

# Visions of China: Avant-Orientalism, Art Rock, and Conflicted Otherness

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## *Abstract*

The essay reexamines the countercultural positionality of art rock musical works by considering the often-dismissed correlations between Western rock and the Oriental. Introducing the concept of Orientalism to Lawrence Grossberg's five-hypothesis proposal for studying rock affects, I will focus on the case study of the *Tin Drum* album (1981) by the British band Japan. Through a contextual analysis of the album and a symbolic analysis of the *Visions of China* music video, I will examine some intricate relations between rock's "affective Otherness" and the construct of the Oriental Otherness. Juxtaposing postmodern aesthetics with popular music and Orientalism, I will discuss the implications of reducing Orientalist cooptation to a progressive technique of music making. I will then propose the concept of 'Avant-Orientalism' to describe this series of musical practices and their representational problematics. Finally, I will argue that although the post-war context constructed the Oriental Otherness, this subjectivity was furthered by the avant-Orientalist cooptation to secure the affective positionality against the hegemonic. However, while the cooptation of Oriental Otherness reflects rock's survival strategy and anti-hegemonic agenda, it inevitably re-inscribed an Orientalist ideology under its fragmented progressiveness, making the Otherness of avant-Orientalism an always-conflicted one.

With cultural roots in African-American music, but having been disproportionately popularised by many white musicians,<sup>1</sup> rock music has been an important terrain for scholars and critics to investigate issues of racialisation, cultural hybridity, identity and cultural citizenship, and countercultural politics. Music and cultural studies scholars have long been interested in how the transcontinental and cross-cultural flows from urban Black America, Jamaica,

<sup>1</sup> For rock music's significant Black roots and how rock and roll became 'white', see Jack Hamilton, *Just around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). For another look into African/African-American musical influence on popular musical forms, see Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

and Europe have influenced rock music, such as the late-1960s progressive rock and the 1980s post-punk.<sup>2</sup> However, academic debates surrounding these issues usually significantly overlook how Asian cultures have had a constitutive, and not just symbolic, role in complicating the trajectory of Western rock music.<sup>3</sup> We can see endeavors to fuse Asian musical traditions with rock as early as The Beatles' *Revolver* (1966), which is influenced by Indian traditional music. The new wave and post-punk era of the late-1970s and 1980s - coinciding with the introduction of the marketing category of 'world music' to the West, the globalization of popular music, and the general spirit of musical experimentation at the time,<sup>4</sup> - produced many musical works that incorporated non-Western elements. While some scholars have seen this as a postmodern 'technique' to break stylistic boundaries and create new meanings,<sup>5</sup> this article calls attention to musical works that exemplify a musical phenomenon that I call 'Avant-Orientalism'. These works, often created by white musicians, incorporate or experiment with the rhetoric, sounds, and images of Asian cultures in ways that misrepresent, mystify, monetise, and fetishise them at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

Examples of 'Avant-Orientalism' in rock music abound: Siouxsie and the Banshees have dabbled with Asian tunes and themes in *Hong Kong Garden* (1978) and *Arabian Knights* (1981); Brian Eno and David Byrne have heavily integrated sampled and recorded Middle Eastern sounds with electronica in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1981); and David Bowie has spiced up a love song with an exotic intro in the controversial single *China Girl* (1983).<sup>7</sup> These works, admittedly, demonstrate different composing rationales for coopting Asian cultures. This article takes special interest in the authorial intent and social meanings of a self-Othering strategy that operates through a unique practice of

<sup>2</sup> See Simon Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For a wholistic view on this issue, I recommend Rehan Hyder's book on British-Asian popular musicians: *Brimful of Asia: Negotiating Ethnicity on the UK Music Scene* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion of these coinciding factors, see Simon Frith, 'The Discourse of World Music', in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, eds. by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 305-22; Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); and Andy Bennett, 'The Forgotten Decade: Rethinking the Popular Music of the 1970s', *Popular Music History*, 2.1 (2007), 5-24.

<sup>5</sup> For an example of postmodern analysis of music videos, see Will Straw, 'Music video in its Contexts: Popular Music and Post-modernism in the 1980s', *Popular Music*, 7.3 (1988), 247-66.

<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to does not provide extensive sonic analysis of Avant-Orientalism. For examples of analyses of s Oriental/Asian riffs in Western popular music, see Martin Nilsson, 'The Musical Cliché Figure Signifying The Far East: Whence, Wherefore, Whither?', <<http://chinoiserie.atspace.com/>> [accessed 29 March 2019] and Charles Hiroshi Garrett, 'Chinatown, Whose Chinatown? Defining America's Borders with Musical Orientalism', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 57 (2004), 119-74.

<sup>7</sup> For current examples of Avant-Orientalism, readers can refer to examples like Katy Perry's 'Dark Horse' (2013), Blur's *The Magic Whip* (2015), Muse's *Simulation Theory* (2018), or even Nicki Minaj's 'Chun-Li' (2018).

self-Orientalisation: namely, white musicians coopting Asian elements in order to produce a countercultural stance and self-alienate from the racial and political hegemony in the post-war and cold-war conjuncture. I use the case of *Tin Drum* (1981), the last but most commercially successful album by the British band Japan, to examine these complications.

It is both important and difficult to examine this self-Othering strategy. First, besides intersectional concerns surrounding racism, sexism, imperialism, and postcolonialism when it comes to cultural appropriation, we must also examine how the intention of creating an affective and political alliance against the dominant societal structure complicates those intersectional concerns. In other words, we cannot simply generalise the band Japan's musical interventions as acts of yellow- or black-face.<sup>8</sup> Second, the political conjuncture of the late 1970s and 1980s – i.e. (xenophobic Thatcherism and Cold War anti-Communist ethos – complicated the social meanings of processes of musical experimentation like Avant-Orientalism. Lastly, this musical phenomenon has coincided with the 'postmodern turn' in academia, but examples of the turn in popular music studies have tended to focus on theorising postmodern patterns in stylistic and genre innovations, thus providing limited critical insights on its racial and ethnic matters.<sup>9</sup>

Informed by the afore-mentioned political and musical conjuncture, this article asks: How should we understand the superficial yet popular fusion of art rock and the Orient? What is at stake when these 'creative' yet purposefully anti-hegemonic fusions are constructed and delivered through reenacting and coopting a political and cultural Other? Particularly, I consider how the ideology and criticism of Orientalism provide us with alternative insights into the cultural logic behind first, the experimental and countercultural politics of rock music and second, the postmodern logic behind the crafted superficiality of art rock musical works. To explore these questions, this article combines a contextual analysis of the album *Tin Drum* (1981), a critical discourse analysis of various texts, and a semiotic analysis of the music video for the song *Visions of China*, in which we see the band members taking on the personae of 'Communist Chinese soldiers' and performing an abstract collage of their frugal yet orderly everyday life, in which they practice Chinese martial arts and marching band.

I use Lawrence Grossberg's concept of affective alliances and a five hypotheses proposal to study rock's affective power,<sup>10</sup> based on which I

<sup>8</sup> And, in the case of such interventions in Black and Asian musics like Asian American jazz or Afro-Asian hip-hop, appropriate analysis of this phenomenon would require different frameworks.

<sup>9</sup> Some scholars have dissected the postmodernity of rock through its intertextuality and interracial identities, such as Angela McRobbie in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and E. Ann Kaplan in *Rocking Around The Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987). However, focusing on postmodern patterns may cost concrete readings of the texts. For a critique of postmodern reading of rock music, see Andrew Goodwin's 'Popular Music and Postmodern Theory', *Cultural Studies*, 5 (1991), 174-190.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, 'Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life', *Popular Music*, 4 (1984), 225-258.

highlight three perspectives: the post-war context (after the Second World War), affective Otherness, and cooptation strategy. Broadly put, I examine a rarely-articulated connection between the countercultural politics of art rock, the postmodernisation of popular music, and Orientalism. More specifically, I examine the racial and affective complications that come along with art rock's anti-hegemonic praxis. I argue that while the post-war conjuncture produced the postcolonial and Communist Otherness of the Orientalised subjects at the time, this marginality was appropriated to construct an imagined and crafted Orient in *Tin Drum* (1981). I further contend that this manufactured Oriental Otherness was reinforced through the countercultural politics of art rock and its cooptation strategy for securing the affective possibilities to stay outside of the hegemonic. At the same time, I show how a postmodern analysis of the fragmentary contents and filming strategies of the 'Visions of China' music video accounts for the construct and reinforcement of Oriental Otherness. Finally, I argue that Orientalism is not just a symptom of the 'eccentric' taste of art rock gone wrong, but a postmodern discourse *constitutive* of art rock's survivalist creativity that often gets praised by music critics. The article concludes by calling for a careful re-examination of the scholarship dealing with the postmodernisation of popular music and critically reflecting on potential alliances with Orientalism.

### *Conflicted Otherness and Affective Alliances*

This section explains why I call out the discourses of 'Otherness' of rock music, especially those found in experimental, avant-garde and art-school traditions, as 'conflicted' and why it needs critical attention. Following this, I explain why it is important to approach the topic with the politics of rock affects in mind. I also explain how these complications inform the proposed concept of Avant-Orientalism.

I use Otherness to describe the intentionally constructed and maintained, anti-hegemonic, countercultural positionality put forth by many rock musicians. Like many subcultures, rock has long been grappling with the hegemonic incorporation and absorption of style.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, self-Othering could be an apt characterisation of the kinds of strategies entailed in those struggles. When discussing the ambivalent resistance of avant rock to mainstream culture, Bill Martin differentiates between the antagonism toward becoming mainstream artists and the antagonism toward the commodification associated with becoming mainstream. He argues that the resistance of avant rock lies more in resisting commodification than going mainstream, and that this elastic relationship with

<sup>11</sup> Many subculture studies scholars have investigated this complicated process. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (n.p.: Methuen, 1979) and Jodie Taylor's *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2012) are landmark studies dealing with this issue.

the mainstream is a unique dynamic of the avant-garde in rock. He explains that '[a]vant rock resists and plays off the mainstream of rock music [...], but it may not have the sort of *antagonism* [emphasis in the original] toward the mainstream that one often sees in jazz and classical avant-gardes' and that 'the antagonism is perhaps not with the mainstream artists per se, but with the market and commodification'.<sup>12</sup> This complicated attitude toward the mainstream is the first way in which art rock displays a conflicted relationship to the notion of Otherness.

Another layer of art rock's conflict is enacted through white avant-garde rockers actively aligning themselves with a minority identity and culture to express their own anti-hegemonic resistance. Besides the band Japan, Pink Floyd in songs such as 'Chapter 24' (1967) and 'Set The Controls For The Heart Of The Sun' (1968) exemplifies a trend of using elements of Oriental mysticism to ex-corporate themselves from hegemonic patterns of music-making. Examples are also abundant in Rock Against Racism (RAR) where many white rockers, such as The Clash and Billy Bragg, allied with Black and South Asian rockers to express a collective stance against the dominant anti-immigrant hostility of the time. As Grossberg remarks, creating affective alliances affords 'modes of survival' for rock to self-produce and survive as a resistant culture in a postmodern world where rockers experience conflicted affects 'between despair and pleasure' and 'between the desire to celebrate the new and the desire to escape it'.<sup>13</sup> Grossberg defines an affective alliance as 'a network of empowerment' and 'an organisation of concrete material practices and events, cultural forms and social experience which both opens up and structures the space of our affective investments in the world'.<sup>14</sup> Following this idea, I investigate the creation and complications of affective alliances between art rock and Oriental Otherness in *Tin Drum* (1981).

Grossberg proposes five hypotheses for analysing the intricate system of rock affects: first, rock originated within the context of the post-war era; second, meanings in rock function affectively, not just ideologically, to produce and organise affective alliances that disrupt the hegemony over pleasure and desire; third, rock locates and produces sites where pleasure is possible and important for audiences by piecing together and organizing fragments of everyday life; fourth, rock is diverse in its inscription of structural and affective differences compared to other cultures and its structures of affective alliances; and five, the cooptation of new sounds, styles and stances is a significant strategy of rock to self-produce its history and reproduce its affective power.<sup>15</sup> This framework captures some of the intricate, multilayered power dynamics of rock music in a time that the fine boundaries between the hegemonic and the countercultural were being

<sup>12</sup> Bill Martin, *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Bjork* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2002), pp. 188, 213.

<sup>13</sup> Grossberg, p. 235.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, pp. 225-58. Note this proposal was originally for studying rock in the US.

tested and (re)negotiated. Like Grossberg, I am interested in investigating rock's strategic empowerment through the production of affective alliances, but I seek to enrich his original proposal by introducing Orientalism into the conversation.

I show that an affective alliance articulated around a series of vaguely imagined concepts of the Orient – such as a poorly conceived representations of Communist China, Japan, or East Asia more broadly – complicates the ‘modes of survival’ of rock. This affective alliance inevitably fetishises Asian cultures as something ‘new’ to celebrate while somehow also offering a magical solution balancing those conflicted desires. I propose the concept of ‘Avant-Orientalism’ to describe the conflicted affective and ideological issues of the musical phenomenon discussed above. An avant-Orientalist musical work actively incorporates musical and non-musical symbols of the imagined Orient in order to produce a quasi-sensibility of the avant-garde and experimental that does not perfectly fit the mainstream market.

### *Post-war Context and Affective Otherness: Constructing Oriental Others*

This section considers how the conservative and activist post-war ethos in the U.K. stimulated an affect that informed the making and using of the Oriental Otherness in general, and the Otherness of the album *Tin Drum* (1981) by the band Japan specifically. I propose the musical movement Rock Against Racism (RAR) (1976-1982) and the rise of Thatcherism (1975-1990) as two particular contextual matters to better understand how and why the band constructed, mobilised, and performed a series of Oriental subjectivities through their creative agency.<sup>16</sup>

While music scholars and critics have referred to *Tin Drum's* (1981) musical aesthetics in terms as diverse as ethno-funk, art pop, and new romantic,<sup>17</sup> its *conceptual* inspiration – early days communist China – is prominently consistent throughout the album. Many track titles instantly evoke communist China, such as *The Art of Parties*, *Canton*, *Visions of China*, *Sons of Pioneers*, and *Cantonese Boy*. Besides the visuals of the album cover and ‘Visions of China’ music video, the band members also impersonate Chinese Communist soldier in the lyrics. For instance, ‘Cantonese Boy’ describes how an assiduous and obedient young man in Canton is hailed by the Red Army to join the mission of changing “the lives [they’ve] led for years”.<sup>18</sup> In the lyrics, the band vocalist, David Sylvian,

<sup>16</sup> My use of ‘Oriental’ subjectivity is an intentional rhetorical decision to emphasise the fictionality and imperialism behind the Asianness invented in *Tin Drum* (1981). One can think that the Oriental subjectivity is about the quality of being Asian in an Orientalist’s mind. The point is that the white avant-garde, not the Oriental, created the Oriental subjectivity; the Oriental doesn’t have actual subjective agency and, honestly, doesn’t exist among us.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London: John Hunt Publishing, 2014) and Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again*.

<sup>18</sup> Canton refers to the Guangzhou Province in modern China. ‘The Red Army’: a direct reference of the army of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1930s; simplified Chinese: 红军; pinyin: hóng jūn.

adopts the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ and expresses the hailing from the putative perspective of the Red Army: “We’re singing / Marching through the fields / We’re changing / The lives we’ve led for years / Red army calls you / Red army needs you”. The lyrics conjure up a sense of unity, collectivity, and positivity toward the communist future. Specifically, a series of imagined Oriental subjectivity is performed through the Cantonese boy being framed as a “civilian soldier” who can follow orders and “bang [the] tin drum” because “only young men broke the wall”.

The lyrics do not express clearly why the army calls the boy, but the positive tone towards the communist future and the Cantonese boy being needed in the army is an affective link that requires further discussion.<sup>19</sup> Stereotypes about Asians being polite, obedient, and lacking creativity are not new, but a positive affective link between an obedient Cantonese young adult and the army’s interpellation is rather rare and, more importantly, anti-hegemonic in the 1980s UK. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said writes how the Orientalist (referring to “area experts” in the original passage) sees the relationship between communist Soviets and other communist nations:

After all, the ‘West’ since World War II had faced a clever totalitarian enemy who collected allies for itself among *gullible* Oriental (African, Asian, undeveloped) nations. [...] The legendary Arabists in the State Department warn of Arab plans to take over the world. The perfidious Chinese, half-naked Indians, and passive Muslims are described as vultures for ‘our’ largesse and are *damned* when ‘we lose them’ to communism, or to their unregenerate Oriental instincts: the difference is scarcely significant.<sup>20</sup> [emphasis added]

Tellingly, the Oriental in *Cantonese Boy* that Japan created shows nonconventional Oriental subjects and traits found in Said’s depiction of the Orientalist tropes of Asian peoples. The Cantonese boy might be ‘gullible’ but certainly is not being ‘damned’. After all, as Sylvian explained to *NME* journalist Paul Morley in 1982, *Tin Drum* (1981) was not meant to concretely signify anything more than an absolute abstraction to free one’s mind from subjective and objective limitations:

*Tin Drum* wasn’t ‘a record about China’, [...] It was a state of mind being presented, thoughts and moods pushed forward *as bare as possible* [emphasis added] to not even reach the place where confusion enters into it. I want to achieve that state of mind where what I write doesn’t refer particularly to time or place, but goes beyond that.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> While I do analyse musical texts, I do to the extent that it serves to unfold bigger pictures. I kindly ask readers not to read this article as a textual analysis or a traditional musical analysis.

<sup>20</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Group, 2003), pp. 107-8 [first publ. in (1961)].

<sup>21</sup> As cited in Martin Power, David Sylvian: *The Last Romantic* (London: Omnibus Press, 2004).

In retrospect, it is safe to say *Tin Drum's* (1981) abundant tropes of Communist China and other pan-Asian symbols are not 'bare' enough to make this mission possible. Art has that potential, but the band was not there yet. Regardless, to understand the making and embodiments of postcolonial and Communist Oriental Otherness, even though they look quite different from Said's classic depiction, we need to take a closer look at the post-war context.

One rather important backdrop on cultural, political, and musical levels against which *Tin Drum* (1981) was produced is Rock Against Racism (RAR). It is possible to refer to the sentiments and issues that RAR addressed to interpret the rationale and sociocultural effects of the album, even though Japan was not an active RAR participant. RAR is a musical and political movement in the U.K. led by many punk and post-punk musicians to address racism and white-nationalism in the general public as well as among musicians. RAR aimed to break the racial boundaries of the time and brought about concerts and collaborations by Black, South Asian, and white musicians. Many participant bands were influential punk personalities at the time, such as The Special, The Clash, and X-Ray Spex. Although RAR was active only between 1976 to 1982, it has become a quintessential example of how popular music can mix politics and education, with pleasure.<sup>22</sup> As Simon Frith observed, to some degree, the popularity of RAR reflects a collective oppositional sentiment against Thatcherite UK: "the pop record is about the only public account of Thatcher's Britain that makes any emotional sense of what it means to be young or unemployed or black."<sup>23</sup> Within this affective and political context, Japan and *Tin Drum* (1981), an ostensibly anti-racist and anti-hegemonic record, could easily borrow the resistant aura from RAR while remaining 'different' from major RAR activities, which had relatively fewer engagements with Asian communities than their Jamaican counterparts.<sup>24</sup> In other words, singing about/for/by Asians, especially East Asian communities, remained rare.

Meanwhile, to better understand how the artistic decision of appropriating communist Chinese discourses may contribute to *Tin Drum's* (1981) anti-hegemonic stance, it is crucial to consider cold war tensions and the rise of Thatcherism in the U.K., where neither the Oriental 'flavour' nor communism was welcomed. The popular discourses produced by *Tin Drum* (1981) praising the social order and military life of communist China disrupted the ideological hegemony in the capitalist West. By creating this affective alliance,

<sup>22</sup> Simon Frith and John Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge: From Music to Politics, From Politics to Music', in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, ed. by Reebee Garofalo (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 67-80.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Frith, 'Post-punk Blues', *Marxism Today*, March 1983, pp. 18-21.

<sup>24</sup> RAR had active Asian members (e.g. Alien Kulture, a quartet having three second-gen Pakistani immigrants) and organised concerts protesting against racist attacks on Asians (e.g. the concert held by RAR groups responding to "Paki-bashing" incidents), but the involvement of Asians in RAR in general was much less than their non-Asian counterparts. See Frith and Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', 67-80.



the countercultural positionality of the album was constructed and reinforced. Moreover, the strong xenophobic tendencies stimulated by far-right National Front and the Conservative Party under Margret Thatcher leadership afforded *Tin Drum* (1981) more oppositional capital. Simon Reynolds notes that in 1978, “Thatcher had expressed concerns about immigration, using the metaphor of “swamping” to describe the impact of multiculturalism on the British “character” and way of life.”<sup>25</sup> In an interview with *NME* journalist Ian Penman in 1982, Sylvian explained how he was drastically opposed to this sentiment and how he built the purposeful vagueness of representations of the East into the album:

My fascination with the East has always been because it’s a *totally different* culture [...]. I’ve never actually been to China. My fascination for it is purely in terms of imagery. I’m not really dealing with Chinese problems or the society as such. A lot of the ideas come from *totally different* places [...]. I think the Japanese way of life is a *much better* way of working in terms of society [...]. The way they live their lives is based on old ideals and traditions, as well as modern technology. That’s why it works, they’ve kept their morals and values.<sup>26</sup> [emphasis added]

Singing about how the ‘Japanese way of life’ – or the life depicted in *Tin Drum* (1981) – was ‘much better’ than ‘the British “character” and way of life’ was certainly an Othering discourse distancing itself from the dominant lifestyle. In fact, both RAR and Thatcherism had served to secure the affective Otherness of *Tin Drum* (1981), a musical work that remains at a critical distance from the dominant Thatcherite ideology as well as at an arguable distance from RAR. In the above quoted interview, we can also sense a clear flavour of techno-Orientalism in its fetishisation of the combination of the old (‘old ideals and traditions’) and the new (‘modern technology’). Many media critics and scholars have debunked techno-Orientalism and illustrated how a seemingly positive and harmless ideology like this has done great damage to Asians in the form of Asian erasures, the objectification and dehumanisation of Asian bodies, the instrumentalisation of Asian bodies and cultures, etc.<sup>27</sup> While the ‘communist China’ theme could be an artistic preference that explains art rock’s ambivalent antagonism toward the mainstream, it does not easily mitigate the problems of appropriating Oriental Otherness, an imperialist intervention which has produced concrete collateral impacts on both the diasporic Asian communities in the West (most of whom in the 1980s UK were from ex-colonies) and Asians in Asia for centuries.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again*, p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> As cited in Martin Power, *David Sylvian*.

<sup>27</sup> Many media productions, such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Neuromancer* (1984), have been scrutinized for their techno-Orientalism. For such analyses see Jane Chi Hyun Park’s *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. by David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), and Timothy Yu, ‘Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: “Naked Lunch, Blade Runner”, and “Neuromancer”’, *MELUS*, 33 (2008), 45–71.

*Orientalist Cooptation: Fabricating Superficiality*

Although the post-war context has produced Oriental Otherness and secured an anti-hegemonic affect, Japan decontextualised this marginality and then recontextualised its signs in *Tin Drum* (1981), a process particularly evident in the music video of *Visions of China*. Grossberg suggests that rock is postmodern in that it appropriates hegemonic incorporation into its own discourses: while hegemony responds to resistance through *incorporation*, the power of rock would practice *excorporation* by reproducing the boundary between dominant and youth cultures as a response to the hegemonic attempts to incorporate rock into mainstream consumer culture. He explains that rock exercises *excorporation* by removing:

signs, objects, sounds, styles, etc. from their apparently meaningful existence within the dominant culture and relocates them within an affective alliance of differentiation and resistance. The resultant shock – of both recognition and of an undermining of meaning – produces a temporarily impassable boundary within the dominant culture, an encapsulation of the affective possibilities of the rock and roll culture.<sup>28</sup>

On the affective level, this holds true for *Tin Drum* (1981). Many media reviews of the album expressed the sentiment that Japan removed the signs of communist China from their originally meaningful context and relocated them in *Tin Drum* (1981). In the song, the relations between the East and the West were rearranged and reimagined to construct what Sylvian deemed as an ideal way of life, which, nevertheless, was inspired by Japanese culture. Since it is the complicated ways that affect works in cases of avant-Orientalism that the present analysis is interested in, I will then show that when *Tin Drum* (1981) ‘produces a temporarily impassable boundary within the dominant culture’, that boundary is only possible through a synergistic effort by the social ethos of the U.K., the band’s Orientalist performance, and similarly reductionist media discourse.

In the music video of ‘Visions of China’, the band members take on the personae of young communist Chinese soldiers and sing about the hopes and hardships of the time while reenacting multiple scenes of the supposedly everyday life as Chinese communist soldiers. In this non-linear and multi-sited music video, a minimalist setting appears first: Sylvian sits on the floor, singing and playing a jigsaw puzzle, alone in an empty room where all the viewer can see is a window with blowing curtains and a TV set. All the video’s scenes in this setting are monochromatic. In the last scene after Sylvian finishes the puzzle, the puzzle turns chromatic, and then so does Sylvian as if he was lit up in the process of completing the puzzle. After Sylvian finishes the last piece of the puzzle, the viewer sees a pale naked back with a colored tattoo, and when this individual puts on a piece of kimono-looking clothes and turns around to face

<sup>28</sup> Grossberg, p. 232.

the camera, the viewer sees an East Asian woman who appears ultra-pale. She wears straight long black hair and makeup that evoke the look of a geisha, with pale complexion, largely blended red eyeshadow, bright red lipstick, and heavy eyeliner. The aesthetic and visual influence from Japanese culture is also obvious in the androgynous appearance and kabuki-style makeup taken on by the band members.<sup>29</sup> Under a superficial reshuffle of Chinese and Japanese symbols that are heavily framed as visions of 'China', the music video creates a sense of depthlessness and superficiality. In a television interview, Sylvian talked about the influence of Japanese culture:

The first visit to Japan influenced us. It took us a long time to actually bring into the music, but in 79 I think it was when we first went there. I mean we were really taken by the place. And I came back to London and read a lot about the culture and so on, and went back a few more times and then slowly got an idea about the music because I was getting interested in the culture of Japan [...]. Japanese music in particular, I think it's *the space, the emptiness of it* [emphasis added]. How important the spaces are, as important as the music itself and as something we try to incorporate in *Tin Drum*.<sup>30</sup>

As indicated in the interview, the concept of *Tin Drum* (1981) was not just built on referencing China but also Japanese culture. The minimalist setting of the music video could then be seen as a visualisation of sonic emptiness, which is a significant feature of the song. However, the music video ironically features real footage of marching armies of China as well as the band members performing Chinese culture and the life of communist Chinese soldiers. All the original scenes take on a minimalist aesthetic when it comes to space. For example, a scene depicting a Chinese lion dance<sup>31</sup> is arranged in an empty space with a white background and is visually blurred. Nothing else is visible on site other than the dancers; nothing else is chromatic other than the lion dancing costumes. In another similarly delivered scene, we see two individuals practicing fighting with each other using with objects that look like traditional Chinese weapons (possibly Chinese spear and sword).

A pursuit of minimalist aesthetic of space may be most strongly demonstrated in another scene where two Caucasian individuals (presumably members of the band), dressed in costumes resembling Chinese military uniforms, sit on the ground together in front of a small table. The background is extremely minimalist and empty, with just enough signifiers for a Western audience to recognise this as an imitation of Chinese communist life: a chicken, a willow tree, and a sonic signifier: Chinese sorna.<sup>32</sup> An austere lifestyle is enacted but the minimalist

<sup>29</sup> Paul Simpson, *The Rough Guide to Cult Pop*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Toolateforheaven, *David Sylvian Ghosts and Interview 480p Quality*, online video recording, YouTube, 26 February, 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGCB6Fyn58M>> [accessed 15 December 2018].

<sup>31</sup> Simplified Chinese: 舞狮; pinyin: wǔ shī.

<sup>32</sup> Simplified Chinese: 唢呐; pinyin: suǒ nà. This instrument is credited as 'dida' in the album credits.

aesthetic largely romanticises this austere, if not primitive, lifestyle. Surely, the superficial fusion of Japanese aesthetics and a communist China imagery produces a temporal hyperreality that the dominant Western culture was not able to discern: a metaphorical kiss-and-makeup session between capitalist Japan and communist China during the cold war after the Second World War. Even if this postmodern reshuffling appears shocking and incompatible to Caucasian eyes and ears, it still stirs up a long history of Orientalism that treats Asians as homogeneous, apolitical, and ahistorical subjects, as Mark Fisher aptly comments on Japan's fabricated superficiality of the album:

Japan had pursued art pop into a sheer superficiality, which exceeded even their inspirations in its depthless aestheticism [...]. All – social, political, cultural – meaning seems to be drained from these references. When Sylvian sings ‘Red Army needs you’ on the closing track, *Cantonese Boy*, it is in the same spirit of *semiotic orientalism* [emphasis added]: the Chinese and Japanese Empires of signs are reduced to images, exploited and coveted for their frisson [sic] [...]. Images are decontextualised, then re-assembled to form an ‘Oriental’ panorama that is strangely abstract.<sup>33</sup>

With the exception of a few critics like Fisher's, other critics considered *Tin Drum* (1981) a musical advancement under the influence of Asian music. One review compiled in *All Music Guide to Rock* (2000) exemplifies such media discourse. It praises Japan for having ‘finally dropped their Bowie/Roxy fixations and began making their own music’ and notes that the album is under ‘heavy Oriental influence’ and ‘indebted to Asian music’.<sup>34</sup> The review specifically references the intro of the second track ‘Talking Drum’ as its synthesiser textures and percussion ‘point to the Orient’. However, listening to the intro, it is very hard to identify any authentic Asian musical signifiers.<sup>35</sup> The intro arranges synth sounds in a thin yet widely spaced, monophonic texture and the percussion, starting with a quaver, delivers a polyrhythm built on a steady one drop rhythm that is in fact a popular reggae style drum beat. The overall musical texture (created by the percussion, bass, synthesizer, and vocals) is rich but does not feel overloaded due to the song's consistent simplistic approach to mixing sounds. This minimalist aesthetic adopted for constructing soundscape might be able to ‘point to the Orient’ but it is certainly not due to Asian musical influence found in the intro's synthesiser textures or percussion as the review suggests. Media discourses like this inevitably exoticise Eastern cultures by arbitrarily labelling unusual sounds and textures as foreign and therefore ‘naturally’ Oriental and Othered.

Similarly, *Alternative Rock* (2000) describes the album as ‘[j]ourneying deep

<sup>33</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*.

<sup>34</sup> *Alternative Rock* and *All Music Guide to Rock* are compiled books of rock music reviews. See p. 579.

<sup>35</sup> By authentic Asian musical signifiers, I mean to emphasise that the intro doesn't demonstrate any traditional Asian/Chinese musical features (e.g., texture, instrumentation, rhythm, melody).

into the vagaries of musical structure, texture, and rhythm, weaving atmosphere as fine as gossamer' and as 'dominated by the exotic Eastern themes'.<sup>36</sup> Without a critical listening to the actual tracks and coopted cultures, these unusual arrangements, such as offbeat drums, rare synth sounds, and unstructured fretless bassline, were often seen as innovative, progressive, and unprecedented, signifying the Oriental. Paul Morley, in his *NME* review of the album, emphasizes how learning from Eastern aesthetics is important for breaking through the restrictions of Western pop: 'Western (pop) techniques surrender to an appreciation of greater Eastern techniques, a meditative serenity and ascetic impressionism wither the restrictive formality of the pop song [...]'.<sup>37</sup> Morley further suggests that 'a sense of helplessness and hopelessness' would inform the 'elusive design' to advance Western pop, which exemplifies a type of media discourse allowing us to capture the fetishisation and romanticisation of Eastern austerity and tranquility. These two types of media discourse both run the risk of Orientalism through their careless appreciation of the (problematic) musical content and Orientalist cooptation strategy.

### *Conclusion: Under the Progressive Superficiality*

Fredric Jameson observes that some postmodern works have 'a more positive conception of relationship, which restores its proper tension to the notion of difference itself' through radical, random, discontinuous, and collagist differences from the 'old aesthetic'.<sup>38</sup> However, what is seen as 'differences' and 'radical' usually comes with political baggage. When a postmodern work operates around 'radical differences' through reenacting Oriental Otherness, it is crucial for us to critically and carefully re-examine the postmodern progressiveness that is usually associated with such practices.

Sue Thornham describes a postmodern panorama of popular music where 'signs are the reality and the imaginary and the real have become confused', 'time and place are hard to identify', and 'a blend of styles and references mix together'.<sup>39</sup> On the surface, *Tin Drum* (1981) seems to fit in this postmodern panorama. However, as noted by Grossberg, postmodern music such as new wave and post-punk is explicitly surreal, with emphasis on fragmentation and reflexivity, which acknowledges and celebrates superficiality without foregrounding interpretation.<sup>40</sup> There tends to be an assumed antagonism between

<sup>36</sup> Dave Thompson, *Alternative Rock* (San Francisco, CA: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Paul Morley, 'Japan: Tin Drum (Virgin)'. *New Musical Express*, 21 November 1981, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/japan-tin-drum-virgin>. [accessed 25 March 2019].

<sup>38</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> Sue Thornham, 'Postmodernism and Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Stuart Sim (New York: Routledge, 2013), 41-52.

<sup>40</sup> Grossberg, pp. 248-9.

postmodern patterns (such as superficiality, fragmentation, and nonlinearity) and the readability and communicativeness of messages. Under such theoretical tendency, I argue that it is imperative to reconsider this antagonism for two main reasons: first, it inevitably forecloses or invalidates critical readings of nuanced power dynamics in postmodern works like *Tin Drum* (1981), and second, it risks becoming an ally of Orientalism in representing the East as intrinsically mysterious and unreadable to Western audiences.

For *Tin Drum* (1981), it is often the identified authenticity of 'Oriental flavour' that enables its musical creativity. Even to the trained ears of many music critics, the peculiar sounds and arrangements of the album 'naturally' signify the Oriental as if they were discovered by the progressive band members for delivering musical innovations. Turning to the East to satiate an avant-garde agenda inevitably alienates the East as something both *different* from and *new* to the West, consequently reproducing and perpetuating a system of Orientalist knowledge through a white avant-garde epistemology. In this process, the East becomes *naturally* associated with *uncommon* cultural discourses and its cultural capital and history become trivialized for 'new' artistic praxis. Finally, Orientalism, I contend, has taken on the role of a postmodernising discourse that works to ex-corporate the imperialism and racism in art rock, and repackage the musical cooptation strategy with Asian elements as a postmodern intervention. Therefore, Orientalism is not just a tool or symptom of art rock's avant-garde agenda; instead, it is a constitutive discourse in the postmodernisation of popular music. Overlooking the dangerous Orientalist side of postmodern 'creative' works or assuming that postmodern theories of popular music transcend racial politics would only indicate that a renewed political reading of countercultural affects of rock music and their affective alliances is crucial.