

## Between avant-garde and popular music: the “sonic” breaking up of the song form. An example from Sonic Youth’s “Teenage Riot”

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With this paper I would like to propose a specific case, starting from a very famous song, considered by critics to be a sort of “classic” of popular music – “*Teenage Riot*”, from the 1988 album *Daydream Nation*, by the seminal New York avant-garde (or “art rock” or, even better, “post-punk”) group *Sonic Youth*. But, on the other hand, starting from this example, I would like to try to develop a more general question concerning musical signification. How to produce sense, how to make new signification possible (while obtaining a powerful aesthetic effect) by using, at the same time, a musical structure which is apparently “typical”: by deforming this structure from inside?

But, first of all, why *Sonic Youth*? And why their song “*Teenage Riot*”?

This group is considered by critics as particularly important in the recent history of popular music, for its activity in research and “avant-garde rock” or “art rock” and, this for several reasons. Firstly, it’s a seminal band because of the great influence (although this band has continued until today to produce a large amount of parallel projects) that marked, from the ‘80s, and during the following decade, the whole field of what is usually described as “alternative rock”, and, later on, “indie-rock”. Moreover, this band marks also the advent of a specific “scene” (the so-called “noise scene” of the late 80s, early 90s) starting from the USA and characterised by a distinctive and creative use of feedback effects produced by guitar amplifiers.

Yet – and I anticipate here my hypothesis – in this song are proposed, as said before, musical forms which are typical of the rock song, but, at the same time, exhibit transformations related to a “meta-song” structure, something like the game of “Chinese boxes”: with boxes inserted one inside another, reproducing the features of the previous one, in a sort of recursion or “*mise en abyme*”. And all this provokes a tension which breaks up that typical structure. In our example, this song refers to and quotes the album’s title, and some of the album’s tracks. In a deeper way, by using, apparently, the conventional structure of a song format, this provokes an effect of refusal, of a break with the kinds of constraints typical of the rock song. So this track would be a sort of “song of songs”: a song inside a song. Finally, this mechanism makes reference, from a thematic and cultural values point of view, to the artistic and experimental scene of the late ‘80s.

Secondly, the originality and interest of this piece seems to be strictly connected with the question of syncretism. However, which kind of syncretism are we talking about? Especially in this case, it is not just a question of relationship between words and music, or between words and images (such as art, etc.). It deals with an “internal” relationship between elements, and between the levels of the song structure on which Sonic Youth have worked. Of course we are talking about sounds and their relationship with words; but we need to see which specific links are created between the different levels of expression of this complex discursive device.

Someone could say, regarding the first point, that all history of music in general – and of rock and popular music in particular, but also in the succession of poetics or styles in history of arts – that the typical mechanism of innovation is “change in apparent continuity”. This is the idea according to which changes start from previous continuities: from forms, or styles, or even within a single song or musical composition. Or, starting from a musical theme (a similar example is proposed by Genette,<sup>1</sup> in discussing the arguments of Goodman, about jazz improvisation), with exchanges, replacement or recombination, or perhaps decomposition, of the items which are part of it.

I will try to show how this song, and the poetics of Sonic Youth, activate their own specific mechanisms.

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard Genette, *L'Oeuvre de l'art: Immanence et Transcendence*, Seuil, Paris 1994.

## 1. The Scene

Sonic Youth and the late '80s poetical and musical scene delineate a cultural area which can be defined as being at the intersection of, at least, three kinds of development and evolution of Punk musical culture (or, as suggested by critics, "Post-punk"<sup>2</sup>). On the one hand (in this multiplication of labels and classifications) "Art rock" (or, better, we might add, "Art-punk") represents an area of musical research in connection with the artistic and visual experimentation of that period (from artists such as Shindy Sherman, to the avant-garde sound, multimedia research and performative arts on the New York scene, already deployed in preceding years by Laurie Anderson's research).

On the other hand, we find a direct connection with the research area that crosses and starts from free-jazz, working in particular on "sound": the use of improvisation, chained with the use of electric instruments "contaminated" by noises, with distortions and use of effects, especially for guitars, able to produce feedback results. With a sort of a joke, we could say that it is like producing poetical and artistic effects from "flaws", from failures, from lacks. This was the case with musicians like Glenn Branca, Arto Lindsay, Lydia Lunch, and many others, and with bands like DNA, between the '70s and early '80s.

Finally, and again in connection with this artistic research and development in popular music and avant-garde rock – especially their most radical versions – we find another intersection with Hardcore punk (a very fast style of Punk, as underground, independent, a genre that originated in the late 1970s, early '80s). And this is interesting because it concerns the transformation, as said before, of classic rock song structure. This rock structure is based, as stressed also by Middleton,<sup>3</sup> on three main possible alternatives (with all their possible transformations and inversions): the first, is the "blues structure", characterized by typical chord progressions, of which the "twelve-bar blues chord progression" is the most common; the second is the "verse-chorus structure"; and, the third, which is similar,

<sup>2</sup> See, i.e., Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978-1984*, Penguin, London 2005; Simon Reynolds, *Bring the Noise*, Faber, London 2007; Antonio Puglia, Sonic Youth – Daydream Nation – Deluxe edition, [in:] *Sentireascoltare*: <http://www.sentireascoltare.com/CriticaMusicale/ClassicAlbums/speciali/SonicYouth.html>, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Middleton (1990)

is the “a central riff repeated” (again, with all the possible transformations). What is important in Hardcore punk, with its “further raw work”, is that it is about the demolition of these structures. Working on extreme speed (with very fast performances and very short timing of songs), hardcore punk works as if it is making extreme cuts on this structure. This provokes rapid jams and overlaps of different parts, in the paroxysmic recurrence and extremely rapid sequence of the track, and the breaking up of the typical “verse-chorus song”.

## 2. A change, and an image

So, in what sense does the Sonic Youth project bring something new? And how is it so original as to merit the enormous consideration it has received from critics and scholars and success with success with the public? It has to be mentioned that the “Daydream Nation” album was included, a couple of years ago, in the Heritage Library of Music of the U.S. Congress; as if it were a sort of “classic of popular music” of independent popular music: a “classic of anti-classic”.

Some critics, journalists and scholars stress the point that, starting from the same album’s cover, Sonic Youth’s album “Daydream Nation” represents something like a shift “from their radical noise roots” to “something more accessible”.

We do not believe so. It is true that Sonic Youth have made use, for the covers of their previous albums, of graphics and designs typical of the cultural underground (coming from punk-skate and artistic street culture, with artists like Raymond Pettibon); and that for this album they mark a change: choosing a painting by Gerhard Richter, *Kerze* (“Candle”, 1983’s hyper-real or, better, photo-realistic, painting).

But what kind of link can we find within this image? Is there a little mystery there? For one of the album’s songs there is a reference – in the title, as well as in the verbal text – to a candle, and it could be again a signal of the general and thematic coherence of *Daydream Nation* (something like a “concept album”). But there are more general isotopic lines of coherence which are present at different, deeper levels: particularly inside the song we are going to analyse in this paper.



**Figure 1:** *Daydream Nation*: album cover<sup>4</sup>  
(from Gerhard Richter, *Kerze*, Candle, 1983)

Sonic Youth, in producing this album, and as said before, carry out a sort of breaking line within the song form of popular music (especially in the track which we refer here) through the apparent use of a “typical” form: use of a catchy riff or musical phrase, repeated in various forms and variations, which proposes itself in the form, as mentioned by many critics, of what is really an “*anthem*”, with its repetition and intensification.

This is what can be seen at the surface level of the textual organization of the song. What happens at a deeper level is a quick overlay of this figure which is both melodic and rhythmic-harmonic:<sup>5</sup> in its repetition, in many moments of the musical discourse, as well as of verbal text.

Each layer reproduces this tension between repetition and breaking off. Verbal utterances (see the schema at the end of this paper) are in the form of an almost continuous passage and alternation of subjects, from “I” to “Him”, and finally to “Us”: and this builds up a form of dialogue which is, at the same time, in counterpoint with the guitar riffs. The thematic level, as well as the sound and musical substructures, proceeds in a parallel, similar way. The track, from the point of view spatio-temporal organisation (different spaces that chase and intertwine with each other), breaks

<sup>4</sup> This painting from Richard Richter, is part of a series of similar paintings concerning the same theme, and the same figure, with variations. One example can be seen at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This picture of Sonic Youth album's front cover is taken from the web: [theglassmagazine.com](http://theglassmagazine.com): [www.theglassmagazine.com/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=118](http://www.theglassmagazine.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=118).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, Open University Press, Philadelphia 1990/2002, pp. 172, 377)

through in a rupture and recomposition of the spaces themselves (we cannot deepen here all these analytical levels, so we refer to the synthetic table at the end of this article).

### 3. A new sound shape

The title of my paper aims to be also an allusion to the book of Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh.<sup>6</sup> These authors, working on the problem of the connection between sound and meaning, in relation to issues such as the motivation in the language, discuss and make reference to a famous example (from Gershwin's famous song "*You like potato I like potato*") in which different sounds and pronunciations produce tension and new meanings.

Here, in a very different musical context and in different ways, (we don't have neither potatoes, nor tomatoes...), we equally emphasize the problem of the "breaking of the song shape" through musical-discursive forms of speech.

For Sonic Youth, this breaking-off is obtained through two "artistic gestures" and figures:

*duplications through redundancies and resonances* (either at the "sound" and musical level, or in terms of verbal and textual organisation: see again the table at the end of this paper);

*distortions* (and this happens not just in a specific, technical sense, in producing distorted noisy sound; they also operate in such a way so as not directly overturn the standard form, but in an apparently smooth way, and are then tossed and agitated through different layers).

Critics have insisted on both these kinds of practices, which are, basically, building (productive) operations of the artistic work of Sonic Youth. Both operations concern either the musical, sound material, but also, in a more general way, in the scrambling and quotation of previous moments and elements taken from the history of popular music: in order to deconstruct them, and to break things up in an ironic and mocking way.

The point is, for Sonic Youth, that these elements are "passed by force", in the poetry of this group, through a sort of a specific "wall of

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<sup>6</sup> *The Sound Shape of Language, the Phonetic form of Speech*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin 1979.

sound”: they are produced by the effects of distortion and feedback. So in Sonic Youth we don’t have just artistic re-invention, neither citation nor remake, but the production of new substances through the decomposition of the previous ones.

In our example, there’s still something else and more: this track rises in a rolling up, a wrapping around itself (both in repeated sound components and those arising through rhymes and references, verbal and discursive, thematic and enunciatory, cf. the schema of analysis at the end of this paper). And noises, here, “Cast a sort of stillness”: we find a sort of “locking noise”, as another critic and journalist said.<sup>7</sup> In a sort of a paradoxical immobility, it also “makes you shake your legs” in a kind of ecstasy.

The overlapping of distinctive elements and configurational organisation<sup>8</sup> – at the same time, of oppositions and recognition of links, and of bonds – give form and shape to the spatial structures of the song-poem, both at the micro level (of the rhymes) and the macro level of global organisations of the text.

Something similar is produced, in a parallel way, in terms of structure and musical enunciation (as well as in terms of space and time): with the fading of the initial sound of guitars and its recurrence is produced the idea of something which is “arriving and then turning around” (see figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Representation of the very long guitar sound attack, like a slow “prelude”, with resonances (for a description, see finale table at the end of this paper)

<sup>7</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Bring the Noise*, Faber, London 2007, p. 30)

<sup>8</sup> Roman Jakobson, Linda R., Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin 1979

From a thematic and cultural values point of view, according to Reynolds (op. cit.), *Teenage Riot* (and the entire album, *Daydream Nation*) “transcends the juvenile dementia” but the result is not the representation of the “typical” rebel or its “removal”. On the contrary, it provokes a sort of a “spectral freezing”, a congelation of this image and situation, but not a disappearing. The youth rebel becomes a ghost, a suspended ectoplasm.

Here, perhaps, is the subterranean, thin, link with the candle... Remembering Bachelard’s “*la flamme du chandelle*”: a punk ghost, and spectrum, in its being both movable and immovable, and still trembling. In a space redesigned by projecting its flickering light: the space that is, in itself, the fragile place of the production of meaning.

#### 4. *Note*

Finally, concerning kinds of spaces and syncretism: a book entitled “Mixtape” has recently been published by Thurston Moore (guitarist, singer and composer of Sonic Youth), in which the musician – collaborating with many artists, friends of his (from the artistic scene in which the group began, from Cindy Sherman, to Pettibon, to Mike Watt, Lasse Marhaug, Pat Griffin) – has collected photos of audio-cassettes self-produced during early ‘80s (but containing songs made by other groups that they listened in that period). The artist and his friends gave a representation of a specific moment, a particular artistic movement. But it is not a real “remix” compilation: it is the music they played then; the material is the “raw” starting point of music that would be produced in the future. That’s the point: each period, each cultural, musical moment and movement produces a real “space”: a space in which things happen and this is a part of the music; and if there is work on “media”, on technological support, it’s about writings, collages, drawings, and music, inscribed on them, for the future.



Table of the analysis of the song “Teenage Riot”



Lyrics	Sound characterisation	Voice and enunciation:
<i>title: Teenage riot</i>	<p>(Intro: guitar riff in the form of slow and dragged prelude: guitar sound “distant” and “dirty” (with “flanger” effect ). Chord sequence (DDCGG) forming a figure that is repeated in cycles. (see fig. 3):</p> 	<p>subject represented inside text; parallel variations in different temporal moments 0:0</p>
<p>You're it No, you're it Hey, you're really it You're it No I mean <u>it, you're it</u></p>		<p>0:13:You (starting: voice: female sussurrato: Kim Gordon): You 0:20</p>
Say it	Fig. 3	0:27
Don't spray it	<p>First intensification, stepping up – same lap guitar – attack on snare drum, which stops immediately.</p>	<p>Impersonal vs You/Me</p>
Spirit desire (face me)	<p>Again, beginning marking the rhythm (also through the voice that emphasizes “thick” consonants (sp and it) and rhymes and repetitions between them); and echo effect to the end.</p>	0:30
Spirit desire (don't displace me)	<p>Track goes on with the same riff with drum interventions that create an effect of attack and arrest awaiting possible intensification and growth; the voice insisted and finally this time suffered the effect of “fading” disappearing.</p>	<p>0:33 Impersonal vs You/Me</p>
Spirit desire		We
We will fall		<p>0:40 vs You/Me Impers.</p>
<p>Miss me Don't dismiss me Me</p>		<p>0:45 Impers. vs We</p>
<p>Spirit desire Preludio Noi Spirit desire [x3]</p>	<p>Stop: silence and then guitar attack around the same cycle but this time it accelerated: (see fig. 3)</p>	<p>1:20 1:28 1:46</p>



Fig. 4

*After that a new starting point with the drums (in the form of “attack and response”).*

*Finally restarting with drums at full capacity and guitar that repeats a single chord.*

Everybody's talk-  
ing 'bout the stormy  
weather

And what's a man do  
to but work out  
whether it's true?

Looking for a man  
with a focus and a  
temper

Who can open up a  
map and see between  
one and two

Time to get it  
Before you let it  
Get to you

Here he comes now

Stick to your guns  
And let him through

Everybody's coming  
from the winter vaca-  
tion

Taking in the sun in a  
exaltation (to you)

*After a few bars it joins the male voice (and the second guitar); again the central riff of the song: but now in a “dialogical” way; not in a cyclical way as in the beginning, but in the form of dialogue (question and answer) with the voice; until the end of the song, every verse ends with “you” and there is a sort of response with two guitars which play higher in the scale;*

*Riff continues in a similar way*

*2:05: (attack of the male voice: Thurston Moore): Impers. in form of question 2:11*

*Impers. 2:14*

*Impers. 2:20*

*Impers. 2:26 vs You 2:30*

*He*

*(Passage to: “You”) vs He*

*Impers. (collective).*

*vs*

*You*

<u>You</u> come running in on platform shoes	<i>Impers. vs You</i>
With Marshall stacks	
To at least just give <u>us</u> a clue	<i>We</i>
Ah, here <i>it</i> comes	<i>Something</i>
I know <u>it's</u> someone I knew	<i>Impers. vs Me</i>
<i>Teenage riot</i> in a public station	<i>Impers.</i>
Gonna fight and tear it up in a hypernation ( <i>for you</i> )	<i>You</i>
Now I see it <i>I think</i> I'll leave <u>it</u> out of the way	<i>Me vs impers.</i>
Now I come near <u>you</u>	<i>You</i>
And it's not clear why <u>you</u> fade away	<i>You</i>
Looking for a ride to <u>your</u> secret location	
Where the kids are setting up a free-speed nation, <u>for you</u>	<i>You</i>
Got a foghorn and a drum and a hammer that's rockin' And a cord and a pedal and a lock, that'll do <u>me</u> for now	<i>You</i>
It better work out	<i>Me</i>
I hope it works out my way	<i>Me</i> <i>Impers.</i>
'Cause it's getting kind of quiet in my city's head	<i>Me</i> <i>Impers.</i>

Takes a teen age riot to get me out of bed right now		<i>Me</i>
	<i>Continua</i>	
You better look it		<i>You</i>
We're gonna shake it Up to him		<i>We</i>
He acts the hero We paint a zero On his hand		<i>We</i> <i>Imp.</i>
We know it's down		<i>We</i>
We know it's bound too loose		<i>4:50</i>
Everybody's sound is round it		<i>Impers.</i> <i>5.50</i>
Everybody wants to be proud to choose So who's to take the blame for the stormy weather		<i>Imp.</i> <i>Imp.</i>
You're never gonna stop all the teenage leather and booze		<i>You</i>
It's time to go round		<i>Impers.</i>
A one man showdown		
Teach us how to fail	<i>Cut; bridge for a few bars remaining on a single chord; then picked up the riff until the end of the song</i>	<i>We</i>
We're off the streets now		<i>We</i>
And back on the road		<i>Impers.</i>
On the riot trail		<i>6:55 stop</i>

*Daydream Nation's Album tracklist:*

1. **Teen Age Riot**
2. Silver Rocket
3. The Sprawl
4. 'Cross The Breeze
5. Eric's Trip
6. Total Trash
7. Hey Toni
8. Providence
9. Candle
10. Rain King
11. Kissability
12. Trilogy:
  - The Wonder
  - Hyperstation
  - Eliminator Jr.

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