Chapter 9

‘Dragged into the Dance’ – the role of Kraftwerk in the Development of Electro-Funk

‘Once upon a time, ‘the future’ was something that hadn’t happened yet. It lay up ahead of us somewhere in the distance, filled with an unknown potential whose features and even outlines were unguessable. But during the twentieth century, an extremely odd thing has happened. In the 1920s, science fiction writers began developing detailed scenarios of what the future would be like; and since World War II the technology for making those scenarios come true has been expanding at an unprecedented rate. By now, our sense of history as a linear progression into the future has collapsed. We’re living in the future today; there’s no way to escape.’

(Aikin, 1982, p.33)

Jim Aikin’s article on Kraftwerk was written just a few months before DJ producer Arthur Baker, Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force teamed up in New York to produce the recording ‘Planet Rock’. This was a new musical concept that matched the electronic, robot-inspired music of Kraftwerk, an emerging electronic aesthetic in African-American dance music and the improvised form rap. In the US Billboard listings, the song reached number #4 in the Black charts, and #3 in the Disco/Dance charts, and gave exposure to Bambaataa’s vision for a new electronic rap/funk sound.

The new form that ‘Planet Rock’ played a large part in kick starting would later be named ‘electro funk’, and paved the way for the explosive success of Hip Hop in the years to come. The collision between the two distinct worlds of West German electronic music and Bronx rap can also be measured as a collision between a dominant aesthetic of creation on one hand (Kraftwerk), and a more marginal aesthetic of evocation on the other (Bambaataa and Baker). This essay will examine the three works involved in this collision:
‘Trans-Europe Express’ and ‘Numbers’ by Kraftwerk, and ‘Planet Rock’, and will attempt to describe them within the framework of three critiques: immanent, poietic and aesthetic. Despite key ideological commonalities and philosophies that have developed over the years between Bambaataa and Kraftwerk, the irreconcilable differences between their own understanding of the compositional process mirrors a paradigm embedded within Western aesthetic teleology – the notion of new, legitimate, innovative creation versus the imperative of evocation. Perhaps it is at this point of aesthetic collision where exciting and unpredictable forms gain voice.

Prologue: the times and the mix

The early 1980s were heady, volatile days of cultural interaction in New York, where the innovative DJ Afrika Bambaataa travelled out of the seven-mile circle of the Bronx to take his music and culture into a white artsy-crowd and the punk-rock clubs of lower Manhattan. This was a philosophically driven move that had origins as much in Bambaataa’s own personal history as it did in the politics of the day. A former Black Spade Bronx gang warlord, Bambaataa was influenced at an early age by the break-centered style of DJ Kool Herc and began experimenting early with eclectic mixing techniques that pointed towards his new political philosophy of peace-making and inclusiveness. Jeff Chang (2005) marks the death of Bambaataa’s cousin Soulski in a police shooting in January 1975 as the turning point that cemented this philosophy and that was the motivation behind the creation of the Universal Zulu Nation; a social justice organisation dedicated to ‘knowledge, wisdom, freedom, peace, unity, love and respect’ (Mitchell, 2002). The organisation recognized the futility, cyclical entrapment, oppression and racial divisiveness spawned by gang warfare, and focused the anger and energy into the creation and exploration of black/latino culture through the four elements of what would come to be known as Hip-Hop: dance (B-Boying), street art (graffiti), DJing and MCing (rap).

The first commercial success of rap came from an obscure studio creation *sans* DJ, in the form of the Sugarhill Gang’s ‘Rapper’s Delight’, that Chang (2005) claims is the best-selling twelve-inch single ever pressed (p. 131). The breakout success brought the new musical form to the attention of a world audience, just as the street art component that had been under increasing attack from conservative politicians was finding its way into downtown art galleries through the Ahearn brothers and Henry Chalfant.

A young artist called Freddy Braithwaite sought out the more established Lee Quiñones, joined his graffiti crew and was reborn as FAB 5 FREDDY. Within a year, FAB was in the first ever graffiti art show in Italy, and soon he was mixing with the likes of Andy Warhol and Keith Haring at the Mudd Club whilst at the same time checking out the rap crews and DJs.
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in the Bronx. FAB saw graffiti as an essential part of Bambaataa's revolutionary youth culture, as he wrote:

I once read somewhere that for a culture to really be a complete culture, it should have a music, a dance and a visual art. And then I realized, wow, all these things are going on. You got the graffiti happening over here, you got the breakdancing, and you got the DJ and MCing thing. In my head they were all one thing.’ (Chang, 149)

Meanwhile, The Clash had recorded a rap in early 1980 for the Sandinista! album. They arrived in New York in summer of that year, and booked Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five as the opening act for their show, much to the disgust and horror of many of their white punk fans. Despite this apparent cross-cultural setback, the nightclub was rapidly becoming a far more communal space; by spring 1981 Blondie had topped the charts with ‘Rapture’, a mainstream song referencing FAB 5 FREDDY and DJ Flash. Former Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren too had arrived at the same time as The Clash to promote his newest discovery, Bow Wow Wow. McLaren booked Bambaataa and the Rock Steady Crew to open for Bow Wow Wow, but it was his associate Ruza Blue who would prove the alchemist in bringing white and black sounds together. On Thursday nights her Negril club (already providing a heady interaction between Brit-punk and reggae) was hosting Wheels of Steel nights, bringing the Bronx sound downtown. And in April 1982, a white music journalist Tom Silverman introduced the multi-talented Bambaataa to the DJ and fledgling producer Arthur Baker. He and Bambaataa began work together and looked to some of their favourite music including Babe Ruth, Captain Sky, Kraftwerk, Rick James, Ennio Morricone and Gary Numan. In the process, a new concept in recorded music was born, teaming the electronic, robot-inspired music of Kraftwerk with rap: ‘Planet Rock’.

Immanent Critique

‘Trans-Europe Express’ is the eponymous fourth track of Kraftwerk’s 1977 album. The song is based in synthesized sound, beginning with a destabilized percussive swirling rhythm (a Doppler-like sound which evokes the rhythmic pattern of a train traveling over tracks and sleepers). This is followed at [0:05] by a series of notes building up perfect fourth intervals from Eb resolving to an Eb minor chord, and then the introduction of a steady, electronic rock beat (bass drum on 1 and 3, high-hat on 2, 4), with a new synthesizer sound for the interval-note pattern. These two sections are repeated to stabilize the pattern with additional lower harmonies, before a new section is introduced at [0:41], where a computer-modified voice speaks/whispers the words ‘Trans-Europe Express’ in time, four times
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to [0:57]. A sustained minor chord follows (the same key of the resolving note pattern previously), which after eight beats slides down a minor 3rd to a new C minor tonality (for 8 beats), with the voice now vocalizing in that particular key (again four times from [1:16]). The sonic effect of sliding down from one key to the lower could possibly evoke the effect of hearing extraneous sounds outside a very fast train modulate when one passes them by. The four repeats of the text this time builds up with harmonic notes in the fundamental minor chord.

At [1:33] we hear the first sustained melody (electronically produced) repeated, followed by the beginning interval-note pattern. A ‘normal’ (electronically non-modified) voice, speaking dialogue in English follows at [2:00] (with a quasi-French ‘Rendez-vous at Champs Élysées’ as opening text), followed immediately by a sung and unmodified ‘Trans-Europe Express’ (sung four times, again with the harmonic notes building higher in the fundamental minor chord). An exact repetition of the sustained melody occurs [2:26], and the fourth build-up again, followed by a different spoken dialogue at [2:52] in English (this time, locating the travel ‘In Vienna we sit in a late-night café’). At [3:02] ‘Trans-Europe Express’ reoccurs four times (again sung, with the harmonic notes building). This entire pattern of normal voice, sung ‘Trans-Europe Express’, sustained melody and fourth-interval build-ups repeats.

By [3:46] a new rapid 5-beat percussive element is introduced (sonically akin to a snare drum), and this sound is played (albeit with just two beats and then three after the initial 5-beat occurrence) all the way to [4:22], when we return to the fourth-interval pattern. Spoken and sung dialogue pattern occurs as it did previously, this time evoking a meeting with the musicians Iggy Pop and David Bowie at Düsseldorf city [4:35-4:38]. At each spoken section, the narrative advances, and by [5.28] we have register change of the sustained melody (to a higher register), and this repeats eight times, integrating the fourth-interval pattern within it. By the end the rhythm has folded into the next track, ‘Metal on Metal’.

‘Trans-Europe Express’ works on many levels because of the combination of the repetition of simple motives with new and interesting percussive elements and differing timbres and sonic effects. As a result of the highly repetitive nature of the rhythmic figures and electronic music structure, the spoken dialogue occupies a noticeably linear narrative in the work. It provides interest and evokes the sense of a progressive journey through continental Europe. The attraction of its simple minimalism, sparse texture and constantly repetitive figures allows a familiarity in the listener, and lends the work a potential for open-endedness.

‘Numbers’ is the third track from Kraftwerk’s eighth album, Computer World (1981), and is grounded in Kraftwerk’s established style of synthesized sound and vocals. It is remarkable in its distinct lack of melodic features and quirky, innovative synthesized sounds used for percussive and pseudo-
melodic effect. There is a distinct contrast to the strong melodic basis of the first two tracks, ‘Computer World’ and ‘Pocket Calculator’. It begins with a fourfold recitation of numbers in German (counting up to eight – the trope of counting numbers is recurrent throughout the work). By [0:10], the 3rd sounding of the counting a short, synthesized piano figure is introduced on the word ‘fünf’, and then a longer, lower, slower (i.e. minim) number count is introduced in a computer-modulated voice on a low Bb pitch. At [0:24] we hear the all-important introduction of the stabilized (although slightly syncopated) rhythmic percussion section, which is maintained until the end of the work. This rhythmic section has attached to it a type of random higher-pitched semi-quaver pattern, which is more percussive than melodic, but contains pitches that continue without vocal accompaniment until [1:22] when counting appears in different languages.

As the vocals reappear, the melodic feature of the rhythmic section disappears. Each language features a different rhythmic component – the German one is a simple 8 crotchets, the English one is merely 2 (on the 2nd and 3rd beat of the bar). At [1:54] the French counting (to three) appears with two minim, a minim rest and one more minim, and is later pared with the Spanish counting, which misses ‘tres’ in favour of the French ‘trois’, but adds ‘cuatro’ after the French ‘trois’. The Italian counting to 4 occurs before the introduction of the Spanish words, and features some syncopation (between ‘tres’ and ‘quattro’). Rhythm develops constantly throughout, and the higher-pitched semi-quaver pattern also changes. At [2:22] the vocal line disappears again, leaving the intense rhythmic pattern to feature itself until [2:52]. Two new languages appear at this point: Japanese (counting to 4, this time in a higher pitched, androgynous voice; and Russian (counting to 3 in three steady, low-pitched minim). These two languages mark the end of the track, which folds directly into the following song, ‘Computer World Part 2’ (a contrast to the fade-outs that mark the conclusion of every other track in the Computer World album).

‘Numbers’ is a striking work, not only in the general context of Kraftwerk’s output, but also because it seems so different and more experimental than the other tracks on Computer World. The lack of reliance on melodic drive focuses the listener towards considering rhythm as a melodic and prime interest, rather than just the driving accompaniment to the song in question. When vocals appear, they too rely more on the rhythmic sensibility than a pitch, and this rhythmic sensibility is also tied up in the language in which the numbers are being counted.

‘Planet Rock’ begins with Afrika Bambaataa exhorting to the crowd in a technique derived from soul singers such as James Brown, earlier DJs such as Grandmaster Flash, and not entirely different to the call-response patterns of early African-American music. After acknowledging important parts of the crowd (Party People, Soul Sonic Force, Zulu Nation), it is only at
the lyrics of ‘Just Hit Me’ that the beat is introduced, which is the same basic beat as that of Kraftwerk’s ‘Numbers’, though an 808 handclap/hi-hat pattern appears sporadically that appears to be a direct rhythmic allusion to the basic beat of ‘Trans-Europe Express’ (most notably at 3:19). The Soul Sonic Force crew start their rap (alternating lines), and it is at ‘But scream’ [0:48] that the melody from ‘Trans-Europe Express’ is introduced, and it is repeated, and treated very much as a bridge section to the next rap. This happens again at ‘Be what you be, so be’ [1:46]. A direct call-response occurs between crowd and rappers at ‘Everybody say Rock it don’t stop it’ [2:36]. At 3:19 a new keyboard melody appears that was modeled on a section from Babe Ruth’s ‘The Mexican’ (1972), that in turn was an appropriation of Ennio Morricone’s main theme for For a Few Dollars More (1965). The synthesized melodic motifs that occur up to [4:00] are very reminiscent of the Kraftwerk style in ‘Trans-Europe Express’, albeit not a direct take of the 4th-progressions. The ‘zih zih’ vocal section almost recalls the scat singing of jazz greats such as Ella Fitzgerald. The invocation of counting in Japanese is most definitely a reference to ‘Numbers’. Bambaataa rejoins the dialogue from ‘So hit me’ down to ‘now hit me’, and the rap is taken up again by Soul Sonic Force. The rap continues and fades out to the last two lines, repeated.

Musically and structurally, ‘Planet Rock’ works on layers quite different to the Kraftwerk works. Bambaataa’s introduction imbues an imprimatur on the song, as he evokes a group participation, from the live audience (party people) to the inventive word repartee of the Soul Sonic Force crew. The use of the ‘Numbers’ beat pattern is purely to provide a rhythmic consistency throughout the work; the further addition of the reconstructed synthesizer melody from ‘Trans-Europe Express’ acts first as a bridge between what is essentially the most important aspect of the song, that is, the lyrics, and later as an accompaniment under might notionally be termed a chorus (‘Rock, rock to the Planet Rock’). The lyrics provide not only a message and a philosophy, but they also add to the rhythmic and tonal complexity through the contrasting voices of Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force crew.

Poietic Critique

As suggested by Jim Aikin, Kraftwerk’s philosophy is firmly implanted within the Modernist (he refers to this as ‘Bauhaus’) agenda, ‘advancing to the stage of developing a society that has a ‘friendly, relaxed attitude towards working with machines … a complete symbiosis of organism and technology’ (Aikin, p34). Furthermore, Kraftwerk do not lay claim to being musicians (despite the two leading members of the group having studied music formally at University); rather, they call themselves ‘musical workers’, conceiving themselves as ‘functional parts of a music-making machine’ (Aikin, p35). In a 1981 interview, Ralf Hütter describes Kraftwerk’s music
as minimalist ‘to a point’, where the minimal nature encourages clarity of meaning. The other two descriptive expressions he chooses are ‘Industrielle Volksmusik’ (industrial music of the people) and ‘gerade aus’ (straight ahead) (Bohn 1981). This description hearkens back to a comment from 1977, after the release of Trans-Europe Express. At that time, Hütter stated, ‘[o]ur music is rather minimalist. If we can convey an idea with one or two notes, it is better to do this than to play a hundred ... there is no question of playing with a kind of virtuosity, there is all the virtuosity we need in the machines’(qtd. in Bussy, 1993, p87) He goes on to speak specifically about the inspiration behind ‘Trans-Europe Express’, and states ‘[t]he movement [of a train] fascinates us, instead of a static or motionless situation. All the dynamism of industrial life, of modern life … the artistic world does not exist outside of daily life, it is not another planet.’(p.88)

In an interview at the time of the release of Computer World, Hütter spoke explicitly about Kraftwerk’s aim to explore the emergence of computer technology and emerging fears about its use in a surveillance society. He observed that ‘now that it has been penetrated by micro-electronics our whole society is computerised, and each one of us is stored into some point of information by some company or organization, all stored by numbers.’ He specifically talked about the regulation of West German society (notably the transmission of passport information from border control to the Bundeskriminalamt in Wiesbaden), and of Kraftwerk’s desire in this album to take computers ‘out of context of those control functions and use them creatively in an area where people do not expect to find them. Like using pocket calculators to make music, for instance.’ (Hütter qtd in Bohn 1981).

Six years prior to this interview, in discussion with Lester Bangs for the magazine Creem Hütter explains the creation of Kraftwerk’s aesthetic in the context of the cultural crisis facing a post-Nazi Germany – an anxiety about the overwhelming presence of American music, a hesitancy and doubt about how to express German culture:

‘We are the first German group to record in our own language, use our electronic background, and create a Central European identity for ourselves … we cannot deny we are from Germany, because the German mentality, which is more advanced, will always be part of our behaviour. We create out of the German language, the mother language, which is very mechanical, we use it as the basic structure of our music. Also the machines, from the industries of Germany’ (Bangs, 1975, p4)

As Albiez and Lindvig indicate in this volume, Hütter’s statement could be read as part of an ironic or satirical strategy to counter the stereotypical attitudes about Germany and Germans they experienced in their first tour to the USA. However, these comments clearly reveal important cultural imperatives in Kraftwerk’s creative process: the desire to reconstruct a
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German character in music, and the necessity to configure this literally with the notion of technological skill as embedded in the German culture. In order to create, Kraftwerk seek inspiration of man-machine integration from past German industrial/mechanical/innovative triumphs of the 1920s, detached from the political implications surrounding those triumphs that were and remain refracted through Nazi ideology and atrocities. It is interesting to note that Hütter acknowledges the historical/ideological rift that his (post-Nazi) generation has had to negotiate (‘we certainly represent the generation with no fathers’) but also notes that in such a circumstance, ‘it is also in some ways encouraging because it gives you possibilities of doing new things’. (Bohn 1981)

Afrika Bambaataa began his music-making quest a little later than Kraftwerk. The commentary that Bambaataa and his producer Arthur Baker have to make is not only a commentary on their creative process, but on the reasoning behind using Kraftwerk’s material. An obsessive collector of records (especially with unusual covers), Bambaataa identified with the futuristic presentation of Kraftwerk, and integrated Trans-Europe Express and Computer World into his regular sets for progressively minded, multi-subcultural and multi-ethnic crowds. At the parties where he attracted new wave, hip-hop and punk attendees, he indicated that ‘[t]hat’s when you heard … a real cross-breed of music … I started digging up other electronic artists and that’s when I realised that there was no black group out there doing that electronic sound.’ (Barr, 1988, p165-166)

Arthur Baker also had an interest in Kraftwerk after buying Autobahn in the 1970s, and at high school had musical interests that cut across rock, pop and soul. However, he identifies that it was later as a DJ that he fully developed an interest in Kraftwerk’s music ‘because it was possible to dance to it. Bambaataa loved that too: it was a quest for the perfect beat.’ (Bussy, p.123) Baker has claimed that though they had a shared this interest, it was his idea to ‘use the beat from Kraftwerk’s ‘Numbers’ and the melody from ‘Trans-Europe Express’ and put a rap on top’ (Barr, 166). More recently (see Buskin 2008), he explicitly mentions the importance of call/response as a way of authenticating the ‘live element’ of the rap component of the work. He again claims that it was his idea to combine the beat of ‘Numbers’ (replicated by ‘Joe’- a hired man with a drum machine recruited via a Village Voice advert) with the melody of Trans-Europe Express. He indicates the music was completed in one session on one piece of tape, without the rappers. Baker also talks about the various ‘happy accidents’ which became accepted practices in later hip hop recording (kick/handclaps, the orchestra hit, etc). But by far the most revealing fact comes when he describes the rappers initial revulsion when hearing the ‘Planet Rock’ backing track. Baker indicates that Soulsonic Force member MC G.L.O.B.E.
worked out that they should do the track half-time as opposed to a regular rap that would be right on the beat. The beat was so fast, it would have been difficult for them to rap right on the beat, so he created a new style which he called 'MC Popping'. (qtd. in Buskin 2008)

Subsequently, G.L.O.B.E. wrote most of the lyrics for the song. Baker also indicates that he added the chorus himself that borrowed from a contemporary dance hit, ‘Body Music’ by Strikers. In addition notes that Bambaataa suggested using a break from Captain Sky’s ‘Super Sperm’, which appears to have been incorporated in the rhythmic basis of his ‘zih, zih’ scat interjection. All in all the production and composition of Planet Rock was truly a collaborative process between all concerned as Baker indicates when he states that

As it is, everything on the record played a part, as did everyone who was involved in its making, including Jay Burnett, who did a great job of engineering and whose voice is the one going 'rock rock to the planet rock, don't stop. (qtd. in Buskin 2008)

Aesthetic Critique

The only recorded public reaction to the initial unacknowledged copyright breach by Afrika Bambaataa in ‘Planet Rock’ was that of resentment and anger from two former Kraftwerk musicians who were in the group at the time. Karl Bartos, co-writer of ‘Numbers’, has said that ‘in the beginning we were very angry, because they didn’t credit the authors … [so] we felt pissed off … there was nothing written down saying that its source was ‘Trans-Europe Express’ and ‘Numbers’.’ (qtd. in Bussy, p.125). Wolfgang Flür also indicates Kraftwerk’s annoyance, but also that they soon resolved the situation when stating that ‘[t]hey didn’t even ask in the first place whether Kraftwerk was in agreement … the company that had released the single, Tommy Boy Records, had to fork out a lot of money after the event, but they just increased the price of the single … [and] recouped their fine.’ (Flür, 2000, p168)

These reactions are understandable especially when one takes into consideration Kraftwerk’s insistent (and foresighted) independence, and their consequently strong negotiating position with other record companies. However, it is important to note that neither Ralf Hütter nor Florian Schneider (the two creative centres of Kraftwerk) commented in press on the creation of ‘Planet Rock’, probably because they had reached a financial agreement with Bambaataaa as is implied by Flür.

It is also important to note that the clear appropriation of the Morricone For a Few Dollars More melody does not (so far) appear to have resulted in
similar controversy or litigation. Whether or not one takes into consideration the intellectual property issue(s), ‘Planet Rock’ marks a turning point in the construction of popular music. Bambaataa’s contribution to the introduction of electronic music into the commercially emerging rap/hip-hop milieu was crucial. However, it is important to note that the electro-funk sound had important contributions from several other artists, and that ‘Planet Rock’, no matter how innovative it clearly was, did not stand in musical isolation in the period. Early champion of electro-funk, British DJ Greg Wilson, suggests that before

“Planet Rock” … exploded on the scene in May 82, there had already been a handful of releases in the previous months that would help define this new genre. D Train’s “You’re The One For Me” (Prelude), which was massive during late 81, would set the tone, paving the way for “Time” by Stone (West End), “Feels Good” by Electra (Emergency) and two significant Eric Matthew / Darryl Payne productions, Sinnamon’s “Thanks To You” (Becket) and, once again courtesy of Prelude, “On A Journey (I Sing The Funk Electric)” by Electrik Funk (the term Electro-Funk originally deriving from this track, “electric-funk” being amended to Electro-Funk following the arrival of Shock’s “Electrophonic Phunk” on the Californian Fantasy label in June [1982]). (Wilson 2003)

As Wilson also indicates, in common with Baker and Bambaataa these artists drew influences from Kraftwerk, and UK electronic artists such as The Human League and Gary Numan. Likewise Wilson suggests they also looked back to

a number of pioneering black musicians … Miles Davis, Sly Stone, Herbie Hancock, Stevie Wonder, legendary producer Norman Whitfield and, of course, George Clinton and his P Funk brigade, [who] all [played] their part in shaping this new sound via their innovative use of electronic instruments during the 70s (and as early as the late 60s in Miles Davis’ case).’

Noting this wider network of artists and influences, it is important to consider why Kraftwerk proved influential for Bambaataa and others contributing to the emergence of electro-funk in this period. It can be suggested that Kraftwerk provided electro-funk with a suitably sparse, rhythmically regulated base, free from the teleologically thick guitar-based popular music before them. In doing so, they gave Bambaataa and others a template, a potential to expand musical language and bring together a new set of people on the dance floor: those who were, at that time, disenfranchised from the established rock industry and society as a whole (African American/
Latino street musicians, and other minority audiences who were beginning to assert their own voices including punks, gays, etc. In examining the success of Kraftwerk’s sound, Aikin (1982) argues that the regular 4/4 time, straightforward harmonics and easy melodic lines produce a hypnotic effect, fulfilling ‘our most basic subconscious expectations about how a phrase will round out; instead of being jarred by unexpected shifts, we are lulled into a receptive state’ (p. 38). The effect of this compositional simplicity is ‘to direct the listener’s attention toward the sounds in any given texture … and it is in these sounds themselves and their interlocking rhythmic relationships that Kraftwerk shines.’ (p. 38)

In relationship to ‘Planet Rock’, the combination of a harmonically hypnotic effect and regular beat was a highly appropriate backdrop for an improvised, narrative style of rap mixed with DJ. Though there were other important songs and artists that contributed to the development of electro-funk, there was no previous exploration or interaction of these contrasting traditions. As such Bambaataa lays claim to the teleological priority of ‘innovation’, a necessity for him to survive in the music industry. At the very same time, ‘Planet Rock’ ‘evokes’ musical works from various points over the preceding 17 years, and was a collaborative enterprise not solely authored by Bambaataa, Baker or MC G.L.O.B.E.

In the last decade, the phenomena of mashing, bastard pop, and Nü-Electro or Electroclash (Paoletta, p66-67) have brought a serious new challenge to this dynamic, where the necessity of ‘innovation’ has been challenged by the priority of ‘evocation’, rather than the reverse. From activist artists such as Danger Mouse, whose Grey Album mixed instrumentation from the Beatles’ White Album with vocals from rapper Jay-Z’s Black album, to the sexually provocative aesthetic of Peaches; from the deliberate detachment of Chicks on Speed to the twisted bastard pop of Soulwax (also known as 2ManyDJs), artists are now, more than ever, tapping into the universalist aesthetic and creative processes they perceive coming (in very different ways) from both Bambaataa and Kraftwerk. With readily available software, virtually any musician can now create newly mashed tracks; with open-source networks still in existence despite the best efforts of record companies, and with the invention of ever-smaller compressed sound files, Kembrew McLeod (2005, p83-84) can comment that the ‘[i]nternet is the Wild West of today, sort of like Hip Hop in the late 1980s before laws and bureaucracies limited its creative potential.’ At the heart of this aesthetic beats a disruptive rhythm which (in the case of 2ManyDJs) will mash the Peter Gunn theme together with Basement Jaxx’s Where’s Your Head At (which, in turn, samples Gary Numan’s ‘M.E.’) in a multilayered ironic interplay, perhaps not as explicitly political as Bambaataa or Kraftwerk in an old-school sense, but certainly aimed at commenting on the corporate restraint that governs musical output today. In this artistic context where the contribution of a posthuman (i.e.
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electronic) sound is now celebrated, Bambaataa continues to evoke, explore – on his 2004 album, *Dark Matter Moving at the Speed of Light*, he pays homage to Gary Numan with the reinterpretation of Numan’s iconic track ‘Metal’, collaborating with Numan himself.

‘Planet Rock’ endures as an iconic first-recorded representation of this aesthetic. *Plus ça change, plus c’est même chose* … below is an account of Afrika Bambaataa’s live set in Oakland in 1997:

But it was Bambaataa’s early morning set that really got the crowd moving. Even though the sun was nearly rising by the time he hit the stage, the bleary-eyed audience of rap and rave fans broke into break-dance circles and loopy Deadhead-style dances as Bambaataa’s fat beats filled the room. In fact, when he broke into his classic 1982 track ‘Planet Rock’, a propulsive mix of electro-funk meltdowns, blaring shipyard sirens and Latin house, it was clear that 15 years later, Bambaataa’s music is still way ahead of its time.’ (Kun, 1997, p24)

The year 1997 is also significant for Kraftwerk. As mentioned earlier, neither Schneider nor Hütter ever commented on the legal implications of Bambaataa’s use of their music. However, in this year the German rap producer Moses Pelham used a two-second sample of Kraftwerk’s 1977 track ‘Metal on Metal’ as part of a rhythm sequence in a song ‘Nur Mir’ by Sabrina Setlur. Kraftwerk successfully sued Pelham in a Hamburg state court, only to have the case overturned by Germany’s highest civil court in November 2008. It seems that in Germany, along with the rest of the world, outmoded notions of copyright and the new technologies are still clashing and interacting, and it is fascinating to observe the parallels here. It appears mystifying, bordering on ironic that Kraftwerk would attempt to sue someone for sampling two seconds of their work, especially considering that the constancy of their success has been due in no small part to the absorption of their samples through a vast array of popular musical genres and artists. One can only speculate why, after so many years Kraftwerk would choose this as a battleground – perhaps it is because they are fellow German artists that the issue strikes more personally; or perhaps this is the first time in a while that an artist has refused to pay Kraftwerk for the intended sample.

Philosophically, it may seem that Afrika Bambaataa and Kraftwerk are aeons apart. However, both were/are deeply committed to a universalist vision. Bambaataa’s philosophy is geared towards social justice, communal understanding and anti-racism. Kraftwerk were imbued from the start with a modernist, quasi-futurist sensibility that sought to integrate the bionic with the organic in alternative readings, as a way of commenting on the progress of technology and society. Mark Prendergast (2000) sees the alliance of classical (music) education and progressive use of electronics with pop concepts.
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(perfectly formed and often ironic) as Kraftwerk’s ‘tremendous cultural impact … Though often seen as over-simplistic and too mechanized in their approach, they nevertheless humanized electronic music for a mass audience’ (p. 301). Perhaps the best way to read the creation of ‘Planet Rock’ is to see the counter-intuitive folding of a new form from an old aesthetic with an old form of the new aesthetic, into a codified recording that fulfilled the aesthetic aspirations of both – creating, evoking, integrating, reinterpreting.

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