

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 21 Jan 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

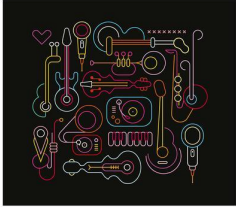
Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis Expanding Approaches

Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, John Brackett



The Love Detective

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544700-25>

Stephen Overy, Kenneth Smith

Published online on: 18 Oct 2018

Edited by [Ciro Scotto](#), [Kenneth Smith](#), and [John Brackett](#)

How to cite :- Stephen Overy, Kenneth Smith. 18 Oct 2018, *The Love Detective from: The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis, Expanding Approaches* Routledge

Accessed on: 21 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544700-25>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

THE LOVE DETECTIVE

Cybernetic Cycles and the Mysteries of Desire in Arab Strap

Stephen Overy and Kenneth Smith

In this chapter, we consider two of the twentieth century's most influential theories of desire as alternative ways of engaging with groove-based music. As a test case, the project provides two competing readings of selected songs by the Scottish band Arab Strap. Initially, we apply a Lacanian model of desire—a view of desire characterised by lack, negativity, and the impossibility of satiation. This model depicts the music of Arab Strap according to a dark theory in which the psychologically complex, musically expressive, subject can never attain what s/he desires. However, an alternative reading as outlined in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* endeavours to show how Arab Strap's music can be interpreted according to a positive, productive conception of desire.

In contemporary critical theory, the model of desire developed by Jacques Lacan is used in a staggering number of analyses of artworks and is often treated as the final evolution of psychoanalytic theory.¹ Its various tropes—the *objet petit a*, the sliding signifier, and the “desire of the other”—are of such malleability that they have been deployed to capture objects, relations, and dispositions in all branches of art to various degrees of success. Throughout the 1970s, the *philosophers of desire*—Gilles Deleuze with Félix Guattari, and Jean François Lyotard—objected to the dominance of Lacanian analysis on account of its miserablism and conservatism. We find that looking beyond Lacanianism offers deeper insights into the music of Arab Strap, and the language of desire, redefined by Deleuze et al., supports bespoke musico-analytical methodologies.

Introducing the Suspect: “Love Detective”

The lyrics of the song “Love Detective” from the album *The Red Thread* (2001) contains a range of Lacanian concepts, including lack, unattainable desire, and an *objet petit a* which activates an unconscious economy of desire.² These concepts are all triggered by the presence of a red box whose contents are unknown. The trope of a box containing a hidden secret is common in Lacanian analysis. In “Love Detective,” the box is particularly interesting as it has a dual structure. First, the box is the initial object (the *objet petit a*) of curiosity which sets the psyche in motion (“and as soon as she was out of sight, I went for the keys”). But, second, even after it is opened, the box's content (“some sort of sex diary”) retains the initial

capacity of its container to irreversibly open a wound. This red box is supremely Lacanian—something seems amiss and, when investigated, there is still something amiss.

The lack of closure or resolution is a structural characteristic of the Lacanian revision of the Freudian drive schematic. Freud's mechanistic theory created a certain qualitative change, described as a discharge of hydraulic force or a release of energetic tension.³ For Lacan, the replacement of force with signification and of biological bases with social construction, reconstitutes the drive as something which is never resolved. While the Freudian drive moves from aim to object with an eventual release (cathexis), the Lacanian drive gets to the object and, (in)famously circles around it. The Lacanian drive is not an urge to satisfy but to put into play, this is what gives desire (which is rooted in the drives) its dark and perverse connotations; desire will never be satisfied; desire obsesses over its object; it always returns to it; it toys with it. In short, it is pathological. In Western diatonic music we might associate this conception of the drive most clearly with the yearning and straining chromatic harmonies of Romantic music. But this is a (sound-) world away from Arab Strap. Or is it?

Arab Strap provide an open field for psychoanalytic discussion, given that their "lyrics" are mostly prose that often drifts through streams of consciousness, recited by "singer" Aidan Moffat. This is accompanied by Malcolm Middleton's instrumental layers, which sometimes form quite lo-fi "rough and ready" textures, and sometimes form intricate groove layers. This productive combination is perhaps one reason why the band have produce novel formal patterns, resisting standardized structures such as AABA or strophic forms. The groove patterns of the "Love Detective" create a cyclic form, depicting a drive which remains active even as the song ends—an unresolved conclusion. The thick texture dissipates into reverberation at the song's ending, when the protagonist does not know what to do; his concluding paragraph, like the musical non-terminus, is pure suspension:

Eventually, I had to stop reading it because I started to feel sick. So I put everything back the way I found it, shut the drawer, and phoned you. See, I don't know what to do. I keep having fantasies about leaving her dictaphone under the pillow. Or following her when she goes to work. I've been lying about where I'm going, just in case I can bump into her.

The drive had two phases, both essentially the same: (1) look at the box, and (2) to open it. In a Lacanian analysis, the enjoyment, even though one threshold was surpassed, is in the retention of the dilemma regarding the box's contents. This perverse joy of the unobtainable desire can be heard in the voice of the narrator ("I opened it up. Nothing"), which is laden with disappointment as if the opening of the box has spoiled the picture. But the contents do offer an unappreciated reward, and the narrator reconstructs his desire based on the new information. Figure 25.1 schematises this reading, transcribing the manifest narrative of the song into the Lacanian schema of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real elements.⁴

In support of this (provisionally) Lacanian reading, we might analyse the song's immanent musical factors. A preliminary observation is that, like many of Arab Strap's songs, "Love Detective" is groove-based. Rather than to rely on the more standard model of how desire is aroused from musical patterns, which works in the domain of *tonality*⁵ (the song's chord progressions and pitch patterns), "Love Detective" tends towards minimalist repetition that de-intensifies voice-leading tendencies often associated with tonality. The sheer need of $\hat{7}$ to resolve to $\hat{8}$ in a diatonic piece is only one of many pitch-expectations that

texture at junctures which are then vitalised. An example could be the early question “why hide it?” that is immediately followed by silence. These are moments in which signification is produced in the *musical unconscious*. This form generates excitement and expectation, taking us with it as our own desires for the music become ever more complexly woven around what will happen when the box—the central image of lack—is approached. Such breaks become prophetic, as when the box is finally opened and the musical layers are immediately torn apart. Consider the section of “Love Detective” beginning at 1’45” as shown in Figure 25.3,¹¹ which reproduces the waveform of the song below the layers of grooves. The metre is perhaps most clearly shown in the miniature circles of the drum-kit, each lasting a single four-beat measure, and each repeated until the box-opening section between 1’45” and 2’30”. Here only the drums remain, their groove darkening drastically to focus on the lower drums, as if staring into a bottomless abyss. Note how the guitar, bass, and piano strata are lost here, leaving only the cold, whispery (and therefore interior) narrator and the newly-introduced lounge piano. The riffs are too structurally repetitive to be differentiated into a series of “cellular groove patterns” (CGPs, *pace* Stan Hawkins), though we can see obvious blocks of repetition on the graph, a snapshot of which should demonstrate clearly the change in volume in this central section as well as the increased stratified complexity of the aftermath.

While the previous signification between music and words is held in “real time” (i.e. we are *taught* “on the fly” that the high saw-tooth sound represents the jangling door keys, or perhaps an *affect* of the keys), we now hear the piano play a form of nostalgic, reverberant lounge jazz as he reads the diary’s entries on her “exes.” All of this speaks of the past; reverb and sleepy lounge jazz come with a certain nostalgia. The moment faces backwards as the love detective momentarily gazes into the suspect’s past and tries to configure his own place in it. This void, *qua* lack, is thoroughly Lacanian and is represented by the minimal textural substance, where only the lower drums intone the primitive rhythm, with rim-shots, and muffled cymbals, projecting a “distant” sound. Once the diary has failed to answer the subject’s queries, the present-tense texture is reintroduced in full groove as before, but in a more chaotic way as shown on the upper layers of Figure 25.3 (and indirectly in the waveform as an increase in volume). Electronic sound effects (represented as “SFX” in Figure 25.3) are more common. In particular, note how a beautifully blended pitch-oscillation emerges from the guitar-line (represented by a rising diagonal line); the detective has absorbed the information about the subject and reconstructs (or recalibrates) his original drive once again, having failed to attain his object he has looped his drive around the object it aimed for and has kept the Lacanian lack alive just as the groove lives on after the reverb ends the recorded track.

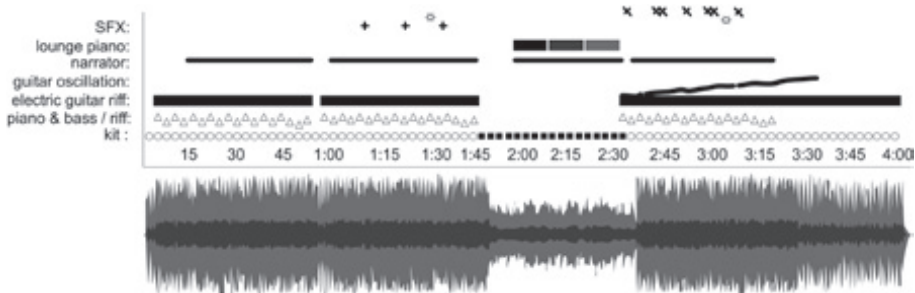


Figure 25.3 Sound Layers in “Love Detective”

The Shape of the Case: From Line to Spiral

We have seen that the “Love Detective” story is amenable to a Lacanian interpretation. We suggest a new interpretative framework that critiques the first. The “Philosophers of Desire” offer a sustained critique of Lacan’s conception of desire—a theory predicated upon lack and absence—for failing to capture the workings of desire in the subject. For Deleuze and Guattari, and Lyotard, desire was productive rather than predicated upon an absence and therefore a process of genesis rather than stasis (as illustrated in Figure 25.1 where the drive encircles its object). Their critique was directed at the theatricality of Lacanian desire, in which the subject was reduced to a character on a stage who is destined to play the same part for eternity.¹² They also claimed that Lacan’s erasure of the biological bases of desire reduce desire to a shuffling of signifiers which can never be satisfied.

The accusation that the application of Lacan’s clinical technique to both works of art and, more generally, to society at large leads to a worldview in which desire is problematic and something to be managed, is a fundamental claim of the post-68 critique of Lacan. Such management inevitably takes the form of social control, and is therefore repressive—Deleuze and Guattari used the term “Oedipus” to represent the negative and theatrical notion of Lacanian desire.¹³ Their essential premise is that desire is positive rather than negative, and that its object can become attained or passed through rather than circulated.¹⁴ In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe how partial objects or *desiring machines* realise production and form a variety of productive syntheses. This stands as the converse of Lacanian theory, in which drives to partial objects/objects *a* are never satisfied. In Deleuze’s metaphysics, organization is a spontaneous emergence achieved by the agglomeration of partial objects into bigger machines or bodies. Essentially, all materials that can enter into productive relationships become organs. Because it creates a machinery with outputs and feedback control, Deleuzian desire becomes *cybernetic*. Rather than a paralytic desire—circling, going nowhere; a desire that repeats-the-same—there is an element of time; there is therefore a second phase of desire—what happens next. Whilst the Oedipal theatre of Lacan’s conception of Freud repeats the same production endlessly (like Agatha Christie’s *Mousetrap* in St. Martin’s Theatre), Deleuzian desire is progressively productive and captures change and development. In some respects, Deleuzian desire reemphasizes an alternative Freudian conception of drives found in *Drives and Their Vicissitudes*. It certainly seeks to undo the Lacanian re-working of the drive described in Lacan’s *Seminar XI*.¹⁵

How does a positive view of desire allow us to reinterpret Arab Strap’s work? If we ask the question again utilising Deleuzian theory, does a different pattern emerge? We believe that one does, and it can be constituted from two of their most popular songs: “The First Big Weekend” and “The Shy Retirer.” The following outline briefly sketches the broad composition of such a reading. These songs depict a longer storyline than “Love Detective,” and can be used to map an evolving cycle across four stages: (1) going out; (2) meeting a girl / taking drugs / having fun; (3) maturation of stage 2 (or *relationship*); and (4) the collapse, breakup or comedown which allows the protagonist to return to stage 1. We can therefore recapitulate “Love Detective” as a micro-analysis of a specific trajectory in the larger cybernetic cycle that Arab Strap describe as an arc centering on stage 2 (between the possibility of a relationship and the conditions of its end) is constructed. “Love Detective” is therefore a snapshot of a transient phase of desire rather than a description of the whole.

This account of desire differs from the Lacanian one in the following respects: (1) the object of the Arab Strap cycle is not an *objet petit a*, but is a much more general figure—romance, friendship, or life in general; (2) objects on this cycle are not lacking but are used, affirmed or passed through; (3) the cycle is not static, but is a process of cybernetic evolution. As desire is attained, it changes and develops. The subject of the desire is not trapped in the negative, but develops through positive relations with the objects it encounters. It is therefore no longer possible to hold the linear model of desire seen in Figure 25.1, and it must be conceived of as an arc, which is part of a cycle (represented in Figure 25.4). However, we can see in Figure 25.4 that, in the narrative of “Love Detective,” we miss a final phase that would allow completion of the cybernetic circle. Based on the model seen in “The Shy Retirer” and “First Big Weekend”, we can add this stage of resolution to form a complete cycle of the drive dynamic Arab Strap seek to capture in their work. Adding this to our model creates the full circuit that constitutes our final model (as shown in Figure 25.5).

If we extrapolate more general descriptions of the Arab Strap cycle’s stages we can constitute a Deleuzian model of desire based on that posited in *Anti Oedipus* and developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (see Figure 25.6). The stages illustrated here correspond to: (1) the animating force in matter—*productive desire*; (2) an accelerative or generative process as desire interacts with formations and entities in the world—*machinic production*; (3) a level of reality testing in which the effects of this desire are apparent—*organization*; and finally (4) a stage of resolution, feedback or reconfiguration in which these effects of desire are subsumed into the existing order, changing its characteristics—*cybernetics*.

This trajectory of the final cycle remains similar to our previous circuit, but we note a break between stages 4 and 1 indicating the cycle does not endlessly repeat itself in the same form. Desire’s cycles always amend both the subject and reality, and will therefore never come back in exactly the same form. By adding the dimension of *time* to the graph, we can represent this cycle three dimensionally and show how this desiring production never repeats in the same pattern (see Figure 25.7). This (inverted?) spiriform indicates an accelerative growth of desire over time. There are Arab Strap songs that depict a decelerative



Figure 25.4 Towards a Deleuzian Model (I)



Figure 25.5 Towards a Deleuzian Model (II)

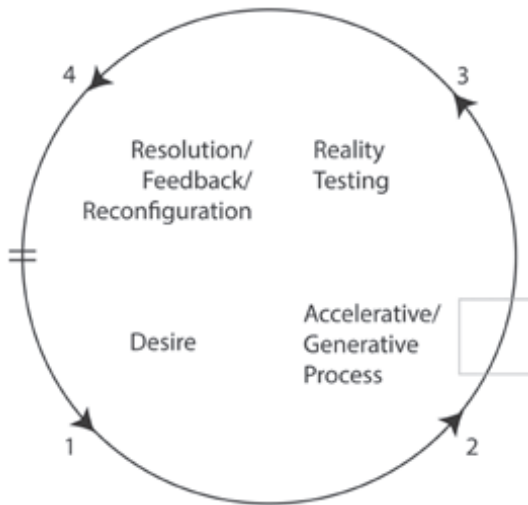


Figure 25.6 Towards a Deleuzian Model (III)

momentum caused by stage 4, in which connections are broken before they could be reforged, such as “Chat in Amsterdam, Winter 2003,” “Last Orders,” or “The Week Never Starts Around Here.” Although these songs may be more germane to a darker and less positive reading of the cycle of desire, they can also be understood, again, as vignettes (or moments) within the greater cycle of productive desire. They are characterised by a sense of development that goes beyond the norms of Lacanian analysis, as the pre-subjective unconscious of desiring production constantly evolves, whether through negative or positive feedback.

We shall return to this cyclical model after refining our musico-analytical framework, “The First Big Weekend” shares some formal features with “Love Detective.” “The First Big

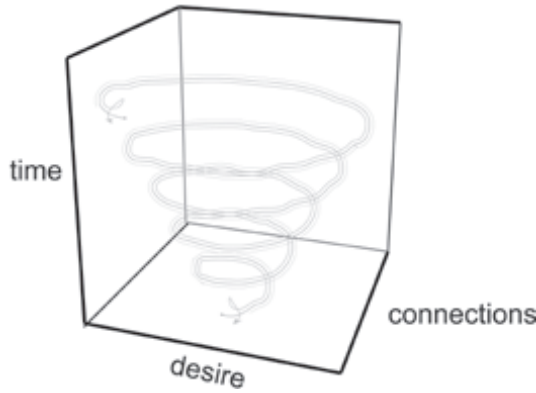


Figure 25.7 Cybernetic Production Across Three Dimensions

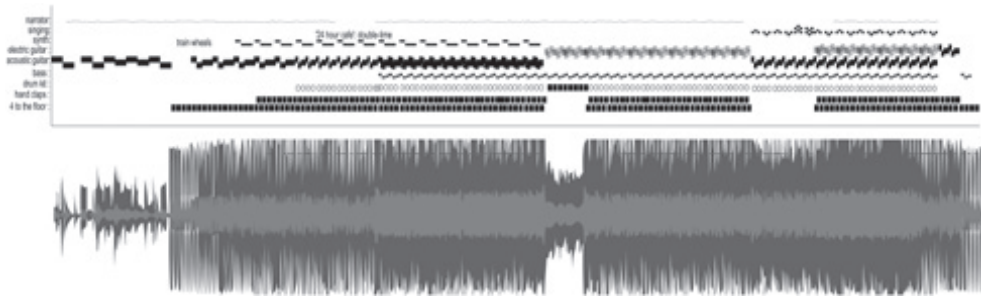


Figure 25.8 Sound Layers in “The First Big Weekend”

Weekend” redeploys the method of narrative signification where, again, every new element of the banal story of low-level decadence corresponds to a new positive layer of sound, adding complexity to the groove (see Figure 25.8). Like “Love Detective,” the bard-like subject is represented by the instrument closest to him: the guitar, which begins the track. We feel the intimacy of the instrument to the singer’s body because of the fret-buzz coming from the guitar’s own (anthropomorphic) neck. This gentle acoustic riff supports the remembrance of the early Thursday evening quiz, where the fact that the narrator “shouldn’t have bothered” making peace with his ex, shows us that one round of courtship had already been played out before the song began. This moment of mild despondence is accompanied by one of those gentle rhythmic arrests that signify a flicker of reflection—a break in the temporal flow. In many ways, this beginning—a narrative surrounding a musical empty abyss—is an *aperçu* of “Love Detective.” But things change as we see the bigger picture of this very different economy of musical desire.

On Friday, when the boys go to “The Arches” (a now defunct Glaswegian nightclub), the four-to-the-floor drum beat offers us a whimsical synecdoche of the dance scene. The layers build up with a descending three-note figure as they “join the queue;” the blonde girl (cruelly likened to a pig) gives us the new off-beat snaps; the 16-beat cymbal pattern enters as they leave the club and enter the streets. Accompanying this accelerated pace of life is a moment of double-speed, when the guitar riff accompanying the image of the 24-hour opening time is played twice as fast. As individual moments pass in the textual storyline,

experiences appear in a stretto-like fashion in the musical storyline to create an ever-denser groove. The subtle bass adds intensity by playing octaves while the 144 bpm kick-drum part is filled in by a 16-beat cymbal pattern to add ever-increasing urgency and textural density before developing apace into a fully recognizable disco beat. This all happens when the singer's actions exponentially accelerate, as activities and objects (fence-climbing, urinals, woods, tombs, lakes) and the assemblage of positively-attained desires piles higher.

The continued acceleration pushes the night to its limits, and the texture simply has to fall apart. After this exciting night, Sunday afternoon breaks through the threshold and the layers of the sound-field dissolve to focus on a dissonant (hungover?) version of the main guitar riff (the detuned ostinato is now icy and electric compared to the original acoustic, intimate, warm version), while the pals watch *The Simpsons*. The texture shifts as kaleidoscopically as the Stravinskian montage of block-forms described by Edward T. Cone (1962). Indeed, while aspects of Figure 25.8 may remind some readers of Cone's graphs of *stratification*, *interlock* and *synthesis*, the crude ruptures in Arab Strap songs lack the sense of dialectical montage associated with Stravinsky's block forms. This cycle of (1) expansion → (2) threshold → (3) release → (4) new beginning, is now contextualised as a regular cycle: a weekend routine. A breakthrough occurs with the sudden eruption of the pitched vocal refrain at 3'39". This new anthemic chorus intrudes violently but layers of information are retained from before; the broken dissonances of the guitar riff still persist, the three-pitch melody is a simple inversion of the guitar and the synth; we haven't quite lost the old hangover yet. The track ends at "The Arches" again, musically if not textually, with its four-to-the-floor drum beats. We are left with the impression that the narrative could go on forever, although each cycle would differ, based on the feedback produced by the previous traversal.

By contrast, "The Shy Retirer" employs a simple strophic structure that depicts a vignette of an evening rather than a weekend. Similarly, though, its layers of repetition—underscoring the narrative events—do not promise/deny the fulfilment of a musical lack, but produce positive new experiences. The drum-machine ties the stanzas together, adding and subtracting its layers at various points in the story. The form relies on clearly cyclical harmonic progressions. These progressions only change at the expected termination points at the ends of verses, when each time a deceptive cadence to chord vi with added ninth merely drifts into the next stanza rather than resolving onto an authentic cadence.¹⁶ Each stanza uses the same melody but its inherent intensities (in dynamics, harmony, texture and timbre) increase and decrease in the surrounding layers. In the second stanza, for example, the flute very briefly replaces the now poetically redundant violin. The third stanza is accompanied with drums, while the bridge section now uses brass, string trio, and flute. The fourth verse is stripped back and emphasises the deceptive cadential vi chord, which actually forms the accompaniment to the fifth verse, holding the dissonant ninth throughout, before the piece finishes with drums only. This latter effect is almost like a microscope that zooms in on the "deceptive cadence" problem and rubs our noses in the fact that, tonally and grammatically, the piece does not achieve any form of tonal closure. This lack of closure is not the Lacanian lack; rather, in "The Shy Retirer," additive and contractive textures see each verse moving around the same cycle in cybernetic feedback loops.

Psychological Profiling: The Arab Strap "Modus Operandi"

Despite the tawdry nature of the narratives hitherto discussed, in Arab Strap's world, quotidian life in the towns of Great Britain is ultimately a productive, lived relation and not a

perverse, dark or repressed mode of being in which one's furtive lusts are never satisfied. This again mirrors the move from a Freudian-Lacanian model of desire in which Oedipus defines the normal and the abnormal, to that of Deleuzian-Lyotardian view in which polymorphous desire connects freely. Before illustrating this once more, it pays to consider the most notorious passage of Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, a passage which challenges the tendency of the psychoanalyst to depict the life of the lower-middle and working classes as a series of repressions and defeats:

The English unemployed did not have to become workers to survive, they – hang on tight and spit on me—enjoyed the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was of hanging on in the mines, in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed it, enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolutions of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous anonymity of the suburbs and the pubs in morning and evening.

(1993, p. 111)

In Arab Strap's ode to affirmation of social misery "There Is No Ending," such a joy of desiring-production in the everyday is pitted against the transcendental miserablism that Marxists often project onto the working class.¹⁷ The lyrics now tell us that the cybernetic cycle, driven by desire, keeps spinning despite the moments which would try to slow it:

But plates may smash and doors may slam, my comments may be less than kind but that won't mean I've changed my mind. I'm a huffy prick the best of times, I love to sulk and shout and squeal but please don't doubt the way I feel.

Accompanying this anthemic account of Glaswegian miserablism is a return to the musical Baroque with a descending ground bass. The ground's major tonality (see Figure 25.9) and solid span of a full octave allows for repeated cycles of jubilation, like the ground of Pachelbel's famous "Canon" in D. This Baroque ground bass is certainly not a *basso lamento* or funeral dirge, which would perhaps suit the lyrics in a more "obvious" way. This positivity comes also from the use of the jubilant trumpet, bouncy rhythms, and an easy-going, rather approximate sense of rhythm, that celebrates a kind of metric freedom. The guitar may behave like a mechanised music-box but it is out of time, with a sense of liberation from the strict micro-timing of their usual groove patterns. The strong descending tenths between the melody and the bass—acting here as a broad Schenkerian 8-zug octave span—act as structural pillars for the sloppy musicianship to drunkenly cling to. This combination of factors creates the impressions of both a basic level of certainty and the freedom that comes from choosing to celebrate rather than resist it.

A formal overview of the whole song would support this; AB (repeated) ACA may appear to be a simple strophic form with a "middle 8" two thirds of the way through, but



Figure 25.9 Ground Bass from "There Is No Ending"

we must remember that this also has a “rondo” element with the A-section being a clear refrain (more like a “chorus” than a verse, but driven more by the instrumental “ground” than a vocal melody) and B-section and C-section contrasting both with the refrain and with each other, while neither could be categorised as a “verse” nor a true “middle eight”. The A-section acts as the refrain (ritornello?); the B section acts as a minor-key negation of the refrain; the C-section is vital for showing us how to absorb the negative and transform it into productive relations (much more profound than a “middle eight”):

Bullies, burglars, paedophiles, bird flu and passive smoke (They’re coming!), volcanoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, heart disease and strokes (They’re coming!), terrorists with homemade bombs, and factions everywhere (They’re coming!), they’re drinking in the street and they could steal your name and I don’t care!

This spirit of transforming the negative into positivity is underpinned by perhaps the most obvious and banal compositional technique: the inversion of the ground bass. No longer a descending progression but a rising one; no longer a tonic underpinning but a dominant one. This adds a rare moment of hope in Arab Strap, which seems to work against the lyrical content of disease and disaster. Although it is probably obvious to us from the instrumental music, the mystery of the disconnection between lyrics and music is solved in the final throwaway line, “And I don’t care!” Once again, crises and existential threats all become grist to the spinning mill of productive desire. The negative is shown as something to be passed through rather than tarried around. The phrase “I don’t care” is not an expression of defeat or resignation but a statement made from a position of power. Life’s cycles progress despite the incursions of misfortune. The return of the ground bass of the A section follows with the new information found through the excursions of the B and C sections.¹⁸ The exuberance is displayed through the free improvisation of the instrumentalists. The overcoming of the *negations* here may seem like a dialectical form (as in Lacan’s “dialectics of desire”), but it is in fact a positive series of rondo episodes (the form suggests that the future may hold sections D–Z). The thrilling march over the hill beginning at 3’08” breaks through the final qualitative threshold. Although the final bars intone the ground bass in octaves in all instruments, reminding us that this repetitive cycle actually *is* an ending in itself (contra the title), the band transforms something which should be an ending into a series of perpetual beginnings (Figure 25.10).

The optimism expressed on “There Is No Ending” (on *The Last Romance* and reprised on their final album, *Enjoy Your Retirement Arab Strap: Ten Years of Tears*) finds a neat parallel in another song, “Chat in Amsterdam, Winter 2003” from *The Last Romance*. On “Chat in Amsterdam, Winter 2003,” the descending ground on the funereal bandoneon becomes an elongated sigh, casting a shadow over much of the song. However, two-thirds into the song (2’38”) (the same ratio as the about-turn in “There Is No Ending”), despair is turned into hope through a rising inverted $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}$ as the Arab Strap pair focus on returning to the home town of Glasgow. The ascending melody heightens the desire for the final tonic

A	B	A	B	A	C	A
0’00”	1’00”	1’23”	2’13”	2’36”	3’18”	3’57”

Figure 25.10 Formal Design of “There is No Ending,” *The Last Romance*, with Track Timings

pitch ($\hat{8}$) which is withheld in favour of an ever-suspended $\hat{7}$ —a question that begs to be answered. Is this not the return to diatonic *lack* – a microcosm of Wagner-Schopenhauerian suspension of the tonic? If so, it is showcased beautifully by being reduced to its lowest (simplest?) terms: the single pitch that represents tonal desire, a feature missing from much of Arab Strap’s groove-based rhythmic additive texture. Quite simply, this is an open-ended look towards the future, reminding us of Kurt Weill’s jazz-standard barrel-organ “Mack the Knife” that ends on $\hat{2}$ needing to descend to $\hat{1}$, meaning that *there is no ending* to the melody. Weill’s song is performed by a barrel organ, and therefore designed to be mechanically perpetuated. Similarly, Arab Strap’s cycles, while moving temporarily within a Lacanian false economy of lack, are only part of an ever-increasing circle. Their successes and failures (taken in the same spirit) are destined always to be repeated, but as part of a cybernetic evolutionary repetition.

Afterword: The Love Detective Retires

Considering Arab Strap’s body of work as a whole, we can now construct a diagrammatic representation of our whole cycle (see Figure 25.11), showing how their songs depict either the complete cycle (such as “The Shy Retirer” or “The First Big Weekend”) or part of it (“Love Detective” or “Last Orders”). Some songs depict the decelerative momentum of stage 4, in which connections are broken before they are reformed, such as “Chat in Amsterdam, Winter 2003,” “Last Orders,” or “The Week Never Starts Around Here.” A line from the latter—“Easy come, easy gone, simple as this stupid song. Now your cupboard’s clean you can carry on”—expresses how one cycle transitions into another, with simple, matter of fact acceptance. Unlike the Lacanian dialectical model of desire, the old connections and productions of desire remain in the subject and are available to condition and direct new productive relations.

This band’s own cybernetic circuit—of depicting decadence over and over in song form—went on for over ten years. But the members “grew up” in many ways—separated, got married, started families, and so on. *The Most Important Place in the World*, a 2015 album by Bill Wells and Aiden Moffat is a significant resurgence/departure for Moffat. The album’s

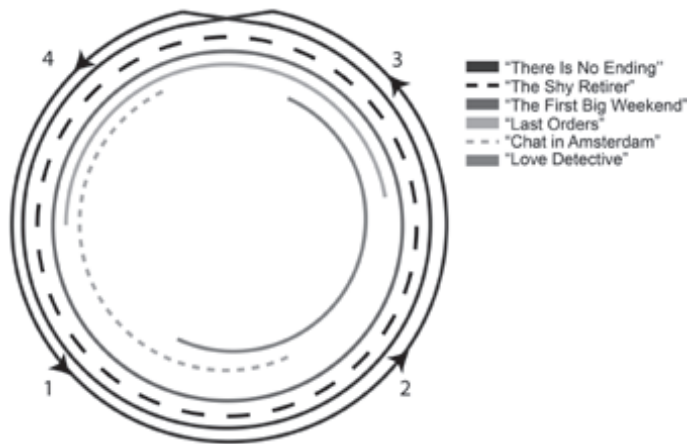


Figure 25.11 Various Stages in the Desiring Production of Several Arab Strap Songs

title is ambiguous: is the most important place the bar or is it home? Does the album revisit the accelerative decadence formerly depicted by Arab Strap, or an entirely new position that Moffat has discovered through “growing up”? The song “This Dark Desire” is interesting as it imparts a sense of nostalgia for the band’s earlier hedonistic existence. The repetitive lounge piano cycle, over which the sleazy night club trumpet and improvised sax eventually enter, recalls with the distance of time, yet still with the disturbing urgency of the present tense lyrics, the city that used to be their playground. This dark desire is not a repressed memory (a la Freud or Lacan), it’s expressed, and imminent to Moffat’s disposition to repeat, albeit with a new family life, and a new writing colleague, and in a new decade.¹⁹

Despite their popular reception as a band who focus on the darker side of desire, Arab Strap depict the cybernetic circuits of desire that (pre)constitute the subject through its development from teen years to middle age as it learns to desire, to love and lose, and to connect and disconnect from ever-productive cycles. As such, they present life as it is lived in the towns of Great Britain, in its pubs and suburbs, through weekends of excess and weekdays of recovery, through meet-ups, make-outs, and break-ups. Perhaps, we might finally conclude, they are not so abnormal after all.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Dill, Charles, “Rameau Avec Lacan,” *Acta musicologica* LXXX, no. 1 (2008); Slavoj Žižek, “‘There Is No Sexual Relationship’: Wagner as a Lacanian,” *New German Critique* LXIX (1996); Alexander Carpenter, “Erwartung as Other: Schoenberg, Lacan, and Psychoanalytic Music Criticism” (McMaster University, 1998); Žižek, Slavoj, and Dolar, Mladen. *Opera’s Second Death* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).
- 2 The object *a* (indicating *autre*: other) is the imaginary spark that sets desire in motion and is the “object-cause” of desire. See, for example, Lacan, Jacques. *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Jacques Alain Miller. (London: Vintage, 1998 [1964]), 83.
- 3 See Breuer, Josef and Sigmund Freud, “Studies on Hysteria” (1895). Translated from the German and edited by James Strachey. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* II (London: Hogarth Press, 1955).
- 4 The transcription of the artwork into the registers of the Real (inaccessible materiality), Imaginary (internalized images), and Symbolic (the world of inherited signifiers) is a feature of much Lacanian analysis of popular culture. See, for example, Žižek’s analysis of *The Birds* or *Blue Velvet* in the documentary *The Perverts Guide to Cinema* (2006).
- 5 This was begun by Schopenhauer’s musings as desire, represented by the tension-release of the V–I cadence. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. Jill Berman, ed. David Berman (London: J.M. Dent, 2004). For extensions of this into Freudian–Lacanian metaphysics, as represented in discourse on music see “Musical Form and Fin de Siècle Sexuality” in Kramer, Lawrence, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 151–165.
- 6 Danielsen, Anne, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 172.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 8 This method of musico-textual narrative is particularly characteristic of the album *The Red Thread*. For example, the opening track “Amor Veneris” sets the scene. Over a gentle guitar riff, the crying in the kitchen ushers in the piano; the boots that make the girl look too tall initiate an inner piano pedal (ostinato?); dissonances accompany the removal of a watch; when one person pretends that their hand is someone else’s, the guitar clashes minor seconds; when things are described as “best in the morning,” all instruments sound together and are accompanied by a key change.
- 9 Leslie, Camilo Arturo, “Review of Arab Strap: *The Red Thread*,” *Pitchfork*, 21 February 2001.

- 10 *Point de capiton* concerns the slippage between the signifier and the signified in Lacanian theory. Like the “quilting points” in a mattress, there are moments of fixity, when the slippage between signifier and the signified is temporarily arrested. These moments give humans the illusion of normal functioning. See Lacan, Jacques, “Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” in *Ecrits*, translated by Alan Sheridan (Routledge: London 2004), 323–60, 335.
- 11 This figure is based loosely on Stan Hawkins’ graph of Li’l Louis’ “French Kiss.” See Hawkins, Stan, “Feel the Beat Come Down: House Music as Rhetoric,” in *Analyzing Popular Music*, 80–102, ed. Allan Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 89.
- 12 See the opening sections of Lyotard, Jean-François, *Libidinal economy* (London: Athlone, 1993 [1982]).
- 13 See Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (London: Athlone Press, 1984 [1974]).
- 14 “If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality. Desire is the set of passive syntheses that engineer partial objects, flows, and bodies, and that function as units of production. The real is the end product, the result of the passive syntheses of desire as autoproduction of the unconscious. Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object.” Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus*, 26.
- 15 Lacan, *Seminar XI*.
- 16 This procedure does not lead to the cliché of the IV–V–vi // IV–V–I pattern. Again, the words and music attempt to cross the Lacanian “bar” at various points. For example: (a) the “sniff of romance I’ll forget” aligns with the faux-romantic lush violin that alludes to the comedic trope of romantic restaurant violinists; (b) the references to the weekend, see the Arab Strap boys “put a donk on it”; (c) the only textural break in this otherwise continuous track coincides with the words “I always slip off on my own.”
- 17 See Nick Land, “Critique of Transcendental Miserablism,” in Land, Nick, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, translated by Ray Brassier and Robin Mackay (London: Urbanomic, 2011), 623–7.
- 18 We might compare this with the way that Musorgsky’s refrain—entitled “Promenades”—in *Pictures at an Exhibition*—increasingly adopt the characters of the individual character pieces that it is interspersed with.
- 19 Such a conception of repetition-in-itself as the primary motor of the unconscious is delineated in Deleuze’s reading of the death drive throughout Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (London and New York: Continuum, 2001 [1968]).

Further Reading

- Abbate, Carolyn. *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Bailey Shea, Matt. “The Hexatonic and the Double Tonic: Wolf’s Christmas Rose.” *Journal of Music Theory* LI, no. 2 (2007): 187–210.
- Cohn, Richard. “Hexatonic Poles and the Uncanny in Parsifal.” *Opera Quarterly* XX, no. 2 (2006): 230–48.

Discography

- Arab Strap, *The Week Never Starts Round Here*, Chemikal Underground (1996).
- Arab Strap, *The Red Thread*, Chemikal Underground (2001).
- Arab Strap, *Monday at the Hug & Pint*, Chemikal Underground (2003).
- Arab Strap, *The Last Romance*, Chemikal Underground (2005).