

# ‘What is music? Anything can be music’: Frank Zappa’s theory of art

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## Abstract

*This paper presents an analysis of Frank Zappa’s aesthetic values, drawing on two examples: his writing and his music. This paper examines Zappa’s musical techniques and contextualises them within art criticism; Zappa’s discussion of his own music and theories of art in *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (1989) further help align his work with contemporary aesthetic theories, namely those of Levinson (*Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, 2011) and Berleant (‘Further ruminations on music’, *New Sound International Journal of Music*, 50/2, pp. 129–37, 2017). Together, Zappa’s techniques and his own testimony suggest an aesthetic standpoint underpinning his discography that emphasises referentiality as well as subjectivity and the role of the public in the musical experience. Indicating a more sympathetic view of popular opinion, distinct from the Adornian condemnation of mass culture with which Zappa is often attributed, this analysis of Zappa’s aesthetic beliefs subsequently indicates a position sympathetic to both popular and avant-garde musics.*

## Music, elitism and expression

Frank Zappa’s discography and testimony present a variety of views of the nature of music and its role in Western culture. Often sarcastic, flippant and contrarian, but underpinned by a highly intellectual and penetrating worldview, Zappa’s work presents a challenge: how to specify any fundamental principles within a musical output that spanned genres with seemingly little value placed on any specific aspect? However, while no single style takes precedence over another, as I will show, musical value is found in each final, interconnected totality. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate some of the artistic principles that Zappa held, and, drawing on contemporary aesthetics and art criticism, contribute to a theoretical framework through which to understand Zappa’s music. In return, this will allow us to test the strength of proposed aesthetic theories. The albums given specific attention here are those to which Zappa makes explicit references or indications regarding his own artistic principles.

Zappa's interviews in his co-authored *The Real Frank Zappa Book* offer insight into what he valued in musical composition, and indicate that there is a universal aesthetic thesis underpinning his discography (1989, p. 141):

So, *if music is the best*, what is music? Anything can be music, but it doesn't become music until someone wills it to be music, and the audience listening to it decides to perceive it as music.

This statement, and its emphasis on the role of both the composer *and* the audience in determining something as music, raises the question of how Zappa constructs his own theory of art and artistic value.

While now dated, *The Real Frank Zappa Book* is one of the few texts in which Zappa explicitly details his personal views on music and art, though his views can also be found sporadically elsewhere, such as in interviews and speeches. For example, the following quote, originally from a 1984 keynote address for the American Society of University Composers, makes clear Zappa's condemnation of an elitist view of musical value, suggesting that the appreciation of artworks is a subjective and personal experience, rather than one that can be decided and disseminated with any perceived authority. The immediate inference is that 'it represents the work of a self-declared enemy of the establishment-sublime' (Ashby 1999, p. 565). However, it also points towards an aesthetic critique on the purpose of music (Ashby 1999, p. 564):

Ever heard this one before? 'Back in the old days, when all the REALLY GOOD MUSIC was being written, composers were TRULY INSPIRED, had a DEEP MEANING in their works, and SUFFERED INTENSE EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT as these GREAT WORKS were "BORN".'

Yes, people still believe this kind of stuff. In truth, the situation was pretty much the same then as now (with a few slight variations).

THEN: The composer had to write for the specific tastes (no matter how bad) of THE KING, THE POLITICAL DICTATOR, or THE CHURCH. Failure to do so resulted in unemployment, torture, or death. The public was not consulted. They simply were not equipped to make assessments of relative merit from gavotte to gavotte. If the king couldn't gavotte to it, it had no right to exist.

ALL OF THE SWILL PRODUCED UNDER THESE CONSTRAINTS IS WHAT WE NOW ADMIRE AS 'REAL CLASSICAL MUSIC.' Forget what it sounds like ... forget whether or not you happen to enjoy it ... that's how it got made ... and when music is taught in schools, it is the 'taste norms' of those KINGS, DICTATORS, and CLERICS which are perpetuated in the harmony and counterpoint classes.<sup>1</sup>

Several aesthetic issues are indicated here. First, Zappa's emphasis on and flippancy towards perceived emotional meaning suggests that he does not view emotion, or at least, a serious emotional response, as a necessary component of music. This is perhaps unsurprising, as Zappa's broad use of musical styles, coupled with his critique of much of Western society, suggests that anything historically valuable, like the institutionalised European musical tradition in which artistic expression is emphasised, would also be scrutinised.

This position, however, is not without theoretical precedent. Jerald Levinson rejects the necessity for the inclusion of emotional content in the definition of music, as 'some music seems neither the embodiment of a creator's inner state nor

<sup>1</sup> As Ashby notes, this particularly damning view of classical music may have been emphasised due to that fact that Zappa was addressing, and deliberately 'goading', an audience of composers (Ashby 1999, p. 601).

a stimulus to emotional response in hearers', but instead 'an abstract configuration of sounds in motion' (2011, p. 271). Suggesting that 'music cannot be defined by some special relation to emotional life', Levinson's view seems to correlate with Zappa's critique of the composer's personal emotion in the production of 'good' music (2011, p. 271). However, when asked, Zappa appears to believe that it is possible to convey emotion: 'to reach somebody emotionally without using words that have literal connections' is 'quite a challenge', but it is possible 'to perform expressively on an instrument' (Lyons and Friedman 1987a). In his view, this is achievable once the musical experience ceases to focus on the physical performance of an instrument, at which point 'you are no longer thinking about operating a piece of machinery and can just project something emotional through the machinery' (Lyons and Friedman 1987a). Zappa makes the distinction between emotion as defined above, in the musical experience divorced from technical procedure, and emotion in the Adornian sense, as an appeal to pre-existent musical features perceived as eliciting an emotional response (Lyons and Friedman 1987a):

What I think of as the emotional content of music is probably a lot different than what you think of. Since I write music, I know what the techniques are. If I wanted to write something that would make you weep, I could do it. There's stuff that you stick in there. There's ways to do it. It's a cheap shot.

To appeal to emotion via recognised musical techniques, for Zappa, is easy, insincere, and not a reflection of the actual musical content.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Zappa's sarcastic observation that historically 'the public was not consulted' in what good music was as they 'were not equipped', also indicates that he does not believe that there are any qualifications needed for the appreciation of music (Ashby 1999, p. 564). Levinson argues that there are forms of music that do not require aesthetic attention, and therefore the definition of music cannot include the necessity for such (2011, p. 272):

Music for the accompaniment of ritual, music for the intensification of warlike spirit, and music for dancing are all examples of musics whose proper appreciation does not involve contemplative and distanced apprehension of pure patterns of sound, or put otherwise, does not call for specific attention to its beauty or other aesthetic qualities.

This, however, appears to contrast with Zappa's position that music only exists when the 'audience listening to it decides to perceive it as music' (1989, p. 141). Zappa's critique of the idle consumption of mass culture suggests that the decision to listen must always be cognitive, but this is certainly not an attention only attainable by those privileged enough to have had musical training or some special understanding.

In Zappa's view, the judgment of musical merit is open to all, but it does require a particular contemplation. In Levinson's definition, for organised sound to be quantified as music there must be some sort of *experience* for the listener. Levinson's conclusion is that music 'is engaged in so that a certain heightening of life, or of consciousness, is attained', finding that 'all sound phenomena that are categorizable as music' lead, or are designed to lead, to 'the enrichment or intensification

<sup>2</sup> Asked what specific aspect of film can make him cry, Zappa responds 'I can literally hate the show and find myself crying because of something that happened in there. And I know that the fact that liquid comes out of my eyes has got nothing to do with reality' (Marshall 1988).

of experience via engagement with organized sounds' (2011, p. 272). If musical expression for Zappa is found once the physical playing of the instrument becomes secondary to the musical experience, then perhaps there is a comparison to be made with Levinson's definition. Zappa seems to share the significance of the 'enrichment or intensification of experience', which for him is achieved beyond 'thinking about operating a piece of machinery' and the musician then subsequently able to 'project something emotional through the machinery' (Lyons and Friedman 1987a). While Levinson's definition is convincing, it does not specify beyond 'engagement' an active decision to recognise the organised sound as music, which is what Zappa appears to require. To refer back to the earlier quote, Zappa's initial definition of music is that 'anything can be music' as long as 'someone wills it to be music', and the audience 'decides to perceive it as music' (1989, p. 141). The role of the audience, and the process of viewing and understanding the artwork, is fundamental. When asked if during composition he is 'guided' by the effect the music would have on a 'listener's spiritual, emotional, intellectual or physical state', or instead 'by the musical structure – melody, harmony and rhythm', Zappa replied (Lyons and Friedman 1987a):

None of the above. It's more like, how did it turn out. Does it work? And if it works you don't even have to know why it works. It either works or it doesn't work. It's like drawing a picture. Maybe there are too many fingers on one hand, and a foot is too short over there.

In his response that these are practical issues instead of aesthetic ones, Zappa, while having initially suggested a somewhat functional motivation in composition, indicates instead a subjective account, arguing that 'if you take a blank piece of paper and a pencil and just start sketching on there, it doesn't necessarily have to be a house and a tree and a cow' (Lyons and Friedman 1987a). Instead, Zappa describes a personal process in which the value of the artefact rests on the individual's opinion (Lyons and Friedman 1987a):

It could be just some kind of a scribble, but sometimes those scribbles work and they are the right thing for that blank piece of space, and you can enjoy them. Or you can say, 'That's not a house, that's not a cow, that's not a tree, and so I don't like it; it's just a scribble.' It depends on what your viewpoint is.

So, while Zappa initially presents a critique on emotion in music, this regards more the socio-historical definition as derived from institutions and tradition, and there is still value in the subjective account of the musical experience, including the personal emotional response of musical taste. Nonetheless, for Zappa, emotional content in music appears as a contingent rather than essential property. If Zappa believes that music exists only when the audience decides to recognise it as such, it is necessary to understand how he confers his music *as* music, to be interpreted correctly.

### **The 'Frame', the audience and engagement**

To understand music as subjective, qualified by both its creator's intentions and the audience's recognition and agreement, the question remains of how the creator presents their work as art to be viewed appropriately. Zappa suggests that boundaries, or 'The Frame' that he calls 'the most important thing in art', are essential in the identification of music by an audience, as 'without this humble appliance, you can't know where The Art stops and The Real World begins' (1989, p. 140). The significance is

one of delineation, like Derrida's *parergon*: the frame 'closes up the artistic work', and 'is made necessary by an internal lack of determinacy in the work, a lack of certainty about where and whether it needs to come to an end' (Hobson 2002, p. 146). In defining what he considers the frame to be, and how it manifests itself, Zappa argues that it is the artist that frames the work, and by declaring the creation as a work of art, it therefore exists as such: "'Take it or leave it, I now will this to be music.'" After that it's a matter of taste' (1989, p. 140). The role of the frame in Zappa's artistic philosophy gives an indication of intentionalism, but this is problematic.

Zappa's statements appeal strongly to the intentionalist account, that the work is qualified by the artist's intentions, essentially that music exists on account of its creator's decision, and only through understanding the composer's intentions can the work be properly understood. The referential aspect of Zappa's work supports the theory that only through understanding Zappa's intentions can the full content of the work – whether representational, referential or emotive – be grasped. In the aesthetic sense, with Stephen Davies using the example of painting, intentions 'appear to determine what one must understand or appreciate in understanding or appreciating the painting as an artwork' (1991, p. 187). The notion of the frame that Zappa refers to, while not fully endorsing the intentionalist account, can serve as a way to present external factors, such as category, which can 'restrict the possible range of a work's aesthetically important properties' (Davies 1991, p. 187). As Davies argues, 'artists' intentions are not determinative of what we must understand if we are to understand the works aesthetically', but 'external factors are relevant in determining the character of aesthetically relevant properties' (1991 p. 187).

Zappa also values external factors, but stops short of considering them to be autonomous in the designation of music. Zappa appears unconcerned with his role in an audience's interpretation of the work once finished and framed, but maintains its importance in the conferring of status as music. Davies concludes that the intentionalist account fails as intentions do not 'determine the range of proper interpretations of artworks'; a work may fall into several artistic categories, and can be understood by various conventions depending on the interpretation (1991, p. 205). Zappa can be held to go along with this view, as shown by his statement that 'the audience listening to it decides to perceive it as music' (1989, p. 141): Zappa values intention and the process of representing the way in which a work should be viewed, but his account does not fully endorse intentionalism.

The notion of personal circumstances elucidating artistic content is one that Zappa dismissed entirely, stating that 'the part of me that people should be most interested in, if they have any interest in me at all, is what I do. Not how I do it, or who I am, or whatever' (Marshall 1988). In fact, according to Zappa, 'you have to understand the way in which people voluntarily decide to consume something', arguing it 'has more to do with their own orientation than it has to do with the concept or the conception of the person who made the object', and even if his intentions or circumstances were relevant, 'what I put into the things that I make has little or nothing to do with the way in which people consume them' (Marshall 1988). Therefore, Zappa's aesthetic thesis is better understood through the subjective experience, in which the artist's framing and designation of a work has significance, but so too does the reception by an audience in qualifying and attributing value to the work.

A substantial comparison can be made between Zappa's view and Arnold Berleant's aesthetic theory of engagement, in that 'the painting must be seen to be appreciated', and that 'without being engaged in experience, it is merely a physical

object' (2017, p. 136). Zappa echoes this, stating that the music must be heard and experienced for it to then be called music, and that 'the audience listening to it decides to perceive it as music' (1989, p. 141). Berleant's theory is defined by the 'activation of art in appreciative experience rather than by distancing oneself through disinterested contemplation' (2017, p. 135). For Zappa it seems necessary for there to be an active engagement with the work from both the creator and the audience, and an agreement on both sides that what is being experienced is music.<sup>3</sup> However, an issue arises when examining Berleant's theory of how music is constructed. He argues that 'the efforts of some aestheticians to ontologize music', particularly the construction of music 'into an object that can be appreciated and judged', is erroneous (2017, p. 135). Instead, Berleant argues that a 'musical event offers a distinctive context' and the understanding and appreciation of 'identity, style, originality, and the like must be clarified with reference to the entire field' (2017, p. 131). In other words, Berleant rejects aestheticism, claiming that 'musical sound is embedded in the occasion, in the many-faceted experience of active listening' (2017, p. 135).

To apply this to Zappa's position is difficult. In stating, "Take it or leave it, I now will this to be music." After that it's a matter of taste', Zappa does not provide a relativistic determination, instead suggesting that music can be assessed aesthetically on its own merit, and therefore with the potential for something akin to intrinsic value (1989, p. 140). On the other hand, there are several indications that Zappa also rejects any aestheticism, in his critique of the objective musical artefact over the subjective musical experience expressed in the earlier quote on perceived historical value of classical music, writing 'forget what it sounds like ... forget whether or not you happen to enjoy it' (Ashby 1999, p. 564). Furthermore, when asked about any objective claim to value, Zappa dismisses this entirely (Lyons and Friedman 1987a, b):

**Is your view truly as subjective as you are painting it to be? So, if I look at an image and it appeals to me, then all I can say is that it works for me and I can't say any more about it. What else do you have the right to say? If you go beyond that, you become a critic. Who needs those fuckers.**

Zappa goes on to qualify this with a culturally relativistic position that musical value is not a universal phenomenon, observing that 'in different cultures there are also different norms for how certain sound combinations are perceived' (Lyons and Friedman 1987a). When asked about an objective account of music that he agrees with, Zappa's response interprets objectivity as the physical nature of sound, rather than in relation to aesthetics. Further to this, when asked about the meaning of 'music' on the album notes of *Joe's Garage* – 'Information is not knowledge, Knowledge is not wisdom, Wisdom is not truth, Truth is not beauty, Beauty is not love, Love is not music, and Music is THE BEST' – Zappa replied that it refers to 'whatever you happen to think music is' (Marshall 1988).<sup>4</sup> So, if Zappa's account of musical value is based entirely on subjective response, then how does he convey qualities in a way that is generally accessible to an audience? In other words, does Zappa achieve any universally agreeable content, such as emotion, if he discounts

<sup>3</sup> In a 1978 interview Zappa, on the subject of his audience, stated, 'They are part of the act. They're the reason why we're there' (Miles 1993, p. 50).

<sup>4</sup> This is also said by the character Mary on the track 'Packard Goose' and, as Kevin Seal notes, is a reworking of John Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and 'may be the closest Frank Zappa ever came to a statement of his spiritual philosophy' (2013, p. 55)



historic conventions and objective artistic value? To answer this, we can now examine how Zappa's theory of art manifests itself through his musical techniques.

### Conceptual continuity and the project/object

Conceptual Continuity is the name Zappa gave to the recurring themes and motifs throughout not only his music, but all creative material he was involved in. The 'Project/Object' formed part of this idiom, in that 'each project (in whatever realm), or interview connected to it, is part of a larger object, for which there is no "technical name"' (1989, p. 139). The reasoning and motive behind this approach is in part to form a narrative arc with returning, identifiable features (1989, p. 139):

Think of the connecting material in the Project/Object this way: A novelist invents a character. If the character is a good one, he takes on a life of his own. Why should he get to go to only one party? He could pop up anytime in a future novel.

The phrase Project/Object, and the indicated distinction between the work and its wider context, is argued by Carr as evidence that Zappa considers 'individual works of art as being in a constant state of development', forming the crux of the Project/Object notion (2013a, p. 8). Zappa also used the Project/Object approach to determine a consistent style, comparing it with the recurrent use of specific colours by painters, writing that 'Rembrandt got his "look" by mixing just a little brown into every other color – he didn't do "red" unless it had brown in it' (1989, p. 140). The emphasis, and the intrinsic value, is that while the individual parts may not have significance when isolated, their totality presents an arc through which to understand the artist's overall creative output, in that 'the brown itself wasn't especially fascinating, but the result of its obsessive inclusion was that "look"' (1989, p. 140). Zappa states rather simply that lyrics, as well as 'pictorial images and melodic themes, recur throughout the albums, interviews, films, videos (and this book) for no other reason than to unify the "collection"' (1989, p. 140). While that may be the sole motivation for this approach, the effect is more complex.

Returning to Berleant's theory of engagement, locating the musical experience in its wider context results in the aesthetic experience of features such as 'identity, style, originality' being subsequently 'clarified with reference to the entire field' (2017, p. 131). Conceptual Continuity functions as a way to contextualise the material Zappa presents, and relate it to other themes and motifs. One example is the premise of the 'Utility Muffin Research Kitchen', which is a frequent reference in his discography, and beyond. It is mentioned in the introduction of 'Muffin Man' as the workplace of the Muffin Man on *Bongo Fury* (1975), the same place the protagonist Joe ends up working on the final track of *Joe's Garage Acts II & III*, 'Little Green Rosetta' (1979). In 1980, Zappa finished building his home studio, which was named the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen (Ruhlmann 1997, p. 33). Not only does Conceptual Continuity operate within Zappa's work, it is also itself the focus of attention. On the song 'Stink Foot', Zappa breaks the fourth wall by referring directly to Conceptual Continuity in the lyrics (1974).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The two 1967 recordings *Lumpy Gravy* and *We're Only In It For The Money* share continuity between them, directly referenced in the posthumous compilation of the two, *Lumpy Money Project/Object* (2008).

Considering Zappa's comparison with characters in a novel, the effect of this technique is that it creates a fictional world, one that spans Zappa's entire creative output. In terms of the dialogic consequence of Conceptual Continuity, there is a similarity with Brian Kane's recent examination of the ontology of jazz standards as instances of nodes in a network. As Kane observes, 'for any standard that possesses property *p*, there are versions (actual or potential) that are instances of the work and lack *p*' (2018, p. 523). Each performance, and its use of identifying musical material, informs the listening of instances of a work past, present and future. The effect is topological, as what is created is a 'network', through which a performance 'relays some properties forward, adds new properties of its own, and excises others' (Kane 2018, p. 523).<sup>6</sup> In Zappa's work, identifying his self-referentiality and contextualising it amongst his wider creative output generates a recognition and appreciation of both the specific musical content of a given recording, and its wider meaning as informed by other uses. Only through actively engaging with Zappa's discography can the inter-related material be understood. So, while valuing the subjective musical experience, Zappa presents the mode of listening to the audience, indicating and encouraging the *right* way to listen. The album notes of *Lumpy Gravy* go as far as giving instructions, such as 'NOTE: listen to side one first' and beneath, 'AND TURN IT ALL THE WAY UP!!'. James Borders suggests that, through this, the norms and traditions of classical performances and their strict discipline are 'demanded, if simultaneously lampooned' (2001, p. 128). Conceptual Continuity can also be seen as an extension of Zappa's philosophy beyond music, with parallels to physics and the work of Stephen Hawking, of whom Zappa was a great enthusiast,<sup>7</sup> suggesting that through 'linking every piece he composed into an endlessly self-referential and edgeless fabric, Zappa expressed his theory that all events in time happen simultaneously' (Seal 2013, p. 65). The remaining question is how this referential approach contributes towards the expressive aspect of Zappa's work, and how the premise of engagement supports this.

## Referentiality and postmodernism

Frank Zappa's incorporation of a wide variety of musical styles lends itself to a post-modern interpretation (Gioia 2011). However, to use these elements in a referential manner, as part of a wider musical system of representation and expression, suggests a more nuanced reality, and a recognition of the distinction that 'both embodied and referential affect constitute musical meaning in the sense of being emotionally expressive', and therefore stand 'in contrast with postmodern forms of musical borrowing' (Manuel 1995, p. 232).<sup>8</sup> Zappa's chaotic blurring of influences and subject matter functions as a constant critique of musical norms, and through this, 'established cultures are at the same time imitated and taken apart' in the rejection of stylistic

<sup>6</sup> While not a jazz musician, interestingly, the first track Zappa ever recorded in a studio, 'Never On Sunday', later known as 'Take Your Clothes Off When You Dance', was a jazz-style piece using session musicians (Wills 2015, p. 16), and he frequently referred to the genre throughout his career (not least on his 1991 album *Make a Jazz Noise Here*).

<sup>7</sup> Zappa dedicates *The Real Frank Zappa Book* to, among a few others, Stephen Hawking (Seal 2013).

<sup>8</sup> James Borders also uses Manuel's criteria for postmodernism in analysing Zappa, finding that his 'early work in no way anticipates the ahistoricity, ironic detachment, and playful depthlessness characteristic of postmodern quotation' (2001, p. 120).



constants (Ashby 1999, p. 559).<sup>9</sup> For example, Zappa's use of the orchestra, 'refuses the beautiful sounds and particular "positive solutions" of nineteenth-century European romanticism', and Ashby draws this comparison with Schoenberg and his contemporaries' 'anti-fetishism' (1999, p. 564).<sup>10</sup> However, almost all of Zappa's work can be read as a direct appeal to the recognition and contextualisation of musical material, and we can explore how this creates aesthetic value rather than rejects it.

The first issue to be examined in regard to Zappa's referentiality is the use of mimesis, or imitation, in which sounds are introduced within his compositions that directly reference reality. Ranging in complexity, there are numerous examples of this in Zappa's music, both in a general as well as a direct sense. In terms of general reference, on the track 'I'm A Beautiful Guy', from *You Are What You Is*, the lyrics detail in the first person a vain, self-involved man who is talking to a woman to whom he is attracted. Initially a distorted guitar in a minor key leads the song, until the lyrics "Cause you want to try, try, try, some stupid game on me" are sung (1981). As this happens, the instrumentation changes to a synthesiser playing a chord sequence in a major key, parodying a game show theme song. The emphasis is on the word 'game', and the reference combines the vanity of the young man and the imagery of the shallow pop-culture game show format. Similarly, 'Don't Eat the Yellow Snow' from *Apostrophe (')*, also uses this technique, with various sound effects enhancing the lyrics, such as blowing wind and percussive effects (1974). This referencing goes beyond his own work and themes, directly bringing other works into his own fictional world. On the following track, 'Nanook Rubs It', a trumpet quotes the jazz standard 'Midnight Sun' when a disreputable fur-trapper/businessman, who is 'strictly from commercial' appears in the narrative (Wills 2015, p. 21).<sup>11</sup> Direct musical quoting is used, at times, even more obviously. The track 'Greggory Peccary' on *Studio Tan* (1978) uses the main motif from the track 'Chameleon' from Herbie Hancock's *Head Hunters*, an extremely popular jazz-fusion album (1973). The motif is played when the protagonist Greggory is followed by what the lyrics describe as 'slowly ageing, very hip young people' (1978), a reference to Zappa's view of the fans of modern jazz. On the instrumental 'Variations on the Carlos Santana Secret Chord Progression' from *Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar Some More* (1981), the chord progression played is a i-IV chord progression (G minor 7<sup>th</sup> to C dominant 7<sup>th</sup>), which features regularly in Santana's music, perhaps most famously on the *Abraxas* track 'Oye Como Va' (1971). On Zappa's recording, in contrast to the track's title, the only variation is rhythmic, with the entire piece made up of the two chords, and while initially improvising in the Dorian mode, this descends into more

<sup>9</sup> On modern music, John Cage writes, 'It goes without saying that dissonances and noises are welcome in this new music. But so is the dominant seventh chord if it happens to put in an appearance' (1968, p. 11).

<sup>10</sup> Ashby's argument concludes that Zappa's anti-fetishism can be 'characterized as belated modernism, a subculture within a subculture' (1999, p. 599), and while modernism can be identified in the *absence* of meaninglessness in his music, Ashby's argument is based around Zappa's use of the orchestra specifically, concluding with the observation that his orchestral work 'has no time for considerations of aesthetic value', which is not applicable to his broader discography (1999, p. 599).

<sup>11</sup> The phrase 'commercial' and the image of the faceless businessman are part of a reoccurring representation of the music industry throughout Zappa's discography, thought to stem from being told his music had 'no commercial potential', such as the tale of adolescent music making on 'Joe's Garage', in which the characters are ultimately offered a music deal by 'a guy from a company we can't name' (1979).

dissonant playing, with out of tune bends, feedback and increasingly fast and sporadic phrasing. This direct musical critique of other musicians had a real-world impact, and Carlos Santana said that at first he 'felt like it was a put-down', although he later found it humorous (Noble 1995).

The theory of engagement is defined by the 'activation of art in appreciative experience' (Berleant 2017, p. 135). These examples demonstrate direct appeals to the consciousness of the audience to understand the reference in relation to the music. They do not, however, fully account for the expressive capacity of Zappa's music. Instead their use is more akin to a 'resemblance theory', where meaning is founded in 'analogy or resemblance between a piece of music and a state of mind', and therefore reduces expression to resemblance (Scruton 1997, p. 146). This is applicable to the music of Zappa, as he deliberately references other works, including his own, to bring forth and combine existing concepts or themes in the mind of the listener, and the significance of this distinction when applied to Zappa's referentiality is that it separates representation from expression, and is instead based in what Scruton calls the 'sounds like' relation (1997, p. 147).

Much of what is considered expressive in music is the use of techniques and features that are reused by composers, and as Zappa states, 'There's stuff that you stick in there. There's ways to do it. It's a cheap shot' (Lyons and Friedman 1987a).<sup>12</sup> Zappa can also be held to use mimesis in the Adornian sense, in the 'manipulation of musical materials' in order to deliberately 'engage and indeed to render problematic their conventional usage' (Leppert 2005, p. 105). However, Adorno's ideal consequence, in which 'convention is denaturalized, returned to history, and rendered profoundly social', and ultimately 'releases its claim to the transcendental', does not appear to concern Zappa (Leppert 2005, p. 105).

As Zappa's referentiality demonstrates, material constitutes meaning and affords some expressive capacity; while an enduring element of his compositions, however, this does not explain the mode of expression when the musical material is entirely original. Zappa's earlier dismissal of emotion in music echoes Plato's critique of drama, in that an appeal to the emotions is imitation, and avoids engagement with the mind (Carroll 1999). Yet there are still cases in which Zappa seems to be expressing something. If Zappa believes that valuable musical expression is found when 'you are no longer thinking about operating a piece of machinery and can just project something emotional through the machinery', then it seems likely that the best place to look for this is in his instrumental compositions (Lyons and Friedman 1987a).

### Expression, xenochny and impossibility

One example of apparent emotional expression in Zappa's discography is the famous track 'Black Napkins' (1976), a four-minute guitar-led piece, comprising largely improvisation. It certainly contains an expressive element, with an overdriven guitar lead backed by frenetic drums, and more gentle keyboards and bass in 6/8 time. Ben Watson writes that the title refers to Zappa and his band being served black napkins alongside Thanksgiving dinner in Japan, and suggests that the intensity of the track emulates 'a western notion of Japanese extremity' in post-war American culture

<sup>12</sup> This echoes Hanslick, who critiqued emotion in music and held the view that musical material 'is not purely natural, raw material, but is historical' (Paddison 2001, p. 336).

(1995, p. 302). While this may be the inspiration for the track, it must be impossible to express in lyricless music to an audience unaware of the story. However, Watson's further observations help us to understand one format of expression in Zappa's music.

Another track on *Shut Up 'N Play Yer Guitar Some More* (1981) features a piece titled 'Pink Napkins', which is an improvised variation of 'Black Napkins'. Watson notes that the use of 'Pink' instead of 'Black' is a reference to what he calls 'its sound-world' (1995, p. 414). Watson is referring to the style, as instead of overdriven guitar and rapid drum fills, the guitar is clean and modulated, providing a shimmering sound, and the drums are played with a much softer and more reserved feel. While 'Pink' and 'Black' are not emotions in themselves, there is a notion here of using these colours and a particular instrumentation and style to refer to an expression.

Kendall Walton suggests that pieces of music are able to create 'fictional worlds' by inducing the use of the imagination (1994). This theory is applicable to the idea of Conceptual Continuity and musical expression because it returns us to the subjective necessity of music that Zappa has highlighted. It is through these 'fictional worlds', Walton argues, that music achieves a provocation of the imagination, and it is through this provocation that the listener experiences the emotion, rather than just its expression (1994, p. 55):

This accords with the idea that music sometimes portrays anguish, not by portraying behavioural expressions of anguish but more directly, and also with the thought that our (fictional) access to what is portrayed is not perceptual – we imagine introspecting or simply experiencing the feelings, rather than perceiving someone's expressing them.

In other words, the phenomenon that can occur is music's ability to induce an emotional response within the listener, rather than just the recognition of the portrayal of an emotion. As a result, an emotion can be experienced without the listener necessarily understanding its presentation, and therefore 'even when there is no definite character in music', the listener can still discern a particular emotional content (Walton 1994, p. 58). The important nuance of Walton's theory is that music can provoke 'feeling in certain ways', in that is not necessarily a specific feeling, but some sort of emotional response (1994, p. 55).

When listening to a particular piece of Zappa's music, and by situating it within Zappa's discography as a whole, the listener can identify recurring expressive themes. The constant manipulation of material, as we have seen in the case of 'Black Napkins', presents not a finished article, but instead, through reworking and revision in performance and recording, a transient and multifaceted product, with different iterations revealing different expressive contents.

Another technique, the examination of which may go some way to explaining this thesis, is what Zappa termed 'Xenochrony', which translates as 'alien time'. This was his practice of taking a guitar solo recording from one track and dubbing it onto another, which he began experimenting with in around 1971 (Ruhlmann 1997, p. 47). This has the effect of what Watson calls a 'spacious, delayed metrical scheme' (1997, p. 183). Watson writes that this had a 'liberating effect', a 'freedom from human control' and 'the possibility of undreamed-of combinations' (1995, p. 304).<sup>13</sup> Indeed,

<sup>13</sup> While noting the similarity between this and the avoidance of strict metre by free jazz musicians, Watson states that 'there was always a point where the musicians sought to resolve their meters', while Zappa does not (1997, p. 183).

Zappa himself said that its purpose was to achieve musical results that would not be possible live, as the limitations of complexity would prevent 'a good performance' (Marshall 1988). Instead of following any formal method that would fulfill usual expectation, Zappa would attempt to create the least likely or least predictable result, and through Xenochrony, even though all the parts used are of his own composition, the final musical work will take on an unpredicted form, even for him. There is a comparison to be made between Zappa's Xenochrony and that of the New Complexity school, originating in the 1980s. New Complexity composers sought not to define a specific method of composition, but instead, according to Brian Ferneyhough, to achieve authenticity through recognising 'the endless continuum of complexity uniting all things' (Toop 2010, p. 91). As the aim of the New Complexity school was to push the boundaries of composition, they were subsequently aware of its limitations (Toop 2010, p. 91):

One can, perhaps, detect a certain fatalistic tendency in this conception of complexity. In terms of both performance and perception, it is well aware that its voyages begin at the limits of possibility, and that its hope of transcendence is fragile.

To relate this approach to Zappa, as we have seen, he sought to push the boundaries of not only composition, but also of live performance and the normative musical experience.<sup>14</sup>

Xenochrony, and the editing process itself, particularly the use of *musique concrète* as on *Lumpy Gravy* (1967), is seen by Gardner as 'a kind of immanent critique, to do with the traditional aesthetic limits of the musical worlds in which Zappa operated' (2013, p. 73). This is certainly in keeping with Zappa's pessimistic observations of mass culture, with Zappa knowing he cannot escape mass culture, and perhaps not wishing to. Instead, the aim is to draw attention to it, to critique society from inside, and subvert any expectations or requirements placed on him or his music. Further to this, however, Zappa's editing, including Xenochrony, has a deeper effect on the musical experience, which brings us to the final technique examined here, which can be termed 'impossibility'.

Throughout his discography, Zappa uses extremely complicated musical composition and arrangement, and there is evidence for motivation beyond a mere interest in complexity. The most well-known of these is 'The Black Page', originally for solo percussion, with the earliest version recorded in 1976 and released on *Zappa In New York* (1978). One interpretation is that the monumental complexity of the piece 'posits unplayability as an aesthetic strength', perhaps suggesting an ironic comment on over-composed music (Durkin 2014, p. 228). However, it also raises the question of how, if engagement is what defines the musical experience for Zappa, an impossible work can be engaged with. An aesthetic of impossibility in music suggests that any intended meaning is to be considered beyond the aural experience. Durkin suggests that with complex notation and scores, the objective is to present a statement through the visual medium alone, arguing that 'because the

<sup>14</sup> Delville and Norris identify a 'maximalist fold' in Zappa's music, particularly in the composition 'The Girl In The Magnesium Dress' from *The Perfect Stranger*, through the 'infinite polyphonies of the piece', 'irregular rhythmic groupings' and 'overall absence of symmetry' (2007, p. 132). This, however, is not consistent throughout his compositions.

work demands to be considered, at least in part, as text, perhaps one does not even need to actually hear the music to “get it” (2014, p. 229).

Guitarist Steve Vai recalls how, during his audition for Zappa's band, Zappa asked him to play increasingly complicated technical exercises until they were physically impossible, and then mocked him (2011). Vai was subsequently given a place in the band, so perhaps this was simply Zappa challenging Vai, but it nonetheless suggests an interest in the physical boundaries of music. However, in the case of ‘The Black Page’, it is not actually impossible, just exceptionally complicated. Requiring serious musicianship and preparation, there is still a tangible musical outcome, so a better term would perhaps be ‘improbable’ or ‘unlikely’.

There is shared similarity with Xenochrony as the final result is one that challenges musical expectations. For example, while on tour in 1978, Zappa invited members of the audience to dance on stage during the performance of ‘The Black Page’ (Watson 1995, p. 334). As we have seen through an examination of Zappa's testimony, he treats the identification of music as a subjective event, in both its creation and its reception. The composer ‘wills’ the music into existence, and the listener decides whether what is being heard is music (1989, p. 141). The existence of works like the ‘The Black Page’ initially suggests, as Durkin argues, that ‘one does not even need to actually hear the music to “get it”’ (2014, p. 229). However, in *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, Zappa emphasizes the role of the real, aural experience of music (1989, p. 161):

When someone writes a piece of music, what he or she puts on the paper is **roughly the equivalent of a recipe** – in the sense that **the recipe is not the food, only instructions for the preparation of the food**. Unless you are very weird, you don't eat the recipe. If I write something on a piece of paper, I can't *actually* ‘hear’ it. I can conjure up visions of what the symbols on the page **mean**, and imagine a piece of music as it might sound in performance, but **that sensation is nontransferable; it can't be shared or transmitted**. It doesn't become a ‘musical experience’ in normal terms until ‘the recipe’ has been converted into **wiggling air molecules**.

Again, we see the emphasis on the musical experience over the musical artefact. For Zappa, there must be an attempt to realise the score, to provide an aural experience to then be understood by the listener. In combining recordings of live and studio performances, Zappa was able to create ‘an illusion of what appears to be an impossible display of musicianship’, which consequently ‘engages the listener in the dual process of immediacy and hypermediacy’, and it is the realisation of these seemingly impossible creations which is key to the appreciation of the music (Carr 2013b, p. 138). So, again, perhaps Zappa's impossibility is better understood as an interest in musical boundaries and the unexpected, unexplored, and unlikely musical phenomena.

If we consider Levinson's analysis of definitions of music, and his conclusion that phenomena that qualify as music are in some way ‘aimed at the *enrichment or intensification of experience* via engagement with organized sounds’, Zappa's above statement is certainly compatible with the music techniques we have examined (2011, p. 272). If these techniques are to afford the work an expressive capacity, it seems that Zappa's expression is rooted in his reuse of material, the subversion of expectation in both recording and performance, via once having created the work, reshaping it, and constructing a continuous and constantly changing world. In understanding Zappa's Conceptual Continuity, themes and motifs can be traced throughout his discography, and ultimately, meaning is achieved through the overall



network this creates. To use again the example of the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen, if only one of its uses is known, it provides little information. Yet once understood in relation to his wider material, it takes on meaning, as the workplace of the sinister Muffin Man, the factory where Joe ends up working as his dream of being a musician fails, and Zappa's own place of musical creation. Carr argues that Xenochrony 'invites the listener to consider how seemingly immediate-sounding performances are in fact mediated, and more importantly how these events are made real', therefore asking the audience to consider the manipulation of time and space inherent in the technique (2013b, p. 138). Alongside Zappa's desire to experiment with techniques that subvert the expected musical experience, he seemingly 'opposes realism', incorporates real-world topics and narratives in his work and 'is at least equally preoccupied with providing a mimetic and truthful account of the world as he perceived it' (2013b, p. 143).<sup>15</sup> In keeping with Walton's theory, Zappa's music encourages a provocation of the imagination, and for the listener, a central part of the experience of his music is to engage with the 'fictional world' that he creates.

### Zappa's social critique and the role of music

One remaining problem with Zappa's own aesthetic thesis as we have so far examined it is that he simultaneously places value on audience reception in qualifying music and stands as a well-known critic of mass culture. We are left with the question of how Zappa locates the audience appreciation of his work, whether he requires any existing musical experience or knowledge, and if there are any factors which discount certain individuals' opinion. In stating that music exists when 'the audience listening to it decides to perceive it as music', Zappa appears to refer beyond individual opinion to some variation of a consensus (1989, p. 141). Further to this, as we have seen, he was critical of objective definitions of music, particularly ones derived from any institutional hierarchy (Ashby 1999).

The issue here is that Zappa also routinely condemned popular culture. David Wragg suggests that Zappa's music exists in two conflicting spheres, and argues that there is a duality in Zappa's position as an avant-gardist who wanted to entertain and reject the bourgeois category of 'serious' music (2001, p. 209):

Since Zappa does, in fact, identify the operations of the capitalist market place in a way which is roughly comparable with Adorno, we are faced with the problem of how his identification *with* the culture industry allows him to stake out a critical position on popular music from *within* its limitations as 'entertainment'.<sup>16</sup>

In general terms, the culture industry restricts art through standardisation, and as a result, that which succeeds in the marketplace must conform to predetermined rules, and 'must already have been handled, manipulated and approved by hundreds of

<sup>15</sup> In the case of Zappa's use of parody, Schmalenberger emphasises the role of the informed audience in understanding and contextualising the complex references, indicating Zappa's 'intimate collaboration with his audience' (2018, p. 22).

<sup>16</sup> This position, and its negation of Adorno's, is also examined by Watson, who argues that an attempt to keep 'a critical consciousness alive in the marketplace', as 'an explicit degradation amidst the graded racks of available product', is impossible for Adorno (1995, p. 45). Nonetheless, as Wragg suggests, 'Zappa can be held to go along with Adorno's view on "entertainment"' (2001, p. 214).

thousands of people before anyone can enjoy it' (Adorno 2001, p. 67).<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, everything produced by the culture industry can be easily identified, and 'the consumer is encouraged to recognize what is offered to him' as the product 'asks to be identified', therefore finding its place within mass culture through its conforming to predetermined standards (Adorno 2001 p. 81). Adorno's critique of the culture industry argues that the fundamental motivation of any product is its economic success. One example of Zappa's rejection of this is his third album with The Mothers of Invention, *We're Only In It For The Money* (1968), with the title immediately drawing attention to, and foregrounding a critique of, the financial rather than artistic motivations of the music industry. As well as critiquing the music industry in his lyrics, the album cover for *We're Only In It For The Money* deliberately shows Zappa's 'disgust with the Beatles' (Watson 1995, p. 21). However, this critique is more specific: Watson suggests that Zappa's dislike of The Beatles, demonstrated by his parodying the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) album cover, was due to 'their adoption of the raggle-taggle bohemianism of San Francisco flower power', instead of a general attack on mass culture (Watson 1995, p. 21). Zappa seems to value the opinions of the general public in the appreciation of music, and his main critique is levelled at the culture industry and those engaged in its propagation, demonstrated by his disdain for The Beatles and their appeal to the popular trends of the time.<sup>18</sup>

If we take Adorno's view that 'the consumer is encouraged to recognize what is offered to him' as the product 'asks to be identified', establishing its place within mass culture by conforming to predetermined standards, Zappa subverts this through his use of conflicting musical genres, imagery such as the *Sgt. Pepper's* parody, and the techniques of Xenochrony and 'impossibility' (Adorno 2001, p. 81). If Zappa locates the musical experience socially, emphasising public opinion and dismissing any preordained or inherent value, then the existence and 'activation of art in appreciative experience' appears satisfactory in appraising Zappa's aesthetic thesis (Berleant 2017, p. 135). However, while Berleant's theory elucidates the notion of engagement as validating the work, Zappa maintains the importance of consensus, beyond that of the individual.

There is also the question of where Zappa locates value in the musical experience. If we consider the cognitivist view, 'that the artworld makes an indispensable contribution to processes of discovery, thinking, and learning', Zappa's statements provide conflicting accounts (Gracyk 2012, p. 180). On the one hand, Zappa's critique of 'REALLY GOOD MUSIC' from a period when 'composers were TRULY INSPIRED' and their music 'had a DEEP MEANING' indicates that in his view, it is the musical experience itself that is valuable, without reference to or need for any wider considerations (Ashby 1999, p. 564). When asked about the purpose of music in society, and Berkeley Symphony conductor Kent Nagano's view 'that the public is employing the composer to lead them, to show them a direction', Zappa replied, 'I don't think a composer has any function in society at all, especially in an industrial society', then adding sarcastically, 'all the good music's already been

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between Zappa's music and critical theory see Ben Watson's *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (1995).

<sup>18</sup> While Zappa appears critical of The Beatles in this instance, Costa suggests that there are similarities between The Beatles' later albums and Zappa's *Cruising with Ruben & the Jets* in that they both make 'references to older popular-music repertoires', both demonstrating a 'developed consciousness of its own tradition' (2020, p. 184).

written by people with wigs and stuff on' (Lyons and Friedman 1987a, b). In keeping with his fatalistic view of mass culture, Zappa goes on to critique emotion as primarily a marketable feature of music in the culture industry (Lyons and Friedman 1987a):

The performers and composers don't necessarily believe in what they're saying or what they're doing, but they know that if you write a song about love, it's got a 3000 percent better chance of going on the radio than if you write a song about celery. It's a buy and sell. And so the value system builds up from that.

Asked directly about the value of music, and if he would 'define the word "art" as a sensory training for common-sense perceptions', Zappa replies, 'I think the word "art" has been pretty much flogged into porridge' (Marshall 1988). He goes on to state that 'I don't think that training people to consume art in that sense makes them any more sensitive, or more highly developed or refined in any way', although the distinction is that Zappa is referring to the contemporary art industry (Marshall 1988).

While any inherent moral or emotional value in music seems at odds with what Zappa believed, however, this does not exhaust the cognitivist account. In fact, in the same interview, Zappa agrees that he does aim his music at an audience, considering whether its content will be understood, and being aware that there are limitations to what can be conveyed to an audience, explaining that he must 'conjure up in my brain an imaginary picture of who the guy is, how smart he is, how many references he might have that I can make through metaphorical references in a work' (Marshall 1988). In doing this, Zappa approaches these limitations and asks whether the implicit message will be understood, and if not, 'should it go in there anyway or should I change it and say it blunt' (Marshall 1988). Zappa recognises that the subjective reading of the music prevents total understanding, and that 'in order for them to get it all they have to know what I know', concluding that 'nobody gets 100% but if anybody ever got 60%, they'd be in big trouble' (Marshall 1988).

For example, consider the three acts of *Joe's Garage*, released in separate parts as *Act I* and *Act II & III* in 1979, and its use of a narrator in the character of The Central Scrutinizer. The opening track on *Joe's Garage Act I* is named after this character, and is introduced as a bureaucratic governmental machine that warns against the dangers of popular music, giving a speech detailing its role throughout the album (1979):

I bring you now a special presentation  
To show what can happen to you  
If you choose a career in music

Throughout the album, The Central Scrutinizer returns periodically to narrate the story of the main character Joe, painting a dystopian picture of a society in which music leads to moral corruption. At the close of *Act 1*, the Scrutinizer refers to Joe's story as an example of the dangers of rock and roll and youth culture (1979):

Joe says Lucille has messed his mind up  
But, was it the girl or was it the music?  
As you can see ... girls, music, disease, heartbreak  
They all go together ...

If the story of Joe is considered, Zappa is clearly referencing the issue of government censorship spurred on by moral panic regarding the themes of popular music. Six

years after the album's release, Zappa testified at the Parents' Music Resource Center senate hearing on 19 November 1985, arguing against their proposal that parents' groups could determine records as explicit; Zappa would use audio samples from the hearing on the track 'Porn Wars' from the album *Frank Zappa Meets The Mothers Of Prevention*, with the album title also being a reference to the Parents' Music Resource Center (1985). So Zappa indicates a non-cognitive view of musical appreciation, emphasising the subjective experience of music in stating that 'anything can be music' as long as 'the audience listening to it decides to perceive it as music', providing no necessity for cognitive value within the aesthetic experience. *Joe's Garage* seems to challenge this position, however (Zappa 1989, p. 141).

In the opening of 'Watermelon In Easter Hay', the Central Scrutinizer continues to narrate but begins to laugh, breaking character. At last, on the final track, 'A Little Green Rosetta', the Central Scrutinizer reveals himself to be Frank Zappa, by removing the vocal effects (1979):

And if this doesn't convince you that music causes big trouble  
Then maybe I should turn off my plastic megaphone  
And sing the last song on the album in my regular voice

Zappa deliberately exposes his position as narrator, and as the track continues, Zappa talks directly to the audience, and to other band members. The effect is similar to that of the close of a theatre performance, where the actors return to the stage to receive applause, removing any illusion that what just occurred was anything more than a story. This subversion of narrative structure certainly points towards Arthur Danto's statement that narrative no longer has an 'active role to play in the production of contemporary art', that contemporary art 'is produced in an art world unstructured by any master narrative at all' (1997, p. 48). However, there is still a moral at the end, as at the close of *Joe's Garage* the warnings of the Central Scrutinizer and the story of Joe are finally shown as meaningless and irrelevant as the illusion collapses, with the moral panic regarding music and pop culture shown to be nothing to worry about, and therefore a 'master narrative' of critique related to real world issues endures, negating the applicability of the postmodern account of narrative (Danto 1997, p. 48).<sup>19</sup> Zappa's discography continuously refers beyond itself, encouraging the recognition of what Zappa himself calls the 'journalistic aspect' (Marshall 1988). This aspect, however, while present, is not essential to the appreciation of music, with Zappa again echoing pessimism towards modern society, stating 'that if a person is truly intelligent, then they're going to find their own way, and they don't need me to tell them what to do', and the messages in his music aimed at those 'who are just teetering on the brink of being consciously intelligent, who will opt for it' (Marshall 1988). Therefore, the relevance of Berleant's theory is questioned, as Zappa seems uncommitted to either account of aesthetic value. His position is instead pluralistic: music maintains a significant cognitive function, or at least has the capacity to, but this is not an essential function for its appreciation.

<sup>19</sup> Zappa states that 'the whole idea' behind the album is 'the criminalization of America' (Marshall 1988), and had himself been legally challenged over the content of his music, including in a 1971 court case involving the cancellation of the *200 Motels* film promotional concert at the Royal Albert Hall, in which Zappa was confronted about his sexual lyrics, which were used against him to successfully justify the breach of contract and loss of earnings (Gray 1985).

## Conclusion

Suggesting any definitive qualities that form an aesthetic thesis for Frank Zappa is complex. His constant and deliberate subversion of musical expectations, and his repeated critique of any style or musical identity leads to an overarching assessment of his music being meaningless in the postmodern idiom. In contrast, I have shown that Zappa relies on a series of musical techniques through which to encourage, but not demand, recognition and engagement with extramusical content. Zappa frames his work, providing the right way to appreciate and listen, but believes that beyond that, it is ultimately up to the audience to decide its merit and qualify a work as music.

Instead of an inherent expressive capacity in music, Zappa views expression as largely drawn from socially recognised techniques, although expressive content is found in the interconnected totality of fragments as they relate to his wider discography. Zappa rejects aestheticism, instead finding value in being able to communicate to an engaged audience and recognising the limitations of this communication, but does not consider the communication of any content as an essential property of music. Zappa can be understood as a musician who is aware of his position within the culture market, but who also seeks to disrupt and circumvent its conditions. Fundamentally, it is the circumstances of the audience that decide the merits of the work: 'another thing you have to remember about all science and all art: it is impossible if you're starving to death' (Marshall 1988). Zappa presents his music as entertainment, resisting any alignment to the notion of art and its historical and elitist connotations. Instead, music is defined by the public's response, validated by appreciation, and ultimately, that is the limit at which the value of music can be found.

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