The Residents: Musical Deconstruction of Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT: The music of The Residents is discussed as a "deconstruction" (Derrida) of the discourse (Adorno) of popular musical culture. Their "repertoire" ranges from cowboy music to Gershwin to Elvis to The Beatles, and includes genres such as the Hi Parade and the carnival sideshow. Avoiding personal "fame," The Residents have focused attention on their work, relying on audio technology from the tape-recorder to samplers to interactive multi-media.

Originally hailing from Louisiana, The Residents emerged in the early 1970s from the psychedelic counter-culture centered in San Francisco. Biographical details are sketchy (c.f. Shirley 1993, Willie 1993), and intentionally so, according to the "theory of obscurity" which has governed the group's public persona (Ham 1994). In accordance with the musical-cultural deconstruction for which The Residents have become notorious, their personal stories have been contextualized in order to focus attention on their work. As The Simpsons' creator Matt Groening states, "There is no true story of The Residents... Part of what The Residents are about is their camouflage, and any understanding of them must take into account both their organized sounds and their organized silence" (Groening 1980). Our interest here is to explore the ways, conceptual as well as technical, in which The Residents have engaged in creative readings of popular musical culture, and to try to outline a context for the critical appreciation of their work. And, given the intimate relationship The Residents have always maintained with audio technology, this study should be of interest to computer-musicians working with similar means, who find themselves pondering the socio-cultural context within which they operate.

Of all the bands born in the hallucinatory and creative environment of the late 1960s bay-area scene to have achieved any longevity (e.g. The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Starship), The Residents are clearly the most experimental and "ecentric" (Shirley 1993). One reason for this may be the "fact" that they are not trained musicians, and perhaps because of that were drawn to the tape-recorder (and related technologies) as their main compositional tool (Willie 1993). In addition, performance held little interest for them, an orientation which certainly placed them outside the standard image of a rock band. However, this also freed them from any compulsion to define their creative roles in terms of particular instruments (e.g. lead guitarist, drummer) and on-stage personas. This is not to say that The Residents have not been interested in earning a living from their creative work, and indeed, following the lead of Frank Zappa, have, through their management and recording companies, Cryptic Corporation and Ralph Records, rigorously controlled the marketing and dissemination of their output (a feat which in itself poses a challenging critique to the ever-increasing corporate control of the music industry).

In terms of musical culture, the creative/critical gaze of The Residents has swept wide and far. Before going into the details of their "repertoire" however, it will be useful to outline some of the concepts relevant to a critical understanding of their work. In the first place, The Residents have applied the techniques of what would best be called "deconstruction" (after Derrida 1982) to the discourse of popular music, particularly in reaction to what Adorno terms the "standardization" of popular music.

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(Adorno 1941). According to Derrida, deconstruction works to expose the problematic nature of all discourses. In the field of music, concepts such as "truth," "unity," and "objectivity" are reduced to playful effects. The text explores the deconstruction of stereotypes in music, such as "Pseudo-individuation," which refers to the disorganization of sound through the control of means of production and distribution. Adorno traces this conditioning of music toward the earlest childhood musical experiences and molds nursery rhymes, Sunday school hymns, folk songs, etc. 

The Residents, by remaining independent and "obscurant," have managed to avoid the crushing oppressiveness of commercial standardization and conformity. Tris has allowed them to continue to aim their artistic guns where they please, and to 'do the same thing to adapt the available technological tools to their own creative purposes. Mast Groening is a disc jockey, "organized sound," holds the key to the compositional orientation of The Residents. In contrast to Varèse, Cage, or "acoustic" composers, sonic materials provided in the Residents organize comes, for the most part, from the domain of popular music. However, their utilization of a wide range of sound sources and scrupulous attention to timbre, along with their reliance on techniques such as looping, layering, transposition, juxtaposition, fragmentation, etc., make their work suitable to be classified, at least in terms of sonic structure and on the basis of analytical technique, developed specifically for electroacoustic music (Roy 1995).

Given that the tape-recorder, until the advent of newer technologies, was the primary focus of The Residents work, beginning with mono and stereo machines, and eventually working up to 8-track and 16-track recording, it should be no surprise that fragments of existing recordings were "plundered" (Cutter 1994), and incorporated into their work. The most radical example of this approach is found in "Beyond the Valley of a Day in the Life," released as a single in 1971. This piece consists entirely of material taken from Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band by the Beatles. A number of tape-loops of varying lengths are layered up to as many as five at a time. Each loop is carefully constructed to contrast the others by means of timbral definition (instrumentation), rhythm, register and length, and then mixed by judicious use of stereo placement, dynamic balance and reverberation. The overall structure is articulated through reference to the distinctive rising orchestral glissando and sustained chord from "A Day in the Life," creating a loose AABA form. The Residents allow the original musical elements to speak for themselves without imposing any obvious judgment, but there is certainly an element of "subversive parody" (Hatchet 1985) implicit in their reworking of this material using classical studio techniques (which The Beatles themselves made extensive use of) and following a stereotyped formal outline.

In their third album, The Third Reich 'N Roll (1975), The Residents adopt a different approach for their deconstructive readings of a number of 1960s pop songs: "an attempt to treat Top 40 rock and roll ... as if it were avant-garde material as performed by early '60s progressive German bands" (Shirley 46). The original song was laid down, after which various layers of material were superimposed on top so that eventually, nothing of the original recording remained. In certain cases, material for different numbers are combined together, such as in the final track, where the main phrase from "In-a-Gadda-da-

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"Vida" is gradually transformed into a phrase from "Hey Jude," which then becomes a phrase from "Sympathy for the Devil." Simultaneous layers of these "phrase loops" are presented in different keys, and occasionally at different speeds. These reworkings are not covers—rather, they are readings, in which fragments of melodic phrases, rhythmic figures, textures and vocals are extracted and combined with original material and recorded sounds (helicopters, cars, gunfire) to produce a dense, complex work that owes as much to Stockhausen as to the group Faust. The Residents' critical stance, which seeks to explode the neat packaging of the pop songs, is forcefully underlined by the cover graphics, which "depict Dick Clark dressed as a Nazi, clutching a tentalizing carrot. He dangles the carrot before the youth of America, just as Snuffy Smith had ... before the nose of Barney Google's horse while leading him to the glue factory" (Wilie, 58).

In 1983, The Residents conceived of the American Composers Project, in which they would present the work of twenty influential musicians two-by-two (for the LP format). They completed two of the ten albums before digital technology and the CD format (along with copyright problems) caused them to re-evaluate their plans. George and James (Gershwin and Brown) was completed in 1984, and Stars and Hank Forever (Sousa and Williams) in 1986. The other "subjects" were to include Captain Beefheart, Bob Dylan, Charles Ives, Stan Kenton, Henry Mancini, Harry Nilsson, Harry Partch, Sun Ra and Smokey Robinson (Shirley, 121). The Residents' version of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" is a rhapsodic deconstruction of the original, replacing the iconic clarinet glissando with the wail of a siren, paring away the jazzy chromaticism of the harmonies, collapsing the formal structure, magnifying melodic fragments (through minimalist repetition), erasing all traces of instrumental virtuosity, incorporating industrial and other sounds into the texture. The annihilation of the context within which all of the elements of the original piece fit together to create an integrated work is truly disconcerting, raising questions about the social conventions within which Gershwin produced and presented his music. The Sousa treatment sets the music in the context of a Fourth of July picnic, but destroys the jubilation of the live brass band by substituting cold, electronic textures. Similarly, the "hot" performance of James Brown's Live at the Apollo is crudely emulated in the studio, replete with fake applause tracks. The Hank Williams' "Kaw-Liga" arrangement achieved some notoriety in that the drum track was lifted from "Billie Jean" by Michael Jackson.

The American Composers Project was discontinued, but The Residents did go on to complete some related projects. CUBE E: The History of American Music in 3 E/Z Pieces (1989) comprised three works dealing with the sources of modern American culture: Buckaroo Blues (frontier music from 1850 to 1950), Black Barry (black music, from voodoo and blues to jazz and soul), and The Baby King (the life and death of Elvis Presley). By this time, The Residents had outfitted themselves with a fully digital, MIDI-based studio (they had obtained one of the first Emulator prototypes in 1981, and used it on The Tunes of Two Cities from 1982). The sound quality of the music improved a great deal, enabling The Residents to infiltrate the territory of the "slick product" (The Commercial Album was released in 1980, but The King and Eye (1989) comes closer than ever before to being a "correct" album, although, ironically, the cleanliness of the sound serves to focus attention on the sinister interpretations of Elvis's vocals). It is perhaps fitting that, to celebrate their 20th anniversary, The Residents would release Our Finest Flowers (1992), a work that deconstructs their own catalogue. Using the surgically-precise tools of the day, they dissected material from their previous albums and then recombined everything to create new pieces. Another layer in this self-deconstruction project is the intervention of technology, where the sometimes deliberately crude sound quality of the original material is digitally "doctored" to come out "cleaner than clean."
Perhaps the most cogent critique of technology (from a band that has embraced technological innovation) can be found in the CD-ROM for Freak Show (CD - 1991, CD-ROM - 1993). The consumer is voyeuristically drawn into a world of "freaks," a grotesque carnival both repulsive and fascinating. According to Bakhtin, this kind of duality indicates the need for an outlet from oppression (cultural as well as social), and the focus on common bodily realities (however distorted) acts to remove the distinctions between observer and observed (Bakhtin 1968). "Deconstructive" multi-media technology blurs many conceptual and even social boundaries, but at the same time, the framework, the environment, is always defined by the producer, not the user. The Residents highlight this situation by focusing on a historical genre, the circus "side-show," placing it in an updated cyberpace context, where isolated individuals are free (having paid the price of admission) to wander, anonymously looking in on whatever grabs their fancy (this line of cultural criticism is carried on in their latest CD-ROM release, Bad Day on the Midway).

The Residents are the epitome of deconstruction applied to music and popular culture. Their work is always ironic, but their engagement with the subject-matter goes far beyond a negatively critical stance, combining historical, musical and critical analysis with artistic creativity, using whatever tools (conceptual and technological) are available. They have faced (and battled) up to the commercial pressures of the music industry, working within it in order to earn enough to carry on, but always maintaining a critical and existential distance from it. Their longevity and productivity speaks for itself, and no doubt provides inspiration for aspiring deconstructionists.

REFERENCES


