

Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism

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and

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Introduction

Exploring the Maximalist Body

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 is one of the most prolific artists of the 20th century, a composer whose sheer output could stand accused of maximalist excess. His attempts to embrace different genres and creative practices (rock, jazz, blues, orchestral music, film, opera, . . .) have 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. As James Grier writes:

Zappa clearly relished the conflicting images he projected as rock musician and knowledgeable observer or practitioner of art music. This posture allowed him to remain an outsider in both fields (rock musician who employed the language of art music; practitioner of art music who

played rock) while capitalizing on the cultural hegemony of art music to create an ironic distance between himself and other rock musicians, and assert the superiority of his cultural sophistication and musicianship.

(unpag.)

As we will see, however, Zappa's maximalist poetics, as well as his more general disdain for genre boundaries, goes well beyond the fashionable levelling out of high vs low dichotomies that has become associated with postmodern art. Zappa has repeatedly alluded to the fact that all the diverse aspects of his musical output were to be perceived as part of a single "Project/Object," a formulation meant to describe "the overall concept of [his] work in various mediums":

Each project (in whatever realm), or interview connected with it, is part of a larger object, for which there is no "technical name."

(*Real* 139)

The art of connecting apparently antithetical styles and items usually seen or experienced in radically different contexts has long been a feature associated with the international avant-garde, and Zappa's aural collages have been compared with the equally democratic and undogmatic aesthetics of Kurt Schwitters's *merzbau*.¹ But Zappa's extension of collage aesthetics to the non-musical and even the non-artistic materials and phenomena that gravitate around his published works and performances (Zappa repeatedly insists on the importance of interviews, audience participation and cover art) reflects above all his commitment to compositional methods that consider musical works as having an existence that exceeds the sum of their parts. Zappa's holistic poetics is also indicative of his desire to experience the whole world as a material extension of a single, prime-moving vibration which he calls the "BIG NOTE" ("Everything in the universe is, is, is made of one element, which is a note, a single note. Atoms are really vibrations, you know. Which are extensions of the BIG NOTE, everything's one note").² The suggestion that the universe began with one primal sound can be related to the theories of the astronomers and Nobel-Prize winners Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson who, in 1965, accidentally discovered the existence of Cosmic Background Radiation, a residual vibration from the Big Bang which comes to us from all directions with the same intensity and a tone a little flatter than B, as defined by standard tuning. Once translated into aesthetic terms, Penzias's and Wilson's primordial hiss from the beginning of time can be seen as the cosmological justification of

various forms of (intentional and nonintentional) “conceptual continuities” that incorporate Zappa’s works into a constantly evolving “event-structure”, poised between careful calculation and chance operations:

The *project/object* contains *plans* and *non-plans*, also precisely calculated *event-structures* designed to accommodate the mechanics of fate and all the bonus statistical improbabilities attendant hereto . . . [It] incorporates any available visual medium, consciousness of all participants (including audience), all perceptual deficiencies, God (as energy), THE BIG NOTE (as universal basic building material), and other things.

(quoted in WALLEY 122)

Zappa’s conception of his work as an organic-event-structure-in-expansion is indicative of his decision to let the material itself suggest ways of connecting apparently unrelated musical objects and live idiosyncracies which are liable to be fitted together and synchronized into further studio constructions. Whole tracks from *Sheik Yerbouti*, *Joe’s Garage* and *Shut Up ’N Play Yer Guitar* were developed around live guitar solos extracted from other pieces. This process of gradual musical and conceptual recycling, which Zappa termed “xenochrony” (or “strange synchronization”), evokes the aesthetics of James Joyce, another maximalist artist, whose “epiphanies” were recycled into his longer and more ambitious works of fiction, of which more will be said later. As for Zappa’s “Big Note” itself, it amounts to what David Walley calls “a painting of time in time, the purposeful working with coincidence,” a structure over which the composer sometimes has only limited control, as Zappa explains:

I can say that I control the structure of it perhaps acting as an agent for some other contractor . . . I’m a sub-contractor, from time to time I’m a master of ceremonies in the larger sense, if I bring to the attention of a certain audience an event or situation which is not of my own manufacture.

(Walley 147)

Of “Rubber Shirt,” a piece entirely composed of a bass track and a drum sequence performed independently from one another, Zappa writes:

The drummer was instructed to play along with this one particular thing in a certain time signature, eleven-four, and that drum set part was extracted . . . The bass part which was designed to play along with another song at another speed, another rate in another time signature,

four-four, that was removed from the master tape. . . . Then the two were sandwiched together. . . . The musical result is of two musicians who were never in the same room at the same time, playing at two different rates in two different modes for two different purposes, when blended together, yielding a third result which is musical and synchronizes in a strange way. That's xenochrony, and I've done that on a number of tracks.

(Marshall, unpag.)

In the years that followed the release of "Rubber Shirt," the possibilities afforded by multitrack recording and remastering enabled Zappa to manipulate time and disrupt the linear sequentiality of his own career by mixing materials from many different periods into composites that do justice to the multidimensional dynamics of the "Project/Object". From the mid-1980s onwards, the Synclavier provided Zappa with even more ways of exploring the wonders of electronically-transmitted signals turned into musical notes. The complicated, kaleidoscopic geometries of *Jazz from Hell* (1986)—an album consisting almost exclusively of tracks electronically composed and recorded on the Synclavier—were eventually performed live by the Ensemble Modern in 1991. Ironically enough, the gestural interpretation of the German musicians, who turned out to be Zappa's last band, restored the Benjaminian "aura" of the original compositions whose digitally produced sounds had until then been completely divorced from the primal gesture of the composer or musician. Zappa's well-documented delight in conducting and composing for the Ensemble would seem to confirm the fact that his interest in electronic music had been first and foremost prompted by practical rather than aesthetic reasons. (The problem of having to deal with the ego problems of real musicians and the costs of having his scores performed by classical orchestras such as the London Symphony Orchestra in the late 1970s had proved too discouraging for him to proceed with his orchestral projects).³

Air Sculptures and Other Musical Objects

As suggested by the "Big Note" theory discussed above, Zappa regarded music as a material construction, a kind of synaesthetic "air sculpture" (or "molecule-sculpture-over-time" [Walley 188]) that is "looked at' by the ears of the listeners—or a microphone" and creates "perturbations [that] modify (or sculpt) the raw material (the 'static air' in the room—the way it was 'at rest' before the musicians started fucking around with it)" (*Real* 161). In his interview with Bob Marshall, Zappa makes another

interesting remark connecting his musical theories to the realm of modern physics. Here, Zappa's awareness of the physicality of sound (see also our discussion of Zappa and Satie's "musique d'ameublement" in Chapter One)—an awareness gained from Edgar Varèse and other composers interested in timbre and noise rather than traditional notions of harmony and rhythm—leads him to posit the existence of musical *matter*, namely the transformation of sound waves into solid objects:

If you buy the idea that the vibrational rates translate into matter, and then if you understand the concept of vibrational rates above perception and below perception combining to create a reality, that opens up the door to some pretty science fiction possibilities. If you can create an audible reality by a sine wave above the range of what your ear can hear and another one from below, and you put them together and suddenly it creates something that your ear can detect, is it not possible that solid matter of an unknown origin could manifest periodically because of the frequencies of some unknown nature above and below which, for short duration, manifest solid objects? It could explain a lot of strange things that people see.

(Marshall; unpag.)

In the mid-1980s, Zappa discovered that the Synclavier's G page (which contains the machine's inaudible inner codes and numbers) could be used to generate "G numbers" that never surface at the level of the "user-friendly" part of the machine. "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress," from the *Jazz from Hell* album, was based on the rhythms indicated by the "dust particles" resulting from guitar notes recorded by the Synclavier and which Zappa subsequently converted into pitched sounds:

So we found a way to convert bunches of G numbers into note blanks. And G numbers occupy points in time. They indicate that something happened on the guitar string at a certain point in time. It takes a little piece of eternity and slices it up, and if your finger moved, there's a G number that says what your finger did besides just playing the note. So we converted this dust into something that I could then edit for pitch, and the dust indicated a rhythm. So what I did was take the rhythm of the dust and impose pitch data on the dust and thereby move the inaudible G number into the world of audibility with a pitch name on it. That's how "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress" was built.

(Menn 60)

As we will see, Zappa's commitment to the materiality of sound and

the physicality of performance is inextricably linked with an aesthetic geared towards the creation, appropriation and (mis-)consumption of everyday objects, a tendency most apparent in the radical fetishism of such songs as “Montana”, “Evelyn, A Modified Dog” and “Sofa.” The most everyday object of them all is the human body, and in what follows we will explore how maximalist art projects and exploits a pluralisation of the body’s material means. In Chapter Two we will argue that so-called degenerate art reflects and enacts a re-materialisation of the body which detonates conservative mythologies of perfection, leaving the body radically potentialised, subject to a new maximalisation of forms. This hybrid condition has affinities with theories of abjection, and in Chapter Three we pursue these connections in the context of the gothic, which has traditionally exploited the in-betweenness of the body as a source of trauma; where the relation of the subject to the object is fraught with the anxiety of becoming other. In Chapter Four the liminal maximalist body is associated with an eroticisation of the edge between self and world, and a notion of style emerges as an expression of the body beyond objects.

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 degenerate critical method we develop in the course of our readings culminates in Chapter Five in a discussion of the problem of maximalist pleasure. The cross-contamination of subject and object reveals itself at this point as an unavoidable condition of our writing as well as one of its guiding thematics. The maximalist body-in-progress, like any attempt to define it, is located at a point of double contingency, where it is impossible to decide whether pleasure is a concomitant of meaning or vice versa; and where it is all but impossible to decide what criticism is for.

Maximalism vs Minimalism?

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

—John Barth

Was the maximalist potential of the Big Note for Zappa a way of defying generic categories in order to avoid being pigeonholed as either a

classical or a rock musician? Of defeating the expectations of both rock and classical listeners by breaking down the barriers separating low and high art forms? Of creating a multidimensional art project that is no longer subject to such distinctions? Of filling the empty space of the Mojave desert of his youth with “imaginary guitar notes that would irritate an executive kind of a guy”?⁴ Of composing an œuvre which seems *as big as his century*? Of doing justice to a world in which “time is a constant, a spherical constant” and “EVERYTHING IS HAPPENING ALL THE TIME” (*Them* 62)? Or of cheating closure and death through a creative application of Stephen Hawking’s “no-boundary proposal”, the notion that the universe has neither singular beginning nor ultimate end (Zappa dedicated *The Real Frank Zappa Book* to the author of *A Brief History of Time*)?

Certainly one of the difficulties in dealing with 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 Book Review* 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 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.⁵ 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 iron-

ical fashion—nearly all existing musical genres and modes, from 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 to the rather dubious notion that such a decision should be dictated by a Baudrillardian sense of “epistemological uncertainty.” 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 in fact 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 (Varèse used 400 speakers to perform his “Poème électronique” at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair).

Does the Body Belong in Music?

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”:

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 musics” as probably one of the first instances of pre-digital “xenochrony” 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 doo-wop 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]).⁶

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 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 more 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? Monochromonotony.

(Real 189)

Ironically enough, the only work by Zappa which could conceivably be described as possessing certain minimalist features is his last masterpiece, *Civilization Phaze III*, a Synclavier-based opera derived from "a vague plot regarding pigs and ponies, threatening the lives of characters who inhabit a large piano" and incorporating various fragments of spoken material, some of which dates back to the recording sessions of *Lumpy Gravy* in 1967. Here, Zappa's attention to the physicality of sound once again manifests itself in the music performed by the "ponies" who make music "with a very dense light" ("How the Pigs' Music Works"). Zappa's use of space and silences in such pieces as "N-Lite" or "Beat the Reaper" represents a break from his earlier works and even led Ben Watson to suggest some connection with New Age music in his last interview with the composer:

OTL: I noticed certain "new age" sounds in the music that preceded "Beat the Reaper" on disc two of *Civilization Phaze III*—surely you're joking?

FZ: What's a "new age" sound?

OTL: Sounds I associate with new-age music—shakuhachi or some kind of flute . . .

FZ: Mmm. [Affirmative grunt]

OTL: . . . and the throat-singing—quite atmospheric sounds. I was quite surprised to hear you use them. Normally . . .

FZ: Normally in new-age material there is no hint of dissonance, so no

matter what you're orchestrating it with, the fact that you're not dealing with lush triads would set it apart anyway. The only thing it has in common with new age music is that the chords are held a very long time, but you couldn't go out and get a new age record contract with that tune, because there's too much going on in it.

(548)

Characteristically, Zappa uses a pro-maximalist argument ("there is too much going on in it") to defend himself from allegations of derivativeness and distance himself from a musical tradition which capitalizes on the soothing effects of repetition and endless atmospheric chords. The New Age sounds of *Civilization Phase III* are only the tip of the iceberg of Zappa's preoccupation with the relationship between matter and sound, as well as a number of other questions related to those which have occupied the mind of Stephen Hawking and other contemporary physicists. Among these, the notion of infiniteness and finitude in both extent and content figures prominently. Where does a sound-wave or a movement begin and where does it end? Was it determined by chance or by a set of rules and equations designed by the composer? What is the relationship between time and space and how does a sound exist in space as well as time?

In this sense, *Civilization Phase III* (1994) is perhaps the ultimate example of Zappa's maximalist-objectist aesthetics as well as a climax in the development of his materialist-objectist musicosm(icom)ology. It can also be seen as the last of Zappa's xenochronic experiments in that it alternates Synclavier pieces with spoken word fragments recorded over a period of more than 25 years. Whereas the short bits of conversation sandwiched between the instrumental pieces returns us to the collage techniques of *Uncle Meat* and *Lumpy Gravy* (Zappa had originally meant the album to be titled "*Lumpy Gravy Part II*"), the compositions themselves create a space in which the sound environment becomes a living structure that expands along the lines of an (anti-)method best described by the composer himself as "AAAFNRRAA"—an acronym for "Anything, Anytime, Anyplace For No Reason At All". The "plot continuity" of the work, Zappa argues, is derived from a serial rotation of randomly chosen words, phrases and concepts, including (but not limited to) *motors, pigs, ponies, dark water, nationalism, smoke, music, beer,* and various forms of *personal isolation*" (sleeve notes 3), a description which evokes the aesthetics of *Uncle Meat* (1969), where "the words to the songs on this album were scientifically prepared from a random series of syllables, dreams, neuroses & private jokes that nobody except the

members of the band ever laugh at, and other irrelevant material. They are all very serious and loaded with secret underground candy-rock psychedelic profundities.”

The liner notes estimate that 30% of the music of *Civilization Phase III* was played by the Ensemble Modern who, Zappa claimed, was meant to beat what Stockhausen called “the lazy dogma of impossibility” by performing the most complex, “unplayable” music he ever produced (Menn 44). Whereas “Dio Fa” incorporates sounds created by Tuvan Throat Singers, and “N-Lite” contains piano parts which were played by Zappa himself, the bruitist “Waffenspiel” features the sounds produced by construction workers as Zappa’s kitchen was being remodeled, the sound of barking dogs, automobile noises as well as sounds of semi-automatic weapon fire reportedly sampled from CNN newsreels. With its emphasis on the dialectics of the gestural and the mechanical, *Civilization Phase III* confirms Zappa’s attraction to Hawking’s no-boundary proposal. Listeners, who are deprived of the irrevocable illusion of “real time”—which gives us the sense that we can grasp the singular reality of sounds and objects, that they can be traced to their sources—find themselves in the position of the post-quantum physicist confronted with the impossibility of determining both the velocity and the position of any given particle. They are forced to resist the illusion that turns the musical object into an objective fact liable to be enjoyed and consumed passively and uncritically. The enjoyment of Zappa’s *Civilization Phase III* is subject to a similar principle of radical uncertainty, one which is further emphasized in the second CD, where it is often hard to distinguish between the sounds that are computer-generated and those which are performed by the Ensemble Modern. Such a radical blurring of the boundaries between different states of the physicality of sound creates a space for the creative transformation of musical matter into a physical experience which resists analytical thought, accentuating its flight into abstraction and the void. The general body of the piece will only materialize for those who allow themselves to explore the most improbable reaches of sonic physicality.

This is not to suggest that Zappa’s *Civilization Phase III* is the only example of such a radical use of musical materiality. A maximalist alternative to Eno’s “Music for Airports”, Anthony Braxton’s *Composition No-173* (1996), a “one act play” for “4 actors, 14 instrumentalists, constructed environment and video projections”, is a structuralist speculative opera based on a series of dialogues taking place in an airport, “a kind of orange-like luminous state area-space” containing four giant

video screens that give off “‘image motion’ projections and moving shadows”, a circular table and four white chairs around which four people are seated, examining various maps including a large one that “almost covers the whole table but doesn’t”. Like Zappa’s, Braxton’s sounds “have a sense of humour”:

One can make you jiggle over to the left side of the room-space like a spinning top or something, or one can send out a smoke-trail of sonic imprint flashes that dart up and down the ceiling of the event-space. It’s a kind of action-experience thing.

(liner notes; unpag.)

Like Zappa’s “Black Page” or Satie’s fruit-shaped *divertissements*, Braxton’s composition not only incorporates visual signs into his musical performance but also builds upon the visual potential of the material signs to create “different imaginary sound occurrences” (one also thinks of the “imaginary guitar notes” and air sculptures of *Joe’s Garage*) liable to effect psychological changes in the actors and their audience. Braxton attempts to create an “animate-experience” born out of a synaesthetic awareness of the interaction of space, sound and image. His characters spend most of their time trying to “map” their environment and make sense of the strange sounds that swoop around them, bouncing on and off the stage and occasionally trying to come into their bodies causing them to check their “body-areas” for signs of physical alteration. They also try to create or represent new sounds by tracing their “physical” trajectories with their hands. The patterns of recognition vary according to the reactions of the four characters—one of them thus points at a sound which has just “landed” at his feet and speaks of a “‘sponge-like’ sonic garden” while another one immediately proceeds to formulate a “kind of sound that sinks in under the fireplace (light)”. A third actor, using a typically Zappaian vocabulary, is more interested in the material texture of sound and seeks to identify a “kind of sound that sneaks up behind the lumpy area in the ‘shade area’”. A little earlier in the play, the “air sculpture” postulated the existence of a “creamy sound texture that blended into a ray of pulsing light—flashes (like at the Vegas floor show spectacles)”. Braxton’s synaesthetic *art total* reminds one of *Lumpy Gravy*, of course, but also of the “hot and putrid” sound and the pigs making music “with a very dense light” on *Civilization Phaze III*, which was originally envisioned as a theatrical production which was to be adapted and produced by Matt Groening and choreographer Jamey Hampton (of the ISO dance troupe). Zappa’s

description of the work, in the liner notes to the album, as “an operapantomime, with choreographed physical activity (manifested as dance or other forms of inexplicable sociophysical communication)” (3) confirms both his growing interest in making the body an integral part of his compositions and his attraction to the idea of a maximalist *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would transcend traditional genre boundaries and constitute an alliance of music, poetry, the visual arts and dance.

The closing chapter of *The Real Frank Zappa Book* establishes Zappa’s status as the Mark Twain of American music, a man whose variety of occupation—as a composer, producer, businessman, social satirist, politician, writer, publisher, and inventor—is perhaps best illustrated by what he calls his “own personal collection of crumbled dreams” (*Real* 333), a series of extra-musical projects he sought to develop in the early 1980s and which range from a late-night adult program called “Night School” (340) to a cable network broadcasting 3-D movies (334) and a proposal to replace traditional record merchandising with a system allowing music consumers to access digital files by phone or via cable TV.

It is hard to imagine what kind of turn Zappa’s career would have taken had it not been brought to an end by his untimely death. But one is tempted to believe that he would have given up on touring altogether and devoted himself to his orchestral and Synclavier-generated compositions. The notion of a maximalist *spectacle total* was becoming dear to his heart in the last years of his life, as attested to not only by the projected performances of *Civilization Phaze III* in various European theaters, but also by the “Proposal for a World Cup Football Opera” entitled *Dio Fa*, which Zappa claims to have presented to the Socialist Mayor of Milan in 1988 in advance of the World Cup Football Finals in the Summer of 1990 (*Real* 343).

Baby Take Your Teeth Out

the swollen lips from where
she munched them down
to the strawberry roots
when the bottles ran out
stupid voice tries to sing

stupid feeling for everything
irritation: pond—leg—pond—leg—pond—leg

—Andrew Norris. Recorded by
The Wrong Object as “Cunningimus”

Like marron-glaced fish bones
Oh lady hit the road!

—King Crimson, “Ladies of the Road”

Baby take your teeth out
Try it one time
Baby take your teeth out
Try it one time
Leave 'em on the kitchen table

—Frank Zappa, “Baby take Your Teeth Out”

The synaesthetic dynamics of *Civilization Phaze III* are only one example of how Zappa’s relationship with the perceiving/thinking/functioning body reflects the true essence of his maximalism. More generally, the examples discussed in the following chapters indicate that the body imposes itself as the essential receiver and be-all-and-end-all transformer of maximalist art. 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 through the essential component of 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.

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* to the exaggerated, phallic noses that appear on the cover of *Ruben and the Jets*⁷—represents “the epitome of incompleteness” (Bakhtin

26), an unfinished unit transgressing its own limits through eating, excretion and sexuality. The stress, therefore, is on the excesses and potentialities of its 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.

Rabelais’ poetics of degradation, with its focus on food, drink, digestion and sexual life, clearly anticipates Zappa’s own “carnavalesque” compositions. These also enact the peculiar logic of the inside-out explored in Chapter Four, shifting accepted models from top to bottom, front to rear and delighting in imagining a new musical space in which inside and outside are one. According to such a totalizing/maximalist notion of art production (and consumption), scatological jokes become one of the prime movers of artistic creation itself. When Gargantua almost gets expelled from his mother’s loins during a fit of diarrhoea, Rabelais establishes a symbolic link between the digestive cycle and the act of giving birth to a new human being, or a work of art—artistic fertility and peristaltics go hand in hand, so to speak. The following chapters will show that Zappa, like Rabelais (and Swift), does not shy away from describing fantasies of infantile regression (see our readings of “Lost in a Whirlpool” and “Let’s Make the Water Turn Black” in Chapter Three) and puts them to the service of a popular art that delights in imagining how the most banal situations can degenerate into absurdist extremes. In “For Calvin (And His Next Two Hitch-Hikers)” (*The Grand Wazoo*), a song about back-seat fucking and eating, punning on the various meanings of the word “leakage”, this absurdist logic typically takes us in the direction of abstract connections between sex and food:

Where did they go?
When did they come from?

What has become of them now?
 How much was the leakage
 From the drain in the night
 And who are those dudes in the
 Back seat of Calvin's car?
 Where did they go?
 When they got off the car?
 Did they go get a sandwich
 And eat in the dark?

The examples discussed below suggest that Zappa's irreverent humor revels in all things related to the body, from eating, farting and belching to defecation, laughing, dancing and masturbation. Scatology imposes itself as an important strategy, one of the most common manifestations of the conjunction of diet and discourse (one thinks, for example, of the Chaucerian farting devil of "Titties and Beer" or the poo-poo jokes of the "Illinois Enema Bandit") at the same time as it invigorates Zappa's satirical spirit. ("Satire is traditionally associated with filth, and the satirist is described as throwing turds and urine on those whom he ridicules. [Ehrenpreis 691]")

More generally, Zappa's treatment of the body confirms Bakhtin's dictum that "all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" (19). This principle extends of course to the representation of sexuality in both literature and music. The alliance of the grotesque and the obscene in Zappa's explicit lyrics (in 200 *Motels* and other socio-documentary materials of life-on-the-road, the word "ob-scene" can often be taken in its literal sense, of that which happens "behind the scenes") has often been seen as the expression of Zappa's radical politics. Still, it would be a mistake to reduce it to, say, Wilhelm Reich's famous assertion that fascism is an expression of man's "orgastic yearning, restricted by mystic distortion and inhibition of natural sexuality" (24). There are similarities between Reich's sex economy and Zappa's warnings against the dangers of an authoritarian and sexually repressed society (see our discussion of Zappa's and Anthony Braxton's "Enema Bandits" in Chapter One). But more often than not Zappa's explicit lyrics do not take us in the direction of social-psychological emancipation. Rather, they seek to develop abstract forms of sexual behavior that enact the gradual decontextualization and abstraction of body parts from their traditional functional uses.⁸ In such songs as "Charlie's Enormous Mouth," "Cocaine Decisions" or "Your Mouth,"⁹ the mouth and the teeth (to which a whole section of Chapter Two is devoted) as organs of

both speaking, eating and sexual intercourse, are often subjected to such a process of a physical decontextualization:

Your mouth is your religion.
 You put your faith in a hole like that?
 You put your trust and your belief
 Above your jaw, and no relief
 Have I found.¹⁰

As the rest of this book will make clear, such a radical use of the grotesque indicates a tendency to move away from social and political satire per se. This tendency for the grotesque to drown or obscure the point of satire is well-attested:

The grotesque artist exaggerates at first only for satirical purposes. But it is in the nature of this kind of powerful, extreme satire that its exaggerates burst through all limits. The grotesque satirist becomes intoxicated with its own creation. Gradually he loses sight of the satire. The exaggerations which he had at first unleashed in full awareness of their purpose become more and more wild, until they get out of hand, obliterating like a turbulent stream everything around them.

(Thomson 42-43)

The opening section of this book will show that Zappa's and Don Van Vliet's use of the grotesque, the abject and the repellent (the fundamentals of post-Dada anti-totalitarian art) nonetheless lends itself to a political reading, one which is not geared towards practical changes (if one excepts, of course, Zappa's crusade against the PMRC campaign to label obscene lyrics) but seeks instead to create mediations between imaginary objects "liberated from the curse of being useful"¹¹ and abstract forms of behavior that put degenerate art to the service of an aesthetics that follows Kundera's recognition that beauty and harmony are first and foremost a political lie.

At this point, one is led to consider the ways in which Zappa used his own body as a stage on which to perform further practical eccentricities. The liner notes to the first album of the Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out*, set the tone for the first few years of his career, a period characterized by his satire of teenage America and in which the group tended to present themselves as disgusting and revolting "freaks". At the time, the phrasal verb "to *Freak Out*" was itself described as "a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his relationship to his

immediate environment”:

These Mothers are crazy. You can tell by their clothes. One guy wears beads and they all smell bad. We were gonna get them for a dance after the basketball game but my best pal warned me you can never tell how many will show up . . . sometimes the guy in the fur coat doesn't show up and sometimes he does show up only he brings a big bunch of crazy people with him and they dance all over the place. None of the kids at my school like these Mothers . . . specially since my teacher told us what the words to their songs meant.

Frank Zappa is the leader and musical director of *THE MOTHERS* of invention. His performances in person with the group are rare. His personality is so repellent that it's best he stay away . . . for the sake of impressionable young minds who might not be prepared to cope with him. When he does show up he performs on the guitar. Sometimes he sings. Sometimes he talks to the audience. Sometimes there is trouble.

(liner notes; unpag.)

From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, Zappa systematically opted for an aesthetics of abjection, forcing his audience to contemplate (or imagine) the most degenerate parts of the human body (“Stink Foot”, “What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body”). Zappa’s use of the abject, in this respect, clearly allies him with the spirit of Dada. His 1967 revue entitled “Pigs and Repugnant”, to cite but one example, deliberately used the shock tactics of the avant-garde. In the years that followed, Zappa acquired a reputation for obscenity and the rumor spread that he went as far as defecating on stage and eating the turd. Zappa later denied these rumours, but he nonetheless posed for the now famous “Phi Beta Krappa” poster.

In his later works, Zappa’s relationship with his own body became more and more ambiguous. The mid-1970s, in particular, saw the construction of a more explicitly sexual persona. In those days, Zappa frequently appeared on stage with straggly hair, wearing tight trousers and an open shirt revealing the hairy chest of a glamorous demon-lover, a public image reinforced by his growing reputation as a guitar hero. An extreme example of this change can be found in the bold, phallic exhibitionism of *Zoot Allures*, whose cover, conceptualized by Cal Schenkel, features Zappa with his long untidy mane of thick dark hair and his skintight narrow hipped white jeans revealing a bulging crotch, perhaps intended as an ironic response to the rather feeble penis joke perpetrated a few years earlier by Andy Warhol on the cover of the Rolling Stones’ *Sticky Fingers*.