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The Intellectual Situation

The Information Essay

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JUST AS THIS IS AN AGE OF GREAT WEALTH inequality, it is also an age of great inequality of knowledge or, more exactly, factual information. For all its democratic potential, the fact-filled internet has only heightened the pre-Google asymmetry between those, on one side, loyal to Baconian methods of patient, inductive gathering of facts — the ways of the card catalog and the archive, of the analysis and evaluation of empirical data — and those, on the other side, who didn't need to read Foucault or the Frankfurt School to nurture a suspicion that positivist orders of knowledge mask a hierarchy of power in which they are meant to occupy the lowest rungs.

It's the Republican Party's deliberate disinformation strategy, more than any properties inherent in so-called information technologies, that has created these two parallel Americas. In one of them, weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, climate change is a patent hoax, and the Laffer curve is the most basic truth of economics. As for the inhabitants of the other universe — "the reality-based community" of old-fashioned skeptics and empiricists, frequenters of public and university libraries, readers of the *New York Times* and of Elizabeth Kolbert in the *New Yorker*, avid perusers of *Harper's Index* and WikiLeaks — we possess ever vaster quantities of mostly accurate facts, and not much sense of what to do with them. *Data data everywhere, and not a thought to think!* Outside of a hedge fund or the CIA, there aren't too many places where knowledge is power. Much of the time, intellectually and politically, knowledge is powerlessness.

The division between empiricists and fantasists is clearest in politics. But it's beginning to enter literature. Dickens in *Hard Times* made fun of Gradgrind — "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these girls and boys nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life" — and there is a way in which, until recently, information and what used to be called "imaginative literature" were usually understood to be addressing themselves to the right and left hemispheres of the brain instead of the political spectrum. Lately, however, there has also come to be a literary expression or embodiment of liberal empiricism, an emergent literary Gradgrindism that deserves analysis.

Apart from glimmerings in early forebears — Flaubert in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Dickens himself in *Bleak House*, a few chapters of *Moby-Dick*, and most famously Zola — the

informationization of literature became most clearly visible in what we've called "the research novel" of the 1980s and '90s: the fact-flaunting of writers as diverse as Sebald, Tom Wolfe, and Don DeLillo, whose brilliant but failed *Cosmopolis* gave us Eric Packer, a portrait of the artist as a hedge-fund tycoon and obsessive gatherer of facts. As James Wood observed in 2001, 'knowing about things' has become one of the qualifications of the contemporary novelist. Still, the research novel mostly subordinated its facts, even as these increased in density, to plot and character. What we begin to glimpse in recent years, especially in "literary nonfiction," is something different: the evolution of a style that resembles "information for information's sake," in something like the art for art's sake of 19th-century French decadence. What can this new literature of information be saying? The nature of facts is supposed to be that they speak for themselves. The nature of literature of course is the opposite — that it always means more than it says. Maybe the new literature of information can tell us something about our relationship to facts that the facts alone refuse to disclose?

The dossiers of documents, the montages of objects, in magazines like *Harper's* or *Cabinet*, stage first of all a deliberate refusal to use the information they display for any other purpose, like persuasion or synthesis. Information, they suggest, is the very thing itself, self-sufficiently eloquent — no embellishment or commentary required. These fact-heaps feed our appetite for what practitioners in these genres like to call reality, something said — by David Shields for instance — to be in short supply.

The absence in these texts of anything resembling argumentation is itself a tacit kind of advocacy. The assemblage of information (Wikipedia and WikiLeaks being collective examples of the form, and Jonathan Lethem's famous essay-of-quotations being an individual one) promotes the cause of Roland Barthes's open form, where meaning-making is fundamentally a readerly rather than writerly activity. It also brings to mind Walter Benjamin's over-cited proclamation that montage is "useless for the purposes of fascism" — because it doesn't predigest reality, in the manner of propaganda. The liberal empiricists' idea is that facts, naked and massed together like the human beings in those Spenser Tunick photographs, serve the cause of political and intellectual freedom, because facts don't tell you what to think. They report, you decide.

In the best of the empiricists' works, information for information's sake becomes information for art's sake. Consider the following passage from the opening of *Moby Duck*, Donovan Hohn's book-length essay, which, eyes wide open to the epic irony of its title, sets out to chart the ripple effects of a spilled shipment of rubber bath toys. Hohn ends up detailing a thoroughly engineered world, in which there's even an expert analyst to explain why the eyes painted on the rubber ducks are positioned like human eyes:

"We know that twelve of the colorful containers stacked above deck snapped loose from their moorings and tumbled overboard. We can safely assume that the subsequent splash was terrific, like the splash a train would make were you to drive it off a seaside cliff. We know that each container measured forty feet long and eight feet wide and may have weighed as much as 58,000 pounds, depending on the cargo, and that at least one of them — perhaps when it careened into another container, perhaps when it struck the

ship's stays, perhaps as it descended to high-pressure depths — burst open. We know that when it left port, this ill-fated container had contained 7,200 little packages; that, as the water gushed in and the steel box sank, all or most of these packages came floating to the surface; that every package comprised a plastic shell and a cardboard back; that every shell housed four hollow plastic animals — a red beaver, a blue turtle, a green frog, and a yellow duck — each about three inches long; and that printed on the cardboard in multicolored lettering were the following words: FLOATEES. THEFIRSTYEARS. FROM6MONTHS. EXPERT DEVELOPED. PARENT PREFERRED. 100% DISHWASHER SAFE.”

This paragraph, like many of the 117 others in the essay, is as much concerned with telling the story of what we know as it is with recreating the moment the ducks went overboard. The precision of weights and measures illustrates several propositions simultaneously: 1) these are knowable facts, obtainable by research; 2) the author has done the research, establishing his authority as an agent of knowledge, even as his gracious “we know” makes it seem as though the facts he’s assembled are commonly available knowledge, not the result of a well-earned expertise; so that 3) what authority he has derives from this ability to let common facts speak through him. But there’s also something else going on.

The numbers Hohn cites, discrete and intelligible, though large, hint at a much more enormous scale, which might be called “the infinitely large,” which in turn evokes what we know of the total daily goings-on of global manufacture and transport (although it’s never directly said that we know this, and surely we know it in a different way than “we know” what it says on cartons of rubber animals). Not only is the globalized world infinitely large, then; it is infinitely small, bounded by a single logic. Dishwasher safety is the perfect bathetic note for Hohn to strike about these rubber duckies, not just because of the easily available irony — safe for dishwashers and kids, destructive of the world in which those kids will grow up! — but because our lives are poised between these two scales: a hyper-controlled small private space, fit for a tale of the tub, and the macro-space of the oceans, where Leviathan — or Capital — sports and dives as the oceans acidify and a new continent of plastic assembles itself in the Pacific.

Hohn’s OCD style builds an almost perfectly detailed miniature universe. He even reproduces most of the classified ad section of a small-town Alaskan newspaper in which news of the washed-up bath creatures first appears. Yet as he reconstructs the world out of carefully salvaged bits of knowledge, an epistemological anxiety overtakes both him and the reader: who knows what to do with all this knowledge? Such data points plot no arc of Enlightenment, in which the more we know the freer and more capable we become. Instead, the more we know the more helpless we seem. Hohn writes movingly of the beach combers he meets on his research excursions, and appears to identify himself, the fact collector, with their pursuit, like Milton’s Jesus comparing philosophers to “children gathering pebbles on the shore.” The impression you get is of fragments from some unknowable, exploded whole.

This disconnect between knowledge and power can be sensed even more clearly in another book-length essay, John D'Agata's *About a Mountain* (note the flatly empirical title), which is also about nuclear waste disposal, teen suicide, and the general propensity for human self-annihilation as expressed by Las Vegas. A typical passage:

"If the temperature of the Sun is, as *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons* estimates it is, about 25 million degrees Fahrenheit, and if five times that amount is 125 million degrees Fahrenheit, and if the temperature at which a human body combusts is 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit, and if such a blast of heat would reach their bodies, ten miles away from the site of detonation, in approximately four and a half millionths of one second, and if pain impulses in the human body are believed to travel 382 feet per second, and if all of this is shorter than the time it takes to climb by elevator or to climb by foot or to climb inside one's own private mind above the city's lights—looking down at them from the stratosphere for one final view—then it is more than likely that in the event of a nuclear strike on the nearby National Stockpile, just a few miles away from anyone in Vegas, the minds of most Las Vegas residents in the path of that blast would literally not know that they were being destroyed until sixteen hundredths of one second afterward."

D'Agata, like Hohn, embraces what might be called "the empirical sublime." Unlike the traditional, Kantian sublime, which supposedly restored us to a knowledge of our own freedom of will and mind in the face of the infinite and amazing, here the entire vast machine of knowledge serves only to remind us that we're trapped within an inescapable totality. Most of the aspects of life D'Agata focuses on are aspects that we know a lot about, without knowing enough for instruction to make a difference. No one, it turns out, knows of a safe way to dispose of nuclear waste that, in some cases, will remain radioactive for up to a million years, and, ultimately, as much as we know about the mind, we can't prevent certain people from killing themselves. It seems telling that both D'Agata and Hohn's books are ecological in theme, ecology being the realm in which knowledge of how to avert disaster has had least effect on public policy. The mastery of facts, these books suggest, will only get us to the point at which information turns into poetry, which notoriously makes nothing happen.

At times, this has been D'Agata's stated intention. He does not claim that the art essay, like Sidney's poetry, aims to delight *and* instruct. "Do we read nonfiction in order to receive information, or do we read it to experience art?" he asks in *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, another omnium-gatherum that suggests the answer to be the latter. Except, as D'Agata shows, "to receive information" can be equivalent to the experience of art. It's difficult to read works like *About a Mountain* and *Moby Duck* and not see them as superbly unavailing artifacts of a culture that doesn't know what to do with everything it knows (while the know-nothings know just what to do). These are "Mandarin" texts, in the sense that they are written for the enjoyment of a certain group of people expected to appreciate the artfulness of the collected information, and breathe a quiet sigh of despair at a form achieving its natural limits. They flatter the education of their readers, who are expected to draw the right conclusions from all those ducks in a row. Harsher notes of outrage, or clarion calls for political action or self-improvement, would be jarringly out of place in this kind of essay.

Writers the likes of D'Agata and Hohn have revealed to us what previously only some cracked poet could have conjured, namely the despair experienced by the facts themselves as they go to waste in a society that won't act on them — that could save itself, but refuses to learn how. Still one misses, in these ironic Gradgrinds, the generous anger of Dickens. Artists and essayists should not be expected to carry alone the burden of combating a disinformation machine of the scale and complexity of the new Know-Nothing Party. Yet even the most explicitly political acts of data gathering and collecting, like WikiLeaks, can succumb to a contemporary ideology of the self-sufficiency of information. This involves a mistaken expectation that if all known knowns, in Rumsfeldian parlance, were somehow made democratically available, it would trigger a chain of events, like D'Agata's nuclear stockpile explosion, leading to justice without the pangs of revolution. (What passivity the fantasy of revelation allows us!) But information alone, like technology alone, won't lead us into a promised postpolitical land of enlightened technocracy. Ideological battles must still be won or lost: "The Tigers of Wrath are wiser than the Horses of Instruction." (It's another fact that at current rates of attrition the last wild tiger will die in 2023.)

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THIS IS TOTALLY INFURIATING. If we wanted to see a computer beat everybody, we would have watched chess. And why has all the trivia gotten so — unimportant? You used to be able to learn stuff from *Jeopardy!*, like: *Who was Ayn Rand?*

So we're up, tripping over feet, and out the double metal doors. There's a red "On Air" light illuminated above the studio down the hall. Judging by the din coming from that direction, nobody with a headset is going to notice if we slip in and find a place — like, here, in the stadium seating on the right, next to this guy who's singing along to the theme

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Whoa! Those blacks and purples, and the rotating lights, and the crazy audience, it's like some kind of nightclub, crossed with high school choir, all in an S&M dungeon. And that blond guy! Wasn't he a huge rock star a few years ago — or, like, a host of *Entertainment Tonight*?

A redheaded fireplug from Tennessee has been called as the next contestant. She's dancing around, while her mother and sister sit on the platform blinking. "Tina Honig, get ready to play *Don't Forget the Lyrics!* Your choice, in the category 'The Sixties,' is Charles Manson's 'Your Home Is Where You're Happy' or Marvin Gaye's 'Inner City Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler)'! The band's going to play, you're going to start singing, and when the music stops, you're gonna fill in some lyrics and win that five thousand dollars! Now, what's it going to be?"

"Well," says Tina, "I'm really into the music of serial murderers, but I kind of prefer Manson's earlier work. And Marvin... like my boyfriend was always singing this 'life's unfair' soul stuff, he played that song constantly — and I downloaded his whole iTunes to

my computer before I dumped his ass! So I'm going with 'Makes Me Wanna Holler'!
Wooooo!"

"All right! Ricky Minor — hit me!"

A sinuous bass line and rattling snare emanate from the band.

Inflation — no chance
To increase — finance
Bills pile up — sky high
-----.

"Six words to fill in, Tina! For five thousand dollars!"

"OK . . . Finally got a piece of the pie-ie-ieeee!"

"Ooh . . . sorry. That's from the Jeffersons theme. And seven words. How many volts do we have for Tina?"

BZZZZZZSHZZZAT! Electricity makes a blue coil around the poor woman as she falls writhing to the stage. Her hair smokes.

"That looked like five thousand volts, audience! Whoa, we are not playing! Who's our next contestant?"

We poke our seatmate. "Is this normal?"

"Ratings were low, so they brought in some elements from the Japanese edition," he pants, not taking his eyes off center stage, from which the stretcher-bearers are now departing. He bellows: "More Buck Owens! More Jandek!" +

Wall of Sound

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The Editors

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TWO YEARS AGO, AT THE NADIR OF THE financial crisis, the urban sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh wondered aloud in the *New York Times* why no mass protests had arisen against what was clearly a criminal coup by the banks. Where were the pitchforks, the tar, the feathers? Where, more importantly, were the crowds? Venkatesh's answer was the iPod: "In public spaces, serendipitous interaction is needed to create the 'mob mentality.' Most iPod-like devices separate citizens from one another; you can't join someone in a movement if you can't hear the participants. Congrats Mr. Jobs for impeding social change." Venkatesh's suggestion was glib, tossed off — yet it was also a rare reminder, from the quasi-left, of how urban life has been changed by recording technologies.

The concern that recorded music promotes solipsism and isolation isn't new. Before the invention of the record and the gramophone (1887), the only form of listening people knew was social; the closest thing to a private musical experience was playing an instrument for yourself, or silently looking over a score. More often, if you had the means, you got to sit in the panopticon of the concert hall, seeing and being seen to the accompaniment of Verdi — an experience most fully described by Edith Wharton in the opening scene of *The Age of Innocence* (1920), just as it was going out of style. With mechanical reproduction came the hitherto unimaginable phenomenon of listening to multi-instrumental music *by yourself*. How, a contributor to *Gramophone* magazine asked in 1923, would you react if you stumbled upon somebody in the midst of this private rapture? It would be "as if you had discovered your friend sniffing cocaine, emptying a bottle of whisky, or plaiting straws in his hair. People, we think, should not do things 'to themselves,' however much they may enjoy doing them in company."

If solitary listening suggested to some people a scandalous analogy with other forms of self-pleasure, it led others to proclaim the emancipation of music from the vagaries of performance and the distractions of the visual. Even stodgy Adorno praised liberation by vinyl: "Shorn of phony hoopla, the LP . . . frees itself from the capriciousness of fake opera festivals." Lighting a joint, the narrator of *Invisible Man* (1952) discovered a "new analytic way of listening to music," which revealed to him the layers of racial meaning embedded in the melodic flights of Louis Armstrong's cornet. (Jazz, though principally an art of live improvisation, fed on its own recordings, which captured nuances of rhythm and timbre,

pitch and dynamics, better than notation ever could, such that Max Roach would later declare records to be the “textbooks” of jazz.)

But it wasn't only solitary hyper-listening that recording facilitated. By 1960, recorded popular music had begun, in mysterious ways, to promote new social movements. Former Black Panther Bobby Seale recounts in his memoir how Huey Newton developed an elaborate reading of Dylan's “Ballad of a Thin Man” as an allegory of race: “This song Bobby Dylan was singing became a very big part of that whole publishing operation of the Black Panther paper. And in the background, while we were putting this paper out, this record came up and I guess a number of papers were published, and many times we would play that record.” The song wasn't overtly political but its mood of stately menace seems to have insinuated itself into the politics of the Panthers.

The '60s were a decade of both mass protests and mass concerts, and this was more than a coincidence. Barbara Ehrenreich has suggested that the roots of second-wave feminism could be found in the tens of thousands of shrieking girls who filled arenas and ballparks at the Beatles' American stops, from the Hollywood Bowl to Shea. These girls, unladylike, insistent, were going to scream for what they wanted. Social change drove musical experimentation, and — more remarkably — vice versa. The music of this era was — it's worth repeating — an incitement to social change. It was the sound of not going reflexively to war, of mingling across class and racial lines, of thinking it might be all right to sleep around a little, of wanting to work a job that didn't suck. When, recently, the Beatles' discography became available on iTunes, what shot to the top of the charts wasn't “A Day in the Life” but “Twist and Shout” — a trivial and infectious song Lennon and McCartney didn't even write. The song's fantastic energy has deeper sources than its I-IV-V chord progression or even John Lennon's yearning, cocky timbre, as evident in its uncanny and still mysterious ability to have rendered an entire stadium of boys and girls ecstatic, senseless, desperate — the same boys and girls who would end the war in Vietnam.

Of course the radical hopes of the '60s collapsed. The highest-rated YouTube comment on a video of Joan Baez singing “We Shall Overcome” manages to be both smug and glum: “Though we obviously failed, I am so glad that I am of a generation that believed we could make a difference.” By the early '70s, popular music had more or less forfeited its capacity to promote social movements. From then on its different varieties would be associated with defining lifestyle niches, consumer habits, and subcultural affiliations. In this way the make-it-new modernist imperative, which seized pop music several decades late, came to seem little different from the program of advertisers launching fresh product lines. Jadedness swept pop music enthusiasts, many of whom, heartbroken by their brief glimpse of collective life, would discount the whole era of the '60s as history's cunning preparation for a descent into hellish consumerism. Welcome to dystopia, a counterfeit heaven where music plays all the time.

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THE FIRST TO RING THE ALARM about the omnipresence of recorded music were classical music snobs who, as part of their contracted duties as university professors, had to spend time on college campuses. “This is being written in a study in a college of one of the great American universities,” wrote George Steiner in 1974. “The walls are throbbing gently to the beat of music coming from one near and several more distant amplifiers. The walls quiver to the ear or to the touch roughly eighteen hours per day, sometimes twenty-four.” Allan Bloom picked up the beat in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987): “Though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music. . . . Nothing is more singular about this generation than its addiction to music.” MC Steiner: “It matters little whether it is that of pop, folk or rock. What counts is the all-pervasive pulsation, morning to night and into night, made indiscriminate by the cool burn of electronic timbre.” The only historical analogy Bloom could think of was to the Wagner cult of the late 19th century. Yet even world-conquering Wagner appealed to a limited class, who could only hear his works in opera houses. By contrast the music of the late-20th-century world was truly ubiquitous. Steiner: “When a young man walks down a street in Vladivostok or Cincinnati with his transistor blaring, when a car passes with its radio on at full blast, the resulting sound-capsule encloses the individual.” MC Bloom: “There is the stereo in the home, in the car; there are concerts; there are music videos, with special channels devoted to them, on the air, nonstop; there are the Walkmans so that no place — not public transportation, not the library — prevents students from communing with the Muse, even while studying.” Steiner: “What tissues of sensibility are being numbed or exacerbated?”

Yadda, yadda. Yet Bloom and Steiner were right! In fact they had no idea how right they would become. If the spread of home stereo equipment in the 1970s, followed by that of portable devices (the boombox, the Walkman, briefly the Discman), brought music to the masses in a new way, digitization and the iPod have made recorded music even more plentiful and ubiquitous. The fears in Bloom’s time that cassette tapes would bring down the music industry are quaint now, in the face of trillions of bytes of music traded brazenly over the internet every minute. So too does the discmania of record collectors pale in the face of digital collections measured in *weeks* of music. A DJ’s crate of 100 LPs amounts to about three days of straight listening; your standard sixty-gigabyte iPod, fifty days. Has anyone these days listened to all of their music, even once through?

Nobody knows how much music we listen to, since so often we’re not even listening. The American Time Use Survey, performed every two years by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, throws up its hands. Does music playing in the background at a café count? Music in a film? Music played to drown out other music? Music played while reading, writing, cleaning, exercising, eating, sleeping — all of this has to count in some way. Stumbling into a college dorm now to ask the kids to turn it down, Steiner would find them all earmuffed with headphones as they stare at their computers, each listening to his own private playlist while something else plays on the stereo loud enough for a communal spirit to be maintained. And this is true not only of colleges but the world at large.

All this has to mean something, sociologically. The most important *formal* effect of early-20th-century recording — ultimately with sociological consequences — was the

breakdown of borders between genres of music. From the Lomaxes bringing Delta blues up from the South to the recording of songs from the sugarcane fields outside Havana, not to mention Javanese gamelan and Hungarian folk tunes, recording transformed listeners' expectations of what — and who — they could be hearing. Rock music took this pluralism onboard quickly enough, from its obvious debts to African-American blues to the appearance of electronic music pioneer Karlheinz Stockhausen on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's*. Meanwhile atonal music began to appear in the soundtracks to films, where it became approachable; a million times more people have heard Schoenberg's formal innovations in movies (where they signify "creepy") than at concerts. The iPod has merely accelerated this development, so that an ordinary collection of tracks contains sounds from all over, including many that would be inconceivable without such cultural cross-pollination. It wouldn't be strange to find a personal playlist with the usual Kanye tracks side by side with the dance outfit oOoOO or the Harry Partch–inspired punk band Micachu and the Shapes, not to mention ethnic minority choral music from Guizhou or Tuareg guitar rock anthems from northern Niger, all of which (who knows?) might be influencing one another, thanks largely to the ease and accessibility with which such music can be heard and traded.

On the consumer level, something different — and contradictory — has happened. If it's easier than ever to listen to other people's music, it's also more tempting than ever to do so all alone. Walkman-listening never lost the stigma of the juvenile; the sophistication — and expense — of the iPod have made adulthood safe for solipsism as never before. What does it mean for us, on the listening end, as we pad around the world with our iPods, trying to keep those shitty white earbuds from falling out of our ears? Public music criticism — a wasteland — isn't much help. It mainly focuses on individual works or single performances, when it isn't giving us drooling profiles of artists. This has nothing to do with our current mode of listening, which only rarely obsesses on particular works or genres, let alone worships particular figures. In light of the epoch-making iPod, we need a way to find out what all this music listening is doing to us, or what we're doing with it.

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IN THE 20TH CENTURY, the two most considered attempts to connect music and society were those of the philosopher Theodor Adorno and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Among the main philosophers of Western music — Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard — Adorno knew the most about music and worked hardest to figure out its relationship to history. For Adorno, it wasn't just that historical forces circumscribed the production and reception of musical works; it was that historical conflicts appeared in music in mediated form. Thus a seemingly autonomous, nonrepresentational, and nonlinguistic art transfigured the world and returned it to the listener in a way that oriented him ideologically. The huge melodic conflicts animating Beethoven's symphonies and the brassy, thumping triumphs with which they concluded announced the era of bourgeois ascendancy after the French Revolution. The "emancipation of dissonance" in the atonal

works of Schoenberg suggested a crisis of the bourgeoisie in which the self-evidence of tonality, like that of human progress, began to crack up.

Infamously, when society began to produce new forms of music that accompanied unrest by workers and students, the old Marxist turned a deaf ear. His essays on jazz and pop music are notorious classics of “bad” Adorno. The syncopations of bebop were only a mirage of liberty, and the relentless repetitiveness of rock and roll a virtual embodiment of a reified, history-less, mythological consciousness. The problem here was not exactly snobism or even unconscious racism (despite the fixation of cultural studies programs on Adorno’s failure to “get” jazz — the titanic commitments of the ’60s reduced to a scholarly tic). It’s that Adorno seemed only to understand and accept a model of listening in which music solicits and rewards the listener’s whole attention. This is a musical sociology of the concert hall and the study, not the street, store, workplace, block party, or demonstration. From its standpoint, contemporary music of less-than-Schoenbergian melodic complexity can only seem simple, in the sense of dumb.

Bourdieu was a kind of anti-Adorno, his sociology a negation of the traditional aesthetics Adorno had mastered. Bourdieu practiced a deliberate and heroic philistinism. He seemed to know virtually nothing about music; it’s not even clear he liked it. “Music is the ‘pure’ art par excellence,” he wrote in *Distinction*. “It says nothing and it has *nothing to say*.” Adorno would have recognized this ostensibly timeless aperçu as an historically specific statement, the product of a whole century (the 19th) of debate over precisely this question: What and how does music communicate? Yet out of this falsehood Bourdieu came to a startling conclusion, the truth of which we’ve all had to concede: “Nothing more clearly affirms one’s ‘class,’ nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music.” In the mid-1960s, he conducted a giant survey of French musical tastes, and what do you know? The haute bourgeoisie loved *The Well-Tempered Clavier*; the upwardly mobile got high on “jazzy” classics like *Rhapsody in Blue*; while the working class dug what the higher reaches thought of as schmaltzy trash, the Blue Danube waltz and Petula Clark. Bourdieu drew the conclusion that judgments of taste reinforce forms of social inequality, as individuals imagine themselves to possess superior or inferior spirit and perceptiveness, when really they just like what their class inheritance has taught them to. *Distinction* appeared in English in 1984, cresting the high tide of the culture wars about to tsunami the universities. Adorno had felt that advanced art-music was doing the work of revolution. *Are you kidding, Herr Professor?* might have been Bourdieu’s response. And thus was Adorno dethroned, all his passionate arguments about history as expressed in musical form recast as moves in the game of taste, while his dismissal of jazz became practically the most famous cultural mistake of the 20th century.

Bourdieu’s findings led to a wave of academic self-loathing disguised as “critique.” Yet he too was right, of course: taste is connected to education and class position, and institutions designed to “cultivate taste” aid class reproduction. But if the big problem with Bourdieu’s method—a disavowal of the history of musical aesthetics—was the thing that made it possible, it still remained a big problem. *Distinction* deliberately bracketed history and form and their interrelationship in the process of taste formation. As a result, his readings of particular works were frequently rudimentary and ad hoc: music appealed

to either bourgeois formalist “purity” or working-class primitive sensuousness. As a snapshot of a particular historical moment, this was tremendously revealing—but stationary; it couldn’t account for changes in the social uses to which people put works of music. Adorno, for his part, could hardly perceive those social uses, except for two: to serve as banal “aural wallpaper” or, more rarely, to lay bare the truth of history.

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IN ADORNO AND BOURDIEU we have two radically different perspectives, inhabiting each other’s blind spots, with a convergence in both authors’ political sympathy with socialism. We can agree with Adorno that music has immanent, formal properties that are connected, somehow, to large-scale historical forces. And we can agree with Bourdieu that musical taste is an instrument in the legitimation of class hierarchies.

So Bourdieu is helpful when we ask what the iPod has wrought in the realm of musical classification. The social world of opera-going may be headed the way of polar bears and ice caps, but *society* hasn’t disappeared. A hierarchical social world has managed to absorb the omnipresence of music pretty effortlessly. You can see this in the violent intra-genre squabbling that animates indie rock circles, and in the savage takedowns of avant-garde opera performances in art-music magazines (and the *New Criterion*: when will it die?). Meanwhile the proliferation of genre names represents an ever finer process of social differentiation, each genre’s acolytes determining (as Serge Gainsbourg put it) *qui est “in,” qui est “out.”* The rise of generic distinctions has lately reached a climax of absurdity, such that we can name off the top of our heads: house, witch house, dub, dubstep, hardstep, dancehall, dancefloor, punk, post-punk, noise, “Noise,” new wave, nu wave, No Wave, emo, post-emo, hip-hop, conscious hip-hop, alternative hip-hop, jazz hip-hop, hardcore hip-hop, nerdcore hip-hop, Christian hip-hop, crunk, crunkcore, metal, doom metal, black metal, speed metal, thrash metal, death metal, Christian death metal, and, of course, shoegazing, among others. (Meanwhile a thousand years of European art music is filed under “classical.”) Some people listen to some of these; others, to only one; and others still, to nearly all. And this accomplishes a lot of handy social sorting, especially among the young, whenever music is talked about or played so that more than one person can hear it.

At the same time, modes of listening seem to be moving toward the (apparent) opposite of micro-differentiation: a total pluralism of taste. This has become the most celebrated feature of the iPod era. “I have seen the future,” Alex Ross, music critic of the *New Yorker*, wrote in 2004, “and it is called the Shuffle — the setting on the iPod that skips randomly from one track to another.” Here the iPod, or the digitization of musical life it represents, promises emancipation from questions of taste. Differences in what people listen to, in a Shuffled world, may have less and less to do with social class and purchasing power. Or, better yet, taste won’t correlate to class distinction: the absence of taste will. As certain foodies score points by having eaten everything — blowfish, yak milk tea, haggis, hot dogs — so the person who knows and likes all music achieves a curious sophistication-through-

indiscriminateness. The music magazine *The Wire*, which celebrates with equal abandon Cecil Taylor's pianism and Nicki Minaj's *first things first, I'll eat your brains*, represents the best product of this attitude. But the would-be escape from "distinction" more often becomes the highest and most annoying form of distinction there is.

Adorno would be more at home analyzing the uses to which the omnipresence of music has been put in the service of "the administered life" — the background muzak and easy listening, the somehow consolingly melancholy shopping pop, that we hear in malls and supermarkets almost without noticing. "I do love a new purchase!" says the Gang of Four outright — while all the other songs merely insinuate it. Around the holidays, Banana Republic will alternate familiar hits like George Michael's "Last Christmas" with pounding C-grade techno, lulling you into a state of sickly nostalgia before ramping up your heart rate — a perfect way to goose you into an impulse buy. So too, as Adorno would have been unsurprised to find out, has music become a common way for people to get through the workday. Your local café's barista may literally depend on Bon Iver's reedy lugubriousness to palliate a dreary job as you depend on coffee. *Produce! Consume! Work! Buy! Cope! Endure!* These can seem the common messages underlying the pluralistic proliferation of music.

On the other hand, Adorno's prejudice against empirical research — as Brecht said, Adorno "never took a trip in order to see" — meant that he never understood how music could be used for different purposes by the very people it was supposed to manage and administer. People not only use music to help them swallow an unpalatable life, but to enhance and enlarge their capacities for action. If a bass line of a standard twelve-bar blues, repeating with machinelike regularity, keeps you clicking through the data entry sheet, a sharp post-punk squall can move you to sabotage and revolt, and vice versa. Of course music can also move you in less obviously political ways, filling you with romantic enthusiasm or unshakable sorrow. Then there are all the uses of music that are beneath good and evil, that neither shore up nor undermine the system. In utopia, as under late capitalism, there will still be a lot of cooking and cleaning to do, as well as long drives to take in our electric cars. These slightly boring parts of life are made less so by listening to slightly boring music.

If Adorno, in his emphasis on the immanent unfolding of musical works as cognition, didn't understand the mixed uses of distracted listening, Bourdieu missed something even more important. His empiricism blinded him to the utopian potential in music. You would never guess, to read his books, that they were published *after* the '60s, an extraordinary period that demonstrated the capacity of musical taste to break down as well as reinforce social boundaries. Shoveled at us now as commodities played ad nauseam on Clear Channel, the "classic rock" of the '60s no longer discloses its role in the social movements of that time. And yet — Hendrix, Joplin; Coltrane, Davis, Coleman; the Stones, the Beatles; and Riley, Young, Reich — even if they didn't sing a single revolutionary word, even if they chastised you for "carrying pictures of Chairman Mao," they were all either directly involved with social movements or deeply implicated in them.

THE GREAT 1990S MAGAZINE the *Baffler* spent its first half decade analyzing how the culture industry managed, with increasing success, to recognize new musical trends and package them and sell them back at a markup to the people who'd pioneered them. The *Baffler* knew, with Bourdieu, that "cool" was a crock; it knew, with Adorno, that the political evacuation of music would turn back onto the music itself and destroy it aesthetically. Just turn on the radio if you don't believe them. The *Baffler* looked back to the punk scene of the early '80s for inspiration; it spoke up for small labels that sold music to local constituencies. If you couldn't get what you wanted on the radio, you would have to find it left of the dial — and keep looking over your shoulder for the man.

The danger now is different. The man no longer needs a monopoly on musical taste. He just wants a few cents on the dollar of every song you download, he doesn't care what that song says. Other times he doesn't even care if you pay that dollar, as long as you listen to your stolen music on his portable MP3 player, store it on his Apple computer, send it to your friends through his Verizon network. To paraphrase Yeltsin's famous offer to the Chechens, take as much free music as you can stomach. We'll see where it gets you.

If recording and mechanical reproduction opened up the world of musical pluralism — of listening to other people's music until you and they became other people yourselves — digital reproduction expanded that pluralism to the point where it reversed itself. You have all the world's music on your iPod, in your earphones. Now it's "other people's music" — which should be very exciting to encounter — as played in cafés and stores that is the problem. In any public setting, it acquires a coercive aspect. The iPod is the thing you have to buy in order not to be defenseless against the increasingly sucky music played to make you buy things: the death spiral of late capitalism in sonic form.

One radical option remains: abnegation — some "Great Refusal" to obey the obscure social injunction that condemns us to a lifetime of listening. *Silence*: the word suggests the torture of enforced isolation, or a particularly monkish kind of social death. But it was the tremendously congenial avant-garde gadabout John Cage who showed, just as the avalanche of recorded music was starting to bury us, how there was "no such thing as silence," that listening to an absence of listener-directed sounds represented a profounder and far more heroic submission than the regular attitude adopted in concert halls — a willingness to "let sounds be," as he put it. Such were Cage's restrictions that he needed to herd everyone into their seats in order to make his point — an authoritarian gesture toward an anarchic result. But now in conditions of relative freedom we can listen to *4'33"* on record, or on our iPods, and the change in attention it demands is exactly the opposite of our endless contemporary communing with music, our neurotic search for the right sound, the exact note that never comes. What if we tried to listen to nothing? Silence is the feature of our buzzing sound-world we enjoy least, whose very existence we threaten to pave over track by track. Silence is the most endangered musical experience in our time. Turning it up, we might figure out what all our music listening is meant to drown out, the thing we can't bear to hear. +

The Intellectual Situation

Egypt Notebook

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Ken Kalfus

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Ken Kalfus was in Egypt last year researching a novel. In the wake of recent events, we asked to see his travel notes.

Cairo

Family-run hotel on the top floor of an eight-story commercial building, with a balky elevator. Terrace looking west, past a dun sliver of Nile, into the sunset haze. Venus is the evening star, burns hard through the smog; I impress one of the sons by identifying it in Arabic, *Zuhra*, and then running through the names of the other planets, which I've learned for my novel. This about exhausts my Arabic.

Overwhelming impression of Cairo is not its antiquity, its Easternness, or the heat. It's the traffic: chaotic, brutal, oppressive, worse than Moscow or Mexico City. Sidewalks narrow, broken-up, and obstructed by parked vehicles. Very few stoplights, almost no crosswalks, no pedestrian right of way, the cars just plow ahead. To cross the street I position myself on the other side of an Egyptian, preferably a woman, preferably a woman who looks like somebody's mother, and I cross when she does, hoping she'll block for me. Pedestrian rights are a key indicator of a society's respect for the individual, also the power relations between the haves and carless have-nots. In my walks I find a single pedestrian crossing signal; when it turns green, the little man-figure runs for his life. At Tahrir Square, the pink sandstone of the Cairo Museum. Not sure I want to spend a whole afternoon inside, it's not relevant to my book; the deciding factor is that it's not worth trying to cross the road to get there.

An afternoon in the Islamic Quarter, writing in a friendly outdoor restaurant in the plaza by the mosque where the head of the Prophet's grandson, Hussein, is said to be buried. Vendors in the plaza, kids scampering, holiday mood. Al-Hussein lies directly across from the 10th-century Al-Azhar Mosque. A lovely, restorative setting, if not for the fast-moving highway that slices between them.

Watch out for the cars; keep hydrating. Everyone seems to be carrying a plastic water bottle. No signs of recycling, millions of bottles pile up every day. About 20 cents for 250 ml, 50 cents for the liter. I read in the paper that Egypt's population will outpace its water supply by 2018; also that the four countries in the Nile's headlands have united to renegotiate Egypt's draw downward.

Sixteen million people in Cairo; I'm told the daytime population is actually more like twenty-two million, struggling to keep their footing on the congested, uneven pavement. A vision of our unsustainable future: too many people, not enough jobs; too many cars, not enough living space; too much refuse, not enough clean water.

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THE YACOUBIAN BUILDING, a 2002 novel by Alaa Al Aswany, weighs heavily on my time in Cairo, informs everything I see here, an unsentimental picture of an exigent, corrupted people. I pass the actual apartment house downtown, less grand than I imagined, occupied in the novel by several strata of Cairo life: a wealthy wheeler-dealer, a rising politician, a closeted gay newspaper editor, the poor who occupy a shantytown of windowless "iron rooms" on the roof, each of the rooms two by two meters square. The tragic beat of events turns monotonous, but the book is politically provocative, a devastating portrait of the tyrant "Big Man," who must be Mubarak. An Egyptian film was made from the book; I wonder how they toned it down.

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THE "BALADI" BAR on Tahrir Square, with a US consular officer in her late twenties, an Arabist who has lived in Cairo before. Energetic, enthusiastic, pretty, a friend of a friend, she speaks Arabic well. The bar is decrepit, the paneling dark and stained, its clients mostly older men who look like they're having more than one. Christian-owned, if it serves alcohol, but some of the drinkers wear *galabeyas*.

We eat at Caffe Riche, old Cairo restaurant, black (Nubian?) waiters in long blue robes. Nasser and the Free Officers met here to plan the coup. Pictures of old Cairo and old Cairenes on the wall. On my second beer and worried about keeping my companion entertained, I break my rule and tell her the plot of my novel. She's fascinated! This is encouraging.

Then Café Bustan for coffee, located directly behind the restaurant. Feeling adventurous and playful, and knowing that I wouldn't do it on my own, I try an apple-spiced water pipe. As if I haven't been inhaling enough combustion products. The *sheesha* is pleasant enough, but after that I develop a cough and cold that last for a week.

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OUT IN THE DESERT SUBURBS, New Cairo, new campus of the American University *in* Cairo. Bright, airy, sensitive-to-the-environment, Arab-inflected design. The AUC has no official American status; it is an independent university.

I give a brief talk, spend almost the entire day with women, they dominate the literature program. Bright, engaged, not too current on American literature. I bring them news of *Freedom*, mention a few quarterlies, describe my own books. I'm taken around by two undergrads, Mushari and H., a young Palestinian whose family was kicked out of Jerusalem in '48. The students are in Western student dress, jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers. Jared's Bagels in the campus plaza, but I don't get to try one.

Asked about my "background," I strenuously avoid mentioning that I'm Jewish, not wanting to get involved in a tedious conversation about Israel. This of course means I lose half my shtick, including the word "shtick."

But at one point we do start talking politics, what's going to happen after Mubarak dies. The plan for succession is not clear at all; everyone shakes their head in wonder — Will it be Gamal? a junta? Muslim Brotherhood? — the very near future is a mystery. H. steps away from the conversation. She later explains she has to stay out of politics. As a Pal she has no rights in Egypt, she can be deported anytime.

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NEAR THE HOTEL, a good-looking young man in a pressed shirt and a sports jacket stops me to say that the American people are a great people, it's the government that's been corrupted by the "Israelians." I tell him it's slightly more complicated than that, and he agrees that perhaps that's so. He says he's Palestinian. His home in Gaza was destroyed, he lost his wife and four children. Now he's come to Egypt, and is in danger of being deported before his visa gets straightened out. He needs \$9 to pay for his hostel tonight. I know the story's true, even if it may not have happened to him. He's anxious when I signal we should duck into a doorway, but I don't like taking my wallet out on the street.

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AS USUAL I GRAVITATE toward market streets, the gleaming heaps of fresh vegetables, barrels of olives, buckets of spices. Pots and pans for sale, all of them seemingly of identical manufacture, this may be the pots neighborhood. Pushcarts, youths carrying enormous bundles, youths delivering trays of tea. I'm oddly uncharmed. I used to congratulate myself for being somewhere exotic, now I just recognize my presence as a function of my relative affluence or, more specifically, in this case, the accumulation of frequent flyer miles.

More women than not wear some kind of head covering on the streets, a hijab, abaya, or full-length burka, with just a slit showing for the eyes. If Egypt is becoming more deeply Islamic, I'm not sure the evidence is in the burkas. Some are tight and satiny; half-burkas

just make it down to the waist; I see burka-clad women on the backs of motorcycles, their arms around men.

It may be a prejudice, a misreading of a foreign country's signs and symbols, to assume that every burka represents another religiously devoted woman; the head coverings can be fashion without the statement. Is that possible? Perhaps an Egyptian guy comes to the US, sees tight, short skirts, cleavage, high heels, and wonders, "Wait a minute. Are *all* these women whores?"

Up The Nile

Train to Assiut, south, in Upper Egypt. Men in *galabeyas* out in the fields, even scarecrows in *galabeyas*. A youth repeatedly strikes a donkey with a stick and an even left-handed batter's stroke, as if he's trying to knock it out of the park. Kids playing in irrigation ditches, textbook definition of how to get bilharzia. Built-up towns with several-storied buildings on narrow, heavily trafficked streets. Increasingly less Latin transliteration, some of the station signs entirely in Arabic. The green productive valley, the desert plateau rising beyond the river in the east.

I finish *The Yacoubian Building*, resume *Flaubert in Egypt*. Brio, adventure, sensuality. His account of the pyramids at Giza is rhapsodic: "the whole valley of the Nile, bathed in mist, seemed to be a still white sea . . ." He climbs Cheops and from its apex watches the sunrise. Afterward, he finds a business card left there as a joke by his companion, Maxime du Camp: "Humbert, Frotteur." (I wonder if Nabokov . . .) And like other European travelers, he plunges into the Oriental fleshpots. "But the best was the second copulation with Kuchuk. Effect of her necklace between my teeth. Her cunt felt like rolls of velvet as she made me come."

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ASSIUT: TAXI DRIVER from the station inexplicably nervous, won't let me off in front of the hotel. When I check in, the front desk looks at my passport and announces that I'm not allowed to leave the hotel without a police escort. All I want is dinner, but four cops show up, squeezed in a little police clown car. The car follows as I walk down the block and look for a restaurant. When I turn off the street they get mad and start hitting the horn.

I go back to the hotel; its restaurant turns out to serve beer. I'm the only patron and the manager comes to sit with me. He right away asks if I'm a Jew.

I say, “No, not at all! I'm a . . . an Episcopalian!” He looks at me gravely, and is ready to inquire about the tenets of my Episcopalianism, about which I know nothing, so I rush to add: “But I'm not observant!”

He, on the hand, is a Copt and observant and deadly serious; he tells me in low, anxious tones about the violence the Islamists have directed against Christians in Upper Egypt; the Muslim Brotherhood has launched a campaign of terror. He takes out pictures of a local church that was destroyed by arson; the miracle is that a sculpted tableau inside the church survived the flames intact, as I can see, bleached a pearly white. These grievances, these atrocities, and these signs of heavenly attention — Yugoslavia.

The police don't care about me. What with rising political unrest and religious strife, they just want me to leave before I get in trouble or make any. In the morning two police cars arrive, one to lead my taxi to the bus station, the other to follow it, sirens shrieking. An officer sits with me to make sure I get on the bus. I buy him a 7-Up.

Through the Western Desert

To Kharga: completely dead, almost no scrub. Rolling waves of sand that stretch to the horizon. Beige dirt, perhaps some loose sand. “Oilibya” gas station. They let a *fellah* on at the gas station, there's some discussion with the conductor, and they kick him off, two hundred meters into the desert. He'll have to walk back. Struggling trees planted on the side of the road. The many varieties of desert Thayer, a character in my novel, will have to dig through. A sandy plain on which rests many large black round rocks and boulders. They can be polished and sold in Europe as souvenirs.

Excited sense of arrival as I enter the desert, this is what I've come to see. My novel's set in the lower lefthand quadrant of the country, a vastness obscured on most Egypt maps

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