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Listening Awry: Lacan and the Electric Guitar at the Intersection of Music, Technology, and Identity

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Contemporary positions on technology tend to emphasize that its import lies in its appropriation by a given social actor (group or individual), by how it is used. This paper does not categorically deny that such is often the case, but suggests that its inversion is widely overlooked. Overlooked, because much like the skull in Holbein's The Ambassadors, evidence of technology's active effect on the user is distorted until viewed from a particular vantage point. This paper takes Lacanian psychoanalysis as its vantage point and the musical technoculture of the electric guitarist as its object, revealing in the electric guitarist's pursuit of identity through timbre that technology functions as the object-cause of desire, the objet petit a. Evidence of such an anamorphosis certainly supports the need for psychoanalysis in a critical musicology, but the larger implication is for thinkers of all disciplinary stripes to give technology a second look (or in this case a second listen) in order to move beyond the usual determinist, voluntarist, or even Luddite approaches.

Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived.

—Theodor Adorno

Music, technology, and identity cannot find a more demonstrable point of convergence than in the electric guitar. That the audible expression of this intersection lies in the specific pliable nature of electric guitar timbre (or “tone”) is made explicit in the electric guitarist’s preoccupation with sound. For the electric guitarist, “tone” has become a metonym for “musical identity”—with musical/artistic identity then serving as the tautological extension of the representation of the fantasy of the “self” (i.e. the notion of unique individual identity). Technology’s function in this process of conflating timbre with identity transcends its mere intrinsic position as a natural aspect of the musical instrument as such. Technology (specifically any technology designed to electronically model and manipulate the instrument’s timbre), in this case, actually fuels the electric guitarist’s pursuit of an

abstract object of tonal desire. This is to say, that at the ideological nexus of the electric guitar, technology is the object-cause of desire, the Lacanian *objet petit a*.¹

Supporting this argument involves both an application of Lacanian psychoanalysis—particularly as it regards the graph of desire and the concept of identity—and the presupposition that not only is there a dialectic of music and identity, but that technology is immanent to that dialectic—especially as it pertains to electric guitarists and the music they create. In recommending the validity of the prior, one needs only take notice of the many successful applications of psychoanalysis to the study of such diverse cultural realms as film,² race relations,³ and (as in the argument to follow) music.⁴ Cultural critique of this type positions the critic as psychoanalyst—seeking to reconstruct and uncover the “desire that is fantasy”—to the analysand (i.e. culture and its objects).⁵ Just as others have argued before, this paper supports the idea that, for a critical musicology, directing Lacanian psychoanalysis towards the goal of interpreting music’s role in identity construction proves particularly effective.⁶

Attempting to analyze the roots of desire, fantasy, and identity—the deepest psycho-cultural levels of electric guitar playing—in relation to the pursuit of tone, aligns with the use of this specific Lacanian form of psychoanalysis. It is important to state that the choice of Lacan over Freud (or some other variation of psychoanalysis for that matter) is a conscious one, and the reason for it lies squarely in the difference between these two theorist’s notions of ego constitution. Freud states that “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego.”⁷ Stockholder describes the ego as “the psychic equivalent of the proprioceptive senses.”⁸ The Freudian ego is essentially Cartesian; decidedly rational, it occurs in the child’s recognition of itself as autonomous, as distinct from the external world, and involved in a negotiation with that world.⁹ This constitution of the ego allows for the formation of an actual individual self; it maintains the realness of identity.

Contra Freud, Lacan situates the self as a phantasm; for him, the ego is fundamentally alienated. In describing his concept of the mirror stage, as the infant looks into the mirror, Lacan explains:

The total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as Gestalt, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him.¹⁰

Because what the self recognizes as “itself” is, in fact, a *méconnaissance* (a misrecognition), there is no possibility of self-awareness.¹¹ As Zuern points out,

The *otherness* of the image the subject assumes in the mirror stage creates a negative dimension in the subject’s existence. I am never, in Lacan’s model, fully “myself” because the relationship within which my ego, my “I”, comes into being is a relationship with an image that is *not me*, that is an unattainable ideal.¹²

What Lacan effectively offers, then, is a negation of the Cartesian “cogito.” For him, the “I,” as such, is only so *prima facie*; in all actuality, it is the very concealment of what it claims to be: the unknowable true subject.¹³ What I offer herein—when identifying certain psychoanalytic concepts at work beneath the guitarist’s production and fetishism of sound—is a logical extension of the Lacanian argument.

That technology can, at the very least, facilitate the musician's pursuit of identity is not a new concept. For instance, notice two discussions in support of this notion as it relates to the electric guitar. First, Waksman's consideration of the music of Lester William Poslfluss (more commonly known as Les Paul) reveals an exemplary occurrence of this type of music/technology/identity relationship.¹⁴ Paul, after finding out that his mother, while hearing a song on the radio, had confused his playing with that of another guitarist, decided to make a change. "I figured that my own mother had a right to know when her son was playing," he says, "I decided that I wasn't gonna [sic] record or go on the radio or anything until I could work out something so much me, that my mother knew that was her Lester."¹⁵ Waksman goes on to show how "for Les Paul, the search for a readily identifiable sound, a unique musical identity, went hand in hand with technological experimentation."¹⁶ Second, and to compliment Waksman's example, consider Gay's discovery that for rock musician's in New York, "disagreement on musical sound... disassociates one guitarist from the other [and that] in such rituals of everyday life, technologies help define difference... for musicians."¹⁷ In both cases (whether through construction or negation) technology is essential to the guitarist's successful pursuit of identity.

While in complete agreement with the notion of the essentiality of technology in these processes, I am suggesting that technology actually transcends—at least in this specific musical technoculture—its position of necessity. In this regard, it seems important to state that certain locations within Waksman's work presuppose an approach similar to mine.¹⁸ For Waksman though, this is done so primarily by relying upon traditional Freudian interpretations of the phallus (i.e. essentially, the guitar represents an extension of the male genitalia), or through the subtle use of terms like "lack," "fantasy," and "desire,"—jargon which carries along with it certain assumed and decontextualized meanings. Chapters involving race, which Bromell argues as Waksman's employment of "Eric Lott's quasi-Lacanian understanding of the relation between African-American cultural production and white audiences," make this most apparent.¹⁹ In using this technique, Waksman is no doubt successful at offering an effective cultural-historical survey of the electric guitar; he is less so in terms of critically applied theory. This is all to say that theory, in seeking to support the position here in, must be taken a step further, as a surface level analysis is insufficient when attempting to, as Derrida puts it, interrogate "what comes before the question."²⁰

To begin the analysis, notice that for the purposes of this paper the process of desire is discussed on its most fundamental terms: the object of desire, the *objet petit a*, the drive towards the object, and fantasy as it relates to all of these. This configuration of desire is based on a particular Zizekian reading of Lacan. An elaboration of these terms occurs dialectically through their application, but to define them in short: the object of desire is desire's apparent goal, the *objet petit a* is that aspect of the object which makes it desired, the drive is the specific manifestation of desire that circles around the object, and finally, fantasy is that which actually reveals to us how to desire."²¹

Making the connection between the musical technoculture of the electric guitar and the Lacanian dialectic of desire is at its essence a critique of ideology. As is the case with Lacan and desire, Zizek's approach to ideology critique is not surprisingly most useful. This method, too, can be divided into four elements: locating the particular struggle within an ideology that defines its scope, pinpointing that field's *point de capiton* (i.e. that which unifies the ideology), revealing the discourse between the fantasy's constituent elements, and uncovering that aspect of the ideology that ensures fantasy remain as such."²² Here again, the application of the approach serves to better clarify and define it.

The ideology of the electric guitarist is unique in that it is essentially comprised of two broader ideological fields: identity and art—or more specifically identity and the art of music. In the mixing of these two already complimentary ideologies, technology functions both as a catalyst and as that which ties the two together. Théberge, for example, establishes “the equation between individual performers and their equally individual sounds... as revealed by technology.”²³ Decades earlier, Adorno recognized the tendency toward a fetishism of sound, even outside of the effects of technology, in what he saw in Stravinsky as “the primacy of specialty over intention, the cult of the daring feat, the pleasure in agile manipulations... [which] plays the means against the ends.”²⁴ In other words, what effectively emerges from this concoction is an ideology of sound, of timbre, of effect, or as a guitarist might say, of “tone.”

Within the guitarist’s ideology of sound, desire, as Lacan would have it, is revealed by fantasy. This is apparent in the concept of the “guitar hero,” and manifested in numerous technologies aimed at manipulating a guitar player’s tone. As an example of this manifestation, consider the availability of guitar effects pedals designed specifically to mimic those “guitar heroes.” For example, on the main product page for the Cry Baby® (a wah-wah pedal²⁵ sold by Dunlop Manufacturing Inc.) half of all pedals are explicitly marketed as delivering a specific guitarist’s signature version of the wah-wah effect (e.g. the “Eddie Van Halen Signature Wah”). No doubt there is probably room here for a more fundamentally Marxist critique, but I want to place emphasis on the fact that guitarists are buying effects pedals in attempt to *sound like their heroes*. It is this fantasy of the guitar idol that ultimately affirms the existence of desire. When the guitarist, literally, buys into the fantasy of the guitar hero, he effectively embraces a desire for his own identity, his own individual sound.

As stated before, desire circles around the object of desire. To illustrate, Žižek asks, “Who doesn’t remember the nightmarish situation from dreams: the more I run, the more I stay rooted to the spot?”²⁶ In the drive towards the object of desire, the aim and goal are easily confused, this is because the drive’s actual aim is not the goal (the object of desire), but to perpetuate itself as desire; it is here too where the subject finds pleasure.²⁷ Once the fantastic screen of the idolized hero sets the guitarist’s desire for tonal identity into motion he effectively becomes caught in the process. The search then provides the subject a painful pleasure as a surrogate for the pleasure of the impossible experience of reaching the object—this is what Lacanian psychoanalysis refers as *jouissance*. There is a correlate in the guitarist’s accumulation of gear—amps, effects, or otherwise. As Žižek puts it, “in the curved space of desire... more satisfaction is found by dancing around [the object] than by making straight for it.”²⁸

As of yet, describing the process of desire as it pertains to the electric guitar—its object, the fantasy that reveals it, and the drive towards the object with its aim/goal confusion—the *objet petit a* (the object-cause of desire) remains hidden. This is no doubt related to its anamorphic nature. Žižek likens it to the skull in Holbein’s *Ambassadors*: the *objet petit a*, “viewed from in front, is nothing at all, just a void: it acquires the contours of something only when viewed at a slant.”²⁹ In the musical technoculture and ideological structure of the electric guitar, the *objet petit a* is none other than that which, at first listen, seems to lack substance and function outside of simple utility. By listening awry—a listening under the influence of desire—however, technology begins to take shape as the cause of desire.

The *objet petit a* must be immanent to the object of desire, an “x-factor” of sorts. Žižek describes it as “that unfathomable ‘something’ that makes an ordinary object sublime.”³⁰ Technology is certainly intrinsic to the *electric* guitar and any ideal timbre it might

create. The instrument relies on technology to amplify it and model its tone; technology is the reason for the instrument's existence as such. In the line of knobs on guitars and their amplifiers, the guitarist attempts to dial in sublimity.

In addition to being anamorphic and intrinsic to the object, the *objet petit a*, in fueling the drive towards the object, also serves as what Žižek terms, "the formal frame which confers consistency upon our desire."³¹ In the ideology of tone, technology delivers that formal consistency. Rarely, for example, do amplifiers possess, in addition to "volume," anything less than the four primary control knobs: gain, treble, bass, and mid. Likewise, guitar players often frame the tone of an instrument by the device that transmits the signal from the instrument to the amp, the "pick-up" (e.g. they situate the guitar through the tonal difference of what is termed a "single-coil" as opposed to a "humbucker"). Just as technology holds together the ideological fields of identity and music, it also frames the process of desire within those given fields.

To *only* approach an object of study as if it were a mass of puzzle pieces, which when organized in such and such a way resembles the very theoretical grounds on which it was approached, is not enough. To do this would undermine not only all critical intent, but also the possibility of achieving that which the critical intent holds as its goal. Any critical theory—of music or otherwise—must necessarily be concerned both with the theory, and praxis, of human emancipation.³² Certainly, under the gaze of Žižekian-Lacanian psychoanalysis and ideology critique, the constituent elements of the electric guitar's ideological field come together like puzzle pieces, uncoerced. Revealing that this is case, however, has stronger implications for not only music and technology, but also for the society in which they are both situated as well.

The general consensus is that technology's import amounts to how it is used. As it relates to musicology, Greene explains the view in connection with Appadurai's perspective on society and imagination. He states:

This is a study in "imagination as social practice," in which technology-facilitated imagining is analyzed not only as an escapist vehicle of class domination, or the coalescing of non-face-to-face communities like nations, or a strategy of creative resistance, but also as a general, everyday practice, in which... a person continuously constructs and reconstructs the self in an ever-changing plurality of social worlds.³³

Certainly, in a social situation as dynamic as the present, people often do make use of technology in whatever way they see fit. However, as the position and analysis of this paper indicates, technology might not always be merely an object of complacency and appropriation. To think so would be to approach society statically—as if nothing ever changes. Who, after all, would doubt that global society in the 21st century is significantly more complicated?

The present relationship between society and technology transcends any position of determinism, voluntarism, or Luddism, as what we find in the unique musical technoculture of the electric guitarist—with its ideology of tone—suggests. In other words, the process of desire is a dynamic one—it only changes and gains moment once set into motion. If technology is only what we make of it that does not mean that it will always be only what we make of it. Instead, technology often does making. As the powerful constellation of music, technology, and identity—when approached awry—gives evidence to the fact that sometimes something is masked by the appearance of nothing.

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Endnotes

- 1 Evans notes how “this term has sometimes been translated into English as ‘object (little) a’ but that Lacan insisted that it should remain untranslated.” Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996). 124.
- 2 See Slavoj Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (but were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, New ed. (London: Verso, 2010).
- 3 See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Race and American culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 4 See Jan Jagodzinski, *Music in Youth Culture: a Lacanian Approach*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 5 Lars Iyer, “Speaking the Real: Richard Middleton’s *Voicing the Popular*,” *Radical Musicology* 3(2008), <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>, para. 11.
- 6 Bert Olivier, “Lacan and Critical Musicology / Lacan i Kritička Muzikologija,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 1 (2005): 136. See also Martina Viljoen, “Questions of Musical Meaning: An Ideology-Critical Approach / Problemi Glazbenog Značenja: Ideološko-Kritički Pristup,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 35, no. 1 (2004).
- 7 K. Stockholder, “Lacan versus Freud: Subverting the Enlightenment,” *American Imago* 55, no. 3 (1998): 381.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004). 95.
- 11 John Zuern, “Lacan: The Mirror Stage,” University of Hawaii, <http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticallink/lacan/guide6>, para. 25.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Stockholder, “Lacan versus Freud: Subverting the Enlightenment,” 325.
- 14 Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: the Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). 36.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 37.
- 17 Leslie C. Gay, Jr., “Acting up, Talking Tech: New York Rock Musicians and Their Metaphors of Technology,” *Ethnomusicology* 42, no. 1 (1998): 86.
- 18 Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: the Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience*.
- 19 Nick Bromell, “Review: Music, Experience, and History,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2001): 169.
- 20 Kirby Dick et al., *Derrida*, (New York: Zeitgeist Films : Jane Doe Films, 2002).
- 21 Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007). 47, 66-67, and 77.
- 22 Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London; New York: Verso, 1997). 87-129. – As cited in Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music*: 236-37.
- 23 Paul Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press : University Press of New England, 1997). 191.
- 24 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). 128.

25 A Wah-wah pedal is an effect that allows the guitarist to control the frequency of his guitar and effectively manipulate a spectral glide from the instrument. The effect is similar to that of a trumpeter's use of the Harmon-mute.

26 Žizek, *How to Read Lacan*: 77.

27 Slavoj Žizek, *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991). 5.

28 Žizek, *How to Read Lacan*: 77.

29 Ibid., 68-69.

30 Ibid., 66.

31 Žizek, *The Plague of Fantasies*: 39.

32 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1982).

33 Paul D. Greene, "Mixed Messages: Unsettled Cosmopolitanisms in Nepali Pop," in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures*, ed. Paul D. Greene and Thomas Porcello (Middletown, Connecticut Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 201. See also Arjun Appadurai, "Here and Now," in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

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