

# Tool and the Dionysian Future of Music: A Pop Analysis

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What follows is a music analysis of Tool, a contemporary American rock band comprised of a vocalist, drummer, guitarist, and bassist. Indicating how Tool's musical compositions involve experiments with altered and intensified states of consciousness that dissolve conventional boundaries to facilitate personal and collective healing and transformation, I suggest that Tool's music fulfills what Nietzsche, in *Ecce Homo*, calls his "tremendous hope" for "a Dionysian future of music."<sup>1</sup> Becoming Dionysian, Tool's music can be said to involve a kind of religious impulse, with religion being conceived broadly as a network of discourses and practices (e.g., myths, symbols, and rituals) that shape the dynamics of experience (e.g., feeling, thinking, and acting).<sup>2</sup> Religion can provide structure and meaning in people's lives, motivate transformation, and challenge established orders and meanings. It is in the latter transformative and disordering tendency of religion that the Dionysian impulse can be found.

Some might find it strange to take a rock band or any popular music seriously in a scholarly theoretical context, especially in a context that discusses a religious impulse named after an ancient Greek deity (Dionysus). Rock music and other genres of popular music are generally considered "trivial forms of secular entertainment," such that, as Robin Sylvan astutely observes, the profound implications of this music "remain hidden from view, marginalized and misunderstood."<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that popular music (which I am using synonymously with pop music, for short) in its general sense includes a wide variety of genres and should not be restricted to teen pop, dance, or bubblegum, but should also include country, rock, hip-hop, folk, metal, and much more. Pop music appeals widely to a variety of people, which stands in contrast to the music of fine arts (i.e., classical music), which is characterized by a narrow appeal to people with trained ears, academic backgrounds, and civilized refinement.<sup>4</sup> Although Tool or some other rock or metal band warrants being labeled as a different genre than a teen-pop performer (e.g., Justin Bieber), they are alike in their appeal to people without musical training or exposure to high culture.

Before describing Tool's music, I describe a method of analysis appropriate for analyzing music that appeals to the masses and escapes the confines of high culture: the pop analysis expressed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Then, I consider how Tool's music relates to Nietzsche's hope for a more Dionysian music.

## Pop Analysis

Pop analysis is a method for analyzing expressions or events that elude authoritative and proper standards. It is a method for analyzing that which escapes the majority. What Deleuze and Guattari call "pop" ("pop music, pop philosophy, pop writing") is an "escape for language, for music, for writing," an emancipatory gesture that makes use of the "polylingualism" of minorities and multiplicities to resist the "oppressive quality" of any regime of signs that aims to be "an official language" or "a master of the signifier."<sup>5</sup> Whether in music, philosophy, or some other mode of expression, pop designates an open system that is irreducibly complex, harboring a multiplicity of potentials for becoming different and/or becoming polylingual. That polylingualism can show up in many ways. For instance, a classical musician has to have knowledge of how to read sheet music; whereas, rock and folk musicians do not have to speak that official language. Although pop musicians speak to their audiences in ways prohibited by the conductor of a symphony orchestra (e.g., pop musicians can use profanity), if the pop musician wants to, they are free to speak like a polite conductor as well, by way of phrases such as "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen."

Pop subverts the status quo by becoming different. Deleuze articulates a guiding principle of pop analysis when he describes a cosmos in which "everything bathes in its difference."<sup>6</sup> Pop analysis traces those differences, crossing boundaries of academic disciplines and opening them up to pop languages. This methodological approach honors the creative and emancipatory power of popular culture and pop art, while also criticizing the use of cliché. When it is clichéd, the creative becoming of pop is habituated and conformist and is thereby prevented from becoming a force of liberation.<sup>7</sup> For example, the clichéd love stories in many pop songs can habituate a very narrow sense of love as sentimentality, and by conforming to that sentimentality, one severely limits one's capacity to deepen and intensify levels of intimacy or commitment in love. The criteria to discern the difference between clichéd and emancipatory tendencies in pop cannot externally transcend the music, for that would subordinate the music to a master signifier; they must be immanent to one's experimental encounters with the music and its clichéd or liberating tendencies.<sup>8</sup> However,

listeners and music change over time as they mutate in changing contexts, so that what was once liberating can become cliché, and vice versa.<sup>9</sup>

Although there are many more nuances to pop analysis, for now it will suffice to say that the aim of pop analysis is to map out the differential relations of a system and experiment with them, subverting oppressive structures and engaging the creative becomings of the system, which is to say, the multiple capacities of what the system can do. Those capacities are open to endless creative repetitions, overflowing the limits of master signifiers and of all official accounts of what things are, what they can do, and how much they can do it. In short, a pop analysis of any music (pop or classical) holds open the question: What can this music do? How do its imbricated lyrics, instrumentation, and rhythm constellate different modes of existence? A pop analysis of *pop* music finds musical compositions that are already opening up those questions, opening up possibilities to transform and become different, to escape from the homogenized majority, to “Get up,” as Tool’s vocalist Maynard James Keenan sings, “and free yourself from yourself.”<sup>10</sup>

## **Tool**

Tool was founded in 1990 and is still performing and releasing new music.<sup>11</sup> The band pushes limits in many ways, thus eschewing clichéd tendencies of rock and of popular music in general. Their musical compositions utilize the verse-chorus-bridge structure common to pop music, yet they push the limits of that structure, either by dissolving the distinction between verse and chorus parts (e.g., the similarity in the bass parts for the verse and chorus of “Forty Six & 2”), or they multiply those sections beyond a threefold structure (e.g., the many distinct song sections of “Rosetta Stoned”).<sup>12</sup> They also extend the lengths of their songs from the three-minute-average of most pop songs to ten minutes or more, which is common in metal but quite rare in other genres of pop music.

Tool fits in the genre of rock while pushing the clichéd use of genre to its limit, developing melodies, riffs, rhythms, and vocal stylings that move across boundaries of rock, metal, punk, progressive genres, and more, as indicated by the occasional presence in their music of synthesizers and of the tabla (a hand drum from India). The explicit religious elements of Tool’s music can be discerned in the lyrics, rhythms, and instrumental melodies and harmonies that make up the band’s compositions.

In some ways, Tool also seems anti-religious. The lyrics of Tool’s songs express critiques of traditional institutional forms of religion, especially Christianity. Songs like

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“Opiate” and “Eulogy” satirize religious claims to authority or leadership and the weakness of those who follow that leadership, those who are, as the lyrics of “Opiate” put it, “deaf and blind and dumb and born to follow.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a whole album (*Opiate*) bears a title that alludes to Karl Marx’s famous critique of religion as “the opium of the people.”<sup>14</sup> However, amid the critique of authoritarian religion, the lyrics also express commitments to personal transformation and the realization of the divine potential of humanity, specifically using images and symbols from traditions of Western esotericism (e.g., alchemy, astrology, and magic), including lyrics that speak of personal transformation by opening the “third eye” and lyrics that reformulate a classic hermetic axiom about microcosm-macrocosm interconnectedness: “As below, so above and beyond.”<sup>15</sup> Some language is more explicitly religious, for instance, singing of embodied existence as a “holy gift” (“Parabola”), or singing of aspiration to realize one’s “divinity and still be a human” (“Lateralus”).<sup>16</sup> Other notable lyrical characteristics include the use of profanity, the use of screaming in the vocal melody, and multiple allusions to drug intoxication, chaos, transgressive sexual acts, and death-rebirth experiences. The lyrics alone indicate that Tool expresses a non-authoritarian religiosity that strives for transformation through intensified experiences, like ecstatic states or initiatory ordeals that bring about meaning and order through a transgression of personal boundaries and social conventions.

Furthermore, the religious elements of Tool’s music are not expressed primarily through lyrics or voice. Unique among pop music, Tool’s lyrics are not a dominant part of the music. This is evident on stage, where the vocalist is not placed front and center. The band is arranged in more of a rectangle with no central position. The decentering of voice is not only evident in the perceived geometry of the band, but also aurally, insofar as the rhythms and instrumental harmonies of the instruments are not mixed into the background but are just as prominent as the vocals, making some lyrics very hard to hear or understand. Some songs are even entirely instrumental. The distorted and electronically altered sounds of the guitar and bass contribute much emotional intensity to the music, using complex and dissonant tones and sound-patterns, thus providing a feeling of engagement with the world by disturbing the conventional privilege that pop culture gives to music that is clear, consonant, and easily comprehensible. Tool’s music opens up a less comprehensible and more visceral meaning immanent to one’s complex and chaotic engagement with the changes of the world, “I wanna feel the change consume me...Change is coming. Now is my time.”<sup>17</sup>

The beats played by the instruments (especially drums) frequently make use of polyrhythms, wherein multiple meters occur simultaneously in a multi-stable gestalt. Not incidentally, polyrhythms are a defining trait of the ritual music of African diaspora traditions, where the mixture of meters corresponds to the mixture of divinity and humanity that occurs in the spirit possession states that the music occasions.<sup>18</sup> Rock, metal, electronic music, and many other strands of popular music use polyrhythms, but much of it just amounts to syncopation, where the mixed meters are emphasized in a way that makes one meter the basic orienting beat to which the other meter syncs. In contrast, Tool makes conscious use of polyrhythms, such that rhythmic complexity is even more pronounced (i.e., more disorienting) than in an average electronic dance song on the radio, wherein one can still detect, and tap a foot to, a steady pulse underlying any rhythmic irregularities or oddities. In polyrhythm, one feels many ways to tap one's foot to the beat, and no single way appears to be the primary pulse. Furthermore, Tool's drummer, Danny Carey, exhibits some rather explicitly religious elements by setting up his drums using hermetic correspondences.<sup>19</sup> All of the music, including the lyrics, expresses a religious orientation toward intensified dynamics of experience, and it is a non-hierarchical orientation, which does not privilege comprehensible lyrics over the geometrical and aural presence of the music. This Dionysian orientation is also apparent during their live performances, where the stage is often decorated with the psychedelic artworks of the visionary painter, Alex Grey, and audience members encounter drug use, nudity, dancing, screaming, moshing, and various boundary-dissolving states of consciousness. In sum, Tool's musical compositions and performances harbor multiple potentials for facilitating liberation from the boundaries of conventional and authoritarian beliefs and institutions.

Tool's music opens possibilities for becoming different, intensifying one's existence so as to facilitate healing for the microcosm and macrocosm of self and world. Furthermore, these religious aspects of Tool's music can be described as Dionysian, particularly insofar as they revolve around altered and intensified states of consciousness and a non-rational impulse that undoes the subordination of rhythm to discourse (lyrics and vocal melody). The idea of Dionysian music warrants some elaboration, not only to help develop a pop analysis of the religious elements of Tool's music, but to show how Tool expresses a boundary-dissolving impulse characteristic of the history of rock music and of pop music in general.

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## Dionysian

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche declares his “tremendous hope” for “a Dionysian future of music,” in which music would free itself from moralizing and rationalizing tendencies and creatively affirm the boundary-dissolving experiences that accompany states of ecstasy.<sup>20</sup> This tremendous hope for Dionysian music follows from his critique of the moralizing and rationalizing tendencies of Western music, according to which music is subordinate to the boundaries drawn by good sense, reason, and intelligible discourse.<sup>21</sup>

For Nietzsche, the rationalization and moralization of music is a life-negating habit, imprisoning the multiple forces of life in the narrow confines of good sense and reason. A more fulfilling existence requires a more life-affirming sense of music, a music that overcomes the moral and rational codes of musical history, a Dionysian music wherein the intense and boundary-dissolving power of rhythm and sound is encountered as a wellspring of creative enchantment. Moreover, by invoking Dionysus, Nietzsche indicates that this life-affirming music occasions ecstatic states not unlike those experienced by participants in the ancient Dionysian mysteries, wherein music facilitated ritual acts oriented toward the dissolution of the boundaries of ordinary waking consciousness, standing in stark contrast to life-negating religious services, wherein everybody maintains a habitual sense of the boundaries organizing reality. Also, those ecstatic states were occasioned by wine that included a variety of psychotropic plants in its composition, which is worth noting in light of the allusions that Tool makes to psychedelics (e.g., their work with the psychedelic art of Alex Grey) and altered states of consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

Many forms of twentieth-century music contributed to the fulfillment of Nietzsche’s tremendous hope for a Dionysian future of music.<sup>23</sup> The music that has been most Dionysian emerged not in classical or art music but in popular music. As the pop analysis developed by Deleuze and Guattari suggests, becoming heterogeneous and minoritarian is the only way to effectively escape the master signifiers and major identities that dominate music, and that is precisely what pop music and pop culture accomplish. Varieties of pop music spread through mainstream culture in networks of subcultural and countercultural trends, thus engaging while also subverting conventional standards and moral authorities, including those that mark the proper boundaries of music as a “fine” or “high” art. Lyrics in pop music use local dialects and diverse idioms that transgress proper grammar; and furthermore, the topics of those lyrics frequently transgress conventional moral codes (especially regarding sexual promiscuity). Tool, Led Zeppelin, Lady Gaga, and Jay-Z all say things that do not conform to

what a serious lyricist of a classical opera would say. As Tool's Keenan sings, "I can say what I want to, even if I'm not serious. Things like, 'Fuck yourself.'"<sup>24</sup>

This Dionysian tendency is not only in pop lyrics, but is also in its rhythms and melodies, as it is with Tool's music. First, the rhythms and melodies of pop are extremely repetitive, designed not to express a clear development of musical motifs but to provoke uninhibited dancing, community building, sexual activity, and ecstatic states. The live performances of pop music are very loud, far louder than the average performance in a church or symphony orchestra hall, thus intensifying and transgressing one's habitual exposure to music. Likewise, the behavior of audience members includes acts that are not welcome at a classical music venue (e.g., singing along with the performers, screaming, nudity, and drug use). In short, the lyrical, instrumental, and performative dimensions of pop music enact Dionysian modes of becoming that escape the master signifiers of Western music.

Even more than other kinds of pop music, rock is uniquely focused on altered states and modes of existence that overflow rational and moral discourse, and Tool more than many other rock bands is capable of creating complex musical compositions, which eschew clichéd forms of rock, like the simple verse-chorus-bridge structure, the central emphasis on vocals, or the use of rhythms in simple meters. Moreover, rock has explicitly understood itself as Dionysian for decades, from Jim Morrison to Marilyn Manson; and it should be noted that the British origins of rock also express Dionysian elements.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, to describe Tool's music with the term Dionysian does not subordinate Tool to a master signifier but situates Tool within the subversive pop tradition of rock music.

Perhaps official authorities and scholars could say that rock musicians have been incorrect to call themselves "Dionysian." Maybe a better term would more properly reflect the indebtedness of rock to the rhythmic styles of African diaspora traditions or the experimental spirituality of Western esotericism. In any case, it is worth considering the possibility that rock musicians are not trying to be *correct* in calling themselves Dionysian, but perhaps they are trying to thwart authoritarian conventions and proper standards with a life-affirming creativity that overflows reason and good sense, a creativity that evokes intense experiences that generate powers of transformation and healing. The point is not to quibble about labels and definitions but to listen with feeling and become moved: to become different.

In the words of Maynard James Keenan: “You really should be able to feel the higher power of music and be moved by it, rather than listening to me waffle on and having to explain it.”<sup>26</sup>

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 51.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Mark C. Taylor's definition of religion as "an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure." See Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to classical music in the general sense, not in the specific sense of the music of the Classical period, which was preceded by the Baroque and followed by the Romantic period.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 26–27. For those familiar with the concept of rhizomatics – one of the more well-known concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari – it is helpful to know that Deleuze and Guattari identify pop analysis with the work of rhizomatics, which maps the complex and non-hierarchical relations of various kinds of systems (artistic, linguistic, biological, geological, etc.). As they say with the emphasis of all capital letters, "RHIZOMATICS = POP ANALYSIS." See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 243.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Buchanan, "Deleuze and Pop Music," *Australian Humanities Review* 7 (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Ramey provides a clear account of the call for immanent criteria in Deleuze and Guattari, noticing that a thorough examination of "the character of the specific practices by which they [Deleuze and Guattari] exemplify the parameters of creative becoming... suggests the need for immanent criteria." Philosophy "must invent a set of immanent criteria that can be neither formulated without nor expressed in advance of its experiments. In this way immanent thought harbors a kind of blanket affirmation of expanded experimentation." Of course, experiments do not always produce the desired result. Accordingly, "immanent thought can often fail to be creative, and can produce hallucination, erroneous perceptions, and bad feelings. However, Deleuze argues that if we are to think at all, there is no choice but to risk these dangers." See Joshua Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze: Philosophy and Spiritual Ordeal* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012), 188, 180, 21.

<sup>9</sup> The important thing is to experiment and not accept as given any pre-established taxonomy separating the conformist pop from emancipatory pop. Does the experiment result in a renewal of one's engagement with the world or an expansion of one's receptivity to novelty? If so, then it is liberating pop. However, if the experiment results in a homogeneous or conformist engagement that impairs one's receptivity to that which is new and different, then it is clichéd.

<sup>10</sup> Tool, "4°," in *Undertow* (California: Zoo Entertainment, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> A history of Tool can be found in many online contexts. For a widely circulated version of that history, see Kabir Akhtar, "The Tool FAQ," *Toolshed* (July 16, 2001). Tool is reported to be recording a new album. Danny Carey has even suggested that the album could be released sometime in 2013 ("Sometime this year"). Carey's comments were reported by the rock and metal news website, Blabbermouth.net: "Tool Drummer Hopeful New Album Will Drop This Year" (February 7, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Tool, "Forty Six & 2," in *Ænima* (California: Zoo Entertainment, 1996); Tool, "Rosetta Stoned," in *10,000 Days* (California: Volcano Entertainment, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Tool, "Opiate," in *Opiate* (California: Zoo Entertainment, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right.'* trans. Joseph O'Malley and Annette Jolin (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 131.

<sup>15</sup> For references to the third eye, listen to Tool, "Third Eye," in *Ænima*. On the hermetic correspondence between above and below, listen to the title track of Tool, *Lateralus* (California: Volcano Entertainment, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> "Parabola" and "Lateralus" are both on the album *Lateralus*.

<sup>17</sup> Tool, "Forty Six & 2."

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of the role of polyrhythms in phenomena of spirit possession in a traditional African religious context, see Steven Friedson, *Dancing Prophets: Musical Experience in Tumbuka Healing* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> In some performances he has placed his drums in front of an Enochian magic board, which is something like a metaphysical map of the interconnected levels and dimensions of reality, not unlike the visual maps provided by mandalas in Hinduism or representations of the tree of life in Kabbalah.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Examples of this subordination of music to rationality can be found throughout Western history. A classic example is in Plato's *Republic*, where the ideal city is described as one in which songs should be arranged in a hierarchy that subordinates their harmony and rhythm to their verbal element, their *logos*; see Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 397b-402a. This subordination resonates in some Christian religious music (e.g., plainchant and liturgical music), where *logos* is Christ. That is not to say that this subordination is a problem for all Platonism or all Christianity, Nietzsche's bombastic rhetoric notwithstanding. In musical systems, whether Platonic, Christian, modern, etc., there are always multiplicities harboring potentials for becoming otherwise. For instance, the history of Christianity includes many affirmations of non-rational expressions (e.g., "speaking in tongues," glossolalia). For an even simpler example, think of the polite and buttoned-down behavior of the performers and audience at a symphony orchestra hall.

<sup>22</sup> On the use of psychotropic substances in the wine of Plato's culture, see Michael Rinella, *Pharmakon: Plato, Drug Culture, and Identity in Ancient Athens* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> For example, consider Arnold Schoenberg's atonal pieces, which thoroughly challenged the official rules of scales and keys (i.e., tonality). Also, consider John Cage's aleatory and silent compositions, which opened up official definitions of music so that random sounds (i.e., noise) and silence could be considered as music. However, Schoenberg and Cage are still classical musicians, still appealing primarily to listeners of relatively high culture and refinement.

<sup>24</sup> Tool, "Hush," in *Opiate*.

<sup>25</sup> On the Dionysian elements of rock music, including British and American examples, see the following: Wilfred Mellers, *Twilight of the Gods: The Music of the Beatles* (New York: Schirmer, 1975); Dirk Dunbar, "Rock and Roll's Twist and Shout for Dionysus," in *The Balance of Nature's Polarities in New-Paradigm Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994); Dirk Dunbar, "The Evolution of Rock and Roll: Its Religion and Ecological Themes," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 2 (2002).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Steve Morse, "Sonic Evolution With the Use of Tool," *Boston Globe*, November 15, 1996, D14.