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Torpedoing the authorship of popular music: a reading of Gorillaz' 'Feel Good Inc.'

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Abstract

This article addresses problems of authorship and creative authority in popular music, in particular in view of a pervasive split between modes of aesthetic production (involving modernist assemblage, multiple authorship, and the late capitalist logic of major label policies) and modes of aesthetic reception (which tend to take popular music as the organic output of individual performers). While rock musicians have attempted to come to terms with this phenomenon by either performing a 'Romantic' sense of authenticity (basically by importing folk values to the production process) or 'Modernist authenticity' (by highlighting experimentation and alienation), Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett, creators of Gorillaz, found a third way which ingeniously allows them to do both. By creating a virtual rock band, and by hiding their own media personalities behind those of their virtual alter egos, they brought themselves into a position which allows them to produce 'sincere' popular music which 'playfully' stages the absurdities of major label music business while very successfully operating within its very confines.

Introduction

The problem of authorship and authority in songs – invariably with regard to verbal content, musical sound or their medial embodiment – is an intricate affair. This is most obvious, perhaps, with regard to the lyrics, which are often belittled as formulaic or plain, especially when compared to their purportedly more refined counterparts in the tradition of written poetry. Such criticism is reductive in its focus on textual surfaces, thereby overlooking the situatedness of lyrics at the crossroads of various discourses which complicate their 'meaning'. Other than poetry, lyrics cannot be conceived outside of generic and ritual contexts of performance, involving not only their organisation in sound, but also particular conventions of communication, social and ideological framing, and specific economies of production and consumption (see e.g. Fabbri 1982).¹ This has far-reaching consequences for the system of authorship and authority in particular, which is certainly more intricate in songs than in written poetry. Due to the situatedness of songs in specific performance arenas, the concept of the author has to be supplemented with the notion of performers who 'interpret' and embody the words and sounds for a real or implied audience. Hence, questions of authority must always be negotiated between author

and performer, between text and performed text, and between ideal and real audiences.

Such relations vary considerably according to the cultural capital and communicative conventions at stake in different 'music worlds' (cf. Frith 2002, pp. 39–41). The art music world, for instance, tends to privilege the authority of the author/composer, as the singers and musicians are usually expected to perfectly 're-enact' the original sound and intention a composer presumably had in mind. In his classical study of *The Composer's Voice*, Edward T. Cone promotes this model as the 'legitimate interpretation, the 'faithful' interpretation for which every singer should strive' (Cone 1974, p. 62).² The folk music world, in contrast, usually emphasises the need for an 'authentic' experience, in which the lyrical and musical content is expressed in ways that match the present emotional state of both the performer and the community that the artist sings for and with (see e.g. Shumway 1999).³

The case is again different for what Frith refers to as the 'commercial music world'. Indeed, one could argue that much popular music delved into the 'death of the author' long before Roland Barthes did. At the risk of oversimplifying, the commercial music world may be characterised by the utter marginalisation of the author in favour of the sole foregrounding of the performer, as its logic typically insists on the marketable public persona of the artist as the singular site of authority. In Cone's terms, what we are dealing with here are 'illegitimate interpretations' (a terminology which of course betrays an obvious art music bias, despite Cone's claims to the opposite), as

the singer – Mr. X or Miss Y there on the stage – becomes the 'composer', the experiencing subject of the song. [...] This misappropriation can occur when [...] – as is often the case with pop singers – the emphasis is entirely on immediate performance. I do not mean to imply that there is anything morally, or even esthetically, wrong about this practice. I merely insist that what one is listening to in such cases – as in many virtuoso performances of 'serious' music – is not the piece being performed, but the performance itself. (Cone 1974, pp. 62–3)

By convention, the lyrical and musical meaning of a song tends to be fully attributed to the singer (in pop, while in rock, often the band), associated with her individual style, and brought into correspondence with a biography and public image crafted by the media. In performances of rock and pop, this is – whether live or mediated – the performing artist can't help but become the singular focal point of creative authority, no matter how complex or polyphonous the actual creative genesis of the song.

In this essay I wish to illustrate how this model of authorship in popular music has been transcended by the commercially immensely successful 'Gorillaz' project, whose second album *Demon Days* headed the UK and several other international charts soon after its entry in May 2005.⁴ 'Gorillaz' may be called the first entirely virtual pop band; its creators are Damon Albarn, frontman and singer of Blur, and Jamie Hewlett, established cartoon artist and creator of Tank Girl. While Albarn provides the lyrics and musical ideas, Hewlett created four animated characters and a virtual universe in which these characters live and perform. Whereas critics have widely commented on the Gorillaz project as an entertaining, yet rather juvenile multi-media spectacle, I would like to propose that the project is an entertaining, yet nevertheless very serious attempt on Damon Albarn's part to (re)gain artistic and political agency as a songwriter while strictly working within the rigid commercial logic of the major label music industry. This shall be illustrated by a reading of Gorillaz' hit single 'Feel Good Inc.', one of the most popular songs on global TV and

Radio stations in 2005. To begin with, however, a few more words need to be spent on the problems of authorship in popular music.

Problems of authorship in popular music

In a recent attempt to summarise a 'scholarly consensus' about popular music, Simon Frith subsumes five essential aspects: thus, popular music is formally hybrid regarding its origins and influences, primarily made for pleasure (esp. dancing and public entertainment), relies on ever-changing technology (esp. recording and sound storage utilities), and is usually experienced as mediated, relying on mass media such as cinema, radio, TV, and, one should add, increasingly the Internet. Finally and most importantly for our context, popular music is defined as 'music made *commercially*, in a particular kind of legal (copyright) and economic (market) system' (Frith 2004, pp. 3–4, emphasis in the original). The economic system of popular music is rather complex, of course, and its agency is distributed unequally between producers, consumers and different kinds of intermediaries such as radio or TV stations. Most aspects of *aesthetic production*, however, are channelled through major label politics where artists invariably have to negotiate their ideas with both Artist & Repertoire and Marketing departments.

The contributions of A&R people primarily relate to the actual production process, during which they not only critically review and technically process the artists' material, but usually also manifestly change lyrical and musical ideas. It is on these grounds already that the authorship of commercial music is almost necessarily multiple rather than singular in nature, despite the fact that an 'organic' notion of creativity still marks A&R self-perception (cf. Negus 2004). This is certainly no longer the case in Marketing where people mostly think in 'synthetic' categories. In an interview with Keith Negus, a major label marketing director for instance argues that 'being a pop star is not just about making a record. Popular culture is about media manipulation. It's about how you present yourself. It's about utilising the avenues at your disposal to create an image, a lifestyle, a point of identification for people' (Negus 2004, p. 34). In this process, the 'composition' of popular music is to be taken literally, as putting together disparate components and resources to meet economic ends. More generally, this is not to argue that the artist necessarily loses all authority of aesthetic production to the publishing labels; yet there will always be substantial involvement regarding all aesthetic decisions, aspects of technological processing and ways of ideological positioning.

The paradox of popular music, however, is that its aesthetic reception hardly acknowledges this. Surely, there are as many ways of listening to music as there are listeners, and notions of musical consumption defy any singular predictive logic which would foreclose creative modes of reception at the crossroads of lifestyle and distinction, embodiment and transcendence, as well as widely different situations and contexts of music use. Within this diversity, however, there seems to be a certain sense of unity regarding the attribution of creative authority in popular music; or in other words, in terms of what Ola Stockfelt refers to as 'genre-normative modes of listening' (Stockfelt 2004, p. 383), rock and pop audiences tend to exclusively allocate an organic sense of creation to performances and performers. As Will Straw notes:

Typically, [...] we evaluate a musical recording or concert as the output of a single individual or integrated group. The unique character of music evaluation in this respect stems from our

willingness with which we grant this primacy to performers (few would do the same with film or theatre). The precise input of composers, producers, engineers, and back-up musicians is, most of the time, unclear to us. (Straw 1999, p. 200)

The effect of this, I believe, is an unmistakable divide between the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception. On the one hand, the process of aesthetic production could be labelled 'postmodern' in its appeal to a Jamesonian (1991) understanding of the cultural logic of late capitalism, invariably with regard to notions of multiple authorship, the primacy of economic concerns, and the fabrication of simulacrous media identities. On the other hand, the aesthetics of reception clearly continues to move along 'romantic' lines. As if in a willing suspension of disbelief, audiences of popular music seem to take the subjective depth and integrity of the artist for granted, whose lyrics and music are expected to transport a genuine message relating to genuine feelings or biographical experience. The products of the mainstream popular music industry are, one could argue on these grounds, to a large extent carefully calculated postmodern simulations of the romantic authenticity which the market demands.⁵

This of course provides an obvious dilemma for aspiring creative artists who wish to succeed within the economic confines of major label politics. On the one hand, they have to acknowledge the split between their roles as authors and performers, involving a machinery of aesthetic production largely adhering to a commercial logic. On the other hand, they deal with an audience which responds to what they perceive as a largely organic presentation, thereby clearly conflating author and performer again. All attempts to find a creative way out of this somewhat schizophrenic situation in search of artistic integrity lead from the word of pop into that of rock.

The distinction of rock and pop is a much contested one, and may need some clarification for the purpose of my argument. Keir Keightley puts it most straightforwardly, I think, when he notes that from a rock perspective, '[p]op is understood as popular music that isn't (or doesn't have to be, or can't possibly be) 'taken seriously'. Rock, in contrast, is mainstream music that is (or ought to be, or must be) taken seriously' (Keightley 2001, p. 128). As the inverted commas indicate, 'seriousness' is a highly subjective category at the crossroads of musical practices and musical preference (Bourdieu's 'taste'), and one should indeed rather conceive of a continuum between rock and pop than of a binary opposition. The focus on seriousness is helpful, however, to question limiting associations of rock with rebellion against dominant social values, and to highlight that 'rock's oppositionality operates in the [...] systematic stratifications of capitalist consumer society' (Keightley 2001, p. 129) rather than typically aligning with forms of cultural action (see also Frith 1978). This notwithstanding, the ideology of rock is rooted in an awareness of popular music's complicity with late capitalism, and the value of 'serious' rock is thus seen in a refusal of artistic and ethical compromises and commercial sell out. Rock artists typically author their own songs, and propagate an awareness of their social and political role in society.⁶

The attempt to bridge the divide between the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception in commercial music is vital in regards to what Keightley sketches as two essential roads to stage a sense of 'authenticity' that elevates rock from pop.⁷ The first road is to go for what Keightley calls 'Romantic authenticity', which basically consists in importing folk values into the pop music world – key values include tradition, community, populism, sincerity and hiding musical

technology (most of the singer/songwriter genre is to be located here). What this move essentially performs is a re-negotiation of the aesthetics of reception with those of production: making it a trademark to write one's own material, to make music 'honestly' (perhaps even going acoustic), and to produce lyrics that are largely in the confessional mode implies catering to audience expectations of subjective expression and emotional depth, and to adjust the production process accordingly as best as possible. To resort to discourses of 'romantic' authenticity means gaining a folk-type rock sincerity – however, it comes at the cost of losing much of pop's possibilities of self-fashioning.

The second road is to perform what Keightley calls a sense of 'Modernist authenticity', which, crudely spoken, imports values from the more progressive branches of the art music world – values listed by Keightley are experimentation, artistry, elitism, irony or obliqueness, and celebrating technology (Keightley 2001, p. 137). A 'modernist' sense of authenticity allows, in many ways, to exploit, rather than narrow, the gap between modes of production and reception. Conscious alienation effects involved in role play, eclectic experimentation and an emphasis on performativity deliberately draw attention to the artificiality of musical and lyrical production rather than attempt to minimise it. One way of achieving 'modernist' integrity, for instance, is to go for multiple impersonations within one performing identity (take Bowie) by pursuing what Lawrence Grossberg defines as a 'logic of inauthentic authenticity' (Grossberg 1992, p. 234); yet 'eccentric' moves usually come at the cost of being attributed an 'eccentric' personality not only as a performer, but also as an author/individual – in short, it tends to foreclose a sense of 'organic' integrity as a performing subject.⁸

One of the consequences of the dichotomy between 'romantic' and 'modernist' fashions of authenticating pop into rock is that rock appears to be an either-or game: at the risk of simplifying, attempts to regain artistic authority and agency in popular music conventionally either lead towards an emphasis on integrative 'romantic' confessional, or towards exclusive 'modernist' experimental modes of performance, with very few choices inbetween – and it is here that I would like to locate the importance of the Gorillaz project. As I will argue in the following, the crucial innovation of Gorillaz is that they manage to experiment rather freely with both romantic and modernist discourses of authenticity, while remaining strictly within the world inhabited by major label commercial music rather than resorting to exclusive avant-gardism (in a move which is not without its own inherent contradictions and ironies). Gorillaz' regained artistic agency in this context relies on a crucial disruption and extension of common approaches to authorship and authority in popular music which merits closer attention.

Taking popular music to a new level of reference

Gorillaz are a two-dimensional animated band and the first entirely virtual pop act to achieve mass international success. Certainly, the idea of attributing music to a third level of reference beyond authors and performers is not altogether new and was explored, for instance, by Kraftwerk's rather avant-gardist employment of robots at performances and press conferences. In its aesthetic scope and consistency, however, Gorillaz far exceed such early attempts, especially as Hewlett and his animation staff not only created four idiosyncratic animated band members, but also a virtual

universe for them to move and perform in.⁹ On the one hand, this is achieved through the interactive possibilities of the Internet, which on Gorillaz' homepage hosts 'Kong Studios' where the band is said to both live and record. Here, Internet surfers may enter their rooms, play interactive games, enter chat rooms, or watch the band's videos in the Kong Studio cinema. It is in these videos, which are more widely distributed through international music television and DVD sales, on the other hand, that Hewlett creates a larger animated world beyond the studio. While also featuring humorous episodes with rather bright settings, the videos tend to increasingly paint gloomy landscapes with a gothic touch of post-industrial decay.¹⁰

It is the band members themselves, however, who are of most interest with regard to questions of authorship and creative authority. As can be traced on the band's homepage, in some booklets,¹¹ and most recently also in a full-fledged 300-page biography called *Rise of the Ogre* (Gorillaz, Brown and Hewlett 2006), each of the four cartoon characters is given an idiosyncratic fictional identity, history, musical taste, and temperament. Without going into detail here, bass player 'Murdoc' is a slightly unhygienic rock macho type, born 6/6/66 in Stoke on Trent,¹² singer '2D' is a rather likable but slightly demented twenty-three year-old kid with 'a mind full of zombies and painkillers', drummer Russel is a 'hip hop hard man from the US' with an ivory league college education, while guitarist 'Noodle' is presented as a ten year-old martial arts expert from Osaka who speaks no English. Taking its cue from the recent flooding of the pop market with manufactured boy or girl groups, the Gorillaz project thus creatively radicalises the synthetic assembling of marketable media images and takes full fictional licence to 'make the ultimate manufactured band'.¹³

At the same time, however, the boundaries between authors, mundane performers and fictional characters are deliberately blurred. Thus, the band members are clearly modelled on the core of those flesh and blood performers who have created and recorded Gorillaz' sounds in the real world.¹⁴ They are, in a way, fictionalised caricatures of their real live models: 2D physically resembles Damon Albarn and obviously sings with Albarn's voice, Murdoc is inspired by Jamie Hewlett, Russell is modelled on Ice Cube's Cousin Del Tha Funky Homosapien,¹⁵ while Miho Hatori of the New York independent group Cibo Matto backs up Noodle. In a simulacrous way, 2D, Murdoc, Russel and Noodle are thus independent characters with idiosyncratic fictional biographies, but at the same time also function as signs representing real life artists.

With regard to questions of authorship and authority, this constellation offers radically new possibilities, particularly to Damon Albarn as a songwriter and performer. Within the Gorillaz project, all aspects referring to Albarn's role as a rock star and media celebrity are relegated to the fictional characters, allowing Albarn to largely draw himself out of marketing constraints. Albarn and Hewlett have fairly uncompromisingly declined to explain themselves in interviews as either the authors or performers of Gorillaz, and instead it is their animated alter egos who answer all questions strictly within the bounds of their fictional roles and horizons. This extends to live performances, where the real artists perform behind the scenes while the animated characters are projected onto the stage in 3D animation. After their first album, this still involved projection screens, but the first live performances after the release of *Demon Days* at the 2005 MTV Europe Awards in Lisbon as well as in Manchester used a more advanced version of the Victorian 'Pepper's ghost' stage trick (see Sherwood 2005) which puts the animated band right in front of a real crowd.¹⁶

This consistent insistence on a third level of reference beyond the levels of real life authors and performers has two important effects: First, it disrupts the habits of music audiences who are confronted with media images that both represent and sound like, but at the same time significantly differ from the flesh-and-blood members of the band. The audience is thus forced to primarily locate the significance of Gorillaz' music and lyrics within the fictional universe that has been created under the supervision of Jamie Hewlett; only in a secondary step are they invited to establish meaningful relations to the world of the artists backing the characters. Secondly, by using a fully fictionalised alter-ego which replaces his semi-fictional media image, Albarn re-appropriates much agency and control over the public image and medial appearance of his songs. In one of the few interviews Albarn did give about Gorillaz, he explains to the *Rolling Stone*:

I've realized that I care more about making music than about being famous. [...] I wanted to make pop music again. With Blur, it's just become impossible because the ramifications of making a pop record with Blur were really unpleasant. [...] the fact that I wasn't ever going to appear in any video or be seen in any sense just freed me up completely. (Albarn in Baltin 2001)

Within Gorillaz' rather 'modernist' virtual setup, the animated world thus also offers a new dimension of 'romantic' artistic integrity and political agency. It serves as a fictional universe in which ideological concerns may be staged which, as in all good fiction, relate back to the outside world.

In the following, I wish to illustrate this in some more detail by focusing on Gorillaz' 2005 hit single 'Feel Good Inc.' As I will show in a first reading, the song comprises a rather scathing attack on the contemporary pop music industry which has so far eluded most critics. Such attacks on the slaving ways of the commercial music world are of course not at all alien to rock and may even be called one of its central *topoi*. What is new in Gorillaz' approach, however, is the elaborate staging of this rock ethos on a fully fictional level of reference encompassing not only theme and setting, but also the rock stars themselves. While not exactly escaping the familiar paradox of rock ethics (its commercially highly profitable rebelling against the bleak commercialisation of popular music), Albarn and Hewlett's approach allows them to pursue a more complex, more self-reflexive, and perhaps more entertaining argument. By virtue of the creative possibilities of virtual simulation, 'Feel Good Inc.' self-consciously (and, I believe, ironically) plays out a modernist discourse of alienation and despair against a romanticist vision of wholeness and integrity, both facing a third discourse of 'capitalist realism'.

The performative staging of these discourses is particularly obvious in the song lyrics and the visual organisation of the video; in my following reading, the verbal performance and visual context will therefore be the major focus, while musical contexts play a comparatively small part. To foreground verbal and visual meaning in the context of musical multimedia is of course a deliberate choice which violates Nicholas Cook's call for a thoroughly anti-hegemonic approach to film and music video. In his *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, Cook admonishes a

terminological impoverishment epitomized by film criticism's traditional categorization of all music-picture relationships as either parallel or contrapuntal, and a largely unconscious (and certainly uncritical) assumption that such relationships are to be understood in terms of hegemony and hierarchy rather than interaction. (Cook 1999, p. 107)

He consequently proposes to analyse cross-medial dialogue by critically investigating complementation, contradiction and contest in a largely free interaction of all

medial codes. I shall come back to this problematic after the following reading in order to complicate the aesthetic and ideological positioning of Gorillaz' critique.

Staging a Babylon of commercial music: Gorillaz' 'Feel Good Inc.'

Let us start with the visual code of the video¹⁷ then, which is vital in establishing the primary frame of reference. The animation of 'Feel Good Inc.' begins with a shot pushing in on a derelict, post-industrial cityscape. The camera travels up a slim and ludicrously high tower, finally reaching a large barred window with the letters 'Feel Good Inc.' painted underneath. The camera zooms in through this window and reveals a decadent and subdued concert hall setting with a depressed-looking 2D on stage in an oversized armchair; it is at this point only that, after a spell of hysterical laughter from the off, Murdoc sets in with the thumping bass line kicking off the tune.

The unfolding song itself has a tri-part structure. The first and second parts are sung by 2D/Damon Albarn, while the third part is performed by hip hop act De La Soul. Each part – verse, chorus, and rap sequence – as indicated, represents a discourse of its own in a dramatic confrontation relating to questions of authority and agency in the music business. The lyrics are as follows:¹⁸

Verse:

- City's breaking down
On a camel's back
They just have to go
'Cos they don't know whack
- 5 So all you fill the streets
It's appealing to see
You won't get out the county
'Cos you're damn ass free
- You've got a new horizon
10 It's ephemeral style
A melancholy town
Where we never smile
- And all I want to hear
Is the message beep
15 My dreams they've got to kiss me
'Cos I don't get to sleep, no

Chorus:

- Windmill windmill for the land
Learn [Turn] forever hand in hand
Take it all in on your stride
20 It is sticking [sinking] falling down
Love forever love is free
- Let's turn forever you and me
Windmill windmill for the land
Is everybody in?

Rap:

- 25 Laughing gas these hazmats
Fast cats

Lining them up like ass cracks
 Ladies homies at the track
 Its my chocolate attack
 30 Shit I'm stepping in the heart of this here
 Can't bear bumping in the heart of this here
 Watch me as I gravitate
 Hahahahaha

We gonna go ghost town
 35 This motown
 With yo sound
 You're in the blink
 You gonna bite the dust
 Can't fight with us
 40 With yo sound
 You kill the Inc.
 So don't stop get it get it
 Until you're cheddar header
 Yo watch the way I navigate
 45 hahahahaha

Repeat Chorus

Rap:

Don't stop get it get it
 We are your captains in it
 Steady watch me navigate
 Hahahahaha

For a better understanding of the first part of the tune, it is helpful to briefly address aspects of setting and performance in image and sound. The first thing to note here is that the verse is performed in a distorted and filtered voice, immediately signalling a loss of (vocal) immediacy that goes along with an overall sense of disillusionment. This is to some extent supported by a laconic thrust of the overall musical soundscape – in the tune's signature bass-line, performing a circular, mirror-image movement emphatically beginning and ending in the same note, and in the thin, two note guitar support laconically and monotonously descending a fairly simple three-step minor-chord progression. But it is especially the melodic progression of the vocals, flippantly descending ('city's breaking down') to an almost doggedly repeated note ('on a camel's back') to which they emphatically return in 'don't know whack', which supports a sense of exhaustion and frustration.

On a visual level, the alienating vocal effects are explained through 2D's use of a megaphone through which he laconically sings while strolling through a passively lounging audience towards the barred window of the concert hall. But it is the lyrics which flesh out the sound effects with rather disorienting imagery. The opening line 'city's breaking down / on a camel's back' already proposes a challenge to determinacy by linking images of urban rioting with the abrupt way that a camel kneels down, leaving the listener at a loss of where to exactly place a logical connection beyond the expressivity of the visual association. The resulting sense of modernist alienation continues throughout the following lines. It remains unclear who exactly 'they' are that the revolutionary upheaval on the streets is meant to drive away. The 'you' of the following stanza (ll. 5–8) then seems to be more clearly definable as the crowd in the broken down city. Their situation is again described in paradoxical ways: They are both 'damn ass free', yet at the same time obviously captured within

their run down city. The freedom they imagine to have, as the following stanza suggests (ll. 9–12), is no more than a delusion, and their ideas of renewal only lead back into yet another scenario of a depressing cityscape, another ‘melancholy town’ (l. 11).

This modernist description of an inescapable urban wasteland works perfectly well on an expressionist level and may simply be read as a random product of 2D’s alleged psychiatric disorders. However, it also invites a metaphorical interpretation which is particularly supported by the visual universe of Hewlett’s animation. Quite clearly the video encourages the viewer to associate the ‘Feel Good Inc.’ tower behind whose barred window the band plays with the confines of the entertainment industry, and to consequently associate the world inhabited by major label music corporations with the wasteland that the opening stanzas evoke. The rioting people in the streets would then have to be read as the mass market audiences who are addressed by an insider or victim of the world of manufactured popular music: In a disillusioning voice, he dismantles their ‘new horizons’, i.e. the musical ‘styles’ (l. 10) which they listen to as ‘ephemeral’ (l. 10) products of manufactured mass market pop. But let us for now follow the further course of the lyrics.

The last stanza of the first part provides a transition to the following chorus. It introduces for the first time the lyrical ‘I’ after the first stanza’s ‘they’ and the second and third stanza’s ‘you’. The lines expresses the speaker’s response to the wasteland, the dominant feeling being one of utter exhaustion. Again, this is expressed by way of a paradox, in that ‘dreams’ are called for in a state of insomnia. The arrival of those dreams is expected to be announced by the ‘beep’ of a ‘message’ (l. 14), and indeed there is a brief ‘beeping’ sound marking the transition from verse to chorus. It can be assumed, therefore, that the second part precisely embodies the rescuing ‘dream’ that the speaker calls for.

The chorus is thus already set up as a counter-discourse to the first part by means of the song lyrics. This is underlined, furthermore, by musical and visual effects. A short break after the ‘beep’ is followed by a new quality of musical discourse, which is particularly obvious in the change to a fuller, folk-oriented, strummed guitar riff. Together with an emerging, rather bright and spacious keyboard sound they provide the only accompaniment to the first half of the chorus (ll. 17–20), before the drums set back in. More significantly, perhaps, there is a crucial change in Damon Albarn/2D’s vocal quality which is no longer artificially distorted but evokes the impression of immediacy and emotional depth.

In the video, moreover, the shift to a new discourse is underlined by a change of setting. The track shot following 2D’s movement towards the window of the tower eventually zooms out through the window again and leaves 2D staring longingly through the bars at the outside world. This shot precisely coincides with the transition to the chorus, in which the video blends over to the curious spectacle of a windmill hovering over the clouds. This image remains something of a mystery, which is however decoded in the second performance of the chorus after the third part involving De La Soul’s rap sequence. There, the windmill is shown to stand on a flying plot of green land with a ship-shaped body of earth, featuring an introvert Noodle sitting at the bow strumming an acoustic guitar.

Whereas the lyrics of the first part confronted the audience with modernist images of decay and fragmentation, the chorus instead offers wholeness and salvation. The opening line ‘Windmill windmill for the land’ clearly associates Noah’s ark, even if the decoding of the ‘windmill’ image relies on the video to

unambiguously evoke an air-born ship. Once the biblical context of reference is established, other images of the song also gain new associations and meaning. A dawning apocalypse is evoked in the deterioration of the urban wasteland beneath the sky-scraping 'Feel Good Inc.' building, while the tower itself brings to mind the Tower of Babel, just as the broken down city recalls Babylon. Read in the context of mass-market music capitalism, this puts Gorillaz in the position of slaves to the 'Feel Good' incorporation which exploits their music both as a pacifier for the rioting crowds and as a way of making ever more money to extend the incorporation's power. The chorus, in this context, offers a vision of salvation from the Babylon of mass-market music: It emphasises a renewed sense of community ('hand in hand') and permanence ('forever'), while it also pleads for emotional truthfulness and advocates a renewed sense of aesthetic sensibility beyond the world of pre-manufactured experiences (ll. 19–20). In short, it provides a vision of romantic integrity and authenticity in the midst of modernist alienation.

Melodically, the affirmative thrust of the chorus as opposed to the rather depressing outlook of the verse manifests itself in a predominantly ascending and more playful tonal progression, which, ironically, owes heavily to intertextual borrowings which rather blatantly undercut the creative 'integrity' and 'authenticity' called for in the lyrics. Not only is the first line very reminiscent of the verse of the Kinks' 'Sunny Afternoon', the entire chorus adopts much of its phrasing from the verse of U2's 'Staring at the Sun'. Such correspondences are quite unlikely to be accidental, not least since both 'Staring at the Sun' and 'Sunny Afternoon' correspond thematically to the sunny, lazy Sunday-feel associated with the pastoral flying island. Yet particularly the reference to the Kinks is to be read, I believe, as an homage to Albarn's well-documented musical heroes, and to Ray Davies in particular, with whom he closely worked and performed.¹⁹ There is, therefore, an underlying playfulness and ironic attitude to Gorillaz' take on 'romantic' rock integrity.

It is this playful irony that one should perhaps keep in mind when it comes to the third part of the song and its association with what I have termed 'capitalist' realism (as opposed to the modernist and romantic takes on rock authenticity). This part rather crudely interrupts the romantic vision of the chorus: In the video, it sets in with a sudden appearance of De La Soul on several large screens behind the stage. Even though the projection shows De La Soul as if in a black and white video clip and could thus be read as an intrusion of the outside world into the animated universe, I would argue that De La Soul do not primarily represent their real life identities but take on a fictional role in the framework of the song. Their rap in fact suggests that they should be read as agents of the incorporation, as 'Big Brothers', if you like, who watch their 'slaves' from the walls of the corporation building. In this function, they meaningfully disrupt 2D's 'dream' of musical integrity. Moreover, there is a meaningful association of the two rappers with two black helicopters chasing after the windmilling aircraft through De La Soul's repeated mentioning of their navigation skills (ll. 32, 44, 48).²⁰

With regard to their lyrics, this interpretation would allow to read the 'laughing gas' (l. 25) of the agents' 'chocolate attack' (l. 29) as precisely the mass-market pop distributed by the Feel Good Inc. to drug and stupefy the crowds. The cynicism of this act shows when De La Soul, with an altered voice, mimic the helpless response of their victims (ll. 30–1); indeed, after their rap attack, the video reveals an audience that lies unconscious and scattered wildly across the concert hall seats. The

second half of the rap then gives the most explicit hints that the song stages a dramatic confrontation of discourses relating to questions of mass-market music production. It confirms the link between the corporation and the wasteland evoked in the first part; De La Soul's 'we're gonna go ghost town' (l. 34) links up with the crowd's horizon of a 'melancholy town / where we never smile' (ll. 11–12). But more importantly, the 'Big Brothers' also directly address the romantic vision of the chorus: The Gorillaz' 'sound', here, allegedly threatens to 'kill the Inc' (l. 41) and therefore has to be fought by all means. The agents' weapon, in this respect, is again their very own 'laughing gas', or, on a metaphorical level, their version of manufactured mass-market pop: This is what they want the crowd to 'don't stop' and 'get' until they are 'cheddar header' (ll. 42–3), and it is their triumphant cynical laughter that closes the song.

In terms of narrative content, 'Feel Good Inc.' paints a picture of the contemporary pop music scene which is, if anything, bleak. Within the Babylon inhabited by major label corporations, the song relegates almost all agency to the corporeal forces and locates the agency of the artist merely in a desperate 'dream' of wholeness and freedom. The degree of bleakness, moreover, very much depends on the question of how much discursive power we attribute to this dream against the other parts of the tune. Another element of ironic subversion in this context is that the chorus is actually announced by the 'beep' of a 'message', which seems to place it in a context of artificial mediation and at worst associates the downloading of music to a cell phone.²¹ This, of course, would serve to even further deconstruct its romantic immediacy as just another postmodern simulation of authenticity, and would reveal its messianic thrust to be just another delusion. Surely, there is comic relief, for instance in Murdoc's persistent shaking his sleazy bum Keith Richards style in the face of hypnotised luscious ladies. Yet what we are presented with, overall, is a rather disheartening scenario of artistic slavery and capitalist control.

The pessimism of this reading has in fact been confirmed a year after 'Feel Good Inc.' was released by Gorillaz' third release from *Demon Days*, 'El Mañana': At least in terms of its video animation, it presents us with a sequel to 'Feel Good Inc.' in which the flying plot of land (i.e. the romantic vision of musical integrity and wholeness) is eventually machine-gunned by the two black helicopters chasing it (representing the major label corporations). The corporate forces take on the flying windmill in a rather unsentimental and very un-Quixotian fashion, and 'El Mañana' closes with a scene that leaves little hope for 'romantic' rock-authenticity in Hewlett's animated world: The spaceship (together with Noodle) is gunned down from the sky and crashes into a deep canyon in the wasteland below; and just to bring their point unmistakably across, the helicopters eventually nuke it – the last image we get is the dropping bomb.

Sound effects: songfulness and plural address in 'Feel Good Inc.'

The message of 'Feel Good Inc.' and, by extension, 'El Mañana', one is tempted to argue on these grounds, leaves little room for optimism indeed. Yet of course the sombre picture of economic and creative slavery as portrayed in the animated world of 'Feel Good Inc.' is indeed a testimony to artistic freedom on the non-fictional levels of reference. After all, by successfully hiding their celebrity selves behind the persona of their fictional alter egos, Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett have brought

themselves into the position to place the critique of 'Feel Good Inc.' on the mass-market music scene in the first place. It has given them the fictional freedom to tell a gripping tale of Babylon, yet with a performative detachment that involves little pathos and much self-conscious persiflage. The staging of a conversation between three voices representing modernist resignation, romantic optimism and capitalist realism fundamentally relies on their use of persona who both are and are not them, and a universe which both is and is not the world of pop and rock. Gorillaz indeed offer a new creative mode that – among other things – allows Albarn and Hewlett to critically and ironically reflect the world they inhabit without having to go confessional, resort to modernist eclecticism, or losing mass appeal.

Yet why exactly is it that 'Feel Good Inc.' allows for a playful and blatant critique of the world of mass-market music while at the same time almost effortlessly making it to the top of the international charts? Certainly, Albarn and Hewlett's ingenious idea to dissociate their roles as authors and performers by creating virtual performing celebrities in their own places is the crucial twist which allows them to place their critique – yet it does not explain the enormous mainstream success of the tune in itself. Or put differently: quite obviously, most viewers have probably decided not to exclusively read 'Feel Good Inc.' as a meticulously crafted meta-critique of its own means of production as I have done in my reading above, but have chosen different roads of interpretation which highlight entertainment value as much as subversive potential. There are different ways of approaching this phenomenon, and one brings us back to the importance of sound effects in multimedial settings.

My point here is that the reading proposed above relies on an almost Kantian, 'disinterested' analysis of the lyrics, images and a few formal properties of the musical scope. As such this is of course a legitimate way of reception and moreover one which, as I have tried to show, is not unlikely to be encouraged by authorial design (with all due care of intentional fallacies). What I have largely blended out, however, is any sense of receptive 'bodily complicity' (Clifton 1983, p. 273) in the sense of a sensuous indulgence in the beats, soundscape and vocal quality, which has been relegated in favour of a mostly rational attending to verbal metaphors, allegorical imagery, and to a lesser extent 'tonally moving forms' (in a Hanslickian sense). It is vital to see here that despite the very unconventional communicative setup of a virtual band playing to real audiences, 'Feel Good Inc.' presents a very conventional rock song (in the best sense of the word), sticking to a straightforward and unchanging three-chord progression, a singular grooving bass line and, last but not least, a very danceable beat which really calls for kinaesthetic involvement rather than dissociated academic dissection. Without having to go into detail, here, it is obvious that while the lyrics and the imagery of the video may variously thematise de-familiarisation, wholeness, or alienation, the overall musical scope remains very familiar throughout in the sense that it rather consistently complies with the larger generic conventions of a danceable rock song (and self-consciously inscribes itself into the genre by the unmistakable allusions to U2 and The Kinks).

One of the particular powers of music in terms of generic familiarity and bodily involvement, here, may be approached by turning to Lawrence Kramer's (admittedly slightly elusive) notion of 'songfulness' which he proposes to come to terms with the fact that we are often surprisingly unaware of the actual verbal meaning of lyrics – meaning that would be quite obvious to us when presented as a poem on a piece of paper – in the performance and reception of particular songs.

Kramer's own perfect example is that of Schubert's setting of Goethe's 'Heideröslein' – a poem that is commonly read as a thinly veiled and rather cynical extended metaphor on the act of deflowering and the vanity of resisting masculine domination (read penetration).²² Through Schubert's musical setting, this less-than-charming content is, according to Kramer, curiously suspended in an alternative denotative realm of diffuse comfort and fantasy, in a process that has to do with particular generic conventions of musical communication (in this case of the *Volkslied*), and a corresponding 'bodily complicity' between singer and listener.

Similarly, it could be argued, the overall musical appeal of 'Feel Good Inc.' in a way encourages listeners to miss out on the ironical overtones of its title in favour of a 'feel-good' immersion in its overall soundscape. This road of reception would make my tentative interpretations of local musical meanings largely irrelevant; thus, the fact that I spoke of, for instance, a 'laconically and monotonously descending' guitar progression or the 'loss of (vocal) immediacy that goes along with an overall sense of disillusionment distortion' in Albarn/2D's performance of the chorus²³ really made sense in relation to the lyrical content and the visual imagery. What, however, if those lyrics and images are audible yet unheard, visible but unseen? In less 'disinterested' receptions of the tune, the specificity of the verbal (and visual) content, Kramer would argue, may well be suspended despite the fact that words remain perfectly intelligible, as they are suffused with another, larger semantic realm opened up through 'genre-normative modes of listening' (Stockfelt 2004, p. 383) and their mnemonic inscriptions on the body.

In the larger picture, therefore, the intricate ironies and the playful staging of competing discourses in mass-market musicking are quite effectively diffused in 'Feel Good Inc.' by the sheer 'songfulness' and gratifying accessibility of the tune itself. The Gorillaz project, that is, really makes elaborate use of a persistent strategy of plural address, by simultaneously offering very different possibilities of reception: 'Feel Good Inc.' is a fully fledged piece of multi-medial rock entertainment as much as it is an ideological statement, and its video appeals to audiences as a melange of pop-culture and fantasy as much as it invites more critical and allegorical interpretations. Obviously, Gorillaz cannot be reduced to a political statement, and have in fact cultivated – at least within their fictional persona – a profound dislike of 'high-brow' approaches to their music (surely this essay would not fare too well with the band either).²⁴

If cartoon drummer Russel claims that Gorillaz really exist 'to save the nation from soulless, record company puppet, pop stars' in an interview with the *Guardian* in March 2001, this is obviously to be taken with a pinch of salt. Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett are well aware that Gorillaz have themselves turned into mass-market pop stars, that they are produced and distributed through just one of those 'Feel Good' labels which their 2005 hit single addresses, and that they fill the pockets of EMI Parlophone with every single sold copy. Already after the surprising commercial success of the debut album, Albarn reflected this paradox in a documentary on the Gorillaz project, arguing that 'it has turned into a bit of a monster. I think this is the reason why I would like to step back from it. It has sort of gotten out of control' (Wakeham and Brown 2002). The simple fact that Albarn has stepped back into the picture and Gorillaz came forth with a new album, however, indicates that neither Albarn nor Hewlett feel quite as radically uncomfortable with the logic of commercial music as either Albarn's lyrics or the band's public statements suggest.²⁵ This notwithstanding, Gorillaz have provided Albarn and Hewlett with a

tool to critically reflect, persiflage, and playfully (up)stage the world of mass-market music, and to do so with an amount of artistic control which is, I believe, unique in the rock circuit.

Endnotes

- 1 It may be argued, of course, that written poetry evolved from and is still similarly embedded in these discourses, yet this is rarely acknowledged in critical discourses.
- 2 In 'legitimate' interpretations, Cone argues, 'the two aspects of person [singer] and persona [the "implied" voice of the composition, LE] fuse. The physical presence and the vitality of the singer turn the persona of the poetic-musical text into an actual, immediate, living being: the *person* of the singer invests the *persona* of the song with *personality*. If the impersonation is successful, if the illusion is complete, we hear this embodied persona as 'composing' his part – as living through the experience of the song. The vocal persona may be of various kinds – protagonist, character, etc., but [...] the persona is never identical with the singer' (Cone 1974, p. 62, emphasis in the original).
- 3 Both modes of course, are more ambivalent than they seem at first sight: A singer of art music will never be able to fully shed her personality during her interpretation, while the seeming authenticity of folk performances is more often than not carefully contrived rather than 'natural'.
- 4 In early June, *Demon Days* was No. 1 in the UK, France, Switzerland and Hong Kong; it debuted at No. 2 in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Germany, Ireland and Slovenia; No. 3 in Austria, Denmark and Norway; and No. 5 in Canada, Iceland, Italy and Japan.
- 5 I should make it quite clear that I do not wish to support Adorno's claims of a 'pseudo-individualisation' inherent in popular music (cf. Adorno 1990). As more recent research has shown, audience responses to popular are much more complex, active, and creative than Adorno conceived, and its social functions defy deterministic prediction (cf. Wall 2003, pp. 165–210; Osgerby 2004, pp. 59–82). Yet this unpredictability, I believe, still works within, and perhaps, because of a rather holistic and organicist reception.
- 6 As Frith argues, pop, by way of contrast, 'is not driven by any significant ambition except profit and commercial reward. Its history is a history of serial or standardised production and, in musical terms, it is essentially conservative. Pop is about giving people what they already know they want rather than pushing up against technological constraints or aesthetic conventions. [...] Pop is not an art but a craft' (Frith 2001, p. 96).
- 7 The two basic creative ways out of the production/reception dilemma crucially allow artists to remain within the bounds of the major label music industry. The easiest way out is of course to create one's own label (which only works at a sufficiently high level of public success), to sign to independent labels, or to use the new media as an alternative route of publishing. All options, however, come at the cost of losing potential audience segments.
- 8 It may also be achieved by using different performing identities altogether; Norman Cook (best known as Fatboy Slim) is a case in point, who changes names when shifting genres (cf. Straw 1999, p. 207). Such cases are rare, however, in pop music involving lyrics and rather common on the dance music scene which takes less interest in notions of authorship.
- 9 One model that Albarn and Hewlett may have had in mind when founding Gorillaz is the French house act Daft Punk aka Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel Homem-Christo. Daft Punk signed a major label contract with Virgin Records in 1996 that forbids the label to market any photos of Bangalter and Homem-Christo. Moreover, there is a somewhat parallel development as for their most successful album so far, *Discovery* (2001), Daft Punk have collaborated with Japanese Manga-artist Leiji Matsumoto and director Kazuhisha Takenouchi to produce animated video-clips (the Japanese animated tradition was certainly another major inspiration for Albarn and Hewlett). These were later expanded to an animated 'house musical' premiered in Cannes in 2003; *Interstella 5555* tells the story of an alien pop group who are kidnapped by an evil pop music magnate on planet earth, yet are able to escape his control and end up as the most famous pop act of the galaxy. The paradox of enjoying mainstream major label success while at the same time criticising the workings of the mainstream pop industry closely links Daft Punk with Gorillaz, as I hope to show more clearly in the following reading of Gorillaz' 'Feel Good Inc.'
- 10 See, for instance, the video of the 'Intro' to the *Demon Days* album on the band's homepage <http://www.gorillaz.com/flash.html>.
- 11 For instance, in the DVD box booklet of *Gorillaz Phase One: Celebrity Takedown* (EMI 72434901300).
- 12 Incidentally, also Robbie Williams' place of birth.
- 13 The CEO who signed them, Tony Wadsworth of EMI UK, relates in a documentary: 'There are many manufactured bands around at the moment. There is a whole pop scene out there which is inhabited by all these ex-stage school

- people who are making these boy bands, girl bands and so on, none of which have got too much connection with the creativity of their music. And he [Albarn] said: "Why don't we take it to the ultimate extreme and make the ultimate manufactured band?" (Wakeham and Brown 2002).
- 14 Both Gorillaz' albums to date are major label productions with professional producers (Dan 'the Automator' Nakamura for the first, Danger Mouse for the second), featuring an impressive phalanx of guest performers ranging from the late Ibrahim Ferrer to Dennis Hopper to rappers De La Soul.
 - 15 Del Tha Funky Homosapien dropped out after the recording of the first album in 2001.
 - 16 The Manchester performances are available on DVD: *Gorillaz Demon Days Live at the Manchester Opera House* (EMI 0946 356244 9 6).
 - 17 The video can be watched on the band's homepage in the Kong Studio's cinema (The easiest way to get there is by clicking on the floor directory board on the wall in front when you enter, rather than trying to take the long way through the hallways ...). The video is also distributed on DVD, for instance in the CD/DVD double pack of *Demon Days* (EMI 0724347441400).
 - 18 There is no authorised and comprehensive printed version of the lyrics. While the regular CD booklet (EMI 094631168826) features no words at all, the CD/DVD pack of *Demon Days* (EMI 0724347441400) contains some, among them the chorus of 'Feel Good Inc.' The booklet version, however, slightly deviates from the performed wording of the song. The following lyrics are therefore entirely based on my own transcription; deviations from the booklet version are indicated in square brackets.
 - 19 See e.g. their memorable rendering of 'Waterloo Sunset', available on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBjbxJ1ZjHY&mode=related&search=> (10 December 2006).
 - 20 Altogether, it is a clearly ironic move to equate hip-hop and rap with the capitalist control of the mass-market pop scene. While rap and hip-hop have developed as a counterforce to the commercial pop market in urban US subcultures with a social agenda and political ideas, they have long been appropriated by the mass market in the commercially watered-down form of macho 'Gangsta Rap'. De La Soul may well be performing a thorough parody of Gangsta Rap in their fictional roles, a role for which they seem well equipped given that they are usually associated with an earlier generation of more 'authentic' and 'alternative' (East Coast) rap.
 - 21 At their performance at the 2005 MTV European Music Awards in Lisbon, 2D indeed toys with a mobile phone on stage during the De La Soul part.
 - 22 The third and final stanza reads: 'Und der wilde Knabe brach / s' Röslein auf der Heiden; / Röslein wehrte ich und stach, / half ihr doch kein Weh und Ach, / musst es eben leiden. / Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot, Röslein auf der Heiden' [in my tr.: And the wild lad picked / the little rose on the heath / little rose fought back and pricked / but her 'woe' and 'ah' did her no good / she just had to let it happen / little rose, little rose, little rose red / little rose on the heath].
 - 23 It should be noted, though, that for Kramer, the intimacy of voice is the core primer of songfulness, and the distorted vocal sound would thus indeed work against easy identification: 'As the medium of meaningful utterance, voice brings the music into a space of potential or virtual meaning even when actual meaning is left hanging; as the medium of social relationship, voice involves the listener in a potential or virtual intersubjectivity that in some circumstances may be realized in the course of song; and as a corporeal medium, voice addresses itself in its sensuous and vibratory fullness to the body of the listener, thereby offering both material pleasure and an incitement to fantasy. These effects all depend on the ability of the singing voice to envelope or suffuse both melody and text so that their independent existence is obscured. One way of defining songfulness is as the condensation of this distinctness into a quality, the conversation of the absence of textual and melodic distinctness into a positive presence' (Kramer 2002, p. 54).
 - 24 They, for instance, rejected their nomination for the 2001 Mercury Prize (Murdoc: 'Mercury, that's crap they stick on top hats and I want nothing to do with that class because they're all mad and they'll take you down with them', *The Observer* 2001).
 - 25 Noodle – drawing on her infinite repertoire of East-Asian wisdom – is said to have recently claimed that '[e]very band is destroyed by their success ... cartoon bands are no exception' (taken from the virtual booklet announcing *Demon Days* on the band's official homepage: *Gorillaz: The Return 05.05.* <http://fans.gorillaz.com/bio.php>).

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