point as a Barthesian degree zero of meaning, it is very difficult to answer the question: what limits reduction? One would need to consider how it is exactly that a code is wrested from a subject. If, however, we think of the minimalist point of maximal reduction as coincident with the maximalist double contingency (the point at which the aetiology of meaning and pleasure becomes impossibly ambiguous), one can indeed posit an answer. Just as the last redoubt of subjective experience is the body, so the degree zero of meaning is also the body, somehow a transference is effected between the symbolic links in the signifying chain and the

<sup>8</sup> It also, perhaps, helps to explain the continuing resistance to the post-structuralist critique of character in *Finnegans Wake*. Though HCE, ALP, Shem, Shaun and Issy have been subjected to various deconstructions since the 1970s (see for example Margot Norris's *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake*, Roland McHugh's *The Sigla of Finnegans Wake* and John Bishop's *Joyce's Book of the Dark*) they still figure strongly in most attempts to read the text. As presences, archetypes, pseudo-personalities, subjective traces, they imply the literary character, which in turn, at however many degrees of abstraction, implies a body, whether that of the author, the reader or some ontologically uncertain element residing in between.



somatic significance of the body. One can kill an author, but a text (that is *something* rather than nothing) will always have a body.

The minimalist body residing at the point of double contingency is, as we have suggested above, pregnant with its own maxima. The maximalist anatomisation of the body produces a body-in-progress to set alongside the “Work in Progress” of Joyce and Zappa’s Project Object. Even though it was intended as an act of revolution, Barthes’ execution of the Author, as we have seen, runs the risk of installing a neutral territory empty of meaning and thus void of political discourse. The maximalist body-in-progress, by contrast, functions as a guarantor of political content. It is clear, for example, in reviewing Zappa’ work, that its political content has always depended on its physicality and that this has much more to do with its maximalist credentials than a few references to blow jobs, noses and feet. Maximalism is politically embodied and thus stands as a vital check on the bodiless ideology conjured up by Barthes and translated into the anti-practice of political quietude by certain strains of postmodernism.

The degree zero of meaning lies beyond the body in an unimaginable nothing, it is bodilessness, and in the light of this discovery, the Author may begin to look like something of an Aunt Sally. With this in mind, perhaps, we should consider a later essay by Barthes, on the French painter Bernard Réquichot, which goes a long way to acknowledging this body beyond the author and its crucial location at the crossover point between the impossible zero of minimalism and the inconceivable everything of maximalism.

### Minimalism into Maximalism Will Go

William Blake articulated the coincidence of minima and maxima with his famous quatrain:

To see a world in a grain of sand  
And heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.<sup>9</sup>

and, as a child, Salvador Dali would press on his eyeballs to make the angels come, imitating the gesture of the human foetus and countering his fear of the dark with benign intrauterine hallucinations. That we are all relatively myopic is clear from the paranoid imaginings which begin where the penetration of our senses tapers off, when one sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch fails to suggest another, thus creating a maximalist concentration of focus and endurance, which is also a nexus of pleasure and pain.

Minimalism in painting and the minimalist use of repetition in music seek to restrict our sensory receptions and test our aesthetic tolerance. How can one go on listening to or looking at the same thing? For Vico and Nietzsche and any other philosopher of eternal return, repetition does not pose a problem, since its pulse is so infinitesimally slow; in the absence of an enduring observer, objects and events can pass themselves off as unique. History itself would be a minimalist work if its pulse were accelerated to a rate which allowed us to experience it again and again; if we could be outside it and eternal. Since we are within it and finite, history for us is too full, and must remain for the time being a maximalist paradigm. Music, painting, literature, however, are there to be endured.

In his essay on Bernard Réquichot, Barthes argues that “quite often in a single painter [there is] a whole history of painting” (*Responsibility* 228); by changing the levels of perception, for example with the aid of a magnifying glass, “Nicholas de

<sup>9</sup> From “Auguries of Innocence” (Blake *Collected Poems* 585)

Staël is in three square centimetres of Cézanne" (228).<sup>10</sup> What determines our experience of a work is the level at which we perceive it: "isolate, enlarge, and treat a detail, you create a new work" (223). Minimalist music, according to Jonathan Bernard, can induce its listeners to effect a similar perceptual shift:

...the small number of events over time tends to focus the listener's attention intensely on each event, in all its particularity, thus resulting, from the minimalist point of view, in a music of parts rather than a whole. (quoted in Potter 5)

This is not pointillism, where each constituent dot remains a functional part of the whole, submissive and superficial; minimalism (an)atomises its material, distilling particles which have *different* properties, which *depart from* the original unity. In this way, each particle may be a composition, or something else. The minimalist cell is a new maximalist body.

With typical raw intuition, Don Van Vliet may have stumbled across this process and formulated it for the amusement of his musicians in what he called his "exploding note theory." When learning "Flavour Bud Living" prior to the recording of the album *Doc at the Radar Station*, Captain Beefheart guitarist Gary Lucas took for his model an earlier version of the piece performed by John French on the *Bat Chain Puller* tapes. Van Vliet wasn't pleased and sent Lucas back to re-learn it according to his new theory: «...you play every note as if it has only a tangential relationship to the preceding note and the note that follows." (Barnes 273). Each constituent part of the piece becomes semi-autonomous, it may detach itself from its syntagmatic functionality and become a tiny but expanding centre of new experience – a paradigm. Our argument at this point trespasses on one of the classical dichotomies of formal philosophy which pitted Spinoza's monism against the monadology of Leibniz. Each note in "Flavour Bud Living" if played according to Van Vliet's exigencies would perhaps be a monad, not "windowless" as Leibniz suggested, but separated from its neighbours by a translucent veil, rendering relations oblique at best. Spinoza's monism admits only one substance: God. Everything else is merely a mode of this oneness: "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can either be or be conceived without God." (*Ethics* I.xv). In our musical model, God would be the unified work which imposes modality on its parts and arrogates to itself the exclusive right to exist. In critical parlance, this may be what we mean when we say that a work is "self-contained." In Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds," by contrast, God has created a maximum of independent substances; the world is exemplary precisely because it has been created on maximalist principles. In criticising John French's performance as "too religious", Van Vliet may have thought that it made his composition sound too monistic (or even monastic), too much like a substantial God who is ineluctable essence and cannot be subdivided. He must have heard too much veneration in French's playing, a worshipful submission to a single spirit in the piece which checks its capacity to stimulate the ear in and into detail.

This theological cleavage is again audible in "Peon," which was performed by Bill Harkleroad and Mark Boston for the album *Lick My Decals Off* from 1970, and then re-recorded by the same duo in 1976 for the debut album of the group Mallard. In the *Decals* version one of the first things we notice is how loud the bass is in relation to the guitar; they are not playing on the same dynamic level and this discrepancy tends to emphasise both inexactitudes of timing and the piece's asymmetric intervals, opening up a space for the ear to engage in creative decomposition. It would be interesting to know how deliberate this mixing strategy was and at whose insistence it was allowed to stand. The guitar itself sounds excessively dry and trebly, with a lot of muting to cut off its resonance. There is a staccato sinfulness about the unison bends which appear after a definite pause about three quarters of the way through the piece; and when Harkleroad plays the final descent each of its eight no-

<sup>10</sup> The opening lines of Captain Beefheart's "The Blimp" (*Trout Mask Replica*) seem to endorse Barthes' observation with reference to its own perceptual exigencies: "Master master/ This is recorded thru uh fly's ear/ 'n you have t'have a fly's eye to see it."

tes sounds as if it has something separate to say. The Mallard version by contrast is ushered in with a few seconds of twittering birdsong. This pastoral backing track continues throughout, filling in the gaps between the notes, rounding off the edges, assuaging its peristaltic crises. The guitar and the bass are mixed together now and the former has a mellow jazz tone traceable to the soft-stroking fingertip rather than nit-picking nail. The reverb is up and those unison bends are played with a tasteful tremolo. Glissandi are introduced to spread the notes into the gaps with a mollified attack, most notably on the fourth of those last eight notes, which slips self-effacingly into its neighbour, executing the self-sacrifice of melody, an offering to the oneness of the whole. Don Van Vliet said that French's "Flavour Bud Living" "put the whole thing in heavy syrup" (Barnes 273), and with the Mallard "Peon" we have a second helping of the sticky.

If the mechanical aid to the shift of perceptual level in painting is the magnifying glass, in music it is the tape recorder, which not only records sequences of sound but allows them to be played back at different speeds, helping the ear to focus differently<sup>11</sup>. Don Van Vliet's assessment of *Decals* pinpoints the link between its aesthetics and the speed at which it is perceived :

What the music is going at is complete absence. That's the way we did it. You can't think about that music. That music is moving so fast that if you think about it it's like watching a train go by and counting the cars. (Barnes *Captain* 336)

Here there is no danger of minimalist endurance and the consequent effect is one of "total absence." Except it isn't of course, Van Vliet is indulging in hyperbole ; though there is an accelerated rate of event in the music, which certainly runs ahead of our ability to concentrate on any one moment. It is like the scary succession of ideas during insomnia, which defeats our efforts to pin down a single thought or image and endure it long enough to enter the expanded realm of dream, to count sheep for example rather than those impossibly speeding railway cars. It is very difficult to shift the level of our perception of *Decals*, perhaps even more so than was the case with its predecessor, *Trout Mask Replica*. This music is antithetical to minimalism, and it is therefore very intriguing that Van Vliet should associate it with an experience of emptiness, "total absence." If slowed down maybe it would begin to provoke those minimalist moments of escape into new multitudes, or at least some odd points of access for the ear's proactive penetrations. Or perhaps we should think of it rather as fairy music, that is to say the kind of thing we might hear after shifting our level of perception of something which has been pressing on our eardrums, a minimalist piece for example. Could Captain Beefheart be a sonic equivalent of Dali's angels? Perhaps it is *coming from* as well as "going at" absence, revelling in what Samuel Beckett has called the "cyclic dynamism of the intermediate" ("Dante" 16), a phrase which might be usefully set alongside Van Vliet's definition of painting as "fulfilling the absence of space between the opposite meanings," (Barnes *Captain* 331) and which also suggests the technical phenomenon of interference, caused by the intersection of two or more wave systems. In any case, we begin to see here the logic of repetition within the minimalist aesthetic, for what better way is there to slow down the rate of progression of a piece of music than to begin to repeat its parts?<sup>12</sup>

The close scrutiny of minimalist repetition invites the listener to re-hear music. After a certain number of habitual expectations are confounded, the listener and the music arrive at a point of double contingency where it is impossible to decide whether pleasure is a concomitant of meaning or vice versa, where art is reduced to art matter and incorporated into the body-in-progress. Moving from Vico to Bruno the

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Gordon has attempted something similar in video with his slow-motion projection of classic films. His "24 Hour Psycho" challenged the audience to endure a marathon viewing, while offering them the chance to see the fairies in every frame.

<sup>12</sup> That Van Vliet was conversant with at least some American minimalist music is evident from his quotation of Steve Reich's "Come Out" in "Moonlight on Vermont": "Come out to show them." (Barnes *Captain* 94-95)

Nolan and still concerning himself with the poetics of *Finnegans Wake*, Beckett reminded us that “the maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent” (*Exagmination* 6). Joyce’s writing, like *Lick My Decals Off Baby*, moves too fast whereas minimalism moves too slow, but both are maximalist in that they tap into frequencies beyond the normal perceptual range, at the low end or at the high end, where extremes of contraries meet and structured response collapses into an urgency of matter. Blake’s fairies, Dali’s angels, and the dreamer of *Finnegans Wake* are all avatars of the body-beyond-the-author which presides over this point of double contingency, plying its excruciating pleasures. They are not metaphors, since they inhere at a point of concentration, equivalent to Zappa’s Big Note, where the space and time necessary to see one thing in terms of another is no longer available. The shift of the level of perception is now revealed to be a re-materialisation of the language, of the music, in which what you hear is what you hear *and* everything else, miraculously disrobed of the acculturated vestment designed to fast-track pleasure at the expense of its painful other. It is the “special art [made] in an environment hostile to dreamers” announced by Zappa in the communiqué published by the *International Times* in 1971, and its dreamer, along with everything else, is to be taken as literally as possible.

### Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Barnes, Mike. *Captain Beefheart*. London: Quartet Books, 2000.
- Barth, John. “A Few Words About Minimalism.” *New York Times Book Review*. Dec. 28, 1986.
- Barthes, Roland. *Essais critiques*. Paris: Seuil, 1964.
- “The Death of the Author” Trans. Geoff Bennington. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1988.
- *The Responsibility of Forms*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Beckett, Samuel. “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce.” *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of “Work in Progress.”* London : Faber and Faber, 1929.
- Blake, William. *Collected Poems*. New York : Longman, 1971.
- Conde, Yago. *Architecture of the Indeterminacy*. Barcelona: Actar, 2000.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- Harris, William. *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka – The Jazz Aesthetic*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985.
- Ishiwari, Takayoshi. “The Body That Speaks: Donald Barthelme's The Dead Father as Installation.” Unpublished Master's thesis. Osaka University, 1996. <http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~KP7T-ISWR/>
- Jaffe, David. “Orchestrating the Chimera—Musical Hybrids, Technology, and the Development of a “Maximalist” Musical Style.” *Leonardo Music Journal*. Vol. 5, 1995.
- Menn, Don, ed. Zappa! Special, unnumbered issue of *Guitar Player*. 1992.
- Spinoza. *Ethics*. Trans. Andrew Boyle. London: Everyman, 1910.
- Watson, Ben. *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*. London: Quartet Books, 1994.

---

Zappa, Frank w. Peter Occhiogrosso. *The Real Frank Zappa Book*. London: Picador: 1990.