

# SYNCH/UNSYNCH

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In the thriller *Collateral* (2004), Tom Cruise is a contract killer called Vincent. There is a scene depicting a shoot-out in a Korean night club in East Los Angeles. Filmed with hand-held cameras and accompanied by the noise of shooting and relentless disco music, the space of the night club shoot-out collapses as in a major catastrophe (or catastrophe movie) as we watch the scene. Bodies are thrown towards each other and onto the floor. But as much as the scene depicts a powerful eruption of entropy, chaos, and cultural kinesthesia (see O'Dell 2004), the scene can also be understood as an example of cultural synchronization. At the same time as everything crumbles, the relentless and intoxicating rhythms of the dance music played in the night club actually seem to gather kinesthetic energy from the shoot-out (Klinkmann 2005). This kind of cultural synchronization, here seen on a relatively small scale, is the theme of this chapter. More specifically I want to examine the concept of cultural synchronization (“synch”) by way of its negation, cultural desynchronization (“unsynch”), with examples taken from a broad field of practices, mainly through popular music.

The scholarly interest in timescapes, temporal semantics, anachronisms and the like is a rising area of cultural research today. I will not go into these broader theoretical frames more than simply mentioning a couple of comprehensive efforts to theorize time, timescapes and cultural understandings of the meaning of time. Two notable efforts in this research on time concepts, which have informed my under-

standing of the concept of synchronization, are the work done by Adam (1990, 2004) and Grosz (1999, 2004). Time can of course be understood from several different angles. Time can be seen from the point of view of compression, durability, movement, pointedness, recurrence, speed, situatedness, etc.

A central proposition here is that the concept of digital real time has proven to be something of an Archimedean fixation point, at the same time absolute and relative, both fixed and forever flowing into the becoming, into future. The “absolute real time” of digitality has enforced the concept of now and at the same time given cultural synchronization a boost. As Gere (2004) has noted, ‘real time’ also stands for the more general trend towards instantaneity in contemporary culture, involving increasing demand for instant feedback and response, one result of which is that technologies themselves are beginning to evolve faster. The increasing complexity and speed of contemporary technology is the cause of both euphoria and anxiety, Gere writes.

As I will show, the concepts of synch and unsynch are closely related to a powerful emergence of a constantly narrowing, ever more abstract point of *now*. At the same time this focus on the now-moment seems to lead to emergences of action, not least bodily action, because there seems to be quite a strong linkage between these three basic concepts (now, action, body; cf. Grosz 2004; Hassan 2005).

A cultural understanding of the synch/unsynch phenomenon stems, I think, mainly from two separate semantic terrains. On one hand is the concept

of the organic, i.e. that which belongs to nature, the sphere of ecology, with its order and its flow. On the other hand there is the sphere of the machine, or a mechanistic logic, in which the various parts of a larger whole, an engine, a cultural aggregate, or some other complex man-made thing (e.g. a computer), works by ordering timely flows within the machinery.

If the idea of cultural synchronization seems to stem from two different, but related terrains, those of the ecological and of the mechanistic orderings of things, I also look into its opposite, the lack of synchronization. It could be argued that you only are able to spot the synchrony when you see the things which do not fit. Things out of step can be the best guide to the steps. I will proceed by discussing different conceptions of the unsynch-phenomenon, in the following order: (1) cool/uncool, (2) sung/unsung and (3) fashionable/unfashionable. I do not regard these three aspects of the synch/unsynch phenomenon to be comprehensive. Other important dualities might be the untimely, the prophetic and the timeless. But in this analysis I will concentrate upon these three aspects of time.

### **Cool/Uncool**

The concept of cool has a cultural background in the urban jazz scene in Harlem, New York in the 1930s and its movement into the American youth culture of the 50s as a general emblem of both rebellion and group connectedness. Cool is a semiotic marker of style related to the special cultural formations – youth subcultures for example – which emerged in the sociocultural context of modern Western industrialized and urbanized society (Danesi 1994). Cool's relevance to popular culture and music has something to do with phenomena such as marginalization, liminality and reflexivity (Klinkmann 2002: 121ff.). In the realm of popular culture, these concepts are strongly connected to an experience of a fleeting now, passing into an immediate future. Or, to put it in Löfgren's phrase, in the contemporary world of a catwalk economy, or an experience economy, the trick is to be able to "communicate the fact that you are a fast, innovative and creative ac-

tor on the market, one who already has a claim into the future". As Löfgren notes, the crucial questions concern this short temporal span, when one is a step ahead, capitalizing on the short time span, identifying the absolute new, and staging, exploiting and controlling this fragile capital called "newness" or "being ahead" (Löfgren 2005: 57ff.).

An example of the cool hunter is Swedish pop music critic Andres Lokko, who has been described as the most interesting music critic in Sweden, with a postmodern sensibility (Lindberg et al. 2000: 375–377). In his own words, he wants to be "childish" with curiosity and enthusiasm intact. At the same time he is a socialist for whom uncool (sic!) words such as engagement and empathy are important. Lokko believes in an emphatic, passionate form of writing. Lokko's idiom includes a preoccupation with temporality, and marking out cultural capital in the form of a distanced, or slightly ambivalent, position with regard to popular, widely held tastes in youth communities.

Lokko's world of coolness is related to the many markers of the critic's positions regarding taste and tastemaking (cf. Bjurström 1997). His preferences are often described as "falling in love" with particular music. His sympathies and antipathies are frequently constructed through mini-stories. Writing about a new CD by British pop group Prefab Sprout, which he sees as idiosyncratic and unfashionable, he calls the cowboy theme of the CD "a perfect and almost deliriously unfashionable theme." Obviously to underline the impression of uncoolness in this case, he tells a story about an old friend of his, a rabid Prefab Sprout fan, who works today as a journalist on a home fashion magazine and writes about classical music and opera in a Swedish evening paper. This describes an almost total drop out from the popular music orbit, the ultimate of uncool in this case.

Lokko's columns and reviews can be read as stories of his own positioning in relation to his relevant cultural milieu – the Swedish and metropolitan pop music world – involving highly complex temporal transformations, displacements and juxtapositions. He tells stories of his musical yesterday, of his now, and of pockets of timelessness in his life of listen-

ing to pop music. He often shows how something he didn't understand at one point has now become clear to him (the unsung/sung phenomenon). A case in point is the female singer/songwriter Margo Guryan and her sole record *Take a Picture* (1968), which was, he writes, "a completely forgotten pearl which nobody would have had the chance of hearing had it not been for Siesta" (a Spanish indie record company) (Gradvall 2002: 97).

Lokko's time framing frequently uses the phrase "in this instant", a magic substance giving life to the music in question. In a column in *Svenska Dagbladet* (10.12. 2005) he notes that pop music is about seizing the second: "For us who love it (pop music) as much as we love life itself it is all that matters. When the song has faded we can go about with our ordinary chores without giving it a thought afterwards again."

If he has listened to a record for a week it's a long time, since the pace of taste is fast in the world of pop. But he also invites achronism as his confidant. Listening to British singer and guitarist Matt Deighton is for him an act of timelessness comparable to angling (Gradvall 2002: 247) (at least since Izaak Walton's seventeenth century classic, *The Compleat Angler, or the Contemplative Man's Recreation*, the themes of angling and timelessness are closely intertwined in the popular imagination). Lokko's world is centered on modernism of the 1960s (ibid.: 264–265) and "ultramodernism", for example the Japanese "pop-noise savant" Cornelius (ibid.: 457–458).

In a key text about a record collection including 50s jazz, 60s soul, old blues and British mod bands, he meditates upon the modernism of the 60s, in his view the cornerstone of all that he values in pop music. To Lokko, modernism is "to forever be one step ahead, to always search around the corner where no one else has had the idea to look, to build his/her own world of unreachable ideals in music, clothes and politics, a world which no one ever gets access to" (ibid.: 264). Lokko's rhetoric is oddly reminiscent of the "utopian" science-fiction series *Star Trek*.

Lokko seems to be drawn to a temporal positioning that could be called an "instant future" or a "miniature utopia", existing just out of reach or a step from the buzzing and chaotic mess of the

cultural, overcrowded *now* and culturally over-determined popular music history. Being cool is for Lokko "to refuse to step into line" (ibid.: 69). Being uncool in his scheme would indicate that the person in question moves in the cultural mainstream, follows trends and behaves as a cultural copycat.

As Swedish journalist Karin Ström notes in *Svenska Dagbladet* (3.12.2004), café culture is a cultural domain even more trendy than design or music. The impetus to be cool is even more important in the café than in other areas, because the rate of change is so fast. Tomorrow a café coretto might be just as uncool as café au lait. The trendiness of the café world leads to new emerging niches, such as the borderless café, which can be a café in the grocery store, in the little record shop, or the cafés with an expanding agenda, a coffee shop with bulgur salad and Turkish coffee, chocolate tasting, readings of fairy tales, or dance exhibitions (Ström 2004).

Margins between the extreme positions of the cool/uncool dichotomy shrink, the question of a blurring of the borders of the whole concept of coolness is gaining currency. One could speak of the cool/uncool paradox, where in the light of the speeding up of the forward moving and narrowing now moment, all things tend to become uncool in an instant. An example of this paradox is the reportage by Karrie Jacobs, writing in *Metropolis magazine* on the retro-stylings of Ironworks Lofts, a community in Frederick, Colorado. There she found "stand-alone" loft houses and single family subdivision houses tricked out in industrial brick and steel with names like the Firehouse and the Cannery. Jacobs has become interested in this kind of place and design simply because she is an "uncool hunter" (as she calls herself), and her talent is "discovering the places where hipness goes to die. I drive around the country and stumble on phenomena that make me realize that something I once valued is about to be eaten alive by mindless commerce."

The loft is a monument to the disappearance of industry, she notes. The borders of fake and real, of innovation and nostalgia tends to become blurred as a dichotomy and simply turned upside down in the kind of temporal organization which the cool/

uncool dichotomy represents. According to Jacobs, a good place to seek out the uncool is the point where style is pried loose from any semblance of meaning.

### Sung/Unsung

Another type of anachronism is the unsung person or phenomenon, often the unsung hero. I will give some examples of this temporal mode and discuss one of these unsung heroes, and explain why they are important to more general temporal semantics. What is remarkable about unsung heroes such as country soul singer and guitarist Eddie Hinton, country singer Keith Whitley, post punk chanteuse (cum ex model) Marianne Faithfull, pop music producer and musical visionary David Axelrod, and jazz bassist Henry Grimes, is that their life stories seem to be taken directly from one of the bleaker Dickens novels, with their enormous upheavals of personal and professional fame and fortune. The common denominator of these unsung heroes is that they have had an initial success not quite extraordinary, still healthy. Then their life and career went into a tailspin of the most intense sort. Thus, Marianne Faithfull, the top model of the swinging London scene of the 1960s and ex girl friend of Mick Jagger, experienced a serious downfall in the 1970s when heavy drug and alcohol abuse transformed her into a homeless and tragic figure living on the edge of society. Eddie Hinton, guitar ace in the glory days of southern soul, was busy recording in Muscle Shoals, Alabama in the 1960s and early 1970s, but personal turmoil left him on the street, penniless and heartbroken. Heavy drug abuse also left visionary producer David Axelrod living a life as a bum in LA. Keith Whitley, one of Nashville's chief contenders for the title of "country star of the 80's", couldn't cope with alcohol and ended his days dead, drunk on a carpet at the age of 34.

Henry Grimes was a busy and highly respected bass player in the world of swing and free jazz in the 1950s and 60s. He recorded with both "the King of Swing" Benny Goodman and with the free jazz prophet Albert Ayler. The remarkable story of his fall and redemption is told in plain, unadorned prose on the music site *All Music Guide*:

In 1967 when he was just 31, Henry Grimes disappeared completely from the jazz scene. Decades passed and he became one of jazz's most prominent missing persons. He was long presumed dead because no one in jazz heard a word from him. So in 2002 it was a major surprise when Grimes was discovered living in a hotel in South Central Los Angeles, where he had resided for the past 20 years. Grimes, who had become frustrated with the music world and suffered from some ambiguous mental problems, had spontaneously quit music and worked odd jobs for years.

Grimes was discovered by Marshall Marrotte, a social worker and writer, and was soon interviewed by *Sound to Noise* magazine. William Parker, a fellow jazz bassist, sent him a bass in December 2002 and since then Grimes is back in the cultural economy, has regained his form and has played with a combo led by avant-garde guitarist Marc Ribot, a group dedicated to the revitalization and reimagination of the music of free jazz visionary Albert Ayler.

Henry Grimes', who was "lost" for three decades and then made a remarkable comeback, life story follows a pattern which is also *mutatis mutandis* applicable to narratives about many other "unsung heroes'" lives. The basic element is that of the fall from success or grace, the long wasted years, and then the peripetia or recasting of fortunes, with an anagnorisis, a recognition and rediscovery of who the person "really" is, and his/her re-establishment in the "right" position in the cultural landscape. The classical storytelling of these unsung heroes resonates with the stories of Ulysses, Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, Edmund Dantes and other such heroes/heroines of (melo)dramatic fiction (Watt 1996; Brooks 1976/1995). The crucial point of these stories is the moment of peripetia (reversal of fortunes) and anagnorisis (recognition) which have elements of rediscovery and reimagination. Not even death can prevent magical anachronism from taking place. Some unsung heroes are celebrated and deeply missed by many fans only after their untimely death. This is the case with both Keith Whitley and Eddie Hinton. What the unsung heroes seem to be telling

us is that the fleeting moment of synch can appear at any time, even after physical demise. Even death is not an obstacle to being in synch!

### Fashionable/Unfashionable

I find the fashionable/unfashionable duality especially intriguing in relation to the concept of synch/unsynch, because it has an important connection to matters of cultural capital, including the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy. Bourdieu's influential work on cultural and symbolic capital is spatially oriented, and time concepts are strongly underplayed.

Examples of the lowbrow unfashionable mode would be the German budget supermarket chain Lidl with its downsized design, and flea markets and old-time dance bands and singers. The unfashionable aspect of these examples is in no way one dimensional. What one person describes as unfashionable another can view as exciting, nostalgic, exotic and the like. The unfashionable quality of a certain product or representation is above all connected to its low cultural or symbolic status, and the low budget nature of the enterprise. There seems to be no consensus about what is fashionable and what is not. The cultural positioning of those who make this distinction is crucial, just as with the cool/uncool dichotomy. There is now a surge in the fashion of cultural value of being unfashionable. This is clearly about the highbrow variety of the unfashionable. British crooner and guitarist Richard Hawley is a case in point. An internet site calls his second solo CD, *Lowedges* (2003) "an out-of-its-time curio that likely woulda won more hearts 40 years ago than it'll probably win in this here and now" (Gravitygirl). About his latest offering, *Coles Corner* (2005), *All Music Guide*, notes:

Reveries, nostalgia, longed-for wishes, regret, sadness, and the bittersweet mark of the beloved left on the heart of the left and lost. Early rock & roll and rockabilly, country, traces of the vintage-'40s pop, jazz, and even some blues, fall together in a seamless, nearly rapturous whole. Hawley's guitar sound, ringing like a voice from another present era, steps beyond dimension to underscore the emotion and story in his voice.

Here the unfashionable has clearly become ultra-fashionable.

A couple of examples may further illustrate this tendency. The first concerns Pope John Paul II. Shortly after his death Swedish journalist Maciej Zaremba wrote in *Dagens Nyheter* (6.4.2005) about "an unfashionable pope who was ahead of his time". The illustration to Zaremba's article is highly appropriate: a young male break dancer flying through the air head down and feet high up in the air, and in the background of the picture the old and sick Pope on a stool with his head characteristically slightly bowed. The picture was taken on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2004, a little more than a year before the Pope's demise.

Zaremba claims that the reputation of Pope John Paul II will not rest on his stance on contraceptives, nor even on his views on abortion or Opus Dei, which were the same as his predecessors. Zaremba adds, citing cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, that John Paul II remains hopelessly old fashion, and his mark in history will rest on the extent to which he has changed the established order of things, and widened human beings' freedom and dignity.

A decidedly positive appreciation of the unfashionable is served by the Swedish Academy's permanent secretary Horace Engdahl who in a speech on the Academy's yearly celebration on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2003 (Svenska Akademiens årshögtid, 2003), remarked that poets hate the notion of being driven forward by the pike of time at their neck. An evening at the Academy in the beginning of the same year was dedicated to Swedish 19<sup>th</sup> Century writer Daniel Amadeus Atterbom's fairy tale drama *Lycksalighetens ö* (The Island of Bliss), a play which Engdahl notes has never been in synch with the spirit of the day and has been eternally overlooked as national drama. During that night in the Academy this bad luck was, according to Engdahl, broken. Actors and musicians unfolded the world of princess Felicia (protagonist of the drama), a world which strangely had fooled time by never being topical. And, remarks Engdahl, nobody really knows how old the unfashionable can become.

Apropos of the presumed unfashionableness of the Academy itself, he compares the Academy to a

crocodile, one of the most ancient animal species. The academies are, in Engdahl's words, the crocodiles of cultural life, predestined to survive most of the social phenomena they confront during each epoch. Their chronology is outside the usual, which in his view may lead to misunderstandings between them and the rest of the world.

### Concluding Remarks

I have discussed the concept of synch/unsynch by way of three different, but related temporal dualities. The concept of cool/uncool is closest to *now*, and also to new media. The sung/unsung dichotomy forms part of a historical, transmedial narrative while fashionable/unfashionable is the widest in temporal and mental scope and scale.

So what then is cultural synchronization really about? Is it a matter of degree, a scheme with a center of sorts, a moving center which takes the form of a *now* moment, a digital real or absolute time around which secondary temporal patterns are established, or is it a cultural resonance built of something more out of step, out of time, but still in synch with something else? And how can we measure cultural synchronization?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Synch and unsynch are about patterning and rhythm. Though the synch/unsynch dichotomy seems to form a strictly technical concept – this duality is as absolute as digital zeroes and ones – it actually shapes our cultural and social understanding about central concepts like the positive “development”, “progress”, “evolution”, “harmony”, and “utopia” and the negative “discord”, “backlash”, “dystopia”, and “Armageddon”. It therefore has normative and teleological qualities. Therefore, and also because it seems so “objective” and technical, the synch/unsynch distinction is basic to other distinctions. It forms, at least today, the main temporal taxonomy of rhythm on which the other related distinctions (cool/uncool etc.) can play. As pointed out by Wilk (2005), synchronism manipulates the ordering of events to create an impression of commonality and contemporaneity, and it can also be seen as a means of creating objects in the past which can be manipu-

lated for the purposes of mystification and demystification, distancing and control. Or to put it the other way around, the uncoupled, unsynchronized diversity of different times, seems to challenge our society (Brose 2004).

In a world said to be characterized by fragmentation and acceleration, we could predict that the demand for cultural synchronization will rise. Critics of contemporary social and technological developments see such a development in the form of standardization, globalization, digitalization and temporal compression (see Harvey 1989: 240ff.).

Psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs (2001) blames a lack of psychosocial synchronization for psychological melancholia. Fuchs says melancholia results from desynchronization, an uncoupling in the temporal relation of organism and environment, or individual and society. The triggering of melancholic episodes is thus understood as having a basis in time. When resynchronization fails, the person falls out of common environmental time. This kind of anomalous temporality closely resembles that of the *unsung* heroes above.

The discussion about synchronization raises the need for an ecological-temporal archeology, to use a slightly tautological phrase. Following Adam (2004: 143–148), one could begin to draw the lines of a preliminary map of the cultural semantics of different timescapes, involving aspects of the synch/unsynch continuum. Those discussed here could then be condensed in the following way:

1. *Uncool* seen as forgotten time pieces, gems, or pearls (Margo Guryan). A temporality close to *now*, the category of the *unsung*; involves time travelers, discoverers.
2. *Uncool* seen as culturally produced time effects (Loft houses in Colorado, Prefab Sprout). A temporality related to *now*, involving “retro”, uncool hunters.
3. *Unsung* seen as the preferred mode of storytelling of anachronisms, which could also be described by way of various meteorological metaphors such as up-winds, fall winds, wind changes, turbulence, and pressure changes (Eddie Hinton, Henry Grimes, Marianne Faithfull).

4. *Unfashionable* seen as cultural crocodiles or dinosaurs, relicts, often involving stubbornness, steadfastness (the Pope, *Lycksalighetens ö*, the Swedish Academy). A temporality close to timelessness: the now or almost now, which in some cases also can be experienced as a form of timelessness, an eternal present, *kairos*, etc.
5. *Unfashionable* as cultural leftovers, trash (flea markets, Lidl, café au lait). Things that should have been wiped out, forgotten a long time ago.

This short scheme is by no means comprehensive or clear cut. There is always complex border crossing, transgressive representations, that often are of uncertain or ambiguous artistic merit and relevance, in this text Richard Hawley, the Pope, Prefab Sprout, and *Lycksalighetens ö*.

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