

Book Review

John Zorn: Tradition and Transgression

John Brackett
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Reviewed by Nou Dadoun

How does one talk about music? It's clear that a simple sequence of descriptions of (sonic) events is insufficient to convey the sense or *understanding* of music. Is there something essential to be revealed in a piece's inspiration as homage (or famage)? Is there an intellectual pursuit that will get under the notes to uncover the underlying meaning or should one simply play the music and be done with it?

These are some of the explicit and implied questions that structure John Brackett's book, *Tradition and Transgression*, about John Zorn, one of the most prolific and enigmatic artists working in contemporary music. Zorn values this implied curtain of mystery, and his relationship with those who would try to pull back the curtain is often adversarial. I interviewed John Zorn in late 2002 in advance of an Electric Masada concert in Vancouver. At that time, the message on his answering machine was clear: "I think I have here all that I could possibly want; I have my books and my music and a modest art collection and a visit from a beautiful lady from time to time and what I value most: my privacy!" Interviewing John Zorn is something like shadow-boxing—every time you think you have a glimpse of what's going on, he feints and is gone like the mysterious mirror-faced character who is always disappearing around a corner in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

Brackett recognizes that this is part of the puzzle that Zorn has identified as the "game of analysis" and, as anyone familiar with Zorn's game pieces will tell you, letting the audience in on the rules would involve Zorn relinquishing some aspect of control. Although Brackett appears to have had personal communications with Zorn on various topics, it is never clear whether Zorn is revealing something or putting up another smoke screen.

But Brackett is up for the game nonetheless and gamely brings some considerable analytical tools and philosophical interpretations to the board. The book consists principally of four fairly independent essays which analyze and explore four themes or aspects of Zorn's work, bracketed by an introduction and epilogue which argue for the unifying thread implied in the title of the book. The book assumes as a starting point a familiarity with Zorn and his musical eco-system—there is no attempt to give personal or biographical details that are not directly pertinent to the arguments being presented. The only concession to background is a section in the introduction listing the aspects of Zorn's work not to be considered in the book—improvisation, Radical Jewish Culture, Masada, neo-bop explorations, game pieces, film music—the list is quite extensive. (For a more general overview of Zorn's background and work see my essay "John Zorn In Control.")

However, the aspects of Zorn's work that are covered in the book are by no means restrictive, ranging as they do from the noise hardcore of Naked City to the contemporary classicism influences of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, to the neo-lounge-ism of *The Gift*.

In making a case for his play in the game of analysis, Brackett further tries to unify Zorn's work (both musical and extra-musical) by referring to that work as Zorn's *poetics*. This allows him to discuss and draw semantic links between elements as disparate as the (often disturbing) cover art of the Naked City releases and the musical content of Zorn's tribute compositions.

The unifying thread derives from the influence on Zorn from the work of Georges Bataille—the French writer and philosopher whose ideas on transgression, eroticism, and social conventions are recurring themes in Zorn's poetics. Of course, like many other coincidental threads that mystically arise in this context, "Zorn" is the German word for "anger" while "Bataille" is French for "battle" providing a nice symmetry to the discussion of both men. The symmetry extends to the notion of transgression as espoused by Bataille and posited by Brackett as a recurring theme within Zorn's work. If Zorn subscribes to the "art is not a mirror, it's a hammer" philosophy, he also wants to be "le marteau

sans maître” exploring boundaries of convention, of offense, of taste, of volume, and actively crossing those boundaries.

At the same time, as a cultural omnivore with the ability to swallow (musical and non-musical) genres whole and have them inform and influence his own work, he can reasonably be described as a traditionalist. This is the yin and yang of Brackett’s thesis, that Zorn’s work exemplifies both a “transgression of tradition” and a “tradition of transgression” that places him amongst the small group of important artists willfully working at the margins, an iconoclast capable of producing great art. With Brackett’s reference to Zorn’s work as both *modernist*, within the stated “organic” composition methods he employs, and *post-modernist*, within the self-referential nature of the results, the enigma is complete!

The title of the first chapter, “From the Fantastic to the Dangerously Real: Reading John Zorn’s Artwork,” is as ambiguous as the artwork being discussed—the cover imagery of some of Zorn’s CD releases for the group Naked City. Zorn curates but does not produce the visual art content on these albums. However, as quoted in an endnote, Zorn has stated that the cover art is an integral part of the overall presentation. The specific images included with the text include a manga (a form of Japanese cartoon), an s/m still from a Japanese porn film, and an archival photo of a ritualized Chinese torture/execution.

Brackett provides a fascinating, multi-faceted discussion that draws on feminist theory and notions of both racialism and cultural appropriation. He also attempts to put the images into the cultural context of the societies from which they’re drawn (Zorn has lived in Japan and is said to be fluent in Japanese) and, in the case of manga, at least, tries to separate the perceived reality of the imagery from the exaggerations and fantasies that it is meant to express. Returning to the Bataille-ian thesis, Brackett quotes Zorn as saying that the images are used for their “transgressive quality” (20) and uses that as a segue into the thought and writings of Bataille, to discuss transgression as “the pushing or testing of boundaries” that allows us to “recognize the beautiful in the horrible and abject, as well as the hidden horrors of the beautiful” (23).

The chapter also includes musical/sonic analyses of two Naked City pieces, “Speedfreaks” and “Osaka Bondage.” These analyses try to draw the discussion back into the musical realm by demonstrating the jump-cut and transgressive properties of the music as well as the artwork.

As someone who has long struggled with my own reactions to this aspect of Zorn’s work, I found the discussion in this chapter particularly fascinating in providing insights as to how the overall Naked City work might be “read” and interpreted. The images remain disturbing, the music is often dense, aggressive, and abrasive, but Brackett’s approach provides several possible contexts for understanding the intent behind the work.

The second chapter, “Magick and Mysticism in Zorn’s Recent Works,” examines Zorn’s stated interest in occult traditions and their manifestation in some of his compositions and recordings of the last decade. The chapter begins by reasserting the importance of Bataille’s concepts and the transgressive interpretation of the occult, in the dualism of “evil contained in good, light comprehensible only in relation to darkness,” and extends the interpretive context for Zorn’s work to include the thoughts and work of Aleister Crowley and the mystical Jewish practice of Kabbalah. Not coincidentally, the term Kabbalah is Hebrew for “receiving” which ties in nicely with the gift theory discussed in the subsequent two chapters.

To demonstrate the connections between these ideas and Zorn’s work, Brackett discusses a number of compositions and analyzes, in detail, two pieces: “Necronomicon, for String Quartet” (2003), a composition in five movements named for the fictional evil book which plays a recurring role in the works of H.P. Lovecraft, and *IAO: Music in Sacred Light* (2002), described by Zorn’s label Tzadik as a “hypnotic seven-movement suite of Alchemy, Mysticism, Metaphysics and Magic both black and white” (Brackett 58). The latter piece is also explicitly inspired by and dedicated to Crowley and “his Magickal disciple, filmmaker Kenneth Anger” (58), and Brackett spends some time relating some of Anger’s work (his use of light in general and specifically in his film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*) to the mystical themes at hand.

The detailed analysis of both pieces emphasizes the overall structure(s), recurring patterns and motifs as groupings of notes and beats, and the timings of the music *and* the silences between musical passages, in relation to numbers within occult traditions. These include groupings of “the number of the beast” 666, the number of diners at the last supper—the “unlucky” number 13—and other numbers with Crowleian and Kabbalistic interpretations. Brackett argues that the use of these numbers is intended to create an effect of mystical ritual invocation that, particularly in the hypnotic trance-like portions of *IAO*, metaphorically cast a spell leading to a Gnostic musical experience.

After two chapters that emphasize the transgressive aspects of Zorn's work, the last two chapters swing back to the "traditional" aspects; although, in talking about Zorn, the term traditional must be taken with a grain of (kosher) salt. The third chapter "Tradition, Gifts and Zorn's Musical Homages," starts with a discussion of the classic monograph of Marcel Mauss, entitled *The Gift*, and related works (including Bataille's *The Accursed Share*) which argue for gifts and gift-giving as a social construct which puts both giver and recipient in inter-dependent roles. Brackett discusses the variations of the roles, which include equilibrium/disequilibrium between giver and recipient—the gift representing a debt which implicitly *must be repaid*—and a gift-giving spiral as a chain of giver-recipient links in which each new presentation of the gift has been augmented with a personal element (a bonding value) added by the most recent presenter.

It is this last "gift spiral" interpretation that can be used as the template for notions of artistic tradition. Each artist/musician/practitioner receives the gift of tradition as influences (or influences as the gift of tradition) and, through their work, augments that gift and passes it on by influencing their colleagues and disciples in turn. Zorn's work – influenced as it is by various musical, literary, cinematic, philosophical, and artistic genres—participates in a gift spiral through the many dedications and in the many homage/femage pieces which he has produced within his career. The best known of these include *Godard* (for filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard), *The Big Gundown* (for composer Ennio Morricone), *Spillane* (for author Mickey Spillane, creator of the pulp-fiction detective character Mike Hammer), *Two-Lane Highway* (for blues guitarist Albert Collins), and *The Sonny Clark Memorial Quartet* (for bop pianist Sonny Clark).

After setting the theoretical framework for interpreting Zorn's tributes as a gift-giving spiral, the chapter elaborates on two specific examples: *In the Very Eye of Night* (dedicated to early avant-garde film-maker and film-theorist Maya Deren) and *Untitled* (dedicated to artist Joseph Cornell). The book's epilogue reprises the gift theory concept in a discussion of the music and presentation of Zorn's avant-lounge CD release *The Gift*.

The last chapter, "Continuing the Spiral: Aporias and the Prisms of Tradition," further elaborates on the gift spiral with a detailed examination of two movements of Zorn's *Aporias: Requia for Piano and Orchestra* (1998), a composition that Zorn dedicated "to all artists and the indomitable spirit of creativity itself." The word "aporia" is cited in the context of several meanings, such as to "be in a state of doubt" (from the Greek word literally translating as "impassable") as well as the title of a book on death by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose work in turn was influenced by Bataille. And what are requia after all, but meditations on death?

Through rigorous musical analysis, Brackett demonstrates how *Aporias* draws on the structure and some of the characteristics of Stravinsky's *Requiem Canticles* (1966). He also sheds some light on Zorn's compositional methods, citing Zorn's description of the techniques used to incorporate structure and "pitch information" as well as reference materials/working notes supplied by Zorn. These reference materials reveal that the individual movements of *Aporias* form a set of mini-memorials (tributes or requia) to a diverse group of artists—a fact which is not otherwise alluded to in publicly available notes or support material and would not be obvious to a casual listener. Brackett attributes this hidden intent to a desire for concealment, which is consistent with the observations Zorn has made in regard to his game pieces. As I noted in my essay "John Zorn in Control," "Zorn doesn't usually reveal the rules and cards which guide the 'game,' thus leaving the audience 'out of the loop.'"

The dedicatees of *Aporias* include painter Francis Bacon, actor and filmmaker John Cassavetes, flamenco singer Camaron, composer/theorist John Cage, composer Olivier Messiaen, and actress/singer Marlene Dietrich. Brackett uses this newfound information to guide some of the analysis of the movement titled "Misterioso," dedicated to Francis Bacon and partially derived from Stravinsky's "Tuba Mirum," as well as the movement "Drammatico," dedicated to Marlene Dietrich and partially derived from *Libera Me*. Within "Drammatico," Brackett also uncovers chordal material derived from Burt Bacharach's "I'll Never Fall in Love Again," linking Bacharach to Dietrich (he was once her accompanist) and providing a poignant rejoinder to her most famous song "Falling in Love Again" following her death in 1992.

A brief *Epilogue* ties together the threads from the other chapters to argue that Zorn can be regarded as a radical traditionalist in a modern sense by interpreting his work within both a tradition of transgression and a transgression of tradition. Zorn has himself stated that he considers "the avant-garde as a tradition unto itself" (Brackett 157) which completes the final paradox.

Overall, I found the book to be a narrative of experimentation rather than a narrative of discovery—like a set of lab notes that describe different tools and methods applied to the subject rather than a set of conclusions laid bare by a

coherent set of arguments. Brackett certainly has a formidable cultural and theoretical background and repertoire of analytical tools and is able to bring many concepts from diverse fields and arts to bear on Zorn's poetics. For example, I was intrigued by the ideas of Zorn's composition techniques influenced by film montage and the explicit links to the work of Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, and Sergei Eisenstein. I was fascinated by Brackett's ability to identify (and notate) 32 musical events and style transitions in the Naked City piece "Speedfreaks" which is under 50 seconds in duration! But, too often, the narrative would explore a side path without reference to Zorn or his work for pages at a time and I would find myself asking: "where is he going with this?" There is no denying that the book is challenging in its rigorous musical analysis and academic tone, and I suspect that many casual listeners and fans of Zorn who might pick it up expecting a typical musical biography will be both bewildered and sorely disappointed.

That said, readers that persevere will be richly rewarded—the book is a heady brew of fascinating ideas, analyses, conjectures, and unifying theories, which presents some masterful strategies for the "game of analysis" to which Zorn challenges all comers. This seems fitting, and the book acts as the first recognition that Zorn has added a meta-"game piece" to his already formidable poetics.

Works Cited

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