

## Speaking the Real: Richard Middleton's *Voicing the Popular*<sup>1</sup>

Lars Iyer  
Newcastle University

Published in 1990, Richard Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* has been to many the first port of call in reflecting on popular music from a culturalist perspective. Though dense and challenging, the scope of the book is very broad, and it has become a classic in the field, shaping debate and offering a variety of directions for future research. Coming a full sixteen years later, after many papers and edited collections, *Voicing the Popular* is a very different book; the theoretical focus is more concentrated, drawing in a systematic way on Slavoj Žižek's philosophical and cultural theoretical engagement with Jacques Lacan. The book is much more difficult than its predecessor, but its scope and ambition is just as broad: four thorny chapters follow a challenging introduction, grouped around the major topics of gender, race, repetition and authenticity. 1

The difficulty comes for the reader in the degree of familiarity that is required to appraise its arguments; Middleton's exposition of Žižekian-Lacanian thought, though lithe and playful, is of an immense and uncompromising density: this book is for readers who will be either familiar with psychoanalytically informed cultural studies or who (like myself) are sufficiently stirred by the book to acquaint themselves with a field which, although vibrant and served by many excellent introductory texts (including those by Žižek himself), requires an adept's understanding of terms of the art and their operation. Even those who have some familiarity with Lacan will need to acquaint themselves with Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which is an extremely important point of reference for Middleton, especially in his programmatic remarks in the opening chapter setting out his method, and his concluding marks in the last chapter, where he attempts to open up what he calls 'sinthomaticity' as a modification of Žižek's political reading of psychoanalysis. These and other parts of the books are mercilessly dense, and lack the pedagogical clarity at which Žižek can excel. 2

*Voicing the Popular* is nevertheless a rich and important book, providing fascinating accounts of various musics and performers. The discussion of the blues in the second chapter is, by turns, moving, incisive and profound, being much more than an example deployed to make a point; the deft remarks on Charley Patton's modernism or, in the third chapter, Nina Simone's voice seem so apt, so right, they leap out of the complex argumentative machinery of the 3

text. The reading of Patti Smith's 'Gloria' in the light of a culturalist account of sexual difference is exuberantly playful and immensely enjoyable whether or not one agrees with the framing of its argument or its conclusions. The marshalling of various strands of argument in the chapter on repetition has a virtuosic brilliance, however contentious his accounts of the thinkers under discussion. Each chapter conjoins psychoanalytical theory and musical practice, the text dancing through musical examples and theoretical elaboration. Lacanian cultural theory has been deployed with life and ingenuity: it swirls and fizzles around its object.

Nevertheless, those not familiar with Lacan's theory and Žižek's recasting of it are in for some hard work, and those from other contemporary theoretical backgrounds may well be irritated by the quick dismissal of rivals of cultural psychoanalysis. Middleton, for example, misrepresents the schema of methods that belong to deconstruction, as when he claims, echoing the familiar sophistical move that Derrida is caught in an opposition ('as negation of all systems of presence') which contradicts his own anti-foundationalist premises. But is Derrida *negating* the metaphysics of presence, or showing that presence emerges from a play of absence and presence that is more complex than the model of negation might provide? For Middleton, Derrida is drawn to discover a '(partial) alternative' to this metaphysics in 'certain strands of avant-garde art'.<sup>2</sup> But a basic reading of Derrida shows there is never any simple alternative, partial or otherwise to the metaphysics of presence; and that the force of the deconstructive approach to texts and institutions (which are never simply literary but also philosophical, political, juridical ...) is to uncover how the metaphysics of presence would only ever be partial.<sup>3</sup> 4

There is a similar misrepresentation of Deleuze. How, asks Middleton 'could any human being survive, as a subject in any recognizable sense, in Deleuze's world of wild difference, which, surely constitutes itself as a fantasy: language's other, constructed, in language, by a subject on this side of representation?'.<sup>4</sup> What, then, of Deleuze's careful construction of the pre-personal syntheses in *Difference and Repetition* that explore the conditions of emergence of the human subject? Granted, these syntheses should be understood as occurring on the other side of the symbolic order in Lacan – but this is Deleuze's point; the scope of his thought is different from Lacan's; his investigation bears on the genesis of the person in a manner that is not necessarily incompatible with Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>5</sup> Hasn't the time come to read *Anti-Oedipus* and the work of Deleuze alongside the auto-critique psychoanalysis was already undergoing in the contemporaneous work of Lacan? Might one follow up the numerous intertextual links between these thinkers?<sup>6</sup> 5

It is, of course the privilege of any major theoretical work to misunderstand its predecessors and rivals, and the polemics that arise from time to time in the book need not affect the broader argument of the book itself. *Voicing the Popular* also has the advantage of an overall theoretical consistency – it does not dabble 'in a little bit of Derrida, a little bit of Heidegger, a little of Marxism and 6

so on' as Žižek fears he himself would have done if he hadn't spent a long period outside of university employment.<sup>7</sup> No doubt that 'poor stupid unknown professor' that Žižek imagines he might have been would have produced a more measured book, but it would also have been a more mediocre one. I think the insights of *Voicing the Popular* are owed to its methodological severity, but whether it invites the reader 'to continue for him or herself the discursive proliferation in which the author has been engaged', as runs Laclau's account of Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that Middleton takes as an apt description of his own endeavour, is an open question: is *Voicing the Popular* in the rich profusion of its discussions the beginning of a bold new approach in musicology, or, in his methodological single-mindedness, has Middleton limited its reception only to those who have sympathy for the same set of works in philosophy and cultural theory that he has?

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What is specific to Middleton's method in *Voicing the Popular*, that is, Lacanian-Žižekian cultural theory? 7

Culture, for Lacan, is the effect of the differentiation of the signifier, the distribution of which permits the construction of identities.<sup>8</sup> The individual always finds itself enmeshed in the symbolic dimension, the trans-subjective field of signifiers which are held together in a system of differential relations, none of which can appear in isolation. These relations account for the way meaning is produced. The entry into the symbolic order demands a sacrifice of jouissance that thereafter persists only in fragmentary forms, which can never be wholly integrated. It is this fragmentation, however, that gives me the motive for identification with what Lacan calls the big Other – a projected source of authority. My fantasies, for Lacan, concern this kind of identification, opening a frame in terms of which I articulate my desire. It is this fantasmic structure that gives sense to my experience of particular things, allowing them to become desirable in view of my identifications, becoming invested with what Lacan calls the 'object a'. Desire, for Lacan, is only the effect of the *objet a* in its dissimulation; it is intelligible only in terms of this 'object cause.' 8

A successful course of psychoanalysis aims to allow the analysand to traverse the fantasy, in Lacan's phrase, showing that the ostensible power and authority of the big Other is merely a sham. The aim of analysis is for the analysand to confront the void of the big Other, having learnt that desire arises simply as a result of entering the symbolic order, and that the particular objects it takes are only metonyms in a chain without end. As such, Lacanian psychoanalysis can offer no cure for distressing symptoms, but shows our suffering to be part of those structures of fantasy that organise our desire. Traversing the fantasy does not reconcile me with our suffering, but I can understand it for what it is, without nostalgia for that complete and fulfilled life the big Other seems to promise. I can now focus on those nuggets of enjoyment permitted me rather than dreaming of a utopia of fulfilled desire and complete and total jouissance. As Lacan puts it, 9

there is a shift from being the subject of desire to being the subject of drive; jouissance, the analysand now understands, is given in repetition itself - the endless metonymical displacement of desire.

It may seem that the clinical context from which Lacanian thought springs forbids those who have not been through the process of analysis from applying psychoanalytical theory to the cultural field. But Lacanian psychoanalysis is not, on this account, a psychology, concerned only with the inner world of the psyche; it is also a theory of elementary forms of society that bears some resemblance to Hegel's account of the dialectics of recognition (the famous battle between the master and slave). Lacan was present at Alexandre Kojève's course on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which synthesised Hegel with Heidegger and Marx, and he presents analysis itself as a kind of dialectics.<sup>9</sup> As such, Lacanian psychoanalysis, as Žižek has shown, presents itself as a viable tool for the cultural theorist. 10

How might this work? The role of the cultural theorist parallels that of the analyst who, over the course of an analysis meticulously reconstructs the fantasy of the analysand. The cultural theorist is likewise focused on symptoms and the framing of desire that is fantasy. But, as with analysis, it is not a question of a blind application of a pre-given theory. The analytic session involves a give and take. At least initially, the analyst appears to take a role analogous to that of the big Other with respect to the analysand. Frustratingly for the analysand, however, the analyst refuses to play this role, behaving in a manner that will seem non-committal and evasive, with the aim of wanting to prompt the analysand to realise the void of the big Other. Over the course of the analysis, the analyst focuses on the formal features of what the analysand says, as well as using certain irreducible signifiers as they arise in the session to lay bare the analysand's fantasy. All in all, the analyst attempts to get the analysand to hear the message she is unconsciously addressing to herself. 11

Middleton likewise aims to uncover certain formal structures inherent in the experience of the musical materials upon which he concentrates. There are, of course crucial differences with the analytic situation: Middleton concentrates not on the fantasies or the symptoms of a particular analysand, but upon a whole complex of societies in the Anglophone world from the early nineteenth century onwards. By focusing on the experience of performer and listener as they are revealed in a play of various signifiers understood as they emerge within particular cultural contexts, Middleton attends to the unconscious message that the people, always inchoate and internally contested, addresses to itself through popular song. Here, the category of the people is not something pre-given, but must be drawn out in its complexity by Middleton's analysis. The same holds for the experience of the voice, song and other musical materials he examines, since they cannot be mapped in a straightforward manner on to what is normally understood as popular song. Finally, like the analyst, Middleton's practice does not aspire to the mastery such as that which, Lacan argues, characterises the discourse of the university. The psychoanalytic session involves give and take; 12

the analysand can always talk back. But in what way can musical materials be said to talk – or *sing* – back?

The suffix ‘-and’ of the word ‘analysand’, Bruce Fink points out, indicates that it is the patient who must be prepared to do the analytical work.<sup>10</sup> It is the analyst’s role to maintain the focus of this work even against the analysand’s explicit wishes. Fink stresses the difficulty of bringing the analysand into an appropriate role with respect to the analyst: preliminary interviews with the patient, conducted face to face, may last as long as a year, over which the analyst will begin to lose, for the patient, the sense of being just another individual. Slowly, the analyst becomes something like a mirror or a blank screen, passing beyond imaginary and symbolic modes of transference, where he or she is seen, by the analysand, as a rival or as a judge. Only when the patient has given up the impatient demand for a cure can analysis really begin, and it is the aim of analysis to bring the analysand to the point where the analyst can become a ‘real’ object for the analysand, as is indicated by the expression ‘*objet a*’: only now does the analyst stand in for the analysand as the cause of his or her unconscious formations, that is, dreams, fantasies and slips. It is not sufficient for the analysand to talk through those people and events from the past upon whom their symptoms depend; he or she must experience the affect they originally aroused (even as this affect may have been, at the time, unavowed, and hence diffused and unrecognised as such). Only thus can we reach what Lacan calls the *Archimedean point* of the analysis. 13

In what sense can an analysis of popular music and the people reach this point? Psychoanalysis, with Middleton, is put to work as a practice of cultural and political analysis, and it is alive to the extent that it is made to run up against materials that alter the terms of that engagement each time. He quotes John Mowitt approvingly: 14

What is at stake in putting it [theory] to work? How must it be written when it responds to the call of musical practice ...? ... I want to stress the importance of proliferating and diversifying music’s claims on theory. Specifically, what is going on in music ... must be granted the authority to provoke theorising – that is, to provoke a reading of theory that challenges its integrity, that obliges theory to submit to the same, often violent scrutiny that its detractors claim is visited on those practices to which it has been applied. In this sense, theory ‘responds’ to the ‘call’ of music not by smothering it like a salve, but by discovering in this encounter other possibilities of elaboration, other orientations ... By the same token, if what is going on in musical practice solicits the work of theorisation, it is because music, too, is in need of the diversification of critical attention that theory can provoke as well as the conceptual rigour with which judgements about it can be debated.<sup>11</sup> 15

In a similar way, Middleton would allow his materials to sing back, altering psychoanalytic theory and thereby overcoming the concern as to its applicability to the cultural field. What does this involve? The re-establishment of the 16

connections between, on the one hand the performers and their relationship to their cultural field and more broadly, to the political milieu and, on the other, the unavowed affects from which their music was born. It is thus that the *real* of the music can be revealed, understood as the hidden connection between experiences that have been repressed, or indeed, that have disappeared as trauma, having never been talked through. Middleton would *speak the real* in some sense, in order to help those who have the role of the analysand in his book: not simply the performers, but also the people of whom they are a part. It is in this way that Middleton might assist the desire of the people, as they are constituted by his work, to free themselves from particular fixations and sticking points. Only thus, by working through traumatic events through their transferential relationship to *Voicing the Popular*, might the people (of which we ourselves are a part) discover their agency.

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As such, Middleton's project has a marked *political* concern. Lacan himself does not make much of the political import of thinking about symptoms. For Lacan, traversing the fantasy means only the discovery that the Other does not exist (that is, is not intact or complete) and that total jouissance is impossible. Those remnants of jouissance which the post-analytic subject might pursue have no end outside themselves, political or otherwise, the achievement of analysis being simply that jouissance occurs without the former analysand's need to seek approval of the Other. 17

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek takes up Lacan's point and develops it much further, rewriting the entry of the subject into the symbolic field in terms of its entry into ideology. No longer is ideology conceived as a kind of 'false consciousness' with respect to the conditions of society, but as necessary to the production of society as such. Ideology is understood by Žižek to depend upon a construction of reality, a fantasy. In one sense, this shows that politics and society are impossible to achieve as such, since they can never have done with the antagonism that commences with the entry into the symbolic, that is, into culture. Žižek wants to think the symptom socially, looking towards the possibility of a traversal of the social fantasy as it might be productive of a particular kind of political subjectivity. What might this mean? Žižek shows how antisemitism depends upon an understanding of the Jew as symptom, displacing the real antagonism upon which society is predicated. Traversing the social fantasy, for Žižek, would certainly mean the end of the attachment to fantasies of the extirpation of the Jews, blacks or any other element of society. 18

The emphasis in Middleton's work is different, focusing on the cultural work of the people who, in the period under analysis, begins to self-confidently understand its own potential. Internally contested, speaking in borrowed voices, the people do not come to themselves altogether, but rather form, in Paul Gilroy's phrase, a counterculture to modernity. This is exemplified, Middleton 19

claims in his introductory chapter, in the career of the 'Chartist poet laureate' Ernest Jones, who wrote the line, 'the voice of the people is the voice of God' – a voice Jones could find only as it was 'spoken by it from elsewhere': his 'The Song of the Lower Classes' taking up the style of bourgeois marches derived from vaudeville, comic opera and pleasure garden repertoires of the previous century. But gradually, nonetheless, as Jones' song was sung in political soirées, Middleton argues for the appearance of what he calls 'a new type of music semiotics of the social, a new mode of musical representation' - drawing upon, but also altering and replacing the codes associated with the music of court and church.<sup>12</sup>

Particularly telling for Middleton is the way in which comic opera genres allow the presentation of 'low' characters and situations on the stage. Middleton also explores the proto-opera *Omai*, composed by William Shield, who drew on vernacular repertoires for the London stage. As a harlequin figure, Omai himself, supposedly a Tahitian Prince, would have said nothing on stage; it is likely he would have been blacked up. Middleton quotes Eric Lott: 'It was through blackness that class was staged ... blackface ... *figured* class - ... its languages of race so invoked ideas about class as to provide displaced maps or representations of "working-classness".'<sup>13</sup> Such maps or representations are all we have; for us, the voice of the people is ever less than 'plural, hybrid [and] compromised'.<sup>14</sup> This is because this voice is always subservient and hence dialogical; its very existence as voice depends on an economic and cultural machinery that it may want to usurp but upon which it depends. But this does not belie its potential subversiveness; if Middleton finds Gilroy's notion of a counterculture of modernity suggestive, it is not simply because the voice of the people is not simply reactive, but productive; if it appears to be negated, it is nevertheless contained within that which negates it.<sup>15</sup> This is exemplified in the magic talisman given to Omai himself, which causes involuntary sneezing, yawning, whistling, laughing and crying. Middleton compares it to Aladdin's lamp, which allows the master to summon and banish the genie at will - a particularly compelling image for a society whose prosperity is predicated upon slavery. But who is summoning whom in the carnivalesque reversal of roles in *Omai*? Middleton draws on Steven Connor's suggestion that ventriloquism works *both* ways. Are the people here being ventriloquised - summoned, rather than summoning? Or are they in some way summoning themselves to themselves?

Popular music, Middleton writes, 'only exists when it *knows its place*; only on that basis can it then consider answering back': and then, in parentheses, 'the move is some sort of shift from an in-itself to a for-itself state, as dialecticians would put it'.<sup>16</sup> Rather than an inert morass, as yet unaware of itself, the people, in the period upon which Middleton focuses, are beginning to gain a sense of themselves and their agency. This shift is the condition of what Middleton calls, placing this word in inverted commas, the invention of a 'people' - 'as political subject, as economic agent, as cultural actor'; in the musical examples Middleton examines in his opening chapter, we see the working out of a new

apparatus that enabled its self-representation.<sup>17</sup>

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But what does this entail? Surprisingly, Middleton barely refers to the great discourse on slavery in *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, published in 1807 – in the same period upon which he focuses in his introductory chapter. There, Hegel argues that self-consciousness begins only when the solipsistic and egotistic self discovers the other person, thus precipitating a crisis in its self-identity. Altered and estranged from itself, the reaction of self-consciousness to the discovery of the fact that it is not absolutely independent and universal is to embark upon a self-seeking that would exclude the Other as something inessential and of lesser value to the preservation of its own self-identity. The Other is to be cancelled [*aufgehoben*] insofar as it reveals the particularity of the self, but this cannot be accomplished by simply eliminating the Other because Hegel also maintains that the recognition of the Other is essential for the self. 22

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in an argument that impressed Lacan, a struggle ensues, in which the loser prefers to live rather than die, recognising the sovereignty of the master. Death is thereby suspended [*aufgehalten*]; desire is restrained [*gehemmt*]. The slave works at the master's behest, transforming nature in order to produce commodities the master can consume or trade. The master receives recognition from the slave and from others as a slave owner. This means the master is denied a direct mastery of nature. Neither agent nor worker, the master brings nothing into existence directly; unlike the slave, he can never transcend the given through direct action. But nor, for all his mastery, can he ever be said to exhibit true self-possession either, since he does not understand, unlike the slave, that he is defined as a human being to the extent that he can negate, that is, act and transform the world through his action, enriching his self-consciousness. 23

This is what it means to say that the human being is the history of the mediated desire of the slave, and not the master. It is a history of the one for whom real death is suspended; 'labour is the action of the man who, rather than *die* free, chooses to live in servitude', Bataille comments.<sup>18</sup> This servitude is the condition of possibility of history. Hegel's French expositor Kojève will go on to argue that it is the fear of death and the desire for freedom that lead to the development of compensating ideology of religion, whereby the slaves conjure up a dream of an afterworld in which they will be recognised by God, arguing that these ideologies will eventually give way to the desire to create heaven on earth, the universal and homogeneous state in which all are recognised as equal citizens. History, which began with the appearance of the human being in the violent struggle of master and slave, draws to a close with the final institution of universal recognition in the state, which delivers the long sought freedom to the slave. All will be recognised; negativity itself will be negated; the end of work will reveal itself when all the necessities of life are secured.<sup>19</sup> 24



Is this the future to which Middleton's people can look? Not quite. The people, do not exist as something given once and for all, which means they can never finally come to themselves. Perhaps this is why he chooses the word 'people' and not, say, the 'proletariat' – his book is not placed in the service of that vanguard who would look to the workers as embryos of a subject-position that it would take it upon itself to wake up as the subject of history, as the proletarian community to come. Hegel's slave knows the dignity of labour; Marx's proletariat are the subjects of history; but the inchoate people to whom Middleton looks articulate their subject-position through a cultural labour, transforming the forms they inherit, taking them over so as to let their contested, easy-to-miss voice resound. 25

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It is Middleton's aim to allow us to hear this voice, this multitude of voices. Take for example his analyses in chapter two, where he expands upon the work he has already done on the idea of masks in his introductory chapter, laying out an idea of something like a kind of constitutive blackface, meaning that the two lineages of 'black music' he identifies – one rooted in the spiritual, and one in entertainment, specifically the minstrel show – depend alike on 'structures of white desire, fear and self-defence, that is, to their unasked for place as Others of white subjectivity in a great drama of "love and theft".<sup>20</sup> Middleton then takes up Charles Keil's suggestion that the development of the blues was an effect of phonography, rather than reflecting an already developed folk tradition. The blues was always and already a blues revival reflecting not a lost rural past, but the demands of the recording industry. As such, he points out, the blues were not an autochthonously black creation, but emerge from a tangled interracial skein; as such, blues music is embedded in a more complex dialogue between races. This is at odds with the presentation of the tradition itself – often personified ('Mr Blues, how do you do?'), and treated as a pre-existing tradition, it depends upon the recording technology as it manufactures a particular conception of loss and nostalgia. Middleton reads this nostalgia as veiling a spectre, the *objet petit a* which sets itself back into an 'unknowable Real, a space lying beyond the frame; and it is "acted out" (performed) in response to an alienation – the other's refusal to listen (that is, it stands for a blockage)'. And then, 'What is the trauma that is silenced here? Surely the murderous scene "down home".<sup>21</sup> This is the 'blues fantasy' Middleton elaborates, which is read here as a symptom of social relations.<sup>22</sup> 26

In chapter three, Middleton reflects on gender, tracing two lineages of thinking the voice. On the one hand, the voice is the seat of metaphysical presence, the patriarchal source of the *logos*. On the other, it is hidden, uncannily paralleling the hiddenness of the female genital organs (he gives the example of the laryngeal organs, revealing themselves to the laryngoscope in the nineteenth century being concealed in the same way). This voice, he notes, is thought to 27

come from 'down below'.<sup>23</sup> Overlain on music, this binary becomes still more complex – for is music not figured as the other of language, replaying a topography of the inside and the outside, the centre and the margin, which is gendered in turn? One also, Middleton shows, has to consider the impact of performance – which is again coded feminine or queer – and the question of recording, in which the voice can become acousmatic, that is, separated from the body. But this latter only reveals what was already there. Middleton quotes Žižek: “the moment we enter the symbolic order, an unbridgeable gap separates forever a human body from ‘its’ voice. The voice acquires a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see”.<sup>24</sup> There is always a masquerade of sorts, a redistribution of interiority and exteriority.

Reading Patti Smith’s ‘Gloria’, Middleton is drawn once again to Žižek’s reading of Lacan, focusing on the object voice, picking out the falsetto leaps in the final ‘A’ of Smith’s spelling out of Gloria’s name as indicating the castrato whom Wayne Koestenbaum claims we have to focus on if we are to discover female agency in opera. ‘[I]n these “impossible” sounds [...] the subject we expect to be inhabiting our image of Smith’s body definitely seems to be missing, and what unsettles, we might imagine, is something like the castrato within it’.<sup>25</sup> Middleton proceeds to take several orbits around the song, in order to consider what the glimpses of the object voice might mean: is it a ‘a *subversion* of the phallic order; or rather an attempted *theft* of the phallus, an *appropriation*; or again, an eruption – between the lines – of feminine jouissance; or alternatively a same-sex masquerade traversing the routes between all of these’?<sup>26</sup> Here, he is at his playful best – the book comes alive in the explanations he allows to court Smith’s performance like a succession of suitors. There is a virtuosity that is much more here than a simpleminded application of Lacanian thought, and a joy in taking over the familiar categories of Žižekian thought and allowing them to become rich and strange in their contact with his subject matter. It becomes clear what it might mean to understand the people in terms of the experience of the repetition of fragments of jouissance in the music under analysis.

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But what, in this case, does it mean to invoke the people at all, and what does it mean to speak of popular music? Middleton draws on Žižek’s exploration of Kripke’s notion of rigid designators. As Žižek argues, a name is applied retroactively by its effects – as such, it is empty; there was no initial baptism in which it was decided what it was. As name, as master signifier or quilting point, what is called ‘popular music’ can only be understood by its effects; surely any music can be understood in these terms (Middleton: ‘are there any properties whatsoever that would rule out by definition a given musical experience from the category “popular music”? I think the answer is: no’). Popular music is simply that which interpellates its listeners in various ways (‘I know what it is when I hear it’).<sup>27</sup>

Here, Middleton draws on Žižek's reading of Althusser's famous account of the operation of Ideological State Apparatuses such as the family, the education system, the army, etc. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek supplements what he perceives to be a failure in Althusser to account for the internalisation of such Apparatuses such that belief is produced. These Apparatuses, he argues, are experienced as traumatic, internalizing themselves into the unconscious. He goes on to claim that this internalization contains a residue or remainder precisely as it is given traumatically: 30

[T]his leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is its very condition: it is precisely this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism which confers on the Law its unconditional authority: in other words, which – in so far as it escapes ideological sense – sustains what we might call the ideological *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-meant), proper to ideology.<sup>28</sup> 31

For Žižek, it is jouissance that sustains belief in ideology, that is, in the big Other. Ideology, as belief before belief, is what produces the coherency of a meaningful social field even as it depends upon a traumatic leftover, a kernel which is immediately masked. The early Žižek allows this kernel to be thought in terms of what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe call 'antagonism' – as 'a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized'.<sup>29</sup> Ideology, Žižek claims, depends on this antagonism; belief before belief is a fantasy-construction. It is in this way that Žižek supplements Althusserian thought, accounting for the way in which interpellation and subjectivation work. 32

For Middleton, following Žižek closely, the name popular music, although empty, has a correlate in the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the 'sublime object' described by Žižek. It is this which awakens desire as what Lacan calls its object-cause, exposing the symbolic order so that it does not close up upon itself. Such an object-cause works through belief such that the listeners want to turn when it hails them. What turns? That which, in the subject, corresponds to the *objet petit a*: that little piece of the Real. And it is in these terms that one might understand as subjectivation, that is, what Middleton calls 'the articulatory play of contesting subject-positions' as opening the space of 'the people', not as a pre-given unity, but as 'that meaningless and impossible site of jouissance underlying and supporting all social fantasies of the popular'.<sup>30</sup> 33

These are dense pages, the many-stranded argument of Žižek's book being rendered in the space of 2000 words. Equally difficult is the dense run of arguments in the concluding chapter where Middleton brings the project of his entire book into focus. In these pages, he aims to show us how can we shift the symbolic context of the articulation we give of our activity, insofar as that articulation itself is a response to a prior lack, a prior incapacity to identify ourselves with any particular context. The political work that would shift the symbolic context would allow what Middleton calls 'sinthomaticity' to occur in new terms. What does this mean? In his later work, Lacan uses the word 34

*sinthome* to designate what happens when a symptom has become a drive, that is, as it is repeated for its own sake and outside the projective space that still takes the big Other to be whole and intact. It is the *sinthome* that reveals itself in place of the symptom once fantasy is traversed, and the analysand has understood that total *jouissance* is impossible. Henceforward, the *sinthome* holds those fragments of *jouissance* the subject can pursue as meaningless ends in themselves, that is without the projected approval of the big Other.

What is to be gained by moving from speaking of *sinthome* to *sinthomaticity*? 35  
Certainly it renders explicit the transcendental aspirations of psychoanalytic cultural theory as it concerns the conditions of the production of symptoms. But, as Middleton indicates in the many encounters with musical materials in his book, the methodology of the cultural psychoanalyst may well be transformed in turn. What should matter is an encounter between music and theory such that both terms are altered. And what should matter, too, for Middleton, is that it attends to and is generative of new practices in the people it voices. This is what Middleton aims at in his political rearticulation of the meaning of Lacan's notion of the *sinthome*, showing us not simply how our identifications are always politically conditioned, but allowing us to change the field in which this conditioning occurs. The aim, accordingly, is to effectuate *sinthomaticity* in a new sense through the recovery of subjective agency; attending to the way in which the people contest the field that appears to condition them, and indicating that method by which we, as readers, might search for the agency of the people in other fields.

Does *Voicing the Popular* convince? There would be no more dreary response 36  
to the book than one analogous to Miss Jean Brodie's advice to her acolytes about the Girl Guides: 'for those that like that sort of thing, that is the sort of thing they like'. The poor, stupid unknown professor of Žižek's satirical remark might well be vexed by what he finds in Middleton's book. But perhaps something might begin from an engaged *criticism* of this book which would attest to its richness, difficulty and sometimes sparkling brilliance.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to two anonymous referees of this review article for their incisive comments.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 188.

<sup>3</sup> Of recent overviews of Derrida's thought, Marrati's *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) is supremely lucid. Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1986) presents Derrida's arguments about quasi-transcendentality clearly, though Bennington's criticisms of Gasché in *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction* (London: Verso, 1994) are important to bear in mind. Middleton also neglects the writings of Derrida's turn to questions

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concerning the ethical and political, that is from 'Force of Law' (in *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002)) onwards.

<sup>4</sup> *Voicing the Popular*, 190.

<sup>5</sup> Granted, it may seem from *Anti-Oedipus* that Deleuze and Guattari suggest that one might simply bypass the Oedipus complex altogether, giving rise to the wild play of differences Middleton evokes. But I think *Anti-Oedipus* lends itself to the reading that the complex is something that must be worked through; the book is concerned, as Sinthome, author of the blog *Larval Subjects* has noted, with 'the desire for Oedipus or Oedipalisation', which should not be understood solely in terms of the relationship between parent and child, but rather in the relationship to any projected source of authority – in Lacan's parlance, any big Other (see 'Lacan and Deleuze: a Pet Peeve', <http://larval-subjects.blogspot.com/2006/05/lacan-and-deleuze-pet-peeve.html>). I am indebted to Sinthome's blog *Larval Subjects* (at its old address at <http://larval-subjects.blogspot.com> and at its new address at <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com>) throughout this review.) It is the desire for a certain kind of authority from which *Anti-Oedipus* would cure us (its central concern, after all, is with the question as to why people will their own oppression) – and this, I think, is exactly equivalent with the ambition of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Then for Deleuze and Guattari, like Lacan, Oedipus is a fantasy to be traversed (although they might not put it this way). If Middleton's account of Deleuze makes of him a strawman in a manner analogous to the Lacan of Deleuzians (if not Deleuze himself), it continues to steer us away from a genuine encounter between Lacanians and Deleuzians.

<sup>6</sup> Lacan himself, Sinthome notes, praises Deleuze's *Coldness and Cruelty* in Seminar XIV and reads *Difference and Repetition* and *Logic of Sense* in Seminar XVI. References to Lacan's work in Deleuze's work abound – note in particular Deleuze's remark in chapter 2 of *Difference and Repetition* where he distinguishes between Lacan's notion of lack and negativity on the other, reserving only the latter for his approbation. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, tr. Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 33.

<sup>8</sup> See Fink's *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) for the best general introduction to Lacan's work. Fink's *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999) provides an invaluable account of Lacanian psychoanalysis in practice.

<sup>9</sup> See, on Lacan and Kojève, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, tr. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Voicing the Popular*, 36. Middleton is quoting John Mowitt, *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Voicing the Popular*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 24

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 23

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>18</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vols. II and III: The History of Eroticism / Sovereignty*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 283.

<sup>19</sup> See Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, tr. James H. Nichols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> *Voicing the Popular*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 53-4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 95. Middleton is quoting Slavoj Žižek, "I Hear You With My Eyes"; or, 'The Invisible Master', in Renata Salecl & Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>28</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Voicing the Popular*, 35.

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