Reich in Blackface: *Oh Dem Watermelons* and Radical Minstrelsy in the 1960s

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Abstract

This essay undertakes an examination of Steve Reich's music for Robert Nelson's film Oh Dem Watermelons *(1965), which was originally conceived as part of the San Francisco Mime Troupe's controversial production* A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel *of the same year. Reich's long-neglected soundtrack deserves reconsideration for its formative role in the development of the composer's musical style and quasi-liberationist aesthetic at the time, for its participation within what I term the "minstrel avant-garde" in the Bay Area during the mid-1960s and the postmodern revival of blackface minstrelsy more generally, and as a reference point in reflecting upon Reich's professional and political trajectory since its composition.*

Steve Reich's music for Robert Nelson's film *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965) is little known these days.[1] Tacitly understood as an irrelevant detour and even somewhat questionable misadventure in the composer's development, its status as marginal juvenilia and its unavailability on the market have prevented scholars from taking a serious look at the music and the context within which it was composed. Instead, Edward Strickland's offhand comment on the music and film—"it was the middle of the 1960s"[2]—has stood in the place of a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the music's various social meanings.

More recent discussions of *Oh Dem Watermelons* have emphasized its role as part of a satirical treatment of historical blackface minstrelsy and as foreshadowing aspects of Reich's mature style.[3] It is perhaps a little surprising that Reich's work has yet to be brought into conversation with recent writings on blackface minstrelsy in the past decade, as well as high-profile treatments of minstrelsy by black novelists

[1] This film, as well as the rest of Robert Nelson's films, is exclusively distributed by Canyon Cinema; see http://canyoncinema.com for more information. On the music for the film, Reich states the following: "*Oh Dem Watermelons* was withdrawn years ago and does not exist in any written or recorded form. The composer has nothing whatsoever to say about this withdrawn work."

[2] Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 184.

[3] See Paul Hillier, introduction to Steve Reich, *Writings on Music, 1965–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15; and Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 170.

and filmmakers—most famously, Spike Lee in the film *Bamboozled* (2000).[4] My aim here, however, is neither to denounce Reich's neglected composition as racist, nor to celebrate it as harnessing the transgressive power of minstrelsy—a power that, according to the cycle theory of minstrelsy, has periodically swept through U.S. history from the era of Jacksonian democracy in the 1830s to the appearance of ragtime, musicals, and jazz in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the birth of rock and roll in postwar America, and then hip hop as its most recent manifestation.[5] Instead, I propose three arguments. First, it is my contention that Reich's piece, along with his better-known tape pieces *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966), crystallized a set of aesthetic and conceptual preoccupations with problems of race in the United States, particularly concerning the African American freedom struggles in, and tensions between, the Civil Rights and Black Power/Black Liberation movements. As such, *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965) should be placed alongside those two tape compositions as part of a series of "race" works that helped initiate his early compositional style and the musical movement referred to as minimalism; these compositions should be understood as allegorizing processes of liberation. Second, Reich and his collaborators were not unique in reviving blackface minstrelsy and other forms of racial caricature. Rather, several artists, musicians, and comedians were drawing on similar forms in the mid-to-late 1960s, forming a diffuse but interrelated network of creative artists within the San Francisco Bay Area. These artists constitute a "minstrel avant-garde" of sorts, an artistic formation fundamentally linked to the West Coast—and, more broadly, to largely white cultural avant-gardes and bohemian communities of the Baby Boomer generation. At the same time, however, the minstrel avant-garde was made possible by the successes of social movements aiming to remove uncritical forms of minstrelsy from the mass media. The irony was that this avant-garde, like most of the 1960s neo-avant-gardes, was recuperated into the system it so despised, resulting in minstrelsy's reappearance in the public eye with an ironic, postmodern flair that simultaneously mainstreamed the critical power of minstrelsy and returned classic minstrel stereotypes in new forms to mass audiences for consumption. Third, Reich's involvement with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bay Area artistic scene increasingly seems to have become—despite their formative influence on him as a composer—something of an embarrassment for him, and over the years he has attempted to distance himself from most of the work he produced in that period. Although the sensitivity of the subject matter would offer an adequate rationale for Reich's evolving position

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[4] Some of the best known treatments include Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[5] See W. T. Lhamon, "Ebery Time I Wheel About I Jump Jim Crow: Cycles of Minstrel Transgression from Cool White to Vanilla Ice," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James Hatch, and Brooks McNamera (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 275–84.

on his music for *Oh Dem Watermelons*, the broader aesthetic, political, and social dynamics to which it is tied came to be perceived as impediments to the ascending professional trajectory and artistic acclaim that he has long sought.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe and Alternative Theater in the United States

Born and raised in New York, Steve Reich (b. 1936) left the East Coast to study composition with Luciano Berio and Darius Milhaud at Mills College (1961–63) in Oakland, California. While at Mills, Reich met R. G. Davis (b. 1933), an actor-director working with The Actors' Workshop. Davis had also started a political theater company in 1959, soon to be called the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Beginning in the silent mime tradition while drawing on populist forms of wordless performance like Charlie Chaplin's silent slapstick films, Davis soon left the Workshop to concentrate full time on his new company, incorporated words into his productions, switched to the sixteenth-century Italian outdoor theater style of *commedia dell'arte* as the basis for the group's work, and began performing in parks in San Francisco to attract a wide audience. One result of the troupe's increasing prominence in the public sphere was that its members faced censorship and repression from city police and municipal authorities, often on trumped-up charges of lewdness or obscenity. Political battles with city officials in 1965 over permits for performing in public parks, in which Davis was ultimately arrested for leading an unauthorized performance, resulted in the support of the New Left activists and cultural workers in the city and led to the formation of the politically active Artists Liberation Front, in which the troupe was centrally involved.[6]

The Mime Troupe was part of a new movement of alternative and political theater in the United States in the postwar period, including, among others, Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater (New York, 1951), LeRoi Jones's (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka) Black Arts Theater (Harlem, 1965; later in Newark), Luis Valdez's El Teatro Campesino (San Francisco, 1965), and the Diggers (San Francisco, 1966). The earliest of these groups began from an aestheticist modernism rather than from explicitly political work, but given the proximity of political and social radicalism in much modernist theater and the self-perceived aesthetic radicalism of the prewar avant-gardes, it is unsurprising that new U.S. modernisms of the 1950s eventually were transformed into explicitly political productions and theater companies by the 1960s. Moreover, numerous artists and artistic groups coming primarily from music (Cage, Fluxus, AACM) or dance (Judson Dance Theater) were also involved in new forms of performative expression. These groups were perhaps inspired to imagine a new relation to the body through the real physical engagement in civil

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[6] Sources for my description of the Mime Troupe include R. G. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years* (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1975), especially 49–63; Theodore Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theater*, new ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002 [1982]), 50–74; and Eric Noble, "The Artists Liberation Front and the Formation of the Sixties Counterculture," http://www.diggers.org/alf_version_1996.htm.

disobedience acts in the new social movements of the 1960s and new modes of musical performance in rock music or jazz. Indeed, one might argue that the media manipulation of the New Left in the antiwar movement, in particular the work of the Yippies, might represent a theatricalization of New Left politics.[7]

Instrumental in the alternative theater movement was the production of new works by Bertolt Brecht, the leading light of leftist political theater associated with the communist second world. An English-language Brecht revival had been taking place in the 1950s and early 1960s, marked by a translation of several of his didactic plays in 1961 by Eric Bentley. Bentley imagined his collection, *Seven Plays*, including *Mother Courage* (1939), *Galileo* (1938–39), *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1938–40), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944–45), as a corrective in response to the growing popularity of Brecht in the postwar years in the English-speaking world. As Bentley notes, "Brecht has died, and what we have chosen to inherit is a cult, an *ism.* . . . War can be waged on Brechtism in the name of Brecht."[8] In addition to an explicit Marxist political commitment, Brecht's work provided clear examples of various performance and theatrical strategies that would prove useful to the practitioners of the new alternative theater in the 1960s, including the time-honored use of parody, or rewriting or lampooning earlier works in light of the present; the notion of coarse thinking (*plumpes Denken*); the grotesque refiguring of the enemy; a philosophy of performance emphasizing the constructedness of the theatrical scene; and the possibility of demonstration in art, a logical unfolding of a premise that is antisubjective in nature.

Brecht was certainly part of the constellation of figures influencing the Mime Troupe. Perhaps most telling was that Reich, an outsider to political theater, apparently picked up on the influence of Brecht on the troupe: He later described it as "a very left-wing neo-Brechtian kind of street theater in San Francisco."[9] Davis repeatedly theorized contemporary theater practices through Brecht—at one point publishing an article with Peter Berg in *Drama Review* titled "Sartre through Brecht."[10] Davis was, however, critical of the idea that Brecht could provide "a simple solution for American political theater" and despised the "innumerable bad productions of Bentley's apolitical versions" of Brecht's plays.[11] Still, the Mime Troupe director repeatedly returned to Brecht during his tenure with the troupe, producing a version of *Exception and the Rule* in 1964 and *Congress of White Washers* in 1969. In both cases Davis wanted to avoid the "European attachment" of Brecht's work generally and instead drew on the East Asian aspects of the plays, allegedly to make them more relevant to the local context of San Francisco. In the

[7] For a general treatment of alternative theater in the period, see Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries*.

[8] Bertolt Brecht, *Seven Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Press, 1961), xiii.

[9] Steve Reich, interview with Ev Grimes, number 186 a-i OH V, tape and transcript, Oral History of American Music, Yale University, tape 186-a. Reich's involvement with the Brecht revival is an example of a trend in 1960s experimental theater and music that would link Brecht's own work in opera between the 1920s and 1950s and the mainstreaming of Brechtian methods in opera performance since the 1970s. For a fine study that effectively bookends this essay in its treatment of Brecht and music, see Joy Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[10] Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 73.

[11] Ibid., 117.

earlier production, Davis drew on Japanese theatrical forms (Noh, Kabuki) that had influenced Brecht's theatrical productions generally; in the later production, the Chinese setting of the play inspired its treatment as outdoor Chinese opera.[12]

Reich became involved with the Mime Troupe in part because it had connections to the experimental music scene in the city. Davis attended concerts at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, run by composers Ramón Sender and Morton Subotnick, and staged a theater piece titled "Event II" at the center in January 1963. In 1963 Reich became one of a few experimental composers (including Pauline Oliveros) involved in producing music for the troupe's performances and related films. Between 1963 and 1965, he composed music for a production of Alfred Jarry's proto-Dadaist play *Ubu Roi*, tape music for films by troupe associate Robert Nelson titled *Plastic Haircut* and *Thick Pucker*, music for Molière's *Tartuffe* and Milton Savage's *Ruzzante's Maneuvers*, and music with his Mills College colleague and future Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh for *Event III (Coffee Break)*.[13]

The Mime Troupe seemed to provide Reich with a breath of fresh air—in his words it "was just exactly what the doctor ordered after doing an MA [in composition] under Berio and Milhaud [at Mills College]."[14] Through the avant-gardist and political currents that developed together as part of Davis's vision for the group, the Mime Troupe (and particularly Davis) seems to have been one of the key factors in spurring Reich to tackle politically (and racially) oriented subject matter. Reich's compositions prior to his contact with the Troupe (and the San Francisco New Left and nascent counterculture generally) hardly dealt with the difficult, politically fraught subject matter found in works like *It's Gonna Rain* or *Come Out.* Perhaps after arriving in Oakland to study at Mills and perceiving firsthand the continuation of American racial oppression on the West Coast—thus shattering the myths of Californian (racial) utopia that in part may have inspired Reich's transcontinental relocation—Reich may already have been preoccupied with such concerns before meeting Davis.[15] In any case, Reich's contact with the Bay Area's nascent counterculture helped to spur the composer toward thinking about issues of race and ethnicity, a process that intersected fruitfully with his growing interest in African music, with the nexus of his spiritual/religious explorations and his following of the Civil Rights Movement, and with his longstanding interest in jazz and familiarity with popular music.

The Mime Troupe's *A Minstrel Show*

Reich's final project with the Mime Troupe was their June 1965 production *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel.* Conceiving of the production in

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[12] Ibid., 117–22.

[13] These productions are summarized in Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 197–200.

[14] Steve Reich, interview with Ev Grimes, number 186 a-i OH V, tape and transcript, Oral History of American Music, Yale University, tape 186-a.

[15] Strickland notes that Reich "was committed to the civil-rights movement from his teens." Although abstract solidarity and lived experience do not necessarily coincide, he may well have been sensitized to everyday racial politics before arriving in California (Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 190).

1964 with Saul and Nina Landau, Davis sought to revive and rethink the historical blackface minstrel show, much in the way that he had done with the *commedia dell'arte* in prior work—and the use of stereotyped, stock characters was characteristic of both theatrical forms. Unlike the troupe's Italian theatrical model, blackface minstrelsy was an indigenous theatrical form that could facilitate a concrete treatment of race in the United States. According to Eric Lott, nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy not only created stereotypes that justified the existence of slavery, but also created a context in which working-class whites could explore their fascination with black culture and express oppositional, even abolitionist, viewpoints, thus at times providing a space for contesting the dominant racial hierarchies and ideologies.[16] More than a century later, Davis found himself working at an historical juncture that witnessed the remaking of the post-Reconstruction system of Jim Crow segregation and the birth of militant political strategies for ameliorating the post-migration racial order of the ghetto. During a moment of intense racial conflict within the country—the Civil Rights Movement was splintering and transforming into the Black Power Movement, and some of the earliest of the decade's wave of racial urban uprisings took place in 1964—the actor-director felt it important to confront and explode liberal racism by confronting his audience with the culturally repressed racist tropes of minstrelsy. To this end, he cast the show interracially, so that "the audience would have to struggle through the performance trying to figure out which were black and which were white. The process would unnerve them and fuck up their prejudices."[17]

The Mime Troupe's production mimicked the sectional or "presentational" form of the historical minstrel show itself. Both borrowing and altering scripts from century-old minstrel shows and introducing newly written material, the troupe not only updated the minstrel show's form but also made it a great deal more subversive, if not outright strange. *A Minstrel Show* begins with a "tambourine, shoutin', stompin', cake-walk for the opener"[18] that leads into a series of crossfire gag routines between a white, straight-man Interlocutor and individual minstrels. Next is the Stump Speech on Evolution, done by a minstrel "in the style of a [racially ambiguous] Southern senator." All the minstrels then bowed their heads as the Interlocutor sang "Old Black Joe," while one of the minstrels begins to furiously simulate masturbation. After a peculiar Nazi-style march sequence, the show resumes with a recounting of "Nego History Week" (without the "r"), which involves a portrayal of black historical figures and ends with militant black nationalists inciting the minstrels to revolt. The Interlocutor calms the minstrels down, asking them to "improvise" a "chick/stud scene."[19] Here one of the minstrels acting as a hypersexualized black male figure picks up a liberal white woman at a bar and takes her home to bed. In a postcoital dialogue, these stereotyped characters deflate each other's clichéd statements, thereby "deconstruct[ing]" both stereotypes. The troupe then screens Robert Nelson's short film *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965), in

[16] See Lott, *Love and Theft.*
[17] Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 50.
[18] Ibid., 53.
[19] Ibid., 57.

which white actors perform numerous violent and bizarre acts upon watermelons (presumably representing African Americans). During the intermission the minstrels sing the Black Muslim song "White Man's Heaven Is a Black Man's Hell," and blonde female audience members are invited to dance onstage with the minstrels. The second half of the show comprises two short plays. The first was an improvised scene with a kid and cop based on Lieutenant Gilligan's shooting of James Powell in the summer of 1964 in Harlem—the event that initiated the Harlem riots. The second is a bathroom scene written by Landau in which the characters "White," "Negro," and "Nigger" appear, with the last character undermining the pretensions of the first two and ultimately threatening to kill them both.[20]

The point of *A Minstrel Show* was to unearth and then "deconstruct" stereotypes, thus undoing latent racial prejudices. Davis noted that there was a particular logic at work within the show, one that was thought through quite carefully due to the production's sensitive and volatile source material:

> The magic of the show was the unearthing of stereotypical images, placing them on stage, making them move rapidly from cornball black jokes (minstrel racism) to radical black (radical puncturing) jokes thus transforming a stereotypical image into a radical image. The speed of the performance and the shift from level to level, cornball to cornstalk, caught prejudices offguard and exposed them. The through line, of course, was the general apprehension about buried prejudices, which the search for the white performers amid the black faces constantly irritated. When the white and black (three of each) performers played the stereotypes exquisitely, people got confused and were likely to go away shaken.[21]

Imagined as a Marxist theatrical experiment, the process at work was a dialectical one, in which the dangerous stereotypes of racist satire and caricature in minstrelsy were progressively transmuted into confrontational images and behavior. In retrospect, the Mime Troupe's approach to the minstrel show was successful on several counts. Drawing on the collective imagination and wit of the participants and research into historical minstrel shows, it produced brilliant material and shocked its audiences. It quickly became known as one of the Mime Troupe's most controversial performances, leading to numerous police busts and arrests while the troupe toured with the show in the Northwest and Canada. As Davis later quipped, "People thought we were on their side, thought it was a civil rights integration show. Not so, we were cutting deeper into prejudices than integration allowed. We poked not at intolerance, but tolerance. We were not for the suppression of differences; rather, by exaggerating the differences we punctured the cataracts of 'color blind' liberals, disrupted 'progressive' consciousness and made people think twice about eating watermelon."[22] Despite the show's anti-integrationist tendencies, it also was the troupe's first use of an interracial cast and U.S. source material and represented an attempt to speak more directly to its (broadening) audiences. Such efforts prefigure the practices of the later, post-Davis collective era of the troupe, which were

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[20] Davis suggests (e-mail interview with the author, 17 August 2009) that the toilet scene may have been inspired by a work by LeRoi Jones, probably *The Toilet* (1964), and that Jean Genet's *The Blacks* (1958) was the most important inspiration for *A Minstrel Show* as a whole.

[21] Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 57.

[22] Ibid., 63.

more community based and accommodating in spirit. Finally, the *Minstrel Show* provided an opportunity for the participants themselves to examine and learn from their experiences of racial prejudice.

Although the show was intentionally troubling, it also displayed some tendencies that worked against its own aims. Perhaps the most significant of these was the way in which the actors produced a macho environment of racist mudslinging—itself characteristic of the problematic gender dynamics within the Mime Troupe in its pre-feminist years (before 1970). Davis recounts one story in which a talented potential cast member felt uncomfortable with the situation and left the show:

> We never did find a permanent third black to match [Willie Hart and Jason Marc Alexander], although, in the early rehearsals, we worked with a great performer who was five feet wide and six feet tall, played piano, could dance and sing, and was a fine actor. He left. The show was merciless and each joke was self-critical. He couldn't stand up to the scrutiny of the form: racism, white or black. He did not dig the politics or the jokes at his size. He would not admit that he was twice the width of any one performer and we found out later that he hadn't noticed he was Negro until the age of twenty-one.[23]

Hence, although there was understandable desire to avoid the solipsism of "fantasy and dream therapy,"[24] the masculinized radical horizon of the troupe's work at that time could neither tolerate nor represent sensitivity within its boundaries.[25] Another closely related limitation of the show was its method of puncturing stereotypes, which was typically accomplished by transforming a docile black character into a violent or militant one, often in the spirit of Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movement rhetoric. Because the show was meant to be topical, it did successfully draw upon the transgressive images available to the left at the time—including overt sexuality, masculine black violence, and, in a negative way, Nazi fascism.[26] The fact that this imagery was subsequently appropriated and manipulated by the right—with the images of sex, racial violence, and fascism both firmly in the service of capital and rightist causes such as the prison industrial complex or the so-called Holocaust industry—can be seen as both a success and a failure. Given that powerful institutions and hegemonic social forces work hardest to adopt, absorb, and nullify images that they find most useful *and* most threatening, perhaps these images are merely part of a larger political contest over symbols occurring in the wake of the 1960s. On the other hand, the shifting imaginaries associated with these symbols might be linked to the postwar-generation professional-managerial class's shift in social locations or movement from the outside to the inside of powerful institutions—here identified in the cliché of the yippie turned yuppie, or the move

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[23] Ibid., 50.

[24] Ibid., 52.

[25] For a more extensive critique of gender and representation in *A Minstrel Show*, see Claudia Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions: The Politics of Popular Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), especially 115–17.

[26] On progressive invocations of the Holocaust in the 1960s, see Kirsten Lise Fermaglich, "'The Comfortable Concentration Camp': The Significance of Nazi Imagery in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)," *American Jewish History* 91/2 (June 2003): 205–32.

from Haight Street to Wall Street.[27] For his part, Davis has more recently noted that the problematic content of *A Minstrel Show* must be handled thoughtfully in performance, with differing interpretive approaches varying the degree to which it would be "a racist show or one challenging racism."[28]

Robert Nelson and Steve Reich's *Oh Dem Watermelons*: An Analytic Description

Most of the music in *A Minstrel Show* was provided either by the troupers themselves or by two banjo players in the local folk-revival scene and/or loosely affiliated with the troupe, Carl Granich and Chuck Wiley. Reich's sole musical contribution was an extended canon on the word "watermelon" that was sung live by the troupe during the screening of Nelson's *Oh Dem Watermelons*, the screenplay for which was written by Saul Landau. Nelson, a San Francisco native born in 1930, was involved in the city's art scene as a painter, first enrolling in a painting class at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) and soon becoming connected to the "funk" tendency of artists and filmmakers in the late 1950s.[29] Independent cinema was also growing in prominence within San Francisco arts communities thanks to the efforts of Bruce Baillie, who in 1960 formed Canyon Cinema—an exhibition outlet and eventually a collectively run film distribution company that was initially based in the backyards of interested filmmakers and viewers.[30] Nelson first became involved in filmmaking with his wife, the artist (and later, filmmaker) Gunvor Nelson, beginning with a few home movies in the early 1960s. Around 1963, Nelson began to work with Ron Davis and produced films with him and Reich, sometimes for productions by the San Francisco Mime Troupe, including *Plastic Haircut* (1963), *King Ubu* (1963), and later, *Oh Dem Watermelons*. Nelson recalls that in 1965 Davis asked him to "make a short 'intermission' film for *A Minstrel Show*," which was already in production. The Mime Troupe paid the production costs, which included "5 or 6 rolls of color film and one dozen watermelons."[31]

Throughout this period, three artistic entities—the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Canyon Cinema group, and the San Francisco Tape Music Center—often combined forces and in turn facilitated further artistic collaboration. The Mime Troupe was frequently at the center of this activity.[32] Whether in tandem with the troupe or not, the communal aspect of cultural production was a central theme in Nelson's

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[27] Thanks to Michael Denning for these turns of phrase and ideas on the professional-managerial class, in part as found in his book *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 134–35.

[28] For this paraphrase of Davis's words, see Susan Vaneta Mason, ed., *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 19.

[29] J. Hoberman, *To Tightrope Walkers Everywhere: The Collaborative Films of Robert Nelson and William T. Wiley* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1979), 1.

[30] See Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 6–7. Chuck Wiley's brother is artist-filmmaker William Wiley; both collaborated with Nelson. Reich wrote *Pendulum Music* (1968) for a Wiley happening (Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 174–75).

[31] Robert Nelson, private correspondence (letter) with the author, 6 April 2010.

[32] Ibid.

own films, which are marked by their lighthearted humor and often feature rambling, picaresque adventures undertaken by the filmmakers themselves; as film critic J. Hoberman notes, their "friendship is, in great measure, the subject of their work."[33] Indeed, in the case of *Oh Dem Watermelons*, the charged political impetus of the film emerged directly from Nelson's collaboration with Davis and Landau, making it dissimilar from his other films in this respect—though the characteristic humor and communality remain.[34]

Although *Oh Dem Watermelons* was typically screened as a part of *A Minstrel Show*, it also had a separate existence as an experimental film, winning first prize in the "Cinema as Art" category of the San Francisco Film Festival in 1965. Reich's music, though performed live in the show, is relatively well coordinated with the standalone film as a taped soundtrack, and it rubs shoulders with quotations of music by Stephen Foster and a lesser-known songwriter, Luke Schoolcraft.[35]

The autonomous version of the film begins with a credit sequence that includes a ponderous rendition of one chorus of Stephen Foster's classic minstrel song "Massa's in de Cold Ground" (1852) hummed by a men's choir with piano accompaniment (Example 1). At the beginning of the second phrase of the chorus, a low-voiced announcer states, "Music by Stephen Foster and Steve Reich," and the film cuts to footage of the young Reich (Fig. 1a). The film then shows a man wearing ice skates, carrying a watermelon, walking carefully on a high metal beam attached above to a large highway overpass, and preparing of some kind of explosive; the announcer states, "Bombs by Joe Lomuto," as the chorus of the song ends. The next scene, which lasts for a minute and a half, features a still shot of a watermelon sitting at an angle in a grassy field, accompanied by silence. Suddenly, a voice announces, "All right everybody, follow the bouncing watermelon!"[36] On the screen appear the words to Foster's "Massa's in de Cold Ground," with an animated watermelon bouncing out of sync on top of each syllable (Fig. 1b).[37] The song is now performed about twice as fast as its earlier tempo (Example 2).

Without a break, the music and text shift to the chorus of another minstrel song, Luke Schoolcraft's "Oh! Dat Watermelon" (1874), a slightly faster 2/4 tune in the

[33] Hoberman, *To Tightrope Walkers Everywhere*, 28. For a treatment of Nelson and the picaresque, see P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), especially 316–22.

[34] Davis emphasized Nelson's relatively apolitical bent in an e-mail interview with the author on 17 August 2009.

[35] *Oh Dem Watermelons* can presently be viewed both on the Ubu Web site at http://www.ubu.com/film/nelson_watermelons.html and on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvs0-nPNha8. The timings of these files are slightly different from those of my working copy, to which I refer throughout the remainder of this essay.

[36] Here the voice on the soundtrack is that of the director himself, Robert Nelson. Nelson mentions in private correspondence (letter to the author, 6 April 2010) that his call was added to the film (presumably afterwards).

[37] This moment lampoons the bouncing ball sing-along, which was developed in Fleischer studios for its *Song Car-Tunes* series and first used in *My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean* (1925). It was a common presence in cinema houses into the 1950s and was revived in *Hobo's Holiday* (1963). See Wikipedia Contributors, "Bouncing Ball," *Wikipedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bouncing_ball.

Example 1. *Oh Dem Watermelons*, credit sequence, hummed version of "Massa's in de Cold Ground." Transcription by author. Used by permission of Steve Reich.

same key.[38] (See Examples 3 and 4 for the song's original chorus and the troupe's treatment of it.) By the second time through the chorus of "Oh! Dat Watermelon," the words disappear and the watermelon suddenly transforms into a football, which is kicked by a uniformed football player in a kickoff. By this point the images begin to shift rather frequently, from a stadium and cheerleader shots, to a crowd scene,

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[38] Given Schoolcraft's later obscurity, it is unsurprising that the members of the *Minstrel Show* production, including Reich himself, incorrectly believed that both songs accompanying the film were by Stephen Foster. Luke Schoolcraft (1847–93) was born in New Orleans and performed as a singer and actor for most of his life, including in a renowned minstrel duo with George Coes. For more on Schoolcraft and "Oh! Dat Watermelon," see Sumanth Gopinath, "Contraband Children: The Politics of Race and Liberation in the Music of Steve Reich, 1965–1966," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2005, 1–3.

Example 2. *Oh Dem Watermelons,* from "All right, everybody" through sung rendition of "Massa's in de Cold Ground." Transcription by author. Used by permission of Steve Reich.

Figure 1a. Image of Steve Reich in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (0:33). Image stills from *Oh Dem Watermelons* used by permission of Robert Nelson.
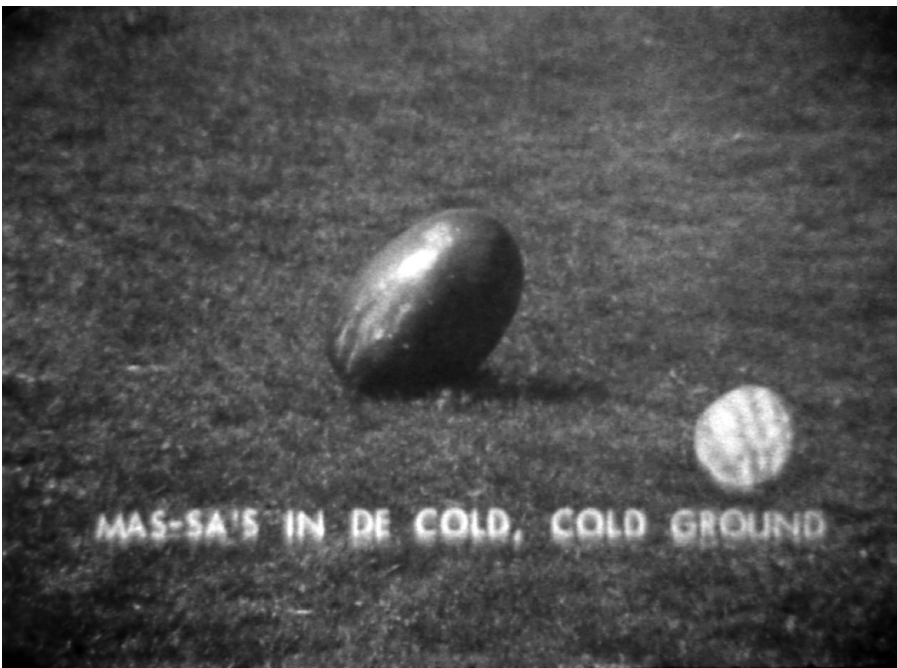

MAS-SA'S IN DE COLD, COLD GROUND

Figure 1b. The "bouncing watermelon" in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (2:47).

Example 3.   Luke Schoolcraft, "Oh! Dat Watermelon" (1874), chorus.

then to football players looped in action. During the course of these image shifts, the music has mutated from a repetitive, one-note chantlike tune on the phrase "Oh, dat watermelon" (mm. 17–30 in Example 4) that is a variant of the chorus of Schoolcraft's song, into a triple-meter passage in which an altered dominant in D is looped, accompanying the more robotically sung "watermelon, watermelon." The passage then transforms into a pulsed version of the same music, accompanying a longer sequence involving a group of men chasing a rolling watermelon down an inclined road and playing football with it in a somewhat busy street.

At this point, the musical accompaniment embarks on a process of expanding from a single-voiced accompaniment to an original multipart canon, with voices entering gradually. The images continue to change and now show greater violence inflicted upon watermelons, which are stomped upon by a person wearing ice skates, sliced with swords and knives, and blown up. One extended passage involves one actor removing animal intestines from a watermelon, apparently disemboweling it (Fig. 2a).[39] A watermelon is shot; another, already mutilated, pops out of a bus at a bus stop and is further trampled upon by exiting passengers; yet another sequence shows a construction vehicle crushing a watermelon (Fig. 2b). Then ensues a series of exotic scenes—often produced with crudely animated collages—showing watermelons in various contexts, such as being transported on different peoples' heads (Fig. 2c). Political meetings appear, involving various heads of state—with the watermelons always accompanying black political figures. Watermelons are birthed, become children, are urinated on by a dog, stuffed into a toilet, carried by Superman, and made love to by a young white woman. Stereotypical images of

[39] Wendy Dozoretz claims that they are "chicken intestines," in "Robert Nelson's Suite California Stops and Passes," *Millennium Film Journal* 4–5 (Summer 1979): 160.

Example 4. *Oh Dem Watermelons*, Schoolcraft's "Oh! Dat Watermelon" and variation. Transcription by author. Used by permission of Steve Reich.

black youths eating watermelons are presented, a watermelon is dropped by a rocket (Fig. 2d), and finally an earlier image of a watermelon being sliced by a sword returns. During the presentation of these quickly cut scenes, the canon has steadily built up to include five voice parts, which are then reduced one voice at a time to a single line, mirroring the earlier entry of the voices. At the end of the film,

Example 4.   Continued.

the opening passage of the group of young men chasing the watermelon down the road is now reversed, and the watermelon appears to fuse spontaneously and chase them up some stairs and the inclined road (Fig. 2e). In the soundtrack, a rousing coda ensues as the music breaks from the canon to arrive on the D major tonic and series of choruses of "Oh! Dat Watermelon," some of which include obbligato harmonized vocal chants of "Oh, dat watermelon, oh, dat watermelon!" As the

Figure 2a. Disemboweling scene in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (5:29).

Figure 2b. Construction vehicle crushing a watermelon in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (6:36).

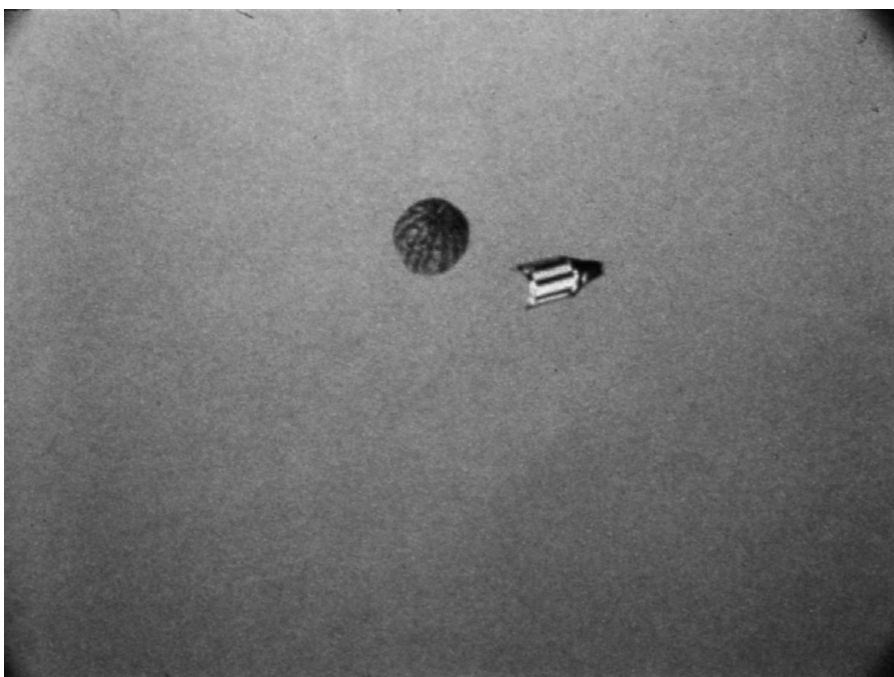**Figure 2c.** Animated collage with African woman carrying watermelon in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (6:48).

Figure 2d. Upper part of animated rocket releases a watermelon in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (9:07).

Figure 2e. Watermelon chases men up the stairs in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (9:23).

coda music continues, the chase scene is juxtaposed with fleeting images of the faces and heads of different African American men. The silent closing scene shows the cameraman (probably Nelson) filming a sticker on a reflective surface (perhaps a car windshield) showing the date and place of the film's creation (California, 1965).

Reich's treatment of the minstrel songs and canon is not unlike that of his tape pieces *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, with a clear material/process divide occurring between the minstrel songs (especially Schoolcraft's song) and the canon. The canon's "process" is somewhat less systematic than those found in the tape pieces but still follows a straightforward logic.[40] At approximately 3:29 in the film, the canon subject setting the lyrics "watermelon, watermelon" appears supported by a "dirty" dominant chord in the accompaniment part. Specifically, the harmony is a V7 chord with alternating fifth and root in the bass in D major but also includes the pitch D4, which clashes pungently with the C-sharp4 just below it (in jazz-harmonic terms, this chord would be a sus4 with an added 3rd; see Example 5a). The canon subject mostly outlines a tonic sonority (D3-A2-C-sharp3-D3), thus clashing slightly with the piano accompaniment but reinforcing the dirty dominant's mild inclusion of tonic harmony owing to the presence of D4 or scale-degree 1. The looping canon

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[40] Here, I am following Keith Potter's method of distinguishing between the "material" and the "process" in Reich's phase compositions (see Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, especially 169 and 177–88. Potter derives this method from Reich's statement on material and process in his well-known essay-cum-manifesto "Music as a Gradual Process" (1968): "Material may suggest what sort of process it should be run through (content suggests form), and processes may suggest what sort of material should be run through them (form suggests content)" (Reich, *Writings on Music*, 34).

Example 5. *Oh Dem Watermelons,* "canon" voices grouped in three-beat cycle. Transcription by author. Used by permission of Steve Reich.

Example 6. *Oh Dem Watermelons,* "canon" voices grouped in four-beat cycle. Transcription by author. Used by permission of Steve Reich.

is set within a triple-metrical framework that I have notated in 3/2.[41] At 3:54, Reich (playing the piano) alters the texture from the "oom-pah" or two-step dance accompaniment to a pulsating texture in which the right-hand part (pitches A3-C-sharp4-D4-G4) is repeated continuously. The left-hand part alternates between E3 and A2, each of which are struck twice in succession but syncopated against the pulse of the meter (Example 5b). This effect, which adds an undulating rhythmic quality to the pulses, recalls some of the offbeat syncopations in Ewe drum textures (such as the *kagan* parts in particular drumming genres such as *Gahu* and *Agbadza*).[42]

At 4:28, the second voice of the canon enters, with the same lyrics but a third higher and adjusted to continue reinforcing the tonic harmony (F-sharp3-D3-E3-F-sharp3), which now clashes more strongly with the (mostly) dominant-harmony accompaniment (Example 5c). Most importantly, the voice enters on a different beat of the looping canon, on beat 3 of the 3/2, providing a complementary rhythm to the first entry of the subject and filling in all of the empty spaces in the vocal part—and thus in accordance with standard principles of idiomatic canon writing. At 4:57, the third voice enters a third higher on beat 2 of the 3/2, further reinforcing the tonic harmony (A3-F-sharp3-G3-A3)—indeed, one can hear a "resultant pattern" out of the texture in which the word "watermelon" is transposed from A3 to F-sharp3 to D3, outlining a tonic triad (Example 5d). At this point, the musical texture exists wholly within the set metrical structure but articulates different beats such that no particular point is accented (perhaps excepting beats 1, 2, and 3 of the perceived 3/2 meter). The entry of the fourth voice at 5:35 breaks through this logic with a four-beat unit that creates a hemiola with the existing triple-based unit (Example 6a). Singing a new subject, a "Twinkle, Twinkle"–like descending tetrachord (A3-G3-F-sharp3-E3) to the words of "oh, dat watermelon," the troupers convey a juvenile, gleeful joy—possibly satirizing the stereotype of African American watermelon-desire. At 6:18, the fifth voice enters one beat later in the 3/2 meter and a fifth higher

[41] It is worth noting that although the music sounds as if it were in 3/2, I believe that Reich's exposure to African musical transcriptions (as in A. M. Jones's *Studies in African Music*) may have predisposed him to working with groups of twelve pulses, and even possibly imagining it in 12/8. The transcriptions here reflect my perception of the music.

[42] See Reich, *Writings on Music,* 60, 62.

TABLE 1. Sections/Timings in the *Oh Dem Watermelon* Canon

Section	Approximate Time
"Alright everybody. . ."	2:26
"Massa's in de Cold Ground"	2:31
"Oh! Dat Watermelon"	3:02
Varied chorus of song	3:17
Canon:	
Introduction	3:29
Pulses	3:54
2nd voice enters	4:29
3rd voice enters	4:57
4th voice enters	5:35
5th voice enters	6:19
4th and 5th voices exit	7:41
3rd voice exits	8:18
2nd voice exits	8:54
1st voice exits/canon ends	9:18
"Oh! Dat Watermelon" reprise	9:18–10:36

with the second tetrachordal subject (E4-D4-C-sharp4-B3), providing the point of maximum textural density within the canon (Example 6b). Accordingly, the effect of this oscillating, pulsating music reaches its peak intensity here, owing to the music's complex texture and the way in which the tetrachordal voices appear to be supported harmonically at times by the (mostly) dominant-harmony piano part (especially G3/E4 and E3/C-sharp4) and at times by the tonic harmony of the lower three voices (especially F-sharp3/D4). The music becomes a "shimmer of rhythms," a thorough fusion of tonic and dominant harmonies, an ambient sea of soothing, mostly comic feeling, in a way analogous to many of Reich's later works.[43] After sustaining this texture for more than a minute, the voices exit individually by sustaining the final pitches of their canonic subjects for upwards of an entire "measure" before dropping out (see Table 1).[44] With the exit of the final voice, the music rushes headlong into the big finale, the reprise of the Schoolcraft tune at 9:18.

During the transition from the Schoolcraft song into the canon the music creates the illusion of stopped time. In seizing upon and repeating a suspended-dominant harmony with the same oom-pah texture of "Oh! Dat Watermelon," the music sounds like a record stuck in a groove.[45] The canon's material is prepared by the varied repetition of the chorus of Schoolcraft's song that reduces the vocal part to a single pitch, D3. Although the melodic register is maximally compressed at this point, the music still "swings" rhythmically due to its syncopated treatment—giving

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[43] Peter Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall: A Chronicle* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 43.

[44] The "arch-form" structure that results in the canon would be favored by Reich in many of his later works as a way of arranging the tempo relations between movements, including the *Sextet* (1985) and *City Life* (1995).

[45] Early listeners to *Come Out* on the radio had the same impression. As Reich notes, "When it was played . . . people would call up and say, 'Your transmitter is broken. Please get the damn thing off.' Or, 'Your record is stuck in the groove, move the needle.'" Steve Reich, interview with Ev Grimes, 15–16, December 1987, New York, N.Y., number 186 a-i OH V, tape and transcript, Oral History of American Music, Yale University, tape 186-b.

Figure 3. Looped football player in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (3:34).

it a distinctly African American sensibility (see Example 4 above). However, the pitch reduction facilitates a smooth transition into the canon's introduction, which has a completely different effect from the preceding music (see Example 5a). Here the rhythm becomes strict and square, as it were, and the minstrels sing with a robotic tone, making the music appear "frozen" in time. Accompanying this change is the now static repetition of the "dirty dominant" sonority, which appears right before the final perfect authentic cadence of the Schoolcraft song's chorus. Likewise, the hypermeter of the canon's music has augmented: The 2/4 measures grouped in twos in the Schoolcraft song are now grouped in the equivalent of three measures; furthermore, with each original 2/4 unit now constituting a single "beat," we also experience the effect of a half-time slowdown in the music's basic pulse. Even more importantly, the length of the loop itself (only three beats or twelve "pulses" long) makes the subsequent music less a "canon" and more like a kind of Africanist compositional loop (not unlike a tape loop) in which the complex interrelation of parts repeats endlessly; and in combination with the singers' robotic tone, Reich's description of his tape pieces as being made up of "little mechanized Africans" perhaps takes on a luridly literal character.[46] It is worth noting that the stasis and sense of being stuck at this point are reinforced by the film, as the image shows a football player in motion being looped back and forth (Fig. 3). The entire effect makes it seem as if the music has

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[46] See the interview with Reich in Edward Strickland, *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 40. For a critique of this statement, see Martin Scherzinger, "Curious Intersections, Uncommon Magic: Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain*," *Current Musicology* 79–80 (2005): 207–44, especially 236.

entered an alternate dimension "outside" of time. The entry into this alternate dimension is reinforced when Reich alters the piano texture to pulsing chords— at which point the literal trace of the minstrel song's accompaniment texture has vanished.

These observations about the music might profitably be resituated within the broad contours of the film. Given that the film's "soundtrack" was performed live, and that a certain neo-Brechtian aesthetic of *Entfremdung* governed the whole theatrical production, we might realize that there was a degree of autonomy, as well as unintentional asynchrony, between music and film—as Ron Davis himself put it, "the [cinematic] devices were self evident or made evident. No tricks . . . only knife to the mind."[47] (Synchronization problems are most evident during the bouncing-ball section, in which the ball lags behind the sung words by a second or two.) Thus, marking the moment-to-moment interactions of the multimedia here might be less helpful than observing broader tendencies. Specifically, we might ask if the basic structure of the music—minstrel songs/canon/minstrel song reprise—inflects how we perceive the film and vice versa.[48] If we generalize the film's shifts in content, we can see that, following the silent long take of the watermelon (0:51–2:26), the material accompanying the initial presentation of the minstrel songs (the "bouncing watermelon" encouraging a sing-along, the football, cheerleader, crowd, and stadium shots) bespeaks a certain faux-naïveté, perhaps ironically linking the minstrel songs to wholesome (and largely white) imagery of Cold War America (2:26–3:36). With the appearance of the canon music, however, the sport scene gives way to mock-thuggery (the gang of actors chasing the watermelon down the incline) and eventually to the spectacles of watermelon (mis)treatment and violence. Here, the mechanical groove of the canon seems to reinforce the spectator's voyeuristic interest in what will happen next to some watermelon—indeed, one might think of them collectively as *the* watermelon, a cartoonish figure with multiple lives. The canon music thus serves as the motor of the viewer's libidinal investment in the long sequence of actions on screen (3:37–9:12), heightening what Laura Mulvey famously referred to as the gaze's "visual pleasure."[49] In tandem with the spontaneous reassembly of the watermelon and its subsequent pursuit of the actors (followed by a series of stampede-like shots of running white individuals), the end of the canon and return of the minstrel song convey a powerful sense of closure (9:12–10:35)—perhaps more so than any subsequent piece of Reich's. Indeed, the film's closure effect is largely

[47] Ron Davis, e-mail interview with the author, 25 June 2008. Davis's purpose in keeping the soundtrack live was to create a sense of continuity between staged and filmed material, thereby preventing the film from overwhelming the live performers, and to break up the seamless multimedia construction of the filmic medium itself. Davis noted (e-mail interview with the author, 19 January 2009) that the intention was for the live performance to be correctly synced and that there was some problem with the film.

[48] Here I draw on Claudia Gorbman's pithy statement as to how to understand music's relationship to simultaneously presented text and image: "If we must summarize music-image and music-narrative relationships in two words or less, *mutual implication* is more accurate." Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 15.

[49] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 46–56.

Example 7. *Oh Dem Watermelons*, ending: "Oh! Dat Watermelon" (reprise). Transcription by author. Used by permission of Steve Reich.

produced by the music, which resolves the perfect authentic cadence prolonged by the canon with the return of the Schoolcraft song chorus (Example 7). Its embellished repetition—sung spiritedly at full volume—provides an ironically triumphant and even manic conclusion to the events of the film, which, at one level, is a simple parable of the tables being turned or, in Malcolm X's infamous words about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the chickens coming home to roost.

Minstrel Resonances and Reich's Aesthetic Origins

Although the music discussed above may seem somewhat unusual when compared to Reich's more familiar works, aspects of the analytic description should resonate with those relatively familiar with the composer's music. Indeed, representing his first stylistically characteristic composition for live performers, the music for *Oh Dem Watermelons* is marked by a particular set of musical preoccupations that were worked out over the course of a decade in Reich's first "mature" works and even beyond. The presence of extended or suspended-dominant and quartal harmonies (particularly in *Four Organs*) and the related abstraction of cadential progressions (arguably in *Piano Phase* and *Four Organs*); the African-influenced twelve-beat patterns involving hocketing, layered entry, multiple, noncoinciding downbeats (the A. M. Jones–derived way of understanding African music that was so influential on Reich) and shifting downbeats (as in works such as *Drumming*[50] and *Music for Pieces of Wood*); the pulsing chords of *Music for 18 Musicians* and other works; and the different phase relationships inherent in canons all point to a similarity with Reich's other work that argues for the piece's inclusion in the Reich canon. As such, *Oh Dem Watermelons* provides concrete evidence for Reich's often-made statement that his aesthetic trajectory first crystallized after he became involved in the premiere performance of Terry Riley's *In C* in 1964. Moreover, as Keith Potter notes, Reich performed "'hand-over-hand piano variations' on its material with Arthur Murphy, and sometimes [Jon] Gibson, in several of his early New York concerts [in the late 1960s]—and even much later on social occasions, usually under the title *Improvisations on a Watermelon*, offering 'a simple shift of accent in a repeating figure, and a gradual expansion of a two-note figure into a five-note one.'"[51] Although the music in this account seems somewhat different from that for Nelson's film—the main melodic motives of which are four notes (set to "watermelon") and six notes ("oh dem watermelons") in length—Reich's initial attachment to, and his gradual distancing from, the composition (first publicly, then even privately) seem evident enough in Potter's historical narration.

Why would Reich want to disassociate himself from his composition, given that it cannot be straightforwardly classified as "juvenilia" (as might be the case, for example, with the collage-based tape music for *Plastic Haircut*)? An obvious answer is that Reich wanted to avoid future association with this work's sensitive thematic material and, in light of Reich's subsequent rightward political drift, its connections

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[50] For an analysis of *Drumming*'s shifting downbeats, see Sumanth Gopinath, "'A Composer Looks East': Steve Reich and Discourse on Non-Western Music," *Glendora Review* 3/3–4 (2004): 134–45, especially 139–40.

[51] Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 170. Gibson himself described the piece, "'Watermelon' (11/66)," as being "for one piano (six hands!). I remember playing the bottom part which consisted of a basic boom chop ostinato pattern while the other two improvised on a melody in the upper registers. I remember the melody only as a short staccato affair of six or so notes. Tempo was medium and in one key" (e-mail interview with the author, 6 September 2009). Judging from both comments, it seems likely that the six hands were used to essentially reproduce aspects of the musical texture from *Oh Dem Watermelons*, with Potter's "repeating figure" being the lower "watermelon" line and his expanding figure being the "oh dem watermelons" line.

to the radical politics of the San Francisco Mime Troupe.[52] *Oh Dem Watermelons*, like the *Minstrel Show* for which it was first created, draws two elements into a potent brew—historical blackface minstrelsy (with its obvious racist stereotypes) and confrontational subject matter (typically, but not exclusively, associated with U.S. race politics and racism in the 1960s)—and audaciously combines them in a blatant form of "cognitive mapping," whereby present-day racism is figured by past racist aesthetic practices.[53] In terms of the project's relation to historical minstrelsy, the film and its music, like the *Minstrel Show* generally, draw on a rather synthetic palette of references that range from the form's earliest days to the contemporaneous moment of the film and music's composition. For example, the two minstrel songs Reich uses come from very different eras in the history of minstrelsy. Whereas Foster's is an antebellum song, associated with the earlier, relatively less demeaning period of minstrelsy (and is even quoted by composers such as Charles Ives and John Alden Carpenter), the post–Civil War minstrel songs of Schoolcraft and others intensified their use of classic stereotypical clichés of black life (like the putatively unique, almost genetic black love of watermelons). That said, the particular narrative of the song sequence reveals that the subject (a slave) in the first song is much more ideologically aligned with the project of slavery—feeling sad that his master is dead and buried—whereas the second song is that of a slave hoping (and actively making efforts to ensure) that his mistress will die so that he might be freed:

> Foster: Down in de cornfield, hear dat mournful sound,
> All de darkies am a weepin', massa's in de cold, cold ground.
> Massa make de darkies love him, 'cause he was so kind.
> Now dey sadly weep above him, mourning 'cause he leave dem behind.
>
> Schoolcraft: Den oh, dat watermelon, lamb ob goodness you must die!
> I'm gwine to join de contraband children, gwine to git a home by and by.[54]

In addition to the text of the two explicitly quoted minstrel songs, the film also arguably parodies the sing-along segments of Columbia Records recording artist and

[52] In April 2007, a 70th-birthday festival in Reich's honor in Atlanta included a screening of new prints of *Plastic Haircut*, *Oh Dem Watermelons*, and Gunvor Nelson's *My Name Is Oona*. Reich attempted to prevent the screening of these films, according to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* 12 April 2007. See Pierre Ruhe, "4/12: Steve Reich's Sonic Balm," http://www.statesman.com/blogs/content/shared-blogs/accessatlanta/reviews/entries/2007/04/12/412_steve_reich.html. Such actions may have something to do with Reich's frequent efforts to police the boundaries of his official oeuvre, with his more general distancing from 1960s politics in his work, and possibly with fears of being labeled "racist" as a result of the composition. For more information on this subject, see Gopinath, "Contraband Children," especially 19–45.

[53] See Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347–57.

[54] The full lyrics to Foster's song are widely available. Those to Schoolcraft's song can be found in Stephen Collins Foster, *Minstrel Songs, Old and New, a Collection of World-Wide, Famous Minstrel and Plantation Songs, Including the Most Popular of the Celebrated Foster Melodies: Arranged with Piano-Forte Accompaniment* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1882), 160–61. A transcription of the lyrics is available at Benjamin Robert Taub's "Public Domain Music" Web site, http://www.pdmusic.org/1800s/74odw.txt. Note that the edition is usually listed in library catalogs (including WorldCat) with Foster as author, even though a number of the songs in the anthology are not his. (Indeed, the members of the production assumed that both of the minstrel songs were by Foster.)

A&R chief Mitch Miller's television show, *Sing Along with Mitch*, a popular, family-oriented show in the 1960s that was described as a "great minstrel show, complete right down to the tambourine"[55] and that routinely featured sanitized versions of classic minstrel songs, in line with the corniest elements of the folk revival (like the New Christy Minstrels).[56] Further, the singers perform "Oh! Dat Watermelon" differently from the way it is notated in its nineteenth-century score, replacing the chorus's parlor-song piano texture with a dynamic two-step accompaniment and adding syncopated figures more typical of the cakewalk and ragtime rhythms first popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (compare Examples 3 and 4); the effect is similar to that of an up-tempo gospel song. The singers also ham up their attempts at minstrel dialect, that strange tongue that the African American minstrel comedian Bert Williams described as "a foreign dialect [as much] as that of the Italian."[57] In addition to the pronunciation of the text using all of the "de, dat, den" and other (allegedly) Africanized variants on the /th/ consonant, the troupers even added those sounds (or imagined that they did) in places they may not have belonged. As Peter Coyote notes:

> The soundtrack . . . was performed live by the company. Three tiers of minstrels seated stage right of the screen sang the words "Wa-DUH-Me-LON, Wa-DUH-Me-LON," in a four-note round, each tier beginning its "Wa" on the "DUH" of the tier in front of it. The effect was hypnotic, deconstructing the word *watermelon* into a shimmer of rhythms.[58]

Finally, there seems to be a reference to Foster's "Old Folks at Home" in the credit sequence's hummed version of "Massa's in De Cold Ground"—a scotch snap reminiscent of the ascending melodic minor third ($\hat{6} - \hat{8}$, harmonized by IV) that sets "River" at the opening of "Old Folks" ("Way down upon the Swanee River")—though it may be unintentional (see Example 1, m. 7). The cumulative effect saturates Reich's score with sonic references to the historical legacy of black-face minstrelsy, encompassing its explicit and repressed variants, particularly as understood by radical artists in the mid-1960s.

The Neo-Avant Garde and Two Moments in *Oh Dem Watermelons*

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, Reich's musical offering to *A Minstrel Show* was, in part, an unsparing send-up of minstrel show stereotypes both past and present, one whose willingness to tackle thematic controversy is seemingly unparalleled in Reich's entire career as a composer. Yet Reich's apparent disdain for his work in *Oh Dem Watermelons* might be somewhat misleading, in that its putative singularity in the composer's oeuvre and its political incorrectness could, from a certain perspective, justify the composer's attempts to excise the work from his

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[55] This citation is from Miller himself on a particular episode (from 1963?) of *Sing Along with Mitch*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dY9gtYeHhk.

[56] The New Christy Minstrels, in fact, modeled themselves on Mitch Miller & The Gang, Miller's own folk-revival choral ensemble. The New Christy Minstrels were also satirized in the film *A Mighty Wind* (2003).

[57] Cited in Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 43.

[58] Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall*, 43.

compositional history. Thus, to better understand these attempts at historical era-
sure we might first consider the ways that the subject matter of *Oh Dem Watermelons*
is consonant with that of other works by Reich. Indeed, *Oh Dem Watermelons* seems
neither terribly uncharacteristic in its creative approach nor particularly offensive,
at least when viewed and heard critically and sympathetically: Multimedia explo-
ration of multifaceted and politically charged subjects is characteristic of Reich's
more recent work as well, particularly his video operas with Beryl Korot, *The Cave*
(1990–93, on Israeli-Palestinian relations) and *Three Tales* (2002, on the dangers of
technology). Although forty years later Reich's political positions may have changed,
he does seem to have understood himself consistently as being in solidarity with
African American political causes and has often referred to his tape piece *Come Out*
(1966) as a "civil rights piece" (although it is perhaps best understood as a Black
Power piece).[59] The same could be said of *Oh Dem Watermelons*: Superficially, the
watermelon as a "character" or symbol for an African American undergoes a kind of
transformation throughout the film, first being defamiliarized in the opening shot
(as is the word "watermelon" in Reich's canon), then violated in all sorts of ways, and
finally gaining some kind of "agency" by pursuing its former persecutors—offering
an allegory of black liberation, as it were. Moreover, in some cases, these acts of
violation are explicit references to the violence of the Jim Crow South: The bus
episode immediately calls to mind the history of segregation and the movements
opposing it, whereas the disemboweled watermelon makes reference to the sadistic
violence and bodily mutilation that often accompanied lynchings.

Perhaps, then, the most troublesome aspect of *Oh Dem Watermelons* for Reich is
not necessarily its subject matter, but the sheer irreverence with which it is handled.
Indeed, in Davis's words, "What the California [and] San Francisco mode, code,
and mood were about" seem to have something to do with this irreverence and a
certain aesthetic *lightness* that are quite at odds with the seriousness of the subject
matter in *A Minstrel Show* and *Oh Dem Watermelons*. Other, related attempts to
describe the San Francisco artistic scene of the early to mid-1960s have emphasized
an "openness" absent of "polemical scorn" (including openness to popular music)
and a "less intellectually 'Old World'" and hence "less classist" attitude than the
European avant-gardes.[60] Certainly, these aspects of the San Francisco sensibility
may have been articulated with a kind of West Coast (racial) utopianism quite
specific to the San Francisco artistic formation of which Davis speaks—which in-
cludes the Mime Troupe and other radical theater groups, the filmmakers connected
to the Canyon Cinema, the "funk" tendency in West Coast painting and sculpture,
the composers circulating through the San Francisco Tape Music Center, the folk
revivalist and nascent psychedelic rock scene (including Phil Lesh and Jerry Garcia,
eventually of the Grateful Dead, and Janis Joplin, among many others), and the
more established Beat poets (especially Allen Ginsburg, Neal Cassady, and Gary

[59] Strickland, *American Composers*, 40. On the Black Power/black nationalist aspects of *Come Out*
and the related Harlem Six case, see Gopinath, "Contraband Children," 203–33, 270–72, 276–83.

[60] John Rockwell, "Foreword" (ix), and Lee Breuer, "When Performance Art Was Performance
Poetry" (16) in David Bernstein, ed., *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and
the Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Snyder) who presided over some of the new developments as elder statesmen of sorts. On the other hand, however, one might also discern a degree of irreverence in the neo-avant-garde generally, particularly the U.S.-based artistic formations that recycled, reimagined, and self-reflexively critiqued the prewar avant-garde's subsumption into art institutions—perhaps in response to the locked-down absurdity of American Cold War consumerism.[61] If, as Davis notes, the aesthetic formation in which he was involved was "annoying, surprising, and breaking codes," we may not be surprised if a certain degree of unprofessionalism (indeed, antiprofessionalism) was central to its ethos.[62] One example might include the technical shortcomings of Robert Nelson's early work and cinematic editing, of which Reich was often quite critical and which led Nelson to perpetually re-edit his celebrated (and messy) works from the 1960s.[63] Another indicator of such irreverence might be the degree to which U.S. audiences began to expect humorous and sensationalistic amusement from avant-garde performances.[64]

In terms of the music, the most obvious marker of this particular neo-avant-garde formation is the flip treatment of minstrel songs—indeed, aspects of minstrelsy were appropriated by certain tendencies within the U.S.-based neo-avant-garde and counterculture during the 1960s and 1970s. Two rather different musical moments in *Oh Dem Watermelons* offer analogies to the avant-gardist techniques appropriated by the neo-avant-garde: the transition to the canon and the canon more generally, particularly at its peak of intensity. The first moment might be thought of as "surreal," the second "sublime." "Surreal" was a term frequently used by contemporaneous critics to describe Nelson's film.[65] Indeed, its elements of construction and image juxtaposition are accompanied by a focus on the bodily and physical images reminiscent of surrealism (the disemboweling moment as reminiscent of the slicing of eyeballs in the Dalí-Buñuel film *Un Chien Andalou*), as well as the body/performance art of Fluxus and other groups in the 1960s. The film's preoccupation with images of African society—in both rural/traditional and postcolonial contexts—and especially collage-based treatments of these (as in Fig. 2c) places it in dialogue with the combination of anthropological fascination

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[61] For a complex treatment of this argument about the relationship between the prewar avant-gardes and the postwar neo-avant-gardes, see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), especially 1–32.

[62] Davis, e-mail interview with the author, 1 August 2008.

[63] See, for example, Robert Nelson's discussion of Steve Reich's dislike of *Thick Pucker* (1965), the last film on which he worked with Nelson; the discussion ends with the rather modest comment that "all of my films have different things that are wrong with them and all of them have at least something that I like about them." In "Robert Nelson on Robert Nelson," *Film Culture* 48–49 (Winter/Spring 1970): 25. On Nelson's re-editing, the extent of which apparently has been exaggerated, see George Clark, "The Return of Robert Nelson," *Vertigo* 3/3 (Autumn/Winter 2006): 51.

[64] Ramón Sender's illuminating thoughts on the audience's expectation of "some sort of scandalous behavior" are found in "The San Francisco Tape Music Center—A Report, 1964," in Bernstein, *The San Francisco Tape Music Center*, 43.

[65] See, for example, John Seelye, "Watermelon," *Film Culture* 48–49 (Winter 1965–66): 54; and Nigel Andrews, "Oh Dem Watermelons," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 38 (no. 448), 129. The method of tracking down a reception-historical trope and investigating its potential for musical interpretation is inspired by Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), especially 18–20.

and interwar creative practices that James Clifford described as "ethnographic surrealism."[66] Indeed, the cutouts and animated images that populate the film draw on another kind of postwar American surrealist and experimental animated cinema, one master of which was filmmaker Harry Smith—also famous for putting together the folk music anthology that would have a huge impact on the folk revival. More capaciously, one can imagine surrealism as having a powerful effect on the aesthetics of the counterculture (itself influenced by the neo-avant-garde): Psychedelic juxtapositions of fantastic imagery arguably owe as much to the precedent of surrealism as they do to mimetic and automatic responses to hallucinogenic experiences.

It is one thing to suggest that Nelson's film may be in dialogue with both aspects of prewar surrealism and postwar U.S. surrealism in its various guises; it is quite another to make claims for the surreal character of the music. For one, the relationship between music and surrealism has long been vexed, its troubles extending back to the origins of the surrealist movement itself—with many of the prominent surrealists (including Breton and De Chirico) finding the medium of music lacking with respect to their aesthetico-political aims and with the best known composers associated with surrealism (Satie, Antheil) being easily assimilated into Dada or futurism.[67] Additionally, surrealist multimedia projects (films, theater works, operas, ballets) have often involved music that was not necessarily all that "surreal" but made use of surrealist texts (such as Poulenc's operatic setting of Apollinaire's foundational play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*)—leading some commentators to lump together many forms of modernist composition under the rubric "surrealism."[68] Nonetheless, with these caveats in mind, we may point to some historians who have identified salient features of a surrealist musical aesthetics. Anne LeBaron, for example, cites the compositional practices of automatism (i.e., automatic, or stream-of-consciousness, composition) and collage and argues for the importance of postwar technologies—particularly audio recording.[69] Drawing on surrealist aesthetics more generally, we might note some of the key themes within the aesthetic discourses on surrealism, which emphasize the importance of combining the dream state with awakedness (which brings the unconscious into a direct relationship with consciousness in seeking to bring unconscious thought to light), the confusion of the identities and properties of objects and the unpremeditated juxtaposition of different realities, the notion of the "marvelous" (*merveilleux*) as a marker of the

[66] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23/4 (October 1981): 539–64.

[67] See Christopher Schiff's excellent essay "Banging on the Windowpane: Sound in Early Surrealism," in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 139–89.

[68] The worst culprit in this regard is Nicholas Slonimsky, who even equates serialism with surrealism. See Nicholas Slonimsky, "Music and Surrealism," *Artforum* (September 1966): 80–85.

[69] Anne LeBaron, "Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics," in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27–73, especially 35–37; François-Bernard Mâche, "Surréalisme et musique, remarques et gloses," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 264 (December 1974): 34–49; and Theodor Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 391–436, especially 396–97, 408–9.

fantastic (which Breton describes as being equivalent to the beautiful and yet contains traces of the sublime), and, qualifying LeBaron's emphasis on collage, the *continuous* nature of surrealist experience.[70]

Clearly, the transition between the minstrel song and the beginning of the canon is a collaged one, in the sense that the end of the one-note D-vamp variation of "Oh! Dat Watermelon" directly abuts the beginning of the canon, which acts as a new musical section of Reich's live soundtrack; here we have the direct juxtaposition of two highly contrasting musical styles, a gospel-like variation on a minstrel song and a mechanical, proto-Reichian pulse minimalism. However, the continuities between the two musical moments—which include the accompanimental (oompah) figuration, the pitch content of the material (the D3 monotone in the voices, the A3-D4 dyad in the right-hand part, the low A2 as remaining the lowest note in the texture), the quadratic hypermetrical interruption at the end of the vamp (which leads one, initially, to hear the canon music as continuing a cadence that, in fact, is completed only at the end of the canon), and the syntactical consistency of the lyrics themselves ("Oh, dat watermelon, dat *watermelon*")—lead to a smooth transition. Indeed, the arrival of the new material is not immediately apparent, and only in retrospect (albeit soon) does the listener realize that the canon material has overtaken the vamp. Moreover, the music of the canon gets stuck on the word "watermelon" and on a harmony literally "in between" the I and V[7] chords used earlier. The listener enters a warped, funhouse world by way of this transition, one that arguably mimics a certain thought process in which normative patterns of cognition are disrupted, and, through a rut of repetitive, quasi-African looping, enters a kind of trance state, and thereby an entirely different cognitive order. This shift in consciousness implied by the transition is, therefore, not unlike the continuous movement between waking and dream states in surrealist aesthetics.

A rather different moment in Reich's music can be identified at the point of greatest intensity during the canon itself, when all of the voices have entered (6:15–7:37). Perhaps surprisingly, a connection to the sublime as a figure for the "limits of reason and expression" or, more specifically, "a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language"[71] comes to mind here (see Example 8a and 8b, showing a schematic reduction of the canon and a simplification thereof). Specifically, the fusion of tonic- and dominant-oriented pitch classes in the passage merges in such a way that it produces an effect of comparable magnitude to that of a "salvation $^6_4$" or, more accurately, a prolonged, major-mode, cadential dominant arrival characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concert music (particularly in developmental retransitions or codas)—and given the use of such a harmony to signify a powerful form of redemptive closure, the perception of the "sublime,"

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[70] I take much of this discussion from Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 301–24, and André Breton's "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), reprinted in translation in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 1–47, especially 11 (on dreams and their phenomenological continuity), 14 (on the marvelous and beautiful), 16 (the marvelous as being compared to romantic ruins, often a marker of the sublime), 36–37 (on the issue of the juxtaposition of two realities).

[71] Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2–3.

Example 8. *Oh Dem Watermelons*, reduction of canon, comparison to dominant-prolongation/cadential figure.

with its quasi-theological associations, is perhaps warranted.[72] In this case, the sublimity of the experience is mitigated, or at least problematized, by not functioning according to the convention of dominant arrivals or prolongations with which it seems to be in dialogue: Rather than making a grandiose appearance and signaling (impending) victory in a protracted narrative struggle, here the sublime creeps up on the listener unexpectedly, even surreptitiously.

Invoking the discourse of the sublime is fraught, because of its long history as a central category of aesthetics and because many have written about it at length, including writers on music.[73] The locus of interest for our purposes is the post–World War II revival of the term, which includes its appropriation by the U.S.-based neo-avant-garde formation of Abstract Expressionism and especially Jean-François Lyotard's later articulation of a "postmodern sublime."[74] Two points are relevant to the present discussion. First, the sublime was originally imagined as being produced through a horrific or otherwise perceptually overwhelming experience of nature and, later in the nineteenth century, was linked to the notion of the unconscious. With the advance of capitalist development and humanity's conquest of the globe (as well as its own mental faculties), however, one might argue that, in the late twentieth century, the postmodern sublime is increasingly an experience produced by the towering, nearly unfathomable aspects of human society itself—from its massive architecture and sprawling cityscapes to the communicative overabundance of information.[75] Second, the sublime is typically associated with a relatively

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[72] On the "salvation $^6_4$," see Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 15; and Michael Klein, "Chopin's Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative," *Music Theory Spectrum* 26/1 (Spring 2004): 45.

[73] See Peter le Huray and James Day, eds., *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), especially 4–6, 9, 69–74, 138–39, 223–29, and 287–92; and Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

[74] On the sublime in Abstract Expressionism, see Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially 1–59. Although he doesn't use the term, Lyotard is seen to have first described the "postmodern sublime" in "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), especially 79–82.

[75] This argument derives from Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), especially 37–38.

serious and earnest affective state. Some nineteenth-century authors attempted to understand the sublime in its more ironic and even unserious modalities in various ways, but perhaps they did not entirely resolve the contradiction between the notion of the sublime and playfulness, wit, and humor—between the exalted and the everyday or lowly.[76]

The difficulty of finding appropriate language to understand the "seriousness problem" in what we might describe as the *watermelon sublime* has much to do with the conflicting signifiers present within the music—just as one hears tropes of the musical sublime during the canon, one simultaneously hears repeated references to a watermelon in the sung text that retain the traces of racialized satire from which they emerged. That said, it is important to pay attention to the processual nature of the sublime effect: As the canon builds up its layers, its sublimity is only apparent as the crowning effect of the addition of the final layer (the fifth voice). It is as if, while listening to a rather elaborate musical joke, a realization of great profundity arises unexpectedly, and thereby associatively transforms the meaning of the word "watermelon" through its juxtaposition with a decontextualized musical convention of sublime affect. The semantic recasting of the word watermelon itself, which in racist humor refers metonymically to the derision and ridiculing of black Americans (although it, of course, also exists organically within black humor), thus provides a different way of dialectically overturning a stereotype and perhaps recalls the watermelon's transition from oppressed victim to radical avenger. Its racist associations temporarily softened, the now-defamiliarized word "watermelon" points in utopian fashion toward its liberated use—whether of anti-white or race-neutral, universal-humanist ilk.

Although the watermelon sublime treads carefully between a charged lighthearted-edness and unanticipated seriousness—indeed, connecting these affective states through something like a gradual process—the object of perception to which it refers is less ambiguous. Although the watermelon might superficially be linked, via its rural origins, to nature, and although the problem of the stereotype and its associations is squarely located within the unconscious, the object that functions as the sublime referent is the system or the social totality. Indeed, the film reinforces the societal/technological sublime-effect of the canon's buildup, the completion of which coincides (at 6:18) with the appearance of the construction vehicle—perhaps figuring the system itself—and the slow, inexorable descent of its crane-arm, eventually crushing the watermelon (as in Fig. 2b). The specificities of that system, however, can be perceived more clearly when heard through its racialized sonic and musical forms. In addition to the hypostasized cadential dominant discussed above, the buildup of parts within the canon includes a distinct division of labor between the "watermelon, watermelon" parts (which produce a hocketed groove three beats in length) and the "oh dat watermelon" parts (which cycle at four beats). The lower parts appear to fit Reich's previously mentioned description of the "little mechanized Africans" rather explicitly; the machinic nature of the singing, the rhythmic syncopations of the line vis-à-vis the 3/2 meter, and the reiterated pitch (whether

[76] See, for example, Max Keith Sutton, "'Inverse Sublimity' in Victorian Humor," *Victorian Studies* 10/2 (December 1966): 177–92.

on D3, F-sharp3, or A3) of the first "watermelon" lend the music both African and mechanical traits (with the conflation of the two having a long history within Afro-modernisms and exoticisms). In contrast, the upper parts, with their scalar (almost Schenkerian) descents, gleeful vocal delivery, and rhythmic squareness, seem much more "Western," and, thanks to their distinct temporality, seem relatively distant from the lower parts while at the same time commenting upon them. Racialized as relatively white, the upper parts thus function as relatively powerful (and partly coordinated, partly asynchronous) strata within the figured totality, while the lower parts, racialized as relatively black, function as subordinate (and internally divided, having their own division of musical labor) within that same totality. Implicitly evoking the racialized division of labor and capitalists' dance of competition and collusion within the Americas and the world system—and hence recalling plantation slavery, debt-peonage sharecropping, and the racialized fractions of labor in the urban and suburban working class—Reich's music offers us an evanescent auditory image of the regimes of accumulation that lurk behind—indeed, produce and reproduce—the watermelon stereotype.

Psychic Liberation and Reich's Aesthetic of the Unconscious

My point in this article, however, is not primarily to relate aspects of Reich's music to earlier aesthetic ideologies or their contemporaneous appropriations and manifestations (though the fingerprints of the neo-avant-garde are certainly unmistakable here), but rather to take note of two moments within the music for *Oh Dem Watermelons* that appear to highlight different conditions of "consciousness" within the work. The relationships between different sections in the music seem to relate to one another as different modalities of thought or states of being. In particular, the surreal entry into the canon, which then gives way to a sublime vision emerging from the quoted and altered song material prior to the canon, seems to imply a transition between what might be understood as *conscious* and what might be understood as *unconscious*—with the "sublime" material akin to either something of a dream state or an altered, heightened state of being that could be heuristically, if somewhat reductively (i.e., fusing the sublime object as nature/unconscious/totality), described as being in contact with the otherwise inaccessible unconscious.

Viewing the relationship between the given material (minstrel songs and gospel-variant) as conscious and the resulting material (canon) as unconscious, transformed through a musical process, allows us to connect *Oh Dem Watermelons* with Reich's other "race" pieces from his formative 1965–66 period—the tape pieces *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966). Reich's work at this time can be described as operating within an *aesthetic of the unconscious*, in which given material subjected to a process yields a psychological excavation of that material, producing its "unconscious," so to speak, for the listener.[77] The presence of the unconscious is overdetermined in Reich's work, given his descriptions of his pieces as acting like an "oral [or aural] Rorschach test" and given the way in which his

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[77] Much of the argument in this section derives from Gopinath, "Contraband Children," 45–74.

tape pieces use preexisting recorded sound and therefore draw on an "auditory unconscious" tied to a technical apparatus. Extrapolating from these examples, the unconscious in question is then twofold, involving both the *unconscious of the material*—aspects of which are made manifest by the process—and the *unconscious of the listener*.[78] The movement from conscious to unconscious (or rather, unconscious-made-conscious) can be described as *desublimation.* The term is associated with the work of the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse and refers to the release of repressed and sublimated drives—thereby being a form of regression; desublimation could take place in both repressive (by which he meant recuperable and therefore capable of perpetuating domination) and nonrepressive ways.[79] For Marcuse, desublimation was inseparable from the notion of "liberation," a ubiquitous term of the 1960s, referring to various political and social liberation movements—sexual liberation, racial and ethnic liberation, women's liberation, gay liberation, all arguably emerging from the foundational national liberation movements and anticolonial struggles and cresting with the ambitious projects of liberation from capitalism itself, as exemplified in the long moment of 1968—as well as forms of (often non-Western) spiritual liberation not necessarily linked with the previously mentioned movements, with personal liberation of one's own psyche mediating the various forms of collective liberation of both counterculture and New Left.[80]

Reich's works of this period produce allegories of liberation, by illustrating liberation as a process rather than as a given—as might be the case with many other aesthetics bound up with the unconscious, from Abstract Expressionism's painting of the unconscious itself to the ostensibly liberated aesthetic practices of performance art, indeterminate music, "free jazz," or psychedelic rock.[81] Whether emerging as a response to a perceived lack of aesthetic discipline in other unconscious-oriented aesthetics or as an aestheticization of personal (and even spiritual or political)

[78] See Gopinath, "The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich's *Come Out*," in *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 134–35. For the quote from Reich, see Rob Baker, "The Art of Fine Tuning: Conversations with Steve Reich, Lincoln Kirstein, and Peter Brook," *Parabola* 13/2 (1988): 52.

[79] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 71–79; and *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 197–221.

[80] For more on liberation, see Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 16–22; and Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), 419–20, 424–38. For an excellent history of U.S. politics and thought relevant to my argument, see Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), especially 146–67.

[81] On Abstract Expressionism and the unconscious, see Michael Leja, "Jackson Pollock and the Unconscious," in his *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 121–202. Also, Daniel Belgrad treats what he describes as the "culture of spontaneity" as emerging in response to bureaucratic corporate liberalism that was ascendant by the outset of World War II. See *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially 1–12 for his broader argument. For an important essay on the subject of postwar musical improvisation, see George Lewis, "Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1 (Spring 1996): 91–122.

discipline, the Reichian *process*—as per his much-discussed quasi-manifesto "Music as a Gradual Process"—introduces a new, impersonal element into the aesthetic environment whose impact is perceived, over time, as structuring the flow and meaning of the work.[82] Linked to an analogous aesthetic in the visual arts known as "process art," Reich's process music combines aspects of earlier, unconscious-oriented aesthetic practices with a kind of (Cagean) formalism and sets the two into a productive, arguably dialectical conflict with one another.[83] The unfolding of that musical process, mimetically capturing in aesthetic form what Marcuse describes in political terms as a "methodical desublimation," yields a series of dialectical sound images that can be read and interpreted individually.[84] The content of this process is, of course, dependent in part on the source material and its interaction with that process, on the one hand, and on the listener or interpreter's perception of the whole, on the other. In the context of Reich's race works, I have viewed the desublimation allegory as largely political, in light of their politically charged source material and suggestive if inchoate sonic results emerging from the specific processes employed. In other words, the Cagean, impersonal "it" of Reich's process in these works acts to figure the System, or the name for the larger social totality that characterized, in contemporaneous thought, the imperialist state-capital nexus.[85] Hence, the unconscious of these pieces can be best understood from the lens of Fredric Jameson's elusive but productive notion of the *political unconscious*, allowing us to read the aesthetic psychodynamics of these works as complex political allegories.[86]

Reich's aesthetic of the unconscious connects his work to both contemporaneous preoccupations with psychic liberation and with the aesthetic politics of the neo-avant-garde. The problem of psychic liberation, writ large, is multifaceted and cannot be discussed extensively here, but we should note that, in the context of the United States, it appears to find its roots in the dynamics of repression and affluence in Cold War America. According to Robert Cantwell, who identifies early stirrings

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[82] See Reich, *Writings on Music*, 34–36. Reich claims (vii–viii) that he never intended his essay to be read as a manifesto, though its epigrammatic construction belies this claim. I should also note that Reich's relative conservatism in comparison to other, more explicitly "liberationist" artwork of the moment may in part have something to do with his generational distance from the Baby Boomer generation, being slightly older than that cohort. Robert Fink (*Repeating Ourselves*, 68–69) interprets this distance as a sign of their disconnection from the social upheavals of the 1960s, instead linking their "anti-expressive" music to the corporate culture of postwar advertising.

[83] This reading of Reich's music thus is to be understood as being different from arguments by other scholars, such as Wim Mertens, who, following Adorno and Lyotard, argues that minimalism is nondialectical music. See Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, trans. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983), 87–92.

[84] Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 46.

[85] On the Cagean "it," compare Reich's essay, "focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward toward *it*" (*Writings*, 36) with Cage's comment that life, as affirmed by the play that constitutes the purpose of writing music, "is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of *its* way and lets *it* act of *its* own accord." John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966 [1961]), 12, emphasis mine.

[86] On Jameson's political unconscious, see *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

toward liberation in the apolitical aspects of the Folk Revival,

> The collectivizing, rationalizing, scientizing, and regimenting influences of that [postwar] environment amounted to the appropriation by the commercial, educational and other establishments of what nature had given them most to enjoy, their own youth. To be young and middle-class in the postwar environment was not only to have your sexuality reduced to an elaborate set of prohibitions, exclusions, obsessions, and petty neuroses, but *at the same time* to have your sexual identity commodified, coarsened, and puerilized. To be young and female in the early sixties meant, in effect, to transform yourself into a rubber doll with plastic hair, purely a factory product; to be young and male demanded a practiced hypocrisy that sanctified women and at the same time demanded sexual conquests whose purpose was to provide materials for the minutely detailed narratives, graphic boasts, and outrageous claims familiar in men's dormitories.[87]

Describing the experiences of middle-class white American baby boomers in the postwar era, Cantwell offers a vivid picture of what Marcuse meant by "repressive desublimation," but deals with the problem of racism as primarily one of a search for authenticity, usually found in African American and/or white rural cultural practices. However, as the Baby Boomer generation came of age during the 1960s, its members became increasingly aware of the problems of their own internalized racism, primarily as a result of the Civil Rights and then Black Power/Black Liberation movements and through powerful accounts of the psychological effects of racism, as in the work of Frantz Fanon. Later in the decade and at the beginning of the next, various political attempts at a racially oriented psychic liberation attracted attention, including the radical-adventurist political efforts of the White Panther Party and the infamous Weatherman faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), as well as more clearly reformist attempts to undertake white-on-white political and labor organizing in Appalachia and the southern United States. Among the best-known theoretical texts of the time addressing the problem of whites' internalized racism was psychotherapist Joel Kovel's *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (1970), which produced a number of categories for the historical (and, implicitly, self-) diagnosis of racism and drew explicitly upon Marcuse's work.[88]

The problem of racial-psychic liberation thus connects Reich's musical allegories to the critique and puncturing of racist stereotype in the Mime Troupe's *A Minstrel Show* and Nelson's *Oh Dem Watermelons*, with the production clearly seeming ahead of the curve when assessed with respect to its contemporaries. Indeed, in Davis's view psychic liberation was understood to be central not only for the audience but also for the actors. In exploring performers' background experiences with the ironies and complexities of racism, Davis sought to create a communal understanding of race and racism necessary to produce a coherent political perspective for the show. As he notes,

> In addition to our social analysis, we had to deal with the personal liberation of each actor; not only to incorporate some material we might find in each performer but also to make sure that the individuals would present the collective point of view. I asked each actor to

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[87] Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 334.

[88] Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984 [1970]), 294.

talk privately into a tape recorder about the time he first realized his black, white or ethnic identity. We learned a lot. Jason [Marc Alexander] and Willie [Hart] had torturous early experiences. Willie saw his father run across the path of a milk truck. The driver, furious that he almost hit the man, yelled out: "You fuckin' nigger. . . ." His father didn't say anything. Marc Alexander lived with his mother, who was a mammie to some white kids. He went to play with the black kids down the road and they threw him in a box and called him "whitey," while they kicked the box around. Don Pedro Colley, at twenty-one, walked into a dining room in some college in Oregon and didn't sit at the table with all the blacks, but with the whites. They pointed to the black table. White-Spanish-descent kid, Julio Martinez, said, "We were never prejudiced against Negroes. Of course, we were never taken for Negroes."

   All of us heard these important "coming-of-age moments." Those who had realized early their skin color or ethnic origins understood our show and created its whip-like intensity. Performers who had not experienced the existential racial twist until very late never stayed on for long.[89]

For Nelson, the problem of the unconscious was central to his work, in the frequent employment of themes of sexual frustration and masturbation, in the use of formal framing and dream sequences that figure the movement into and out of different states of consciousness, and in the ambiguity of political perspective and even subject matter.[90] On the last point, Nelson himself discussed the relationships between stereotype, racial repression, and imaginative projection in *Oh Dem Watermelons* as follows:

> I probably felt that *Oh Dem Watermelons* was an instance of stereotypes, but of stereotypes that were already passé, repressed. Racism is usually repressed. . . . My view was that stereotypes in themselves can't say anything: they obscure rather than reveal. To present them blatantly, in a context that made them confrontational, seemed to me a way of being bold and daring (which I didn't mind doing at that particular time) *and* a way of creating a lure for racist projections. I can understand people getting upset [by the film], but the film is about being on a razor line. Because you can't add all the images together into a conclusive point of view, the film becomes what you project into it.[91]

Given the centrality of a liberationist aesthetic to *A Minstrel Show* and *Oh Dem Watermelons*, how might we put together Reich's aesthetic allegories with a reading of the film and theatrical production more generally? One way of doing so might be to emphasize their congruence. Specifically, the problem of the conscious and unconscious that structures Reich's music could be said to play an analogous role in the film and the production. In the film, we might first take note that there are a number of framing mechanisms that structure it: (a) the credits (in the standalone version of the film), (b) the long take of the watermelon, (c) the regression to childhood with bouncing-ball sing-along, and (d) the Cold War-era football match (understood, paradoxically, as a further regression?). Then, after a watermelon falls and bursts, the gang-of-rowdies chase scene that ensues might seem to inaugurate the long moment of greatest desublimation, as it gives way to the rapidly shifting violent, surreal, and sexual treatments of the watermelon. With

[89] Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 53.
   [90] See Sitney, *Visionary Film*, especially 317, 320, and Hoberman, *To Tightrope Walkers Everywhere*, especially 6–7, 14, 18, 20–21, on the role of the unconscious, sexual frustration, castration, and dream association in Nelson's work.
   [91] Cited in the interview in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 263–64.

the reconstitution of the watermelon and reversal of the chase scene, as the canon ends, we have what might be viewed as a nonrepressive (re)sublimation, necessary for some form of organized radical action (in the Marcusian rubric). Moreover, with the film serving as a midpoint between the two acts of the *A Minstrel Show*, the process of desublimation and resublimation continues in a more humorous vein, with the post-film intermission involving dancing between the minstrels and white female audience members ironically presenting a putatively forbidden release of miscegenetic desire.[92] An apparent moment of desublimation, the irony of sexualized social dance already being one step removed from, for example, the watermelon sex scene in *Oh Dem Watermelons*, also thus yields a moment of resublimation. That is, the stage production both moves from (mediated) film to (unmediated) bodily interaction in the audience members' lived experience, but also from an ostensibly unrestrained act of bodily pleasure (desublimation) toward one of greater social propriety (resublimation) in the show's subject matter. Once the show begins again and audience members take their seats, a further step toward the establishment of normative social relations is taken, and the ending minstrel songs of "Jump Jim Crow" and "O, Dem Golden Slippers"—like the opening song "At a Georgia Camp Meeting"—provide further framing back to the world of minstrel entertainment (as an exaggerated form of normative racism), all of which is framed by the boundaries of the mock-fantasy space of the production itself.[93]

Formations and Legacies of "Radical Minstrelsy"

If Reich's music for *Oh Dem Watermelons* is, then, inextricable from the aesthetic goals of Nelson's film and the Mime Troupe's minstrel show, it is not unsurprising why he soon moved outside its aesthetico-political orbit: It was a prudent career move. In one fell swoop, Reich severed associations with the self-consciously offensive racism of the show's risqué material, the radical politics of the Troupe, and the unprofessionalism of the West Coast neo-avant-garde of that moment. Although an explicitly progressive race politics resurfaced one last time as he returned to New York and got involved tangentially in the Harlem Six trial—and producing *Come Out* as a result—never again would Reich be involved as organically with a politicized avant-garde artistic community; but then, given that the majority of Reich's early compositional techniques emerged with pieces such as *Oh Dem Watermelons* and *It's Gonna Rain*, which were composed during his tenure with the Mime Troupe, what did he take from the troupe, beyond the escape from academic proprieties that was "exactly what the doctor ordered"?[94]

    Perhaps one answer to that question has to do with the rich political and intellectual environment supplied by the Mime Troupe, members of the Canyon Cinema

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[92] I should note here that Davis claims a very pragmatic reason for the audience interaction in *A Minstrel Show*, including the dance intermission: to ensure that viewers would not leave and thereby "get away from the racist elements in the whole matter" (e-mail interview with the author, 17 August 2009).

[93] See Mason, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, 29–56, for more details.

[94] Steve Reich, interview with Ev Grimes, number 186 a-i OH V, tape and transcript, Oral History of American Music, Yale University, tape 186-a.

collective, and the San Francisco Tape Music Center that inspired the different modes of thought necessary for the aesthetic breakthroughs he made in 1965. Surely, more informal markers of that environment and Reich's participation in it are hard to come by, though they might include an extensive conversation between Davis, Landau, Reich, and future Muslim convert and Egyptian journalist Marc (now Abdallah) Schleifer, in which the four of them discussed, in an all-night conversation, the possibility and benefits of forming a church, given the troupe's studio in an old abandoned church and the tax-exempt status of religious groups.[95] Maybe another answer lies in the conceptual freedom afforded by the Mime Troupe's and Nelson's attempt to deal with such problems in a way that helped to generate new artistic forms. In terms of the general sensibility of the troupe, however—which was marked by a profound and politically acute irreverence—Reich would seem to have taken relatively little from the group, instead moving on to greater acclaim and success after being propelled artistically and intellectually by the momentum of its aesthetic and political energies.

In a sense, the singularity of Reich's composition is complemented by the singularity of Nelson's film and of the Mime Troupe's production as a whole. Certainly, *A Minstrel Show* was an unprecedented rethinking of the problematic history of U.S. blackface minstrelsy and racial stereotypes, a history that would be revisited in similar depth only in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) thirty-five years later. The production was in most ways a unique occurrence in both the troupe's history and in comparison to contemporaneous theatrical work done in the Bay Area, although the troupe did stage a version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1991–92 with some of the same intentions in mind.[96] The dialectic of satire and confrontation evident in their show and, to a lesser extent, in Nelson's film *Oh Dem Watermelons* appeared in other, perhaps less politically sophisticated forms of cultural production in San Francisco during the early to mid-1960s. For example, comedian Lenny Bruce, who had moved from New York to San Francisco in the 1950s, performed several skits during the early 1960s with titles such as "How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties," in which Bruce would drop increasingly vulgar and racist stereotypes into a conversation with a well-educated African American man (performed by Bruce's friend Eric Miller).[97] Also, the underground cartoonist R. Crumb produced numerous cartoons using racist caricatures of African Americans beginning in the mid-1960s, similarly touching a raw nerve with predominantly white readers.[98] In addition to these explicitly critical cultural expressions, we might also consider as related some of the strange racializations of the San Francisco folk-revival and psychedelic rock scenes—from Janis Joplin's faux-black blues-singer performances to Jimi Hendrix's confrontational reproduction of black "stud" stereotypes and

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[95] Ron Davis, e-mail interview with the author, 11 June 2008. Davis notes that Reich taped the conversation, but the recording probably hasn't survived.

[96] See Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions*, 90–93, 119–23.

[97] See Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce: His Original Unexpurgated Satirical Routines*, ed. John Cohen (London: Granada, 1973), 87–91.

[98] See D. K. Holm, *Robert Crumb* (Harpenden, Herts, UK: Pocket Essentials, 2003), 64–67; and Alan Moore, "Writer: Watchmen, From Hell, Swamp Thing," in *The Life and Times of R. Crumb: Comments from Contemporaries*, ed. Monte Beauchamp (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 71–82.

Grace Slick's 1968 blackface performance and Black Power salute with the Jefferson Airplane on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*.[99]

Moreover, these artists were intimately connected in various ways: Davis refers to Crumb's Zap comics in discussing his own work,[100] Crumb designed the cover to Joplin's album *Cheap Thrills* (1968) using racial caricature,[101] and the Mime Troupe's bail payments were funded by Bay Area psychedelic rock concert benefits organized by the troupe's manager and future rock music promoter Bill Graham— concerts that in turn served as important early vehicles for groups like the Jefferson Airplane. Noting the cumulative impact of these creative forms as well as the inter-relatedness of the participants involved, we might interpret these expressions and artists together as a San Francisco–based component of what Raymond Williams termed a "cultural formation," which is simultaneously an "artistic form" and a "social location."[102] This particular formation, which one might label "radical min-strelsy" or "the minstrel avant-garde," would have a particular historical location as well: the interstices between the "White Negro" jazz enthusiast culture of the Beats (of which Lenny Bruce was a part), the overlapping but distinctly younger eastern-religion and popular-music oriented counterculture (to which the psychedelic rock musicians were closest), and the political New Left (which saw its home at Berkeley in the "Free Speech Movement" and antiwar movement based on the University of California campus) spanning the entire period of the long 1960s to the end of the Vietnam War. Moreover, the fact that this work was produced in San Francisco affected the freedom with which predominantly white artists made use of racist caricature and minstrel forms. Unlike most Northeastern and Midwestern cities, San Francisco's racial dynamics were at the time relatively looser and more multira-cial rather than exhibiting the same degree of white/black tension that appeared in New York, Chicago, Boston, or Detroit—although things were certainly different in nearby Oakland, where in 1966 the Black Panther Party was formed.[103] As such, one might argue that these artists imagined their audiences as primarily white— those persons who had both the most to gain from the simultaneous existence and unawareness of these racial stereotypes.

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[99] On Grace Slick's performance, possibly directly inspired by the work of the Mime Troupe, see Patrick Burke's excellent essay, "Tear Down the Walls: Jefferson Airplane, Race, and Revolutionary Rhetoric in 1960s Rock," *Popular Music* 29/1 (2010): 61–79. A grittier approach located on the East Coast also seems to have drawn inspiration from Genet's *The Blacks*—specifically, LeRoi Jones's play *Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show* (1966) which directly mirrors the trial scene of Genet's play and, despite the minstrel-style reference to the "coon show," is much less flippant in tone.

[100] Davis uses the phrase "verbal Zap comics" (*The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 24) to describe an improvised skit by Danny McDermott in the Mime Troupe production *Event II*.

[101] In particular, Crumb uses a stereotypical caricature-image of a mammy to illustrate Joplin's cover of "Summertime," from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

[102] I draw this idea from Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), xx. For an attempt at mapping this formation, see Walter Medeiros, "Mapping San Francisco 1965–1967: Roots and Florescence of the San Francisco Counterculture," in *Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis and Counterculture in the 1960s*, ed. Christoph Grunenberg and Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 303–48.

[103] The Hunter's Point riot in September–October 1966, however, is an important and often forgotten example of racial tensions in San Francisco itself during the decade.

Perhaps yet another defining characteristic of this formation was its attempt to revive forms of racist lampooning such as blackface minstrelsy, racialized dialect (or "blackvoice"), and racist cartooning, at a point after minstrelsy in its mass-cultural forms began to come under harsh criticism as part of the Civil Rights Movement. This criticism, extending at least as far back as Fredrick Douglass's original criticisms of minstrelsy in his journal *North Star* and explored further in key texts by Ralph Ellison and LeRoi Jones during the late 1950s and early 1960s, was perhaps best realized in the broad-based social movement to remove from the air reruns of the popular but controversial (and therefore short-lived) television show *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951–53), succeeding in the mid-1960s.[104] Indeed, the decline in blackface minstrelsy's presence in the mass media was palpable by the early 1950s—as Krin Gabbard notes, "Blackface disappeared from the American screen in about 1952" and essentially "no films with blacked-up actors appeared again until . . . 1964."[105] Although in part the positive result of decades of struggle on the part of groups such as the NAACP, this disappearance appears to have been read by white radicals as a superficial, even dishonest masking of the realities of racism in the interests of liberal proprieties—and hence a form of repression that needed to be liberated in the consciousness of liberal white America.

What was the impact, then, of the "minstrel avant-garde" in the mid-60s? I would argue that it was dual. On the one hand, efforts like *A Minstrel Show* helped to bring a greater consciousness of racial problems to political theater and beyond, along with better-known works such as Genet's *The Blacks* and LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*. Specifically, the Mime Troupe's work attempted to fashion a politics of race through the use of satire and the defanging of stereotypes; the main targets of these (largely white) radicals were (largely white) liberals, and the issues of race under interrogation were mostly those of whiteness rather than blackness. Moreover, the broader impact of the minstrel avant-garde was to create greater awareness of the history of raciological imagery so central to the development of popular culture in the United States. Indeed, despite their largely white audiences, the various endeavors of the minstrel avant-garde were likely known to (and perhaps viewed askance by) black artists preoccupied with similar concerns during the Black Nationalist period (and who in part may have been reacting to white adoptions of minstrelsy and racial caricature), from artists like Bettye Saar and Faith Ringgold in the late 1960s and 1970s, or the Art Ensemble of Chicago's minstrelsy-inspired performances during that decade. These artists in turn inspired the flourishing of work on racial caricature and stereotype by younger artists in the 1980s and 1990s, including Robert Colescott, Michael Ray Charles, Ellen Gallagher, David Leventhal, Gary Simmons, Kara Walker, and many others—with Lee's *Bamboozled* being in part a product of this artistic work.[106]

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[104] See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 7; Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991); and John Strausbaugh, *Black like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), 227–29.

[105] Krin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 42, 44.

[106] Michael Ray Charles served as a consultant on *Bamboozled*.

On the other hand, the minstrel avant-garde may have contributed to the resuscitation of minstrelsy-derived stereotypes in the mass media, particularly in filmic and televisual representations.[107] With the previously mentioned decline of blackface in U.S. film and television in the postwar period, blackface performances in two key events appeared to have had a decisive impact: the Mime Troupe's *A Minstrel Show* (1965–67) and the book and film *Black like Me* (1961/1964). The two racial "performances" featured strikingly different premises: Whereas the troupe drew upon the tradition of minstrelsy and blackface makeup, *Black like Me* concerned the journalist John Howard Griffin's travels through the U.S. South chemically disguised as an African American in order to understand racism firsthand.[108] In the cinematic version of the book, John Whitmore plays Griffin in makeup, effectively combining the longstanding practice of a less caricatured blackface-justified-as-disguise that smuggled a residue of minstrelsy into the postwar period, often for laughs (for example, in *Ocean's 11*, 1960), with the new topos of the "race change," which would be pursued further in the 1968 film version of the 1947 musical *Finian's Rainbow* (featuring a bigoted senator who is temporarily turned black) and radicalized in Melvin van Peebles's 1970 film *Watermelon Man* (in which black actor Godfrey Cambridge plays a white salesman who, in Kafkaesque fashion, one day wakes up black).[109]

The more radical example of the Mime Troupe—in contrast with the clear racial liberalism of the Griffin products—was less taken up than recuperated, particularly when it moved beyond the confines of the "minstrel avant-garde." Racial masking in radical political theater was satirized in Brian De Palma's *Hi, Mom* (1970), in a black-and-white sequence showing a play titled "Be Black Baby," in which white liberal spectators are interviewed, forced to put on blackface makeup, and violently terrorized by armed black actors in whiteface (and Robert De Niro playing a white policeman)—with the white spectators claiming that "it made you feel like what it felt like to be a Negro" (1:08:57) and the actors afterwards complaining that the spectators had not "learned a thing" (1:09:34) from the show.[110] Other than a brief, satirical appearance of Robert Klein in blackface in the tense and racially charged comedy-drama *The Landlord* (1970), however, blackface had all but disappeared, again, from U.S. film and television by the turn of the decade. The year 1973, however, saw two powerful uses of critical blackface in which black

[107] Davis emphatically noted (e-mail interview with the author, 17 August 2009) that there was no effort made to engage with Hollywood and literary representations of African Americans in creating *A Minstrel Show*. Instead, he drew upon the influence of Malcolm X and various contacts in SNCC, the Black Panthers, and CORE, some members of which ended up becoming performers in the show itself.

[108] In comparison to the United States, the widespread presence of minstrelsy in other countries was not affected to the same degree. For example, in Britain, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1958–78) was incredibly popular and featured blackface performances despite complaints beginning in 1967.

[109] On the blackface-as-disguise trope, see Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 183. For a treatment of both Griffin and *Watermelon Man*, see Eric Lott, "Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1999), 241–55.

[110] Brian De Palma, dir., *Hi, Mom*, DVD, MGM, 2004.

characters torture and humiliate white characters by blacking their faces, perhaps inspired by the use of blackface in *Hi, Mom*. The blaxploitation film *Black Caesar* (1973) ends with the protagonist Tommy Gibbs (played by Fred Williamson) being forced to shine a corrupt white policeman's shoes at gunpoint before turning the situation around, pummeling the policeman and then blacking his face with shoe polish while frenetically demanding he sing Jolson's hit "My Mammy" (although the policeman is only able to blurt out the words "mammy" and "Alabammy" before being beaten to death). In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973), a suppressed film by Ivan Dixon and Sam Greenlee about a black revolutionary movement led by an ex-CIA officer, a group of radicalized black militants abduct a white military officer, blacken his face, give him LSD, and send him away riding a bicycle in his underwear before killing him.[111] By 1974–75, blackface in its historical form or in historicized contexts returned in force, including in Robert Altman's *Thieves like Us* (1974), in which a child participates in a rehearsal for a robbery in blackface, claiming to be the porter; in a never-aired spot on the Merv Griffin show in 1974, when comedian Pat Paulsen appeared in blackface while criticizing (and producing) ethnic humor; and, perhaps most famously, in the two-part "Birth of the Baby" episode of *All in the Family* in 1975, in which Archie Bunker plays in a minstrel show and shows up in blackface to the hospital at which his pregnant daughter is giving birth. By 1976, the racial disguise and critical-historical blackface tropes had merged in *Silver Streak*, in which Gene Wilder dons black shoe polish at Richard Pryor's behest in order to escape from the police; as Pryor famously notes to Wilder, "Al Jolson made a million bucks looking like that."[112] In a sense, though, the moment was both critical-blackface's last hurrah and a turning point, as the racial disguise approach mostly won out by the 1980s, as in Billy Crystal's impersonations of Sammy Davis, Jr., and the film *Soul Man* (1986).[113]

The dual trajectory of blackface minstrelsy's post-1960s revival coincides with (and thus perhaps serves as a footnote to) the well-known history of the rise and fall of black film and television. In the late 1960s, the film industry was in the middle of an economic crisis, one that was in large part saved by the emergence of a new independent black cinema heralded by Melvin Van Peebles's landmark blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which was then softened and transformed into a formula by the major Hollywood studios, yielding films like *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972). By the mid-1970s, the black cinema boom had gone bust, with the new imperatives of "crossover" cinema driving efforts to

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[111] See Strausbaugh, *Black like You*, 259; and Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 103. In an earlier scene in *The Spook*, the militants act out a scene from a mock-plantation film in which a slave is freed at the end of the Civil War.

[112] Cited in Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 183.

[113] Blackface, often of a more critical variety (at least, judging from its intentions), has continued to appear in various contexts, from Ted Danson's infamous blackface performance in 1993 during a "roast" of his then-girlfriend Whoopi Goldberg at the Friars Club in Manhattan to the more recent blackface and gender-crossing performances of Shirley Q. Liquor (played by a gay white man, Chuck Knipp). Strausbaugh (*Black like You*, especially 1–23) also discusses Liquor and other recent blackface acts.

lure black audiences to movie houses.[114] A parallel, if not equivalent, trajectory took place in television, with the rise of productions by Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, featuring a new presence of African Americans on shows such as *Sanford and Son* (1972–77), *Good Times* (1974–79), and *The Jeffersons* (1975–85), all of which must be seen in light of the famous Lear/Yorkin production addressing white working-class resentment and bigotry, *All in the Family* (1971–79). These shows dealt with problems of racism, the black working class (and newly made middle class), and arguably reintroduced elements of minstrel-era humor to television in often uncritical, if black audience–targeted contexts.[115] Thus, by the mid- to late 1970s—and therefore coinciding with the endpoint of the "long 1960s"[116]—the decrease in mass political militancy, formerly directed (or sublimated) through consumption, and the onset of a global economic downturn paved the way for what various critics refer to as "neo-minstrelsy," identified in various forms in the recent history of U.S. film and television including the biracial male-buddy films of the late 1970s and 1980s (involving black actors Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy) and the black comedy shows and serials of the 1990s including *Martin* (1992–97), *Goode Behavior* (1996–97), and *The Wayans Brothers* (1995–99).[117] Moreover, when contrasted with the development of middle-class-oriented black programming such as the enormously successful sitcom *The Cosby Show* (1984–92) and its various derivates, one can see a certain class divide in black-oriented television and film (sometimes thematized in TV sitcoms themselves, like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*) in which inclusions of neo-minstrel humor, hip-hop (pseudo-)realism, and performance entertainment (standup comedy, music, etc.) mark, in varying and complex ways, appeals to white youth and black working-class audiences alike.[118]

The varied returns of blackface minstrelsy must additionally be understood in light of the fact that racialized performance became disarticulated from the minstrel mask and even the minstrel voice (in its historical guises) over the course of the twentieth century. Indeed, John Szwed exaggerated only slightly when he noted, "The fact that, say, a Mick Jagger, can today perform in the same tradition without

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[114] For excellent treatments of this period of black cinema, see James A. Miller, "From Sweetback to Celie: Blacks on Film into the 80s," in *Toward a Rainbow Socialism: Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Class and Gender*, ed. Mike Davis, Manning Marable, Fred Pfeil, and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1987), 139–59; and Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, especially 69–111.

[115] See Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland, 1998), especially 93–100; and, with Charlton McIlwain, "The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary Dalton and Laura Linder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 125–37.

[116] For attempts to periodize the 1960s, see Fredric Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s," *Social Text* 9–10 (Spring-Summer 1984): 178–209, in which the 1960s are seen to end around 1973. Also see Timothy Brennan's trenchant comments on "the turn" of 1975–80 as a critical moment of rightward political drift in *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5.

[117] See Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 122–34; and Means Coleman and McIlwain, "The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms," 132–33. More recently, anti–politically correct television shows of the last two decades, such as *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *Wonder Showzen*, and many others, constitute a related development to the rise of neo-minstrelsy.

[118] See Means Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 110–37.

blackface marks the detachment of culture from race and the almost full absorption of a black tradition into white culture."[119] Outlining the trajectory of what one might describe as the African-Americanization of popular culture in the United States, we might consider the development of styles of racialized mimicry and performance that eschewed blackface makeup. These would include, in an increasing order of intensity, the legacy of white jazz musicians during the 1920s through 1940s; the appearance of black R&B and white imitators in the postwar years; the emergence of rock and roll in the mid-1950s—that remarkable fusion of blues, R&B, and country and western musics; the soul- and blues-based vocals of the psychedelic rock moment; and more recent white imitators of (and commentators on) black musical practices like hip hop, encompassing the Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, and Eminem, among others. Despite the facile ease with which scholars have equated the rise of minstrelsy with the rise of rock and roll, as well as the actual marketing of some of the early Sun Records artists using "darky" imagery, one must resist the temptation to identify this practice as the same thing as minstrelsy, lest one unintentionally overlook the ways in which race functions somewhat differently in this context. Indeed, more fertile categories and vocabularies to describe racialized performance might emerge if we bear in mind the changing set of coordinates determined by forms of *fidelity* facilitated by the changing (reproductive) technologies of viewing, listening, and performance; by the *shifting racial imaginaries* of a fantasized "authentic" blackness whose temporal geography ranged from the mythical antebellum plantation of the American South to the "post-Soul" ghetto of the urban North; and by the historical development and mass mediation of *new creative practices* emerging from within African America itself, which in the last forty years have been increasingly shaped by the growing economic power of black artists and media entrepreneurs.[120] Such complexities notwithstanding, the most significant point here is that as white racialized performance became separated from the blackface mask and explicit racial caricature of the pre–Civil Rights Movement era, a revival of blackface for confrontational uses became possible and then actually took place as part of the cultural production of the mid-1960s New Left and counterculture.

Conclusion

Reich would thus seem to have acquired the dubious, but by no means completely dishonorable, distinction of having participated in one of the founding moments and most imaginative examples of minstrelsy's postmodern revival. Yet it seems unlikely that this reason alone—the fear of guilt by association—provides a sufficient explanation for Reich's distancing himself from the music for *Oh Dem Watermelons*. It does not—or should not—have anything to do with the strength of the music, which in my view still stands as one of Reich's most impressive

[119] Cited in Lott, *Love and Theft*, 7.
[120] See Greg Tate, "Introduction: Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects," in *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 1–14.

early works. (Indeed, as can be gleaned from the relative staying power of his *Improvisations on a Watermelon*—performed publicly as late as the "Reich at 50" Almeida Festival in London in 1986—Reich appears to have been somewhat unwilling to let go of this musical material.) Moreover, when grouped with his two tape pieces *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, Reich's underappreciated soundtrack can be understood as comprising a powerful initial impulse reverberating throughout almost all of his later work in ways both compositional-technical and ideological. Matters of technique—which include the overlapping problematics of Sub-Saharan African musical structures and practices (especially, but by no means exclusively, rhythmic ones), looping grooves, plain-language text setting and speech melodies, canons, phasing, harmonically ambiguous stasis and repetition (often deriving out of jazz and pop harmony and cadential figures), electronic and acoustic sound (re)production technologies, to name a few general preoccupations—have changed relatively slowly in Reich's career, however, and, to some degree, provide a repository of compositional methods and questions that Reich has usually either repeatedly revisited (say, in the case of harmony) or rejected and returned to after long delays (say, in the case of prerecorded human voices with pitch-content sufficiently capable of being assimilated to the 12-note chromatic and, especially, diatonic harmony). Only in relatively rare instances—such as phasing, in its continuous variant—has Reich essentially abandoned a technique altogether.

Where ideology is concerned, however, Reich's evolution since 1965 seems to have been marked by a particular trajectory—toward an increasing political conservatism, of a religiously inflected sort—and by a growing skepticism of political commitment in art, which is encapsulated for Reich (in my view, unfairly) in the failure of Picasso's *Guernica* to have any impact whatsoever on the outcome of the Spanish Civil War.[121] Reich's conservative leanings have not been extensively discussed in print, but they may be pieced together from the following bits of information, as part of a very gradual process: Reich's move away from San Francisco to New York in 1965 and his extraction from the New Left/proto-counterculture of that moment; his near-complete abandonment of African American concerns after *Come Out* in 1966; his (re)discovery of Judaism in the early 1970s with his wife, video artist Beryl Korot and their affirmation as modern Orthodox Jews as early as 1981;[122] his growing interest in addressing subject matter of a politicized-religious sort in the 1980s and early 1990s (first arguably starting with the Holocaust treatment of *Different Trains* in 1988 and then more evidently with the Israel-Palestine conflict in *The Cave*, 1990–93); the unveiling of a significantly antimodern religious worldview (as expressed in *Three Tales*, 2002); and a growing preoccupation and developing concern with the politics of Islamic fundamentalism, dating as far back as *The Cave* and *City Life* (1994), which uses voice samples of firemen responding to the 1993 bombings of the World Trade Center, and more recently including an

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[121] Reich may have taken the Picasso example from Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1947). For a more extensive treatment of Reich's changing positions on the political artwork, see Gopinath, "Contraband Children," 19–45.

[122] See Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 201.

in-progress (and possibly withdrawn) choral work titled "9-1-1" in response to the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, informal reports of his support for the ongoing Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and his recent composition *The Daniel Variations* (2006) based on the words of Daniel Pearl, the Jewish-American journalist kidnapped and murdered by al-Qaeda members in Pakistan in 2002.[123] In a recent interview with choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Reich restated his now-familiar views on the political artwork with a new emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism (with its violent attacks apparently perceived as commensurate to mass-scale, sustained military bombing of civilian populations in World War II):

> Finally, an artist should have no illusions about how their work will change the world. The best example I know is Picasso's *Guernica*. Guernica was a small town in Spain where Franco bombed civilians for the first time during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso was in Paris and read about it in a newspaper, hence his painting is in a kind of black and white. It is clearly one of his greatest masterpieces, but did it stop civilian bombing for a millisecond? Not exactly. What followed was Coventry, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and now Muslim extremist intentional bombing of civilians in Bali, New York, Kashmir, London, Madrid, Beslan, Jerusalem, Turkey, et al. Judged as a political force Picasso is an abject and total failure. Yet his masterpiece does serve a modest purpose beyond its mastery. The name of "Guernica" and its fate is at least remembered as a result of this great artist's work.[124]

When the above is situated within the broader context of the tendency of many Jewish Americans to disaffiliate with the Civil Rights Movement as it took a black nationalist turn, the rise of a self-conscious embrace of Jewish ethnicity in the United States generally (especially as a result of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973) and in New York in particular (as in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville community schooling controversies and teacher strikes in 1968), and the aggregate political shift to the right of the Baby Boomer and slightly older cohorts over the last three decades, Reich's creeping rightward drift can be seen as consonant with, if not equivalent to, the increasing conservatism of U.S. (and global) politics at the broadest level and, to a lesser degree, with the specific rejection of the 1960s-era left characterized by neoconservatism.

As part of this trajectory, Reich not only essentially abandoned his earlier imaginative investments in African American political issues by the late 1960s (with the main exception being the African American protests featured in *City Life*) but also extricated himself from the remnants of the organic, neo-avant-gardist community that provided him with the aesthetic space to first develop his compositional practice outside the university system. It is my sense that he did so in order to more fully establish himself as a professional *composer*, instead of being seen as a fringe experimental *artist*—and Reich's career development, which was marked by

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[123] For a good treatment of Reich and Korot's *Three Tales*, see Adam Shatz, "Music: A Fighting Man's (and Woman's) Work," *New York Times*, 13 October 2002. For a mention of Reich's "9-1-1," see Anne Midgette, "Theater: Responding to Crisis, Art Must Look beyond It," *New York Times*, 3 March 2002. On Reich's connections to the counterculture after 1965, see also Kerry O'Brien, "Early Steve Reich and Techno-Utopianism," paper read at the 2nd International Conference on Minimalist Music, Kansas City, Missouri, 3 September 2009.

[124] Steve Reich, "Questions from Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker & Answers from Steve Reich," e-mail exchange in 2008, www.stevereich.com. A few incidental typos and editing errors have been corrected in my citation of the statement.

the growing success of his ensemble in the late 1960s and 1970s and then took with a number of commissions in the 1980s, can be easily situated within the political trajectory outlined above. In part, it may be that Reich's abjuring of this community is connected to a rejection of the lifestyle choices of the counterculture, on the one hand, and the escape from associations with painful personal memories from his West Coast sojourn, especially those involving his first marriage and very early death of his first child, on the other.[125] Yet, what might be termed an "apocalyptic" interest in bombing and nuclear holocaust, however varying in its inflections, persists to the present day in Reich's work, recalling what P. Adams Sitney has described as the "oscillation between irony and apocalypse" characterizing San Francisco independent filmmaking in the 1950s and 1960s and arguably much of the San Francisco counterculture and minstrel avant-garde.[126] Perhaps in noting such continuities as being the preoccupations of a particular generational formation, we might plant the seeds for an effective rapprochement between Reich's present and his past. If the potential lesson for Reich would be to recall, once again, the light that irony casts on unquestioned commitments and apocalyptic worldviews, the lesson for scholars is to pay closer attention to the routine apocalypses, past and present, that ironic distance too easily obscures.

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[125] See Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists,* 156, 170–71.
[126] Sitney, *Visionary Films,* 306.

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