

## Essay: General Remarks on “Cultural Appropriation”

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For a long time, Western epistemology saw itself as the ultimate and universal arbiter of all forms of thinking. Other forms were considered as infantile, underdeveloped, or at best, proceeding from a naïve, superstitious and archaic framework. Not only that, but the West took it upon itself to bring enlightenment to those it considered as less fortunate than itself. Most often, however, this was a thinly disguised pretext for a plundering of economic resources.

This did not remain unopposed, thanks to the works of Weber, Mauss, Levi-Strauss and Foucault, among others. As a result, Academia tutored and groomed the post WWII generation into the delights of *Otherness*, stressing that other modes of thinking were just as adequate as the Western one, and in particular, outlined that thinking was the result of a structure, and therefore could not be considered natural.

Music theory sets guidelines, which makes its praxis easier, but also helps with its dissemination. While its oral forms are amenable to variations, however small they may be, its written forms attract a great deal of passion (in ordinary language), or a strong libidinal investment (in Freudian language). This provides a subject (whether a single individual or a group) with a strong sense of unity and identity, when in fact, identity is always vacillating. In turn, this allows for what Freud termed the narcissism of little differences (*cf.* Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, 1930): *they* are not from the same hamlet, the same village the same shire, the same country, etc... and as a result, creates a sense of superiority.

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Music theorists are not exempt from such feelings, hence the passion some of them can show concerning the validity of their systems. The attachment to the signifiers and their relationships which characterize their theories is so strong that switching position is near impossible, as it would require a relinquishing and mourning of a portion of their libido. Such is the psychical structure of the subject in its Freudian-Lacanian conception. In effect, such theories have the same role as founding myths have for nations. It is not the signifiers which create a rigid subject. It is a strategy of creating a rigid subject which uses signifiers in such a manner. The psychical fragility of a subject is such that trying to absolutely convince him of the validity of a different set of beliefs can lead to a general collapse. Political examples of this abound in the West, when in the 60's and 70's, the questioning of Soviet Communism led to suicides.

Concerning the Westernisation of Oriental music<sup>1</sup>, Freud describes desire as having a push/pull structure: when a particular position is adopted, it is the result of a push from the subject, and an attraction from the position at issue. In other words, our favourite ideas are not random, nor rational. This brings 2 questions: 1) what was the West's desire towards the Orient, and 2) what was the Orient's desire towards the West. These 2 questions are simultaneous. While territorial colonisations can have an element of violence, I would see cultural colonisation as resulting from a desire to colonise (from one side), and a desire to be colonised (on the other side). In other words, what we have is what we *desire* to have. This may seem surprising to those unfamiliar with Freud's theory, but it should be remembered that at its heart, is the notion that there is unknown knowledge. It would therefore become interesting to explore what were the structures which 1) led to the integration of Western musical elements in Oriental music, and 2) led to the integration of Oriental musical elements in Western music. In the 1980's, young experimental musicians were very keen to integrate in their practices elements from Oriental music, probably from the influence of John Cage, while not forgetting that generations do not replace one another, they succeed one another. Each generation has its own way of inventing and

<sup>1</sup> With regard to Part 5 in Beyhom's dossier in the current issue of NEMO.

elaborating. At the same time, we should not forget that each of us is the exotic other for an other. Exoticism goes both ways. In that respect, an apocryphal story comes to mind: a Pigmy tribe once attended an opera; they wrote back home and explained that there was this fat lady screaming on stage, and it was just awful.

The above remarks stem from a semiotics based in the Freudian-Lacanian text. Subjects exist via language, i.e. the Symbolic. Something of the *Umwelt* is captured and invested with libido. That something then passes into the world of symbols, via a phenomenon of metaphor and metonymy. From this world, subjects build a structure of identity (e.g. *I am a musicologist*). They therefore become the *predicates* of logical and signifying structures, not their creators and masters. Being is indeed a logic, but given the unrelentness of libido, its inability to remain at rest, that logic is always in movement. Being, then, is a movement in movement.

The admiration for Hellenistic Greek culture became generalised around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Schliemann frantic search for and subsequent discovery of Troy (we now think that it is unlikely to have been the famed city of the Iliad, but a small principality). Until then, any appreciation for Greek culture, as transmitted by the Muslim world, was the province of scholars. An earlier possible source *may* have been the actions of the German founder of the Illuminati secret order, Adam Weishaupt. Opposed to the church dogma and political conservatism, his project is to widen the influence of the ideas issued from the Age of Enlightenment. Around the time of the French revolution, he wants to establish the perfect state, inspired by the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Hence the choice of the owl, Athens' symbol, for the order's emblem, and why Illuminati members named themselves after Greek names<sup>2</sup>. This is known from the order's archives, stored in Gotha, in the German province of Thuringia<sup>3</sup>. At its peak, the order counted some 2000 members.

Another contributing factor may have been a yearning for peace, order and stability, after the seism of the French revolution and Napoleon conquest wars. At that point in history, European rulers could no longer exclusively rely on the concept of Divine Right as the basis for their power. The idea of a reasoned rule established by mutual consent, through elections, became a guiding principle. In a movement of idealisation, those sought after qualities were projected back in time onto Hellenistic Greece and "rediscovered". This is ironic, since those ancient Greek city-states were constantly at war with one another, their entire social organisation was based on slavery, women were second class citizens, their outlook was towards Eastern Europe and the Northern part of the African continent, and the *erastes-eromenos* relationship was considered the apex of social refinement.

We should also not forget the admiration the West developed for the Romans, considered a genius people, themselves great admirers of the Hellenistic culture. This led to Latin being part of Western school syllabuses, for surely, the genius of their culture could be transmitted via its language.

The concept of Cultural Appropriation has now been on the social agenda for quite some time, notably on American & European campuses. In 2003, HRH Prince Harry was heavily criticised by some Australian Aborigines for using Indigenous Australian art motifs in a painting for a school project<sup>4</sup>. In April 2016, the white Canadian singer Justin Bieber was strongly criticised for sporting a dreadlock hair style<sup>5</sup>. In September 2016, at the University of East Anglia, the students' union banned a Mexican restaurant from giving out sombreros to students on the grounds that it was an act of cultural appropriation, and therefore racist<sup>6</sup>.

In its current form, I consider this concept dangerous, as it seems to be motivated by the theme of exclusiveness, behind which lurks the idea of purity. Only if I belong to a particular ethnic group am I able

<sup>2</sup> Note from the Editors: Adam Weishaupt adopted however the name of "Brother Spartacus" (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Adam\\_Weishaupt&oldid=745832002](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Adam_Weishaupt&oldid=745832002), accessed 2016/11/01).

<sup>3</sup> cf. *Sociétés secrètes*, Arte documentary, broadcast, 13 August 2016.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/08/20/1061261182182.html>, accessed 2016/11/03.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/justin-bieber-cultural-appropriation-dreadlocks-accused-a6967201.html>, accessed 2016/11/03.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/29/uea-student-union-bans-racist-sombreros>, accessed 2016/11/03.

to make use of the sets of signifiers in existence within that group. In addition, these sets cannot be borrowed by outsiders, lest they become soiled and weaken the group, by introducing impurities. Sounds familiar? Yet, in which ethnic group I am born is entirely contingent, and does not give me any particular privileged access to existence. Closing off a culture can easily pave the way towards another "*Ein Volk, ein Kultur*", and its temptations towards autarky. Pushing that logic to its extreme, we could ask if the use of a telephone (a white American invention) by a Togolese chap in Lomé, is an act of cultural appropriation, if the Neanderthals came into the world through an act of cultural appropriation towards their Denisovan cousins, if the Chinese pianist Lang Lang should be allowed to play Tchaikovsky, if Miles Davis should have been allowed to study at the Paris conservatoire, or if Steve Reich should have been studying drumming in Ghana in 1970. Is so-called Black music, in its Blues, Motown, Hip-Hop and Rap manifestations, a cultural appropriation of Palestrina and Bach's I-V-I structure? And what should we make of the Chinese government's gift to the Algerian government of an opera house, in October 2016? Continuing in the same vein, what of the epistemological appropriation of the very idea of cultural appropriation?

Yet, there is the interesting phenomenon of the taboo on incest, from which followed the laws which regulated marriage among traditional tribes. You could not marry someone within your own tribe or someone too close a kin, but from designated *other* tribes or kins. At work in that structure is the principle of relational differentiation, exogamy in effect, aimed at ensuring the continuation of social metonymy. By marrying into *another* tribe, you spread not only your genetic material, but also your ideas, crafts, traditions, and beliefs, in other words: your culture. And us 21<sup>st</sup> century humans, are the result of this metonymy. Culture is an on-going metonymy or, to use a Pop music term, a constant remix, and it would be difficult for anyone to justify claiming a copyright on it, as it would bring instant paralysis to the continuity of innovation. Papa is indeed a rolling stone.

From the Freudian-Lacanian text, what is called cultural appropriation can be seen as a way to deal with Otherness: 1) by ingestion of a particular trait of that Other, 2) by destruction or remix of what has been ingested, 3) by a spitting out of into the world of

a new form, thus contributing to the social bond. When that dynamic dialectic of difference is absent, the only refuge is to reject and ostracise the Other, at the cost of mental anorexia. In that respect, the anger and aggressiveness which often accompanies accusations of cultural appropriation is a good indicator of what is fundamentally at stake.

If there is a problematic in the so-called appropriation phenomenon, it seems to me to consist in the attempt at creating a dialectic not being expressed for what it is, and therefore remaining uncritical. This leads to a "miraculous" adoption, as if the adopter had been pre-destined, since the beginning of times, to receive a divine legacy. Rather, it is an opportunity to create a space where the discourses of 2 others can have an encounter with and acknowledge one another, instead of both trying to become universal, and at the same time. If it is possible to re-visit the past in order to re-interpret the present, it may also be possible to re-visit *à-côtés* in order to re-interpret *ici*. It is what the French philosopher Montesquieu did, in his *Lettres Persanes*, when a character exclaims "How can you be a Persian?". More recently, the French writer Roland Barthes wrote an extremely subtle criticism of Western culture in his *The Empire of Signs*.

A particular logical arrangement of signifiers is invested with a strong libidinal intensity or *jouissance* (in Lacanian terms), in order to create a *semblant* of reality. There is no guarantee of an actual correspondence between the chosen signifiers and the phenomenon. This arrangement is transferred into the common stock of knowledge, the Symbolic, and becomes a master-signifier. It rules the subject and his discourses, as well as his relationships with other subjects, thus creating the possibility for what we call *society*. It is a way to elaborate on and from the realities of the world, including impossible realities. Such an arrangement has the structure of a myth, giving a form of social experience to individuals within a social group, as well as ensuring the cohesion of the group (*cf.* Levi-Strauss, *La structure des mythes*, Anthropologie structurale, Plon, Paris, 1958). Its value is not so much in its truth or falsity, but in its capacity to strengthen the social bond.

You can equally dance to music tuned in Just Intonation or Equal Temperament.

