

“YOU’LL ONLY END UP LIKE RIMBAUD ... ”: BOURDIEU, FRENCH SYMBOLISM AND THE VERLAINES

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Cultural studies scholars tend to avoid discussing popular music *as* art, because they reject the idea that aesthetic considerations can be separated from cultural and social uses, or that artworks occupy a special domain above or beyond the everyday, as in the distinction of classical and popular music, or high and mass culture (Williams, 1973:32; Green, 1999:6). However, popular music *and* art, the influence of art or high culture and its institutions on popular culture is, hopefully, a different matter. Frith and Horne (1987) discuss the relationship of art schools to 60s/70s UK rock; intertextual “art” references and influences occur regularly in pop and rock music.

Pierre Bourdieu claims: “One cannot fully understand cultural practices unless ‘culture’ in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into ‘culture’ in the anthropological sense” (Bourdieu, 1984:1). Culture as “the best” must be reconciled with culture as “a way of life”. For Bourdieu, cultural capital correlates with social position, eg high culture links to the haute bourgeois, intellectual class, who also represent the highest taste. Although this seems like a thesis about reception, it also illuminates the text. Whereas “the popular aesthetic ... [is] based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life,” high culture is marked by its autonomy from the everyday (1984:4). High culture is art about *art*: “which ever increasingly contains references to its own history [and] demands to be perceived historically ... to the universe of past and present works” (1984:3). Intertextuality was originally part of high art.

With the advent of postmodernism this model is no longer high-culture specific, witness the seamless intertextuality of say *The Simpsons*, Beck, the Clean or more mundanely, advertising. Nevertheless the ability to read and interpret cultural phenomena still serves as an indicator of social position, and may also be annexed to claims about their significance. In New Zealand, many ex-Dunedin Sound/Flying Nun musicians such as myself, Graeme Downes, Bruce Russell, Michael Morley, Alistair Galbraith and Bill Direen have become academics or “consecrated” artists. Indie rock is now in the institution – is this a postmodern blurring of boundaries between cultural domains, or does it confirm Bourdieu’s thesis that “good taste” predicts social position?

Ryan Hibbett draws a parallel between indie rock (eg the Dunedin Sound) and high art “both of which depend on a lack of popularity for their value, and require specialised knowledge to be fully appreciated”, focussing on subcultural capital – how alternative scenes employ cultural distinctions to create difference from the mainstream (Hibbett, 2005:57; Thornton, 1996). Intertextual references require specific cultural knowledge to be decoded, and may function as passwords to scene participation. But what happens when these references are actually to high culture, as in the work of Graeme Downes of the Verlaines? Do the contexts of these references – popular music and postcolonial culture – mean that they work differently and more ambiguously than in Bourdieu’s theory, which is based on a single, national model (France)? Ironically, many of the Verlaines references are *about* France, which feeds into an argument about how cultural capital can operate between cultures as well as

within them. I also discuss how the Verlaines' use of references negotiates between subcultural and cultural capital, alternative rock culture and ordinary society (eg the difference between writing a "rock symphony" and performing it in a pub), particularly a postcolonial settler society like 1980s Pakeha New Zealand. This may in turn require rethinking some of Bourdieu's concepts.

Hibbett draws on Bourdieu's model of the art world and applies it to indie music. The art world is an area of the cultural field, "structured ... by ... opposition between two subfields: the field of restricted production and the field of large-scale production" (Johnson, 1993:15) – in pop music, the difference between a "cult" band like the Verlaines and a massive seller like Green Day. With restricted, high art production, the stakes are largely symbolic, involving prestige, consecration and artistic credibility. High art is "production for producers" (I recall all the gigs I played where the audience was the other band on the bill). Conventional forms of economic and social capital are reversed so that "loser wins": artists maintain credibility by their distance from economic relations. They may reject or reverse social capital – marginality or deviancy convert into subcultural capital (Johnson, 1993:15).

Art references can also be viewed as a way of intertextually connecting alternative music to bohemian art/literary worlds, and were fairly common in indie rock, especially the UK and the Antipodes: the Smiths (UK), the Go-Betweens (Australia), Sneaky Feelings, Look Blue Go Purple, Don McGlashan, George Henderson, Bill Direen (all NZ) (Bannister, 2007, 2006:75; Nichols, 2003). Indie was part of a more general fragmentation of rock, in which specific subgenres served increasingly specialised markets – with indie rock, mainly a young, educated middle class, similar to Bourdieu's "bourgeois adolescents ... economically privileged and (temporarily) excluded from the reality of economic power, [who] express their distance from the bourgeois world ... by a refusal of complicity whose most refined expression is a propensity towards aesthetics and aestheticism" (1984:55). In the case of the Dunedin Sound, many art references arose directly from musicians studying arts at Otago University, which was based on the European canon.

Indie "aestheticism" is not necessarily avant-garde – it is also "classic" in its reinterpretation of musical and cultural history through practices of musicmaking, canonising and writing (Hesmondhalgh, 1999:46-47). Most Dunedin Sound artists used a guitar, bass and drums line-up, a sonically conservative move in an era of rapidly advancing technology. Moreover, post-punk revivals of older musical styles highlighted the increasingly reflexive nature of musicmaking: "there was such a variety of genres and styles ... that making new music was, for some, an act of musical archaeology ... A great rock group ... needed not just a sexy singer, a great virtuoso, or a sussed marketing scam ... It needed a ... *historian*" (2002:5). References to canonised culture can create cultural capital.

This historicism also extends to literary and art references, however, literary name dropping in rock goes back to Bob Dylan, continuing in the 70s with the New York punk underground (Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine, Richard Hell) – both major influences on the Dunedin Sound. Dylan in turn was responding to the Beats' integration of popular music (jazz) and literature (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg). And a particular influence on the Beats was French Symbolism. In *You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go* (1975), Bob Dylan sings "Situations have ended sad/Relationships have

all been bad/Mine've been like Verlaine's and Rimbaud." Patti Smith "the poet laureate of punk" was supposedly transformed by reading Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. "And I fill my nose with snow and go Rimbaud, go Rimbaud, go Rimbaud" (*Horses* 1975). And then in Dunedin, 1982, the Verlaines' *Death and the Maiden*:

*Do you like Paul Verlaine?
Is it gonna rain today?
Shall we have our photo taken?
We'll look like Death and the Maiden ...
You'll only end up like Rimbaud
Get shot by Verlaine, Verlaine, Verlaine, Verlaine ...*

Although it is possible to argue that this is merely postmodern "play" – like the Verlaines' Flying Nun stablemates the Jean-Paul Sartre Experience, whose name correlates to precisely nothing in its output (Bannister, 1998-9) – *Death and the Maiden* is not an isolated instance, but rather part of a framework of references to *fin de siècle* European high culture, and particularly French symbolism in the Verlaines' early work (up to and including their second album *Bird-Dog*). *Baud to Tears* (Verlaines 1984, 1988) quotes Baudelaire's "Le Voyage": "O Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! Levons l'ancre..." (Downes paraphrases in English). On the B-side of *Death and the Maiden*, CD *Jimmy Jazz and Me*, James Joyce, Claude Debussy (who drew on symbolist poet Mallarmé for *l'Après-Midi d'un Faune*) and Graeme "fuck off to Paris to write of the sea". Symbolism as a movement was not limited to literature, or France: Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's "Death and the Maiden" (1894) features on the label of the Verlaines' side of the *Dunedin Double* EP (1982) (Flying Nun artists George Henderson and Bill Direen have also drawn on aspects of French aestheticism and symbolism) (Direen, 1983, 2003; www.myspace.com/georgedhenderson accessed 2 July 2008).

The late 19th century French Symbolist movement takes the Romantic cult of the individual and critique of science and mechanisation to an extreme, while bypassing its idealisation of nature and political Utopianism. It rejects reality and emphasises subjective experience, the more subjective the better – the unnatural, supernatural, fantastic – its mode of delivery privileging obscurity and indirection over clarity and reason. Music is its ideal, because of its perceived emotiveness and lack of referentiality (Wilson, 1993:13). "Symbolism" refers to a private or personal system of correspondences – the artist's imagination is conceived of not as enhancing reality, but replacing it (1993:20). To achieve this, Rimbaud recommended "derangement of the senses" by which "the Poet makes himself a seer ... [by experiencing] All forms of love, suffering and madness" (1966:307). Hence the *poète maudit*, the artist as madman, decadent, debauchee and criminal, doomed to early death – an excellent model for aspiring rock stars. The *poète maudit* combines the glamour of the dreamy poetic realms of high culture aestheticism with sordid excess, freedom from moral restraint or obligation, and an existence lived entirely on the edge, the archetype being 15th century troubadour Francois Villon, whose style is referenced in the Verlaines' *Don't Send Me Away* (1985).

It's tempting to say that rock culture hasn't digested the deeper implications of symbolism and is merely adoptinG a pose of bohemian artiness, but this is to judge

rock by art standards; moreover, the Symbolists were foreshadowing how in pop culture “author/star” and “work” tend to overlap. Downes adopted some Symbolist techniques, as in the title of the Verlaines 2003 compilation *You’re Just Too Obscure For Me* (also the opening line of *Death and the Maiden*), alluding to the technique of obfuscation. Discussing *The Lady and the Lizard* (Verlaines, 1985), Downes states: “That image is a private one, and no one else is going to understand what it means ... reading through my lyrics ... they give you an impression of something, but they don’t actually tell you anything definite”

(http://grimalco.com/verlaines/upside_down_under.htm, accessed 2 July 2008).

However, some themes are clear – artists descending into moral or emotional hell, usually through dissipation, unrequited love or the pressures of performance. Themes of aesthetic rebellion, violence, pessimism, death and misunderstood genius proliferate alongside a faint hope: art as a contemplative refuge from the world – “we live in hope” (*CD Jimmy Jazz and Me*). All these characteristics of French Symbolism are amenable to alternative rock culture.

The Symbolist yearning for “refuge” in art also intersects with indie culture’s textuality and introspection. Here was a music split between a progressive desire to cut loose from mainstream pop and fascination with the past. Symbolism romanticised “things that are dying—the whole belle-lettristic tradition of Renaissance culture” that was increasingly marginalised by modernity (Wilson, 1993:298). But although rebellious, symbolism was basically inward looking and politically passive – revolt was personal and aesthetic (Wilson, 1993:265-6). Similarly, indie rock lacked punk’s radicalism, not so much “challenging the system” as creating alternative means of production and distribution – a parallel universe of alternative culture (Grossberg, 1997:486-7).

Early Verlaines repertoire contains a plethora of art references: *The Ballad of Harry Noryb* (1985) (Noryb is Byron backwards); Julius Caesar: “the day that you left I sang ‘Et tu Brute’” (*Phil Too* 1985); Mozart (*Burlesque* 1984); Mahler (*The Lady and the Lizard* 1985), and Dostoyevsky (*New Kind of Hero* 1988). It departs from conventional pop song structures (and lengths), using unusual time signatures (*Burlesque*) and crescendos and diminuendos that recall the symphonic form (*Ash Grey*, *Phil Too*, *Ballad of Harry Noryb* 1985). The first Verlaines album *Hallelujah All the Way Home* is structured like a symphony, with leitmotifs and a harmonic structure that relates the keys of each song to an overall scheme (it was also Downes’ honours music composition project at Otago University).

These high culture models have influenced the reception of the Verlaines: Russell Brown, reviewing *Death and the Maiden* in *Rip It Up* claimed that “the words ... make nearly every other lyricist in the country look silly” (Brown, 1983:28). An article in *Filler Magazine* is bylined “The Verlaines’ tortured songwriting genius – Graeme Downes” (<http://home.golden.net/~tekapo/type/verlaines.html> accessed 2 July 2008). *Option* opens its piece with a Chagall reference (http://grimalco.com/verlaines/upside_down_under.html accessed 2 July 2008). The implication is that this band is for the discerning listener who appreciates the finer things, who wants an alternative to mainstream pop culture, as Hibbett describes. However, the Verlaines’ association with high culture goes further than name-dropping or being positioned as “alternative” – the way they incorporate classical

compositional elements and references reflects Downes' involvement with academia and classical musicology, problematic areas in alternative rock culture.

Downes states that references to Rimbaud and Verlaine are "tongue-in-cheek ... The song was written a long time ago, toward the end of adolescence" (http://grimalco.com/verlaines/upside_down_under.htm, accessed 2 July 2008). After Downes started a PhD thesis on Mahler at the University of Otago, he was similarly ambivalent about being identified as an intellectual: "Articles do focus on the PhD, I guess it's an easy angle for them. From my perspective, I don't think it makes for great press ... some people are gonna expect Yes or Emerson Lake and Palmer or some other orchestrated abomination" (<http://home.golden.net/~tekapo/type/verlaines.html>, accessed 2 July 2008). What passes for cultural capital in society does not necessarily translate into subcultural capital. Rock culture disdains overt intellectualism.

Punk/alternative rock defined itself in opposition to 70s progressive rock (eg Yes, ELP etc). Prog's conceit was that rock could be as legitimate as classical music, but by defining its aims in terms of a high culture agenda, it sowed the seeds of its own critical demise. This must have been a problem for Downes, whose combination of rock energy and classical references was open to the same critique. Finally, punk, certainly in the NZ context, was strongly anti-intellectual and identified with DIY amateurism – Craig Robertson, for example, states that the early Dunedin scene distanced itself from the University (Robertson, 1991:42). To some extent a similar decorum operates in the "art world" – high culture commentators often "devalue scholarly knowledge and interpretation as 'scholastic' ... the absence of academic training ... may be considered a virtue" (Bourdieu, 1984:2, 16). That is, cultural knowledge must be borne lightly and seemingly instinctively, like an inborn disposition. Will Straw makes a similar point about rock culture: "hipness" is a "controlled economy of revelation, a sense of how and when things are to be spoken of" (Straw, 1997:9).

In 80s indie rock culture, high culture references needed to be grounded, either in "the real world" or in rock discourse (eg in styles of self-presentation). The key for the Verlaines was performance. A Verlaines song is "ached over in composition, set fire to live" as Roy Colbert noted in the sleeve notes of *Tuatara* (1985). Live, Downes conflated the roles of rock star and *poète maudit* and played them to the hilt: "Where Martin [Phillipps, of the Chills] was winsome and dreamy, Graeme was smouldering and Byronic. On stage, he whipped himself into an expressionistic frenzy" (Bannister, 1999:44). French symbolism oscillated between fantasy, nostalgia and blood, danger and darkness – the potential preciousness of "art" offset by the grime of the barroom floor and the opium den. Downes maintained rock credibility by mixing high cultural references with intimations of boozy camaraderie and dissolute bohemianism (similar to Dunedin poet James K Baxter, another NZ *poète maudit*) (Baxter 1971). On *Hallelujah All the Way Home*, almost every song mentions cigarettes, pubs and drinking. There are violent extremities: ice and blistering heat; "blood on my pickups" (*All Laid On* 1985), hell and madness, choking, kicking etc. "It's not hard to see why some condemned Dunedin bands as gloom junkies" (Bannister, 1999:138–9). However, these Gothic overtones are also a strategy by which rock justifies high culture intellectualism – think of Nick Cave.

In contrast to Bourdieu's France, 80s Pakeha society was dominated by the petit bourgeois or "popular aesthetic", which tolerates art only insofar as it is "functional" (music for dancing, paintings to look nice) (1984:5; Pearson, 1952). In such a situation, any art identification, high or pop, signals alienation and disaffection. The misunderstood *poète maudit* seems germane to the position of Dunedin Sound musicians, especially given that pubs, the centre of rugby, racing and beer, were the main performance venues. The mutual alienation that performance in such venues could engender, stemming from this collision of haute and petit bourgeois values, is a recurrent theme in Downes' early lyrics (*All Laid On*):

*This is hell playing madmen on the stage
But a different kind of idiot wrote this play
And it isn't even relevant today
And my being splits
One half walks out and sits
In the audience and grins
"The Ballad of Harry Noryb"*

At the same time, booze, poetry and men behaving badly has a long history in Antipodean culture – its homophobic, anti-intellectual masculinism dictates that the only fit matter for verse is boozy camaraderie, violence and sordid details (Bannister, 2007). It's hard to imagine the *poète maudit* being a woman, or sober.

CONCLUSION ... GET SHOT BY BOURDIEU?

It is ironic that Bourdieu's critique of distinction attacks the very high culturalism that Downes is appropriating. The intellectual glamour of French sophistication, which Bourdieu takes apart, is the same thing that is so appealing to colonials. But I don't think this means that the Verlaines are cultural dupes. Bourdieu's model, based on France, claims to be "valid ... for every stratified society" (1984:xii). But in settler societies like New Zealand, class is not significant in the same way, and the haute bourgeois less influential. Bourdieu states that "the Parisian version of the art of living has never ceased to exert a sort of fascination in the 'Anglo-Saxon' world ... thereby attaining a kind of universality" (xi). This suggests to me that cultural capital does not operate simply within societies, but also between them, a consideration particularly relevant to "peripheral" postcolonial settler societies, whose struggles with identity are closely related to their perceived lack of cultural capital in relation to the "centre", a dislocation expressed as pessimism. Bourdieu takes the cultural identity of Frenchness for granted, but in doing so he sacrifices his reflexivity by mixing a universal model of taste with a judgement about taste – other Western cultures compare themselves with France because they think it's the best. This makes me wonder whether to apply Bourdieu in an NZ context is simply to reproduce the cultural hegemony of the centre.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital may partially explain high culture references in the Dunedin Sound, but cannot necessarily predict the diverse ways in which such references are employed in a global cultural context. Homi Bhabha has written that although colonialism seeks to impose hegemony on the Other (in this case through cultural capital), in doing so it needs to mediate through local agents who become "neither one or the other" – hybrid subjects. Bhabha's focus is on ethnic hybridity, but I wonder if this insight can also be applied to "freak social and cultural

displacements” such as settler societies and subjectivities which hover between centre and periphery, coloniser and colonised (Bhabha, 1994:12). There is something freakish about the Verlaines – it is hard to imagine their fusion of punk, folk rock and classical elements emerging from 80s Europe and the US because such a combination would have transgressed contemporary cultural boundaries (given the emergence of post-rock, Downes might have been ahead of his time).

French Symbolism was an unlikely and therefore highly appropriate way for “edgy” musicians to negotiate the demands of an unsympathetic cultural context, as a homology of alienated artistry, but one that also intersected with the real conditions in which bands performed. French urban sophistication provided a useful rejoinder to Pakeha pragmatism – indeed “against nature”, the symbolist cry, suggests a way of resisting dominant models of Pakeha identity based around ruralism and landscape. The *poète maudit*'s very alienation from normality made him a workable model in a culture where to be artistic was by definition, abnormal.

The identification of Dunedin bands with French and high culture can be understood as identification with otherness, with the obverse of local reality (another defining characteristic of the Dunedin Sound being, ironically, its lack of local references). Although in some ways a “colonial fantasy”, it has given rise to real effects in the form of a local rock culture which is the product of a peculiarly postcolonial perspective.

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