



A Reply to Mark Slobin

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Call and Response

A REPLY TO MARK SLOBIN

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The following remarks should be understood as a critique of some of the epistemological implications of Mark Slobin's remarkable *tour de force* of a vast ethnographic terrain, rather than a commentary on ethnographic evidence, data which I have a far more fragmentary understanding of than does Slobin in his truly encyclopedic grasp of the musics under review. The convenience for me—and probably the only qualification I bring to this task—simply lies in the fact that, like Slobin, I am an “ordinary citizen” of that relatively homogeneous group of advanced capitalist societies of North America and Europe (although the whole point of his article seems to be to deny this proposition, and there may be a difference after all between an American perspective and a European view) and that, like Slobin, I am also an academic/intellectual trying to construct reasonably theoretical accounts (something less than a “high-theoretical” and something more than a “commonsense” approach, perhaps) of the apparent disorder around us.

I am particularly interested in what strikes me as perhaps the central problem with Slobin's analysis, his distaste for “totalizing” modes of analysis. This dislike of a “particular conceptual grid” and Slobin's penchant for “truly nebulous” terms is, of course, not owed to the sheer magnitude alone of the geographic space covered and the multiplicity of the phenomena under review. It reflects a deeper conceptual and methodological problem. Thus, the *dramatis personae* in Slobin's narrative are the familiar characters of postmodern dramaturgy. There is the villain of the piece, clearly recognizable in terms such as “system,” “blueprint,” and “model”—concepts that count among postmodernism's most loathed vices of a former era of analytical thought, and that ethnomusicologists are accustomed to associate more specifically with the grand old comparative schemes of *vergleichende*

Musikwissenschaft. The good guys, predictably, are terms like “multiple view-point” and “disjuncture.”

Now for all the emphasis on “multivalence” and “overlays,” Slobin’s account does yield a set of notions, after all, like subculture, intercultural, and superculture, that seek to integrate the multiple, amorphous realms of micromusics into some kind of overarching model. Ultimately, however, this attempt to systematize something so resolutely unsystematic as the new micromusics, is doomed to reproduce only the paranoiac effect caused by a system unleashed of its own logic. Thus, on reading Slobin’s piece, I had difficulty ridding myself of the vague feeling that somehow the new global culture is all an overwhelming muddle as it sometimes haunts you in your dreams, that the superculture inextricably affects the subculture and vice versa, that musicians constantly “code-switch” between the subculture and the intercultural which in turn determines the interaction between subcultures, and so forth, in an endless whirl. And perhaps this is the only definition of global culture we might attempt to advance at this stage, or, as Slobin says: “there is little difference between ‘hegemony’ and ‘culture.’” Hegemony would then be another way of saying that there is no culture outside the system, regardless of how microdifferentiated the system may be otherwise.

It is clear that such a picture of an incomprehensible labyrinth, populated by amorphous collectivities and innumerable sub-groups, and the corresponding fear of totalizing concepts, as Fredric Jameson has suggested, are themselves a function of globalization. Where there is nothing outside the all-encompassing system, the notion of a system must lose its *raison d’être*. This then only comes around again by way of a “return of the repressed” in the nightmares of 1984 or in the sci-fi novels about global conspiracy.

Of course, as Slobin correctly points out in his timely critique of Hebdige et al., the way to redemption cannot lie in the romantic hope for some kind of salvaging force out there, an “Other” that will eventually, by the virtue of its mere existence, save us from the self-enclosure of the total grey-out. Rather, the question of how to account for both global generality and local specificity might have to be recast by trying to think this global-local relationship in more dialectical terms, as mutually constitutive features of the very micromusics that Slobin finds so hard to pin down, to anchor more firmly the “micromusical home” in a space that is both more local and more global than Slobin’s tripartite model. The point is to find the name of the new global game, as it were, to somehow save the notion of music in today’s shifting world as a systemic realm of cultural production. We need to look for a more resolute way of articulating the vague experience of some kind of sympathetic participation in a giant macro-system. Or, to put the whole issue in somewhat more formal language, we need to think about ways to

represent how the idea that we are part of an increasingly total (and at times threatening) world-system in which the destiny of, say, even the remotest longhouse in Papua New Guinea and the life worlds of each of its inhabitants are closely linked with the workings of such remote and impersonal “forces” as multinational corporate strategies, U.S. domestic policy, and the price of oil.

This position does not negate the role of disjuncture and dislocation in contemporary world politics and culture, any more than it acquits us from having to remind ourselves continually of the radical difference between “us” and other realities and cultural practices in the global periphery (both “at home” and in the Third World). But if something like a logic of the global information society can be formulated, we might have to look for its conceptual center in a completely novel meaning of difference. Following Fredric Jameson (1991) on whose thoughts about the systemic nature of late capitalism much of my argument is based, difference is something that relates rather than separates disparate realms of experience. Connected to this premise is the tight nexus that I assume as given between the commodification of culture and differentiation. The omnipresence of commodity production is the roof, as it were, under which differentiation and homogenization now comfortably reside as members of the same family. Or, as Jean Beaudrillard says in *La transparence du mal*, otherness, like the rest, has fallen under the law of the market (1990:129).

In other words, I see homogenization and differentiation not as mutually exclusive, antonymous features of musical globalization that can be lamented, reprehended, or demanded as needed, but as integral constituents of culture in the advanced countries of the West. Synchronicity, the *totum simul*, in other words: the contradictory experience of the universal marketplace alongside proliferating neo-traditional codes and new ethnic schisms, is the key signature of an era, a mode of production, whose ultima ratio rests on the production of diversity. Or, to use a more familiar range of images from the realm of commodity aesthetics: homogeneity and diversity are two symptoms of what one is tempted to call the Benetton syndrome; the more people around the globe purchase the exact same garment, the more the commercial celebrates difference. Or, if you prefer an analogy from thermodynamics that Jean-Francois Lyotard once used: the growing capacity of the modern world-system for internal differentiation and communication reminds us of the second law of thermodynamics according to which systems in contact with each other tend toward a state of high entropy and equilibrium.

To support my argument I would like to summarize briefly a line of thought that sees the production of difference as inherent in the logic of capitalism itself. As Fredric Jameson, who is one of those who have pursued

most vigorously the idea of “mapping a totality,” argues, the ability of the system to reproduce itself in endless variations and inter-connected sub-systems rests on a deeply “anti-social,” atomizing logic that makes for much of capitalism’s originality as a historical mode of production. Paradoxically, the systemic reproduction of capitalist society through social difference—or, “growth by internal disjunction,” as Niklas Luhmann would say (Luhmann 1982:231)—does not implode the system from within, in the sense of the structural contradictions producing the collapse of the whole without the intervention of some outside force or acting subject. Differentiation simply increases, on a grander scale, the heteronymy and chaos that are the historical attribute of this society. For Jameson, therefore, the corresponding liberal tolerance of neo-ethnicity is a yuppie phenomenon *tout court* (1991:341).

It may seem disquieting to invoke a theory that is so patently devoid of any reference to human agency and that would leave practically no space for the popular arts to articulate some kind of creativity and authentic truth. In Luhmann’s systems theory, whose proximity to Jameson’s argument springs to the eyes, the production of difference in ceaseless internal replications of a closed system achieves even claustrophobic dimensions. System differentiation, Luhmann says, merely replicates the difference between a system and its environment. Each subsystem therefore becomes a copy of the whole system in the special form of the difference between the subsystem and its environment. A complex system such as the global economy (or world music) thus gains integration not only on the basis of common values, norms or power relations, but simply by providing an ordered environment to its subsystems (Luhmann 1975:59).

But Luhmann’s notion of system seems all the more attractive for the analysis of global aesthetic production, because we are in fact dealing with the most ramified, all-encompassing environment ever in the history of artistic production, regardless of how creative individual performers or groups of performers may still continue to be. In fact, analogous to the romanticization of creativity in the electronic age, a direct correlation may be established between the globalization of music and the mythologization of local talent. For the most advanced state of mass cultural production is now the one that is also the most global.

Be that as it may, all I want to conclude for the moment from my reading of Luhmann is the fact that a system that constitutively produces difference remains a system all the same. Difference, in this interpretation, is no longer an antithesis to the system, it is drawn back inside the system. The eccentricity of the system is the symptom of an inner metastasis rather than of its impending death. At the very least, this theoretical option should help us to transcend the heteronymy and tautology implicit in the ideology of difference. Unlike Iain Chambers’ discussion of the “traveling sounds” of the

postmodern era, a more systemic notion of global cultural production prevents us from essentializing music as a “source of difference” per se (Chambers 1992:144). Systems theory might provide an opening in which to rehearse an aesthetic theory that goes beyond a random collection of ethnoaesthetics “unto themselves,” a theory that defines difference ontologically, as it were, as an intrinsic, internal feature of global musical production rather than something resulting from the purely descriptive juxtaposition of incompatible sets of socio-historical circumstances.

The relevance of this point for my argument needs to be particularly emphasized, because even where, as in much of the current postcolonial literature, the Other is constructed not as an ontologically given, where the binarisms of “Self” and “Other” are dissolved and differences are seen as historically produced and contingent upon each other, there remains at times a hint of a tautology, an unaccounted-for space in which difference cannot be further theorized: “every subculture, each micromusic, is a world unto itself.” (Slobin 1992:75) Charles Seeger’s dictum of half a century ago that music is “a means of communication between people” serving “to embody what is common (or strange) between them” and that some humans “must of necessity sing their difference” (1939:149) may remain valid, but we now sing our difference as part of a system that condemns us to seek the signets of otherness in the images it produces from within itself.

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A REPLY TO ERLMANN

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I would like to thank Veit Erlmann for his thoughtful and stimulating response to “Micromusics of the West.” Because I must be brief, I would like to highlight just his interest in my having more of a “system,” apparently