

‘Ga, ga, ooh-la-la’: the childlike use of language in pop-rock music

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine several aspects of pop-rock music that are characterised by the childlike use of language. Relying on the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – particularly on their concept of ‘becoming-child’ – I locate, describe and analyse three distinct childlike strategies common in pop-rock: the use of gibberish and nonsense that unbinds language from sense, enabling it to release its own expressive intensities; the utilisation of baby talk and other childlike vocal mannerisms, drawing attention to the physical properties of the act of singing as bodily experimentation; and different forms of repetition that ‘shake’ sense out of words, allowing them to draw their own lines of flight. Foregrounding these strategies, I ultimately claim, expands our understanding of pop-rock music while problematising its traditional interpretation as ‘rebellious’ music, offering its positive, productive qualities and ‘minoritarian’ politics as an alternative to the restricting dichotomy between oppression and liberation implied by the concept of rebellion.

Pop-rock and childlikeness

Discussions of pop-rock music¹ seldom relate to it in terms of childlikeness. Songs conventionally described as ‘childlike’ are usually nursery rhymes, playground rhymes, perhaps tunes from Disney films or children’s TV shows. Pop-rock, on the other hand, is almost consensually considered ‘youth music’, music that reflects the conflicts, frustrations, joys and aspirations of adolescents and twenty-somethings. Dealing with sex and drugs, expressing rebellion against the adult Establishment, it is as far away from the innocence and naïveté of children’s music as it can be. Thus, the bulk of academic writing on pop-rock tends to ignore its potential relations with childhood altogether, and the occasional text that does acknowledge some connection between the two usually tries to incorporate childhood into the discourse of resistance and/or adolescent rebellion, whether as a symbol of youth against adult society (Keightley 2001; Bannister 2006) or as a more general signifier of purity and innocence in opposition to sexism (Gottlieb and Wald 1994), war (Neustadter 1994), or the general constraints of Western capitalism and modern life (Reynolds and Press 1995).

What I will try to do in this paper is to approach the question of pop-rock and childhood from a different perspective, one that does not regard childlikeness as a contingent strategy of resistance but as an immanent component of pop-rock, not as a signifier of something ‘real’ outside the musical event but as an important musical practice that deserves an explication of its own. Although I find childlikeness to

be prevalent in many aspects of pop-rock music, in this paper I will limit my discussion to pop-rock's childlike use of language. For this end, I will rely on the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly their concept of 'becoming-child'.

Becoming and becoming-child

Offering a precise definition of Deleuze and Guattari's unique concepts is not a simple task, mainly because they themselves avoided any clear-cut definitions, preferring to let concepts evolve in the context in which they were utilised instead of supplying them with rigid, predetermined meaning. Although this could be misunderstood as deliberate obscurantism, it is only consistent with the basic metaphysical principles espoused by the philosophers, who relate to everything in the world as existing in a state of constant flux, a state where there is no 'being', only 'becoming'.

As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 272) stress, becoming is not an issue of resemblance, mimicry or 'being-like'. Rather, 'becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are the *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes'. Deleuze and Guattari discuss many types of becoming, but in this paper, I will focus on one specific becoming, one that holds, as I will aim to show, a special affinity with pop-rock music: becoming-child.

Since becoming is not about resemblance, becoming-child does not necessarily entail childlike behaviour or 'childishness'. It might manifest itself in such manner in specific contexts, but this is not what makes it a becoming. Deleuze's ontology is one of dynamics, stops and starts, connections and disconnections, and these are the principles that becoming-child rests upon. It happens when there is a certain assemblage that allows a childlike start or stop, a childlike connection or disconnection, a certain childlike relation between things. Becoming-child does not indicate a return to the child that the adult once was, but a childlike movement towards something else that is neither adult nor child. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 294) differentiate between the 'molecular' child, which is created by the becoming, and the 'molar' child, 'the child we once were, whom we remember or phantasize [...] whose future is the adult'. Thus, as I will demonstrate throughout the paper, becoming-child is not necessarily related to specific musical genres where 'childish' behaviour or performance tends to be more explicit and widely acknowledged, such as twee pop and riot grrrl – this explicit childlikeness is often articulated through the molar child – but is actually a common and prevalent component of most pop-rock music, regardless of genres and eras.

An additional Deleuzian concept that should be taken into account in our discussion of pop-rock and childlikeness is that of deterritorialisation. Deterritorialisations, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 172), are the basis of many human and non-human activities alike. They imply a certain movement, change, problematisation. They are not necessarily intentional, wilful or wanted, and are often followed by a *re*territorialisation that stops their movement and restores the order of things, although it could now be a different order; a club, for example, is 'a deterritorialized branch', reterritorialised as a club. Deterritorialisations play an important part in becoming: '[t]here is no subject of the becoming except as a deterritorialized variable of the majority; there is no medium of becoming except as a

deterritorialized variable of a minority' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 292). In other words, becoming occurs as a deterritorialisation of a certain variable that could be identified with the majority – a person's or thing's stable identity, a dominant social class or state authority – but its medium belongs to a deterritorialized minority, a political minority, such as childhood.

Although Deleuze and Guattari's concepts and neologisms might appear somewhat obscure or opaque without a more elaborate introduction to their metaphysics – which, naturally, is not possible within the scope of this paper – the theoretical framework that they offer is useful and important for my investigation for two reasons. First, it offers a way to discuss the use of language in pop-rock without resorting to a simple thematic analysis or literary reading of song lyrics, focusing on the affectivity of language instead of trying to decipher the 'message' that it allegedly tries to convey. As Ronald Bogue (2003, p. 53) aptly puts it, '[t]he various themes enunciated in [...] song lyrics [...] are not extraneous impositions on a musical form, but indexes of becoming, elements proper to music yet unassimilable within a mimetic model of musical imitation or representation of a discursive content'. Thus, rather than interpreting lyrics as independent signifiers carrying a specific meaning, I will try to understand the way in which they take part in the wider event that enables the becoming; instead of assuming that they point to a transcendent referent, I will try to locate their immanent points of connection within the musical assemblage.

The concept of becoming is also important because it enables us to think about music without giving precedence to the listening subject or to 'pure' music in itself. It relates to music as an event and does not force any transcendent interpretation upon it. Understanding music's becoming-child means describing a trajectory of desire, one that does not exist in the listener's independent consciousness or in the music itself, but in their convergence, in the points of connection. Deleuze and Guattari (1994, pp. 167–8) describe art as a monument, but this monument 'is not something commemorating the past, it is a bloc of present sensations [...] we write not with childhood memories but through blocs of childhood that are the becoming-child of the present. Music is full of them'. And while Deleuze and Guattari did not really deal with popular music – when they talk about 'music', they usually mean classical music² – pop-rock, as I will aim to show, is full of these becomings as well.

Gibberish and baby talk

'Awopbopalooobop, alopbamboom!' So begins one of the founding songs of rock'n'roll, Little Richard's 'Tutti Frutti' (1955). Assigning a semantic meaning to this string of syllables is practically impossible; the closest that it sounds to any sort of human communication is the mumbling of a baby, the gibberish spoken by infants before they learn the rules of language. The words that follow do not help in extracting any meaning from the song either, at least if we presume that such meaning is to be produced according to the conventions of the English language: 'tutti frutti, all rooty', repeats Little Richard five times, each time with a slight change of pronunciation and tone, before roaring the opening line again. If, as Deleuze (1998, p. 65) claims, 'art says what children say', then Little Richard might be suggesting here that rock'n'roll talks like children talk: with gibberish, nonsense, a compulsive repetition of words, enjoying the physical production of sound with no interest in creating a decipherable meaning.

The chorus of 'Tutti Frutti' includes two separate, discernible tactics of becoming-child. One is repetition – I will come back to it later – while the other is the use of gibberish, the dismantling of language into a series of meaningless syllables, like the mumbling of a baby. The type of baby talk that Little Richard uses to open the song is central to many pop-rock songs. One of the defining characteristics of doo-wop, a widely popular genre during the 1950s and early 1960s, was the use of vocal harmonies based on syllables that converged into 'words' that lack any semantic meaning. Even the genre's name was taken from these harmonies of gibberish; as Wayne Robins (2008, p. 20) writes, '[i]t could have easily been called "Shoo-dooie-doo", "Bomp-diddy-bomp", or "Oo-wie-oo-wah"'.

Robins' humorous remark suggests a certain interchangeability between different performances of baby talk. Since the name 'doo-wop' is composed of nothing but 'nonsense syllables', it can be easily replaced with any other combination of nonsense syllables. Robins' implicit assumption is that words in songs are supposed to make sense, and that the difference between words can only be determined according to the sense that they make, which naturally leads to the conclusion that there is practically no difference between various instances of gibberish and baby talk. Since none of them makes sense anyway, one combination of nonsense syllables can easily replace another one with no apparent loss. However, as I will aim to show later on, the situation is not that simple.

Before we get there, it should be stressed that doo-wop is certainly not the only genre of pop-rock that is characterised by the use of nonsense syllables. Although baby talk's prominence in doo-wop led to the whole genre being named after it, song titles that are actually gibberish can be found in various songs from different genres and eras: 'Be-Bop-a-Lula' (Gene Vincent, 1956), 'Da Doo Ron Ron' (The Crystals, 1963), 'Ob-La-Di-Ob-La-Da' (The Beatles, 1968), 'MMMBop' (Hanson, 1997), 'Tik Tok' (Ke\$ha, 2009), and more. Lady Gaga embodies baby talk not only in her music, with lyrics such as 'ra-ra-ah-ah-ah, rama, ra-ma-ma, ga, ga, ooh-la-la' ('Bad Romance', 2009), but also in her stage name. The American pop musician, *née* Stefani Germanotta, adopted the name Gaga as a gesture to British rock band Queen's 1984 hit 'Radio Ga Ga' (Callahan 2010, p. 55), a song whose name actually originated from the mumbling of band drummer Roger Taylor's baby son.³

The case of Lady Gaga shows how baby talk can move through different milieus, infecting different elements and injecting them with childlikeness: one infant's random mumblings penetrate a successful British rock song from the 1980s and from there determine the name of a 21st-century American pop star. The history behind the allegedly arbitrary, nonsensical phrase 'shimmy shimmy ko ko bop' is even more complex: as shown by Kathryn Marsh (2006), the phrase, a variation of which appears in the track 'Country Grammar (Hot Shit)' (2000) by American rapper Nelly, is taken from a playground rhyme sung by children during a clapping game called 'Down Down Baby'. The game and the accompanying song were spread by the television series *Sesame Street* (as 'chimmy chimmy coco pop'), but the phrase 'shimmy shimmy ko ko bop' had actually appeared much earlier in a song by rhythm-and-blues group Little Anthony and the Imperials, titled 'Shimmy, Shimmy, Ko-Ko Bop' (1959). The story, however, does not end here: according to Marsh, the phrase might have actually been appropriated by Little Anthony from a playground rhyme popular among African American children as early as the beginning of the 20th century.

Marsh (2006, p. 14) lays out the strange history of 'shimmy shimmy ko ko bop' in order to highlight what she sees as the 'parallel between postmodern aspects of popular music [...] and the aesthetics of appropriation found in children's musical play'. She understands this parallel through the discourse of resistance, describing it as the means by which both little children and the African American community challenge the hegemonic discourse and affirm their separate identity (Marsh 2006, pp. 22–3, 28). Although Marsh's study is insightful, I find the interpretation of childlike practices as resistance problematic, since it ignores the singularity of the becoming-child, treating it as yet another, ultimately contingent, strategy of subversion. What I find most interesting about the story she lays out is the opportunity to trace the path through which baby talk infects different, heterogeneous factors, time after time, through many decades and different continents: an expression that lacks any conventional meaning, taken from an early 20th-century playground rhyme, penetrates a rhythm-and-blues song half a decade later; from there, it passes into a children's television series, bumps back into different playgrounds around the world, and ultimately (for now) settles in a 21st-century rap song.⁴ This elaborate history of one nonsensical phrase raises some important questions about the relations between pop-rock music and childlikeness, questions that cannot simply be answered using the traditional discourse of resistance or rebellion. Resistance by appropriation is common among many disempowered communities, using different genres of music and other types of cultural products, and it is certainly not limited to playground rhymes or to 'African American' music.⁵ Thus, the repeated fluctuation of 'shimmy shimmy ko ko bop' between playground rhymes and pop-rock songs might be better understood as suggesting a more intricate relationship between pop-rock and childlikeness.

How can we approach this relationship? Richard Waterman describes how, among the indigenous people of Yirkalla in Northern Australia,

[E]ven the babbling of infants may have musical importance [...] Cases in which a baby's inept attempts to mimic speech have been interpreted as revelations of secret and sacred song-words are not rare. In fact, this is one of the recognized ways the elders have of 'finding' new songs. (Waterman 1971, p. 168)

A somewhat similar event, I would argue, often takes place in pop-rock music. The mumbled baby talk, celebrating the joining of syllables to create a new word, which lacks any definite sense, forms the skeleton of many pop-rock songs. It could be construed as the means through which they are 'discovered', yet there is one significant difference: unlike the practices that Waterman observed among the people of Yirkalla – and the story of 'Radio Ga Ga' is also atypical in this respect – in most cases the childlike gibberish is not taken by the musician from a specific baby's utterances, but from the becoming-child of the musician himself or herself. Pop-rock's baby talk, I suggest, might be better compared to the becoming-child that Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 21) identify in the writings of Kafka, a language of warbles, whistles and coughs that lacks any sense, a language 'torn from sense, conquering sense, bringing about an active neutralization of sense'.

Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 20) attribute to sense the 'reterritorializing function of language'. The ordinary use of language, they claim, always affixes it around a 'correct sense', which determines a certain set designation for the spoken sound, or a 'figurative sense' which determines the meaning of images and metaphors. Against

this ordinary language, which undergoes what they term ‘negative’ deterritorialisation – a deterritorialisation that is immediately compensated by a reterritorialisation in sense – Deleuze and Guattari locate in Kafka a language of ‘absolute’ deterritorialisation, one that does not stop at sense, but crosses it through a line of flight and carries on. Its aim, however, is not to deconstruct meaning and be left in a vacuum of senselessness, but to ‘liberate a living and expressive material that speaks for itself and has no need of being put into a form’. A living, expressive material that speaks for itself and needs no form – this is exactly how I propose that we should understand all these ga-gas, be-bop-a-lulas, ob-la-di-ob-la-das. It is not as if the songwriters could not think of ‘real’ words, words with a designated sense, and had to settle for something that sounds ‘like a word’, but vice versa. At the peak moment of these songs – and in most songs that include this type of gibberish, it appears at the peak moment, or at least serves as a ‘hook’ – words with ordinary, conventional sense just cannot produce the right effect. They cannot ‘speak for themselves’, since they are chained to sense. Only through baby talk, the becoming-child of language or the becoming-child *in* language, is it possible to liberate the expressive material that some songs’ zenith requires.

Now it might be possible to better understand the problematics of interpreting baby talk as ‘resistance’. This type of interpretation reterritorialises it, gives it sense, while in effect it is already speaking for itself. The attempts to force a specific sense upon baby talk only block its line of flight, disrupt its flow. Sources that describe ‘Tutti Frutti’ often mention that it is ‘a cleaned-up version of a paean in praise of anal intercourse’ (Kirby 2009, p. 72; see also Miller 1999, p. 87; Robins 2008, p. 37), as if this sexual ‘transgression’ somehow gives the song added value, rescues it from its childlike innocence. As if without it, it might be mistaken for just another negligible children’s song. As if the reference to a ‘provocative’ sexual act has more power than the expressivity of ‘awopbopalooop, alopbamboom!’

Childlike vocalities

The occasional moral panic about ‘hidden messages’ in pop-rock songs – practically a mirror image of the discourse of rebellion, since it also purports to uncover subversive elements in seemingly innocuous songs, if only to demonstrate how dangerous they are – is often triggered by a becoming-child, centring around moments where language stops acting as a communicative vehicle given to pragmatic or poetic interpretation and turns into gibberish, unintelligible and incomprehensible. This urgency to locate a rebellious sense behind the childlike lack of sense might have reached its peak in the famous scandal that revolved around the Kingsmen’s ‘Louie Louie’ (1963): the suspicion that the song’s unintelligible lyrics convey a pornographic meaning led to an FBI investigation lasting two and a half years, meant to reveal whether this allegedly innocent rock’n’roll track actually hid ‘dirty’ words that might corrupt American youth. Unfortunately, the lab audiologists failed in deciphering the song’s lyrics, eventually reporting that ‘the record [...] was played at various speeds but none of the speeds assisted in determining the words of the song on the record’ (1964, in Marsh 1993, p. 116).

‘Louie Louie’ might have earned its place in the pop-rock canon as the ultimate unintelligible song, but it is certainly not the only one. Grunge band Nirvana’s defining hit, ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ (1991), became so infamous for its unintelligible

lyrics that musician and comedian 'Weird Al' Yancovic recorded in response a parody version titled 'Smells Like Nirvana' (1992), where the lyrics are sung in a much more comprehensible manner, yet deal only with the fact that they are impossible to understand.

Sometimes, vocal mannerisms that obscure a song's lyrical content can evoke concern regarding the loss of their alleged rebellious message. Dave Laing (1985, p. 56), for example, notes that even though 'Dead Cities' (1981) by Scottish punk band The Exploited is basically a 'protest' song, and in principle would shock any 'adherent of dominant social values', there is still one problem: 'such is the frenetic pace of the piece', writes Laing, 'that the enunciation of the title can easily be heard as a kind of "scat" singing, as "Deh See", and enjoyed as a form of abstract (wordless) vocalizing'. Laing presents this as an example of the way that 'the potential play of signifiers will always challenge the idea of a "pure" oppositional or sub-cultural music', but is aware that this presents an actual problem for those subcultures that are bent on preserving a specific meaning for their music, on getting a certain message through. For such subcultures, the case of 'Dead Cities' expresses the opposite concern from the one investigated by the FBI regarding 'Louie Louie': the rebellious punk faced with the Exploited's music does not worry that a subversive message might be hidden behind vocalist Wattie Buchan's unintelligible singing, but knows very well that such a message is there, and is concerned that Buchan's vocal mannerisms might cause it to dissolve into innocuous rambling.

Songs such as 'Louie Louie', 'Dead Cities' or 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' are different from the other cases that I have dealt with so far, in the sense that their lyrics by themselves are not gibberish. They are just sung in a way that makes them very hard to understand. However, once we take note that one of the fundamental characteristics of becoming is the physical adoption of different intensities, different relations of speed and slowness (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 258), then we see that the different use of mouth and jaw muscles, singing or speaking through different intensities and relations from the ones commonly applied by adults, also constitute a strategy of becoming, becoming as a childlike experimentation in the bodily production of language. Such use might be carried out in different ways, and another type of becoming that is common in this context is becoming-animal (singers that 'bark', 'roar' or 'wail'). Indeed, when Michael Hicks (1999, pp. 2–4) offers a taxonomy of 1950s rock'n'roll singing styles, he differentiates between the 'roar' of singers like Screamin' Jay Hawkins and Little Richard, the 'buzz' of Billy Riley and Eddie Cochran, and 'baby talk', a singing style that he associates with Buddy Holly, defined as 'a soft, high-pitched, crisply enunciated, frontally resonant singsong – a kind of nasal cooing'.⁶

When Hicks discusses baby talk, it is clear that he is not referring to the way babies talk, but to the manner in which adults tend to talk to babies. This type of speech certainly has the characteristics of becoming-child, since it is based on the penetration of certain childlike intensities into the speech of the adult who faces the baby. These intensities change the former's behaviour and are expressed not only in the tone of speech but also, for example, in the typical facial expressions that many adults make in front of babies. Nevertheless, not all forms of becoming-child through singing answer to the characteristics enumerated by Hicks. Next to Holly's crisp enunciations, we also find Cobain's incoherent mumblings or Buchan's manic rambling. In all these cases, we encounter a two-fold, absolute deterritorialisation of the mouth through its activation in a limp, sloppy, exaggerated or

simply 'incorrect' manner, like a child who has not yet learned how to control his or her body, or endow the exact intensities in his or her actions.

This deterritorialisation is two-fold since, as Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 19) note, the use of language, the oral articulation of sounds, always forms by itself a deterritorialisation of the mouth, whose 'primitive territoriality' is found in food.⁷ While ordinary speech finds its reterritorialisation in sense, baby talk deterritorialises the always-already deterritorialised act of speech, thus leading to an absolute deterritorialisation. It does not necessarily prevent the production of sense – there are many singers who remain comprehensible despite their becoming-child in language – but it offers a line of flight and foregrounds the intensities of the becoming. It suggests that maybe what is really important is not the semantic meaning of the lyrics, but their affectivity, their relations of speed and slowness, the way they are moved around the jaw, or warbled in the mouth, or slipped under the tongue, or chuckled or chortled or rambled or whispered. This method of singing has an affinity to the 'destratified voice' that Laura Cull (2009, p. 245) locates in Antonin Artaud's 1947 radio play, *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, a 'voice that escapes from signification into incantation'. However, while Cull sees Artaud's speech as a way to 'enter into proximity with the madwoman who speaks only to her selves, or to the wolf that howls at the moon' (Cull 2009, p. 249) – in other words, as instances of becoming-mad or becoming-animal – I would suggest that in the case of pop-rock music, this 'destratified voice' is usually produced through a becoming-child, though, as I have noted earlier, there are numerous instances of becoming-animal as well.

Jónsi Birgisson, vocalist for Icelandic post-rock group Sigur Rós, combines the two forms of becoming-child that I have discussed so far when he softly sings, in a loose falsetto, songs that are written in 'Hopelandic', an imaginary language invented by the band. Childlikeness is also a recurring trope in Sigur Rós' visual imagery: the cover art for their debut album, *Von* (1997) features a baby's face arising from the shadows, while the band's second album, *Ágætis byrjun* (1999) is adorned with a monochromatic drawing of an angel-winged foetus, a juxtaposition between the kitschy, romantic image of the child and the cold, sterile image presented by science.

The singing mannerisms of Elizabeth Fraser, vocalist for Scottish alternative rock group the Cocteau Twins, are also a characteristic example of becoming-child through singing, a singing that physically examines the different intensities of a child's speech. Fraser operates her mouth in different ways, apparently more interested in the various manners by which she can pronounce the words than in the lyrics themselves. The constant warbling of the syllables and the general unintelligibility of the words have become so identified with Fraser's singing that every deviation is deftly noted: 'the melodies are catchy, the production is superb, and (gasp) you can actually make out some of the lyrics', writes Rob Morton (2006, p. 634) in his review of the Twins' 1990 album, *Heaven or Las Vegas*. A similar tactic is often employed by Yoko Ono and by Diamanda Galás, especially emphasised in the video for Galás' 'Gloomy Sunday' (1992): most of the video is a close-up of Galás' face, especially her mouth, so one can discern all the different movements of her jaw muscles, the different motions and speeds, the continuous vibration of the words.

In his discussion of Icelandic musician Björk, Greg Hainge (2004, p. 48) describes the way that she 'deterritorialises the English language with her every utterance, ripping its signifiers from their syntactic chain with her Icelandic

inflections whilst the idiosyncrasies and singularity of her musical vocalisations deterritorialise her songs' refrains'. Hainge offers Björk as an exception to the rule, claiming that the majority of pop cannot actually be classified as music, since it is tightly bound to the transcendent, commercial plane of the music industry and market demands, and therefore 'the mode according to which it operates is not one in which it is desirable to perform the deterritorialisation of the refrain' (Hainge 2004, p. 42). However, as I have attempted to show so far, deterritorialisations occur time and time again, in different pop-rock songs from various genres and eras, regardless of the level of their affinity to the popular, 'mainstream' sphere. So far I have concentrated on the way this deterritorialisation is produced through nonsense and through childlike vocalities, and now I would like to turn to a third tactic of becoming-child which is possibly even more prevalent in pop-rock music: repetition.

Childlikeness and repetition

In their discussion of George Clinton's 'P-Funk' music, Mark Willhardt and Joel Stein (1999, p. 159) describe how the science fiction tales narrated through it are related to African American traditions of resistance, and even locate in them a 'political funk-conscious' that 'acts to free bodies but, even more importantly, [...] removes intellectual constrictions and frees minds'. On the other hand, they also make sure to remark that '[t]his is not to say that chanting "da da da dee da da da da da da da da da" for five or ten minutes (as happens at P-Funk concerts during "Flash Light") is a particularly enlightening experience' (Willhardt and Stein 1999, p. 146). Although I do not wish to contest the importance of Clinton's unique articulation of resistance through sci-fi lyrics as portrayed by Willhardt and Stein, I would like at this point to suggest that we should take this chanting of 'da da da dee da da da da da da da da da' just as seriously.

As Margaret J. Kartomi (1980, p. 207) notes, repetition is a 'universal childlike characteristic', a basic component of children's song and behaviour. Moreover, it is also prevalent in pop-rock music. Scholars such as James Snead (1981, pp. 150–1) and Tricia Rose (1994, pp. 66–74) identify repetition mainly with genres of 'black' music such as jazz, funk and hip hop, but it is actually nearly impossible to find any genre of pop-rock that lacks some sort of dominant repetition in the songs' form, rhythm, melody, chord progression or lyrics. It is also worth noting, as Jacques Attali (1985, pp. 87–8) points out, that repetition forms the material basis of 20th-century popular music, as the invention of recording technology transformed the musical event into an industrial product given to endless replication, and as Ian Buchanan (1997, p. 185) remarks, it is also its preferred mode of consumption among its audience.

The affinity between repetition and popular music's childlike characteristics was first theorised by Theodor W. Adorno. According to Adorno (2004, pp. 178–81), repetition in popular music does not indicate a proximity to children's songs, but to childish consciousness itself, and this proximity is pathological. In the repetition of jazz, he finds not only infantile characteristics, but psychotic ones as well. 'In certain schizophrenics', writes Adorno, 'the process by which the motor apparatus becomes independent leads to the infinite repetition of gestures or words, following the decay of the ego', and this process is also reflected in musical 'infantilism', in its Sisyphian, barren repetition.

Adorno was not the only writer to present a damning view of the relations between popular music and childlikeness indicated by repetition. '[T]he infantilizing

of “mere repetition”, writes Richard Middleton (2006, p. 140), ‘[...] would become a repeating [...] trope of mass culture critique’.⁸ Middleton, one of the only pop-rock scholars to write extensively on musical repetition, tries to understand it through a musico-semiotic framework. Popular music, he claims (Middleton 1999, 145–6) ‘seems to offer a particularly strong example of the impulse to repeat [...] music’s effects are peculiarly linked to the play of repetition and difference’. Middleton offers a distinction between two types of repetition, musematic and discursive. Musematic repetition repeats short units (the museme, according to Middleton, is the ‘minimal unit of meaning’ in music, the musical equivalent of the linguistic morpheme), typically riffs, while discursive repetition repeats longer units, with the paradigmatic case being a musical phrase ending with a cadence.

Although Middleton does not seem very keen on the identification between repetition and childlikeness, he does raise (Middleton 1990, p. 288) the speculation that our enjoyment of repetition might be related, at least on the psychological level, to the fact that one’s primal aural connotations are repetitious: the mother’s heartbeats as heard by the embryo in the womb. Middleton’s aversion to any further explication of the relations between the two might be related to the problematics of the dichotomy between oppression and liberation, or in his words (Middleton 2006, p. 165), ‘the whole bivalent *topos* of conformity versus transgression’, since the treatment of musical repetition as childish has often served as a method of denigrating the music, denouncing it as banal, conformist and conservative. However, he does describe (Middleton 2007, p. 111) certain musical practices which are not related to repetition, such as the use of gibberish, as ‘infantile’.

Since his analysis is mainly musicological, Middleton does not offer an extended discussion regarding the repetition of particular words (unlike the repetition of particular musical units), and only suggests (Middleton 1999, p. 152) that ‘a continuous repetition of a key word or phrase intensifies (and is perhaps generated by) musematic repetition’. However, in our case this type of repetition demands a more detailed discussion, since the repetition of single words or phrases is not only a ‘childlike characteristic’ or a convention of children’s songs, but also a concrete practice often performed by little children. As such, it is significantly related to becoming-child. As Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 21) write, ‘[c]hildren are well skilled in the exercise of repeating a word, the sense of which is only vaguely felt, in order to make it vibrate around itself’. If the use of gibberish avoids the reterritorialisation of language in sense through the use of words that cannot be tied to a specific meaning, the vibration of words through repetition helps to ‘shake’ sense out of them, to ‘take flight on a line of non-sense’.

In the early 1960s, the repetition of the word ‘yeah’ practically served as a metonym for pop-rock. In France and other Francophone countries, the moniker ‘yeh-yeh’ (or *yé-yé*) was used as a general name for the evolving genre, and the American release of French *chanteuse* Françoise Hardy’s debut album was even titled *The ‘Yeh-Yeh’ Girl from Paris* (1965). Repetition, as is evident, is present in its name; even by this stage it was already grasped as having an inherent relation to pop-rock songs, and one ‘yeh’ was simply not enough to define what was seen as their essence. This was often emphasised by pop-rock’s critics as an indication of the music’s lack of cultural value and general ridiculousness (e.g. Saibel 2007, p. 56; Spitz 2007, p. 118). For Walter Ulbricht, leader of the German Democratic Republic during that period, it symbolised the decadence of Western capitalist culture, as he declared in front of the Central Committee of the ruling Socialist Unity Party that ‘[t]he

incessant monotony of this "yeah, yeah, yeah" is not only ridiculous, it is spiritually deadening' (Caute 2003, p. 466).

The case of 'yeah' stands on the threshold between gibberish and repetition, since the sense of this word is already vague. Although it is slang for a word that has a defined semantic meaning, one could make the case that its use in many songs has more to do with the way that it works as a general cry of enthusiasm than with its precise meaning. In the Francophone case, it probably also served as some kind of a general signifier of 'Americanism', not necessarily related to the French *oui* ('yes') or even *ouais* ('yeah'). However, as noted by Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 20), the absolute deterritorialisation of language entails not only flight from the ordinary, literal sense of words, but also from their figurative, associative or metaphorical sense. Thus, even if 'yeah/yeh/yé' might have such a figurative function, its inherent repetition – inherent since every 'yeh' is always-already 'yeh-yeh' – undermines the figurative sense of 'enthusiasm' or 'Americanism' as well. This is also enhanced by the multiple spellings of the word, a multiplicity that serves a double function. First, it emphasises the childlike dimension of the music. As Carolyn Steedman (1980, pp. 10–11) remarks, the inclusion of spelling mistakes is a common literary trope for marking a certain text as written by a child. Thus, the insistence on misspelling the word as 'yeh' or 'yé' is also an emphasis of its relations to childhood. Second, the different spellings form in themselves a deterritorialisation of the English language, a becoming of English where it stops being conventional English but does not turn into a language that is not English. In both cases, it functions as what Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 23), following French linguist Henri Gobard, define as a deterritorialising, worldwide 'vehicular language', a majoritarian language given to minoritarian use by the French musicians. This is somewhat similar to the deterritorialisation of the French language located by Jean-Godefroy Bidima (2004, p. 189) in the works of Franco-Caribbean *Zouk* musicians.

In his discussion of 1950s rock'n'roll, Nick Cohn (1969, p. 35) describes Larry Williams not only as 'the first rock 'n' roll whistler' – an honourable title by itself – but also as having a very specific specialisation: writing songs about girls' names. According to Cohn, this 'obsession with names', which expressed itself in songs such as 'Dizzy Miss Lizzy' (1958), 'Bony Moronie' (1957), 'Short Fat Fanny' (1957), and more, 'was quite a central part of rock, one manifestation of the massive swing toward gibberish'. And indeed, much like the repetitious use of 'yeah', the repetition of first names also combines the 'vibrating' effect of repetition with the expressive power of gibberish. As Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 21) write, repeating the first name is 'particularly propitious for [escaping sense]', since names have 'no sense in [themselves]'.

Larry Williams might have been the one who turned the writing of songs based on first names into a 'whole tiny anti-art form', as Cohn (1969, p. 35) puts it, but many other songs that revolve around the first name have been written along the way. It is usually a woman's name – 'Gloria' (Them, 1965), 'Layla' (Derek and the Dominoes, 1970), 'Roxanne' (the Police, 1978) – but songs that revolve around masculine names are not too rare either (for example, Ace of Base's 'Donnie' [1998] or Carly Simon's 'Jesse' [1980], although the paradigmatic example would be Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode' [1959]). Songs of this type are usually classified as 'love songs', but what sort of love are we, in fact, dealing with? When tens of thousands of concertgoers sing along with Paul Simon that Cecilia is breaking their heart, they

certainly are not referring to the same Cecilia. Odds are that many of them do not know any Cecilia at all. Others do, but it could be their mother, or a friend from work, or their cat. In actuality, it does not really matter. The intensities that are charged into the first name have nothing to do with its referential or designative function; they are indifferent towards the actual person that the song was written about (assuming such a person existed in the first place), or towards any person at all. They are impersonal. The childish repetition of the first name offers not a confession of love but a 'sequence of intensive states, a ladder or a circuit for intensities' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 21), a deterritorialisation of language that does not lead to its reterritorialisation in sense.

Since the first name has no conventional sense, there is a wider range of repetitions that can be applied to it. It is not always necessary to repeat the same name time after time in order to make it 'vibrate' and lose its relation to a semantic reference. One can also perform a playful repetition of different names, abuse the loophole in the linguistic law that allows the use of first names as nouns without them being tied to any sense. This tactic is especially prevalent in 'list songs', such as Paul Simon's '50 Ways to Leave Your Lover' (1975) or Lou Bega's 'Mambo No. 5' (1999), where every line of the chorus introduces a different name, humorously integrating it into the song's concept, be it Simon's musings about breaking up or Bega's ode to the fact that he is sexually attracted to females.

Sex, drugs and becoming-child

Throughout this discussion of the childlike use of language in pop-rock, I have made some sporadic remarks regarding the ways in which becoming-child contrasts with the traditional interpretation of pop-rock as 'rebellious' music. Now, after describing the three main childlike strategies prevalent in pop-rock's language, I would like to briefly expand on this issue in a more systematic manner, by taking as a test case two of the greatest mythic images of pop-rock rebellion: sex and drugs.

'The Luckiest Guy on the Lower East Side' (1999) is a 'list song' by American indie-pop group the Magnetic Fields. Sung by a male narrator to a female friend with whom he is in love, the verses of the song are composed of short characterisations of the romantic relationships between different men and the narrator's friend, while in the chorus, backed by the chord progression commonly known as the 'doo-wop progression' (I vi IV V), the narrator reveals his secret weapon: unlike all the other guys in town, he has a car, and therefore only he can take his love out for a ride.

Mark Butler (2007, p. 239) offers a subversive queer reading of the song as using the 'language of the closet': according to Butler, the true object of the narrator's desire might not be the elusive female whom the song allegedly addresses, but her many male lovers whose names the singer enumerates with 'poetic pleasure'. Butler acknowledges some of the childlike elements of the song – not the repetition, but the 'innocent references to candy' (the song opens with the line 'Andy would bicycle across town in the rain to bring you candy') – but chooses to see them as elements that make the song seem 'transparently heterosexual' (I am not sure in which sense candy is supposed to make one seem heterosexual). Now, many of the Magnetic Fields' songs do indeed deal with questions of sex, gender and sexual inclination, and it would not be unfounded to identify some sort of ambiguous queer desire in 'The Luckiest Guy on the Lower East Side'; yet, while Butler aims to present

a model of depths, where homosexual desire lurks under the heterosexual façade, a pure examination of the song's surface, its repetition, simple melody, the nostalgic character of the harmonic progression, the puns and the candy, reveals a song that is first of all childlike. Furthermore, this childlikeness disrupts the possibility of articulating the discourse that Butler (2007, p. 238) suggests, a discourse of a struggle between 'homosexuality and the forces attempting to control and police it'. The idea of such a struggle is based on accepting the logic of what Michel Foucault (1978) termed the *dispositif* of sexuality,⁹ the diagnosis of contingent practices as symptoms that allow for a clinical cataloguing of identities (in our case, buying candy indicates a heterosexual identity while reciting male names indicates a homosexual identity).

Becoming-child does not accept the categories of the *dispositif* of sexuality, yet it does not seek to deconstruct them either. It does not wage semiotic warfare on meaning, but simply avoids it and travels further on. Thus, the interpretation of songs such as 'The Luckiest Guy on the Lower East Side' as offering some kind of queer subversion or resistance actually dilutes their power, since it channels the deterritorialising intensities of childhood into a reterritorialised, predetermined discourse.

This danger is also evident in readings of Britpop band Blur's biggest hit, 'Girls & Boys' (1994). A semantic, sense-oriented understanding of the song's chorus, which talks about 'girls who are boys who like boys to be girls who do boys like they're girls who do girls like they're boys', will probably lead to the conclusion that the song celebrates the dissolution of sexual differences, subverting ordinary conventions of gender and sexual orientation. However, once we focus on the repetitious elements of the song, highlighted by its production – the words 'boys' and 'girls' in the chorus are louder than the words that connect them, since they're emphasised by backing vocals that chant them behind vocalist Damon Albarn's singing – then the playful, ritualistic, hypnotic chanting of 'girls-boys-boys-girls-boys-girls-girls-boys' can also serve as part of a becoming-child. This becoming does not seek to erase the differences between girls and boys, women and men, but to introduce the child as an 'unengendered' potentiality (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 304). Thus, becoming-child is not resistant or subversive but indifferent and impersonal, exploring its own trajectories of desire without being bound to the *dispositif* of sexuality.

It almost goes without saying that many 'expressions' of sexuality in pop-rock music are regarded as subversive even if they plainly stay within orthodox, heteronormative discourse. The very acknowledgement of sexuality is often regarded as transgressive: as Foucault (1978, p. 6) notes, whenever we speak of sex, 'we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive'. And while Foucault is more interested in medical, psychoanalytic and psychiatric discourse, this depiction seems to aptly describe a major element of pop-rock discourse as well.

Two of disco singer Donna Summer's biggest hits, 'Love to Love You Baby' (1975) and 'I Feel Love' (1977), with their suggestive lyrics coupled with Summer's whispery, 'angelic' vocal style, can easily be interpreted as sexually transgressive. 'Love to Love You Baby' was even banned by the BBC (Thornton 1994, p. 181), probably due to the 'orgasmic' moans heard in the background. Nevertheless, the songs' repetitious character – a large part of both of them is composed of Summer simply repeating their title – serves more to highlight their childlike inclination. Is it really possible to assign any sense, sexual or otherwise, to the word 'love' when Summer repeats it incessantly dozens of times – and in the case of 'Love to Love You

Baby', for 17 minutes? Does her voice really express sexual seduction, or are we actually dealing with 'a becoming that includes the maximum of difference as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on the word'? (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 22).

According to Brian Hulse (2010, p. 33), 'every repetition is a question. Why does this repeat? What is the musical effect? How does it achieve this effect? How does this repetition work in concert with other repetitions?' I would suggest that Summer's repetition of the word 'love', as she utters it time and time again, each time with a slightly different inflection, extracts from it intensities that have nothing to do with its designative sense. It is not that every other word could have replaced it – each word has its own singularity, its own deterritorialisation, its own line of flight, its own intensities – but that the effect produced by repetition does not stem from the semantic or metaphoric sense of 'love', but from neutralising its sense, from what is left once childlike repetition gets rid of it.

'Feel Good Hit of the Summer' (2000), by American rock band Queens of the Stone Age, is composed mainly of one repeating line, naming six recreational drugs – 'nicotine, Valium, Vicodin, marijuana, ecstasy and alcohol' – while in the chorus this line is replaced by the stuttering of a different drug's name: 'C-c-c-c-c-cocaine'.¹⁰ Again, the discourse of resistance can interpret such a song as transgressive, since it can be said to legitimate or even celebrate all these psychoactive substances that are frowned upon by mainstream society (some of them are, of course, downright illegal). However, once again the repetition and stuttering suggest that we might be dealing with something else, with a becoming-child whose relation to drugs is much more complicated than simply waving them as a symbol of rebellion.

Drugs, claim Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 283–6), might act inside a certain assemblage as 'agents of [...] becoming'. However, they tend to lead to a relative deterritorialisation, one that is always 'compensated for by the most abject reterritorializations' of addiction, delusion and paranoia. The solution that Deleuze and Guattari offer is to avoid the dichotomy between the use of drugs and the non-use of drugs, to 'make it a stopover, to start from the "middle" [...] to succeed in getting drunk, but on pure water'. From the use of drugs one can learn about the deterritorialisation that they offer, but in order to prevent it from fixating around the black holes of addiction or insanity, it is crucial that these effects be reproduced by other means, that are not drug use but also not an avoidance of drugs. In the case of 'Feel Good Hit of the Summer', we see a becoming-child that establishes such a connection with drugs that surpasses the use/non-use dichotomy. Turning the drugs' names into a repetitive childlike chant empties the words of their semantic sense, of their referential role as signifiers of particular substances, while at the same time charging them with an effect that is much closer to the way drugs themselves operate. This is what Deleuze and Guattari mean when they talk about 'starting from the middle' and 'getting drunk on pure water' – the preservation of a certain relation to drugs as 'agents of becoming' through a displacement of that becoming to a different medium, that of music and childhood.

Another interesting song in this context, sung with a very noticeable, exaggerated stutter, is the Who's 'My Generation' (1965). This song is usually identified with 1960s youth counterculture, with vocalist Roger Daltrey's stuttering interpreted as an imitation of the way amphetamine users speak, a knowing wink to the drug habits of British mod culture (Shuker 2001, p. 160). Nevertheless, once again it is not also possible to understand this stuttering as a type of baby talk, the speech of a young child

who is having problems pronouncing words? Since 'My Generation' is commonly regarded as a rebellious, countercultural song, its expressions of childlikeness can easily be reterritorialised and presented as signifiers of subversion. Yet, if we understand the song in an immanent fashion – not as a signifying system that references different transcendent signifieds ('drugs', 'grown-ups', 'the establishment'), but through the becomings that occur within it – then we might concur, just like in 'Feel Good Hit of the Summer', that the relation between the stuttering and drugs is not referential but intensive. Through the becoming-child, the song harnesses certain intensities that are related to drugs yet enable an absolute deterritorialisation only when disconnected from them.

Conclusion

Pop-rock's various childlike qualities tend to go unnoticed. Often interpreted through the discourse of rebellion, as an instrument of resistance or subversion, not enough attention has been paid to all these moments where the music goes beyond the tired dichotomy of liberation and repression, when questions of whether a song is rebellious or conformist, progressive or reactionary, cease to be relevant. This is not to say that these questions are not important, but that focusing solely on them runs the risk of making us blind (or, to be precise, deaf) to whatever else might be going on with the music, to other paths that the music is taking. As Inna Semetsky (2004, p. 59) notes, becoming-child entails a certain innocence, a journey 'beyond truth and lie, right and wrong, that is, beyond [...] dual opposites', and I suggest that the liberation/repression dichotomy is one of those opposites that becoming-child forces us to leave behind.

By no means should this be understood as claiming that becoming-child is apolitical. On the contrary, becoming-child is deeply political, but it belongs to a different order of politics, to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 275) define as minoritarian, 'molecular' politics. Here I am in agreement with Ian Buchanan's (1997, p. 183) claim that 'what popular music does is set in motion a becoming-minor', yet I would give this claim a wider scope than that suggested by Buchanan, who limits this becoming to the music giving a voice to alienated teenagers. The political function of art, claims Deleuze (1997, p. 255), is to offer a universal becoming-minority, to 'trace [...] a figure of the minority consciousness as each one's potential' (Deleuze 1997, pp. 253–4), and this, ultimately, is what I think we might find in pop-rock music once we focus on the lines of flight produced by its becoming-child instead of interpreting it according to the preordained dichotomies offered to us by the discourse of rebellion: not a rebellion against something, a subversion of something or a resistance to something, but the positive production of an inherently different type of consciousness.

In this paper I have tried to elaborate on some of pop-rock music's childlike characteristics, specifically the ones which manifest themselves through language. We have seen how the childlike use of language enables a vibration of the words, a neutralising of conventional sense and an operation of different types of childlike intensities. Gibberish, nonsense, baby talk, childlike vocalities and repetition all form together one tactical assemblage of becoming-child, an assemblage that uses language as a means of becoming. Against the discourse of rebellion, which insists on fixating music's sense as resistance or subversion, in becoming music operates

with no sense or, to be precise, it is the flight from sense that enables it to operate. While the discourse of rebellion speaks for the music, childlike language allows pop-rock music to speak for itself.

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Endnotes

1. My use of the term 'pop-rock' is based on Motti Regev's (2002, p. 253) suggestion of it as an umbrella term for different styles and genres of popular music that share a certain set of creative practices, particularly an 'extensive use of electric and electronic instruments, sophisticated studio techniques of sound manipulation, and certain techniques of vocal delivery, mostly those signifying immediacy of expression and spontaneity'.
2. For a critique of Deleuze and Guattari's preference for canonical, classical works in their discussions of music, see Bidima (2004, pp. 188–94) and Gallope (2010, pp. 100–102).
3. This fact is recounted by Taylor in the BBC2 TV documentary *Queen: Days of Our Lives* (2011).
4. The expression has since resurfaced again, this time as 'shimmy shimmy coco puff', in the track 'Keep Your Shoes On' (2012) by American disco/glam rock outfit Scissor Sisters.
5. See, for example, Dafna Lemish's (2004) discussion of Israeli gay men's appropriation of music from the Eurovision song contest, or Susan Fast's (1999) description of the way Led Zeppelin's allegedly macho, misogynist music is put to empowering use by their female audience. The use of the scare quotes around 'African American' is due to the problematics, accurately described by Philip Tagg (1989), of the discourse regarding 'African American' or 'black' music as opposed to 'European' or 'white' music.
6. Hicks borrows the description of Holly's singing as 'baby talk' from Jonathan Cott (1980, p. 78). On the childlike characteristics of Holly's singing style, see also Bradby and Torode (1984).
7. On the relations between language and food, see also Deleuze (1990, pp. 23–7).
8. For a critique of the critics of repetition, see Potter (1998).
9. Foucault (1980, pp. 195–6) defines *dispositif* as 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions' and the 'system of relations that can be established between these elements'. The term has been differently translated into English as 'deployment' and 'apparatus', yet I prefer keeping the original French term in order to highlight the uniqueness of the concept.
10. To be precise, only nicotine and alcohol are the names of actual psychoactive substances; the rest are commercial brand names or street names of such substances.

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