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# An analysis of Neil Young's 'Powderfinger' based on Mark Johnson's image schemata

WILLIAM ECHARD

## Introduction

The analysis presented in this paper is one result of my interest in embodiment, and its potential role in the semiotic analysis of popular music. In cultural studies and symbolic anthropology, theorists often read the body as a carrier of codes, a surface for the inscription and negotiation of meaning. In popular music studies, this viewpoint often appears in fairly simple ways, and it also sometimes appears in a more subtle fashion. Richard Middleton, for example, considers the body both as a code-bearing surface, and as the ground for musical feeling, exploring how embodied experiences generate and interact with other levels of code (Middleton 1990, 1993). Similar things are done by Frith (1996), Walser (1993), Brackett 1995), and others.

This sort of study often involves two distinct theoretical components. On one side we see the influence of simple trigger or resemblance theories of music–body interactions, which look for deterministic, physical links between musical materials and body states. Although convincingly critiqued by many, notably Rouget (1985), these continue to crop up, since the immediacy of music's somatic impact continues to invite such an interpretation. At the same time we can see the influence of performative theories of body and identity which, following the lead of theorists such as Butler (1990, 1993), view bodies as cultural constructs, only partly material in nature. Most of the embodiment work in popular music studies perches between these poles of opinion, borrowing from each. While this tactic partially avoids mind–body dualism, it does so mostly through methodology, and not on a theoretical level. We might ultimately do better with a perspective that can allow for this sort of diversity when appropriate, but which can also explain the unity of bodily and mental experiences.

Perhaps the most promising theoretical models in this area are the cognitive semantics of the philosopher Mark Johnson (1987), and medical anthropology as practiced by Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987), Good (1994), Csordas (1990, 1994), Strathern (1996), and others. In musicology, the medical–anthropological approach has been adopted most fully by Roseman (1991). Although I ultimately see cognitive semantics and medical anthropology as complementary, and equally necessary to questions of musical embodiment, this present paper focuses on the former.

## Outline of cognitive semantics

Johnson's work has already been of interest to some musicologists. McClary (1992) has commented favourably on it, noting that it provides the sort of flexible, non-

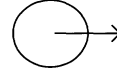
*Containment*

Specifies a boundary, and a position within.



*Out 1*

A movement beyond the boundary, with no further boundary encountered. Examples from spoken language include: John went out of the room; Pump out the air; Let out your anger; Drown out the music; Pick out the best theory.



*Out 2*

A movement beyond the boundary which encounters another boundary. Examples from spoken language include: Pour out the beans; Roll out the red carpet; Send out the troops; Hand out information.

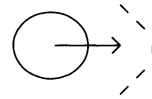


Figure 1. Some schemata from Johnson (1987)

dualistic epistemology required by feminist criticism, and Hatten (1994) engages it as well. The Society for Music Theory held a special session on Johnson at their meeting in Autumn 1996. The present paper is intended to build on this initial interest. I will start with a quick overview of the theory as presented in Johnson's book *The Body In The Mind* (1987).

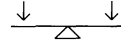
Johnson constructs what would once have been called a theory of mind, except that his theory refuses mind-body dualism from the outset. He does not see abstract modes of thought as transcending or fleeing the body, but as arising from and elaborating upon it, and he is concerned to show how embodiment and metaphor are the two cornerstones of all experience. The term 'cognitive semantics' describes this broad view of meaning-making as a dynamic, experimental, embodied process.

The two central concepts in Johnson's model of cognitive semantics are image schemata and metaphorical projection. Image schemata are dynamic gestalt patterns based on recurring features in the physical interaction between our bodies and the environment. While some of them may be innate to a degree, many develop, appear, change, or disappear over time. Each schema abstracts the essential features of a particular sort of embodied experience. For example, the schema of *Containment* stipulates some sort of boundary or border, and a position within it (see Figure 1). Metaphorical projection is the tendency to use schemata from one semantic or perceptual modality in order to structure another, or to create new schemata which are variants of others. This is essentially the same process that other workers have called cross-domain mapping. An example of the creation of new schemata through elaboration can be seen in the variety of out schemata (Figure 1). The way that a particular schema can be active in many different modalities and semantic domains is evident in the more elaborate schema of *Balance* (Figure 2). Schemata exist as tendencies in the way we understand and create meaning in both new and familiar circumstances. Existing as modalities of lived experience, schemata have an analogue, continuously variable quality. They encourage reinterpretation and modification. But since they arise from regularities in physical experience, they are not

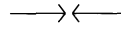
The fact that drawn figures are only approximate representations of schemata is made especially clear in this case. In practice, the axes around which *Balance* works, and the subtle ongoing distribution of forces, are clearly felt and quite real, but do not correspond to a single or simple physical locus. We cannot quickly explain or show how to balance, because so many fine adjustments of so many body parts are required.

All forms of balance involve a point or axis around which forces are distributed in some even manner. But there are many possible manifestations of this basic idea.

*Twin-pan Balance*

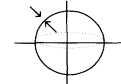


*Point Balance*



*Equilibrium*

A closed volume, where all internal and external forces (continuous across the surface) cancel each other.



There are also more complex and abstract imaginative elaborations of *Balance*: systematic balance and homeostasis, psychological balance, balance of rational argument, legal and moral balance, and mathematical equality. These all depend on three abstract properties implied by the schematic forms above: symmetry, transitivity, and reflexivity.

Figure 2. Aspects of Johnson's schema of Balance

unstructured. Eventually, as the same schemata are successively elaborated in many different situations, a rich web of similarities and variations arises between all levels and kinds of experience. In this sense metaphor is not just a linguistic device, but is the means by which all of cognition remains coherent and ultimately grounded in the body.

Cognitive semantics makes a seamless (although not unarticulated) continuum out of the body-mind, and also provides the basis for a more specific theory of cross-modal exchange, which could help to theorise more densely the issues of homology and musical signification that have been so problematic for culture-sensitive music theorists. Also, cognitive semantics provides one way of placing understanding and uttering, encoding and decoding, play and logic, all under the same rubric. It is able to do all this partly because it is based on what Grosz has called 'nonphysicalist materialism', mapping aspects of subjectivity in terms of corporeal relations without lapsing into a mechanistic reductionism (1994, pp. vii-viii). It admits both determinist and constructivist factors, and begins to credibly explain how they form an indivisible continuum.

One could take issue, though, with Johnson's claim that some sort of shared bodily experience allows the cognitive realms of different people to be substantially similar. This view of 'the' body as a site of shared, essential experiences permeates much writing in the human sciences, and is dubious on both technical and political grounds (Kirby 1997, pp. 3-4). As Grosz phrases it: 'Indeed, there is no body as such: there are only *bodies* - male or female, black, brown, white, large or small - and the gradations in between' (1994, p. 19). Johnson sometimes falls into the trap of suggesting an abstract realm of identical bodily experiences, shared across people and cultures. But the model itself does not require this. It is enough to suppose, following Wittgenstein, that family resemblances between different bodies can lead to intersubjective agreement in body-related language games. The claim that there are similar experiences should not be taken to endorse a totalising notion of some ideal, shared body somewhere. Understood in this way, cognitive semantics also provides another way to approach questions of translation and difference as they arise in ethnography, post-colonial studies,

and other disciplines concerned with the intersections and distinctions between different cultural and personal realities.

However, this is all very general. I am further interested in Johnson because he offers us an assortment of schemata to play with, which tend to suggest specific analytic possibilities. What I want to do in the present analysis is to try a literal mapping between a passage of music and some of Johnson's schemata. I have found them very useful in adding extra substance and organisation to gestural and affective interpretations. Similar things have been done by others, following other theoretical rubrics. Hatten (1994) uses the theory of markedness, Tarasti (1994) uses the narratology of Greimas, and Abbate (1991) and McClary (1992) use the general tendencies and practices of Western art music. I would suggest, though, that by adding Johnson we are not just lengthening the list, but investigating a theory which can claim to underpin the others.

### **Scope and purpose of my analysis**

Some have already begun to use cognitive semantics to re-read familiar themes in Western art music. For example, Aksnes (1996) has commented on how the notion of melodic balance in the music of Palestrina can be given a schematic interpretation. In my own analysis, I have tried to do something more particularistic, and look in detail at a single piece of music, Neil Young's 'Powderfinger'. This is a pilot analysis, so I am not attempting to be complete in the elements that I consider. I will look at the first verse only, considering harmony, use of guitars, and backing vocals. I seek to show how the principal gestures and movements in these aspects of the music can be convincingly interpreted through a literal use of some of Johnson's schemata. Notably absent here (among other things) are the lyrics, and any sort of cultural context or reception history. I do not suggest that this would be acceptable in a full analysis, and in fact by limiting myself in this way I am missing one of the strongest aspects of cognitive semantics: the way that it can make connections between ethnographic, critical, and sonic materials. The present analysis is intended to show the usefulness of cognitive semantics from a fairly narrow text-centred viewpoint. I would suggest, though, that in future work we might see that it may also be useful in ethnographic and critical contexts, and that it can provide one way of bringing all these perspectives together.

The first verse of 'Powderfinger' might be described as follows: there is a very gradual increase in intensity, leading to a singular point of suspension, followed by a dramatic gesture in the guitars and a return to stasis. I would suggest that there are two peaks here. The lead vocal reaches its peak and then does not resolve, but disappears. This is followed by the peak in the guitars, and then a return to a lower state of intensity in preparation for the next verse. We could see this as a single peak with two moments, even a kind of rebound. The rest of my analysis is an attempt to elaborate on this basic impression. First I will point out certain sonic features using vocabulary and methods already common in popular music analysis, and then I will offer an interpretation of the same features in image-schematic terms.

### **The analysis in conventional terms**

Figure 3 shows the harmonic and phrase structure of the first verse of 'Powderfinger'. Figure 4 gives a registral transcription of the guitars and vocals, beginning

I	IV	II	II	I			
IV	IV	II	II	I			
IV	IV	iii	IV	I			
iii	IV	iii	IV	iii	IV	V	I
V	I	IV	II	II	I		

In the graphic representation below, each dot represents one chord in the progression above. Vertical arrangement is in scale order (I, iii, IV, V).

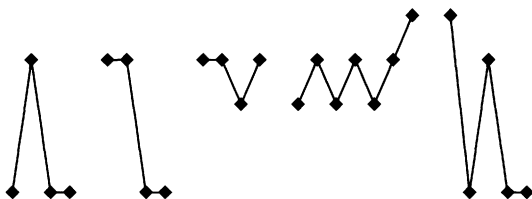


Figure 3. Harmony and phrase structure

from bar 13. In this transcription, horizontal bars represent pitch-areas occupied by the instrument. Chords appear as enclosed blocks, and all instruments are included on the same simplified staff, so that the registral relations are more evident. The passage given on this registral transcription is the one I find most interesting: the tumbling guitar gesture in parallel thirds, and the immediate build-up to it. Note that the transcription of the rhythm guitar parts is approximate. On the recording the guitars are quite overdriven, making it very difficult to discern individual notes.

I divide the harmonic progression into three phases: an initial tonic-centredness with the subdominant as a strong secondary area, then an oscillation between subdominant and mediant which finally continues towards the dominant, then a cadence and return to tonic (see Figure 3). Bars 1 to 12 are fairly unremarkable, simply decorating the tonic with the subdominant for eight bars, and then moving more firmly to the subdominant. The four-square phrase structure here underpins this casual, unintense tonic-centredness. In bars 13 to 19 a sense of ambiguous stasis is introduced with the oscillating movement between the subdominant and mediant, which then resolves into a clear movement towards the dominant. The movement to the subdominant in bars 9 to 12 is prolonged to the point where its tendency to go either to the tonic or the dominant is suspended, and the texture at this point becomes more important than harmonic movement, although a sense of harmonic tension remains through the oscillation. The deviation from four-square phrase structure here reinforces this effect. It takes us out of the normal, measured time of the opening, and causes the arrival on the dominant to seem very special and heightened. In the third part of the harmonic progression, bars 20 to 24, we get the cadence that has been so strongly prepared. It is a fairly typical cadence, with a notable rebound to the subdominant prior to full resolution. But note that there is continued effect of the move away from four-square phrase structures, in that we are left with a perceptually 'extra' bar of tonic at the end, as a result of putting the four-measure cadence on bar 20 rather than bar 21. In this part of the

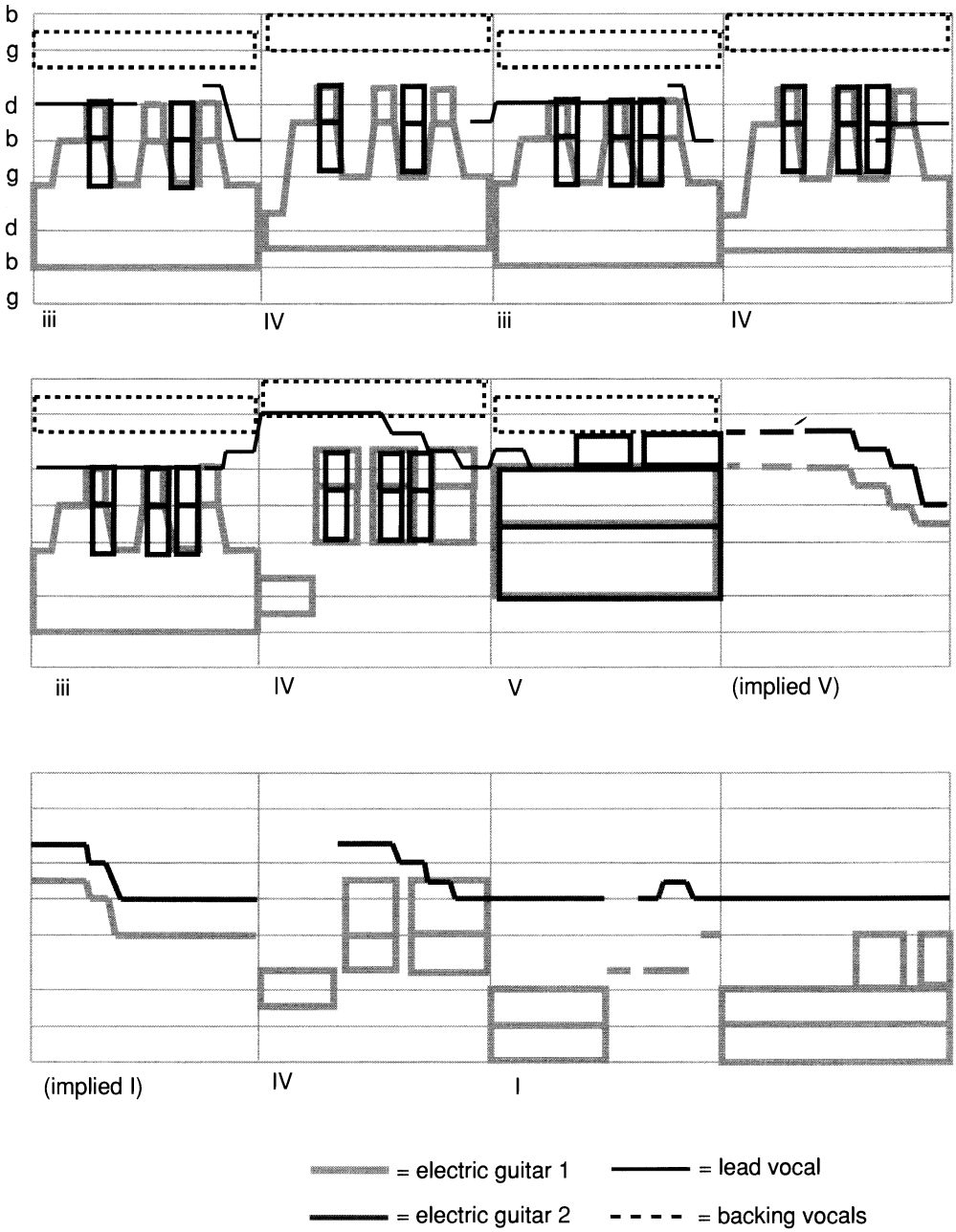


Figure 4. Registrational transcription bars 13–24

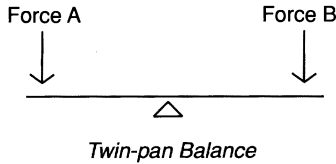
progression, then, there is a return to normal harmonic teleology, but with a slight lingering effect of the oscillating stasis of the previous passage.

The guitar figuration and backing vocals reinforce these harmonic effects. For the first sixteen bars or so, the two guitars present two closely related but slightly different textures. They are playing the same first-position chord voicings (except for the mediant, which they both play barre 2), and they also have the same basic pumping movement with the right hand (not evident from the recording, but visible whenever you see them perform this piece, as in the concert film version of *Rust Never Sleeps*). But within this framework of sameness, they introduce some differences in rhythmic emphasis, with one playing a more arpeggiated figure, and the other accenting single chords. To borrow (and stretch) a phrase from Keil, the guitar textures in this passage seem to be 'in sync but out of phase' (Keil 1995, pp. 11–12). They are both together and not together. As the harmony progresses towards the dominant, the guitars subtly move towards an emphasis on each quaver (hard to indicate in the transcription, since this is a matter of subtle inflection more than a new figure). At the arrival on the dominant, the guitars hang for a moment, and there is a notable levelling-out of the texture here as the rhythmic figuration gives way to a sustained chord. Then there is the pivotal gesture of bar 20 to 23, where the guitars play a strongly directed melodic line almost in parallel thirds. (There is one second, on the last note of bar 20, although I had to listen hard to hear it. Again, a together–untogether nuancing of the underlying idea.) After this, there is another hanging moment, where the guitars play no regular figure but fill in space with some casual figures around the tonic. In terms of register, it can be noted that the guitars gradually move upwards throughout the entire oscillation, and then down again through the tumbling gesture. The range here is slight, but combined as it is with strong harmonic and textural effects, the use of register is effective.

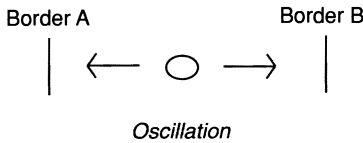
The final element I want to examine in detail is the use of the backing vocals. These enter abruptly in bar 13, as the harmonic oscillation begins, and they end equally abruptly in bar 20 (see Figure 4). They strongly emphasise the ambiguous and oscillatory character of the passage in a number of ways. First, their actual movement is very narrow and unvaried. Second, the upper voice adds sevenths to the underlying harmony (a minor seventh over the mediant, and a major seventh over the subdominant), which helps to underscore the importance of texture over function through this passage. The arrival on the dominant is made even more dramatic by the reinterpretation at this point of the top voice of the vocal dyad as the fifth of the dominant, instead of a seventh over the mediant. At this point there is no extra movement or material in the backing vocals, but their reinterpretation strengthens the textural 'levelling-out' that I have already noted for the guitars at this point, and also heightens the removal of harmonic ambiguity.

### **An image-schematic interpretation of the passage**

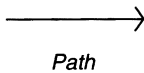
Already in the conventional analysis, I have used several gestural terms, like 'oscillation', and 'tension'. In Figures 5 to 7 I reinterpret this material through the overtly gestural framework of Johnson's image schemata. Figure 5 deals with harmonic movement, Figure 6 with guitars, and Figure 7 with the overall impression created by the passage and its role in the total form of the song. In each figure, I indicate the main features of the relevant schema, and then state which musical details in particular I map onto each feature of the schema.



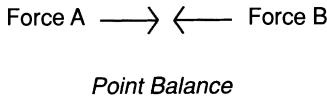
Force A = Attraction to tonic.  
 Force B = Movement to subdominant.  
 Fulcrum = Feeling of tonic-centredness, with colour and movement.



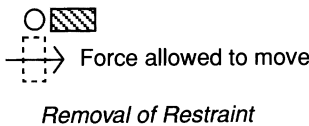
Border A = IV chord. Subdominant function.  
 Border B = iii chord. Ambiguous function in this context.  
 Centre = Feeling of suspension on subdominant, moving but not really, an energised stasis.



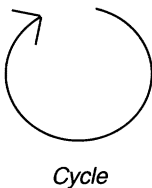
Renewed sense of movement and increased potential, through slightly higher register and arrival on V chord. Path in the sense that the meaning of the preceding oscillation is now interpreted as definitely a stage towards further harmonic movement.



Force A = The implications of the PATH, strong expectation of harmonic resolution.  
 Force B = Other textural factors which delay resolution, the hanging on V.  
 Point = Feeling of being held at a maximum height, prolongation of the moment.

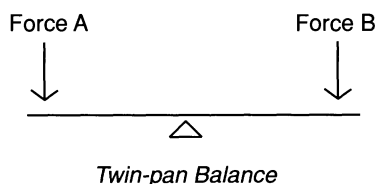


Restraint (removed) = Force B above.  
 Force A = The strong melodic movement, a textural and harmonic continuation/conclusion.

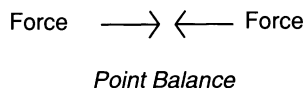


Having removed the restraint and completed the movement, the strong sense of teleology (*Path*) begun in the oscillating section drains away, leaving the feeling that we have finished the verse and are about to begin the next one. The sense of a singular, compelling *Path* is re-contextualised as part of a larger *Cycle*.

Figure 5. Harmony



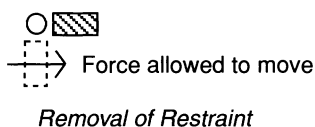
Force A = Chord position, right-hand movement (sameness).  
 Force B = Figuration (difference).  
 Fulcrum = Balance between sameness and difference in texture; variety without radical difference.



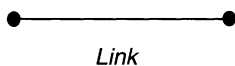
Force A = High registral placement at end of long climb, emphasises pull towards harmonic resolution.

Force B = Feeling of arrival after oscillating section, strong groundedness of timbre on this hanging chord, a textural levelling-out that invites extended attention.

Point = Feeling of hanging, being held to examine a moment that has strong tendencies to move on.



Same as in harmonic analysis.



The striking textural unity and unified melodic direction. Not *exactly* parallel, though. A together–untogether effect.

Then returns to *Twin-pan Balance*

Figure 6. Guitars

Both harmony and guitar-texture display *Twin-pan Balance* at the outset, although in different ways. For the harmony (Figure 5), the fulcrum is the tonic-centredness, and the balancing forces are the tonic and subdominant. In the guitars (Figure 6), the fulcrum is the sense of together–untogether, the enlivened sameness, and the balancing forces are the things which are the same on the one side, and the things which are different on the other. The guitars maintain this balance as the harmony begins to oscillate (Figure 5). Now the fulcrum from the beginning has become a moving point, a sense of harmonic ambiguity and charged stasis, oscillating between the twin boundaries of the subdominant and the mediant (now defined more as textural positions than as harmonic functions). The guitar texture also remains similar as the harmony moves out of the oscillation, although at this point the registral-rise of the guitars becomes more evident. In the harmony, this can be interpreted as movement along a *Path* (Figure 5). Whereas the harmonic impression was first balanced, and then oscillating, it now has a strong sense of teleology towards the dominant. This tends to set up the dominant as a singular point, since the schema of *Path* proceeds linearly from a discrete beginning to a discrete ending.

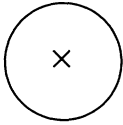
In this sense, the tumbling guitar gesture is being set up as a singular, perhaps even transcendent moment.

At the arrival on the dominant, we have both harmonically and texturally a *Point Balance* (Figures 5 and 6). The movement along the *Path* has gone to a point of maximum tension. There is a strong harmonic tendency to move on, but there are also strong textural factors to hold us here. So we are at a singular point, suspended. This impression is strengthened by the sudden disappearance of the backing vocals, and the climaxing of the lead vocal at this point. Then the dramatic guitar gesture occurs, leading to a strong feeling that the forces that balanced us at the single point have been re-distributed, and that the completion of the movement is now possible (*Removal of Restraint* in both harmony and texture). In the guitars this moment is made more poignant by the sudden textural unity of the two, the together-unttogether concerted movement along a clear melodic path which contrasts strongly with the wallowing, blurred-together accompanying texture used by the guitars up to this point. This moment is encapsulated by the *Link* schema (Figure 6).

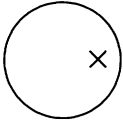
In the end, the harmony and texture both return to a kind of neutral point, waiting for the next verse to begin. In the guitars, this is marked by a return to a *Twin-pan Balance* texture. In the harmony, I hear something else happening. At this point, the strong linearity of the *Path* dissipates, and there is no longer any sense that we are approaching a singular, transcendent event that will take us outside regular song-structure. The *Path* curls into a circle, and we realise that it was all part of a larger *Cycle*, which can periodically allow the *Path-like* energy to build, but which also periodically re-absorbs it (Figure 5).

I would suggest that this underlying movement between a singular *Path* and a recurrent *Cycle* is what gives the guitar gesture its deep resonance. Every time it happens, it feels intense and special, a climax. But it also functions every time as an elision, as one point in the larger design. Figure 7 reinterprets this effect in even broader terms, pointing out how this gesture re-visits a form of balance which is typical not only of much rock music, but also of much Western music in general. The forces of *Balance* can be seen as setting up a kind of *Containment*. Gradually, as the various harmonic and textural factors first remove us from a square and unremarkable context, and then begin to move us along a *Path*, the containment begins to seem weaker, the point moves closer to the boundary. At the most dramatic moment, it almost feels as if we escape completely, that *Containment* is escaped and we are *Out*. However, as the dominance of the *Cycle* schema shows, this is not the case, and even these strong forces and implications of transcendence are ultimately balanced. The final formal effect, then, can be summarised by the schema of *Equilibrium*, where all the many movements and forces, large and small, ultimately balance-out across the multi-dimensional space of the song as a whole (represented here by a three-dimensional sphere, Figure 7).

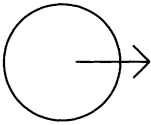
Of course, this last and most general part of my analysis should not be taken as an end-point or 'highest' level. To do so would be to minimise the unique aspects of this particular song, and to value general trends in style over local details. I include this very general level of analysis only to show how an image-schematic approach can encompass both wide and narrow perspectives. In a similar vein, I am not suggesting that the interpretations presented in this paper are, in general, the 'right' ones. Another strength of the image-schematic approach is that it encour-



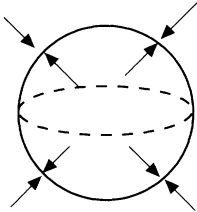
The many kinds of *Balance* could also be heard as a kind of *Containment*, where any movement outside the balance is kept into a particular range.



So distinctive movements of whatever kind, such as those which impose the sense of *Path*, or more local features, have the effect of decentering the *Containment*.



At the most dramatic moment, many such features overrun the containing effect of the *Point Balance*, and imply that we are actually moving *Out*, getting into a singular and somehow new space.



But as noted, this impression does not last. The *Path* to such a space is revealed as part of a *Cycle*, and the texture does not break totally free (perhaps into a jam), but returns to *Containment*. Overall, then, there is a continuing *Equilibrium*, where many forces in many directions all balance in multi-dimensional relationships (here represented as a sphere, with pressures on all points, inside and outside, balancing).

Figure 7. Overall effect

ages elaboration and play, which in turn suggests the validity of a whole range of possible analyses. This paper is meant to present just one example.

## Conclusions and prospects

To me, a few things are made clear about Johnson's model through this analysis. First, many of the applications of these schemata to music seem self-evident, and already familiar. One could suggest that they just dress up well known intuitions in another jargon, and this is certainly a danger to be avoided. But transparency of interpretation might also indicate a kind of descriptive adequacy. The obviousness of some of these interpretations is interesting given that the theory underlying the schemata is non-obvious and sophisticated.

Second, I feel a little arbitrary in assigning particular details to particular schemata. This does not contradict the first point, but results from it. In the absence of a clear method for finding and elaborating schemata, we are free to fall back on intuition. The goal of the model is to balance structuring tendencies against metaphorical and elaborative ones, to encompass both the freedom and determinism evident in cultural practices. Whether the arbitrary aspects of the analysis are

sufficiently balanced by motivated ones will partly be determined only by doing more work with the model, and seeing if, in the long run, it tends to focus and foster insights, or diffuse them.

Finally, there is a distinctly mechanistic aspect to the analysis, and this is almost certainly a limitation of the model as it now stands. As I prepared the analysis, I felt very much as if I was drawing plans for some sort of machine. While I can see the value and validity of this sort of approach, in the future it we will need to find ways to allow other flavours to come through as well. We need to add flows and pulsions, subtle juxtapositions, irony, and so-on.

In conclusion, it seems clear that Johnson's schemata can be useful in organising analysis. They can assist and endorse the sorts of gestural and affective readings that have been difficult to pursue using other theories of similar specificity, perhaps helping to bring formalism and hermeneutics closer together. But their ultimate usefulness depends on the fortunes of Johnson's broader philosophical programme, and the general move towards a non-dualistic, creative model of the body–mind.

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