On December 16, 1967, the British rock and roll band the Who released one of the strangest albums ever recorded. That same year, the French intellectual Jacques Derrida published a trio of philosophy books that were equally strange in their own way. The album was “a critique of the forces of commerce that had created and sustained the whole pop industry of the 1950s and 1960s,” while the books were likewise a critique, albeit of the forces of metaphysics that had created and sustained the whole philosophy industry since Greek antiquity. The Who entitled their album *The Who Sell Out*, whereas Derrida avoided the similar but fitting title *Derrida Sells Out Western Philosophy, Volumes 1–3* and went with the more academic titles of *Of Grammatology, Speech and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference*.

In one way, rock music and Western philosophy were never the same after the Who and Derrida “sold out” their respective enterprises. The Who’s album became part of a rising chorus of voices warning about the limits of capitalism and a consumer society and foreshadowed the forces that led to the breakdown of the music and recording industries in the late twentieth and early
twenty-first centuries. Likewise, Derrida’s early “deconstruction” of metaphysics played a key role in the rise of the linguistic turn in theory that is now in its second generation and has yielded many theoretical alternatives to structuralism and post-structuralism, such as cultural studies, globalization studies, feminism, race and gender studies, queer theory, postcolonialism, Marxism, and new historicism in the late twentieth century as well as a very long list of “studies,” such as debt studies, sound studies, surveillance studies, and so on, along with new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and surface reading in the early twenty-first century.

In this chapter, I’d like to argue that there are two fundamentally different ways to “sell out” theory (and music). The first resembles more the work of the Who and Derrida wherein the masterly deployment of critique yields a new type of relationship to their respective industries. It is a relationship that not only demystifies and undermines the extant conditions of the industry but also offers it a different direction. This type of sell out establishes the bar for new directions in music and theory. It is a form of musical and theoretical sell out that is innovative, progressive, and sometimes even strange.

The other way to sell out theory (and music) is to treat it primarily or solely as a means to personal, professional, or financial gain. It involves “using” theory to advance one’s career prospects or to gain notoriety or to sell books. The Mothers of Invention featuring Frank Zappa recorded an album from March through October 1967 whose title captures this type of selling out of theory well; We’re Only in It for the Money was released on March 4, 1968. It was part of a larger project called No Commercial Potential. After the Beatles released Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band on May 26, 1967 in the United Kingdom, Zappa changed the album title to parody the Fab Four because he felt that they were insincere and “only in it for the money.” He targeted the Beatles as a symbol of the corporatization of youth culture and regarded the album as a criticism of the band in particular and psychedelic rock as a whole.
I’ll begin by discussing the Who’s recording and state why I believe that its type of sell out is one fundamental way to regard selling out theory. I’ll then move on to discuss another way of selling out theory through examples from the work of two contemporary theorists: Terry Eagleton and Rita Felski. The chapter will conclude that it is difficult if not impossible to engage in theory today without implicating oneself in one or both of these sell outs. Nevertheless, each way has radically different implications for the theory industry and its institutions.
THE WHO GET ON TRACK

The Who were well known for defying the norms of the 1960s pop scene. If the Beatles and the Rolling Stones set those norms, then the Who broke them. From the guitar and drum smashing of their early live performances to the group’s angry, defiant, and aggressive songs, the Who embodied musical nihilism like no other rock and roll band in the 1960s. And no song set this tone for the Who like their early hit single “My Generation,” which has been aptly described as “the Who’s statement of noise as art—their manifesto of ear-jarring chaos that connected so directly with dissident youth consciousness of the times.”

Their managers were two ex-film industry mavericks, Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp, who just happened to stumble upon them at the Harrow and Wealdstone Railway Hotel in 1964. Lambert and Stamp were looking for a subject for a feature film and stopped their search after hearing the band. And although Lambert and Stamp wanted to make a film, as did the group, a company willing to put up the funds could not be found. The Who would have to wait until 1975 to have a feature film. The film, Tommy, was vastly different from the one envisioned in their early years by their managers.

To say that the Who rejected the commercial aspects of the music industry of the 1960s is only partly true. It is also the case that aspects of the entertainment industry of the time rejected them. For example, not only did they want to be on film like the Beatles, but they also appeared many times on television. Moreover, probably inspired by the success of the Monkees television series, which debuted on September 12, 1966, and aired its final episode on March 25, 1968, the Who even toyed with the idea of their own television series both in late 1966 and early 1968. Still, they came close to being on film during this period. Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni wanted the band in his 1966 film Blow-Up, but ended up with the Yardbirds, who in turn imitated the Who’s “auto-destruction” of their instruments in the film.
The Who’s schizophrenic relationship with the music industry and the commercialization of popular music can be summarized by a statement made by their guitarist, Pete Townshend, in 1968: “Pop music is crucial to today’s art, and it’s crucial that it should remain art, and it’s crucial that it should progress as art.” Thus, there is a tension in the Who between producing music that makes the industry increasing profits and producing music that marks its progress as an art. In these terms, selling out as a musician for the Who means producing music that seeks only to maximize the profits of the music industry—and, of course, hopefully, the band too.

This is further complicated in the case of the Who because their first record contract was a bad one. Their hunt for a record deal ended when their managers, Lambert and Stamp, gained the attention of the American record producer Shel Talmy in 1964, who was at the time admired for his early work with the Kinks. Talmy contracted the Who to a six-year deal that gave him the freedom to license his acts to record companies. Through his efforts, the Who had a deal with Decca records in the United States and its UK subsidiary Brunswick records. Problem was that although they now had a record deal, its royalty rate was a paltry 2.5 percent, and to make matters worse, it afforded Talmy a great deal of artistic control. A legal battle over this contract ensued in early 1966 and would have catastrophic financial consequences for them for years to come.

The Who’s first album, *My Generation*, was released in the United Kingdom by Brunswick records on December 4, 1965, and released in the United States by Decca records in April 1966 as *The Who Sings My Generation*. The Who’s legal battle was with the band’s first producer, Talmy and Brunswick Records, with whom they had recorded three singles in 1965 (“I Can’t Explain,” “Anyway Anyhow Anywhere,” and “My Generation”) and the *My Generation* album. The outcome was that the Who got out of their contract and gained artistic freedom and could at least record in the United Kingdom without compromise, but Talmy won 5 percent of all
of the band’s future recording work up until 1971. Lambert and Stamp then founded their own label, Track Records, a move that was ahead of even the Beatles’ Apple label.11

As a result of the lawsuit, their second album, A Quick One, was released in the United Kingdom by Reaction Records on December 3, 1966, and as Happy Jack in the United States by Decca in May 1967. It would be Kit Lambert’s first sustained production work on an album. The production of the record, compared to Talmy’s efforts, is much more sober. Lambert leveled out the instruments and avoided the fiery bursts of chaos found in Talmy’s production.12 Reaction Records was a temporary label until Lambert and Stamp could launch Track Records, which though an independent label, was operated through a production deal with Polydor Records.13

The conditions then for The Who Sell Out were quite unique and speak directly to what was put to vinyl. The Who Sell Out came at the tail end of a bitter lawsuit with their first producer and record label and was released on a label newly founded by their managers, both of whom had little experience within the music industry. Moreover, it would also be produced by Lambert and Stamp, with the former listed as “Producer” and the latter as “Executive Producer.” It is safe to say, that The Who Sell Out would never have found its way to vinyl if it were not for these major conditions: self-production and self-publishing.

One of the more unusual aspects of the album is its use of “pirate radio.” Music critic John Atkins says that it is both a homage to and a parody of the semilegal offshore radio stations that had defined the sound of the mid-1960s in Britain, such as Radio Caroline and particularly Radio London. Nothing was spared (good or bad) in the Who’s satirical recreation of Radio London: vulgarity of the commercials, the inane jingles that punctuated the music, and the thrill of the exciting new sounds that emanated through the airwaves. This is a radio station that plays constant Who music, of course, though to give the right impression, the
band sequenced a selection of songs that reflected a wide range of styles and arrangements.\textsuperscript{14}

Ben Toney, the former program director of Radio London took umbrage to the term \textit{pirate} in reference to radio stations like his. He notes that before Radio London hit the air in December of 1964, “the major record companies and the Performing Rights Society formed a pact and unofficially declared that they would not recognize the so-called ‘pirates.’ Their contention was that the pirates gave too much exposure to records and thus reduced their sales potential.”\textsuperscript{15} The growth of these pirate radio stations thus challenged the long-held control of the music industry by powerful companies like EMI and Decca. Writes Toney, “The BBC was meaningless for record promotion because the Performing Rights Society demanded that they play any one record only once daily. Before the ‘pirates’ came along, only Radio Luxembourg was available as a promotion outlet and since EMI and Decca purchased between them the greater number of hours on that station, they ruled the industry.”\textsuperscript{16} But pirate stations, like Radio London, whose one-year profits “had cleared close to $7,000,000” were challenging the status quo in the music industry.\textsuperscript{17}

Radio London (also called “Wonderful Radio London” and “Big L”) was an all-day Top 40 offshore commercial radio station that operated from a ship anchored in the North Sea, three and one-half miles off of Frinton-on-Sea, Essex, England. It operated from December 23, 1964, to August 14, 1967. Broadcast from the MV Galaxy, a former World War II United States Navy minesweeper, it was shut down at 3 p.m. on August 14, 1967, only hours before the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act of 1967 came into effect at midnight, which made it illegal to broadcast music without a license from ships like the MV Galaxy. At its peak, Radio London had twelve million listeners in the United Kingdom and another four million in the Netherlands, Belgium, and France.\textsuperscript{18}

The context of pirate radio and the history of Radio London
specifically provides an important context for understanding the Who’s critique on *The Who Sell Out*. Side one of the album mixes ads and jingles with songs and plays like a continuous radio program. The only thing not heard on the vinyl is a disc jockey (like the ones used by Radio London). Some of the ads and jingles are authentic ones that were played on Radio London, and some of them were made up by the Who. So too are some of the products advertised real items, whereas others were fabricated by the band.

The radio and product advertising satire though starts with the album cover that has photos of each of the four members of the band advertising a product with some accompanying ad copy. On the front cover, there is a photo of Pete Townshend rubbing a huge tube of “Odorono” deodorant under his arm with the ad copy, “Replacing the stale smell of excess with the sweet smell of success, Peter Townshend . . . needs it. Face the music with Odorono, the all-day deodorant that turns perspiration into inspiration.” Also on the front cover is a photo of Roger Daltrey sitting in tub filled with baked beans and holding its oversized can with the caption “This way to a cowboy’s breakfast. Daltry [sic] rides again. Thanks to Heinz Baked Beans everyday is a super day.” Those who know how many beans make five get Heinz beans inside and
outside at every opportunity. Get saucy.” On the back cover are photos of Keith Moon hawking acne cream and John Entwistle pitching the Charles Atlas weightlifting program. Although each photo is related to a song (or “ad” song) on the album, there is no listing of any of the songs on the album jacket, which was a first for LP records. So too was the featuring of unflattering photos of band members on the album jacket, in this instance, dealing with some of their body “issues”: odor, acne, muscle tone, and dribbling of beans.

Side one has six songs interspersed with radio ads. It begins with a radio announcement of the days of the week, “Monday” through “Saturday” (but no “Sunday”). “Armenia City in the Sky,” the first cut, is sung by Roger Daltrey. It is a psychedelic song with an assortment of backwards instruments à la the Beatles’ “Tomorrow Never Knows” (1966). It is followed by a fifty-seven-second ad for Heinz Baked Beans that includes an inane horn bit. It spoofs family life with lines like, “What’s for Tea, Mum?” “Mary Anne with the Shaky Hand” is a pop song with a three-part vocal harmony in the model of the Everly Brothers. It is followed by a Keith Moon ad for Premier drums. “Odorono,” sung by Pete Townshend, is a cautionary tale about personal hygiene named after something that was once a real product: “Deodorant let her down, she should have used Odorono,” sings Townshend. It is followed by an ad for Radio London. “Tattoo,” sung by Daltrey, “examines the pressures exerted by society on individuals to conform, one result of which is that men tattoo their bodies to enhance their manliness.” It is followed by an ad reminding you to go to church—even if “Sunday” is not one of the days of the week announced by the ad at the start of the album, “Radio London reminds you to go to the church of your choice.”

The fifth song on side one, “Our Love Was, Is,” sung by Townshend, covers a rare topic for the Who but is an appropriate one for 1967 and its “summer of love.” But the use of the past tense is probably a jab by the Who at the euphoria of the summer of love.
It is followed by a number of ads including an ad for Rotosound strings by John Entwistle. “I Can See for Miles” was released as a single on October 14, 1967, two months before the album came out, although it was written in 1966. It was the most powerful, complex song they had written to date. It is the last cut on side one and is not followed up by an ad. Although the song is commonly said to have been written by Townshend about his future wife, Karen, inspired by the jealousy and fear of leaving her when he went away on tour, as the last song on side one, it can also in the context of the album be associated with seeing land from the MV Galaxy, which was anchored three and one-half miles off the coast of England.

Side two also has six songs but does not follow the same radio ad format as side one. Like side one, side two begins with an ad. This one is a mock country ad for the Charles Atlas course that can turn you “into a beast of a man.” It is voiced by Pete Townshend “before” the man is turned into a beast and by John Entwistle “after” the man becomes a beast. “I Can’t Reach You,” the first song on side two, is an up-tempo pop song sung by Townsend. It is followed by a fifty-seven-second ad for an acne cream, Medac, voiced by John Entwistle. On the US release of the LP, the ad is called “Spotted Henry” rather than “Medac,” as on the UK release. “Relax” is an anthem to hedonism, with a short guitar solo that when played live could go on for ten minutes. Noticeably, there is no ad after this song. “Silas Stingy” is a song about a man who spends so much money protecting his fortune that he finds he has spent it all. Its message seems to be “Don’t worry about money, it’s not important; but if you want to hoard it, use a bank.” Again, there is no ad after this song. “Sunrise” is a complex and delicate song sung by Townshend and is played on an acoustic guitar. Again, there is no ad after this song. “Rael,” the final cut on the album, is a political fable that addresses the issue of overpopulation and concerns the discovery of new lands and the idealism of an explorer. The explorer in this song is betrayed by his crew when they don’t return to pick him up. After this song there are three short bits of identical
repeated sound. It is hard to tell if they are from a song or an ad. While much there is much humor and satire about contemporary consumer culture and modern life in many of the songs and ads, they are all dwarfed by the aspirations of “Rael.”

In the first few months of 1967, Townshend started to compose an opera. It would be about a man during a world takeover by the Chinese. There would be twenty-five scenes, and it would be set in 1999. “The hero,” explains Townshend in the magazine *Beat Instrumental* in March of 1967, “goes through hundreds of different situations and there is music for each.” “He goes out in a boat and gets shipwrecked, he has a bad nightmare and so on. I have used sound effects for a lot of the situations with music over them.”22 Within a few months, his aspirations where truncated to a shorter opera entitled *Rael*. “The opera,” Townshend tells the same magazine in August of 1967, “would last a good 20–30 minutes so I don’t know if we could use it on the next LP. It would take up too much of the record.”23

The version of *Rael* on *The Who Sell Out* is the result of editing down twenty to thirty minutes of music to the length of a 45 rpm single. Says Townshend, “Basically the story was running into about twenty scenes when Kit Lambert reminded me that while I was pretending to be Wagner, The Who needed a new single. What did I have? I had ‘Rael.’ Thus ‘Rael’ was edited down to four minutes (too long for a single in those days ironically) and recorded in New York for that purpose. It later appeared on an album. No one will ever know what it means, it has been squeezed up too tightly to make sense.”24 Music critics are enamored with *The Who Sell Out* primarily because of the novelty of using radio ads and jingles. Many too are disappointed that the ads and jingles do not extend through the entire second side of the album. Thus, they regard it as an incomplete concept album if the concept was to mimic a radio station complete with commercials. But as a critique of consumer society, and the use of music and radio in the promotion of consumption, they do more than enough work on the album even if
the Medac acne commercial is the last radio advertisement on the album. Note, however, this last ad is then followed by an anthem to hedonism (“Relax”), a song about the perils of hoarding money (“Silas Stingy”), and a delicate acoustic number (“Sunrise”).

Arguably these three songs set the stage for escaping from the corporate sound machine and the rabid commercialization that is part of the music industry. It is fitting then that the album ends with a truncated utopian opera (“Rael”). Recall that the theme of the original “Rael” was escape from an overpopulated world; the album itself up to this point is also a kind of escape from the overcommercialized music industry, in which sound is just another product like baked beans, acne medication, and tattoos. The ads on drum sticks and bass strings take the focus from the music to advertising the literal instruments of music production. According to the Who, everything is sold out in our world: bodies, music, love, and pleasure. It might be argued then that the four closing songs (“Relax,” “Silas Stingy,” “Sunrise,” and “Rael”) aspire to set the tone for exploring a world beyond the corporate one. That it is only expressed in fragments is the frustration of moving beyond the music industry and capitalism.

The Who, however, were not just satirizing others for selling out on The Who Sell Out. Nor were they simply biting the musical (industry) hand that was feeding them. They were pointing to a form of sell out that transcends its standard connotations of financial expediency. The Who recognized that, like it or not, they were part of a music industry that commercializes every aspect of itself. Although their experiences with their first record deal allowed them to recoup some of their artistic freedom, it did not mean that they were completely free from the control of the music industry. More precisely, their artistic freedom even as independent record producers did not extend to making the entire second side of The Who Sell Out consist merely of the long version of “Rael.” Even with their own self-produced music, concessions needed to be made.
However, in fading out the ads and jingles, and including albeit in truncated form a piece that rejected the pop music format in its initial operatic form, the Who were suggesting an alternative or solution to the pop industry of the 1950s and 1960s. It would be the “rock opera,” a new form of rock and roll music, that would in turn generate an entirely new set of complaints about music in the 1970s.

Unlike say the folk singers of the 1960s, such as Joan Baez and Pete Seeger, or like some other rock artists, like Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, who all regarded themselves as somehow outside of the music industry and society that they were critiquing, the Who on *The Who Sell Out* did not. This created a problem for them: whereas Seeger, Baez, and Zappa would forge careers out of critiquing the corporatization of youth through the music and culture industries, the Who found it difficult to produce studio work that would surpass *The Who Sell Out* in terms of its critical power.

Their next studio album, *Tommy*, released on May 23, 1969, was a rock opera that became their first million-selling album. But like much of their work, opinion was polarized on it. One critic called it a “disappointment . . . pretension is too strong a word; maybe over-ambitious is the right term, but sick certainly does apply.” Barry Miles said “[i]t is impossible to praise this album too highly . . . The Who . . . have pulled together the threads of Rock & Roll, progressive pop, social comment and present philosophical developments till they have crystallised into this one project—a massive undertaking. . . . The Who are ahead of everyone!” Nevertheless, *Tommy* was not a meta-musical critique of the music industry. Rather it would foreshadow the excesses of rock music in the 1970s in its pretension and grandiosity. Still *The Who Sell Out*’s “Rael” prepared us well for the Who music to come in both a philosophical and literal sense, as the instrumental theme in “Rael” was incorporated into *Tommy* in two of its songs, “Sparks” and “Underture.”
WE’RE ONLY IN IT FOR THE MONEY

It should be clear from my discussion of *The Who Sell Out* that this particular album provides a strange albeit powerful vision of selling out. On the one hand, it mocks a music industry that monetizes everything; whereas on the other, it suggests by its very musical being that moving beyond the industry norms is possible (though difficult). But to see in *The Who Sell Out* a parallel with say the way Derrida sells out Western metaphysics in his 1967 theoretical trilogy is to posit a very high musical and theoretical bar for selling out. It is also to put a target on your back as both the work of the Who on this album and Derrida in his early deconstruction may be viewed as pointing a judgmental finger respectively toward both the music and philosophy industries.

Some might argue that selling out music is nothing like selling out theory. They might maintain that one needs to perform a sleight of hand to move from selling out in the music industry to selling in out in the theory industry. But for others, the basic moves appear similar—and the cross-comparison yields more clarity regarding both industries. Albums are comparable to books, singles are like articles, and a live performance is akin to the classroom. So why not place them in dialogue? Especially when it comes to efforts to understand how, when, and why we sell out as theorists in particular, if not as academics in general.

Derrida set the stage for the selling out of philosophy and the humanities to theory like no other person of his era with the publication of three seminal books in 1967: *Of Grammatology, Speech and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference*. These works outline the possibilities of a deconstruction of a metaphysics of presence and describe the effects of logocentrism and phonocentrism in the Western canon. They gave deconstruction a scholarly backbone and launched a thousand ships of commentators, both favorable and unfavorable. With the publication of these works, Derrida came to be one of the major lightning rods of theory, accused of destroying
everything from philosophy to the humanities in general. His critiques of philosophical standards such as Plato’s *Phaedrus* and Rousseau’s *Confessions* is comparable to the Who’s critiques of psychedelic music and pirate radio on *The Who Sell Out*.

But just as the Who did not act alone in their critique of the music industry, neither did Derrida regarding the philosophy industry. That is to say, just as there were other artists at the time offering similar critiques of the music industry through their recordings, most prominent among them Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, so too were other intellectuals in 1967 offering similar critiques of the philosophy industry through their publications. Richard Rorty edited an anthology entitled *The Linguistic Turn* in 1967, which brought together a range of analytic philosophers who were challenging some of the metaphysical traditions in philosophy, in the same year that Roland Barthes published his influential essay “The Death of the Author” and the novelist John Barth published “The Literature of Exhaustion.” Therefore, not only was Western philosophy being sold out in 1967, so too was the author and the novel. And, arguably, just a year later, this all would come to a head with the student and worker uprisings of 1968, which sought to define new identities in relation to the institutions and industries of the family, the state, and education.

Still, it must be acknowledged that all efforts to define new identities in relation to industries and institutions are not the same. This holds just as well for the family, the state, and education as it does for music and theory. The term *sell out* creates a sort of fault line or divide between pursuing these new identities with integrity (the high bar) and pursuing them without integrity (the low bar). But, as we see in the case of the Who’s album and Derrida’s early deconstruction, forging new identities with integrity does not entail simply rejecting one’s musical and philosophical roots. Rather, it involves both embracing these roots and moving beyond them, which is something that at least one definition of *sell out* confirms.
The top definition of 169 proposed definitions of a sell out according to the Urban Dictionary is “anyone who sacrifices artistic integrity in an effort to become more successful or popular (generally in music); someone who forgets their roots.” In other words, not being a musical sell out involves both being true to your artistic integrity and acknowledging your roots—exactly what the Who did on their album *The Who Sell Out*. Thus, there is an irony at the root of the use of sell out in reference to the Who that one does not find in its more popular usage in which the musician either is not true to their artistic integrity or forgets their roots or both. In music, some popular examples of musicians that have allegedly sold out in this way are the punk band Green Day (because they were on MTV), Metallica (because they “bitched about their fans trading their music online”), and even Bob Dylan (because he is in an iPod ad).

It is interesting of course to see how popular conceptions of selling out in music function. A punk band who does videos for cable television is dubbed a sell out; so too is a metal band that did not take too favorably to free download access to their music. And then there is Dylan, who probably has more frequently than any other popular musical artist been accused of selling out and who has an origin story in this regard dating back to the evening of Sunday, July 25, 1965, when he sold out folk music by opening his set at the Newport Folk Festival with an electric version of “Maggie's Farm.”

Just on the basis then of the three musical examples above (Green Day, Metallica, and Dylan) and the definition of sell out noted above, we can start to put a picture together of how one can sell out theory. Like Green Day, if one starts giving popular lectures such as TED Talks aimed at the general public as a theorist, one risks being called a sell out; like Metallica, if one “bitches about their students getting their books online for free,” they risk being called a sell out; and like Dylan, if they give up one form of theory suddenly for another allegedly just to garner attention, then they
risk being called a sell out. But there are of course many more ways to commodify theory and to transfer it into more popular registers.

For one, every time we give a live performance of theory in our classroom, we risk sacrificing our intellectual integrity by transferring it into a register that will reach our students. This situation is amplified by the fact that our “sacrifice” is done with the aim of pleasing our students lest they complain about our teaching performance or the unreasonable difficulty of theory. Moreover, in the neoliberal university, where the humanities are judged by their ability to train students for a vocation, if our live performances of theory in the classroom do not cover its professional applications, then we risk losing the stage of our theory classrooms. Thus, in the live performance of theory in the classroom we are confronted with a dual-headed imperative to sell it out through application: first as a means of assuring the effective teaching of theory to students who are not motivated to learn it and second as a means of demonstrating its relevance to the vocational telos of the neoliberal academy.33

Furthermore, the drive to sell out theory to more popular registers is not just limited to the classroom but also extends to the world of publishing. This is particularly true of many of the major presses that support the publication of theory: Oxford University Press, Routledge, Johns Hopkins University Press, Bloomsbury, University of Minnesota Press, and Norton, for example, all publish a variety of textbooks, handbooks, companions, anthologies, and guidebooks in support of the theory industry. Their aim is to increase the audience for theory by presenting it in a format that softens its intellectual rigor. Although this is not unique to theory, as one finds in, for example, philosophy as well, it is perhaps next to our classroom performances the most dominant register for selling out theory.

The story here is amplified though when the person who is publishing in these popular registers is both a distinguished theorist and appears to be popularizing theory primarily or solely
as a means to personal, professional, or financial gain. While I’m fairly confident that theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida could never be accused of this type of selling out of theory, there are a number of major theorists for which a case could be made here.

One such theorist is said to have grown up poor and has been valiantly dubbed in the press as a “class warrior.” As a youth, this theorist was an encyclopedia salesman who studied at Trinity College, where one of his classmates was Prince Charles, who described him as “dreadful.” Later, he came to be “widely regarded as Britain’s leading literary theorist”34 and “the man who succeeded F. R. Leavis as Britain’s most influential academic critic”35 and was on the faculty of Oxford University for three decades, where he eventually held the Thomas Warton professorship in English literature from 1992 to 2001. In 2001, he surprised the academic world by leaving Oxford to take up the John Edward Taylor Professorship in English Literature at the University of Manchester, where he remained until 2008, when he became a Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University, where he remains. His name is Terry Eagleton.

Among literary theorists, there is nary one among us that does not have strong feelings about Eagleton and his work, especially the textbook he published in 1983 that brought him international attention. Eagleton largely established his reputation through the publication of *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, which became a surprise best seller, with sales figures of over 750,000 copies sold in just its first two decades of publication history. Today its sales figures exceed one million copies sold, and it has been translated into Malay, Arabic, and Sanskrit, among other languages.

Since *Literary Theory*’s publication, Eagleton has become the poster professor for popularizing literary theory. In his 2001 memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, Eagleton says that his work as an encyclopedia salesman was his “earliest experience of peddling ideas to the
masses, a project which later became my full-time occupation.”36 In an interview the same year, he said, “I believe in popularizing and believe I can do it quite well,” but he is nevertheless aware, writes Helen Davies, “that such successful popularising of the theories of others can gain a book a reputation, as a ‘bluffer’s guide’ to what is still a trendy, tricky, and comparatively new academic subject.”37

In spite of the success of Literary Theory in the classroom, Eagleton has always maintained that he did not set out to write a “textbook.” His “real motive for writing the book,” he tells Davies, “was a ‘democratic impulse,’ which stemmed from his undergraduate days at Cambridge in the early 1960s.” “I studied in the final days when to appreciate literature was rather like knowing fine wines, it came with breeding,” says Eagleton to Davies. He viewed this as “an elitist approach which tended to exclude a boy from Salford with Irish roots like himself,” says Davies. His third-generation Irish immigrant family was so poor in Eagleton’s youth that “his two brothers died in infancy,” and all he and his “classmates had to eat at lunchtime was beetroot, which they would puke up in the afternoons.”38 In short, Eagleton characterizes his efforts to popularize literary theory as a form of class warfare, wherein his work makes it accessible to those without “breeding.”

“I have tried to popularize, rather than vulgarize, the subject,” writes Eagleton in the preface to Literary Theory.39 “‘There are some who complain that literary theory is impossibly esoteric—who suspect it as an arcane, elitist enclave somewhat akin to nuclear physics,” he continues. “It is true that a ‘literary education’ does not exactly encourage analytical thought; but literary theory is in fact no more difficult than many theoretical enquiries, and a good deal easier than some. I hope the book may help to demystify those who fear that the subject is beyond their reach.”40 If we believe Eagleton, Literary Theory was an effort to “democratize” theory and make it more accessible to students and a general audience. But in spite of Eagleton’s position at Oxford and his renown as a literary theorist, there are many who view him as selling-out theory in
order to achieve academic renown and financial gain. Moreover, the fact that he is a Marxist seems to only amplify things. Here is a representative sample of this type of complaint: “Eagleton wishes for capitalism’s demise, but as long as it’s here, he plans to do as well as he can out of it. Someone who owns three homes shouldn’t be preaching self-sacrifice, and someone whose careerism at Oxbridge was legendary shouldn’t be telling interviewers of his longstanding regret at having turned down a job at the Open University.” So, the cost of making a career out of successfully translating theory into a mainstream register is to reap the scorn of those who say that as a Marxist, Eagleton should not benefit from capitalism at the same time as working toward its demise. While Eagleton views such criticisms as shallow cheap shots and summarily dismisses them, such criticism of a man who called himself “the worm in Thatcher’s apple” becomes in turn “the worm in Eagleton’s theoretical apple.”

But this is not the only worm. For some, Eagleton sold out theory again in his 2003 book, After Theory, in which he argued that the ambitiousness and originality of high theory has given way to the laziness and derivativeness of the current orthodoxies of cultural theory. Whereas high theory was formed out of a real sensitivity to the social and political realities of the 1960s, current cultural theory appears to Eagleton to be born out of attempts to be merely fashionably obscure. For example, in After Theory, Eagleton bemoans that although high theory established the body as a locus of cultural theory, it was the laboring and famished body, not the erotic and coupling body. Whereas sexuality and gender began as two of the “towering achievements” of cultural theory, over the years they have been reduced to seemingly intellectual amusements. Moreover, in After Theory, he comes close to presenting himself as an anti-theorist in his defense of absolute truth, objectivity, virtue, and morality in cultural theory. For many current theorists, Eagleton’s book was not only an assault on their orthodoxies; it was also an assault on the orthodoxies that he himself
was largely responsible for introducing to a wider public back in the early 1980s. In short, whether it was popularizing theory in the early 1980s or trying to unpopularize it in the early 2000s, the Marxist with three homes epitomized the lowest form of selling out theory from the highest levels of academe—that is, until Rita Felski came along a few years ago to challenge Eagleton for the honor.

Despite the best efforts of the poster professor for the popularization of theory trying to undo his own work and become the poster professor for unpopularizing theory in his 2003 book *After Theory*, Eagleton met his match with Felski when she became the poster professor for attempting to unpopularize theory. Her high profile and higher funded antitheory movement, initiated just a few years ago, is an effort to move beyond the critique that Eagleton and others successfully made accessible to several generations of students as well as to a general audience back in the 1980s and 1990s.

Felski’s post-critique came in the form of a $4.2 million grant in 2016 from the Danish National Research Foundation. A press release from her university announcing the grant says that it stems from work done in her 2015 book, *The Limits of Critique*, which “encouraged her fellow scholars to explore alternatives to increasingly predictable and formulaic styles of ‘suspicious reading.’”42 Felski, continues the release, says “literary scholars should spend less time looking behind a text for hidden causes and suspicious motives and more time placing themselves in front of it to reflect on what it suggests, unfolds or makes possible. What literary studies needs, she said, is less emphasis on ‘de’ words—demystifying, debunking, deconstructing—and more emphasis on ‘re’ words—literature’s potential to remake, reshape and recharge perception.”43 Felski claims that she will use the grant to “develop new frameworks and methods for exploring the many social uses of literature,” something she has already begun in her course, “Theories of Reading,” where, “students first learn to become skeptical
readers, drawing on ideas from Freud, Foucault or feminism to criticize the works of the canon or to challenge their assumptions of their favorite TV shows” and then learn “to reflect on why they love certain novels or movies and to develop more sophisticated vocabularies for describing and justifying these feelings.”44

Felski’s comments here are important to note because they betray the basic parameters of her antitheory. For her, theory has become “predicable and formulaic,” and she aims to provide it with “new frameworks and methods.” These new “frameworks and methods,” that is to say, “antitheories,” will establish “more sophisticated vocabularies for describing and justifying” why we “love certain novels and movies”—and, of course, television shows.

Arguably, Felski builds her post-critique on the foundation of the success of efforts like Eagleton’s to demystify and popularize theory. But her effort to place “more emphasis on ‘re’ words—literature’s potential to remake, reshape and recharge perception” comes with a bit of irony, especially when we consider that Eagleton opens up Literary Theory with the statement, “If one wanted to put a date on the beginnings of the transformation which has overtaken literary theory this century, one could do worse than settle on 1917, the year the young Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky published his pioneering essay, ‘Art as Device’”45—a piece which introduces the concepts of defamiliarization, foregrounding, and estrangement, arguing that art is a means to make things real again, that is to say, a means of recharging our perception of things. Hence, from Shklovsky in 1917 to Felski in 2017, literary theory has come full circle back to its fabled beginnings through a series of high- and low-profile sell outs.

CONCLUSION

All sell outs are not the same. Those who sell out theory through critique are doing the highest work of theory. Such sell outs are generational affairs and not everyday ones. Albums like The Who Sell Out or Derrida’s 1967 “deconstruction” trilogy, though sell outs
of the highest order, aim to push the respective music and theory industries to new directions. Although not sell outs in the popular sense of the term because their ostensive aim is not solely personal, professional, or financial gain, and they have not “forgotten” their roots, they still function as sell outs. Perhaps the best way to think of them is as critical sell outs in that they do not sacrifice artistic integrity or forget their roots but rather become popular because of their integrity and the way they critically uproot the work of their peers and predecessors. Because uprooting the music and theory industries effects its membership, these reverse sell outs draw a lot of attention and controversy.

As opposed to critical sell outs, the more popular and established form of selling out, that is, using music or theory solely as a means to personal, professional, or financial gain by sacrificing one’s critical integrity in an effort to become popular or successful, and forgetting one’s roots, might be called an uncritical or neoliberal sell out. If one’s only value consideration is their place in the marketplace of music or theory, then the market determines both one’s integrity and artistic and/or intellectual telos.

Uncritical selling out though becomes academic business as usual for the docile subjects of neoliberal academe. Rather than using theory to critically undermine the neoliberal education industry, uncritical theory sell outs only serve to bolster it. And, given the recent downturn in tenure-track positions available for literary theorists, they appear to be succeeding. It has recently been reported that from 1995 to 1999, there were thirty tenure-track jobs available for literary theorists, compared to only five available from 2015 to 2018.

Uncritical sell outs like Eagleton’s and Felski’s though have more impact with respect to this decline than everyday live classroom theory sell outs. Why? Because the public transition from theorist to antitheorist by some of theory’s former champions serve to legitimate claims of the wastefulness of theory. These acts of uncritical selling out are the lowest forms of selling out.
English and literary studies have squandered through uncritical sell outs the opportunity provided to them to make their departments the locus of critical theory in the university. The odd result is that while their departments have fewer opportunities for tenure-track positions in the area of theory, most other areas of the university seem to be bustling out with interest in theory. My conclusion here is that while literary theory may have reached its nadir in the academy, theory has moved in the opposite direction. All of those “studies” that Eagleton despises have spread like a fever across the disciplines. And the more that Felski uses her millions of dollars in grant money to forward post-critique, the stronger critique seems to be in every area of the university except in English and literature departments.

The more fully we acquiesce to requests to be more accessible, more relevant, more pragmatic, more concrete, and, finally, more democratic in our theoretical modes of analysis, the more deeply we will descend into the realm of uncritically selling out theory. Although each of these uncritical sell outs may only seem like drops of water taken out of the ocean of theory, critical climate change has brought to us a greater appreciation of the potentially massive scale of small acts. When we uncritically sell out theory in our classroom, we sell out the future of democratic education and further extend the lifespan of the neoliberal university. Who then sells out theory? At its highest level and lowest levels, the names are recognizable, but at its everyday level, it is everyone who walks into a classroom willing to sacrifice their theoretical integrity in an effort to become more successful or popular with their students—and who forgets the critical roots of theory in the process.