

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 for its conspicuous absence in his published oeuvre, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory* collects the chapter drafts and 150 pages of additional memorandum which document Theodor Adorno's inaugural project in the United States while working with Paul Lazarsfeld and the Princeton Radio Research Project from 1938 to 1941. These essays also represent Adorno's first writings in English. With a dramatic reduction in the poetic and otherwise combative language for which Adorno is known, the tone of these pieces — three of which have appeared previously as truncated articles — reflects more than just the language of his new home. Prompted to put his theoretical ideas on music and mass culture to the empirical test, while at the same time employed to answer the significantly different question of "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 draw critique toward the limits of empirical methodology. Beyond these formalities, the inquiry of these essays remains squarely within the purview of Adorno's dialectical thought.

Through his extensive introduction as editor, Robert Hullot-Kentor sets the book in an engrossing context as Adorno struggles less with his transition between national cultures and more with his transplant from one academic bubble to another. In this story, Lazarsfeld represents the assimilating "academic tycoon" who advances by his pragmatism 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 dear friend and foil, Walter Benjamin. Thus a dual intrigue of practical and theoretical conflict persists in these essays.

The book is frontloaded with the nearly 100 page chapter "Radio Physiognomics" which contains the theoretical core of Adorno's radio theory and is by the far the most comprehensive and elegantly written

chapter. Offering a “feature-analysis” instead of the “listener research” he has been 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*, and a drastically different thing from the wireless, digital devices of today. Yet regardless of advances in the state of the art, we are provided with a compelling critique of mediation which remains relevant today.

Adorno rejects the pragmatic parsimony that attributes audiences a child-like fascination with technology, arguing instead that with radio music becomes no longer a “*sui generis*” entity for liberation but another sociopsychological function for control (p. 315). The core conflict of radio is the pretense of an original article (hence as something holding an aura) implying “here and now,” despite the dubious “now” of reproduction (p. 75) and the ubiquitous “here” of broadcast (pp. 90–91). This deception is materialized in the authoritarian entity of the “radio voice,” enabled by the magic of technology and its byproducts. 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 (125). 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 (p. 300). In a victory of style over substance, popular hit-makers respond by developing atomistic elements like “theme” (p. 170) — what today we cherish as “the hook” — subject to a fashion without rational criterion of value.

Shaped by broadcasting into a “musical Babbitt” (p. 210) — a reference to Sinclair Lewis’s epitomic philistine and a possible barb to the Princeton serialist who denied his calls — quality broadcast reception becomes a fetish for the listener to “do good work” by capturing the best signal possible (p. 102). The radio listener has no freedom of rejection, and given the vitality of radio in modern life, “switching off” is likewise a “drive for destruction” (p. 112). Unfortunately, such psychoanalytical maneuvers appear cursory and in most need of the empirical backing which Adorno failed to accomplish during his time with the radio study.

In the end, Adorno does not deny the potential for praxis in radio. Despite cruel reference to the masses of “youngsters, drunks or musically uncultured people” (p. 98), “sob sisters” (p. 125), and speculation

that “all these people are sick” (p. 465), the listener is not necessarily a cultural “dope” (nor was Adorno in the American context, particularly this stint in New York City, as David Jenemann has argued). Citing the “original form” of the symphony, Adorno claims “pre-radio music” ineligible for broadcast by the monophonic voice of radio (p. 154) — and this metaphor is not merely undone with the arrival of stereo sound. Rather, we should “play on the radio itself” as an instrument, embracing the conditions of technology rather than deny 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 which serve the culture industry. This is acute in the chapter on radio pedagogy as exemplified by NBC’s *Musical Appreciation Hour*. With extensive access to broadcaster’s marketing data through the radio study, Adorno recognizes the contradiction of programs “serving the public interest” which are ultimately obligated to corporate sponsors (p. 203). He 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 (an amusing interlude of Adorno caught fantasizing in the third person).

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” (*Vers une musique informelle* [1961]). This has as much to do with the evasiveness of his theory of listening, the most thoroughly dodged theory in the present volume. Further, though regularly contrasting the practical differences between radio and phonograph, Adorno omits comment on the effect of the latter form of mediation, and how his observations on the musical current do or do not here apply.

Abandoned by Adorno as much as by his conflict with the research centre’s paradigm and its financial dependence on corporate funding, *Current of Music* arrives admittedly less finished than the binding implies, and the reader is wise not to reify the text, even by Adorno standards. In this sense, the space for detraction is significantly foreshortened compared to the wealth of raw theoretical concepts which may be derived. Not inaccessibly musicological in presentation, these analyses are in many ways redemptive of Adorno’s widely maligned readings of music prior as it reveals 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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