realities. As we engage with her vocalisations, and tackle the interpretation of that which defies meaning, is it possible that we, too, are transformed? In this way, Yoko Ono’s rock and roll revolution can only gain momentum from this point onward.

Chapter 11
From Countercultures to Suburban Cultures:
Frank Zappa after 1968
Benjamin Halligan

Suburbia would prove to be the terminus of Frank Zappa’s satirical project. In the final analysis, the ringmaster of freaks, a mother to the North American counterculture and champion of outsiders would find himself outnumbered and outmanoeuvred by the rising tide of ‘plastic people’. The nature and efficacy of Zappa’s last formal political stand at this juncture is the concern of this chapter. It is the precise social and political moment of this juncture – as the 1970s turned into the 1980s, and the dawn of the Reagan era, perceived as the final rousing of ‘the long 1960s’ – that lends a context to Zappa’s seemingly reactionary sentiments, a framing which goes some way to recover Zappa’s work from its detractors.

Those detractors typically admit to bafflement and frustration at Zappa’s infantile and puerile preoccupations of these years. Despite the ingenuity and forensic textual analysis of those who would seek to defend Zappa against the serious charges arising from his recordings at this time (homophobia, racism, violent misogyny, red bating), principally associated – in print, at least – with Watson and Leslie (2005), Zappa’s cultural significance seems to have waned rapidly since his death. In his study of the music of 1980, for example, Clover quickly passes over Zappa although his legacy is noted as central to Clover’s concerns of the intermeshing of music, social upheaval and formal political change (… despite his role as unofficial attaché to Václav Havel’s government, and despite the memorial statue of Zappa to be found in Vilnius, Lithuania ‘…’ (2009: 6–7)), Zappa’s presence in the music scene of 1989 is considered marginal from Clover’s 20-year perspective. At best, Zappa is indicative of earlier paradigms of music and change; at worse (and in a moment of the widespread infiltration and subversion of the mainstream: the second summer of love and early manifestations of grunge), irrelevant.

Indeed, at this rough point in Zappa’s own career, after a run of albums that increasingly privileged instrumental music over satirical social content (a transition apparent in the Synclavier use of Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention from 1985 and with the full shift to ‘serious’ and Zappa-executed compositions marked by Jazz from Hell of 1986), and with the data-dump-like release of a dozen or so official live double albums between 1988 and 1992, Zappa would seem to have abandoned any claim to contemporary and popular relevancy. The instrumental and compositional, of confounding complexity, with increasingly
difficult challenges to live performance and appreciation, would preoccupy his remaining years, culminating in the collaboration with the Ensemble Modern and the density and five-form abstraction of what is typically held to be Zappa's farewell symphony: the composition 'N-Lite' on the posthumous Civilization Phase III (1995). After 1989, when Zappa had mostly abandoned touring and even guitar playing, satirical music was an exclusively archival concern, and best framed via hours of live recordings. Frank Zappa, as he had been known, was ever-more historical in this tendency: to paraphrase one live release, the question seems to have been posed, and answered in the affirmative: did humour belong to music?

And yet Zappa, as a contemporary composer, remained a difficult figure: wittily obtuse, avant-garde to the point of delivering 'impossible' scores, difficult to take seriously by the Conservatoire (responses that Zappa certainly cultivated and actively courted), and tedious and humourless for those who knew the Zappa of old. What change had speeded this process, so that the figure of Zappa as a countercultural gadfly, ferocious guitarist, scourge of Republicans, and fearless band leader, had faded into the background by the late 1980s?

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it was in Zappa's engagement with the idea of suburbia that his satire began to founder and his political positions grew increasingly disorientated, and that this ultimately prompted Zappa's retreat from contemporary concerns in favour of a renewal of his lifelong objective to be taken seriously as a composer. However, an engagement with the idea of suburban had been present throughout Zappa's career, and so connected the countercultural years to those of the onset of Reaganism. A number of Zappa's 'lesser' and often more problematic recordings evidence this connection, and so track a key aspect in the evolution of Reaganism and neoliberalism: the routing or dissipation of any latent countercultural sensibilities.

1968 and the Suburbs

Initially the homogenising mores, ambience and routines of suburbia were a target for the counterculture: that horizon of modest expectation for compliant, compliant and uncomplaining members of the workforce. The quiet bêton and despair beyond the manicured lawns, the essential hypocrisy of the moralism of these mostly white, ex-urban middle classes, their seeming indifference to those outside or back home, those lacking financial security, and a fear of those who would erode financial and civil security, represented the order to be unexplored. Timothy Leary's cry of 'tune in, turn on, drop out' was the invite to break free from this gravitation pull, and gain a subjectivity that would have been understood to be both the antithesis, and the breaking, of the suburban fate that awaited.


2 For the integration, or partial integration, of communal living and open relationships into bourgeoisie society, see Roberts' field reports of commune life (1971). For a perspective from the other end of the decade, concerning post-Stonehill queer subcultures that emerged...
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eaving and early disco cultures, and Second Wave feminist separatism) and to BDSM cultural ghettos. Although much of this continuum revolved around — especially in Zappa's reading — a simple matter of fucking, and in this simple matter of fucking came the re-imagination of a Great Society, as comparable to Lyndon B. Johnson's. Marcus, writing in 1969, could identify the coming sensibility of a... negation of the entire Establishment, its morality, culture, affirmation of the right to build a society in which the abolition of poverty and toll terminates in a universe where the sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful become forms of existence..." (1973: 52). This is the attempted or assumed development of the long 1960s, from the counterculture and through the liberated cultures of the 1970s. But in the matter of fucking, or as reduced to the matter of fucking, the revolutionary impetus is also curtailed: sexual freedom is not anti-imperialism, libertarianism is not intrinsically pacifist, brotherly love is not necessarily socialist.

The battle for the maintenance of such freedoms after 1968 was not so much to be won in the urban centres — traditionally in advance when it comes to shocking morals and mores, and traditionally the point of origin of new forms of artistic expression, and their more liberated subjectivities — but in the suburbs. The outward spread of freedoms, decontextualised and dilated, corroded and atomised, in the guise of widened consumer and lifestyle choices, resonated deepest in the fertile grounds of the suburbs.1 It is in this naturally conservative milieu — safely away from the new polarities of city existence in its asset-stripping phase of de-industrialisation — that change can be fully accepted and entrenched. The suburbs become the very vector for the 'normalisation' of alternatives and their embedding, and the location where time is available — away from the bustling and distractions of the city centre, and towards the stretches of commuter tedious so much in need of enlivening. Such an assumption lives on in the urban myth, and pornographic genre tropes, that equate wife-swapping with wealthy but dull suburban areas. Suburban culture requires enticements — the dividends of emancipation — to ease the influx of the upwardly mobile from the city centres. So the suburbs become the locus of the very institutionalisation of the freedoms of the late 1960s.

If the suburbs, suburban life and suburban cultures became Zappa's primary concern during the years of Reagan's ascent, culminating at the point of Reagan's coming to office, it is firstly because in Zappa's conceptualisation of the suburbs is the hauntology of the dreams of 1968 in North America, and of freaking out, difference, opposition, outsiderism and dissonance. Secondly, it is because the West Coast suburbs, almost uniquely, represent future shock. Southern California,

Zappa's locale, increasingly also became his area of scrutiny, and its people his subject matter. Los Angeles, the largest Californian city, has traditionally functioned as a vision of the near or coming technocratic future for the West, in terms of architecture, technology and new paradigms of labour and leisure — with Hollywood cast as a propaganda machine in this respect. Hard and Negri propose the region, and nearby Silicon Valley, as the most advanced sector of the seeming appearance of an imperial 'new Rome': after 'Washington (the bomb), New York (money) [comes] Los Angeles (eternity)', where ether is 'communicative' — the immaterial essence of the virtual (2001: 347, 360).

London and Los Angeles

The suburbs of the West: metroland, commute-city, the dormitory village, bedroom suburbs, edgeland, the 'edge city', 'the Valley', the stockbroker belt, the hinterland, going 'upstate', retiring to — an area of a negative definition whose denizens, suburbanites, are parochial and home-making rather than, as with the city-dweller, masters of their own location. Such geographic and social marginalisation, and a recalcitrant feminisation of a society increasingly associated with suburban home- and family-making (both the female hand in the making of the home, and the permanent re-location of the female to the home, as a housewife and mother, away from the city-centric professions and opportunities) are not typically considered to be matters for celebration, or naturally lending themselves to the concerns of popular culture. The contributors to Pistons of Suburbia (Silverstone 1997) tend to also exit the sensibilities of a suburban culture in the changes in kitchen designs, lowbrow television comedies, gardening trends and run-of-the-mill advertising, and even then find the articulation of a deep ambiguity as to their suburban settings and locales.

A useful exception to this trend is found in Morrissey's work in the mid-late-1990s — that is, in journalistic opinion, at the point of his flourishing at what was perceived to be a low-point in a formerly distinguished career. Morrissey's London suburbs are conceptualised in a way that is diametrically opposed to Zappa's LA suburbs although, crucially, both engage in a sexualisation of suburban existence. The difference is apparent in the way in which Morrissey's suburban music is elegiac, finding in the suburbs the ruins of the near-past, while Zappa's conception is prophetic, seeing in the suburbs a vision of the near future.

The sexualisation of suburban existence, for Morrissey, becomes an organising principle for both his imagination of suburbia and his entree to suburban subjectivities. In suburban sex is the entropy of former aspirations for out, and this explains the persistence of drab, stabby suburban life, and the puzzling immaterialisation of those characters encountered who seem too big and restless for these modest corners of the world. The promise of adventure is mapped onto, and crystallised in, the shadowy nature of suburban sexuality. And that adventure is invariably illicit: taboo-breaking, class barrier-breaching or just straightforwardly illegal. In the forgotten

along similarly open lines, see Edmund White's States of Desire: Travels in Gay America (1986). For a discussion on commons and the counterculture see Miller (2002: 327-33).

1. Historians of suburbia find a strong correlation between isolation and the erosion of communities, and new housing sprawl — particularly at this time. See, for example, Putnam (2000: 204 and ff.). For Jackson, the balance that comes to favour the suburban over the metropolis is apparent in the phenomena of the 'center-less city' as evolved in, or by, California, see (Jackson 1985: 265 and ff.).
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hinterlands of suburbia – the abandoned futures of yesteryear – social and civic certainties have weakened to the point that diversion and experience and movement are vertical (upward and downward mobility, and sexual conquest) rather than horizontal (sticking to your own class and wage bracket: an organizing principle in the planning and political economies of suburban sprawl). For Soulsearch Grammar (1995) and Maladjusted (1997) Morrissey left his native Manchester for the London suburbs – specifically those parts of Essex, such as Ilford, that remain part of the Greater London conurbation. Morrissey also shifted his focus of observation, from outsider to chronicler, or assessor, of the perspective of a cast of familiar suburban stereotypes rather than outsiders: a variety of proletarian wide-boys, blissfully unaware of their marginality, all of whom Morrissey seems to sexualize.

For 'Maladjusted', where Morrissey’s declaratory singing veers from spiteful to gory as he adopts the perspective of ‘semi-perilous lives’, the suburbs are formally named. The line of flight is ‘around / SW6’ and ‘the Fulham Road lights’ (an agreeable enclave of South West London) and ‘a Stevenage overspill’ (a London commuter town). Our unremarkable calibrey, peering at the ‘lights in the windows / of all safe and stable homes’, may turn in to those homes and that suburban realm, but only ever temporarily. The song plays with an ‘us and them’ perspective, dividing those fascinated with the suburbs, but whose critical distance means they can never be truly suburban, from those who dwell in these dreary suburbs and get by as best they can (via, in this case, the use of calibrey against the deadening hand of suburban and/or family existence). There is a sense that even the ‘maladjusted’ (both client and calibrey) will find a function, and welcome, of sorts, and each other, in suburbia. What liberations occur do so privately and under a cloak of anonymity.

Yet such going-ons represent an underground, or psychogeography, of sexual difference, intermingling with the white, working-class cultures that remained (despite, and even in the teeth of, ‘Conservative rule’), precarious and dangerous. These suburban stretches are a refuge or haven: the place where forgetting can occur. Signs of life, for Morrissey, signal an acquaintance to and accommodation of daily defeat.

Zappa's suburban sexuality is not furtive or discrete, and not class-ridden, since – only a decade after the radical sexual agendas of the Summer of Love – sex itself has been edged into commercial domains. What is underground for Morrissey has become overtly and omnipresent for Zappa, and the results are a matter for ridicule. Sex has been feminised for Zappa – in the senses of becoming the preoccupation or pastime of the sexually aggressive female, ‘pace’ feminism, and of the ‘femininity’ of the character of the passive male homosexual, receiver rather than giver, who now looms large. Rounding on sexuality in this way, with sex as the optic through which suburban cultures are presented, examined and derided, inevitably opened up common ground between Zappa and reactionary, moralistic elements then ascendant in the public and political spheres. 4 Zappa’s concern is not so much diagnosing mass sexual dysfunctionality (in the manner of Wilhelm Reich’s writing of the 1930s) as spinning a Chaucerian picaresque, drawing on specific case studies of sexual bad practice. Zappa’s encounter with the suburbs is less passive than Morrissey’s, and not at all celebratory. Zappa’s suburbs remain cast as the locale of Pyrrhic victories rather than a defeat: the freedoms of 1968, as filtered through this strata, coloured by it, and giving rise to modes of life that would have been perceived, at the time of 'We'll Only In It for the Money' (1968), as the minority preserve of pop stars, hippies and freaks. So Zappa, whose relationship with 1968 was never as straightforward as the iconic use of his image at that time would have suggested, came to strike an ambiguous, even contradictory relationship with suburban cultures. They become a constant theme in Zappa’s music from the mid-1970s onwards – gaining momentum especially (and overtaking concerns more centred on the mythology of the rock band on the road) at the point of the soundtrack to the suburbs engulfing the pop charts: the second wave of commercial (rather than underground and gay nightclub-orientated) disco.

The 1976 album Zoot Allures concludes with the track 'Disco Boy', as if in response to Zappa’s update of Dylan’s ‘Twenty years of schoolin’ / And they put you on the dayshift’ (of ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’): an update articulated in the opening track, 'Wind Up Workin' in a Gas Station'. The inexorable 9-to-5 fate of the protagonist is clear: 'your education won't help you ... if you're gonna wind up working in a gas station'. As with the protagonist of Saturday Night Fever (dir. John Badham, 1977), the worker’s compensation comes in escapist weekends away from suburbia and in city centre discs. 'Disco Boy' is typical of a foundational concern of Zappa’s, the commercialisation of countercultures, but beyond this, however, little coherent is said. The disco boy is derided for his effeminacy (referred to as ‘honey’) and yet his care over his appearance, the narrator seems to begrudgingly concede, leads to the promise of success with a woman he meets on the dance floor – albeit one who then elopes with the disco boy’s friend. The very Zappesque punchline is that the disco boy’s dance floor dexterity is now needed for compensatory, masturbatory ends, once he has returned home alone. Auto-repairs or autoeroticism – the choice seems ultimately only in respect of what

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4 The argument could be made – although it is beyond the scope of this chapter – that Zappa’s attempt to block any such communality and disavow such company resulted in the self-consciously outré-exhibitionist strain in his work.
The film Baby Sitters records Zappa’s band and entourage of the Sheik Yerbuts period: the bunker mentality that Gray would rail against is apparent in the film’s claustrophobic small studios, cramped hackstage areas, airless audition rooms, the relatively tight space in which the band performs live, and with the indistinct audience area mostly a haze of bluish light. The effect, across the film’s two-and-three-quarter-hours running time, is stifling. But in its final minutes—in a sequence positioned after the closing credits—Zappa is seen emerging from the concert venue, is walked through a scrun of fans, and whimsical off in his car. It is a startlingly sudden ethnographic lurch into the world outside. Sartorially, the fans themselves can be identified precisely: children of ’68, still living the counterculture, albeit confined to evenings and weekends, since their smart-casual clothes and hair (and uniform whiteness) speak of a creeping accommodation of professional life now that they are in their thirties. The glasses, and the air of the educated comfortably slumming it, suggests positions in the ascendant information technology industries, university research and tertiary-sector management. These are not the deracinated wasters of the mid-West who crowd the frame for Sex Pistols gigs in D.O.A. (dir. Lech Kowalski, 1980) or the appealing, healthy masses who pack the discotheques of Thank God It’s Friday (dir. Robert Klane, 1978). Rather, they are those whose imminent move to suburbia would mark the point at which they made their peace with the world—a truce dramatised in the suburban lifestyles and creative professions as awaiting this generation in the television series thirtysomething (ABC, 1987–91). This motley collection of weekend freaks, waiting to high five Zappa, were perhaps his last real live audience. And their innate, generational preference for difference would be so thoroughly marginalised by Reagan’s coming to office that only one option would present itself at this crucial juncture: to settle down, come into their inheritance and so renounce earlier ways. Such youth excesses would be denoted to nostalgia and fetishism—for one protagonist of thirtysomething, an advertising executive, in his treasured collection of Haig-Ashbury posters.

Zappology and Reagunomics

Zappa’s live popularity in the US began to wane in the late 1970s. Zappa claimed his initial fans had simply grown out of the more youthful pastime of the live concert (‘... now that they have wives, kids, mortgages, day jobs ...’; quoted in Miles 2004: 277) and so geared his music to a younger audience, while Miles reasons that the shift occurs in respect to Zappa’s falling out of touch with the younger audience, resulting in his touring more extensively outside the US (2004: 281). But looking to age disparities risks the danger of overlooking a socio-political change, and one that increasingly marginalised anti-establishment sensibilities.

As well as being an unspeakably patriarchal, authoritarian bully, and essentially friendless and cold, Zappa is, for Gray, ‘... a man who spent most of his life locked away in a basement, inside a semi-fortified house ...’ (1994: 238). This extraordinary outburst in the final pages of a relatively placid biography seeks to effectively undermine the high moral ground from which Zappa, for Gray, evidently found himself free to damn the wretched he encounters (see ibid.: 236–9).

In the absence of any demographic data, the assumption that Zappa’s sexual crudity played and appealed to blue-collar workers, found in much critical writing on Zappa, seems like straight class prejudice.

And indeed Zappa here is a celebrity, kept apart from the crowds, rather than the ringmaster or MC figure of the burgeoning countercultural scene of his appearance in Modula Hollywood (dir. Robert Carl Cohen, 1967), or for Houdini (dir. Bob Rafelson, 1968) in which he commutes upon the scene in passing, rather than being seen as an A-list survivor, or product, or even purveyor of products, of that scene.
Despite Zappa's then focus on the suburban locale of this coming entrenchment, and the counterattack found in his work, his own marginalisation can be accounted for by this sea change too. The dissolution of emancipatory impulses of the 1960s, and the lack of empathy for dissident cultural projects of the 1970s (which would account for Zappa's animosity to disco, wariness of punk and lack of engagement with rap and hip-hop), would leave his oppositional politics high and dry and his confrontational, antagonistic tendencies with an ever-diminishing audience. Zappa would retreat, as Gray notes, to his basement.

Sheik Yerbouti, which is a last hurrah in terms of this timeline, was released in March 1979. The 10 subsequent sides of vinyl that constitute Zappa's journey through the suburbs coincide with Reagan's successful presidential campaign and ascent to office, in January 1981: the Joe's Garage albums were released September-November 1979 and You Are What You Is in September 1981. In these predominantly studio albums, the coming America – Reaganesque, embourgeoisified, materialist, Puritanical (and its flipside: discourses of identity politics, feminism and gay rights in particular, as engendering new underground cultures of sexual emancipation) – is examined almost entirely in sexual terms.

Suburban Accommodations

Sheik Yerbouti initially dwells on the detritus of suburban existence, via a number of concerns, only to transcend them in its final 'movement'. The first of the album's four sides begins with a track that would reduce the romanticism and intimacy of Peter Frampton's popular hit 'I'm in You' and (silly) the innocence of doo-wop, which the song fondly parodies) to the simple boast and promise of repeated intercourse, made via mock-slavey intonation, and with the proviso that the unpleasant experience of previous intercourse will not waylay or delay the coming intercourse ('I Have Been in You'). 'Flakes' has been taken as an attack on the sloth and criminal nature of union-protected blue-collar workers in a way that shares a sensibility with the pro-Reagan press of the late 1970s, and includes a parody-cameo by the former poet of the 1960s proletariat: Bob Dylan. 'Broken Hearts Are for Assholes' seems to chart an odyssey through underground gay clubs, with the 'lonely guy' protagonist reduced to a literal 'asshole' for a series of anonymous sexual encounters. However, such sexual practices then seem to be imported back into heterosexual relations, with a female now promised anal sex and fist-ing. In the later track 'Bobby Brown (Goes Down)', which also parodies doo-wop, feminist aggression and the confusion arising from gender-bending sends an all-American-boy on a similar gay odyssey of S&M and wet sex. The flatness of the lyrical imagination (the one humorous lyrical


Mudhurst notes the particularity of homosexuality as a threat to the perceived calm of suburban life: the difference within the vistas of sameness and the ending of the conventional nuclear family unit – for whom the suburbs exist, (1997: 266). In this respect, Zappa's conceptualisation of the suburbs (and this analysis posits all these albums under discussion as 'concept albums') reproduces the stereotypical grunt of what excessive things might be going on 'out there' – that is, in the environments of the everyman.

The technique of splicing elements of live recordings into (in absolute atemporal or polyrhythmic counterpoint) onto studio recordings. Xenochrony, in dissolving the studio/live dichotomy, results in music that can be seen as a total narrative (spontaneous/planned, contemporary/archived, found/recreated) of musical creation.

Such collectivity is particularly apparent in the 1978 quadrachronic mix of 'Wild Love' with its multiple voices separated out into a call-and-response ontario, released in 2004 on the album QuaUDIOPhilia.

In the 'stage direction' supplied with the album lyrics, Zappa's vision of the future – which, he stated, was inspired by the Iranian Revolution – is one in which everyone collects welfare payments and spends the money on the repair of broken consumer goods (in this respect, the song shares a concern with 'Flakes').
is precise about the locations and parochial locale in the stage directions: 'a boring old garage in a residential area' ('Joe's Garage'), '[at] the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) party with crepe paper streamers' ('Catholic Girls'), '[black]stage at the local Armoory' ('Crew Shit') and The Brasserie nightclub in Miami for 'The Wet T-Shirt Contest'. This track, in particular, paints a depressingly mundane vision of suburban sexuality – of a type that would later be milked for pseudo-amateur softcore pornography (particularly the Girls Gone Wild series), and would lend Hollywood-filmed pornography a characteristic mise en scène (the fitted kitchens and airy living rooms of rented condominiums).

Mary, having abandoned Joe for a life of groupie-dom, is now down on her luck and so enters the wet T-shirt contest for the prize money she needs for the bus fare home. The MC, defrocked priest Buddy Jones, urges on 'the charming Mary from Canoga Park' (in the San Fernando Valley) and teases at both her and the audience (referred to as 'mangoloids squatting on the dance floor' in the stage directions). Jones is voiced by Zappa, and the track is not so different from the straight live recording 'Pastry Rap', from 1981's Travels on the Rear, during which Zappa actually instigates a turner version of such an event – inviting female audience members to throw underwear onto the stage for his inspection, something typical of his live shows at this point.

In Mary's performance comes an expression of the ambiguity of Zappa's take on suburban sexuality – both deriding the cultures of the commercialisation of sexuality, and yet seemingly finding in its practitioners an undeniable spark of humanity. Mary seems to remain blissfully unaware and colludes happily in her sexual exploitation, both here and at the hands of Catholic boys, Father Riley (the former Bobby Jones), the band members and crew of another touring rock group, and seemingly her biological father. As voiced by Dale Bozzio, Mary comes across as feisty and ready to party: an attractiveness that arises from an innocence and naivety that remains intact despite her dire history and situation. The exploitation does not impose on a personality built on a willingness to please, and a lack of awareness of any other option. Even her lack of education ('Where ya from?', 'The bus': the giggling and squealing: 'Here I am': 'I'm dancing!') is winning. And, indeed, Mary triumphs in the competition: a validation of such an engaging persona in the commercial cultures of sexuality.

Certainly these characteristics represents a type and trope typical of pornographic models, and a female persona commonly dissected by feminists (the virgindom dichotomy), but in the context of encroaching and demeaning state control, Mary stands out as – in Shamian terminology – an authentic life-force. The universal of music, theorised by Zappa as the foundational, youthful domain of authentic human expression (be it dancing, doo-wopping, guitar-playing, and so deserving of a rare dose of sentimentalism, in the album's opening track) and thus to be censored, is embodied in the figure of Mary. And, reappearing in a vision later in the narrative (for 'Packard Goose'), she is given the somewhat Ruskin-esque moral of the story to deliver: that music is absolute and transcends the relative values of information, knowledge, wisdom, truth, beauty and love.

FROM COUNTERCULTURES TO SUBURBAN CULTURES

The track that 'The Wet T-Shirt Contest' most closely resembles is another blast of mindless chatter: 'Valley Girl' (voiced by Moon Unit Zappa, on the 1982 album Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch). And this time, despite the exaggerated nature of this pastiche of valley-speak, whatever its sociological pretensions, the traction was such that the song became a radio hit and, establishing an urban type, spawned a minor Valley Girl industry in the early 1980s (which eventually included two feature films).14 Is that the focus of modernity in these two tracks is the valley girl, the question is not over the problematic of the commercial cultures of female liberation – a concern of Third Wave feminism which floundered on the matter of sexual self-performance, as in a wet T-shirt competition (with this 'raunch culture' identified by Levy (2006) as now virtually institutionalised). Nor is it a question of whether valley culture oppresses and retards (in the manner of survival of the stupidest) woman-kind, and degrades participants and observers. Rather, Zappa's presupposition – intentional or otherwise – seems to be that both these tendencies are in operation simultaneously. For this reason, the track – and much of the First Act of Joe's Garage – is caught between celebrating and condemning simultaneously. This ambiguity structures 'The Wet T-Shirt Contest', 'Valley Girl' and even (as the male subjectivity as conversant with such women) 'Titties & Beer' (from 1978's Zappa in New York), since all three contain dialogues between two voices and positions (Buddy Jones and Mary, Moon Unit and nameless male singing voices, the unnamed protagonist and the Devil).

The future shock of these suburbs, as rendered and explored in sexual terms, explains why disco and valley girl cultures should be received by Zappa in such a negative way rather than just acknowledged or dismissed as passing trends. The imminent and place-specific nature of the promised freak explosion of Freak Out! presupposes an authentic culture that was anything but homogenising and mass-produced and was about to break surface. Now, where there were once hungry freaks, Zappa finds valley girls, and where there were once hungry extroverted musicians of the Magic and Mothers of Invention bands, Zappa finds soulless computer muzak. And love in the suburbs, in Lowe's analysis of Zappa especially, is the motor of this homogenisation, this pervasive blandness, new occurring in terms of romance and related feelings (sexual, sentimental, communicative) reduced to commodities and clichés, especially by record companies.

Zappa's cynicism in this regard is one that seeks to look beyond the facade, not so much to find the myths threadbare, but to find an unstable state of continual rupture in homogenising processes. Here Zappa's position becomes unclear. Sociological pretensions aside, where does he actually stand? For or against Mary and the valley girls? If there is no straight answer is because it is a paradoxical and cathartic irrationalism at work in Zappa's love for, and time spent with, the very figures he pities? The net result is the contemporary and typically

14 Despite his strong distaste for the culture of the San Fernando Valley (see, for example, Miles 2004: 305, and Watson 1993: 397), Zappa's career received a considerable boost from its unwritten promotion.
postmodern actuality: irresolution as a state of constant weirdness, as amplified in the suburban margins. It is this position that is closest in Zappa to a critique of political economy, and can be placed in a more general strain in popular American culture, incorporating Matt Groening (who often cites Zappa's work as influential), the 1980s films of John Waters, Tim Burton and David Lynch, the re-imaginations of suburban spaces enacted in the resurgence of skateboarding culture, and the room and building-splitting of artist Gordon Matta-Clark.

... What You Is

Only the constant manifestations of the biological nature of sexuality, its very materialism, and the extended and often dissonant guitar soloing in Zappa's music, seem to cut through this confusion. When love is reduced to mere bodily fluids and parts, and the cast silenced for Zappa's frequently hard-edged guitar-playing (where the plectrum is used in an aggressive manner on the strings, and the phrasing resolutely avoids repetition and familiarity, or even locking into a groove or given time-signature), the prurient framings, and uneasy preoccupations of his narratives, can be momentarily neutralized. Biological essentialism, and an essentialism or primacy of music and musicianship, are easier, and less disorientated, philosophical positions, and so plug the social and ideological lacuna that bewildered Zappa. And such essentialism is translated even into the tutelage of the title of You Are What You Is. Unlike Sheik Yerbouti, You Are What You Is offers very little musical respite. Drenching notes the 'stiffing flatness' of the 'evenly-mixed-paste' of the album (2005: 93, 98 footnote 10). The majority of the album is taken up with near-constant vocals, moving relentlessly, and with jarring speed (and often via segue rather than formal endings and beginnings) as lyrics leap from one song to the next across a succession of suburban targets. The attacks are unapaling and the sexual subject matter unrelentingly joyless: idealistic teenage rebellion meshing with stimulant abuse ('Teenage Wasteland'), infidelity and relationship terminations, with the object of lust seemingly acknowledging the male's abusiveness ('Harder Than Your Husband'), sexual frustration and pleading for intercourse ('Doreen'), 'cosplay' and/or fetishism and oral sex ('Goblin Girl'), and all within less that the first quarter of an hour. Throatier the album returns to oral sex and female stupidity as the defining characteristic of a deceived character ('Charlie's Enormous Mouth'), a bungled suicide attempt by a character craving attention ('Suicide Chump') and the threat of violence to a groupie described as ugly, made once the narrator has tired of receiving oral sex from her ('Jumbo Go Away')..

Lyrics are often functional, repetitive during outers, and scan comfortably within their time signatures. And these character event sketches, even if improvised by Zappa at speed or considered a priori to be secondary to the music, or as the vehicle for singing in character, or enabling riffing off a wide-ranging selection of musical genres, only reinforce a sense of pinched horizons. This wallowing in the enemy camp on the part of Zappa again presupposes a double determinism: both celebrating and condemning. And yet, in the sheer gusto and indestructibility of Zappa's array of emblematic types, the *persona* *dramatis* of the drama of this concept album, there is a vitality that is uncontaminated by conformity. Watson's claim for You Are What You Is, that the album 'remains one of the most ambitious public stands against Reaganism in the 80's' (1993: 395) - sketchy in Watson's appraisal - can be acknowledged in this context. Along with the absence of sonic depth is an absence of the haunting of the dreams (if not the nightmares) of 1968. The contemporary sheen of the album, its speed and flash, its peppery, bubble-gum pop, and even its debt to punk (in its longeurs and repetitions) makes for the music of the new society that the album addresses.

In the album's concluding minutes, the dividend of Zappa's conservatism is apparent. Despite the preceding trawl through the detritus of modern society, an intrinsic, human, anti-Reagan sentiment emerges. 'I Don't Want to Get Drafted' speaks of a defiance (these individuals simply do not want to risk life and limb), as a totality (the lyrics are taken up by a chorus of innumerable voices), underscored by a fear as to where the Reagan years will lead. This sentiment is from one who knows. Zappa recalled the psychic disturbance of militaristic violence of the late 1960s, winding haphazardly and poignantly back into the counterculture, and his own midwifery of the resultant live 'happening'.

I handed them [three Marines in uniform] a big baby doll and said, 'Suppose you just pretend that this is a 'gook baby'. They proceeded to rip and mutilate the doll while we played. It was truly heinous. After it was over, I thanked them and, with a quiet musical accompaniment, showed the ruined parts of the doll to the audience. Nobody was laughing. (Zappa and Occhigrosso 1989: 94; Zappa's italics)

level criticism at the song — even directly, albeit tentatively, to a dying Zappa (1993: xxx and 248-9). At any rate, the precision and deftness of the lyrics of 'Heavenly Bank Account', concerning another Zappa bugbear, the televangelist (where the comically complex time signatures mimic the mystifications and confusions confronted by the IRS on inspecting this citizen's tax returns), and the fragmented existential foilings of 'You Are What You Is', concerning extremes of personality reinvention (in the MTV-banned promotional video applied to Reagan), which could be termed Beckettian, suggest that the lyrics were not necessarily prepared without due care.
The impression is given that the milieu upon which Zappa poured his scorn, the new suburbs of the ascendant 'plastic people', was not exactly unpleasant. Zappa is able to articulate, if not find a synthesis between, the enviable freedoms given to the common man while, at the same time, he attacks their misuses.\textsuperscript{18} In the frescos of merrily feasting groupies and predatory disco dancers there is no sense of anything other than a collective, endemic stupidity – and one nourished by the trimmings of material wellbeing and sexual opportunities. Yet such a world view, prompting this misanthropy, can remain the foundation of celebration when the future anterior to these suburbs is suddenly so threatening: the return of the Old West, with all its militaristic habits, chauvinistic righteousness and imperial violence. For an aside in 'The Blue Light', Zappa appropriates and subverts the title of Reagan's old cowboy show for a resounding warning: 'Death Valley Days – straight ahead!'\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} The populist forms of You Are What You Is raise a supplementary question: to whom is this satire usefully being addressed? One answer, albeit presumably beyond the intentions of Zappa, was East Bloc dissident music listeners. The album's position matches elements of a pre-1989 anti-Communism perspective: the notion of the excesses of consumer society as understood to represent a goal to be achieved nonetheless since excesses could then be moderated. In this respect, Zappa can be read in the cultural front of the war against the Soviet Union, also claimed (and claimed as successful, even if retrospectively) by the Reagan administration.