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Printed in the United Kingdom

Sex, Pulp and critique

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In an article entitled 'Sexist Pulp ads attacked', the *Independent on Sunday* (*IoS*) reported public reaction to the posters advertising Pulp's new album *This is Hardcore* (posters had been defaced with the words 'this is sexist'), and described the advertisements as part of a turn away from political correctness towards a new 'anything goes' realism (Kelly and Clay 1998). The poster shows the naked upper torso of a woman face down on a red leather cushion, in an awkward and ambivalent posture, with lipsticked, half-open mouth. Emblazoned across the centre of the image (which is a reproduction of the album cover) are the words 'This is Hardcore' in pink capitals. A leader in the paper on the same day, under the heading 'This is violent. This is offensive', interprets the image as a demeaning, sexist and violent representation of women and as an offence to the record-buying public. The leader asserts that 'Just to sell a few songs, it shows a woman violated', and concludes with the words: 'To ban it [the poster] now would only generate more publicity for Pulp. So the only advice we have is for anyone thinking of buying the album. Don't bother.' (*IoS* Leader, 1998, p. 4)

Whether or not the image is really as demeaning as the *IoS* suggests (a matter to which we return), there are two possible interpretations of the newspaper's advice. Either the *IoS* assumes that the album is completely compromised by its offensive advertising, utterly discrediting any critical meaning or value that the music might have; or it assumes an identity between the advertising and album in which the music is as violent and offensive as the poster. In this second case, a fundamental issue is raised: how is it possible to attribute social content (in this case qualities such as 'violence against women', or 'offensiveness') to music? Furthermore, how might music be identified as having either a critical or an affirmative stance towards any such content? This paper is an attempt to show, for the specific case of 'This is Hardcore', that the music does indeed have a critical quality, albeit of a rather uncomfortable kind, and that the *IoS*'s verdict on both the album and the poster is superficial and hasty. Although arguably many of the tracks on the album deal with related issues using methods similar to those discussed below, for the purposes of this paper we focus solely on the title track of the album. We start with the question: Is the track about the same subject matter as the poster, and if so how?

An obvious place to start is with the words: the opening line of the track ('You are hardcore. You make me hard.') is unambivalent in its declaration that this is a track about a male experience of sex. In terms of content, the text contains few indications of a critical attitude to its subject matter – except perhaps for the lines 'It's what men in stained raincoats pay for' and 'I've seen the storyline played out

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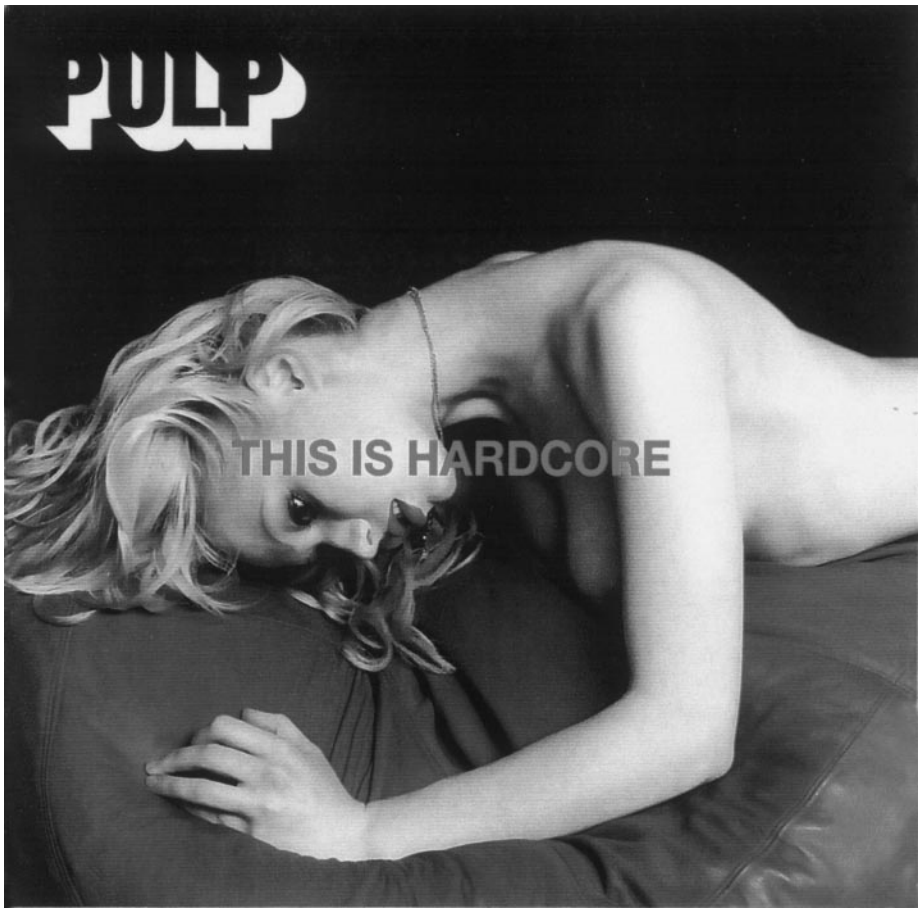


Figure 1. Reproduction of the album cover and poster advertisement for the album This is Hardcore.

so many times before', both of which convey a disengaged cynicism about the sex industry. The track turns out to be concerned with a man's experience of a complex mixture of sexual fantasy and reality. There is no doubt that a sexual act is described, but that direct experience is interlaced with the protagonist's fantasy about himself as both director and sex 'star' in his own imagined film ('I wanna make a movie, so let's star in it together'; 'Don't make a move 'til I say, ''Action''').
The relationship between fantasy and reality is presented in a complex manner in that statements that clearly have the quality of fantasy (such as those above) are directly juxtaposed with others which relate to the reality of the scene being enacted (such as 'Leave your make-up on, and I'll leave on the light'). The control implicit in the protagonist's role as 'director and star' in his movie fantasy, and the self-conscious choreography or arrangement of 'Leave your make-up on, and I'll leave on the light' make it clear that the woman with whom this sex is going on is both a real sexual partner and the vehicle for a fantasy. Fantasy is a pretence that makes up for the inadequacies of reality.

While the process of describing the textual content of the track is relatively transparent, it is less clear how, or even whether, we can do something analogous with the music. Theories of musical meaning have been dominated by an

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intramusical approach: an example is Leonard Meyer's theory which considers musical meaning (embodied meaning) to arise out of the patterns of implication and realisation set up within musical structures (Meyer 1973). However, whatever the merits of looking at intramusical meaning, an approach of that kind is quite incapable (by definition) of addressing the relationship of music to an explicitly extramusical subject matter – in this case attitudes towards sex. The issue is how sounds can have social content. By contrast with an intramusical approach to musical content, the analysis presented here conceives of musical material as socially sedimented: musical materials are socially constituted since they are always the product of socialised human behaviour, and carry with them their historical situation. More specifically, musical materials have a 'history of use', one consequence of which is that sounds are heard as cultural references and associations. For example, the use of bell sounds in a whole variety of music is historically associated with religious worship or solemn occasions. Quite apart from this direct association, however, the 'history of use' of musical materials is also always bound up with their compositional function: for example, the last movement of Haydn's string quartet op. 76 no. 5 starts with a repeated perfect cadence and plays with the consequences of this apparently incongruous beginning, based on the premise that this conventionalised history of use will make an immediate impact on listeners. The advantage of this approach to musical meaning is that it does away with the crude distinction between intramusical and extramusical meaning: sounds always have a compositional function *and* are part of a social situation. The bell sounds have a function in their particular musical contexts at the same time as having wider reference, and the cadences in Haydn have a social character just as much as a musical function.

As may already be apparent, the approach taken here draws upon two different precursors: semiotic theory, of the kind used by Philip Tagg, and critical theory, of the kind represented by Theodor Adorno. Tagg has argued that musical materials have social and cultural meanings by virtue of their associations with prevailing cultural 'topics': in his analysis of the Kojak theme tune, for instance, he points out that the sound of horns and their characteristic large interval leaps have a long-standing association with hunting and alert/alarm calls (post horns, fanfares) (Tagg 1979). The materials and their association signify an aggressive, active, predatory masculinity – the image of Kojak, the detective. Adorno's approach has certain similarities, but engages far more directly with the issue of ideology and mass culture: in essence it is based upon the principle that critique is to be found in the immanent properties of the musical material, regarded as socially sedimented (Adorno 1984). When the material is used as if its properties and possibilities are natural and unproblematic, it simply affirms the musical and social *status quo*. Affirmation is not only an acceptance of musical conventions, but is also complicitous with the social situation that those materials embody. By contrast, when the material questions the conventions from which it has sprung, it has a critical perspective. Beethoven's use of disrupted and unsettling juxtapositions in a late quartet is critical in that it throws into question the compositional conventions of sonata form and the chamber music genre, just as music which uses deliberately historically or culturally distanced materials has the potential to be critical (such as Mahler's exploration of the grotesque in juxtapositions between music of the street and music of the concert

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hall). This is critique directed at musical processes and therefore at the social situation within which they arise and are heard. Two approaches to critique can be identified: one which can be called immanent, illustrated by the Beethoven example above; the other which operates by means of stylistic reference and juxtaposition, represented by Mahler's approach. Immanence and reference both have the capacity to be either critical or affirmative.

Our approach here, therefore, will be to identify the compositional character and cultural associations of musical materials and to use these to consider the ideological allegiances – complicit or critical – of the music of 'This is Hardcore'. The approach has some similarities to Philip Tagg's 'inter-objective comparison' in which the meanings or associations of musical materials are established on the basis of shared characteristics with previous instances. For example, the meanings of masculinity and predation attributed to the horn motif in the Kojak theme mentioned above are demonstrated by citing other examples of similar materials which also occur in similar semantic contexts (Tagg 1979, 1992). Although we use a similar principle in the analysis which follows, we make no attempt to provide an exhaustive account of the meanings of materials in terms of their parallel occurrences. To do this systematically would require a large number of secondary illustrative examples. Alternatively, support for these interpretations could derive from empirical investigation of listeners' perceptions of musical meanings. Since the main aim of this paper is to consider critique and collusion in the music of 'This is Hardcore', rather than to make a methdological point, we have presented these interpretations without always arguing the case for them, on the basis of a shared cultural context.

The Music

Figure 2 is a graphic overview of the track which provides a context for the more detailed comments which follow. Although the track starts with a strophic structure, it turns out to have a more through-composed and continuously developing form. In a fairly obvious and simple way this parallels the sexual act that is the subject matter of the song. After a listless and rather weary start, there is a continuous heightening of energy and drive through an increasing textural density, harmonic rhythm and movement of the bass line. The song reaches a climax at the words 'I can't believe it took me this long', and then dies away into a looser ensemble with a more mobile harmony and sustained string sound. This section in turn generates its own momentum which is suddenly dissipated when, at the return of the words 'This is Hardcore', the original texture and instrumentation becomes more audible again (it is present in the background throughout most of the track) as the strings of the previous section fade and pitch-bend downwards to leave just the kit and brass section of the opening. This is a detumescent gesture of futility: the protagonist's fantasy peels away to reveal the shabby reality that underpins the whole track leaving it back where it started.

Just as the text is obviously and directly about sex, so too is the music – but in this case by virtue of its stylistic references. The big, slow, foregrounded drum sound and more distant brass/big band sound in a very reverberant acoustic suggest a club or strip joint setting by virtue of their association with a style of orchestration (big band), a rhythmic/harmonic style (cabaret/jazz

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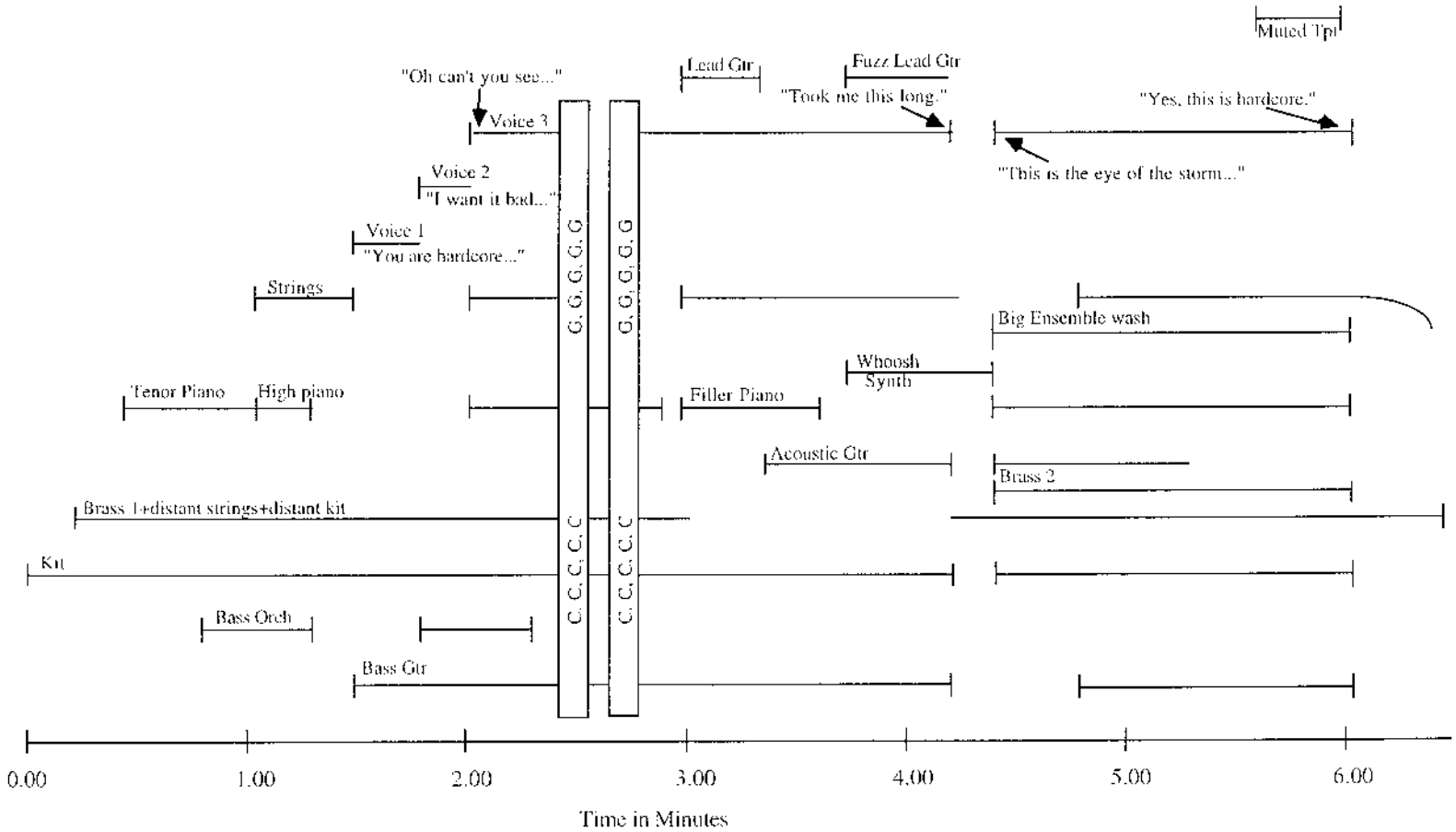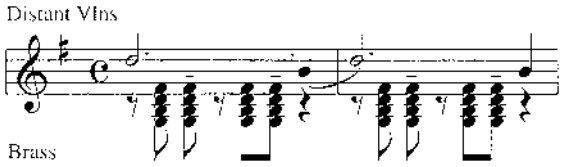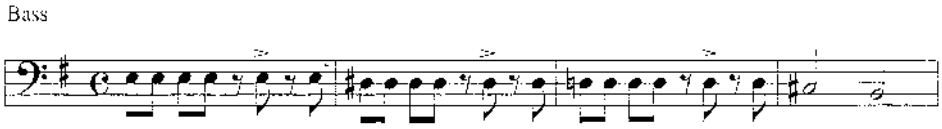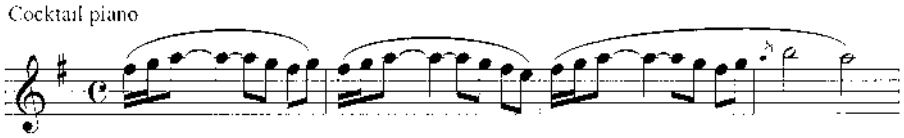


Figure 2. Graphic overview of the single 'This is Hardcore'. Elements of the mix are shown in terms of their occurrence, and unless relabelled, an instrumental 'line' represents a single instrument or group throughout the duration of the song.
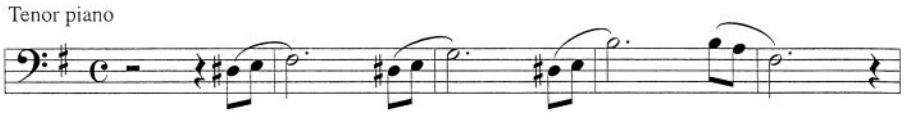


Example 1.



Example 2.



Example 3.
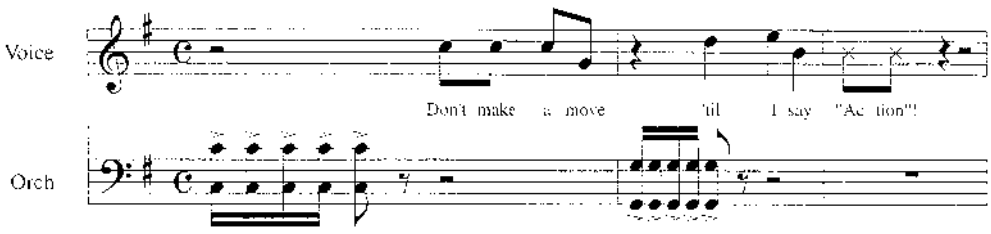


Example 4.

influenced tonal harmony – Em9, and a repeated pattern of syncopation (see Example 1)), and space (reverberation suggesting a large, empty interior). A dramatic, chromatically descending bass which energises it is the music of big cabaret/show numbers – a kind of 'Shirley Bassey' sound (Example 2). A high register piano riff with a little clichéd 'blue' note (Example 3) is cocktail bar piano in contrast to the circling tenor register piano monody which precedes it (Example 4). The association of all these materials is of various locations linked with sexual encounters of one sort or another: singles bars, strip joints, night clubs and cabarets. But how are we encouraged to 'hear' these locations? The reverberation and lack of background sounds suggest an empty hall, and the placement in the mix (middle distance) suggests a kind of remoteness and disengagement. Equally, the slow tempo (76 beats per minute) indicates a weary lack of interest while the circling piano melody is contained, futile. The voice, when it enters has a thin filtered quality as if over a tannoy or poor-quality sound system. The effect is distant, listless, empty, hollow, and the overall character of this opening section as a whole is of a run-down, worn-out glamour.

Already in the introduction the track presents musical materials which reference a number of different styles and associations, and it is this referencing of other styles which is an important way in which the track works both to present a subject matter (sex) and a subject position (ambivalent). It is unnecessary, and not our purpose, to present a systematic or complete analysis of the track in these terms; rather we will focus on a smaller number of examples which illustrate the argument.

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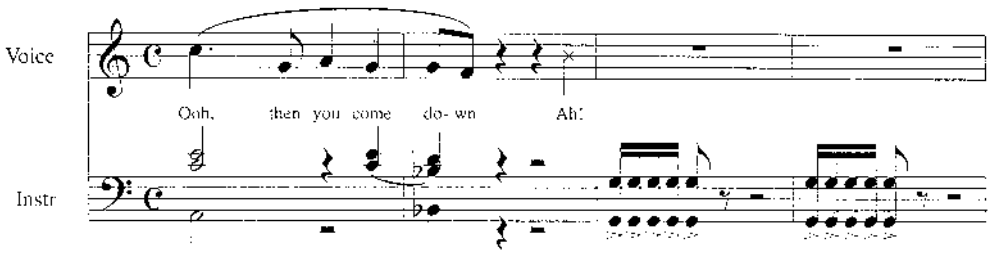


Example 5.

A recurrent theme in the musical references is the relationship between fantasy and reality. Just as the ending of the whole track reveals an underlying shabby emptiness, so also other sections present by turns a glamorous and a seedy image of sex. The section that rises to the song's climax features an increasingly prominent lead guitar played through a fuzz box in a 'cock-rock' style, with its associations of a hard, aggressive male sexuality. The section following the climax begins in a more reflective manner, but soon acquires more epic and overblown qualities as successive layers of instrumentation are engaged (bass, an increasingly prominent and melodic string section, and a free-wheeling, muted jazz trumpet (see Figure 2)). This is fantasy-film music and the sense of excess that these materials generate increasingly suggests that the music shouldn't be taken at face value – particularly since it coincides with the most cynical and world-weary passage in the lyrics: 'It's what men in stained raincoats pay for. . . This is the end of the line. I've seen the storyline played out so many times before.'

In every case, although the increasing energy and excitement of the section engages and draws the listener in, the discontinuities of style and their self-conscious treatment alienate and disengage the listener. The concern with reference as a technique is so all pervading that even Pulp themselves become an object for the method: at the end of the only strophic section of the track a rhythmically emphatic repetition of unharmonised Cs and then Gs (Example 5) punctuates the structure and at the same time functions as Pulp's own signature: exactly the same gesture was used in their equally controversial single 'Sorted for e's & wizz' (Example 6). Nothing is authentic: anything can be used in this game of references, and it is this that gives the whole track its distanced quality. At no point is the listener allowed to feel engaged: the music is 'presented' in the same way that the image is 'presented' with its declaration that 'This is Hardcore'.

Drawing together all the above, the track elicits an uncomfortable mixture



Example 6.

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of complicity with, and critique of, a prurient attitude to sex. A variety of factors draw the listener in. First, the track consists of materials which are stylistically familiar and it is this familiarity which gives them their allure. Second, there is a captivating quality to the sensual pleasure afforded the listener by the technical excellence and gloss of the production techniques. Third, there is a change in the placing of materials in the mix from distant, at the beginning of the track, to an increasingly close and full treatment, as if the music is coming forward to meet and engage the listener. Fourth, the first person voice of the text, and the placement of the singer in the foreground of the mix, creates an illusion of interiority, or of access to an individual psyche, encouraging identification with the singer-protagonist on the part of the listener.[1] By contrast with these techniques of engagement, other factors distance or alienate the listener: for example, the disruption caused by the juxtaposition of diverse styles and genres, the use of 'excess' as a technique of parody (overly glossy production techniques, the musically redundant cock-rock guitar solo) and the direct signification of alienation and distance through such means as place in the mix, treatment of the vocals (e.g. tannoy-like filtering of the voice at the start) and the sudden collapse of the musical texture (just after the climax, and again at the end). This is critique carried out with complicitous materials whose power derives from their ability to involve the listener in their manifest content while simultaneously inviting (or obliging) the listener to take up a critical perspective.

The album's concern with film as a theme, and the imbalance between fantasy and reality, has a personal resonance with Pulp's (particularly Jarvis Cocker's) experience of fame, as well as with their direct experience of film production and consumption (Pulp were engaged in a number of film projects at the time of making the album):

> All of my life I've been an observer, not only of films and TV, but of life, and then as soon as you get that form of public acceptance, then you are somebody else's show. You're actually part of the action on the screen. . . That's why there's a bit of an obsession with it [film/TV] on the record. It's comparing what it was like as a spectator and what it's like being part of the action, and that's always going to be a bit of a disappointment. (Cocker 1998A)

Pornography, and films, are employed here as the most dramatic examples of a more general disparity between the intensity of imagined experience and the disappointment of its realisation.

In the light of this consideration of the music we can reconsider the image which was the starting point for the press and public reaction to the album. Although superficially the image has many of the properties of a pornographic photograph (a glossily produced photo of a naked blonde with a gold chain on a red leather bed or couch, in a submissive posture), there are three elements which undermine the identification that a conventional image might elicit: first, the words 'This is Hardcore', right across the centre like a censor's stamp create a distance which tells the viewer to regard this as an object – a specimen. Second, the glossy production which reeks of pornographic magazine, is heightened through digitisation and the treatment of colour such that the photographic image is given an unreal, distant quality. And third, the woman looks either dead or made of plastic which problematises her otherwise conventionally attractive appearance. All three of these properties can be regarded as offensive (in the way that the *IoS* interprets them), but equally they can be seen as

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preventing the kind of collusion that might go with a more conventional image. Just as the music pulls the listener in the directions of both complicity and critique, so also the viewer is caught between experiencing the image as pornography on the one hand and as alienating and problematic on the other. Indeed, in responding to criticism of the advertising in the *IoS*, Jarvis Cocker pointed out that this was precisely the conception of the album cover and advertising, and of the theme of the album itself:

> . . .the idea with that picture was that, intially, it would be attractive: you'd look at the picture and realise it's a semi-clad woman. But then her look is vacant, it almost looks as if she could be dead, or a dummy. So it was supposed to be something that would draw you in and then kind of repel you a bit. That was *on purpose*. (Cocker 1998B)

> It was more like a bit of the theme of the record. . .be attracted to something and repulsed by it at the same time. (Cocker 1998C)

Engagement, resistance and critique

This analysis of the track 'This is Hardcore' and its advertising poster has tried to show that there is a far more integral relationship between the title track and poster image than the *IoS*'s assertion (that 'Just to sell a few songs, it shows a woman violated') would suggest. Both display a similarly disturbing ambivalence towards their subject matter – a mixture of collusion and critique. This is not a sign of confusion or incoherence, but rather a deliberate tactic in which critique of a particular ideology (constructions of sex and gender) takes place with, and within, the forms of that ideology (its images and music). In order to experience the critique it is necessary to be familiar with, to be a part of the culture of and in some sense therefore to identify with, the conventions of those very phenomena against which the critique is directed – in this case hardcore pornography. To recoil immediately in horror at such an identification, as the *IoS* does, is to adopt a superficial moral righteousness which never engages with the problem. The irony is that the representation, which is the target of their moral outrage, is itself part of a critique whose purpose is to expose that aspect of patriarchal constructions of sexuality which is at an extreme in the hardcore sex industry. Because the *IoS* sees only the demeaning aspects of complicity in the poster, it also writes off the album. The newspaper can bask in its own self-righteousness while simultaneously accepting advertising (the recent Citroen Xsara advertisement, for example) which, with no critical intent whatsoever, exploits and promotes an image of women which is consistent with the social construction of sexuality at which 'This is Hardcore' is critically aimed:

> I think being blatant and hardcore is more honest than putting a model next to something and having everybody buy it. (Cocker 1998C)

Because the *IoS* is not prepared to enter into the collusion at all, it never realises the critique, and its attention is turned away from the real issue – changing the social situation in which women are demeaned – towards an easier target – the suppression of a particular representation of a woman.

And yet the situation is not so clearcut. If the images *can* be interpreted as demeaning and sexist then their critical function is compromised, and if in reality most people see and hear the material as offensively salacious then critique becomes no more than a theoretical possibility. The whole approach that

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'This is Hardcore' represents – critique that entails an element of complicity – is a dangerous strategy: The balance between the two subject positions can easily collapse, and the 'defence' that an offensive representation is intended ironically or critically can be used to cynical and exploitative ends. In the words of one Pulp fan:

> . . .even if you computer generate it, write distancing slogans over it, or dress it up in irony, a pornographic image of a degraded woman is always a pornographic image of a degraded woman.[2]

The advertisers who created the publicity for 'This is Hardcore' no doubt realised that they could appeal both to people's lascivious interest in the image, and perhaps its more critical audience.

The compromised critique which 'This is Hardcore' offers, and the danger that it can be exploited to cynical ends, is one reason for trying to consider a different critical stance. The strength of negative critique (of the kind espoused by the Frankfurt School) is its refusal to have any part in an ideology to which it is resolutely opposed. Adornian critique works by a negation of the material forms of ideology. Its weakness is that it risks removing itself entirely from the very sphere within which it aims to exert its influence. It is this as much as anything that led to allegations of a high cultural elitism against the followers of the Frankfurt School. If the remoteness that the Frankfurt School represents is to be avoided, there seems no alternative but to engage with the forms of the dominant ideology and to 'get one's hands dirty', with all the compromises that this entails. By contrast, the strength of the type of critique illustrated by 'This is Hardcore' is its capacity to draw in listeners such that they experience not only the critique of an ideology but are also forced to acknowledge their own involvement in it. Critique involves the recognition of oneself as implicated in the problem: it may have to be uncomfortable if it is really to engage its audience.

Acknowledgements

This research was carried out while Nicola Dibben was supported by a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. The authors are grateful to Island Records for permission to reproduce the image from the album cover 'This is Hardcore'.

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Endnotes

1. This is discussed in relation to popular music by Terry Bloomfield (1993).
2. Letter of the Week, *Melody Maker*, 27 June 1988, p. 2.

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