

Mandatory Music

Julian Stallabrass

'Mandatory Music', in Song-Ming Ang/ Kim Cascone, eds., *The Book of Guilty Pleasures*, 3rd Singapore Biennial, Singapore 2011.

Why should a pleasure ever be guilty? Because it is indulged in so much that it causes you or those close to you harm, or because of some looking down on a 'low' and vulgar diversion. And even the latter may be described in terms of harm: that to indulge in that pleasure may reinforce the 'low' in the listener: the mawkish, the martial, the proud, the lazily ironic...

Why should the display of guilty pleasures be thought democratic, or to revise aesthetic categories or allow people to listen without prejudice? Why should the standard journalistic mode of self revelation (of an invited group of contributors no less) be thought to help in this? Perhaps the idea is that if this bunch of interesting people feel guilty but OK about revealing that they listen to Britney Spears or Elton John or Tchaikovsky (or whatever is considered low from any particular position), then the readers can feel OK too. In itself, that reinforces a broadcast culture of opinion-makers and followers which is far from democratic.

What does democracy mean in relation to music and culture anyhow? Active listening, the listener as composer, is a beautiful ideal but one that tends to vitiate the power relations involved between composer (and more, producer and distributor) and listener. Broadcast culture is eroding as culture becomes more distributed, as listeners remake music to suit their own purposes, or make parodic videos to accompany existing hits. That dialogue contains the seeds of a democratic exchange and the beginnings of a no

doubt divided, various, conflicted and contentious discourse about what is valuable in music.

Finally, the darkest side of this request: that most of the music we all experience is not out of choice but as pollution: the music of bars, shops, restaurants, even banks. It is hard to go into a public space without hearing some mandatory music. Occasionally, we may take pleasure in some half-forgotten song or the unlikely juxtaposition of place and tune (Joy Division at the hairdressers?) but more often it is the imposition of someone else's 'pleasure' on us, most often for the purposes of dulling our critical faculties. There's nothing democratic about that.

So should I reveal my musical pleasures, guilty or otherwise? Should I show my face? I think not.