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Commune Pop

There is a microhistory to be told about how Occupy Oakland came to have a certain set of musical tastes. There is a microhistory to be told and it would have to pass like everything else that happened in and around the plaza through the Oscar Grant riots and the university anti-privatization struggles circa 2009 which between the two would provide so many participants for Occupy Oakland and it would have to gather in the longer history of Oakland and Berkeley and their relation to each other and it would in the end have to include not just these social sedimentations and drifts but also small and practical things like the tastes of the guy who took on much of the obligation and sometimes the cost of getting the mobile sound system down to the plaza and out to the marches and so had a lot of say. His name was Brian. He liked funk.

This is not the place for that microhistory but I do want to recall a moment of danger. This was during the season of occupations at the university which involved a considerable amount of militant organizing and a corresponding number of militant house parties and “militant house parties” means only one thing and the one thing is this: there was a half-spoken question — a social question — as to whether the music would be somehow righteous or would be pop. There are several ways for music to be righteous. It can have politically righteous lyrics or can be properly sourced through DIY or independent production channels. It can arise from a particular history of political struggle or oppression. It can be aesthetically rebarbative to the abject preferences of the market. In short it can stand in opposition to the pop commodity whose main ambition must always be to go down easy and to spackle over the cracks in its own history and to make as much money as possible as swiftly as possible mostly for people who already own money.

Pop prevailed. Not because it was better or nobler and not exactly because the dream of an aesthetic culture beyond capital is long deceased but because it was pop and pop is not a genre but a social relation and it was this social relation that could provide a connection between the militant milieu and the broader social unhappiness. A connection that would be Occupy. That is how pop always wins for awhile. Popular movement. It's in the phrase. If there was a moment when matters were decided it came in February of 2010 when a brief occupation of Durant Hall spilled out into Telegraph Avenue and passersby decided to join in and set things on fire and get into it with the cops and in everybody's recounting the song that seemed to magnetize this moment of mayfly solidarity was "Run This Town" by Jay-Z and Rihanna. It is a darkly joyous song. Kanye's guest verse is ugly but it is a darkly joyous song with all kinds of good sinister and after that there was no real debate.

The microhistory might even suggest that this episode in which for better or for worse pop did what pop can do foreshadowed the populist character of Occupy Oakland which lacking a clear program required a broad and vague agreement from disparate parties to share this thing and where the sound system played McFadden & Whitehead and P-Funk and 'Pac & Dre and where Michael Jackson was the spirit of the general assembly and everybody could sing PYT and substitute FTP but none of these provided the theme song of Occupy Oakland. The theme song of Occupy Oakland was "We Found Love" by Rihanna. It was unofficial because most things were unofficial.

Occupy Oakland began on October 10th in 2011 about three weeks after Occupy Wall Street and "We Found Love" was released in the interval. That is how it became ours. The first eviction was October 25th and the plaza was retaken the following night and the peak came on November 2nd during a long day of marches and the massive shutdown of the Port of Oakland and the latest but not the last of many ill-fated building occupations that night. It was a long Wednesday in November and on the day before while people planned and painted banners and wrote communiqués "We Found Love" reached number one on the Billboard chart.

It reached number one and posed there as we walked maybe 20,000 bodies through the desolation of the Port of Oakland with the loading derricks and the asphalt pour and the oh so many shipping containers and the occasionally sunsplit gray sitting on the coastline and the vastness of the port almost swallowed up the activity but we were all with each other and “we found love in a hopeless place” did not seem like the third-rate trance that someone called the song later it just seemed like realism. It was exhilarating to be able to call hopelessness hopelessness and also call love love and to dance and to feel like we had a song and were a we.

These are things that pop can do or can be made to do. The meanings and senses of a song which are no more in the lyrics than in the alarm tones that recall the Bomb Squad and the keyboard staccato which cannot achieve ecstasy and so becomes forlorn and in the tension between that rhythm and the four on the floor drums —the meanings and senses that become possible within all of this can be seized upon and made use of. We did this and it felt good. As with a lover in the first month we believed everything was right about the song even what was wrong was right and the way the song is perhaps a bit underdeveloped maybe it could use one more idea well this too seemed right and it left some extra space for us and wasn't that feeling of extra space and of joy in a barren landscape and of something that we knew would end before it was filled out and finished — wasn't that the march on the port and wasn't that the Oakland Commune?

This is why in the end songs are interpretable I think. Not so much because of what they say explicitly and not because of those very complicated ideas about mediation that try to explain how objective social conditions pass through people in waves and come out in certain forms. But in the way that songs and IN the way that the experience of songs shared on the massive scale that defines pop music IN the ways these get seized by people and we use them to figure certain things out or to sharpen antagonisms or to come to agreements or to conceal certain things which may be a different way of saying the same thing. But there is a risk in this moment as there is a risk in every moment of the dialectic.

It would be easy to think that the risk of pop is popular front politics itself and if we think of Occupy Oakland as a sort of cognitive machine it's true that one of the things it figured out pretty swiftly was that the populist aspect was not the sustainable variety of the catastrophe we wanted. I know this with the certainty achieved by hearing a cellmate declare that his political ideal is to be found in the best aspects of socialism capitalism and fascism. That'll put you off populism real quick.

But that way to name the risk is not quite right. It is that you can keep doing it forever this ceaseless election of representations of social existence and think that it is something in the songs and something in how you feel about the songs that has a politics rather than what you are doing while the song is there in your shared social ear and once this confusion takes hold you can come to think that staying at home listening to the song or singing the song at a karaoke bar with friends is part of the antagonism that people are using the song to illuminate and not its opposite number.

This has been a problem in my own life, this ability to choose a new song every few weeks that corresponds to my most expansive sense of things or to my experience of the abyss between the market for which the song is made and the world I imagine while listening to the song. And I guess I think that all pop songs are about this among other things about the interval between the world from which the song has been vomited forth and the world we want the song to open onto. Pop songs are happy for us to live there and Rihanna and Calvin Harris and Universal Music Group are happy for us to live there in that interval and I would not call it happiness but it is living and I have lived there with many others.

If we go back to the militant house parties of 2009 we see that the suspicion around pop songs was somewhat but not completely different. No one really phrased it this way but it was whether pop songs were neutral and could be seized and used as we wished or whether being purpose-built by capital they could not be diverted from their desire to be a form of money that via the

artifice of passing through us made more money. Saying it that way makes obvious the similarity between this question and the question about the productive powers of capital in general. This is the “repurposing hypothesis” that some of our friends have written about so eloquently and the analogy is imperfect as pop songs play a very different role in the reproduction of a society than do refrigerators or staple grains but still we can wonder whether is it a kind of desperate hubris that lets us imagine we can simply do what we want with “We Found Love” and all.

It is probably not one or the other really. They can both be true for now it can be true that pop songs contrive to preserve us in the interval where they pass through us to make more money and it can be true that they can be joyous fight songs and it is surely true that the measure of this will be disclosed by what we do while the songs are spiraling in our shared social ear. And it is even more surely true that one of the things we will have to do at some point after we have discovered pop songs and after we have used pop songs and after we have written pop songs about what we have done after these moments we will have to see that they are a kind of transition that won't end a permanent interval that must be overcome and we will have to destroy pop songs and then we will know the true meaning of kill your darlings. We will have to destroy pop songs by destroying the conditions in which pop songs can be made and be understood and we will have to do this by destroying the conditions of pop and of the popular. I don't think culture as it has been handed down to us can simply become communist culture even if we want it that way.