



“Utopian Punk”: The Concept of the Utopian  
in the Creative Practice of Björk

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The quotation in the title of this article is a phrase coined by Bill Martin in his book *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk* where, writing of Björk's time in the Icelandic band the Sugarcubes, he observes: "If this music was meant to have some relationship to punk, however, at least in its rawness, it was a generally happy, trippy, and even utopian punk" (2002, 166). What we intend to consider in this essay is one strand of Björk's creative practice that we relate to this idea of "utopian punk." This is characterized by being a productive relationship of experimental, collaborative, and technological elements driven by a clear sense of becoming. Björk's music here is described as a practice or assemblage of music production, lyrical composition, music performance (live and recorded), visual interpretation (through video and film), and audience reception and consumption, as a creative engagement with the themes the artist presents and the reflexive interpretations of her own work. As Becker described art worlds as collective endeavors, so the sociology of music has recently described musical worlds as sites of experience and semiotic significance (De Nora 2000; Finnegan 1989; Frith 1998). Sarbanes describes it in this way: "Music links the individual and the collective via modes of action, feeling, and embodiment, forms of relating capable not merely of reflecting existing social structures, but of generating forms of interaction that exceed and contest those structures" (2006). Music in this context provides us with the strongest notion of linkage between the creative form and the utopian. The individual's engagement with specific and particular forms of music, for example, post-punk, provides a site of discovery and potential that links to a collective experience and often to transformative activity.

The intention of this essay, then, is not to seek to somehow explain Björk's work through a notion of origins but, rather, to consider this "utopian punk" as one of the key attractors and trajectories in her work. First, we want to locate Björk as emerging from a specific musical milieu shaped by punk and post-punk cultural practice. Second, we wish to emphasize how the emerging musical practice of Björk worked through well-documented notions of the utopian and cultural hybridity. What is clear, we argue, is that Björk mobilizes two quite distinct understandings of the utopian at different points in her career: from utopia as tied to a location or place to something defined as a process of actualization in a transitory moment of unification. From here we can draw connections between statements she makes about aspects of her practice and wider social changes and theoretical formulations of the nature of the utopian today.

## Musical Practice and Culture as a Milieu for Utopian Vision

We consider that Björk is involved in a global musical practice that has its roots in a musical milieu that evolved from punk and post-punk emanating from the United Kingdom and United States and moving into other cultural contexts such as Iceland. This milieu has since become part of the mainstream musical landscape, but it still bears the scars and growth lines of a particular punk heritage. Milieu here can be understood as an environment that orients and develops a set of relevances, typifications, and sedimented understandings for the individuals involved in the cultural arena of their activity, in this case, a music scene (Webb 2007a). The etymology of the term is situated in its French translation as the center or middle of a place or environment. Durrschmidt (2000) suggests that Rabinow argued that it was originally suggestive of "ether" or "medium" or any environment in which a body is affected and through which it can "extend." Milieu theory locates the actors studied in their own personal biographic journey that has given them a particular "milieu structure" of orientation and initial ways of interpreting, understanding, and using knowledge and information. The theory makes a space for new and environment-specific knowledge, information, and experiences to add to their stock of knowledge through the idea of a "momentary milieu." The momentary can become incredibly important or be dismissed. What is important here is to look at how the momentary environment of the post-punk, esoteric, philosophical "lifeworld" (Schutz 1970) that Björk was inhabiting and becoming affected by in her time in Tappi Tíkarrass, KUKL, and the Sugarcubes became part of her milieu structure in the work that she later created within her solo career as Björk. As we shall see, this method of orienting individuals and groups of people shows how the environment of this particular milieu infected some of the inhabitants with a sense of global humanity and utopian thinking.

Björk's music developed as a "glocal" (Robertson 1992) hybrid that negotiated the impact of local and global cultural forces (Hannerz 1996). To interrogate these processes we first need to articulate how this cultural globalization seeps into the pores of different local communities and is then re-presented as a transformative cultural process that affects both sender and recipient. Andy Bennett (2000), Deitmar Elflein (1999), Tony Mitchell (1996), and Peter Webb (2007b) have all shown how the musical form of hip-hop, when globalized, goes through an initial process of absorption that, ultimately, transforms the

local. From the national (Italy and New Zealand [Mitchell 1996]) to urban Newcastle (Bennett 2000), Berlin (Elflein 1999), and Bristol (Webb 2007b), each of these writers identifies a straightforward copying in the first period of engagement with this new form. However, this process soon gives way to a period of change and transformation where host cultures emphasize their own concerns, histories, and geographies, in a dialogic engagement with a version of the artwork they now claim as their own.<sup>1</sup>

Just as these processes can be seen to be in play with hip-hop, previously punk had evolved out of an outward push from its U.S. and U.K. origins to other parts of the world, where key themes, motifs, ideas, and musical forms were being absorbed by groups and individuals in a variety of very different cultural settings. Iceland was one of those settings, and we will outline some key parts of this process in relation to Björk and her music before moving to an outline of a theory of global cultural practice that pertinently illustrates the way in which these processes can develop.

### **Moments of Orientation: Punk, Post-punk Music Culture**

By considering Björk and her experience of growing up in Iceland and getting involved with its growing music scene of the early eighties we can start to trace the ways that diverse elements intermingle with Icelandic culture. Becoming aware of the incoming punk scene, with its themes of nihilism, disruption, mistrust of authority, starkly juxtaposed collage art, and anarchist political and lifestyle elements, all tied into a “Do-It-Yourself” philosophy, Björk was able to develop an eclectic sense of musical performance. As her creative practice developed over time we can see positive transformative accents in her work, which engages the transnational, the global, and the utopian through the prism of an Icelandic imaginary. However, before we look at those in some detail we should examine this formative period of punk-inspired collaboration out of which Björk developed her later aesthetic practice.

Punk rock was characterized by two main trajectories: one represented by the Sex Pistols—nihilistic, negative, destructive, ambivalent, chaotic; and the other initially represented by the Clash but later by Crass (in late 1978, early 1979), which was political, critical, constructive, and explicitly affected by gender, environmentalism, and animal rights and informed by a rather more revolutionary historical rhetoric. The critic Greil Marcus (2006)

draws a parallel between the Lettrists-inspired Situationist International and punk by suggesting that the sloganeering and artwork of the Situationists were reconfigured and spit out by punk in a combination of potentially life-changing music, fashion, and "artivity." The nihilist strand of punk seemed to be coming to an end as far as the media was concerned with the split of the Sex Pistols in 1978 and the death of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen and the rise of post- and anarchist punk in 1979. Writers have often suggested that the Sex Pistols did represent a trajectory of future development (Marcus 2006; Savage 2005); they were the "flowers in the dustbin" (*God Save the Queen*, EMI, 1977), the future, "your future," rejecting the present as inhumane and representing that in their shock tactics and celebration of rejection of mainstream culture. That future was, however, ill defined until 1978 and John Lydon's departure from the band to form Public Image Ltd, leaving the Pistols as a parody of themselves, with Vicious as vocalist and Cook and Jones performing as cartoon "naughty boys" in the Maclaren-inspired "Rock n Roll Swindle"; the Pistols were shorn of their critique. The post-punk experimentalism of Public Image weaving dub reggae, krautrock, noise guitar, and a hybrid musical production moved the musical world away from Chuck Berry guitar riffs and three-chord rock 'n' roll punk rock to a new sonic architecture that took the imagination to different transient places.

Punk as chaos magician, nihilist foregrounding the destinations of "Boredom and Nowhere," hedonist, or swastika-wearing shock tactician had started to be replaced by a more thought-provoking punk as an anarchist of theory and action, as revolutionary, and as interventionist in a critical and constructive way. Penny Rimbaud, one of the leading architects of Crass, an anarcho-commune punk band that had links back to the hippy era of the sixties with such themes in its work as vegetarianism, squatting, radicalism, and humanism and which took very seriously a belief in nomadic tribal networking, said this about John Lydon's (aka Rotten's) lyrical chant of "No Future": "Well I think you know there was a battle cry and that was Rotten's no future and that fucking got right up my nose and I thought well there is a fucking future I've always believed there is" (interview by Webb, November 2007). In the interview Rimbaud assessed Crass's influence as being one of reinvigorating interest in lifestyle choices such as vegetarianism and squatting but also in terms of the politics of animal rights, humanism, and an antiestablishmentarianism that instigated many individuals getting involved with life-changing

cultural practice. The liminal zone of punk rock was becoming inhabited by a variety of subversive, transgressive, and resistant ideas, akin to Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), a "Pirate Utopia" network of spaces that are

like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can "occupy" these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace. Perhaps certain small TAZs have lasted whole lifetimes because they went unnoticed, like hillbilly enclaves—because they never intersected with the Spectacle, never appeared outside that real life which is invisible to the agents of Simulation. (1990)

Punk and its zones of operation acted as autonomous zones in its gig experiences, club spaces, cultural centers, squats and politics, and fanzines and communiqués, where individual "uprisings" articulated a utopianism that potentially changed quite radically those individuals involved. *Vague* magazine, for instance, developed from being primarily an Adam and the Ants (when it was a punk band) fanzine into a cultural and political A4 scatter bomb of ideas and dissonant content. From early gig reviews it went on to publish articles on the Situationists, William Burroughs, the Angry Brigade, King Mob, Amnesty International, the Illuminati and Robert Anton Wilson, the Red Army Faction, Cyberpunk, and Psychogeography. This kind of information and knowledge was being circulated in the post-punk milieu of which young Icelandic punks were becoming very much aware.

Another area of interest to Björk was the band Psychic TV, which played in Reykjavik in the early 1980s and made strong links with Hilmar Örn Hilmarson, who was a key figure in Icelandic music (a member of the band Þeyr) and a practicing pagan. Psychic TV shared the sensibilities of Hilmarson in terms of their interests in paganism, Reich, Burroughs, and Ginsberg. Þeyr would also provide the group KUKL, which Björk would later join, with two of its members, Sigtryggur Baldursson and guitar player Guðlaugur Kristinn Óttarsson (aka Godkrist).

These strands, then, of post-punk, anarchist punk, esoterica, and a fanzine culture that was engaging with a wide variety of philosophical and

political thought were the milieu that the young Icelandic band KUKL was acting within and then recalibrating in terms of their own Icelandic experience. By 1983 Björk had become part of this Icelandic post-punk group, which supported Crass and Psychic TV. They formed a strong bond with Crass, staying for a while at Dial House (the squatted residence of Crass in Epping Forest, Essex, England), and released two albums on Crass's record label. For Björk there is an expression of the politics of punk in the albums *The Eye* and *Holidays in Europe: The Naughty Naught*. *Holiday in Europe* has tracks that describe journeys through different countries, customs, and places of Europe. KUKL argues:

Our aim is to work for the betterment of humanity through our music. We feel that music is one of the strongest mediums that you can have access to in the Western world: as money is not our game we rely on the inherent power of our group.

Our power is what we are and what we do: through listening to us people will become part of the transmission of that particular power, even should they not realize what we are about. Whether we should be considered artists, does not really matter at all.

We leave that problem to those who want to define to understand. — We only want to wake up in people dormant powers which even they did not know existed. Sometimes we even don't know ourselves what we are doing, as we are still learning. The "magic" has not been intellectualised or consciously assimilated to what we are doing.<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis, therefore, was on music as a process, as transformative action that transported an audience to a place that made them aware of their individual power. The tracks "Anna," "Seagull," and "Moonbath" from the album *The Eye* are examples of Björk's hybrid and antiessentialist approach. They present an aural experience that weaves flute; *bhodrán* drum; Burundi-type percussion; guitar that is jagged, discordant, and rhythmic; vocals that veer from the melodic to restrained screaming; bell; and glass chimes together with pagan and Icelandic fairy-tale references. Musically the central theme that is repeated here and through much of Björk's work is one of hybridization of the musical elements, a cross-pollination of sources of national musics and international popular music to create a hybrid that does not fit generic

convention and works in contrast to themes that often refer to Icelandic culture. KUKL took Crass and the heritage of punk, its traces of Situationism and sloganeering, and reprocessed them in the context of Icelandic culture and geography. Johnny Rotten's sneer of "Cheap holidays in other people's misery" became, instead, a travelogue of "Holidays in Europe," where the young Icelanders started to interact with a European audience that was just as keen to transform themselves and the cultures they were a part of. The process transformed all parties and started to develop something new.

In 2002, Björk released the *Family Tree* collection. She explains her intention behind it thus: "To bring together roots, beats, strings, and words, to unite all these opposing systems, is to be a medium between disparate worlds trying to unite history, the present and the environment into a song on the radio, in a possible moment of utopia."<sup>3</sup> If the punk attitude of KUKL and the playfulness of the Sugarcubes (Björk's first post-KUKL project) provide one framing element for this discussion so far, Björk's stated desire here is the next. *Family Tree* was a retrospective album, Björk's choice of her "Greatest Hits," which included both previously unreleased material and work from her early days prior to her solo career.

### **The Global Culture Complex: Situating Music and Cultural Practice as a Key Driver of Hybridity and Utopian Idealism**

Ahmed Gurnah presents a set of ideas about cultural globalization in his work "Elvis in Zanzibar" (2002). He outlines the processes of global cultural development that are situated in the socioeconomic and political circumstances of imperialist ambitions in Africa but also the possibly unintended consequences of these same global processes. Young Zanzibaris were gaining a lot from the consumption and engagement with Western cultural forms, and Gurnah identifies five important elements of this that give us some clues as to how the process may have been working for a young Björk in Iceland during her formative engagement with post-punk. First, technology, cheap transistor radios, and global radio coverage of Western stations meant that young Zanzibaris listened to a lot of Western pop music such as rock 'n' roll. This was consumed with one ear on the rebellious, often critical qualities that the music had of Western national governments and politics. Young Icelanders tuning in to U.K. and U.S. punk developed similar critical



faculties. This rebellion gave the young Zanzibaris faith in their ability to be critical and young Icelanders a confidence in expressing their world in an array of primal music, art, and the written word.

Second, the anti-imperialist and proto-nationalist movements of liberation in Africa had given young people a self-confidence and belief in their abilities to generate their own cultural awareness. Iceland has its own history of being a Danish and Norwegian dependency but gained independence and a sense of cultural distinctness in 1944. Independence has been a strong cultural theme in Iceland, and for Björk it finds expression throughout her work, for example, the track "Declare Independence" from the album *Volta* (2007). "Declare Independence" also shows that the musical element here is just as telling in terms of evoking these themes. The track was initially developed as a "rave" track: a four/four beat and a deep, distorted, and oscillated bass line pattern. The track builds to a crescendo, linking beats, bass, and the vocal of "Raise your flag, higher and higher," the intention being to disrupt colonial and imperialistic types of colonization with a respect for individuality and localized culture. Rave as a form also invokes the free party scene and independent cultural production as a positive type of creative utopianism (McKay 1996).

Third, Gurnah suggests that the political awareness of young Zanzibaris was important in their engagement with independence and in developing a new type of nationalism. For Icelanders such national politics was more indistinct, but what was important was the cultural significance of Icelandic sagas and the *eddas*, their heritage of Norse poetry combined with an emphasis on a strong legislative stance on gay, lesbian, and transgendered rights, themes that appear in Björk's work throughout her career.

Fourth, Gurnah discusses the processes of immigration and the diasporic links to London, New York, Tokyo, Paris, and other cities. Similarly, for Icelanders these places became important sources of cultural importing and exporting. The networks of these diasporic communities fed into the Icelandic cultural imaginary.

Fifth, Gurnah talks about the knowledge bridge that was built between these diasporas and Zanzibar in terms of technology transfer, modernization, and education. Icelandic society leaned heavily on the European education system and developed good relationships with Western companies. Einar Orn, a key member of KUKL, had gone to London to study art at Central London Polytechnic in the early 1980s, and it was there that he met and started to communicate with members of Crass.

These elements, then, are specific to each case but give us clear views of the processes of the global culture complex that produced the interweaving understandings and hybrids that can be seen as a developing insight into a utopian experiment. Gurnah discusses the intermingling of cultures through global processes as a “culture-complex” where “foreign contact with our culture [Gurnah is himself from Zanzibar] was formative and transformative and somehow real to our organic experience” (2002, 350). Adopting the transgressive signifiers of Western youth culture, young Zanzibaris sculpted hair, wore drainpipe trousers, and listened to rock ‘n’ roll but at the same time developed an anticolonial politics; a sense of Zanzibari nationalism that was different from that of their elders; and a progressive, Western and African cultural mix. There was an active desire to construct common cultural denominators with Western youth and to be a part of “young people’s global culture” (Gurnah 2002, 353). Gurnah stresses the global impact of transformation on both the incoming culture and the existing culture. These processes and their impact on individuals like Björk are central to understanding her transformation as an artist, the intermingling of Iceland and a global travelogue, and the developing notion of utopia in her work.

### The Different Conceptualizations of Utopia in the Work of Björk

By this stage, therefore, what can be identified within the practice of Björk is an articulation of two quite different formulations of utopia that map very effectively onto concerns about the nature of contemporary social experience and its relation to place as meaning. In one way, she describes Iceland as a location where she feels that the landscape, history, and geography are productive of a particular energy and sense of community that is unique. In this context she talks about the postcolonial experience of Iceland since 1944, with its attendant patriotism and nationalistic pride. Utopia figured in this way relates to the long-established notion of it as a distant and inaccessible place, indeed an island surrounded by turbulent seas. It ties into a fundamentally Romantic notion of the sublime landscape, the fire and ice of the Icelandic imaginary, with its periods of darkness and gloom, combined with hints of a Nordic pagan mythology.<sup>4</sup> This imaginary is exemplified by the video for the song “Jóga” (dir. Michel Gondry, 1997). In this video, sweeping camera shots produce a dreamlike sensation

of flying over the Icelandic landscape, revealing cutaway geo-graphics to finally resolve into the computer-generated image of Björk atop a mountain. As the figure of Björk turns we are drawn into an opening in her chest within which an Iceland-shaped island revolves, symbolically functioning as her heart. Musically the track contains a lead melody performed by cello and strings in a Western orchestral style sitting on top of a set of slowly emerging filtered and distorted drum patterns that utilize dub reggae and break beat production techniques, providing a sense of space and timelessness and a musical reference for an internal journey that slowly opens up as the track progresses. This links perfectly with the visual tale provided by the video and uses production and technological effects combined with the more "pure"-sounding strings to again present a hybrid audio/visual piece that links Western classicism, Jamaican spatial dynamics, and Icelandic landscapes.

Such formulations of landscape and identity act as one pole of attraction to her national imaginary and are as easily deconstructed as any other Romantic belief. Yet, simultaneously, Björk is keen to emphasize how she opens herself up to the diversity of experience generated through globalization. Here she is quoted in an interview from 2008: "I am Icelandic, yes, but I was also the one who went out there and mingled my voice with electricity. I collaborated with foreigners and travelled a lot" (Westwood 2008). So we can see a shift away from the understanding of utopia as an idealized notion of *place* to utopia as a *moment* as articulated in the 2002 quote above from *Family Tree*, an instant when elements from a range of processes combine to actualize a potential. Throughout Björk's statements, therefore, is a tension generated by, on the one hand, the paradox of grounding the utopian in a purity of place and yet, on the other, the inherently hybrid nature of contemporary music production and a globalized cultural experience.

In this way, Björk's shift from her initial experiences of collective practice in KUKL and other punk-defined groups through to her solo work exemplifies a broader shift on a globalized terrain. Her emergence in the 1980s locates her at a specific moment of social change as the last vestiges of Western European deindustrialization are violently worked through. The politically informed and socially resistant attitudes and practices of Crass, for instance, give way to a more individualistic emphasis where the utopian lies less in any concrete social organization and more in a self-defined project

of experimentation, playful difference, and temporary loss of identity. This latter formulation is less future orientated than focused on the “right-now.” What this points to is one of a number of oppositions within the creative practice of Björk—local/global, space/time, purity/hybridity—that function to drive an unsteady sense of temporary coherence within each project.

This is an understanding of utopia not so much as a particular social arrangement deemed as moving toward perfection but, rather, utopianism as a process (Levitas 2003, 7). This becomes less about collective agreement of what is good or just and is instead more concerned with identifying those multiple processes at work in the cultural milieu that can be seen to produce the new. This nomadic subject seeks out those potentials for the realization of something beyond the repetition of the same that defines standardized music production. It works along the lines that Jacques Attali (1985, 11) describes in his book *Noise*, where music as a particular aesthetic practice is the site for the analysis and revelation of new forms in society: music as prophecy. This utopianism of the emergent is one of optimism rather than pessimism, less about lack in the here and now and more about the potential available for activation. The emphasis changes away from utopia in the topological mode to that of a becoming, what Elizabeth Grosz (2001, 129–49) calls the “utopic,” as located in a force field orientated around the “strange attractors” of bodies, time, and organization.

In this way the emphasis by Björk on the centrality of an emergent transnational experimentation in her musical practice has an open quality that intimates a calling forth of a new kind of subjectivity. As indicated in the quote above, she sees herself as a generator of a type of energy that flows in circuits and which crosses time and space, whether pagan or electro, preindustrial or postindustrial.

## Always Being in the Middle

It’s just a way to get into the middle of yourself. (Gray 1998)

It is useful at this point to consider the ways in which Björk locates herself “in the middle” of these circuits of potentiality. There does seem to be something inherently fluid in her mode of working. It is somewhat paradoxical that she makes use of the filial metaphor of the family tree when

her practice has arguably been far more rhizomatic than arboreal in nature. What we mean by this is that the defining emphasis throughout Björk's career has been one not of influence *per se* but *collaboration* and extension into new territories of musical production (such as collaborations with Nellie Hooper, Tricky, Graham Massey, Mark Bell, Matthew Herbert, and Matmos, among others). We can characterize Björk's projects as involving being "in the middle of" rather than at the beginning or end of something. What is produced is not considered as somehow an average between the differing inputs but, rather, a place where there is acceleration away from any localizable starting points.

It is precisely the connective movement away from its starting point that characterizes such a move. Björk is adept at engaging diverse elements that produce a unity based not on some kind of integration but, rather, a form of singularization that maintains compositional elements. Louise Gray, writing in the magazine *The Wire*, describes this well when she writes: "Her compositional method is more a connective activity than a crossover fusion" (1998, 46). Such movement is at a perpendicular to the line between the connecting elements, what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a "transversal movement carrying away the one *and* the other, a stream without beginning or end, gnawing away at its two banks and picking up speed in the middle" (1983, 58).

### Islands of Micro-Utopias

The curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has looked to relate the concept of utopia to the changes of globalized culture where resistance is not defined in the way it was, for instance, in the communes and organizations of the 1970s. Given that there is no singular organizing discourse in opposition to the system, there is instead a need to recognize and give support to those localized and temporary interstitial "islets of resistance." He writes in a column from 2002: "Currently, the majority of the political struggles are sectoral fights which relate to 'micro-politics' and 'micro-utopias,' to borrow Felix Guattari's phrasing. From there it is important to privilege these small islands that are apart from the system, or which form a dam around the reigning system. The more we multiply these points of systemic divergences, the more we multiply the possibility of another dialogue emerging one day" (2002).

What is at work within this formulation is an awareness of the need for imagining things as potentially different as key to the emergence of a radical dialogue with the future. For Bourriaud, if the French Revolution had at its core the “Assemblée,” and the Russian Revolution had its “Soviet,” then today we need to look toward something like the “rave” or free party. This sounds, perhaps, on one level a ridiculous comparison, but it is driven by a key Situationist idea of seizing spaces organized for relentless retail consumption or the ceaseless flow of alienated travel and transforming them, if only briefly, into places for collective resingularization through music, dance, and experimentation. Ruth Levitas writes of this view as one where “utopia is squeezed into interstitial spaces, and is thus partial, fragmentary and often temporary” (2003).

This formulation of the micro-utopia takes its lead from the condition Hardt and Negri (2000) describe as *empire*. Here, we no longer have the belief in a transcendent narrative of utopian vision as outlined by Thomas More, for instance. Instead, we have to look to the swarm-like actions of the multitude, an immanent process of contestation. For us, this links to the practice of Björk through a belief in the potential of the carnivalesque as a site for excitement, ecstasy, and action. A key aspect of this idea is that it carries traces of the anticipatory, that it can serve as a link between the now and the future: to go from the “what-is-here-now” to the “what-might-be.” It needs to be said, of course, that Björk is engaged in a *staging* of this notion through her musical and creative practice. But she does, we would argue, seek to connect with the same energy at work in this process, and in this way she can be seen as having a catalytic role in musical practice. One only has to look at the number of times she is listed on the MySpace pages of emerging musicians as a key influence on their development.

This aspirational dynamic inherent to her practice can be recognized as a kind of becoming that works through an active sense of disruption and a form of action. It does this primarily because it deals with what might be *possible* and is linked in this way to a process of actualizing a very real potential. Now of course this is never a simple process that can be merely articulated and somehow provide a positive charge. Björk works through the machinery of the capitalist music industry assemblage that will seek to capture and harness this energy on its own terms. But while the strangeness of Björk can, as Nicola Dibben (2009, 172) observes, be mobilized as part of a marketing campaign where the earnestness and authenticity of a marginal

identity can be useful, it is still driven by an imaginative impulse that cannot so easily be contained. At this point Björk's practice comes too close to the carnivalesque nature of contemporary capitalist reality itself. This is its strength but also, arguably, its weakness. Nevertheless, a work such as the collaboration with her partner, Matthew Barney, *Drawing Restraint* 9, resists any simple appropriation. Such a work does mobilize elements of touristic fascination with Eastern culture, yet it stages a disintegration of the subject in this encounter, a transformation that disrupts the identities it begins with.<sup>5</sup>

### The Utopian as Island Set in a Sea of Possibility

Island communities are the original alternative societies. That is why so many islanders envy them. Of their nature they break down the multiple alienations of industrial and suburban man. Some vision of Utopian belonging, of social blessedness, of an independence based on cooperation, haunts them all. (Fowles 1978, 17)

We conclude with a brief discussion of the image of the ocean as a utopian source for the artist Björk. Iceland as an island is counterposed to the ocean that surrounds it and yet is, of course, intrinsically linked to it. Deleuze observes that such islands are different from continental islands, in that, he writes, "*oceanic islands* are originary, essential islands" (2004, 9). If the land of Iceland provides one kind of grounding for Björk's articulation of a utopian impulse, another relates to the corresponding importance of sailing boats and the ocean. Bauman describes how the change in experience of globalization redefines the concept of utopia toward one now no longer anchored by the land: "The 'u' of 'utopia,' bereaved by the 'topos,' is left homeless and floating, no more hoping to strike its roots, to re-embed" (2003, 22). For Björk, travel has always been central to the dynamic nature of her work, and the ability to relocate is part of her sense of (shifting) self. Pointedly, she sings in the song "Wanderlust" from the 2007 album *Volta*:

I have lost my origin  
And I don't want to find it again  
Whether sailing into nature's laws  
And be held by ocean's paws

As an Icelander, the imagery of the sea and boats plays a central part in that Romantic identity. Nicola Dibben (2009, 63–66) details how the sea functions in a range of different ways for Björk as a key element of her artistic output. Dibben states that by the time of the 2007 album *Volta*, “the sea . . .,” acting as a reservoir of symbolic forms, “is used as a utopian symbol of humankind understood as a single entity, and emphasizes commonalities between people from different cultures” (2009, 66). For Björk herself, there has indeed been an element of the shift that Bauman describes as “imagination privatized” as she sails a recently purchased 90-foot motorboat with built-in recording studio around different locations of the world with her partner and children (McNair 2008). Perhaps this is part of a wider phenomenon that the musician and author David Toop, a consistent champion of the work of Björk, identifies in his book *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound, and Imaginary Worlds*, where he writes: “On our watery planet, we return to the sea for a diagnosis of our current condition” (1995, 270). Similarly, for the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch this imaginary is a key resource as he asks if “the ocean of possibility is much greater than our customary land of reality” (1988, 6). What this points to is what Antonis Balasopoulos characterizes as the amenability of the oceanic to “utopic reprocessing” (2006, 133).

Björk mobilizes the oceanic to generate vectors of exchange over any defensive perception of cultural purity and activates forces through the machinery of the music industry working as potential rather than as limit. It is to her great credit that Björk embodies the desire to relentlessly experiment and engage in an active process of becoming and resingularization in and through her creative practice while still laying claim to a belief in the utopian as an essential element within this.

### *Notes*

1. In Britain, as hip-hop was adopted and transformed, early expressions of the form could be seen in Bristol’s Wild Bunch (mid-1980s) and West London’s Newtrament Crew (early to late 1980s), and both reproduced the key signifiers and practices of U.S. hip-hop culture: DJ’ing, graffiti art, MC’ing, and break dancing. As they developed, though, these sound systems and the people attached to them would transform into the cultural hybrids that became music projects like Massive Attack and Soul to Soul with British cultural specificities.
2. KUKL, “A Laypersons Guide to KUKL,” at <http://www.southern.com/southern/band/KUKLL/guide3.html> (accessed September 1, 2009).



3. Björk, at <http://bjork.com/> (accessed March 1, 2010).
4. For a detailed discussion of this, see Dibben 2009, 24–52.
5. *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005) is a project by Björk's partner, artist Matthew Barney. At the center of this project is a feature-length 35-millimeter film for which Björk composed the soundtrack. *Drawing Restraint 9* is an unconventional love story set aboard a Japanese whaler where the protagonists transform from land mammals to sea mammals.

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